

MEDALS AND MEMORIES

The Victoria Cross, Part I: And the Last Shall Be First

Character Education

- Contrast heroism in war and heroism in everyday life
- Assess how the stories of Victoria Cross heroes impact on your own perceptions of Canada and of heroism
- Distinguish between positive and negative risk-taking
- Develop personal standards for acceptable risk-taking

Facts

- The Victoria Cross, instituted by Queen Victoria in 1856 to recognize valour in the face of danger, was made retrospective to cover the period of the Crimean War in 1854; 1,356 V.C.s have been awarded
- Between the inception of the Victoria Cross in 1856 and 1945, Canadians earned 94 V.C.s—more per capita than any other nationality in the British Empire
- Private Timothy O’Hea earned a V.C. on Canadian soil in 1866

Before the Reading

- Valour, courage and bravery mean different things to different people. What do they mean to you? Give some examples
- Why are the first and the last remembered more frequently than what’s in the middle? List some firsts (i.e. man on the moon) and lasts that you remember
- Under what circumstances would you risk your life?

i Rutherford received the Military Cross for his actions Aug. 9, 1918, when he and his company captured Arvillers and Bangor on the Amiens Front. In their haste to clear out, the Germans left behind a box of pigeons and 300 new machine guns.

Reading



Lieut. Charles "Charlie" Smith Rutherford

When **Lieutenant Charles Smith Rutherford**, ahead of his troops and armed only with a revolver, charged towards a German machine gun pillbox at Monchy-le-Preux, Aug. 26, 1918, the Germans did not take him for earnest. When he took off his helmet and waved them to come out, they were thunder-struck. Persisting in his ruse, the lieutenant convinced the Germans they were surrounded. The bluff worked and the whole party of 45, including two officers and three machine guns, surrendered. Later in the same action, Lieutenant Rutherford, leading his men with the same der-ring-do, took another pill box and 35 further prisoners. Charles Rutherford, V.C., M.C., M.M., *i* born near Colborne, Ontario, enjoyed his Victoria Cross for another 70 years. Rutherford served in the Veteran Home Guard during WWII during which time part of his duty was to guard the Duke and Duchess of Windsor in the Bahamas. When he died at 97 years of age in 1989, he was the last surviving WWI recipient of the Victoria Cross.



Pickering Public Library





Sgt. Ernest "Smokey" Smith
Photo: Directorate of History and Heritage,
Dept. of National Defence

When **Ernest Alvia Smith, V.C., C.M., O.B.C., C.D.**, lay in state on Parliament Hill in Ottawa Aug. 3, 2005, he was only the ninth person to have been accorded this honour. Thousands paid their respects in Ottawa and in Vancouver where he received a full military funeral. At 91 years of age, Ernest "Smokey" Smith was Canada's last surviving Victoria Cross recipient.

Smokey's V.C. moment of valour occurred in 1917 when his unit, the

Seaforth Highlanders, was ordered to establish a bridgehead over the torrentially swollen Savio River in North Italy. Deep into the evening of Oct. 21, 1944, while advancing with two others in his anti-tank group, the trio was suddenly confronted by a troop of three Panther tanks supported by two self-propelled guns and at least 30 German infantry men. Without a moment's hesitation, and under heavy enemy fire, Smith directed the two men to a field position where their P.I.A.T. artillery piece could best be used. Leaving one man with the gun, he and his other comrade obtained another P.I.A.T. by crossing the dangers of the open road.

Unfortunately, Smith's companion was wounded as a German tank bearing down on them sprayed the ditches. Then with only nine meters between himself and the charging tank, Smith took a position in the open, stood his ground under gruelling gunfire and took out the approaching menace. Ten German infantry men bounded off the disabled tank, charging Smith with Schmeisser sub-machine guns and grenades. Smith killed four at point blank range with his Tommy gun. After reloading with a magazine he found in the ditch, Smith held off another advancing tank and the remaining German infantry. Fighting with utter disregard for enemy fire, Smith drove off the Germans who fled in total disarray from the lone combatant on the road.

As the third tank started to fire from a distance, Smith helped his wounded comrade to cover and then returned to his position. With no further offensive in the offing, the battalion consolidated the bridgehead position that led to the capture of San Giorgio Di Cesena and a further allied advance.

King George VI bestowed the V.C. on Smith personally at Buckingham Palace. Smith's nine promotions and demo-

MEDALS AND MEMORIES MINUTES



A.B. William Edward Hall
Image: Nova Scotia Museum

William Edward Hall was the first Canadian seaman, first black in the British Empire and third Canadian to receive the Victoria Cross. Before receiving the V.C., Hall had earned a medal from Turkey and one from England with clasps for Sebastapol and Inkerman.

When Quartermaster Hall retired as a petty officer, first class in 1876 he left behind a distinguished 28 year naval career which included a seven year stint as a gunnery instructor. Hall earned his V.C. Nov. 16, 1857, when he and Lieutenant Thomas Young were the last men standing from his ship, the *Shannon's*, gun crews. One 24 pounder and these two men were the last hope to breach the wall of the heavily fortified Shah Najaf mosque in Lucknow, India. The *Shannon* and her crew were part of a much larger effort to relieve a British garrison besieged during the Indian mutiny. Hall and Young were at such close range to the mosque's seemingly impregnable wall that debris from their shell blasts rained upon them; each recoil sent them out into a hail of concentrated enemy gunfire to bring back the gun, reload and fire again. Finally they succeeded in opening up a breach large enough to allow in Highlander troops. Hall's V.C. citation read, "Finally in one of the most supreme moments in all the age of a long story of courage, Hall fired the charge which opened up the wall and enabled the British to push through to the relief of the garrison and ultimately to the quelling of the mutiny and the restoration of peace and order in India." Hall, was born in Horton, Nova Scotia to former slaves who had found freedom in Canada during the War of 1812.

AUDIO ~ ONTARIO BLACK HISTORY SOCIETY <http://epe.lac-bac.gc.ca/100/205/301/ic/cdc/obho/scenes/index.html> (needs RealPlayer installed)

tions to corporal and back to private were quickly forgotten as he went on to become a poster boy for the Canadian War Bonds drive. Smith re-enlisted for the Korean War and ended his military career as a sergeant.

http://archives.cbc.ca/war_conflict/second_world_war/clips/9861/



Bust of Lieut. Robert Hampton "Hammy" Gray at Valiants Memorial in Ottawa

Although Ernest Smith was Canada's last surviving Victoria Cross recipient, he was not the last person to earn the award. That honour goes to another son of British Columbia, **Lieutenant Robert Hampton known as "Hammy"**

Gray. Serving first in the Royal Canadian Naval Volunteer Reserve, Hammy qualified as pilot with the

British Fleet Air Arm. He flew Hawker Hurricanes in Africa for two years before training on Corsair fighter planes. He was first mentioned in despatches for his spirited attack on three destroyers while having his plane's rudder shot off. Gray earned a Distinguished Service Cross for assisting in the sinking of a destroyer in the vicinity of Tokyo.

On Aug. 9, 1945, the same day as a second atomic bomb was dropped Lieutenant Gray led an attack on a Japanese destroyer at Onagawa Wan, Honshu. In spite of heavy fire from shore batteries and from five Japanese warships nearby, Gray flew in very low to press home his attack. With one 227 kilo bomb shot off and his Corsair in flames, he steadied the plane and aimed his remaining bomb. Gray's final hit exploded the ship's ammunition locker blowing out her starboard side. As the *Amakuza* rolled and sank, Gray's burning aircraft rolled over, hit the water and broke up; his body was never recovered.

Gray's act of bravery was so impressive that a memorial to honour him stands at Onagawa Wan, just metres from the spot where his plane crashed; it is the only memorial dedicated to a foreign soldier on Japanese soil. Lieutenant Gray is one of 14 figures commemorated at the Valiants Memorial in Ottawa.

<http://www.valiants.ca/English/Gray.html>

http://www.valiants.ca/French/Gray_f.html

The last surviving Victoria Cross recipients, and the last Canadian to earn one, admirably represent the single-minded determination and valour in the face of danger demonstrated by Canada's 92 other Victoria Cross recipients.



Wounded Canadians on way to aid-post. Battle of Passchendaele. November, 1917.

Des canadiens blessés en route vers l'infirmerie. Bataille de Passchendaele. Novembre 1917

Credit: Canada. Dept. of National Defence/Library and Archives/Canada/

After the Reading

- Find pictures of the items mentioned in these reading: Smeisser, Tommy gun, Hawker Hurricane, Corsair, P.I.A.T. Write the history of one
- Provide some possible explanations for Alvin Smith's nine promotions and demotions. What does promotion and demotion usually signify?
- Military terms used in these readings have become part of everyday usage. Use five of the following terms in a sentence in a modern way: bridgehead, outflank, counterattack, stronghold

Extensions

- The Canadian movie *Passchendaele*, the German novel *All's Quiet on the Western Front* and the war poems of Siegfried Sassoon and Wilfred Owen provide excellent follow up to evaluate the pros and cons of heroism in war
- Hugh Cairns was the last Canadian to win the Victoria Cross in WWI. Look him up in the Canadian Dictionary of Biography On Line. Discuss the motivations for his valour

Sources

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- <http://museum.gov.ns.ca/infos/william-hall-info.pdf>

Audio

- Ernest Alvia Smith http://archives.cbc.ca/war_conflict/second_world_war/clips/9861/
- William Edward Hall Ontario Black History Society
<http://epe.lac-bac.gc.ca/100/205/301/ic/cdc/obho/scenes/index.html> (needs RealPlayer installed)