

WILLIAM HALL, CANADA'S FIRST NAVAL V.C.

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A century ago Canada's first naval Victoria Cross was won by a Nova Scotian, William Hall, the son of a negro slave who had been brought to freedom in Nova Scotia by a British warship during the War of 1812. There is no doubt that Hall was born in Nova Scotia, but the place and the year are both uncertain. Among the possibilities are Horton Bluff, Kings County, in 1824; Hantsport, in 1825; Avonport, Kings County, in 1826; Newport, Hants County, in April, 1827; and Summerville, Hants County, in 1832. It is difficult to settle this confusion because vital statistics were not kept by the Provincial Government at that time. However, I am inclined to believe that Hall was born in Summerville, Hants County, in 1832, because this information is reported from a newspaper interview with Hall himself in 1900.

According to tradition, Hall's father escaped from his master in Virginia and was carried to Halifax, Nova Scotia, in 1814 by His Majesty's ship *Leopard*. While William was still a child, the Halls moved across the Avon River from Summerville to Horton Bluff, a little village lying between Avonport and Hantsport, and William grew to boyhood on the shores of the Avon River, living in a house that stood on the site of the Bluff Light-house.

As this was before the days of free schooling and as he lived several miles from school, the boy received little education. As he watched the ships on the Basin of Minas and saw old Blomidon guarding the waters, he longed for the life of a sailor. Only a few miles from his home Ezra Churchill and J. B. North were building wooden ships at Hantsport to carry the fame of Bluenoses over the Seven Seas. In 1844, when he was twelve years old, William shipped before the mast in a small vessel from Hantsport, for his parents were struggling to support a growing family.

In the winter of 1852 the young coloured sailor was in Liverpool, England, where on February 2 he enlisted at the recruiting office in Red Cross Street as a seaman in the Royal Navy. From there he was drafted to the receiving ship *Victory* at Portsmouth—Nelson's famous flagship, which was still in use. Hall, then twenty years of age, was posted to H.M.S.

Rodney, commanded by Captain Graham, and for two years served in the Channel fleet.

At the beginning of the Crimean War, in which Britain and France assisted Turkey in her fight against Russia, the *Rodney* was ordered to the Mediterranean and joined the fleet at Malta. Hall was present at the bombardment of Odessa, where he said, "We chastised the Russians for not recognizing the flag of truce," and, according to the Reverend B. D. Knott, he was one of the naval brigade which did such splendid service at the siege of Sebastopol in 1854 and 1855. Here two other Nova Scotians won enduring fame—Capt. William Parker and Major Augustus Welsford. Their names are familiar to tourists who have seen their monument in old St. Paul's Cemetery in Halifax.

At the end of the Crimean War, Able Seaman Hall was transferred to the frigate *Shannon*, commanded by Capt. Sir William Peel, the son of Britain's famous Prime Minister. The *Shannon* was stationed at Hong Kong, where Hall became "captain of the foretop," but upon the outbreak of the Indian Mutiny, several British warships cruising in eastern waters were ordered to various ports in India. The *Shannon* was sent to Calcutta. There hurried orders were received by Captain Peel to send as many men as could be spared overland to Cawnpore and Lucknow, and William Hall was one of the 410 seamen and marines selected.

In the summer of 1857 the mutiny of native troops or Sepoys in the Indian Army of the East India Company was spreading rapidly, for India was not yet ruled by the British Crown. The province of Oude had recently been captured by the Company, although there were only 38,000 British soldiers employed by the East India Company in all India as against 200,000 Sepoys in regiments with European officers, who largely controlled the arms depots. The Sepoys believed that the cartridges they were to use for the new Enfield rifle were greased with the fat of pigs and cows, which would destroy at once the ceremonial purity of the Mohammedan and the caste of the Hindu. Nana Sahib seized the opportunity to fan the flames of the soldiers' discontent into mutiny, for he had been waiting quietly for revenge upon the British who had dared to refuse to continue the pension granted to his foster-father, the Peshwa of Poonah. Placing himself at the head of the rebels, he prepared to capture Cawnpore.

Cawnpore was a military centre of great importance, situated on the banks of the Ganges 700 miles from Calcutta and famous for its manufacture of leather, yet only 300 British soldiers

were stationed there to guard many women, children, and invalids. The British general, Sir Hugh Wheeler, had ignored any talk of mutiny and had left the Sepoys in charge of the guns and powder magazine. When the Sepoys rebelled, shot their European officers, and started to murder every white person they could find, Sir Hugh selected a poor position for defence with little shelter or water, and the children cried night and day for a drink.

Dr. W. H. Fitchett in *The Tale of the Great Mutiny* has related how in one fierce sally the British captured eleven mutineers. Every man was needed to defend the low earthen wall. A rope was hastily passed round the wrists of the captured Sepoys, who were left in the charge of the wife of a private of the 32nd Regiment who was also keeping an eye on some of the children. Bridget Widdowson stood over the prisoners with a drawn sword, and so business-like was the flourish of her weapon and so keen the sparkle in her eye, that not one of the eleven dared to move. It was only when a guard of the stronger sex took Bridget's place that the captives somehow managed to escape.

Although the Sepoys outnumbered the British soldiers thirty to one, the white men fought them off for twenty-one days before surrendering when Nana Sahib promised them a safe passage down the river to Allahabad. Only 450 remained alive from a total of 1,000 to march from the fort to the river a mile away, and as they were entering the boats they were ambushed by the Sepoys, who shot them down with cannon. One boat out of forty got clear and floated to safety. One hundred and twenty-five women and children were dragged from the water by the Sepoys and shut up in a house in Cawnpore. There, on July 16, 1857, five ruffians hired by Nana Sahib cut the white women and children to pieces with swords, and flung their mutilated bodies down a well in the Courtyard, because the Nana had the idea that if all the white memsahibs were dead the British soldiers would not try to capture the city.

At Lucknow Sir Henry Lawrence chose a strong place for defence and gathered in it all the treasure, food, and war supplies from the city of 700,000. He had seven hundred British soldiers and seven thousand Sepoys, seven hundred of whom remained loyal. At the crucial moment Sir Henry withdrew all his loyal forces and the eight hundred women and children into the Residency grounds of thirty-three acres, where the surrounding houses and buildings were woven into a line of defence by earthworks and trenches with batteries here and

there. A private of the 32nd Regiment was deep in drunken sleep when his company was withdrawn to the Residency, and by mistake he was left behind when the powder magazine was blown up. Next morning he was standing stark naked, hammering at the Residency gates, shouting "Arrah, then, open your b--- gates!"

The preparations for defence were only half completed when the siege was commenced by ten thousand Sepoys. Quickly a stack of firewood was pulled down and re-arranged in a semi-circle on the side of the lawn in front of the house, and earth thrown over it. One of the doctors in the hospital had his pillow shot from under his head, for the hospital was frequently hit until the captured Indian princes were put in a room in the hospital—then the shelling stopped.

On the third day of the siege of Lucknow Sir Henry Lawrence was killed, and a Nova Scotian, Lt. Col. Sir John Inglis of the 32nd Regiment and a son of Bishop John Inglis, took command. He had eighteen hundred fighting men to protect eight hundred women and children shut up in the Residency grounds, but he succeeded in keeping off an enemy force of 50,000 for eighty-seven days. According to the diary of Lady Inglis, a number of natives, chiefly Sikhs, had remained loyal to the British, and 350 Europeans and 133 natives were killed defending Lucknow.

In the meantime, small relief columns were fighting their way to the assistance of the beleaguered garrisons. General Sir Henry Havelock with 1,500 men marched 126 miles in nine days in the sweltering heat of the Indian summer, the men wading "in a sea of slush. . . while the flood of tropical rain beat down." On July 16, 1857, General Havelock's little army defeated the Nana with seven thousand men and powerful artillery a few miles south of Cawnpore, and he fled in the night. Next morning the British soldiers entered Cawnpore, too late to save the unfortunate captives.

Not until August did the "Shannon Brigade" start up the Ganges river from Calcutta, being towed by the steamer *Chunar* and taking six 68-pounders, eight 24-pounders, a battery of eight rockets, and two howitzers. By September 2, Captain Peel and his sailors had travelled eight hundred miles to Allahabad, where arrangements were made to convey the guns "across country." There the heavy artillery had to be left behind, but the naval guns were found to be of great service because the Sepoys were continually hovering on the flanks of the small relief columns.

One day the men of the *Shannon* endeavoured to reach a ruined building surrounded by a high stone wall, their object being to use it as a temporary fort. A gun was dragged to a commanding position after heavy loss of life, and it covered the retreat of their comrades. The Sepoys concentrated their fire on this gun, and its crew began to fall rapidly. Seaman Hall was then acting as "No. 3" at one of the other seven guns, but he hurried to their assistance. The officer in charge of the gun, Lt. Salmon, shouted, "Ah! Hall! You're a man!" Three others joined the Nova Scotian negro, and this new crew was able to drive the Sepoys away.

On October 28, the naval force pushed forward with the lighter guns and joined Sir Colin Campbell at Cawnpore in November. Mr. Hall said "the blood of the helpless women was still upon the walls" of the room where the white women and children had been massacred. A small wooden cross made of wood from the house in which they were slaughtered, and from a tree which stood near the well where their bodies were thrown, is now in the library of King's College, Halifax, Nova Scotia. This is a replica of the Memorial erected on the site by twenty men of the 32nd Regiment who were passing through Cawnpore in November, 1857.

As the Europeans approached nearer and nearer to Lucknow, the attacks of the natives became more and more determined. Lt. Col. Sir John Inglis was steadily losing men from death, wounds, and sickness and had barely enough soldiers to man the defences. These men were exhausted by lack of food and sleep, as rations had been reduced from one pound of meat and flour per day to four ounces.

General Havelock had been nine weeks fighting his way through the forty-five miles from Cawnpore to Lucknow, and after a dozen pitched battles, he lost another seven hundred men forcing his way through the city into the Residency on September 25 because the Sepoys shot the British down by scores as they passed through the narrow streets. The General did not have enough men left to take the women, children, and wounded back through the city of Lucknow, and he and his soldiers were shut in the Residency by thousands of Sepoys for six weeks while waiting for Sir Colin Campbell to come to the rescue.

Sir Colin had to capture the outer walls of Lucknow and fight his way through the streets to reach the Residency grounds. He decided to launch the main attack against Lucknow from the south-east, where the mutineers' line vanished in the jungle.

Nearly half a mile to the west of Lucknow, across an open, jungle-bordered plain, stood a large mosque called the Shah Nujeef. Its thick stone walls were loopholed for musketry, and it was enclosed in a walled lane and strongly garrisoned. This temple had to be captured before Campbell's troops could get into the city of Lucknow.

It was after 4 o'clock in the afternoon of November 16 when Sir Colin ordered the attack on the Shah Nujeef. The "Shannon Brigade" dragged their guns to less than four hundred yards range, and sent shell after shell into the mosque, but the projectiles made no impression on the stone walls. The naval captain behaved as if he were laying the *Shannon* alongside an enemy's frigate. For three hours Peel worked his guns under a double-cross-fire but still failed to pierce the stone wall. His men were falling fast. Even Peel's usually bright face became grave and anxious. Sir Colin sat on his white horse looking intently on the smoke-wreathed mosque. At last he decided to assault the position with the bayonet.

Peel's naval guns were hauled forward, and the 93rd Highlanders advanced. They had no scaling ladders, and the twenty-foot walls remained unbreached. Frantically they ranged around the enclosure seeking some way to climb the walls while a torrent of well-aimed musketry dropped them by the dozens. This was the turning point of the battle. Either the Shah Nujeef must be taken or Sir Colin's force must retreat and leave the women and children shut up in the Residency to be murdered by the Sepoys as they had been at Cawnpore.

Captain Peel now ordered two of his 24-pounders nearer to the temple in the hope of making a breach for the Highlanders. The crew was short one man, and William Hall volunteered, "I guess I will go with you."

"You had better not", said the Captain; "it means almost certain death." Quick came the reply, "I will take the chance, sir."

The sailors strained at the ropes and hauled their guns to within twenty yards of the wall in a hailstorm of bullets. All the men working one gun were killed, and the crew of the second were falling fast. Calmly Hall worked the remaining gun. Only his wounded officer, Lt. Young, and Hall were left, but the Nova Scotian continued sponging and loading, sending shell after shell crashing into the wall. With his own gigantic strength he brought back the gun and fired the charge which made a breach in the wall, just large enough to allow a man to climb over. Clambering to the coping, a number of Highlanders

entered the place and opened the great gate. There they saw the white dresses of the garrison gliding away amidst the rolling smoke into the gathering darkness. Sir Colin called it "an action almost unexampled in war."

The next day, on November 17, 1857, the Highlanders appeared at the Residency, and the British at Lucknow were delirious with joy at being relieved after three months. However, Lucknow had to be evacuated. Sir Colin decided that he did not have enough troops to leave a strong force at Lucknow and still take the women and children, sick and wounded, through enemy country to Cawnpore, so he ordered the whole garrison to retire.

In March, 1858, the naval brigade was again at Lucknow, where Captain Peel was wounded and died, just when his gallantry had earned a knighthood. With the capture of Lucknow the work of the "Shannon Brigade" was finished, and on September 15 the ship sailed for home.

Able Seaman William Hall was honoured by being awarded the Victoria Cross for volunteering for dangerous duty and for sponging and loading after all the other members of the gun's crew had been shot down at the Shah Nujeef on November 16, 1857. Captain Noel Salmon, later Rear-Admiral, said, "He was a fine powerful man and as steady as a rock under fire." Although eighty Canadians who have won the V.C. are listed in the *Canadian Almanac*, Hall's name does not appear because he was serving in the British forces. Two other Canadian V.C.'s preceded Hall. Col. Alexander Dunn, a native of Toronto who had joined the British Army, had been awarded the Victoria Cross on October 25, 1854, for bravery during the Crimean War; and a native of Perth, Ontario, Surgeon Herbert T. Reade, won it for service in the 61st Regiment at Delhi in September, 1857. However, William Hall was the first Nova Scotian and the first Canadian sailor to be awarded the V.C.

In 1860 Hall was one of the crew of the warship *Hero* which brought the Prince of Wales, the future King Edward VII, to Nova Scotia. Ships in the British Navy were being decommissioned, and the *Hero's* crew were all veteran seamen. "We had one Victoria Cross man amongst them; curious to say, he was a negro, by name William Hall. V.C.'s were not so plentiful then as they are now," wrote Lieutenant Thomas Gough. History does not record Hall's joy at returning again to his birthplace, and it is doubtful whether he saw his family, for the *Hero* sailed from Halifax to Charlottetown via the Gut of Canso to wait for the Prince.

After twenty-two years and 258 days active service in the navy, Hall was discharged with a good conduct certificate as a quartermaster. There is a tradition that he was offered an attractive post at Whitehall in London, which would have meant a life of comparative luxury. He refused because "I want to spend my days in the old place, the land of my birth." Finally he settled on a small farm about four miles from the town of Hantsport, N. S. There two of his sisters—Mary Hall and Mrs. Robinson—kept house for their bachelor brother. He had returned to the shores of the Avon, to live in the shadow of Blomidon.

The South African War aroused interest in the exploits of Nova Scotians in other wars, and a reporter named D. V. Warner visited Avonport to see William Hall. The farmhouse overlooking Minas Basin was protected from heavy winds by a row of spruce trees bordering the road. A two-acre orchard of young trees adjoined the house, and the small farm was well stocked with cattle and poultry. When the reporter called one afternoon in September, 1900, he found the erect figure of Hall sharpening a scythe. This is the reporter's account of the interview:

"It's rather late for haying, isn't it?" he observed when I had taken the place of the small boy who was turning the stone, "but I just want to get a little salt hay off the marsh."

"By the way," I said after a few turns of the grindstone, "haven't you been in the British navy?"

"Yes, I served a good many years in the navy", he replied; then, lifting the scythe from the stone, and carefully feeling the edge, "I think she'll cut that grass all right now; thank you; it doesn't require a very sharp scythe."

Mr. Hall had to be coaxed to tell how he won the Victoria Cross, and when Mr. Warner asked to see it, the old veteran took him into a neatly-furnished room where pictures of British war vessels hung on the walls. The old sailor stepped to the mantel, and taking down a small cardboard spool box, emptied the contents on the table. The blue ribbon on which the Cross had been originally suspended was missing, having been "borrowed" by a relic hunter. Mr. Hall had fastened his V.C. to a heavy watch chain. Inscribed was the date "16 November, 1857." There were three other medals in the collection—the Crimean medal with the clasps for Inkerman and Sebastopol, the Turkish medal for service in the Crimea, and another for the Indian Mutiny with bars for Lucknow and the Relief of Lucknow.

"It's nothing to have a Cross now; they're as thick as peas", the old man said; "it isn't worth very much to a man after all, only ten pounds a year. If it wasn't for my regular navy pension of forty pounds a year besides I don't know how we'd get along here. The farm is small, and my two sisters live with me, you know." This is the age-old complaint of veterans that their country has neglected them once their service is over.

When the future King George V and Queen Mary visited Halifax in 1901 on their return from an Empire Tour, William Hall was invited by the Royal British Veterans to take part in the reception as the guest of the society. At that time, according to the *Halifax Morning Chronicle* of October 21, 1901, he was the only Nova Scotian to have won the Victoria Cross, and was "the only known coloured man who wears the Cross."

On August 25, 1904, William Hall, V.C., died at his home at Avonport, N. S., and was laid to rest in the little cemetery at Lockhartville. A month later, on Sunday, September 27, a crowd assembled in the Brooklyn Baptist Church, where Hall had been accustomed to worship, to listen to a memorial address by the Reverend B. D. Knott, who said, "He was a peaceable God-fearing citizen. He was honoured and respected by all who knew him. He was ever humble."

The cemetery where Hall was buried gradually became neglected, and in 1945 his body was removed to a place of honour at Hantsport, where a plot of ground had been deeded to the Canadian Legion and adopted for perpetual care by the town. Later a Memorial was erected by the Hants County Branch of the Canadian Legion, assisted by donations from the William Hall V.C. Branch and twenty-four other branches. On Sunday afternoon, November 9, 1947, it was unveiled by Rear-Admiral C. R. H. Taylor, C.B.E., R.C.N., who said, "It is my proud privilege to take part in this ceremony to Canada's first naval V.C. In honour of the memory of this brave coloured seaman, whose devotion to duty in the finest tradition of the navy and the British race resulted in the saving of many British lives, I hereby unveil this memorial." On that occasion a spokesman from the Halifax Coloured Citizens Improvement League expressed their great joy "at this lasting memorial to one of our race who devoted his life to the Empire which symbolizes peace, good will and tolerance among all peoples and all climes."