

Captain Coulson Norman Mitchell, VC, MC Among Canada's WWI Victoria Cross Recipients Honoured



On 10 November 2014, 70 Canadian First World War recipients of the Victoria Cross, were honoured as Her Royal Highness the Princess Royal unveiled a bronze plaque in the British High Commission in Ottawa. The commemorative plaque was presented to Canada as a symbol of gratitude by the people of the United Kingdom and is dedicated to those 70 Canadians who were awarded the Victoria Cross in recognition of their valour and devotion to duty in the presence of the enemy. The Canadian Military Engineers are proud to have one of our Canadian Engineers among Canada's 70 WW I Victoria Cross recipients.

Coulson Norman Mitchell was born in Winnipeg, Manitoba on 11 December 1889 and graduated from the University of Manitoba in 1912 with a degree in engineering. After the First World War began, he joined the Canadian Expeditionary Force as an engineer officer, and served with the 1st Tunnelling Company, Canadian Engineers. Mitchell received the Military Cross at Ypres in 1916.

Captain Mitchell earned the Victoria Cross on the night of 8/9 October 1918 while leading a party of sappers on a reconnaissance mission near Cambrai in France. Their task was to venture beyond the Canadian front line to examine bridges over which the Canadian 5th Infantry Brigade proposed to advance, and to prevent their demolition. After finding one bridge destroyed, Mitchell moved on to the next, which spanned the Canal de l'Escaut. Running across the bridge in total darkness, Mitchell found that it had indeed been prepared for demolition. With a non-commissioned officer he cut the detonation wires and began to remove the explosive charges. When the Germans realized what was happening, they charged toward the bridge but were held off by Mitchell's sappers until reinforcements arrived. Saving the bridge over the Canal de l'Escaut contributed significantly to the later success of the 5th Infantry Brigade's offensive operations.



Citation

"For most conspicuous bravery and devotion to duty on the night of 8th-9th October, 1918, at the Canal de L'Escaut, north-east of Cambrai.

He led a small party ahead of the first wave of infantry in order to examine the various bridges on the line of approach and, if possible, to prevent their demolition.

On reaching the canal he found the bridge already blown up. Under a heavy barrage he crossed to the next bridge, where he cut a number of 'lead' wires. Then in total darkness, and unaware of the position or strength of the enemy at the bridgehead, he dashed across the main bridge over the canal. This bridge was found to be heavily charged for demolition, and whilst Capt. Mitchell, assisted by his N.C.O., was cutting the wires, the enemy attempted to rush the bridge in order to blow the charges, whereupon he at once dashed to the assistance of his sentry, who had been wounded, killed three of the enemy, captured 12, and maintained the bridgehead until reinforced. Then under heavy fire he continued his task of cutting wires and removing charges, which he well knew might at any moment have been fired by the enemy.

It was entirely due to his valour and decisive action that this important bridge across the canal was saved from destruction."

(London Gazette, no.31155, 31 January 1919)



The main building of the Canadian Forces School of Military Engineering in CFB Galetown is named in honour of Lieutenant-Colonel C.N. Mitchell, VC, MC, RCE, who had notable wartime careers in both World Wars. During WW II he commanded 1 Canadian Engineer Reinforcement Unit and A-6, Canadian Engineer Training Centre in Vedder Crossing, BC. As Camp Commander, Lieutenant-Colonel Mitchell was instrumental in creation of the All Sappers War Memorial, honouring those of the Canadian Military Engineers and the Military Engineers of the British Commonwealth who made the supreme sacrifice on the field of battle.

Mitchell died in Montreal on 17 November 1978.