



Dr. Francis Alexander Carron Scrimger

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Editor's Note: *On Oct. 18, 2005, Dr. Scrimger's Victoria Cross was donated to the Canadian War Museum by his family.*

Perspective isn't everything, but it helps. The November 11th ceremonies that occur all around the world challenge us to examine our present against the sacrifices and struggles of the past.

My grandfather, Dr. Francis Alexander Carron Scrimger, served as a surgeon on the front lines in the 1st World War and received a Victoria Cross at the 2nd battle of Ypres. Throughout my growing up I always marvelled at this fact, even as I struggled to understand it. Most, if not all, of the accounts I read of Victoria Cross recipients described fighting men, in desperate, occasionally hopeless, situations, who, with no heed for their own safety, tackled the enemy against all odds, more often than not, paying for it with their lives. How then did this highest of honours come to be awarded to a behind-the-lines physician?

On the day he won his VC, two armies were dug in mere 100s of yards apart, in a devastated landscape of muddy trenches and bombed-out buildings. Furious communications behind both lines flew back and forth as men and machines moved from one position to another, attempting to seize the initiative from any slight weakness in the adversary. Snipers and shelling enveloped all. Into this mix, on the morning of April 25th, 1915, clouds of chlorine gas were released from behind enemy lines, and drifted on a gentle killing breeze onto the dug-in Canadians.

Dr. Scrimger was in charge of an Advanced Dressing Station in an out-

building ironically called "Mousetrap Farm." From there he tended the wounded, who streamed in from the front, treating them as facilities and the chaos permitted. They had been under continuous attack for 3 days, and now the gas attack and a renewed barrage forced the evacuation of the wounded, as the front moved perilously close. One man with a severe head wound was in danger of being left behind, and Dr. Scrimger, braving heavy shell fire, carried him to temporary "cover" in the lee of a shell hole, where he protected him with his body until help could arrive.

His citation notes these actions but goes on to say that the VC was also being awarded for "...the greatest devotion to duty among the wounded at the front." This phrase has been for me the key to understanding. He was, in the end, simply being a physician, and continuing to be one, without faltering, under the most extraordinary of conditions. This is what brought him to the attention

of his superiors, and is the feature of this scrap of family history that reaches across 90 years to touch me.

I would not wish it on anyone to have to pass such baptisms of fire as were experienced by my grandfather and his colleagues, but I draw some comfort from his example when I get tired, when some clinical priority disrupts my plans, or when my capacities are tested and I am called upon to display "clinical courage." On November 11th each year I don't think about war, I think about what it means to be a doctor.



Victoria Cross, Captain F.A.C. Scrimger.
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