

1997

Richard Rowland Thompson and His Queen's Scarf: an Historical Investigation

Cameron Pulsifer

Canadian War Museum, cameron.pulsifer@gmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholars.wlu.ca/cmh>

Recommended Citation

Pulsifer, Cameron "Richard Rowland Thompson and His Queen's Scarf: an Historical Investigation." *Canadian Military History* 6, 1 (1997)

This Canadian War Museum is brought to you for free and open access by Scholars Commons @ Laurier. It has been accepted for inclusion in Canadian Military History by an authorized editor of Scholars Commons @ Laurier. For more information, please contact scholarscommons@wlu.ca.

Richard Rowland Thompson and his Queen's Scarf An Historical Investigation

Cameron Pulsifer

In 1956 ceremonies were held in London to mark the centenary of the inauguration of the Victoria Cross. During these ceremonies an article appeared in the *Illustrated London News* entitled "The World's Rarest Award for Valour." This, according to the article, was a scarf that had been "...worked by the fingers of Queen Victoria when she was in her 82nd year...Only four were made by the Queen as a special recognition of bravery in the field," and it was "maintained by some even to supersede the Victoria Cross."¹ The article indicated that the scarves were intended to be presented to Colonial private soldiers serving in the South African War, and that one of the recipients was a Canadian, Private R.R. Thompson of the Royal Canadian Regiment.

Brigadier R.S. Malone, Vice President of the *Winnipeg Free Press* and a prominent public relations official with the Canadian army during the Second World War, was in London for the commemoration. He was intrigued by the article on the Queen's Scarf. On his return to Canada he wrote a letter to the Department of National Defence requesting whatever information they had on Thompson, a forgotten figure in Canada. DND handed the request over to the Department of Veterans Affairs, which at that time possessed the relevant documentation. They replied that Thompson was born in Cork, Ireland, and had served with The Royal Canadian Regiment in South Africa and that he had been awarded the Queen's Scarf "in recognition of his conspicuous gallantry during the campaign."² Malone published an article on the subject in his newspaper, but thereafter seems to have lost



interest in it. His article did, however, succeed in drawing attention to a unique award and its recipient, knowledge of which had long since disappeared from the Canadian public consciousness.

Interest remained alive at DND, however, and in the early 1960s Bombardier Kenneth Richardson, serving with the army's information department, was asked to see what he could do to track down more information on Thompson, specifically concerning the site of his grave and the location of the scarf. Eventually he succeeded in locating Thompson's grave just outside Ottawa in the cemetery at New Chelsea in the Gatineau, and in tracking down Thompson's descendants in Cork, Ireland, who possessed the scarf. His efforts culminated in the refurbishment of Thompson's hitherto neglected and dilapidated gravesite and, in accordance with a "permanent loan" agreement with the family, the repatriation of the scarf to Canada in 1965. The scarf was deposited at the Canadian War Museum, where it remains on display in the section of its first floor gallery dealing with the South African War.³

Despite the best efforts of a number of commentators there remains a great deal of misinformation current about the scarf. Specifically, this concerning the circumstances under which Thompson received it and its status as an award. As recently as 1991 J.L. Granatstein and D.J. Bercuson, in their book *War and Peacekeeping*, record that Thompson's commanding officer, Lieutenant-Colonel W.D. Otter, "recommended him for the Victoria Cross. Instead the Ottawa soldier received the "Queen's Scarf of Honour," one of only five scarves [in fact

there were eight] knitted by Queen Victoria and apparently intended to be a higher honour than the V.C."⁴ And most accounts still affirm that Thompson was recommended for the V.C. before being awarded the Queen's Scarf. The latest work to perpetuate this misreading of the evidence is Carman Miller's otherwise authoritative account of the Canadian South African war effort, *Painting the Map Red: Canada and the South African War, 1899-1902*. He writes: "Although his company commander, Captain Maynard Rogers and Otter recommended Thompson for the Victoria Cross...in July 1900 he received one of seven [sic] Queen's Scarves, knitted by Queen Victoria, for private soldiers in designated units."⁵ What then does a close reading of the evidence reveal concerning the Queen's Scarf itself, the precise circumstances under which Thompson became a recipient and its status as an award *vis-à-vis* the Victoria Cross?

The second South African or, as it is popularly known, the Boer War, broke out in October 1899. Boer forces moved quickly and during the first months of the war British garrisons in Kimberley, Mafeking, and Ladysmith were cut off and besieged. This was followed by a string of humiliating British defeats in the Battles of Stormberg, Magersfontein, and Colenso. To get a grip on the situation, the British appointed the aged, but still vigorous, Field Marshal Lord Frederick Roberts of Kandahar to command the Imperial forces in South Africa. Arriving at Cape Town in January he and his Chief of Staff, Major-General Lord Herbert Kitchener of Khartoum, decided to launch a bold strike across country, away from the major north-south railway line, against Bloemfontein, the capital city of the southernmost of the two Boer republics, the Orange Free State. Its capture would provide access to another important railway heading northwards towards the ultimate objective of the campaign, Pretoria, the capital of the Transvaal, lying about 400 kilometres further north. The attack towards Bloemfontein would have the additional advantage of threatening the rear of the Boer forces under General Piet Cronje that were at Magersfontein south of Kimberly, about 150 kilometres to the west and slightly north of Bloemfontein.

British cavalry under Major-General John French relieved Kimberley on 15 February. This, and a dawning realization of the threat developing from the south, induced Cronje to begin the process of withdrawing his forces eastwards to Bloemfontein. British forces caught up with him on the 17th at a spot near Paardeberg Drift on the north banks of the Modder River, about a fifth of the way back to the capital. Here the beleaguered Boer commander stopped, laagered his wagons, and determined to make a stand. The main British force advancing from the south came upon him at this position after a gruelling overland march on reduced rations and water on the morning of 18 February. With them were 31 officers and 866 men of the 2nd (Special Service) Battalion, The Royal Canadian Regiment, who were about to fight their first major battle. Cronje put up a stubborn resistance, but finally, with relentless British artillery fire taking its toll, and with mounting distress within his laager, he surrendered on 27 February - the first significant British victory of the war.⁶ Over the course of the following month the Orange Free State was occupied, and the British set about preparing for their advance on Pretoria (which fell in June).

The initial British defeats in the war had generated something approaching war hysteria in Britain and the first British victories at Paardeberg and in the Orange Free State had resulted in a considerable sense of national relief. It was sometime during this period that Queen Victoria, then aged 82, set herself to crocheting a number of scarves that she apparently intended to be presented to deserving ordinary soldiers serving with colonial units in South Africa. There is virtually no documentation concerning the origins of these scarves in the Royal Archives at Windsor. The only specifically royal reference to the scarves was made in 1901 when, after her husband had presented the Australian recipient, Alfred Du Frayer, with his scarf, the then Duchess of York (later Queen Mary) reportedly informed Du Frayer that she recalled helping the aged monarch "when she had dropped stitches whilst working the scarves."⁷ The only reference to the scarves in G.E. Buckle's standard edition of the *Letters of Queen Victoria* is a letter from Lord Roberts to the Queen of 8 August 1900 wherein he states:



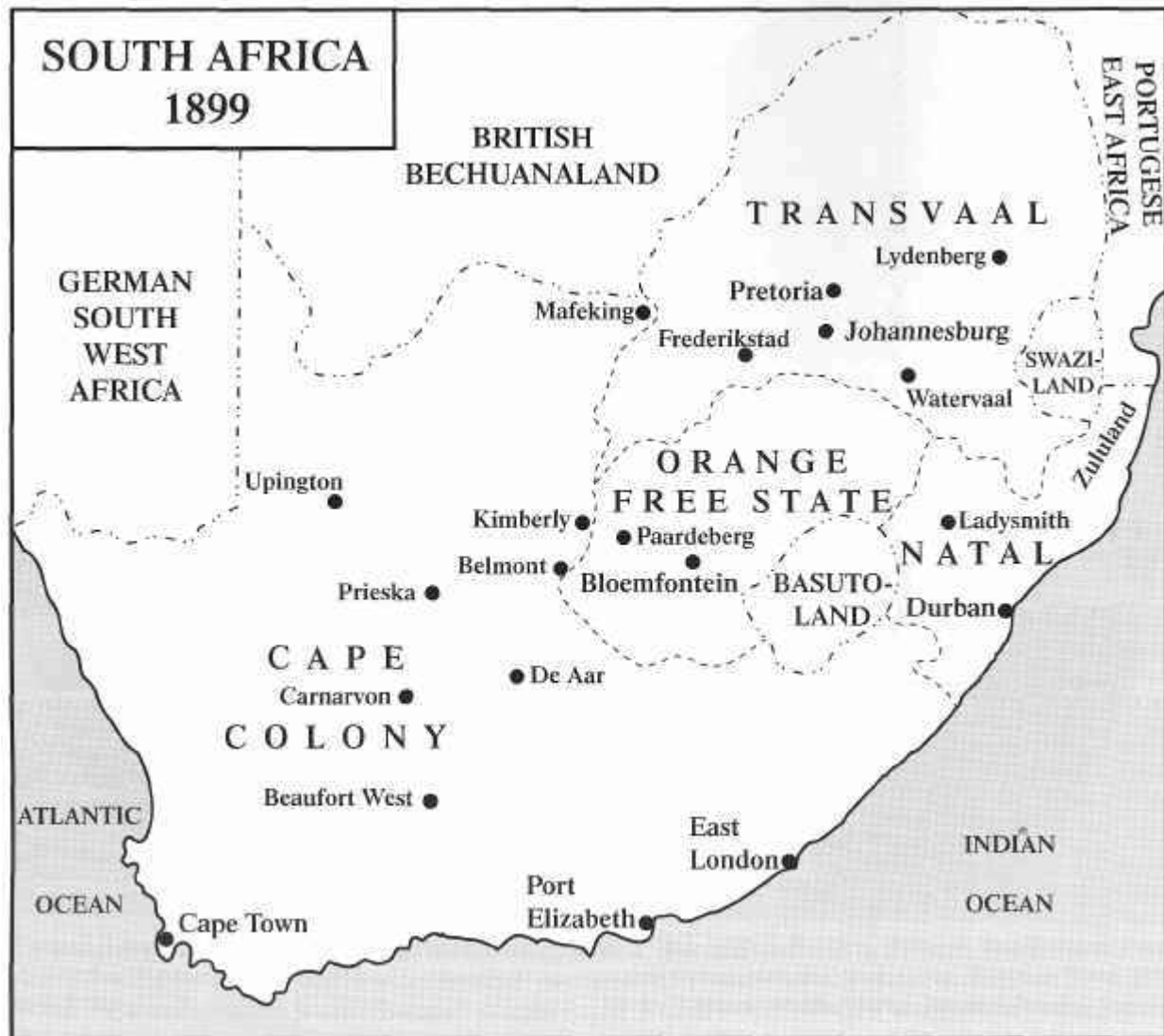
Locket containing pictures of Bertha Alexander and Richard Rowland Thompson, ca. 1904 (the year that they were married). This is the only known photograph of Thompson. His Stetson probably derived from his service with the South African Constabulary. (NAC C16699)

Your majesty will, I dare say, remember [four] scarves made by your Majesty to be given to your Colonial Private soldiers. There was the greatest competition to become the fortunate possessors of these scarves, and it took a very long time to get the required information, which would enable me to decide as to the merits of those eligible for such a coveted award, on account of the troops being very scattered and so constantly on the move. It was finally settled that the following men were in all respects the most deserving of the great honour, viz.

Canadians	- Private R.R. Thompson
New South Wales	- Private [A. Du Frayer]
New Zealand	- Private H.D. Courts
Cape Colony	- Trooper L. Chadwick ⁸

Roberts also stated that Chadwick had been "elected" by his comrades to receive the Queen's Scarf. This is frequently referred to as having been the method by which all recipients of the award were chosen. This indeed seems to have been the case at least with regards to Chadwick,

and also with at least one of the four members of British units who later received similar scarves. Also, in referring to Thompson's receipt of the scarf, some two years afterwards Roberts referred to "his having been selected by his gallant comrades of the Royal Canadian Regiment," which would seem to suggest an election.⁹ It should be noted, however, that Canadian documents make no reference to this mode of selection. In 1904 a special document was prepared by the Adjutant General of the Militia on the circumstances of Thompson's receiving the award for the benefit of the recipient's brother, W.F. Thompson, of Cork, Ireland. Here, Colonel B.F. Vidal, Acting Adjutant General, stated simply that on receiving word that a candidate for the award of the scarf should be put forward, "Colonel Otter at once had the Staff and Officers Commanding Companies brought together for the selection of the non-commissioned officer, or man, to represent the



Royal Canadian Regiment. After considerable discussion the decision was made in favour of Private R.R. Thompson...."¹⁰ This certainly would seem to have been a top-down rather than a bottom-up process.

The four scarves, as Roberts observed in a special despatch he issued soon after the war's end, had arrived in South Africa in April 1900.¹¹ A letter from Roberts' private secretary, Colonel A. Neville Chamberlain, to Colonel Otter dated 21 April announced that "Her Majesty the Queen has forwarded four woolen scarves, worked by herself, to be distributed to *the most distinguished soldiers* of the Australian, New Zealand, Canadian, and South African Forces under Lord Roberts' command" and asked the Canadian commander to "nominate the private soldier whom you consider has performed the most distinguished service."¹² The choice of Private Thompson as the Canadian recipient of

the award had been made by 10 July. This is shown by a letter that Chamberlain wrote to Otter on that date confirming that he was:

...desired by the Field Marshal Commanding-in-Chief to forward a scarf which was knitted [sic] by Her Majesty the Queen.

Lord Roberts wishes this scarf to be presented by you to:

No. 7552 Private R.R. Thompson
in recognition of his conspicuous gallantry during this campaign.¹³

For some reason, virtually all of the extant documentary references are to these four scarves. Yet as has been noted above, shortly afterwards the Queen sent out four more scarves, this time to be awarded to soldiers serving in British units. These latter scarves were sent directly to her grandson, Prince Christian Victor, who was then serving on the staff of the British

2nd Brigade under Major-General Henry Hildyard. The Prince chose to distribute the scarves amongst the four regiments composing the 2nd Brigade, and they were duly awarded during the month of August. Thus Lieutenant Malcolm Rial of the West Yorkshire Regiment recorded in his pocket diary for 7 August: "CO's parade 9am, Queen's Muffler presented to Colour Sergeant Kingsley by CO."¹⁴ It is clear in this instance that the recipient had been chosen by the regiment's commanding officer, Major W. Fry, who afterwards wrote to the Prince to express "our most grateful thanks for giving us one of your mufflers knitted [sic] by Her Majesty the Queen. I gave the muffler to Colour Sergeant Kingsley who is now one of the proudest and happiest men in the army."¹⁵ The Order Book of the 2nd Battalion, Devonshire Regiment, records the award of another of the scarves to one of its colour sergeants, W. Colclough, on 24 August. Here the Order Book's entry reads that Colclough's name had been chosen from amongst "the names of 8 N.C.O.s and men elected by the Coys.," which indicates an election of some sort, and thus that there was some variety in the manner that the recipients were chosen. The two other British Queen's Scarfwinners were Colour Sergeant T Ferret of the Queen's West Surrey Regiment, and Colour Sergeant H.G. Clay of the East Surrey Regiment. Note that all four of the British recipients were NCOs, while those from the colonial contingents were private soldiers. Also, three of the four British winners went on to earn a Distinguished Conduct Medal, which was the case with none of the colonials.¹⁶

There is a photograph of the Australian recipient, Alfred Du Frayer wearing his scarf in the manner of the red sashes of sergeants in most Commonwealth armies - draped over his right shoulder and gathered at the left hip. This has led some accounts of the scarves to conclude that they were intended to be worn in this manner.¹⁷ This is probably an error. Du Frayer spent his life trying to prove that the scarf was equivalent in status to the Victoria Cross, and would naturally have been interested in showing off the scarf in as formal or dignified manner as possible. One suspects that if the Queen had meant for these items of her handiwork to be used as sashes she would have referred to them as such. However, the word scarf or an equivalent was used exclusively. It has been seen above that the term used in the West Yorkshire Regiment



The Australian winner of the Queen's Scarf, Alfred Du Frayer, in the dress uniform of the New South Wales Mounted Rifles, wearing his scarf. The use of the scarf as a sash was probably a personal affectation of Du Frayer's.

(Australian War Memorial A04542)

was "muffler," and there is a photograph of that unit's recipient, Colour Sergeant Kingsley, with the recently bestowed award draped around his neck in the manner of a scarf or muffler.¹⁸ Indeed, it has been suggested that some reference to the bitterly cold nights in South Africa, possibly in the letters home of Prince Christian Victor, may have inspired the Queen to produce these items, which would have helped to keep at least some of her soldiers warm.¹⁹

A brief word on the Australian recipient, Alfred Du Frayer is in order, based upon the research of Ian Fitchett of the Australian War Memorial, which holds the Du Frayer scarf. Du Frayer received his scarf for an action that



Scarf crocheted by Queen Victoria and won by Richard Rowland Thompson for deeds of bravery at the Battle of Paardeberg, 18-27 February 1900. The scarf is now in the collection of the Canadian War Museum, AN #19650033-001. The scarves were all of khaki coloured wool with a very small royal monogram, VRI, sewn on in white thread. The scarf that belonged to Private R.R. Thompson has been described by the CWM's textile conservator, Helen Holt, as follows: "Its overall dimensions are 175 cm x 16 cm, the fringes are 4.5 cm long. The scarf is crocheted in nine rows of three double crochets with the last row being a single crochet. There are eight five strand knotted fringes at either end, producing a 10 strand fringe. The cypher is very small cross stitching done in mercerized cotton." The latter measures no more than 1.5 cm by 1 cm., with the stitches, in Helen's words, being "very uneven in size, angle [and] placement."

(Photograph for CWM, William Kent)

occurred in April 1900. Serving as a private with the New South Wales Mounted Rifles, he rode up before a farm house occupied by Boer sharpshooters and, under heavy fire, loaded a wounded officer onto his horse and carried him back to the safety of the Australian lines. Du Frayer was awarded his scarf by *the* Duke of York at a special ceremony in Sydney in May 1901. Caught up in the enthusiasm that marked the event, the local press made a number of extravagant claims regarding the significance of the award, such as that whenever it was seen or recognized within the British empire it was to be greeted with the salute of a present arms. And thereafter Du Frayer and his heirs maintained a steady and insistent campaign to obtain a recognition for the scarf that they evidently felt had not been made sufficiently clear at the time that the award was made. Thus for a time Du Frayer had the initials "QS" appear after his name in the *Army and Navy List* for New South Wales, a designation that was subsequently dropped. And indeed in 1901 a Sydney newspaper commented, with what some would see as representative Australian irreverence, that "Lieutenant Du Frayer [he had been subsequently commissioned] and his Scarf are a much photoed [sic] pair in this town. Sometimes the Scarf is pictured without the Lieutenant. Never the Lieutenant without the scarf. It is a is a homely brown thing - such as an old lady might knit - but it has the merit of being entirely the late Queen's work."

Later Du Frayer moved to South Africa, where he joined up during the First World War and received an MBE for his services with the local forces. His campaign to secure greater recognition for his Boer War award was to continue, however. In 1938 he wrote to King George VI from his new home in Tanganyika requesting a pension equivalent to that of the Victoria Cross and a special ribbon which, he claimed, he had been promised at the time he received the award. When the request was forwarded to the War Office, an official replied: "there is no question as far as I know of a special ribbon or pension being granted at the time for the Scarf." Alfred Du Frayer died in 1940, but the campaign to receive a special pension for his Queen's Scarf was continued by his son. He wrote to the monarch and to the War Office on a number of occasions, repeating his father's request of 1938, and always received a similarly

negative response. The family's campaign to receive what they conceived to be a properly fitting (and remunerative) recognition for the scarf was to continue until 1956.²⁰

The Canadian recipient of the scarf, Private Richard Rowland Thompson, was born into a prominent candy manufacturing family in Cork, Ireland, in 1877. From 1895 to 1897 he attended Queen's College, Cork, taking courses leading to a degree in medicine. Although referred to as a "sturdy plucky player" with the school's football team, no similar complimentary adjectives could be applied to his performance as a student. School records refer to his "very bad attendance," and he left without taking an exam.²¹ After leaving the college Thompson emigrated to North America.

After the first engagements of the Battle of Paardeberg had been fought an Ottawa newspaper of 21 February 1900 contained the following interesting account of Thompson's movements after leaving Ireland and before enlisting in the Canadian contingent. "Pte. R.R. Thompson is very well known to many Ottawans," it wrote:

as he spent the greater part of last summer in this city visiting friends....At the time that the Canadian contingent [was formed] he was in Buffalo with a brother, but took the first train to Toronto, where he enlisted under Col. Otter. Subsequently he asked to be transferred to the Ottawa company as he knew many of the boys belonging to it and this was done.²²

During his sojourn in Ottawa Thompson met Bertha Alexander of a well to-do Gatineau family who lived near Meech Lake. They were evidently attracted to one another, as they were to marry six years later. In the meantime, however, fighting had broken out in South Africa and recruiting had begun for a Canadian contingent to be sent to join the British forces already there.²³

Thompson's enlistment papers for the 2nd Special Service Battalion Royal Canadian Regiment were signed at Ottawa on 18 October 1899. It is said that he had previously become involved with the local militia unit, the 43rd Ottawa and Carleton Battalion of Rifles (a predecessor of today's Cameron Highlanders of

Ottawa), which provided a large number of the men for "D" Company, in which Thompson served. According to the report of his medical examination he stood 5 feet 6° inches tall, and had light brown hair and blue eyes. Although described as of "nervous" temperament, mercifully, he suffered from neither a hernia nor haemorrhoids.

It is interesting to note that under "Trade or Calling" on these papers Thompson listed himself as a "medical student." Although it would appear that he in fact served in South Africa as a fighting soldier, and not, as many accounts claim, as a medical assistant, it is nonetheless possible that his previous exposure to some medical training stood him in good stead on the field of Paardeberg, and helped him to win the Queen's Scarf.²⁴

The Royal Canadians arrived at Cape Town at the end of November 1899. By the second week of December they had reached the town of Belmont, about 800 kilometres inland along the Cape Town-Kimberley railway. Here they settled down for a couple months of much-needed training under the watchful, and no doubt at times anxious, eye of their commanding officer, Colonel Otter. On 8 February 1900 they were informed personally by Lord Roberts that they had been selected to participate in the great thrust northeastwards across country to Bloemfontein. It was to be a daring strike away from the Cape Town-Kimberley railway across about 200 kilometres of parched countryside on foot. As part of the British 19th Brigade, under Major-General Horrace Smith-Dorrien, the Canadians marched for four days under a scorching sun, their poorly-made Canadian uniforms chafing and scrapping their bodies as they moved. In the meantime, word came through of Cronje's stand at Paardeberg and the force was diverted northwards to meet him. It came upon Cronje's army, waiting behind its laagered wagons near Paardeberg Drift on the north bank of the Modder River, early Sunday morning, 18 February.

At about 0945 hours the Canadians were ordered to cross the river and attack the Boer positions, sited a few kilometres to the east or right, down the river. They duly forded the river, and then, according to their interpretation of their orders, advanced along a relatively flat,

uncovered plain towards the Boer positions. Coming under increasingly devastating fire from the Boers, using their rapid-fire, clip-fed Mauser rifles, the Canadians moved forward in short charges. At last, they reached a point where the intensity of the Boer fire prevented them from going any further, and they were forced to the ground, seeking cover behind ant hills or from whatever depressions they could find. Here they remained, unable to move and picked away at by Boer riflemen, for the rest of the day. Richard Thompson described the situation in a letter to his brother William the next day:

...we lay down under what cover we could find which proved to be nothing but grass a few inches high. It did not take one long to find out that the air was simply alive with bullets, and every second I could hear the hiss of the Mauser bullet, or the short crack of the explosive bullet as it swished past my head, but even as I was beginning to fear for my own safety Kipling's verse ran through my head, "When you're first under fire and your wishful to duck, don't look nor take heed to the man that is struck be thankful your living and trust to your luck and go to the front like a soldier."²⁵

At four in the afternoon they were joined by three companies of a British unit, the Duke of Cornwall's Light Infantry. Their colonel, who had been ordered by General Kitchener to cross the river and end the impasse, appeared to some to be in a state of fury at the day's inactivity. At about 5:15 he ordered an attack and invited the Canadians to join, which they did. No sooner had it started than the Boer Mausers erupted. The British colonel was immediately killed, and the attackers once again forced to scramble for cover. By nightfall when the Canadians withdrew they had lost 18 killed and 63 wounded. In his letter to his brother, hurrying to finish so he could catch the departing messenger, Thompson's disquiet over the day's events is obvious:

Is not this awful...You will have heard about that magnificent but awful charge of the Canadians Cornwall's & Highlanders which resulted in such awful loss Canadians losing over 100 killed & wounded [sic] through a wrong order of the Colonel of the Cornwall's. I don't know how I lived through that charge.²⁶

It was in the aftermath of this episode that Thompson performed the first feat that later would be remembered when he was



Above: A **group** of soldiers from the **Royal Canadian Regiment** rest on their way to Paardeberg, February 1900.

(James Cooper Mason Collection, NAC PA 173037)

Right: A grainy **photograph** showing soldiers in combat on "Bloody Sunday" - 18 February 1900.

(James Cooper Mason Collection, NAC PA 181414)



recommended for the Queen's Scarf. Private J.L.H. Bradshaw of the RCR had been severely wounded in the charge, having been shot through the neck and his jugular vein ruptured. Thompson went to the injured man's aid and lay there pressing a bandage against the vein for the next seven and a half hours until help came. Thompson described the action in a letter he wrote to his brother a couple of weeks later:

I just want to let you know a little about the Paardeberg fight we got into bout 8 or 9 in the morning and I personally did not get out until 12:30 p.m. [sic] that night as after the battle I stayed out on the battlefield right under the Boer trenches with a poor fellow who had been shot in the throat, it is marvellous how I escaped as my helmet was shot off my head by the Boers who started sniping at us in the moonlight, anyhow I saved the poor lad's life by staying by him and keeping the bandage compressed against his throat as he was badly shot through the jugular.²⁷

Thompson's next accomplishment, the second factor in his winning the Queen's Scarf, occurred just over a week later on 27 February, the last day of the battle. Over the past nine days British and Canadian troops had edged eastward down the north bank of the Modder until only about 500 yards away from the Boer laager. Deserters had revealed that conditions inside the laager were becoming desperate so that by 26 February Roberts was hopeful that one last assault might be successful. The Canadians were selected to take the lead in what was hoped would initiate the final effort necessary to capture the Boer position. The advance was to commence at 2:15 a.m. on the 27th, the anniversary of an ignominious defeat of the British by the Boers at Majuba Hill 19 years earlier. The troops had approached close to the Boer lines when a noise alerted the defenders and their rifles once again opened up. The attackers dove for cover and commenced digging in, with Boer bullets whistling overhead. Progress at forming a trench line was beginning to be made when an order was shouted (by whom it is still not clear) that was interpreted as "Retire." After some hesitation a movement to the rear commenced which gathered momentum until it turned into a full-fledged stampede back to the start line. Only "G" and "H" Companies from Nova Scotia and New Brunswick remained in position and continued to fire upon the Boer positions. Thompson described these events to his brother :

Never shall I forget that morning when we were awakened at about 1:45 a.m. it was dark as Erebus. Slowly we filed over the trenches into the open plain into a straight line each man being about two paces apart. Blindly we staggered onwards no one knowing rightly where the Boers exactly lay, all of a sudden a single shot rang out and immediately there was an awful cry from a poor fellow close by me of "Oh my God I'm killed" swifter than it takes to tell a thousand rifles spoke from the Boer Trenches which we now discovered were only forty yards ahead of us and all I know is that I dropped on my face and hands on the soft earth - the bullets all the while tearing up the ground around me. God in his infinite mercy alone knows how I escaped. I fired about eight or nine rounds and turned to speak to the fellow alongside of me and suddenly discovered that the whole line had retired and were nowhere to be seen. I was evidently in a sink[?] hole likely to be taken at any moment so grasping my rifle I retreated slowly backwards until by luck I struck our firing line. How we got back to the trenches just as dawn broke I really don't know....²⁸

Soon after Thompson's return a stretcher bearer noticed a wounded man moving on the ground just in front of the Boer lines. As described by Thompson's company commander, when a volunteer was requested to help bring the man in, "Thompson immediately dropped his rifle put his pipe in his mouth and coolly walked out and they went out in the face of a hot fire to the assistance of the man who expired just after they reached him another bullet having struck him where he lay...."²⁹ Thompson himself wrote to his brother William in the following rather non-self-deprecatory terms:

...you may or may not see it told in the Ottawa papers how I jumped over the Trenches and ran straight for the Boer position in broad daylight and under heavy fire to bring in a wounded comrade. I had to go about 300 yards to get him but the poor fellow just died as I grabbed him. Suffice it to say I was heartily complimented by the officer commanding. I think now [it was?] pure foolhardiness.³⁰

It was shortly after this that the white flag of surrender was raised within the Boer laager, and the battle of Paardeberg came to an end.³¹

These two specific deeds were cited by his commanders in support of their selection of Thompson as the Canadian recipient of the Queen's Scarf. As has been seen the decision in favour of Thompson had been made by the second week of July, by which time Pretoria had

fallen and the Canadians were stationed at the town of Springs, some distance to the southeast. As early as 15 June, however, Thompson had been evacuated to a convalescent camp at Norval's Pont south of Bloemfontein, probably suffering from one of the illnesses that were raging amongst the Canadian troops.³² Indeed Thompson's service with the RCR in South Africa was to come to an end soon thereafter, as his medical records in his personal file at the NAC show that at the end of July he was invalided to England, suffering from sunstroke and rheumatism. By mid-October he was back in Ottawa, and although he was declared "fit to resume former occupation at once," he took his discharge on 16 October.³³ It is possible that he then returned to Buffalo for a period of time.

From that point, the remainder of Thompson's career can be traced as follows. By March 1901 he was back in military service, as he had been nominated by Sam Steele to become an officer in the mounted unit then being formed, the South African Constabulary. Presumably he embarked with it when it sailed for South Africa on the 29th of that month.³⁴ He served (as a lieutenant) with the Constabulary for less than a year, however, before leaving to take up a position with Cecil Rhodes' DeBeers Diamond Corporation at Kimberley. It was to an address here that Thompson's Queen's South Africa medal, with its three clasps for Paardeberg, Dreifontein, and Cape Colony, was sent on 8 June 1903.³⁵ A year later, Bertha Alexander, his girlfriend from Ottawa, came out to join him, and they were married in South Africa on 25 June 1904. At some point, it is not clear precisely when, the Thompsons returned to North America and took up residence in Buffalo, New York. It was here that Thompson died of acute appendicitis on 6 April 1908 at the age of 31. His wife brought the his body back to Ottawa, and he was buried with full military honours in the cemetery at Chelsea, Quebec.

In turning to a discussion of the significance of the Queen's Scarf as an award and its equivalence, or lack thereof, to the Victoria Cross, it must be said that this subject is bedeviled by a supposed Australian Army Order, quoted in the 1956 *Illustrated London News* article referred to above, and in numerous other

less careful accounts of the scarves. This order, reputedly issued at the time that the Australian contingent received its scarf, is said to have stated that recipients of die scarf must have been serving in the ranks, that they must have been recommended for the Victoria Cross, that it was to have equal status with the Victoria Cross, that its recipient was to be determined by a vote of his comrades, and that if subsequently commissioned the recipients were to carry the rank for life.³⁶ The only trouble with this is that no copy of this "Order" has ever been found.³⁷ Indeed, it has been suggested that it originated with the family of the Australian winner of the scarf, A.H. Du Frayer, who, as noted, spent the better part of two life times trying to prove that the scarf was equivalent in status to the Victoria Cross.³⁸

The reputed Order got it right with regards to two particulars: that is, all the scarves went to soldiers serving in the ranks, and at least two seem to have been awarded on the basis of a ballot. There is nothing that supports the reputed Order's claims regarding the scarves' standing vis-à-vis the V.C., however. Carman Miller has stated that Thompson's company commander and Colonel Otter recommended Thompson for the Victoria Cross, but that he received the Queen's Scarf instead. What Miller apparently failed to observe is that Otter's recommendation of Thompson for the Victoria Cross came nearly a year *after* he had received his so-called "Scarf of Honour."

The actual story of Thompson and his recommendation for the Victoria Cross is as follows. Colonel Otter did write to the Adjutant General of the Canadian Militia recommending Thompson for a Victoria Cross, but not until the end of March 1901, after his return to Canada and indeed around the time that Thompson was departing for South Africa a second time with the South African Constabulary.³⁹ The instigation for this would seem to have come from Thompson or his family. The proposal got nowhere, the Governor General, Lord Minto, writing to the AGM on 27 May:

Thompson's case appears to be a hard one and he would suggest that another statement of the facts, and a second application stating why the application was not made at the time should be forwarded... with a request to be transmitted to the Commander in Chief of the SAC [South

African Constabulary], to Major General Smith-Dorian [sic], who commanded the 19th Brigade, and through him to the War Office.⁴⁰

Colonel Otter was then pressed by Thompson or his family to begin this process again, this time proceeding through the requisite steps. Thus on 11 July 1901 he wrote to Thompson's former commanding officer, Captain Maynard Rogers, requesting information on the specific acts of bravery that Thomson had performed. Rogers replied "regarding Thompson's claim for the V.C." on 15 July. His letter outlined in detail the two actions performed at Paardeberg described above, and concluded with the observation: "For these reasons he was as you are aware awarded the Queen's scarf."⁴¹ With this information in hand Otter duly despatched a second recommendation for the award of the V.C. to Thompson to the Governor General on 18 July. By November when he had not yet heard anything he wrote again to the Governor General, whose secretary replied that it had indeed been sent off and was proceeding through the required levels of authority, from the Inspector General of the South African Constabulary, to Major-General Smith-Dorrien, to Lord Kitchener, and then to the commander-in-chief at the War Office, who at this time none other than Lord Roberts himself.⁴²

Roberts' decision on the matter was transmitted to authorities in Canada in March 1902. It must have been a great disappointment to the Thompson family. As reported by the Adjutant General to Otter on 6 March:

With reference to your recommendation of the 18th July last that a Victoria Cross be granted to Private R.R. Thompson of your recent South African Command, the Commander-in-Chief has gone carefully into the case and regrets that he does not feel justified in submitting Pte. Thompson's name for the Decoration in question.

The War Office Despatch states further: "the fact of his having been selected by his gallant comrades of the Royal Canadian regiment is ample proof of his courage, but His Lordship does not consider that the recommendations contain conclusive proof of such conspicuous bravery as is necessary under the provisions of the Victoria Cross Warrants."⁴³

This ends any notion of the Queen's Scarf having been seen as equivalent in status to the Victoria Cross. Indeed it suggests that it was

viewed as being well outside the whole system of military honours and awards, all of which required a legitimate approval process. Richard's devoted brother William would not let the matter drop, however, and continued to pepper Canadian and British authorities with similar requests that his brother be reconsidered for the V.C. Thus on 20 May 1902 the Governor General's secretary replied to a letter of Thompson's of 2 May stating that "his Excellency regrets that he is unable to meet with your wishes in this matter as he has received official intimation from the Colonial Office that the List of Honours and Rewards for South Africa has been finally closed and that no further applications can be considered."⁴⁴ And yet again in April 1903 that "I am commanded by the Governor General to inform you that His Excellency fears that nothing further can be done in the matter....[and] that no further rewards and honours will now be given for the South African campaign."⁴⁵

Yet in December of that year Thompson was writing again, this time to the Minister of Militia, Sir Frederick Borden. Evidently not having been approached previously, Borden had his staff look into the matter. Indeed, it must be said that throughout their dealings with the Thompsons on this matter Canadian officials displayed a great deal of patience, and for the most part seemed anxious to oblige their various requests. This may have had something to do with lingering concerns over a certain perceived stinginess on Otter's part when it came to recommending honours and awards for the rank and file. (There had indeed been charges in the press that he had "attempted to appropriate awards of gallantry to himself."⁴⁶) Borden, for example, noting that Thompson had received neither the V.C. nor the D.C.M., commented: "This case seems to be a hard one, and it is difficult for me to see how the War Office could overlook a case of this kind."⁴⁷ When he looked closer, however, he found that while 6 D.C.M.s had gone to the Strathcona's Horse, 5 to the Canadian Mounted Rifles and two each to the Royal Canadian Dragoons and the Royal Canadian Artillery, none had gone to the RCR. Struck by the anomaly, Borden wrote to Otter that "there must have been some misunderstanding about this as I do not suppose that any Regiment that served in South Africa received absolutely no decorations for its

non-commissioned officers and men."⁴⁸ Otter replied curtly in April 1904 that it was "useless to prosecute the matter further,"⁴⁹ and there the matter seems to have died.

The case of the Australian recipient Du Frayer lends support to this interpretation of the status of the Queen's Scarf vis-à-vis the Victoria Cross. As has been seen he and his family had been engaged in a much more prolonged campaign than the Thompsons to obtain for their scarf what they perceived to be its proper due. This reached what to the family must have been a shattering climax in January 1956. This was the year that the 100th anniversary celebrations for the Victoria Cross were scheduled to be held in London, and the Du Frayers wrote through the government of Tanganyika to the Colonial Office to enquire whether the families of winners of the Queen's Scarf were to be included. On being asked whether this was so, the War Office responded unequivocally. "While the Queen's Scarf is regarded as a most unique and distinguished award," it wrote, "relatives of the those who received it are not being included in the present ceremony as it does not carry equal status with the Victoria Cross."⁵⁰

Brian Reid, author of *Our Little Army in the Field: The Canadians in South Africa, 1899-1902*, has made a study of all the V.C.-winning actions of that war. Of 78 V.C.s awarded in South Africa, he found that a total of 40 were in fact made for rescuing wounded soldiers under fire. He concludes that, given the special circumstances of Paardeberg, had Otter recommended Thompson for the V.C. at the time, either it, or at least a D.C.M., would have stood a good chance of being approved. The same may well have applied in the case of the undoubtedly courageous Du Frayer as well.⁵¹

It is interesting to note that Thompson was not even included amongst 11 soldiers who received Mentioned in Despatches, the lowest form of gallantry decoration, in Lord Roberts first despatch after the battle of 31 March. He is, however, amongst six RCR personnel, including Otter himself, three officers and three other privates, who are listed as receiving a MiD in a second despatch issued by Lord Roberts on 2 April 1901.⁵²



After Richard Rowland Thompson's death, ownership of the Queen's Scarf passed to his older brother William, of Cork, Ireland. Here William's son (and hence Richard Rowland's nephew), Samuel F. Thompson, shows the scarf off outside the family home in Cork, just before he brought it to Canada for presentation to the people of Canada in a special ceremony on Parliament Hill in Ottawa in May 1965. (NACC16705)

Thus the status of the Queen's Scarf as an award remains rather equivocal. In his last despatch that he issued relating to the war, on 12 June 1902, Lord Roberts obviously attempted to ensure that it received some recognition. "I desire to place on record," he declared, "that in April 1900 Her Majesty Queen Victoria was graciously pleased to send me four woollen scarves worked by Herself, for distribution to the four most distinguished

private soldiers of the Colonial forces of Canada, Australia, New Zealand and South Africa, then serving under my command."⁵³ Note that the four other scarves that had been sent by the Queen to her grandson, Prince Christian Victor, and that had been given to soldiers serving in British units, are not mentioned. Indeed there is no evidence that Roberts even knew of the existence of these latter scarves. Thus while the Queen doubtless took the proper course in sending the first four scarves to the commander-in-chief in South Africa, the despatch of the four scarves to her grandson Prince Christian Victor, who chose to hand them over to units serving in his own brigade, possibly betokens a certain element of informality in her own attitude to the scarves.

Also, while the scarves sent to Roberts were awarded according to a slightly more formal process, and the elderly commander did attempt to give them some recognition at the war's end, it is still clear that he did not impute to them the same importance that some of the recipients did. Thus there remained some confusion in his mind as to the manner that they had been awarded once they had been sent to the units - ie. whether by selection by the senior officers, or by ballot. And as has been seen with respect to the Thompson family's pursuit of the V.C. on behalf of their younger brother, it was Roberts, a V.C. winner himself, who ruled that there was insufficient proof under the terms of the warrant for the medal to support the notion of any equivalency between it and the scarf. Nor was any other officially constituted medal suggested as a substitute. Indeed, one must conclude that for the British military high command the scarves constituted somewhat eccentric and informal presentations, bearing little or no relationship to the established and legitimate military honours and awards system.

This is not to say that the deeds performed by the Queen's Scarves recipients were insignificant; indeed the evidence is that they had performed highly courageous or meritorious acts, and some may well have received a V.C. or some other medal had the pains been taken by their commanding officers to begin the approval process immediately after the acts of bravery had been performed. However unofficial the scarves may have been as awards, they are nonetheless, as the personal handiwork of the aged and revered monarch herself, interesting and unique.

One would not want in any way to detract from the importance of V.C.s, D.C.M.s, and other medals as important emblems of military distinction, but there were, and will continue to be, many examples of these awards produced. There were, and will always be, only eight Queen's Scarves.

Notes

1. Typescript of article in *Illustrated London News*, 23 June 1956, in Queen's Scarf File, Canadian War Museum (CWM).
2. National Archives of Canada (NAC) Record Group (RG) 38 A-1 Volume 104, H.M. Jackson, Director, War Service Records, to R.S. Malone, Winnipeg, 29 October 1956; Newspaper clipping, "Queen's Rare Award for Valour," 10 November 1956; R.S. Malone, Winnipeg Free Press Company Ltd., to Personnel Records Branch, Department of National Defence, 22 October 1956.
3. Eric M. Fernberg, "An Investigation of the Queen's Scarf of Honour," 8 June 1994, unpublished manuscript on file, CWM; Lillian Walton, "Hero Buried at Chelsea, Quebec," prize winning essay for Gatineau Historical Society, 1979.
4. J.L. Granatstein and D.J. Bercuson, *War and Peacekeeping: From South Africa to the Gulf - Canada's Limited Wars* (Toronto: Key Porter Books, 1991), p.58.
5. Carman Miller, *Painting the Map Red: Canada and the South African War, 1899-1902* (Montreal: CWM and McGill-Queen's, 1993), p.108.
6. Probably the clearest account of the Canadian role in the Battle of Paardeberg remains Desmond Morton, *Canada at Paardeberg*, CWM Canadian Battle Series No.2 (Ottawa: Balmuir Press, 1986). See also Granatstein and Bercuson, *War and Peacekeeping*, pp.52-59; Miller, *Painting the Map Red*, pp.86-112.
7. Alan Harfield, "Queen Victoria's Scarves," *The Journal of the Orders and Medals Research Society*, Vol.32, No.2, 1993, p. 157.
8. G.E. Buckle, ed., *The Collected Letters of Queen Victoria*, 3rd Series, Vol.III, 1896-1901 (London: John Murray, 1932), Lord Roberts to Queen Victoria, 8 August 1900, p.582. The words in square brackets have been corrected to reflect current knowledge concerning the contents of the letter. See G. de Bellaigue, Assistant Registrar, Royal Archives, to Gerald G. Gallagher, Drexel Hill, Penn., 2 June 1982. Copy of letter in Queen's Scarf File, CWM.
9. NAC RG 38 A-1 Vol.104, Colonel Aylmer, Adjutant General, to Colonel Otter, 6 March 1902. Aylmer quotes a recently received despatch from Roberts.
10. *Ibid.*, D.P. Pinault, Deputy Minister of Militia and Defence to W.F. Thompson, Cork, Ireland, 6 September 1904, enclosing Document signed by Colonel B.H. Vidal, Acting Adjutant General, Militia Headquarters, Ottawa, 2 September 1904.
11. The despatch is quoted in Harfield, "Queen Victoria's Scarves," p. 155.
12. NAC RG 38 A-1 Vol.104, Colonel A. Neville Chamberlain, Bloemfontein, to Colonel Otter, 21 April 1900.

13. *Ibid.*, Colonel Chamberlain, Pretoria, to Colonel Otter, 10 July 1900.
14. Quoted in Nicholas Riall, "Queen Victoria's Scarf," *Soldiers of the Queen*, Vol.80, 1995, p. 10. Most of the information provided on the British scarves derives from this article, pp. 10-13.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 11.
16. The Order regarding Colcloughs award is quoted in Harfield, "Queen Victoria's Scarves," p. 154. See pp. 159-160 for information on other awards.
17. See Fitchett, "Queen's Scarf," p. 10; Harfield, "Queen Victoria's Scarves," p. 157, which also contains the photograph.
18. See Riall, "Queen Victoria's Scarf," p. 11.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 10.
20. All the information on Du Frayer and his efforts on behalf of better recognition for his scarf are as recounted in Fitchett, "Queen's Scarf," pp.9-13.
21. *The Quarryman* (student newspaper of Queen's College, Cork), Vol.11, No.5, 1915, p.109; notes from school record, QCC, 1895-96, 96-97, deposited at NAC, photocopies in Queen's Scarf file, CWM.
22. This item is in the form of a clipping in the Queen's Scarf File at the Royal Canadian Regiment Museum in London, Ontario. It is dated 21 February 1900, but unfortunately the name of the newspaper is not shown.
23. Graeme Mount in his biography of Thompson in the *Dictionary of Canadian Biography* Vol.XIII, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1994). p. 1027, states that Thompson came directly to the Ottawa area from Ireland. The research of Bombardier Richardson, on then other hand, indicated that he had moved first to Buffalo, and then came north to Ottawa. See Walton, "Hero Buried at Chelsea, Quebec," p.3, which is largely based upon Richardson's findings.
24. Besides the enlistment papers, contained in Thompson's personal file "Agreement for Military Service in South Africa," Richard Rowland Thompson, 18 October 1899, (NAC RG 38 A-1 Vol.104), the above biographical information is based on Graeme S. Mount, "Richard Rowland Thomson, 1877-1908," in *Up the Gatineau: The Historical Society of the Gatineau* Vol 16, 1990, pp. 16-18; and the same author's biography in the *DCB*, p. 1027. The association of "D" Company, RCR, in South Africa, with the 43rd Battalion, Ottawa and Carleton Rifles is pointed out in Major Michael Mitchell, comp., *Ducimus: The Regiments of Canadian Infantry*, (Ottawa: CWM, 1992), p. 149.
25. NAC, Richard Rowland Thompson file, R.R. Thompson, Paardeberg Drift, to William Thompson, 19 February 1900. Photocopy in Queen's Scarf File, CWM.
26. *Ibid.*
27. *Ibid.* Two very clear descriptions of the February 18 action are Morton, *Paardeberg*, pp. 16-21, and Miller, *Painting the Map Red*, pp.86-101.
28. NAC, Richard Rowland Thompson File, R.R. Thompson to W.F. Thompson, no date, but written sometime after 3 April when the Canadians had reached Bloemfontein. Photocopy in Queen's Scarf File, CWM.
29. NAC RG 38 A-1 Vol. 104, Richard Rowland Thompson file, Capt. E.S. Maynard Rogers, late officer commanding "D" Coy 2 Battalion Royal Canadian Regiment, to W.D. Otter, 15 July 1901.
30. R.R. Thomson to W.F. Thompson, undated letter written after Canadians had moved into Bloemfontein.
31. See Morton, *Paardeberg*, pp.21-25; Miller, *Painting the Map Red*, pp. 103-112; Brian Holden Reid, *Our Little Army in the Field: The Canadians in South Africa, 1899-1902* (St. Catherines, Ont.: Vanwell Publishing, 1996). For Paardeberg see pp.54-58. I remain grateful to Brian for helping out in numerous ways with the preparation of this paper.
32. See Gaston P. Labat, *Le Livre D'Or: (The Golden Book) of the Canadian Contingents in South Africa* (Montreal, 1901), p. 147, which quotes a letter written by Thompson from the camp at Norval's Pont to a friend in Ottawa on 15 June.
33. NAC RG 38 A-1 Vol. 104, R.R. Thompson File, Canadian Service South Africa, 1899-1900 Particulars Respecting 7552 Pte. Thompson, Richd. Rowland, and Special Service South Africa, Invalided Soldier, State of Health on arriving in Canada, 15.10.1900
34. Miller, *Painting the Map Red*, pp.375-76.
35. NAC RG 38 A-1 Vol. 104, Richard Rowland Thompson File, R.R. Thompson, 38 Warren Street, Kimberley, to Baron Aylmer, Adjutant General, Canadian Militia, 8/6/03.
36. This version is from the script for a speech by the Honourable Roger Teillet, Minister of Veterans Affairs, delivered at the Queen's Scarf Presentation ceremony, Ottawa, 24 May 1965. Queen's Scarf File, CWM.
37. See Ian Fitchett, Australian War Memorial, "The Queen's Scarf," *Military Collectors Club of Canada Journal*, 1974, p. 10.
38. See Fred Gaffen, "The Queen's Scarf: Myths and Reality," *Military Collectors' Club of Canada*, Summer 1987, p.48.
39. NAC RG 9 II A1 Vol. 585, L.D. Pinault, Deputy Minister of Defence to Secretary, Governor General, 27 March 1901.
40. Quoted in Ross W. Irwin, "A Hard Case - Pte. R.R. Thompson, RRCL," *Canadian Society of Military Medals and Insignia Newsletter*, Number 200, July 1987, pp.4-5.
41. NAC, R.R. Thompson File, Capt. E.S. Maynard Rogers to Col. Otter, 15 July 1901.
42. *Ibid.*, S.F. Maule, Secretary, Governor General, Ottawa, to Colonel Otter, 5 November 1901
43. *Ibid.*, Adjutant General, Militia, to Colonel Otter, 6 March 1902.
44. NAC RG 7 G17c Vol.44, FS. Maule, Secretary to Governor General, to W.F. Thompson, 20 May 1902.
45. *Ibid.*, S.F. Maule to W.F. Thompson, 7 April 1903.
46. Desmond Morton, *The Canadian General Sir William Otter* (Toronto: Hakkert, 1974), p.246.
47. Irwin, "A Hard Case," p.4.
48. *Ibid.*, p.4.
49. *Ibid.*, p 4.
50. Quoted in Fitchett, "Queen's Scarf," p. 13.
51. Brian Reid, "South African War 1899-1902 Victoria Crosses" 16 February 1997, Unpublished Manuscript in the possession of the author.
52. *South African Honours and Awards, 1899-1902: Officers and Men of the Army and Navy Mentioned in Despatches*, (London: Arms and Armour Press, 1971), pp.14, 42.
53. Quoted in Harfield, "Queen Victoria's Scarves," p. 155.

Cameron Pulsifer is the Senior Historian at the Canadian War Museum in Ottawa.