

MEDALS AND MEMORIES

The Victoria Cross, Part II: Ontario in the Spotlight

Character Education

- Discuss the role of pride takes in character development. What would make you be proud to be from a particular place?
- Consider what traits, other than valour, are necessary to be a hero
- Explore the “flight or fight” concept and that of a “personal safety plan”. What role should each play in the development of your character?

Facts

- The British Victoria Cross was the highest military award granted in Canada until Canada instituted its own award
- Filip Konowal’s Victoria Cross was stolen from the Royal Canadian Regiment, London, ON, in 1973 and not recovered until 2004; the medals are worth thousands of dollars at auction
- Hancocks Jewellers of London has made every British Victoria Cross from the gunmetal of cannons used in Sebastopol, during the Crimean war

Before the Reading

- Pool all the knowledge you have about the Crimean War and the Boer War. If you have NO KNOWLEDGE at all, delegate someone to do some quick research
- Vimy Ridge, Dieppe, Passchendaele—these are the names of some famous battles. List all the battles ancient and modern that you recall. What person or persons are remembered for these battles and why?
- Discuss what is ‘acceptable risk’ in war and in peace

Reading

Wallacetown, Brockville, Toronto, Owen Sound, Ottawa, Alton, Sault Ste. Marie, Madoc, Lake Rosseau, London, Kingston, Deseronto, Hamilton and Cobourg may lay direct claim to one of Ontario’s Victoria Cross recipients

as they were either born there, studied there, lived there or are buried there. With good research, Ontario students today might claim more Ontario connections for Canada’s 94 Victoria Cross recipients. Based on the bravery of the recipients featured, it would be a proud claim to make.



Maj. Hampden Zane Churchill Cockburn

Hampden Zane Churchill Cockburn

earned Ontario’s first Victoria Cross for his actions in the Boer War.

Suddenly on Nov. 7, 1900, at the Battle of Lilliefontein at the Komati River in South Africa, Cockburn’s group, a rearguard for a column of troops, was attacked by an overwhelming number of Boers trying to capture the artillery pieces in their

care. As all around him his gallant followers were killed, wounded or taken prisoner Cockburn, himself wounded, held his ground. The rest of the British troops were able to escape due to Cockburn’s conspicuous bravery. During the remainder of the Boer War the Lieutenant from the Royal Canadian Dragoons led his troops 1,700 miles for another 45 engagements. As well as the Victoria Cross, Cockburn earned the Queen’s South African Medal with clasps for Cape Colony, Diamond Hill, Johannesburg and Orange Free State. The graduate of Upper Canada College retired as a Major and lies buried in Saint James Cemetery, Toronto.



Capt. Thain Wendell MacDowell
Elliot & Fry, UoF Archives

Two of four Canadian soldiers who won the Victoria Cross for their actions at Vimy Ridge were from Ontario. **Captain Thain Macdowell** with the Canadian Expeditionary Forces, along with two runners, reached a German position ahead of his company the 38th Infantry Battalion. Quick to seize the moment, Thain destroyed one machine gun nest and pursued the

crew from another. When he spotted a German soldier going into a tunnel, he bluffed those inside into thinking he was part of a larger allied force. Two German officers and 75 soldiers surrendered. As the privates were taking the prisoners back to the Canadian line in groups of 12, one of the deceived Germans grabbed a rifle. The German was quickly dispatched but not before he had injured the Captain in the hand. Captain Macdowell remained at his position for five days under heavy shellfire until relieved by his battalion. The graduate of Brockville Collegiate Institute lies buried in Oakland Cemetery, Brockville.



L.-Sgt. Ellis Wellwood Sifton
Image "Courtesy of Elgin County Archives"

Lance-Sergeant Ellis Welwood Sifton, born in Wallacetown, lies buried in a mass grave called Lichfield Crater Cemetery with 56 casualties of the fighting at Vimy Ridge in 1917. The former farmer was awarded his Victoria Cross for his bravery at Neuville-Sainte-Vasst, France. When Sergeant Sifton spotted the machine gun nest that was pinning down his company and inflicting heavy casualties, he singlehandedly charged; he first knocked over the gun and then used his bayonet on the gunners. Sifton next turned his concentrated attack on the enemy soldiers advancing towards them down the trenches. The diversion of this attack with his bayonet and rifle butt enabled his comrades of the 18th Battalion, Western Ontario Regiment, to secure the position. Ellis Sifton was 25 years old when he died of his wounds.

MEDALS AND MEMORIES MINUTES



Lt.-Col. William George Barker
Image "Manitoba Historical Society/Archives of Manitoba"

WWI pilot ace, **Wing Commander William George Barker**, was the most decorated Canadian soldier in WWI; no one has surpassed his record. Barker's pal, Owen Sound born William "Billy" Bishop, also a pilot ace, was credited with 72 victories, but fell short of Barker's medal count. The two ran Bishop-

Barker Aeroplanes for about three years after WWI. Bishop received his Victoria Cross for his actions June 2, 1917, when he single-handedly attacked a German air base on the Arras front. He destroyed seven airplanes on the ground and shot down another four before leaving the scene due to a lack of ammunition. Barker earned his Victoria Cross Oct. 27, 1918, in a dogfight with 15 or more enemy aircraft. Although wounded three times in the legs and with his left elbow blown almost away, Barker controlled his Snipe aircraft to bring down a four enemy aircraft before crash landing behind British lines in France. Bleeding heavily, Barker would have died but for the speedy actions of the RAF Kite Balloon Section which transported him to a field dressing station. Both Barker and Bishop were credited with having exceptional eyesight and being exceptional shots. The play *Billy Bishop Goes to War* by John Gray and Eric Petersen, chronicles Billy Bishop, Commander of the "Flying Foxes" and the greatest Commonwealth Ace of the war. Barker became the first president of the Toronto Maple Leafs Hockey Club.



Cpl. Filip Konowal
photo: Directorate of History
and Heritage, DND

Ukrainian-Canadian **Corporal Filip Konowal** started his military career in the Russian Army and ended his working life as a custodian for the Prime Minister's Office in Ottawa. Austin F. Cross reported, in *The Ottawa Citizen* on June 16, 1956, when Konowal was asked about being a janitor he laughingly remarked, "I mopped up overseas with a rifle, and here I must mop up with a mop".

Konowal was serving with the 47th Canadian Infantry Battalion when he was awarded his Victoria Cross. During the battle for Hill 70 near Lens, France, Konowal's section was in charge of clearing out cellars, craters and machine-gun emplacements. In one cellar he bayoneted three enemy soldiers; he single-handedly took out seven other enemies in a crater. When he found a machine-gun nest that was holding up his unit's right flank, he rushed forward into the emplacement, killed the crew and brought the gun back to his own lines. The next day he repeated this feat with another solo attack on a machine-gun emplacement; this time he destroyed the gun with explosives. Corporal Konowal kept up this killing pace for two days until severely wounded. He had already fought in the Battle of the Somme and Vimy Ridge.

After recuperating in England, Konowal served briefly as a military attaché in the Russian Embassy before seeing service with the 1st Canadian Reserve Battalion, the Canadian Forestry Corps and the Canadian Siberian Expeditionary Force in Vladivostok.

When Corporal Konowal was invited to celebrate the 100th anniversary of the Victoria Cross in London, England in 1956, he turned to his fellow Ukrainian-Canadians for assistance to make the journey. Although many Ukrainian-Canadians had been interned during WWI, at least 10,000 had served with Allied forces. Konowal wrote one Legions branch saying, "Please be kind enough to extend my thanks to every Ukrainian Canadian Legion Branch ... I was very surprised and I was not expecting that much. I knew I had friends amongst the Ukrainian people but I never thought they could do so much for a poor fellow like me."ⁱ

ⁱ F. Konowal to S. Pawluk, May 17, 1956, Stephen Pawluk Papers, National Archives of Canada. Endnote in Konowal by L. Luciuk and R. Sorobey, Kingston, Kashtan Press, 1996

MEDALS AND MEMORIES MINUTES



Lieut. Gordon M. Flowerdew
Image: Veterans Affairs Canada

Lieutenant Gordon Muriel Flowerdew of "C" Squadron, Lord Strathcona's Horse, Canadian Cavalry Brigade led the charge at Moreuil Wood that so unnerved the enemy that the German spring offensive of 1918 turned into a retreat. The Victoria Cross citation read, "... Lt.

Flowerdew saw two lines of the enemy, each about sixty strong, with machine guns in the centre and flanks, one line being about two hundred yards behind the other ... The squadron ... passed over both lines, killing many of the enemy with the sword, and wheeling about galloped at them again. Although the squadron had then lost about 70% of its numbers, killed and wounded, from rifle and machine gun fire directed on it from the front and both flanks, the enemy broke and retired ... Lt. Flowerdew was dangerously wounded through both thighs during the operation, but continued to cheer on his men. There can be no doubt that this officer's great valour was the prime factor in the capture of the position." Gordon Flowerdew died the next day; he lies buried in Somme, France.





Pte. Thomas Holmes and Cpl. Colin Fraser Barron
Images: National Defence/Veterans Affairs

Private Thomas Holmes of Owen Sound and **Corporal Colin Fraser Barron** of Toronto earned their Victoria

Crosses during the fighting in Passchendaele, Belgium. Both showed extreme valour as they attacked German pill-boxes. Holmes, on his own initiative ran forward with two bombs that took out one machine gun before rushing back to get another bomb which he threw in the entrance to another pillbox. Corporal Barron also captured a gun and when he did, he turned it on the enemy with much success. Holmes went on to be a pilot for the Toronto Harbour Commission and Barron worked as a guard at the Don Jail in Toronto. During WWII Barron re-enlisted and served during the occupation of Iceland.



Lieut. Samuel Lewis Honey
Photo:Veterans Affairs

Lieutenant Samuel Lewis Honey, a school teacher from Conn, Ontario, **Lieutenant George Fraser Kerr** of Deseronto and **Private Walter Leigh Rayfield** of Toronto were part of the final Allied push to end WWI. The task of the Canadian Corps was to cross the Canal du Nord, occupy Bourlon Wood and capture the city of

Cambrai. The action commenced on Sept. 27, 1918. It was on that day during heavy fighting at Bourlon Wood that Lewis Honey showed the valour for which he received the Victoria Cross. When all the officers of his company had become casualties, Lieutenant Honey took charge and, under heavy fire, reorganized. To save his new command from the casualties they were suffering from machine gun enfilade strafing, he located the enemy nest and charged it single-handedly. After taking the gun and ten prisoners, he continued to lead his men as they repulsed four German counter-attacks. That night on his own Lieutenant Honey went out and located a German post. He took a squad of his men back to capture the post and three enemy machine guns along with it. On Sept. 29th, Honey was wounded while leading his men against

an enemy stronghold; he died Sept. 30. Honey's commanding officer wrote to his family, "He was the first to reach the final objective during the first day and throughout the days that followed he was an example of grit and determination that was the talk of the whole command. The men idolized him, and as they bore him by me that morning there was a tenderness of their care that only strong men can show."ⁱⁱ



Capt. George Fraser Kerr
Image: FindAGrave.com

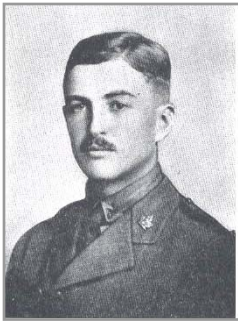
Lieutenant Kerr received his Victoria Cross at Bourlon Wood on the same day as Lewis Honey. Kerr was cited for handling his company with great skill to outflank enemy machine gun fire; he did so while still recovering from gunshot wounds. Lieutenant Kerr was to show bravery again when he later rushed an enemy strongpoint near the Arras-Cambrai road and single-handedly captured four machine-guns and 31 prisoners. A few days later at the Battle of Arras, on Sept. 2, 1919, under heavy fire Private Walter Rayfield earned his Victoria Cross. He rushed a German trench and after dispatching two of the enemy with his bayonet, took another ten prisoners. Later he killed an enemy sniper and took his position, thereby so demoralizing the enemy that a further 30 surrendered.



Sgt. William Merrifield
Image: The Royal Hamilton Light Infantry

A mere month later on Oct. 1, 1918, at Abancourt when **Sergeant William Merrifield's** unit was pinned down by heavy German machine-gun fire, the sergeant, like Honey, Kerr and Rayfield, took action. Charging out from his shell hole he leapt from one shell hole to another until he was able to take out two enemy machine guns. Even when wounded he fought on until a second wound forced him from the field. Prior to the war Merrifield had worked as a fireman for the Canadian Pacific Railroad; after the war the Victoria Cross recipient settled in Sault Ste. Marie to work for the Algoma Central Railway.

ⁱⁱ Gaffen, Fred "Samuel Lewis Honey" Dictionary of Canadian Biography Online, www.biographi.ca/009004-119.01-e.php?&id_nbr=7451



Lieut. Wallace Lloyd Algie
Photo: The Queen's Own
Rifles, Veterans Affairs

On Oct. 11, 1918, **Wallace Lloyd Algie** a banker from Alton was the last Ontarian to receive a Victoria Cross for his part in the Allied push towards Cambrai. Acting as company commander due to the deaths of all senior officers in his unit, his attacking troops came under heavy machine gun fire from a village north-east of Cambrai. With nine volunteers, Algie silenced the gun,

turned it on the enemy and enabled his party to reach the village. He cleared the other end of the village when he rushed another machine gun and killed the crew. Lieutenant Algie went back for reinforcements for the village they were now holding, but, was killed when leading the new men forward; he lies buried in France.



Rev. John Weir Foote
Image: The Royal Hamilton
Light Infantry

There was only about a third as many Victoria Crosses awarded in WWII as compared to WWI. **Rev. John Weir Foote** born in Madoc and **Major Frederick Albert Tilston**, born in Toronto, represent them well. Many Ontario locations may lay claim to the reverend as he was educated in London and Kingston and served a congregation in Port Hope before enlisting

in the Canadian Chaplain Service in Dec. 1939. Rev. Foote was serving with the Royal Hamilton Light Infantry as Honourary Captain when his actions earned him a Victoria Cross on Aug. 19, 1942.

On that day as the boats landed on the beach near Dieppe, Rev. Foote attached himself to the Regimental Aid Post set up in a slight depression only high enough for men lying down. For approximately eight hours as the heavy fire continued, Rev. Foote assisted the medical officer with the wounded but he also risked his life repeatedly to leave the shelter to give first-aid, inject morphine and carry wounded soldiers from the open beach to safety. When the tide went out, the Aid Post was moved to a stranded landing craft to which location Rev. Foote continuously and courageously carried the wounded. When an enemy shell set the new Aid Post on fire, he helped move the wounded once again always braving the shelling on the open beach. Rev. Foote carried the wounded one last time to deposit them in the safety of evacuating landing craft. At the end of this gauntlet of gunfire, Honourary Captain Foote deliberately turned away from the landing

craft that would have taken him to safety. Instead, he walked into the German position to be taken prisoner so that he could help "his men" who would be in captivity until May 5, 1945.

Rev. Foote achieved the rank of Major before demobilization in 1948, the same year that he was elected as MPP for Durham. He remained in government until 1959 when ill health forced him to retire. He made his home in Cobourg, Ontario where he was buried in 1988.

Major Tilston, a pharmacist by education, worked for a drug manufacturer in Toronto before enlisting in 1940. Tilston's unit was ordered to breach the German defence line and to clear the northern half of the Hochwald forest so that the balance of the brigade could pass. Early on the muggy morning of Mar. 1, 1945, the ground was too soft for tanks to support the attack. Nevertheless, Major Tilston personally led his men across 460 meters of open ground. Facing both heavy enemy fire and the danger of friendly shells, he pressed forward through a three meter deep belt of enemy wire. Though wounded in the head, the Major kept firing his Sten gun and shouting encouragement to his men. He personally silenced an enemy machine gun position by running forward to throw a grenade in it. Once the first enemy line was taken, Major Tilston left a reserve platoon and then pressed on to the second line at the edge of the woods hoping not to lose momentum.



Maj. Frederick Albert Tilston
Image: Library and Archives
Canada PA-189620

Before Major Tilston reached the woods, he was wounded in the hip and fell. Shouting to his men to carry on, he somehow managed to struggle to his feet and rejoined them as they reached the German trenches and dugouts which were densely manned. In the fierce hand to hand combat that ensued, Major Tilston continued to inspire his men; they seized two German company headquarters. But, the cost was high. With one quarter of

his men gone and the company reduced to 26 men, the enemy launched fierce counter-attacks. Even as mortar landed and machine gun fire wrought damage on an open flank, Major Tilston's brave actions moving out in the open to organize and direct his men, inspired them to hold firm against great odds. Six times he crossed a road dominated by enemy machine gun fire to bring back ammunition, grenades and even a wireless set. On his

final trip he was wounded in the leg. Barely conscious and now with three wounds, he gave instructions to his one remaining officer on how to hold the position. They held. The regiment was able to achieve its objective; the forest was cleared and the brigade passed through.

The wounds Major Tilston received in the action led to the amputation of both his legs. He returned to work as vice-president of sales in his former company a year to the day after he incurred his injuries; he rose to become president and chairman of the board.

These dozen Ontario Victoria Cross recipients not only betoken the bravery of the 94 Canadian recipients but also that of the many men who valiantly followed their lead. Teacher, banker, businessman, farmer, reverend, rail road man, custodian, M.P.P., prison guard, harbour pilot—they represent all walks of life. It is a roll call that democracy needed in war and still needs today.

After the Reading

- Which actions seemed most common to the Victoria Cross recipients?
- Which Ontario V.C. recipient seemed the most unusual and why?
- If you had to select just one Victoria Cross recipient upon which to model your behaviour, who would you select and why?

Extensions

- Research why and how 10,000 Ukrainian-Canadians served in WWI in spite of the internment of many of their heritage. What does this say to you about divided loyalties of Canadians with dual heritages?
- Create a chart of the 94 Canadian Victoria Cross recipients by rank (at the time the V.C. was earned) with the lowest rank at the top and the highest at the bottom. Work out the percentages of recipients per rank. Are there any conclusions one may draw from this chart?
- Draw conclusions about why the number of Victoria Crosses decreased significantly from WWI to WWII and why NO Victoria Cross has been awarded since Canada created its own version in 1993

Sources

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