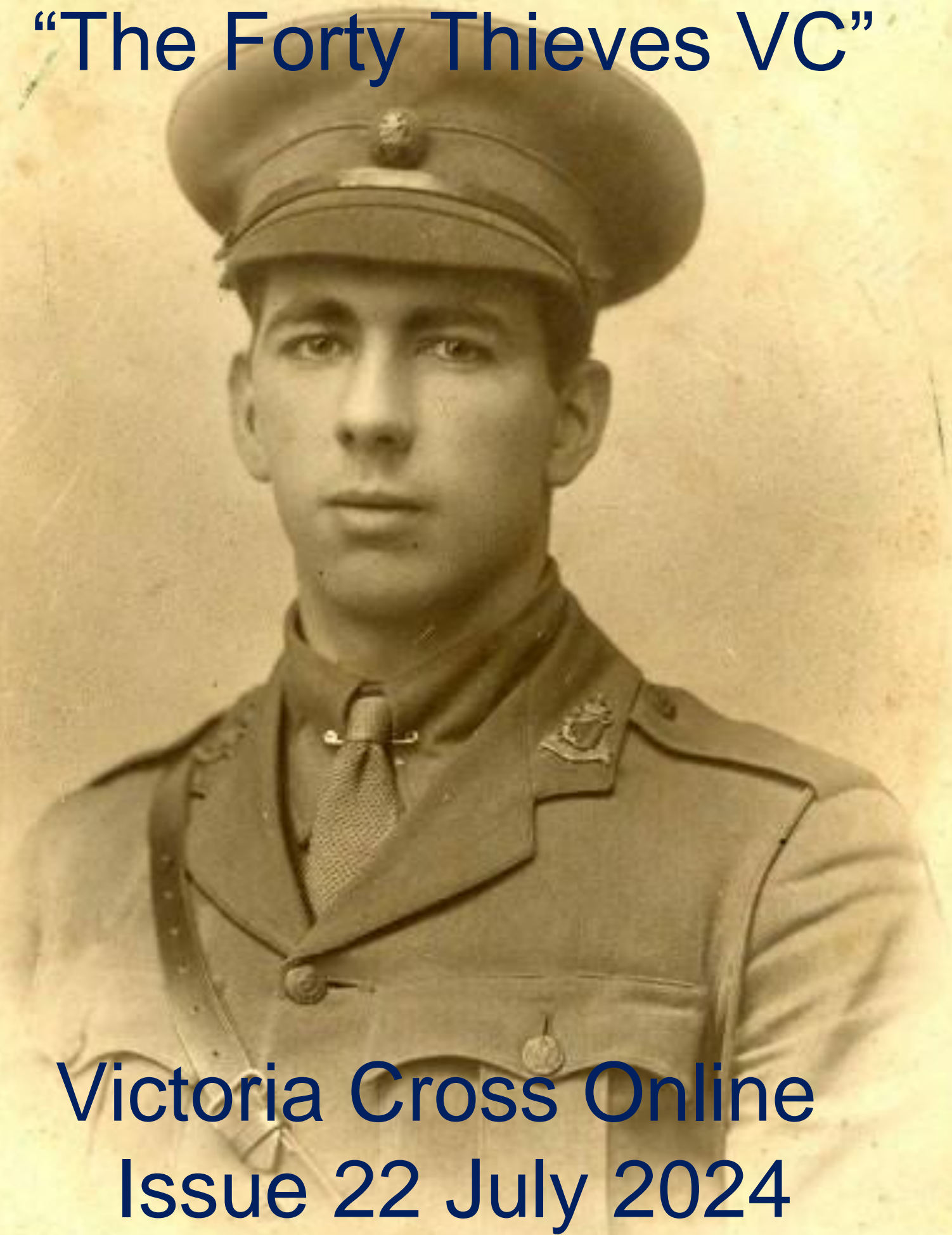


**“The Forty Thieves VC”**



**Victoria Cross Online  
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## EDITOR'S COMMENTS

Welcome to the 22nd edition of Victoria Cross Online Magazine. The feature article this month comes from yours truly and tells the story of the "Forty Thieves" raiding party of World War I and its leader who was awarded the VC – Lt Felix Baxter VC.



There is then the next five instalments of the Medical VCs series featuring Andrew Fitzgibbon VC, Edmund Hartley VC, John McCrea VC, John Crimmin VC and Harry Whitchurch VC.

There is also news of the impending auction of the first Naval VC of World War One in Henry Peel Ritchie VC.

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# Forty Thieves VC



Felix Baxter was born in Oldswinford, Stourbridge, on 18th September 1885 and lived his early life at 'Thornleigh', a sizeable detached property in the Hagley Road. This is now 'The Oldswinford' public house. His father was Charles Baxter, who owned a business in the High Street as a maltster and miller, and his mother was Beatrice, daughter of Mr Harry Sparrow of 'Battlefield', Wombourn. Charles Baxter was a member of St. Mary's church, Oldswinford, where he served as church warden for a time, and was a member of the group which raised the funds for the new chancel in 1898

He and his family moved later to Hartlebury and lived in 'Ivy Crest', Inn Lane and Felix was sent to Hartlebury Grammar School in 1894. From there he won a place in 1896 to enter Christ's Hospital, the London Bluecoat school. The family then moved to "Mostyn" in Kidderminster. From his grandfather onwards his family were keen sportsmen. His older brother was a Birmingham League cricketer and Felix became a competitive motorcyclist.

He left Christ's Hospital in 1901 to work in the United Counties Bank but then decided to enter the teaching profession. About 1905 he joined Skerry's College in Rodney Street, Liverpool, where he eventually became Head Commercial Teacher.



# Forty Thieves VC



Mr. and Mrs. **Baxter** (Rexes) and E. A. Colliver (Indian) and others ahead of time waiting outside a control.

c6

Courtesy of Tim Cornish

The next year he married Leonora Cornish of Roden Avenue, Kidderminster, on 24th February in Liverpool. They had one daughter, also Leonora, who was born in 1907 when they were living in Abercrombie. By 1914 the family were living at 5 Blantyre Road near Sefton Park.

When war came he enlisted in the Royal Engineers on the 4th September 1914 and on the same day was promoted to Sergeant.

# Forty Thieves VC



Courtesy of Tim Cornish

His pre-war experience as a motorcyclist was very useful and so he was given despatch rider duties in the Mersey Defence Corps. The next year he was selected for a commission and in September 1915 he was posted as Second Lieutenant to the 1/8th King's (Liverpool) Regiment, a Territorial battalion generally known as the Liverpool Irish.

In January 1916 the battalion was sent to France as part of the 55th (West Lancashire) Division and moved to the Somme sector which was at that time a quiet part of the Western Front. The Division was stationed at the northern end of the sector close to Arras.

# Forty Thieves VC

The battalion was gradually acclimatised to front line duties and this process included raids on the German lines. He was promoted to Lieutenant on the 19th February and he quickly acquired a reputation as his raiding party was given the nickname of the "Forty Thieves".

One such raid was carried out near Blaireville with Felix Baxter in charge as bombing officer on the 18th April. Although it was a success, he was seriously wounded, taken prisoner by the Germans and died of his wounds on the same day. For his part in the action the citation for the Victoria Cross provides a vivid account of his actions and his bravery. The award was given: "For conspicuous bravery. Prior to the raid on the hostile line he was engaged during two nights in cutting wire close to the enemy's trenches. The enemy could be heard on the other side of the parapet.

Second Lieutenant Baxter, while assisting in the wirecutting, held a bomb in his hand with the pin withdrawn ready to throw. On one occasion the bomb slipped and fell to the ground, but he instantly picked it up, unscrewed the baseplug, and took out the detonator, which he smothered in the ground, thereby preventing the alarm being given and undoubtedly saving many casualties. Later, he led the left storming-party with the greatest gallantry, and was the first man into the trench, shooting the sentry with his revolver. He then assisted to bomb dugouts, and finally climbed out of the trench and assisted the last man over the parapet. After this he was not seen again, though search parties were at once sent out to look for him. There seems no doubt that he lost his life in his great devotion to duty." [London Gazette 26th September 1916].



# Forty Thieves VC





# Forty Thieves VC

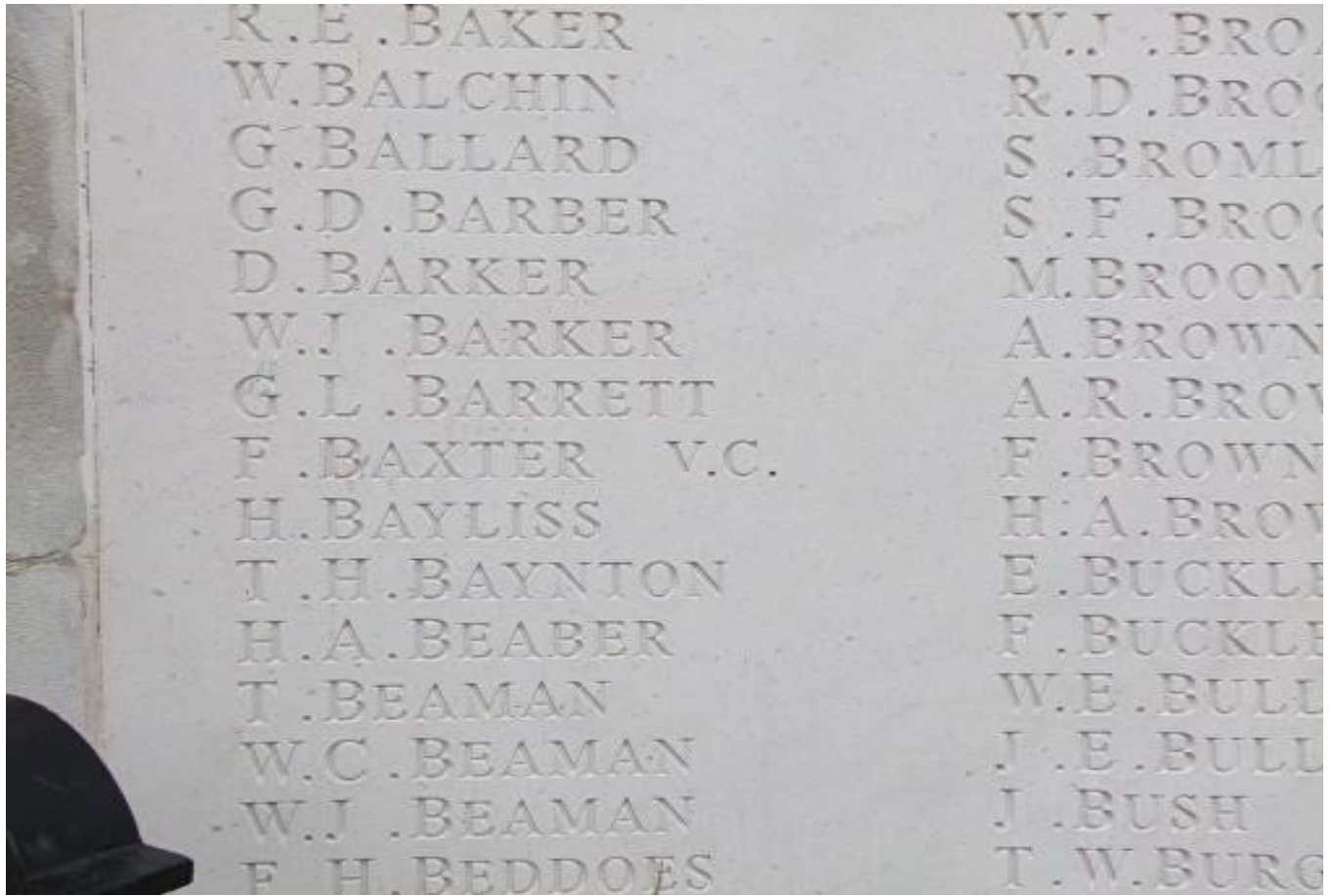
News of his severe injuries reached his regiment and his family but there was a possibility that he had survived and been made a prisoner. In July the German government informed the American Embassy that he had died on the afternoon of the raid. In 1920 German records revealed that he had been buried in the churchyard at Boiry, close to Blairville.

His remains were eventually transferred to the cemetery at Fillièvres and his medals were acquired by the Imperial War Museum where they are displayed in fine fashion today. He was Liverpool's first V.C. in the Great War, although there is apparently no special memorial to him in that city. His name is commemorated on the Kidderminster, St. Mary's, Oldswinford, Christ's Hospital and the former Hartlebury Grammar School Memorials His wife received the Victoria Cross from King George V on the 29th November 1916. She returned to live in Kidderminster for a while and later remarried.





# Forty Thieves VC





# Forty Thieves VC



<https://victoriacrossonline.co.uk/edward-felix-baxter-vc/>

Authors thanks need to go to Tim Cornish for the personal photographs which he has shared from his family archives to support the story of Lt Felix Baxter VC.



# Medical VCs

## 17. Andrew Fitzgibbon VC

<https://victoriacrossonline.co.uk/andrew-fitzgibbon-vc/>



Andrew Fitzgibbon (1845-1883) has the distinction of being the youngest recipient of the Victoria Cross, at 15 years and 3 months old at time of his award. He was born on 13th May 1845 in Petagurh, Gujarat, India. At the time of his award, Fitzgibbon was a Hospital Apprentice in the Indian Medical Establishment who were attached to the 67th Regiment of Foot (later Hampshire Regiment) when they became involved in the China Campaign, and the assault on the Taku Forts.

On the 21st August 1860, during the assault, he was accompanying a wing of the 67th Regiment when it took up a position within 500 yards of the fort. He then proceeded, under heavy enemy fire, to attend to a dhoolie-bearer, whose wound Fitzgibbon had been ordered to bind up. While the regiment then moved forward, Fitzgibbon was seen to run across open ground under fire, to attend to another wounded man. In this action, he was hit and severely wounded.

Fitzgibbon survived his wound, and was gazetted for the VC on 13th August 1861, under the name Arthur Fitzgibbon (an error). There is no details on when or where Fitzgibbon received his VC so it's likely he would probably have received it by registered post. Following his exploits in China, he returned to India, where he became an Apothecary, before he died aged just 38 on 7th March 1883 in Delhi. He was buried in an unmarked grave in Old Delhi Military Cemetery, and it is believed that his VC was buried with him.

# Medical VCs

## 18. Edmund Baron Hartley VC

<https://victoriacrossonline.co.uk/edmund-barron-hartley-vc-cmg/>



Edmund Baron Hartley (1847-1919) was born on 6th May 1847 in Ivybridge, Devon, the eldest son of Dr Edmund Hartley, and received his medical education at St George's Hospital, London, where he took the Diplomas of MRCS, England, and LRCP, Edinburgh. Previous to this, from 1867 to 1869, he was a clerk in HM Inland Revenue, but resigned his appointment to take up the medical profession.

In 1874, Hartley travelled to South Africa, and was soon appointed District Surgeon of British Basutoland, being the first English medical man in that country. His experiences among the natives and the Boer farmers were very uncommon for any white man at the time. He remained there until 1877, when native wars broke out on the south-eastern frontiers of the Cape Colony, and he immediately volunteered for service, and was appointed Surgeon of the Frontier Armed Mounted Police; a title which changed to the Cape Mounted Riflemen in August 1878.

Hartley's first experience of warfare was as medical officer of a column composed of Naval Brigade, 1/24th Regiment of Foot and Connaught Rangers (88th Regiment), operating against the Galeeka tribe. In the following year, 1878, came the Gaika campaign, when he was appointed Principal Medical Officer of the Cape Colonial Forces, and continued as such until his retirement in 1903. In 1879, the Morosi Rebellion broke out, when Surgeon Hartley was mentioned in despatches, received the Medal and clasps, and was awarded the Victoria Cross.



# Medical VCs

## 18. Edmund Baron Hartley VC





# Medical VCs

## 18. Edmund Baron Hartley VC

On the 5th June 1879, he attended the wounded under heavy fire during the unsuccessful attack on Morosi's Mountain. Then, from an exposed position, on open ground, he carried a wounded Corporal of the Cape Mounted Riflemen. He then returned under heavy fire, to attend to more wounded men. He was presented with his VC by Brigadier-General Charles M Clarke on 3rd December 1881.

In 1880 and 1881, he served in the Basuto Campaign, and in 1882-1883 during the ten months General Gordon commanded the Colonial Forces, Colonel Hartley was his Principal Medical Officer. In 1897, he served in the Bechuanaland Rebellion, where he was slightly wounded whilst dressing the wounds of a mortally wounded officer. He served throughout the Boer War of 1899-1902. Following his retirement in 1903, he was Commandant of six Voluntary Aid Detachments in Somerset from 1910-1912, and served as Secretary of the Voluntary Aid Hospital, Seaton, Devon during the Great War. He died at Sandringham House, Southsea, Hampshire on 20th March 1919 aged 71. He was laid to rest at Brookwood Cemetery, Woking, Surrey. In 1955, his Victoria Cross was sold for a then record price of £300. It is now displayed at the Museum of Military Medicine, Keogh Barracks.

<https://victoriacrossonline.co.uk/edmund-barron-hartley-vc-cmg/>



# Medical VCs

<https://victoriacrossonline.co.uk/edmund-barron-hartley-vc-cmg/>



Image of medal group courtesy of Thomas Stewart

# Medical VCs

## 19. John Frederick McCrea VC



John Frederick McCrea (1854-1894) was born in St Peter Port, Guernsey on 2nd April 1854, the son of Captain Herbert Taylor McCrea and his wife, Elizabeth Dobree Carey. Following his parents' deaths in 1855, he was then brought up by his aunt Charlotte, and educated at Elizabeth College. He then studied medicine at Guy's Hospital, qualifying in 1878 as a member of the Royal College of Surgeons of England and Edinburgh.

In 1879 he went to South Africa, where he did duty at the Military Hospital in Cape Town as Civilian Surgeon to Her Majesty's Forces. A year later he moved to Fort Beaufort, Eastern Cape to settle, but decided instead to join the 1st Regiment, Cape Mounted Yeomanry as a surgeon. He marched with the Regiment to Basutoland in August 1880. He was one of the very few to escape when the Basuto Cavalry launched an unexpected attack on the regiment whilst they were going to relieve Colonel Carrington, who with 200 Cape Mounted Riflemen, had been besieged for over 6 weeks at Mafeteng.

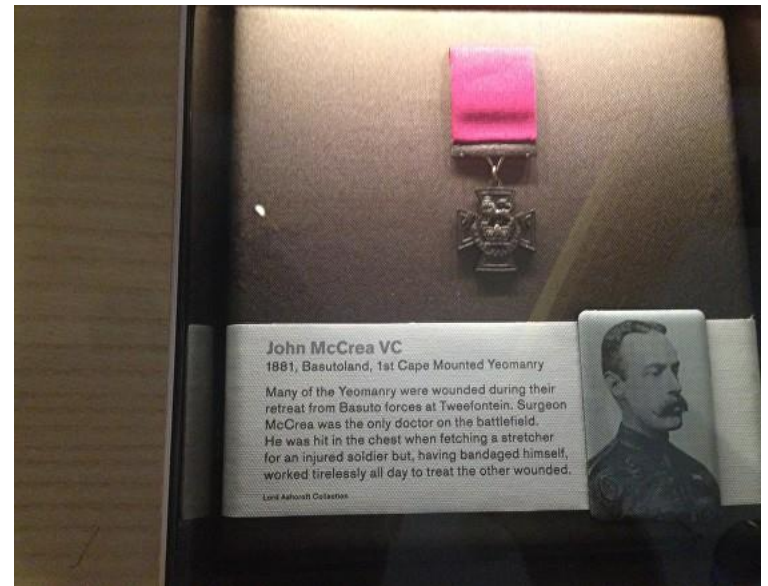
On 14th January 1881, Colonel Carrington was again heavily engaged with the Basutos at Tweefontein, and there were numerous casualties. Surgeon McCrea was the only doctor present and he went out with Captain Buxton to rescue a burgher called Aircamp and took him to cover. At this point, McCrea went back to get a stretcher for the wounded man, and received his own wound to the breast bone, which he plugged himself with lint, and he took the wounded man to shelter, and throughout the rest of the day he dressed all the men who required attention. He was recommended for, and awarded the Victoria Cross for his gallantry (London Gazette, 28th June 1881), and promoted to Surgeon-Major, and transferred into the Cape Mounted Rifles.



# Medical VCs

## 19. John Frederick McCrea VC

He was presented with his Victoria Cross by Brigadier-General Charles M Clarke at King Williams Town, Natal on 25th October 1881. McCrea was probably unique in that his VC was the only decoration he ever wore, as the Basuto War Medal was not issued until 1901, twenty years after the end of the War, and sadly McCrea was not alive to receive it. McCrea died suddenly from heart failure whilst serving at Kokstad, East Griqualand, South Africa. He was buried in Kokstad Cemetery. His Victoria Cross is held by the Ashcroft Trust and displayed in the Imperial War Museum.



1st Regiment Cape Mounted Yeomanry

Surgeon John Frederick McCrea

For his conspicuous bravery during the severely contested engagement with the Basutos on the 14th January, 1881, at Tweefontein, near Thaba Teen, when, after the enemy had charged the Burgheers in the most determined manner, forcing them to retire with a loss of sixteen killed and twenty-one wounded, Surgeon McCrea went out for some distance, under a heavy fire, and, with the assistance of Captain Buxton of the Mafeteng Contingent, conveyed a wounded Burgheer named Airoump to the shelter of a large anti-heap, and having placed him in a position of safety returned to the Ambulance for a stretcher. Whilst on his way thither Surgeon McCrea was severely wounded in the right breast by a bullet, notwithstanding which, he continued to perform his duties at the Ambulance, and again assisted to bring in several wounded men, continuing afterwards to attend the wounded during the remainder of the day, and scarcely taking time to dress his own wound, which he was obliged to do himself, there being no other Medical Officer in the Field. Had it not been for this gallantry and devotion to his duty on the part of Surgeon McCrea, the sufferings of the wounded would undoubtedly have been much aggravated, and greater loss of life might very probably have ensued.

# Medical VCs

## 20. John Crimmin VC



John Crimmin (1859-1945) was born on the 19th March 1859 in Dublin, Ireland. He studied medicine and became a LRCP, LRCS and DPH in Ireland, before entering the Indian Army Medical Service in 1882. He served in Burma between 1886-1889, with the Karene Field Force as Senior Medical Officer, and was mentioned in despatches (15th November 1889), received the Medal and clasp, and was awarded the Victoria Cross on 17th September 1889.

On 1st January 1889, in the action near Lwekaw, Eastern Karenni, Burma, a Lieutenant and four men charged into a large body of the enemy and two men were wounded. Surgeon John Crimmin ran out and attended to one of the men under heavy fire and he then joined the firing line and helped in driving the enemy from small clumps of trees where they had taken shelter. Later, Crimmin was attending another wounded man, when the enemy charged at him. He used his sword to kill the first man to reach him, attacked the second, whilst a sepoy shot the third man. This caused the rest of the men to flee.

Crimmin received his medal later in 1889, from the Commander in Chief Bombay, the Duke of Connaught in India. He was promoted to Major in 1894, and Lieutenant Colonel in 1902, and was created CIE in 1901. He was Civil Surgeon at Rutnagberry, and Health Officer for the Port of Bombay. He was created a CB in 1913, and promoted to Colonel in October that year. He later became Assistant Director of Medical Services, Kohat Brigade, India.



# Medical VCs

## 20. John Crimmin VC

Following his retirement, Crimmin lived in Somerset, and died on 20th February 1945 in Wells. He was buried in Wells Cemetery. The location of his medals is not known.



Grave image courtesy of Kevin Brazier

<https://victoriacrossonline.co.uk/john-crimmin-vc-cb-cie-vd/>

# Medical VCs

## 21. Harry Frederick Whitchurch VC



Harry Frederick Whitchurch (1866-1907) was born on 22nd September 1866, the son of Frederick Whitchurch, of Sandown, Isle of Wight. Harry was born in Kensington, London.

He was educated in England, France and Germany, and entered a medical career at St Bartholomew's Hospital, London in 1883. He served in the Lushai Expedition in 1892, and in the relief of Aijal and Changsil, earning the campaign medal and clasp.

He then served in the relief of Chitral in 1895, was mentioned in despatches, received the medal and clasp, and would ultimately be awarded the Victoria Cross (London Gazette, 16th July 1895).

On 3rd March 1895, during a sortie from Chitral Fort, at the beginning of the siege, Surgeon-Captain Whitchurch went to the assistance of Captain Baird, of the 24th Bengal Infantry, who was mortally wounded.

Whitchurch attempted to get him back to the fort under heavy enemy fire. Captain Baird was on the right of the firing line, and only had a small party of Gurkhas and men from the 4th Kashmir Rifles. He was wounded over a mile and a half from the fort. Whitchurch placed Baird in a dooly, and then the party attempted to return to the fort. The Gurkhas bravely hung on to the dooly, before three were killed and a fourth was badly wounded. Whitchurch then placed Baird on his back and carried him for some distance. Whitchurch and the small party were fired upon for a great distance, and he managed to make it despite many of the men being wounded, including Baird.



# Medical VCs

## 21. Harry Frederick Whitchurch VC

Following his gazetting for the VC, he was invested with his Victoria Cross by Queen Victoria at Osborne House, Isle of Wight, on the 27th July 1895. He later took part in the defence of the Malakand, and in the relief of Chakdara, and the engagement of Landakai, North West Frontier in 1897-1898. He then served in China in 1901, taking part in the relief of the Chinese Legation. He was then posted to India, where he served with the 1st Gurkha Rifles. Sadly, he contracted enteric fever and died aged 40 on 16th August 1907 at Dharmasala. He was buried in St John in the Wilderness Churchyard, Dharmasala. His medals are owned by the Ashcroft Trust and displayed in the Imperial War Museum.



# Medical VCs

## 21. Harry Frederick Whitchurch VC



### Harry Whitchurch VC

1895, India, Indian Medical Service

Captain Whitchurch went to rescue an officer lying wounded more than two kilometres from the fort at Chitral. When the soldiers with him were killed or wounded, Whitchurch carried the officer on his back, fighting his way through the attacking Indian rebels.



### Matthew Dixon VC

1855, Russia, Royal Artillery

When a Russian battery was positioned outside Sebastopol, Captain Dixon carried his gun into action. He fought his way through Russian positions despite himself being wounded.

Medal Group Image courtesy of Thomas Stewart

<https://victoriacrossonline.co.uk/harry-frederick-whitchurch-vc/>



# Ritchie VC Sale



On July 23<sup>rd</sup> 2024, the Victoria Cross medal group of the first Naval VC of WWI is being auctioned at Noonan's in Mayfair, London. It is estimated to sell for between £200,000 and £260,000.

On the 28th November 1914, when in command of the searching and demolition operations at Dar-es-Salaam East Africa. Though severely wounded several times his fortitude and resolution enabled him to continue to do his duty inspiring all by his example until at his eighth wound he became unconscious. The interval between his first and last severe wound was between twenty and twenty-five minutes.

Following the bloody action, Commander Ritchie spent six weeks in hospital at Zanzibar, before being sent back to England where he made a rapid recovery. By 13th February 1915, doctors at Plymouth Hospital were reporting his wounds as healed, with the only obvious sign of his ordeal being a deformed right thumb. Ironically, the injuries he sustained at Dar-es-Salaam almost certainly saved his life. For had he not been in hospital, he would almost certainly have been aboard the Goliath on 12th-13th May 1915, when she was attacked and sunk by a Turkish destroyer with the loss of more than two-thirds of her crew. Instead, Ritchie returned to duty in the same month that the Goliath was lost.

# Ritchie VC Sale

Commander Ritchie received his VC from King George V at Buckingham Palace on 25th November 1916, almost two years to the day after his action in East Africa. He was promoted to Acting Captain, but retired the following year, and was promoted to Captain on the retired list after the armistice. He retired to Edinburgh, living at Craig Royston House, Davidson's Mains, until shortly before his sudden death on 9th December 1958, at the age of 82. He was cremated at Warriston Crematorium.





# Ritchie VC Sale



# Sukanaivalu VC

The Speaker of Parliament Ratu Naiqama Lalabalavu, who is also the Turaga Na Tui Cakau, has granted approval for the repatriation of the late Corporal Sefanaia Sukanaivalu's remains.

The permission was given during a formal ceremony at the Parliament Precinct, paving the way for the repatriation process to begin. Ratu Naiqama noted the gravity of the ceremony, emphasizing the significant sacrifice made by Corporal Sukanaivalu and the joint efforts of the Fijian and Papua New Guinea governments to return his remains.

The consent was sought by Prime Minister Sitiveni Rabuka, leading a government delegation, who has been contemplating this process and the relationship between Fiji and PNG, as Sukanaivalu's current resting place is in Rabaul, PNG.

Foreign Affairs' Permanent Secretary Dr. Lesi Korovavala updated Ratu Naiqama on the progress so far, confirming that the respective governments have been collaborating to complete the repatriation. Corporal Sukanaivalu is a celebrated military figure in Fiji, being the only Fijian soldier to receive the Victoria Cross, the highest honour for valour awarded to Commonwealth Forces. A native of Yacata, he joined the military through the Vanua recruitment in 1942.



# Sukanaivalu VC



# Sukanaivalu VC

