

A COLENZO VICTORIA CROSS: THE AWARD TO MAJOR WILLIAM BABTIE RAMC

Captain (Retd) PH Starling

Director, Army Medical Services Museum



'William Babtie'

William Babtie was born on 7 May 1859 in Dunbarton, Scotland to Provost John Babtie and Janet Babtie. His early education was at the local Grammar School and then Glasgow University which he entered in 1875 to study medicine and where he was awarded a Certificate of Merit [1]. In April 1880 he was examined at the College of Physicians and Surgeons in Edinburgh and shortly

after graduated as a Bachelor of Medicine at Glasgow.

Babtie chose a military career and in February 1881 undertook the entrance examination for the Army Medical Department at which he was successful, joining at Netley in April of that same year [1].

After his initial training Babtie embarked for India on 2 January 1883 aboard the troopship *Crocodile* [1,2]. On reaching India and eventually Calcutta he was assigned to O Battery of 4 Brigade, Royal Artillery [1]. Not wanting to waste an opportunity he used his free time to travel around India and enjoy the sites. He returned home to England in 1885 and eventually spent six years on the home establishment, mostly at Portsmouth [2].

In July 1893 he was promoted to Surgeon Major and spent the next two years in Malta followed by Crete where he was Senior Medical Officer of British Troops during the insurrection in 1897 [2]. For his work in Crete he was made a companion of the Order of St Michael and St George.

On 21st October 1899 he was once again at sea, en route to South Africa and the South African War, assigned to 2nd Division [1]. On 15 December he found himself with the 2nd Division Staff in the vicinity of Colenso and on hearing that wounded were lying close by and in need of medical treatment he requested permission from General Sir Francis Clery to go forward and render what assistance he could. Lying wounded in a donga he found Lieutenant The Hon Frederick Roberts, Kings Royal Rifle Corps, the son of Lord Roberts, who had volunteered to go forward and try to retrieve some abandoned guns. Babtie rendered aid to Roberts under a heavy fire which wounded his own horse and eventually brought Roberts to safety assisted by Captain Walter Congreve of the Rifle Brigade (Figure 1).



Figure 1.

For this action William Babtie was awarded a Victoria Cross the citation stating:

'At Colenso, on 15 Dec 1899, the wounded of the 14th and 66th Batteries, Royal Field Artillery, were lying in an advanced donga close to the rear of the guns, without any medical officer to attend to them; and when a message was sent back asking for assistance, Major W. Babtie RAMC, rose up under a heavy rifle fire, his pony being hit three times. When he arrived at the donga, where the wounded were lying in a sheltered corner, he attended to them all, going from place to place exposed to the heavy rifle-fire which greeted anyone who showed himself. Later on in the day Major Babtie went out with Capt Congreve to bring in Lieut Roberts who was lying wounded on the veldt. This was also under a heavy fire' [3].

Both Captain Congreve and Lieutenant Roberts were recommended for (and subsequently awarded) the Victoria Cross for trying to save the guns, Lieutenant Roberts dying of his wounds shortly after, which in itself caused a dilemma; up to then the Victoria Cross could be not recommended or awarded posthumously. This led to the eventual change in the Royal Warrant allowing posthumous awards.

Babtie eventually came home on 24 November 1900 and in 1901 was appointed Assistant Director General Army Medical Service at the War Office, taking a great part in the reorganisation of the Army Medical Services post South African War. He became the first Medical Officer responsible for officer personnel at AMD [1].

During this time he received much praise from the DGAMS, Sir Alfred Keogh [2,3].

Despite all the hard work he was doing he still found time to marry Edith Mary Hayes (the widow of Major P.A. Hayes, A.M.D.) on 5 October 1903 and a daughter was born two years later.



Figure 2.

After various other staff appointments at the War Office in 1914 he was made Director of Medical Services (DMS), India and in June 1915 DMS Mediterranean, including the Gallipoli Campaign. Here he would work with another medical VC holder from the South African War, Neville House commanding the ANZAC Medical Services.

His next appointment, in 1916, was Director of Medical Services at the War Office in the rank of Lieutenant General, a post he held until retirement in 1919. That same year he was created KCB [2] (Figure 2).

Whilst on holiday in Knocke, Belgium he died on 11 September 1920 and his body was brought home and buried in Stoke Cemetery, Guildford (Figure 3).

References

1. Joel GE, General Babtie, a short autobiography. Unpublished MS, Oxford, 1996
2. Service Record held in the Army Medical Services Museum
3. The Medical Victoria Crosses, RAMC Museum, 1988.



Figure 3.