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NEGRO WAS THIRD CANADIAN TO WIN VICTORIA CROSS

Reprinted from The Free Press, London, July 3, 1933.

In the cemetery at Brooklyn, Hants County, Nova Scotia, is the grave of a very old man who died at Horton Bluff, a small community in that neighborhood, 29 years ago. Beneath a simple tombstone lie the remains of William Hall, the third Canadian to win the Victoria Cross. In the overpowering force of great events enacted within the past two decades William Hall has been forgotten, for the deed which placed his name on the Scroll of Immortals was performed a long time ago.

There are many reasons why this man should be remembered. Chief among them is the fact that he was a full-blooded negro, the son of a slave who had formed part of a cargo of "black ivory" and was in course of being transported to the United States during the war of 1812 when the slave ship was captured by the British frigate, "Leonard," and then brought to Halifax. This slave, so far as can be ascertained, was given employment by a Nova Scotia family, one, probably, whose name he adopted.

Marrying a woman of his own color this product of the Dark Continent lived for many years at Horton Bluff; and there, about the year 1824, the future Victoria Cross hero was born.

Little is known of William Hall's early life beyond that he was reared in the Annapolis Valley, went to the school at Avonport, and eventually joined the Royal Navy, probably at Halifax. From then until the summer of 1857, no records are available of this humble negro's career. We are, therefore, obliged to span that indefinite period and to shift the scene from the shadow of the old Halifax Citadel to Hong Kong. There we find Hall serving as "captain of the fore-top" on board H. M. S. Shannon.

The Indian Mutiny was spreading, the Sepoys stimulated by their early successes. British garrisons were shut up in Delhi, Cawnpore and Lucknow. Small relief columns were fighting their way to the assistance of the beleaguered troops; but the whole situation was dark and menacing.

At Hong Kong, Lord Elgin, the governor, who from 1847 to 1854 had been governor of Upper Canada, had received urgent requests to send all available men to India. Pursuant in these, two naval brigades were dispatched from the warships then on the China station—H. M. S. Pearl and H. M. S. Shannon.

Commanded by Captain William Peel, V. C., who had won his honor at Sebastopol during the Crimean War and who, he it said, was the son of Sir Robert Peel, former prime minister of Great Britain, the "Shannon Brigade" reached Calcutta in August, 1857. The force started up the Ganges in tow of the steamer Chunar, and comprised 450 men, with six 8-inch guns, two 24-pdr. howitzers and two field pieces.

On September 2, Peel reached Allahabad, 809 miles from Calcutta,

where a prolonged halt was made pending completion of arrangements to convey the guns "across country" to Cawnpore. Transportation difficulties, however, necessitated leaving the heavy artillery behind, and on October 28 the naval force began their move forward with a siege train of 24-pdrs. Distinguishing themselves in the fighting on November 2 at Fathpore, midway between Cawnpore and Allahabad, the brigade continued their advance to the former city and joined Sir Colin Campbell. The commander in chief was then completing his preparations for the relief of Lucknow and Oudh, besieged in the Residency at Lucknow.

Of the relentless battle which preceded the heavy and decisive engagement on November 14, when William Hall won his Victoria Cross, this brief record has little to say. This was the day on which Sir Colin Campbell's little force delivered the main assault against the rebel defences east of the city.

The principal attack against Lucknow was launched from the south-east in the cramped area where the mutineers line vanished in the jungle fringing the Gumti.

Late in the afternoon, following some heavy preliminary fighting, the Sikandarbagh—a high walled enclosure about 150 yards square—had been carried at the point of bayonet by the 93rd Highlanders and the Sikhs; but the most critical moment of the engagement had not yet arrived. Nearly half a mile to the west of the Sikandarbagh, across the open, jungle-bordered plain, stood the Shah Najaf, a large and ancient mosque.

Loop-holed, strongly garrisoned, and with walls several feet in thickness, the Shah Najaf was the key to Lucknow. To capture this position quickly was essential to the success of the battle, for the relieving force numbered less than 5000 men, opposed to an army of more than 30,000 rebels.

It was after four o'clock in the afternoon when Sir Colin Campbell directed that the Shah should be attacked. The preliminary bombardment was undertaken by the "Shannon Brigade," who dragging their guns to less than 400 yards range, laid a heavy cannonade on the walls. Under a concentrated fire from three sides the gunners sent shell after shell into the mosque, but so thick were the walls that the projectiles made little or no impression.

"The men were falling fast," records an eye-witness. "Even Peel's usually bright face became grave and anxious. Sir Colin sat on his white horse, exposed to the whole storm of shot, looking intently on the Shah Najaf, which was wreathed in volumes of smoke from the burning buildings in front, but sparkled all over with bright flash of small arms. It was now apparent that the crisis of the battle had been reached."

Sir Colin decided to assault the position with the bayonet, and to that task he assigned the 93rd Highlanders, supported by a battery of the royal artillery and the guns of the "Shannon Brigade."

The artillerymen raced forward, passing the Shannon's men on the right. Unhindered only a few hundred yards from the mosque, they delivered a storm of grape-shot against the walls.

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