

Canadian Victoria Crosses at Hill 70

Six Canadian soldiers received the Victoria Cross for their actions in the Battle of Hill 70 near Lens, France, in August 1917. Each man's citation is provided below in italics.

Frederick Hobson

Sergeant Hobson emigrated from England to Canada in 1904, after serving in the British Army during the South African War (1899–1902). As a member of the 20th Battalion (Central Ontario), he earned the Victoria Cross for stepping in and taking control of a machine gun after all but one of its crew were killed, and then using it to almost single-handedly repel a German attack. He fought to the death, and his sacrifice gave the Canadians time to regroup and defeat the enemy assault. He was 43 years old.

No. 57113 Sgt. Frederick Hobson, late Can. Inf. Bn.

During a strong enemy counter-attack a Lewis gun in a forward post in a communication trench leading to the enemy lines, was buried by a shell, and the crew, with the exception of one man, killed.

Sgt. Hobson, though not a gunner, grasping the great importance of the post, rushed from his trench, dug out the gun, and got it into action against the enemy who were now advancing down the trench and across the open.

A jam caused the gun to stop firing. Though wounded, he left the gunner to correct the stoppage, rushed forward at the advancing enemy and, with bayonet and clubbed rifle, single handed, held them back until he himself was killed by a rifle shot. By this time however, the Lewis gun was again in action and reinforcements shortly afterwards arriving, the enemy were beaten off.

The valour and devotion to duty displayed by this non-commissioned Officer gave the gunner the time required to again get the gun into action, and saved a most serious situation.

The London Gazette, October 17, 1917

Filip Konowal

Corporal Konowal earned his Victoria Cross for a series of attacks between August 22 and 24, including one in which he took on seven enemy soldiers, killing them all. A member of the 47th Battalion, he was severely wounded but survived the war, and was haunted by his wartime experience. He died in Ottawa in 1959 at the age of 70. Corporal Konowal, an immigrant from Ukraine, was not yet a British subject when he enlisted and had previously served as a hand-to-hand combat instructor in the Imperial Russian Army. He is the only East European-born recipient of the Victoria Cross.

No. 144039 A./Cpl. Filip Konowal, Can. Inf.

For most conspicuous bravery and leadership when in charge of a section in attack. His section had the difficult task of mopping up cellars, craters and machine-gun emplacements. Under his able direction all resistance was overcome successfully, and heavy casualties

inflicted on the enemy. In one cellar he himself bayoneted three enemy and attacked single-handed seven others in a crater, killing them all.

On reaching the objective, a machine-gun was holding up the right flank, causing many casualties. Cpl. Konowal rushed forward and entered the emplacement, killed the crew, and brought the gun back to our lines.

The next day he again attacked single-handed another machine-gun emplacement, killed three of the crew, and destroyed the gun and emplacement with explosives.

This non-commissioned officer alone killed at least sixteen of the enemy, and during the two days' actual fighting carried on continuously his good work until severely wounded.

The London Gazette, November 26, 1917

Harry Brown

On August 16, Private Brown was given the dangerous task of running a handwritten message back from the 10th Battalion's fighting front to headquarters. Such tasks were so dangerous that runners were usually sent in pairs, with duplicate messages, in the expectation that one might be killed or wounded. He delivered his message despite mortal wounds and was awarded the Victoria Cross posthumously. His heroism is commemorated on the cenotaph in his hometown of Gananoque, Ontario. He was 19 years old.

No. 226353 Pte. Harry Brown, late Can. Inf. Bn.

For most conspicuous bravery, courage and devotion to duty.

After the capture of a position, the enemy massed in force and counter-attacked. The situation became very critical, all wires being cut. It was of the utmost importance to get word back to Headquarters. This soldier and one other were given the message with orders to deliver the same at all costs. The other messenger was killed. Private Brown had his arm shattered but continued on through an intense barrage until he arrived at the close support lines and found an officer.

He was so spent that he fell down the dug-out steps, but retained consciousness long enough to hand over his message, saying 'Important message.' He then became unconscious and died in the dressing station a few hours later.

His devotion to duty was of the highest possible degree imaginable, and his successful delivery of the message undoubtedly saved the loss of the position for the time and prevented many casualties.

The London Gazette, October 17, 1917

Michael James O'Rourke

Private O'Rourke, who was born in Limerick, Ireland, was a stretcher-bearer with the 7th Infantry Battalion. He earned the Victoria Cross for his unflagging dedication to his comrades during three days and nights of intense fighting from August 15 to 17. Private O'Rourke, who

had also earned the Military Medal for his bravery at the Somme, survived the war and became a dockworker. He passed away in Vancouver in 1957, aged 79.

No. 428545 Pte. Michael James O'Rourke, Can. Inf.

For most conspicuous bravery and devotion to duty during prolonged operations.

For three days and nights Pte. O'Rourke, who is a stretcher-bearer, worked unceasingly in bringing the wounded into safety, dressing them, and getting them food and water.

During the whole of this period the area in which he worked was subjected to very severe shelling and swept by heavy machine gun and rifle fire. On several occasions he was knocked down and partially buried by enemy shells. Seeing a comrade who had been blinded stumbling around ahead of our trench, in full view of the enemy who were sniping him, Pte. O'Rourke jumped out of his trench and brought the man back, being himself heavily sniped at while doing so. Again he went forward about 50 yards in front of our barrage under very heavy and accurate fire from enemy machine guns and snipers, and brought in a comrade. On a subsequent occasion, when the line of advanced posts was retired to the line to be consolidated, he went forward under very heavy enemy fire of every description and brought back a wounded man who had been left behind.

He showed throughout an absolute disregard for his own safety, going wherever there were wounded to succour, and his magnificent courage and devotion in continuing his rescue work, in spite of exhaustion and the incessant heavy enemy fire of every description, inspired all ranks and undoubtedly saved many lives.

The London Gazette, November 8, 1917

Okill Massey Learmonth

Acting Major Learmonth, a 23-year-old native of Québec City and a member of the Literary and Historical Society of Quebec, led a heroic defence against multiple counterattacks against the 2nd Battalion (Eastern Ontario) on August 18. He died the next day and was buried in the Nœux-les-Mines cemetery in France. Québec City's rue Learmonth was named in his honour.

Capt. (actg. Maj.) Okill Massey Learmonth, M.C., late Can. Inf.

For most conspicuous bravery and exceptional devotion to duty. During a determined counter-attack on our new positions, this officer, when his company was momentarily surprised, instantly charged and personally disposed of the attackers. Later, he carried on a tremendous fight with the advancing enemy. Although under intense barrage fire and mortally wounded, he stood on the parapet of the trench, bombed the enemy continuously and directed the defence in such a manner as to infuse a spirit of utmost resistance into his men.

On several occasions this very brave officer actually caught bombs thrown at him by the enemy and threw them back. When he was unable by reason of his wounds to carry on the fight he still refused to be carried out of the line, and continued to give instructions and invaluable advice to his junior officers, finally handing over all his duties before he was evacuated from the front line to the hospital where he died.

The London Gazette, November 8, 1917

Robert Hill Hanna

Sergeant-Major Hanna was born in County Down in what is now Northern Ireland and he immigrated to Canada in 1905. He was awarded the Victoria Cross for taking charge of the 29th Battalion on August 21 after all the officers were killed or wounded in three failed assaults. He gathered the survivors for one more assault, rushing a German machine-gun team and knocking it out. Sergeant-Major Hanna survived the war and died in 1967 near Abbotsford, British Columbia, at the age of 79. He is buried in the Masonic Cemetery in Burnaby.

No. 75361 C.S./M. Robert Hanna, Can. Inf.

For most conspicuous bravery in attack, when his company met with most severe enemy resistance and all the company officers became casualties. A strong point, heavily protected by wire and held by a machine gun, had beaten off three assaults of the company with heavy casualties. This Warrant Officer under heavy machine gun and rifle fire, coolly collected a party of men, and leading them against this strong point, rushed through the wire and personally bayoneted three of the enemy and brained the fourth, capturing the position and silencing the machine gun.

This most courageous action, displayed courage and personal bravery of the highest order at this most critical moment of the attack, was responsible for the capture of a most important tactical point, and but for his daring action and determined handling of a desperate situation the attack would not have succeeded.

C.S./M. Hanna's outstanding gallantry, personal courage and determined leading of his company is deserving of the highest possible reward.

The London Gazette, November 8, 1917