



A not-for-profit agency
of the Government of Ontario
Un organisme à but non lucratif
relevant du gouvernement de l'Ontario

Canada's First Victoria Cross

Celebrating Victoria Day in Ontario

Victoria Day celebrations began in Ontario in 1837 to commemorate the birth of Queen Victoria on May 24, 1819. Victoria reigned as Canada's Queen from 1837 until her death in 1901. Every year on May 24 communities across Ontario held public spectacles, honorific dinners, sporting events, and militia musters to celebrate the Queen's birthday.

In 1845 Queen Victoria's birthday was declared an official public holiday by the Legislature. Following her death in 1901, Victoria Day became a national holiday. Since 1952, Victoria Day has been celebrated every year on the Monday preceding May 25. In Canada, it also marks the official birthday of Queen Elizabeth II.

Queen Victoria's legacy can be seen across Ontario in Victoria Day celebrations and in the names of buildings, streets, and communities. She is also remembered for instituting the Victoria Cross, the highest military decoration for bravery in Canada and the Commonwealth. The Ontario Heritage Foundation has created several plaques to themes relating to Queen Victoria including "Canada's First Victoria Cross."

On November 13, 1966, a provincial historical plaque commemorating Lieutenant Alexander Dunn, the first Canadian to be awarded the Victoria Cross, was unveiled in the small park at the intersection of Clarence Square and Spadina Avenue, Toronto. This is one in a series of plaques erected throughout the province by the Archaeological and Historic Sites Board of Ontario, and latterly by the Ontario Heritage Foundation.

The unveiling ceremony, held in conjunction with the annual memorial service of the Queen's York Rangers, was arranged and sponsored by the Toronto Historical Board; Colonel W.J. Stewart, chairman, acted as program host. Speakers included the Honourable Allan Grossman, Ontario's Minister of Reform Institutions; His Worship Philip Givens, Mayor of Toronto; Dr. J.M.S. Careless of the Archaeological and Historic Sites Board; and Honourary Captain V.B.T. Matthews, chaplain of the Queen's York Rangers. The plaque was unveiled by Major B. Handley Geary, V.C., Sergeant-at-Arms of the provincial legislature.

The plaque reads:

CANADA'S FIRST VICTORIA CROSS

Born in 1833 a short distance north of this site, Alexander Dunn was educated at Upper Canada College and at Harrow, England. In 1853, he was commissioned Lieutenant in the 11th Hussars. A participant in the charge of the Light Brigade at Balaclava on October 25, 1854, he saved the lives of two of his regiment by cutting down their Russian attackers, and thus became Canada's first winner of the newly created Victoria Cross. In 1858, Dunn helped to raise the 100th Royal Canadian Regiment, which he later commanded. In 1864, he transferred to the 33rd (Duke of Wellington's) Regiment, and four years later was accidentally killed while hunting in Abyssinia.

Historical background

Alexander Roberts Dunn was born in York (Toronto) on September 15, 1833, the son of John Henry Dunn and Charlotte Roberts. His father served as the receive-general of Upper Canada from 1820 to 1841, and represented Toronto in the first parliament of the Province of Canada from 1841 to 1844. Alexander was born in the family home on Catherine Street, a house described as Robertson's Landmarks of Toronto (1894) as an "old fashioned mansion ... frame, two storeys, painted dark ochre, with a hip roof and bordered on two sides with a verandah". The boy was a pupil at Upper Canada College, and then continued his education at Harrow in England.

In March 1852, Dunn joined the 11th (Prince Albert's Own) Hussars, and was commissioned a lieutenant the following year. The young swordsman saw action in the Crimean War (1854-56) at the battles of Alma, Sebastopol and Inkerman; on October 25, 1854, he took part in the splendid but ill-fated charge of the Light Brigade at the Battle of Balaclava, the most famous single action of the war. In the course of the battle, Dunn saved the lives of two men in his regiment by cutting down their attackers with his sabre, and it was for this heroic act that Dunn was later awarded the Victoria Cross.

So moved was Queen Victoria in listening to veterans talk of the Crimean War that she decided to institute a specific decoration to be awarded in recognition of "conspicuous bravery or devotion to duty in the presence of the enemy". Official announcement of the creation of the Victoria Cross was made by Royal Proclamation on February 3, 1856. The award is in the form of a bronze cross pattée bearing a lion standing upon the Royal Crown, and the words "FOR VALOUR"; the cross is suspended on a deep crimson ribbon.

The first recipients of the award were veterans of the Crimean War. The Cross placed at the disposal of the 11th Hussars was awarded to Alexander Dunn in a unanimous vote. He was twenty-one years old and, in the words of Toronto historian Henry Scadding (writing in 1873),

"Six feet three inches in stature, a most powerful and most skilful swordsman and a stranger to fear ..." The citation which appeared in The London Gazette of February 24, 1857, read:

[Lieutenant Dunn] for having in the Light Cavalry charge on the 25th October, 1854, saved the life of Sergeant Bentley, 11th Hussars, by cutting down two or three Russian Lancers who were attacking him from the rear, and afterwards cutting down a Russian Hussar, who was attacking Private Levett, 11th Hussars.

In 1855, Dunn took his discharge and returned to Toronto. Three years later, he rejoined the army and helped to raise the 100th Royal Canadian Regiment of Foot in which he was gazetted a major. He went to Gibraltar with the regiment, and in 1861 was made commanding officer. A few years later, he transferred to the 33rd (Duke of Wellington's) Regiment, and joined them in India.

In 1868, he and his regiment accompanied General Napier on a punitive expedition against King Theodore of Abyssinia. There, while hunting deer near Senafe, Alexander Dunn was accidentally killed by the sudden explosion of his rifle.

© [Ontario Heritage Foundation](#), 1966, 1990