

## **AUSTRALIA'S FIRST VC**

Australia's first Victoria Cross was awarded to a member of the medical corps.

Captain Neville Howse (later Major-General Sir Neville) is the only member of the medical services to gain the award. Altogether six VCs were awarded in the Boer War out of Australia's total of 93.

Howse sailed with the second contingent that left Australia to serve in the South Africa in 1900 as a member of the NSWAMC. He was present at actions up to the fall of a Boer capital Pretoria and earned a mention in despatches.

The NSWAMC were part of the force in pursuit of the Boers' most able general, De Wet, along with the NSW Mounted Infantry and the West Australian Mounted Infantry. An action developed around Stinkhoutboom Farm near Vredefort, a small village in hills a few kilometres south of the Vaal River on July 24, 1900.

It was a hotly disputed fight only determined by the British being reinforced by two rapid fire one pounder field guns, pom-poms. The British losses were 39 and the Boers an admitted seven. It was an incident in the latter part of the action that was recorded by the Australian Surgeon-Colonel, William Williams: "Lieutenant N.R. Howse, NSW Army Medical Corps, seeing a trumpeter fall, in the firing line, and though the bullets were flying as thick as hail in a summer thunderstorm,

rushed out to his assistance. His horse was shot dead, but the gallant surgeon reached his patient, dressed his wounds, he having been shot through the bladder, and carried him to shelter and safety.”

Williams drew the attention of the British generals to what Howse had done, and they endorsed the recommendation.

Two other Australians, Trooper John Bisdee and Lieutenant Guy Wylly, of the 1<sup>st</sup> Tasmanian Imperial Bushmen were soon to be recommended for their actions in saving wounded comrades at Warmbad in the Transvaal on September 1.

Their awards were to be gazetted in November 1900 but Howse had to wait until June 4, 1901.

His citation reads baldly in the London Gazette, the official British Government publication: “During the action at Vredefort, on 24<sup>th</sup> July, 1900, Captain Howse went out under a very heavy crossfire and picked up wounded man and carried him to a place of shelter.” The trumpeter survived and all the significant Australian newspapers carried the story.

Today there is no memorial in Canberra to those Australians who fought in Australia’s first war.

On May 31 the Boer War Memorial Committee is to dedicate a site in Anzac Parade, Canberra, to commemorate the nurses and men who went to South Africa. This is to preserve this aspect of our heritage and

military history for the education and benefit of future generations of Australians.

The Boer War was the first full commitment of troops by all the Australian Colonies to a foreign war and with the formation of the Australian Commonwealth on January 1, 1901 it became our country's first military involvement as a nation.

More Australians were lost than in Vietnam, making the Boer War the third most devastating war after the two world wars. It has taken too long for Australia to recognise these sacrifices.

BWM Committees have been set up in all States and Territories. Please contact the BWM office on (02) 9339 3309 or (02) 9339 3209.

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