



MEDICAL RECIPIENTS OF THE VICTORIA CROSS DURING THE ANGLO-BOER WAR, 1899 - 1902

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'The most democratic and at the same time the most exclusive of all orders of chivalry — the most enviable order of the Victoria Cross.'

Prince Edward of Wales, later King Edward VII

The need for a British decoration for valour in time of war became apparent during the Crimean War, and in response to this Queen Victoria instituted the Victoria Cross (VC) in a warrant dated 29 January 1856. The essential qualification was the performance of 'some signal act of valour or devotion in the presence of the enemy'. At the Queen's request, the cross was to be cast from the metal of cannons captured during the Crimean War, and to this day ingots melted from the guns captured at Sebastopol are held in stock at the Central Ordnance Depot for this purpose.¹ The demand has never exceeded the supply of metal — fewer than 1 500 of these crosses have been awarded since 1854, when the first warrant became active. There have been a number of warrants since that time, but they have served merely to broaden the scope of the award and to deal with practical matters related to it. The essential qualification for earning the VC has, however, remained unchanged.²

During the Anglo-Boer War, which followed less than 50 years later, the VC was awarded 78 times, including seven times to medical officers who distinguished themselves by unusual bravery. However, the award of this distinction to medical officers did not occur as a matter of course. When the first two medical men who received the VC in the Anglo-Boer War, namely Major Babtie and Lieutenant Douglas, were recommended for this award, an editorial in the *BMJ* indicated an anomaly in this procedure. The brave actions of these two officers had been reported in telegrams and in correspondence from the front, but they had not been mentioned in dispatches, where such recommendations are properly made. In this editorial the rumour that the Commander-in-Chief at the time

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was against the bestowal of the VC on medical officers was also mentioned. Apparently Sir Redvers Buller had excluded a non-medical candidate from consideration for the VC on the basis that he was only obeying orders and doing his duty.³ It was pointed out that such a restriction on awarding the VC would be contrary to the Queen's intention in establishing this award 'for conspicuous bravery in action, without any distinction whatsoever as to rank, corps, or class'. This matter was apparently resolved for the time being, but was raised again with the last award of the VC in that war, namely to Surgeon-Captain Martin-Leake.

The seven medical officers who received the VC will be presented in chronological order.

HENRY EDWARD MANNING DOUGLAS (1875 - 1939)

Born at Gillingham, Kent on 11 July 1875, he received his education in Edinburgh, took the Scottish triple qualification in 1898, and in July of the same year entered the Royal Army



Major-General Henry Edward Manning Douglas, VC, CMG, DSO.
(Photograph: Courtesy of the Army Medical Services Museum, Aldershot.)

Medical Corps (RAMC), with which he served in South Africa from the beginning of the war. During the battle of Magersfontein (11 December 1899) Lieutenant Douglas RAMC was the medical officer in charge of the Black Watch (Second Battalion Royal Highlanders), which suffered so heavily in that encounter. Later that morning he lost touch with the Black Watch and was attending the wounded of another unit when he was called to attend a wounded officer of the Gordon Highlanders in the front line of fire. He immediately made his way across open land under heavy fire to within about 250 yards of the Boer trenches where he attended to Captain Gordon, Major Robinson and some wounded men. Despite the persistent heavy fire he continued to attend to the wounded until a general retire was ordered. Later that day, while procuring water for the men of the Black Watch, he suffered a severe facial wound from a shell fragment. The VC was conferred on him for these acts of heroism.⁴

As well as the advance on Kimberley, Lieutenant Douglas also took part in operations in the Cape Colony and Orange River Colony. He was mentioned in dispatches in March 1900, and for his activities in the South African campaign he received the Queen's medal with two clasps as well as the Distinguished Service Order (DSO). He was invalided to England in 1901 but served with the RAMC in a number of subsequent campaigns, namely East Africa (1904), Somaliland (1903/4), India (1904 - 1908), Serbo-Turkey (1912/13), and Serbo-Bulgaria (1913).

These activities earned him several decorations. During the 1914 - 1918 war he served for 4 years in France, mostly as Assistant Director of Medical Services (ADMS) and later at Archangel again as ADMS of the British troops in Russia. He was mentioned in dispatches twice, and received a brevet as a Colonel and the Companion of the Order of St Michael and St George (CMG) as well as the French Croix de Guerre with Palm.

In 1926 he was appointed Deputy Director of Medical Services of the Scottish Command in Edinburgh and later that year became Commandant of the Army Medical College at Millbank. On promotion to Major General he went to India as Deputy Director of the Southern Command at Poona, and retired from the RAMC in 1929.⁵ He died in 1939 at Droitwich in Worcester.

WILLIAM BABTIE (1859 - 1921)

Major Babtie, a Scot by birth, obtained his Bachelor of Medicine in 1880 and entered the Army Medical Service the next year. By 1893 he had attained the rank of Major and after a spell as Senior Medical Officer in Crete, for which he received the CMG, he was sent to South Africa on the staff of the Natal Army in 1899. It was at the battle of Colenso that Major Babtie, under extremely difficult circumstances, distinguished himself and earned the VC.



Descriptions of this act of bravery were provided by two of Babbie's medical colleagues who were in South Africa at the time, namely Dr Arthur Conan Doyle and Mr Frederic Treves.

Colonel Long had rapidly brought his batteries of field artillery to within 1 000 yards of the enemy and in doing so had outstripped the infantry brigades on their flanks and opened fire. 'Suddenly there was poured upon them from the shelter of a mimosa wood such a torrent of lead that in a moment there was scarcely a horse or man standing.'⁶ 'Officers and men were falling fast. The guns could not be worked, and yet they could not be removed, for every effort to bring up teams from the shelter where the limbers lay, ended in the death of the horses. The survivors took refuge from the murderous fire in that small hollow to which Long had been carried, a hundred yards or so from the bullet-splashed cannon.'⁷

'The galloper who took up the news of the disaster reported the need of help for the injured. To this call Major Babbie at once responded as a volunteer. Three times was his horse shot under him before he reached the donga. Here in the face of galling fire he dragged the wounded into shelter, and a little later he ventured out under a rain of lead to bring in Lieutenant Roberts who was lying in the open desperately wounded.' In this latter action, he was assisted by Captain Congreve.

'For some seven hours Babbie kept the wounded in the shallow donga, no one daring to lift a head above the edge of the dip. He alone had a water bottle, and he doled out what water he had in a sixty minim measuring glass. He was also able to relieve pain by morphine, and when not otherwise occupied he sheltered poor Roberts' face from the scorching sun by holding above it a letter he chanced to have in his pocket. It was not until darkness was setting in that it was possible to venture from the scant shelter the donga provided.' Visiting this battlefield on an idyllic summer's day a few weeks later, Treves concludes his story of Babbie's heroism: 'No brave deed had ever a gentler setting.'⁸

The VC awarded to Major Babbie was one of seven won at the battle of Colenso. The other recipients were Captains Congreve and Schofield, Lieutenant Roberts, Corporals Nurse and Ravenhill and Captain Lyster. The VC awarded to Lieutenant Roberts (son of Field Marshal Lord Roberts) was the first posthumous award of this distinction and also one of the rare instances where both father and son received the VC.

For his services during the campaign Major Babbie was mentioned in dispatches, received the Queen's medal with five clasps and was promoted to Lieutenant Colonel. After the war a distinguished career in the Army Medical Services followed and from 1914 to 1915 he served as Director General of Medical Services in India. In the First World War he served as Principal Director of Medical Services in the Mediterranean (1915/16), and was active in operations in Egypt, the Dardanelles and

Salonika. In 1912 he was created a CB (military), in 1916 a Knight Commander of the Order of St Michael and St George (KCMG) and a Knight Commander of the Order of the Bath (KCB) in 1919 — the year that he retired with the rank of Lieutenant General. He died on 11 September 1920 while on holiday in Belgium.⁸

EDGAR THOMAS INKSON (1872 - 1942)

Edgar Thomas Inkson was born on 5 April 1872 in Naini Tal in India. He was educated at Edinburgh Collegiate School and took the conjoint qualification, University College Hospital, London in 1898. Following in the footsteps of his father, who had been Surgeon General of the Army Medical Services, he chose the army as his career and became a surgeon on probation in April 1899. Ten weeks before the commencement of the war in South Africa he received his commission, and as Medical Officer to the Royal Horse Artillery he joined the Natal Field Force.

He distinguished himself at Hart's Hill on the Tugela River when he carried the severely wounded second Lieutenant Devenish, who was unable to walk, for 300 - 400 yards over exposed ground under very heavy fire to a place of safety.⁹ This



Edgar Thomas Inkson. (Photograph, Courtesy of the Army Medical Services Museum, Aldershot.)



was gazetted on 15 January 1901 and in August of that year, while on duty at Magaliesburg, Inkson was informed that he would receive the VC from the Duke in Pietermaritzburg.¹⁰ (This was the Duke of Cornwall and York, the future King George V, who visited South Africa and was in Pietermaritzburg from 13 to 15 August 1901.)

Inkson was promoted to the rank of Captain in November 1900; besides the VC he received the Queen's medal with five clasps and the King's medal with two clasps. During the 1914-1918 war, as commander of a field hospital and later of a general hospital, he again displayed exemplary conduct, was mentioned in dispatches twice and was awarded the DSO.¹¹ He retired in 1926 with the rank of Colonel and died at Chichester on 19 February 1947.

WILLIAM HENRY SNYDER NICKERSON (1875 - 1954)

William Nickerson was born in New Brunswick in Canada, the son of an army chaplain. He went to school in Manchester and also studied medicine at Owens College in that city, where he graduated MB ChB from Victoria University in 1896. He entered the RAMC as lieutenant in 1898 and served with the



William Nickerson. (Photograph: Courtesy of the Army Medical Services Museum, Aldershot.)

Mounted Infantry in South Africa for the entire duration of the Anglo-Boer War.¹²

On 12 February 1901 the action that gained him the VC was gazetted: 'At Wakkerstroom on the evening of 20 April 1900, during the advance of the infantry to support the mounted troops, Lieutenant Nickerson went, in the most gallant manner, under a heavy rifle and shell fire, to attend a wounded man, dressed his wounds and remained with him till he had him conveyed to a place of safety.'⁹ This was the first VC awarded by King Edward VII.¹³

The rest of his stay in South Africa was not without incident, as he was apparently captured at Ventersburg later in 1900 but was released shortly afterwards. In February of the next year the *BMJ* wrote that he was discharged from hospital back to duty, but there is no indication as to why he had been admitted.^{14,15}

In the 1914-1918 war he served as a major with the cavalry in the retreat from Antwerp and saw further action in the battles of Ypres, at Neuve Chapelle and on the Somme. He was mentioned in dispatches six times, promoted to Brevet Colonel, and appointed CMG for his war services in 1916 and CB for his services in the Black Sea theatre of war in 1919. In that year he also received the Greek Medal for Military Merit. His career in the army is marked by the fact that he gained rapid promotion and reached the rank of Major General at a very young age. In 1927 he was appointed Director of Medical Services in India and was honorary surgeon to the King from 1925 to 1933, the year of his retirement.

In the Second World War he served variously as a medical officer in an Atlantic convoy, in the river emergency service of the Port of London Authority and in the Home Guard. He died at his home at Kintyre, Argyllshire on 10 April 1954.¹⁶

NEVILLE REGINALD HOWSE (1863 - 1930)

Neville Howse was born in Stogursey, Somerset in 1863, and received his medical education at the London Hospital, where he obtained the Member of the Royal College of Surgeons (MRCS) and Licentiate of the Royal College of Physicians (LRCP). In 1889, for reasons of health, he went to Australia where he commenced practice, returning temporarily to London in 1895 in order to obtain the Fellow of the Royal College of Surgeons (FRCS) in 1897. Back in Australia he established a practice in Orange, where he was fondly referred to by patients and colleagues as 'Howse of Orange'.¹⁷

A staunch imperialist, he came to South Africa as a Surgeon Lieutenant in the New South Wales Medical Staff Corps, attached to the New South Wales Lancers. He took part in operations in the Orange Free State and the Transvaal from May 1900 to May 1902, for which he received the Queen's Medal with six clasps, the King's Medal with two clasps and the VC.



The event that brought him this award was gazetted as follows: 'During the action at Vredefort, July 24th 1900, Capt. Howse went out under a heavy cross fire and picked up a wounded man, and carried him to a place of shelter.'⁹ Starr tells the story in a more dramatic way: 'Lieutenant N R Howse, New South Wales Army Medical Corps, seeing a trumpeter fall, rode out to his assistance. His horse was shot under him but he continued on foot, dressed the soldier's wounds and carried him back through heavy crossfire to shelter.'¹⁸

Starr continues: 'This exclusive award for bravery in the field was the first Australian VC for the war and also the last. No further Victoria Cross has since been given to medical personnel of the Australian forces.'

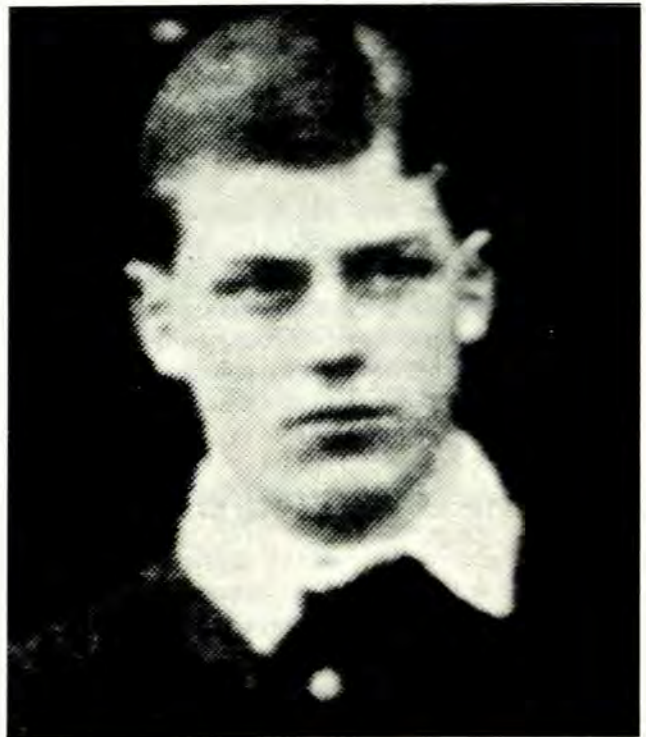
After the South African Campaign Captain Howse returned to his practice in Orange, and in the ensuing years was elected mayor on several occasions. With the outbreak of the First World War he immediately left his practice to take command of the medical detachment accompanying the Australian Naval and Military Expeditionary Force. He rose rapidly in rank and in 1915 was director of the Australian Imperial Forces in Egypt, France and England, with a further promotion to Surgeon General. He was created KCB in 1917 and KCMG in 1919.¹⁷

Following this war his political career commenced when he was elected to the House of Representatives. He became Minister of Defence but resigned in 1928 due to ill health, taking over the Department of Home and Territories and that of Health and Repatriation. He died on 17 September 1930 following an operation. His zeal, honesty and sincerity of purpose in his roles as surgeon, soldier and statesman were widely acclaimed.

THOMAS JOSEPH CREAN (1873 - 1923)

Born on 19 April 1873 in Dublin, Thomas Crean was educated in that city and studied medicine at the Irish College of Surgeons, taking the LRCSI and LRCPI in 1896. In 1891 he received the Royal Humane Society's testimonial for saving life at sea. For 3 years (1894 - 1896) he was a member of the Irish International Rugby fifteen and first came to South Africa as a member of the British Rugby fifteen that visited this country in 1896. By all descriptions he was an enthusiastic and robust rugby player.¹⁸ He liked this country and settled in Rosburgh as a general practitioner. At the outbreak of the South African War he enlisted as a trooper in the Imperial Light Horse and in March 1900 received a commission as Captain, but in June he resigned his combatant commission to become Surgeon Captain to the same corps. Early on in the war he was wounded in the battle of Elandslaagte, although not seriously. He suffered very serious wounds at Tygerskloof on 11 February 1901, the encounter in which he earned the VC.¹⁹

The event was gazetted as follows: 'During the action with De Wet at Tygerskloof, December 18th 1901, this officer



Thomas Crean, doctor, soldier and rugby player. (Photograph: Courtesy of Mr L Laubscher.)

continued to attend to the wounded in the firing line under a heavy fire at only 150 yards' range, after he himself had been wounded and only desisted when he was hit a second time, and, as it was first thought, mortally wounded'.⁹

The story of Crean's action is also told with some added detail. Under heavy fire he went out to attend to two wounded and calmly continued with his work despite being wounded in the arm. While kneeling next to one of the injured men he was struck again, this time in the abdomen. Thinking himself mortally wounded he sat bolt upright and cried out: 'By Christ, I'm kilt entoirely!'. He survived and received his VC at Buckingham Palace in 1902.²⁰ For service during the South African campaign he received the Queen's medal with five clasps and the King's medal with two clasps.

At the close of 1902 he accepted a regular commission in the RAMC but resigned 4 years later when he joined the Special Reserve of the RAMC. In 1902 he was awarded the Arnott Memorial gold medal and in the same year was made honorary FRCS, Ireland. This latter award was presented to Crean at the annual dinner of the Irish College of Surgeons where the Lord Lieutenant of Ireland referred to Crean's story as one 'which sent a thrill through their hearts and was worthy of the emulation of all young Irishmen'.²¹

During the First World War he rejoined the RAMC as a major and served with the first cavalry brigade in France, was mentioned in dispatches on 22 June 1915 and received the DSO



from the same date. In 1916 he was made commanding officer of the 44th Field Ambulance and subsequent to that was Medical Officer in charge of the hospital in the royal enclosure at Ascot. He died in London in March 1923.¹⁹

ARTHUR MARTIN-LEAKE (1874 - 1953)

Arthur Martin-Leake was the last recipient of the VC in the Anglo-Boer War but was to become the most celebrated because he accomplished what could hardly have been foreseen — in 1914 he was awarded the VC for a second time.

He was born at Highcross, Hertfordshire in 1873, was educated at Westminster School and received his medical training at the University College Hospital, qualifying MRCS, LRCP in 1898. In 1899 he enlisted as a trooper in the Hertfordshire Yeomanry because he could not obtain immediate employment as a medical officer in South Africa. He served with this unit until its return to England a year later, but he remained in South Africa as a civilian surgeon employed by the army. In 1900 when the South African Constabulary was formed by General Baden-Powell, he joined that force as Surgeon Captain.

As a member of this unit he demonstrated his remarkable bravery during an engagement at Van Tondershoek near Vlakfontein in the Transvaal. The unit came under heavy fire at close range; on seeing Sergeant Waller being hit, Leake immediately rushed to his aid. On account of the heavy fire he

had to lie down while attending to the Sergeant's leg. Leake then went to Lieutenant Abrahams, who was mortally wounded, and tried to make the dying officer comfortable. While doing this Martin-Leake was struck three times but continued at his task till he fell over exhausted. The group was captured by the Boers who expressed regret that they had wounded Martin-Leake, but on seeing him rush from one point to the other they had not realised that he was attending to the wounded. While he lay in the veld as the wounded were being cared for, he refused water until all the other wounded had been served. The wounds he received were of such gravity that it was necessary for him to return to England.²²

The award of the VC to Martin-Leake was gazetted on 13 May 1902, but before this happened the Principal Medical Officer of the British Army in South Africa was asked whether, in his opinion, Leake had done anything more than his duty. To this Surgeon General Sir W D Wilson responded: '... Captain Leake had the chance of distinguishing himself and he availed himself of it. He could, I consider, have been more careful of his own personal safety and not have incurred censure for doing so... I consider your question, "was he doing anything more than his duty?" would exclude everyone from the Victoria Cross, for it is everyone's duty to do his best.'²⁰

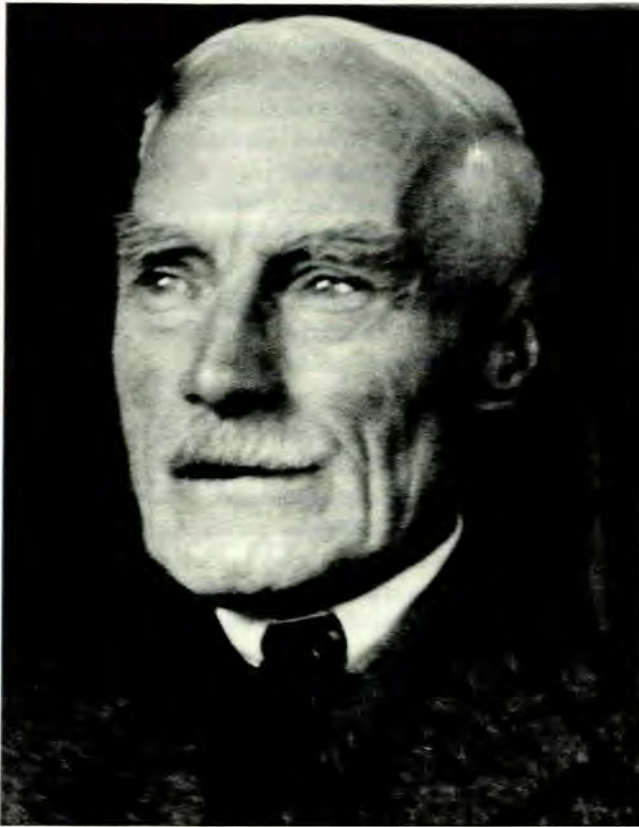
In 1903 Martin-Leake was admitted as a Fellow of the Royal College of Surgeons and later that year went to India as administrative officer of the Bengal-Nagpur Railway where he became medical officer to the Infantry Volunteers provided by the Indian Railways. In 1912 he volunteered for service with the unit of the British Red Cross Society serving with the Montenegrin army. For his services as a Medical Officer he was awarded the Montenegrin Red Cross decoration. News of the outbreak of war in 1914 reached him in Calcutta and in a most unorthodox way he reached Marseilles via Malta. He was immediately commissioned as a Lieutenant and appointed to the 5th Field Ambulance, 2nd Division. For bravery during the first battle of Ypres, Martin-Leake was awarded a bar to his VC. The official citation tells of his 'most conspicuous bravery and devotion to duty throughout the campaign, especially during the period 29 October to 8 November 1914, near Zonnebeke, in rescuing, while exposed to constant fire, a large number of wounded who were lying close to the enemy's trenches'.

Before he could receive the bar from the King on 25 July there was some unusual activity to retrieve Lieutenant Martin-Leake's VC from Calcutta, where he had left it when he was in such haste to join the action in France. It was timeously retrieved by the Military Secretary for this very special occasion.

He continued to serve in Europe during the rest of the war and attained the rank of Lieutenant Colonel. After the war he returned to India and retired from his position with the Bengal-Nagpur Railway in 1937. During the Second World War he was in command of a mobile medical unit in Hertfordshire. He died at Marshalls near Ware on 22 June 1953.²²



Col. Arthur Martin-Leake, VC. (Photograph: Courtesy of the Director, National Army Museum, London.)



Martin-Leake in later years. (Photograph: Courtesy of the Wellcome Institute Library, London.)

CONCLUSION

Why revisit this group of medical recipients of the VC?

Since the beginning of time stories about acts of bravery have fascinated listeners and readers of all ages. Indeed, much of the literature dating to the beginnings of our civilisation falls into the category of 'Heldensagen' — tales of the brave. Our time is no different, but we are probably more inclined to ask questions about the nature of such acts and the reason why some individuals have this capacity for selfless activity.

The fact that all the 'heroes' in the group presented here were medically qualified adds another dimension to these questions and raises others. Would there be, or should there be, a greater tendency for a medically qualified person to see such an act to a fellow human being as a duty or an extension of duty? It is clear from some of the initial official speculation about medical men earning a VC that these were very real considerations. If doctors did see such acts as a duty, would one not have expected more of them to win the VC?

Other questions regarding this group are: What else did they have in common apart from being medically qualified? Is there a personality type that is given to this kind of action? Will one person repeatedly show this extreme concern for others while

another may never show such a degree of consideration? In this small group there is a suggestion that there may be such individuals.

Is such an act just something that occurs on the spur of the moment and never again? This is difficult to judge, as one cannot know whether other opportunities presented themselves to the 'hero'. Where such opportunities did recur, some of the doctors responded bravely on these subsequent occasions.

Is it an impulsive act of a person who has no insight, and therefore no fear? This would imply a person of rather limited intelligence and probably one with a rather limited accomplishment potential. This group certainly disproves that. One and all they displayed a well-developed sense of duty and responsibility, both before and after their acts of bravery. All of them continued in responsible careers, which they filled with distinction and dedication.

Sir John Smyth VC, probably summed it up best when he said: 'To those who ask me — and many do — what sort of men win the Victoria Cross, I can only reply — any sort. Courage is a queer thing and although many people have tried to analyse it, I myself think that it is without rhyme or reason. And men react to different stresses and different conditions in very different ways, in accordance with their individual characteristics. Lord Moran wrote in his book *The Anatomy of Courage* that courage is expendable and I feel that he is right. This alone makes it difficult to predict, for who knows at what precise moment any particular person will run out of it. To very few it is given to be without fear; most men are afraid of something, most of us of many things. How lucky is the man whose courage is at sticking point at the right moment. But if there is any single common denominator amongst all VC's I would say that it is a degree of obstinacy — a refusal to be beaten or pushed around.'²

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