

The Tongham air raid of 22/23 August 1940

On the night of 22/23 August 1940, during the Second World War, a German air raid nearly brought disaster to Tongham. Around 11 o'clock that night, a German bomber attacked an ammunition train in the sidings next to Tongham Station. The train had arrived some ten days earlier and consisted of 47 wagons loaded with munitions and explosives for the Royal Army Ordnance Corps. Around 11 incendiary bombs were dropped, followed by high explosives. Bombs fell all around the area. The roofs of two houses in The Street were damaged by incendiary bombs, Poyle Road was hit and both the church and village school were damaged by a bomb which exploded in the church yard.

The train was hit by at least one of the bombs, which set alight the third wagon. As the fire took hold the munitions started to explode. Wilfred Friday, who lived in Spoil Lane, opened his door just as one of the shells detonated and he was killed by flying shrapnel.

George Keen, who worked as a Sub-Ganger with the Southern Railway Company, saw the attack from the doorway of his home close to the railway. George rushed to the scene and tried to uncouple the burning wagon, but was beaten back by the flames. He went to the nearby cottages and assisted residents into the shelters, before returning to the burning train.

Another Southern Railway employee, George Leach, had seen the attack from his home in Eland Road, Aldershot, just over a mile away. A lengthman with the railway, Leach jumped on his bicycle and hurried to the burning train, joining Keen in his efforts along with other volunteers.

The Aldershot Command fire brigade was alerted and raced to Tongham, led by Warrant Officer Class 1 (Regimental Sergeant Major) Alfred Harrison. They were joined by personnel from a military Salvage Unit commanded by Captain David Johnston, a retired officer who had served with the Durham Light Infantry and was re-employed in the war at the Salvage Training Centre.

These four men, disregarding the danger to their lives, organised and directed the civilian and military volunteers and worked tirelessly for over two hours to save the wagons which had not yet caught fire. Throughout this time there were explosions from the burning wagons, shells bursting and debris flying in all directions. They managed to uncouple the wagons and pushed them down the track to open country west of Grange Farm, out of danger from the fire. At least 42 trucks were saved.

By the heroic acts of all involved, Tongham was saved from a greater disaster. If the fire had spread to the rest of the train there is no doubt that devastation would have resulted, with loss of lives and terrible damage to the village.

George Frederick Keen, George Henry Leach, WO1 (RSM) Alfred Harrison, and Captain David Andrew Samuel Johnston were all awarded the George Medal for their outstanding courage which saved Tongham on that night.

George Leach received his medal from King George VI at Buckingham Palace on 27 May 1941. Tragically, George Keen, who was a diabetic, was taken ill and died on 25 May 1941, just two days before he was due to receive his medal from the King. The medal was sent to his wife, Mrs Elsie Keen. George Leach died in January 1994, aged 91.

Both Keen and Leach were celebrated locally and their stories were told in the newspapers. However, because of wartime restrictions on reporting on military personnel, the actions of WO1 Harrison and Captain Johnston were not publicised. As a result they were largely forgotten for many years, but now they can be recognised. To have four George Medals awarded for one event is very remarkable and shows the level of danger on that night. It is fitting that now all four of these courageous heroes can be celebrated.

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