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The Victoria Cross was instituted in 1856 by Queen Victoria as an award for exceptional bravery.



William Hall received his Victoria Cross in recognition for his actions in 1857 during the Indian Mutiny (Sepoy Rebellion). Hall was the first black person, the first Nova Scotian and the first Canadian sailor to receive this award. His

Victoria Cross to be awarded to a Canadian.

William Hall was born April 28, 1827 in Horton Bluff, Nova Scotia, one of seven children of Jacob and Lucinda Hall. Jacob and Lucinda were former slaves who came to Nova Scotia at the end of the War of 1812. William's parents initially worked on the estate of Sir William Cunard in Hantsport, Nova Scotia. Later Jacob and Lucy moved to Horton Bluff to farm.

Hall launched his seafaring career while still in his teens. He served on a number of American trading vessels as a deck hand. After being in the US navy for three years, he enlisted in the Royal Navy in 1852 as an Able Seaman. During the Crimean War (1853-1856), while on HMS Shannon, Hall served with distinction. Hall earned two British medals: one with the Sebastopol clasp, the other with the Inkerim clasp, as well as the Turkish medal.

By the time of the Indian Mutiny in 1857, Hall had been promoted to captain of the foretop of HMS Shannon. The Shannon, with its complement of marines, was rerouted to Calcutta from its original destination of Hong Kong because of the Indian Mutiny. Sailing from Calcutta in mid-August 1857 the Shannon's objectives were to recapture British Army headquarters at Cawnpore, and then to relieve the British garrison at Lucknow. Cawnpore and Lucknow were of strategic importance to the Sepoys' rebellion.

By September 2, the Shannon was 800 miles upriver from Calcutta and began the trek to Cawnpore. Enroute there was sporadic fighting. By the time the Shannon arrived at Cawnpore on October 28, the British Army had recaptured the city. At Cawnpore the Shannon's marines joined forces with British reinforcements. They began the march across the Indian plain to relieve the besieged city of Lucknow where a greatly outnumbered British garrison was holding out against the Sepoys.

The rescue party, made up of Royal Marines, a Highland regiment and Sikh troops, reached Lucknow on November 16. The marines dragged the ship's guns to within 200 yards of a mosque on the outskirts of the city where the Sepoys were holed up. The crew of one of the 24-pounders was a man short, so Hall, who had been in charge of a gun aboard ship, filled in for him.

The detachment began the barrage at 4:00 PM, pounding the wall of the mosque but to no avail. Meanwhile, the Sepoys continued to inflict terrible casualties on the marines. It was crucial to the rescue of the garrison to breach the wall. There was only one way to do this, and it involved a barrage at close range.

The marines dragged the two 24-pounders to within 20 yards of the wall. One of the crew was cut down by the mutineers' fire. That left only Hall and a wounded gunner with a single howitzer to blow a hole in the wall. In the face of relentless fire they reloaded the gun and finally blew a hole in the wall that allowed the Highlanders to advance into the fort and relieve the besieged British garrison.

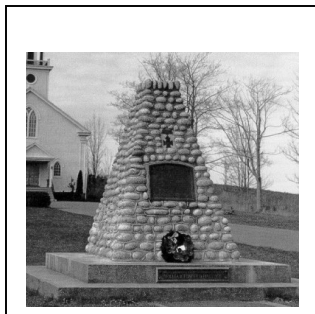
Once inside the fort they found the place deserted. The Sepoys had fled in disarray, leaving Lucknow temporarily in British hands. The British were soon forced to retreat and it was not until March 1858 that they were strong enough to return and reclaim the city more permanently.

For his outstanding display of bravery in breaching the wall at Lucknow, William Hall was awarded the Victoria Cross.

The Victoria Cross was presented on October 25, 1859 at an investiture ceremony aboard the HMS Donegal in Queenstown, Ireland. Hall's citation reads: "Finally, in one of the most supreme moments in all the age of a long story of courage, Hall fired the charge which opened up the wall and enabled the British to push through to the relief of the garrison and ultimately to the quelling of the mutiny and the restoration of peace and order in India."

After Lucknow, William Hall served on various Royal Navy vessels over the years. Hall retired from the Royal Navy as a petty officer, first class, on July 10, 1876, following 25 years of service. On his retirement Hall returned to his native Nova Scotia and purchased a farm. There he lived in quiet anonymity. William, who never married, lived on the farm with two of his sisters.

On August 25, 1904 Hall died and was buried without military honours in an unmarked grave at Lockhart. As a result of a campaign initiated in 1937 to raise William Hall and his actions from obscurity, he was reinterred in the Hantsfort Baptist Church cemetery in 1954.



Two years later a cairn was erected in his honour by the Hantsport Branch of the Canadian Legion. His Victoria Cross currently resides in the Nova Scotia Museum in Halifax, along with his other medals.

In February 2010, in celebration of Black History Month, and in conjunction with the 100th anniversary of the Canadian Navy,



Canada Post issued a stamp featuring William Hall, the first black person, the first Nova Scotia and the first Canadian sailor to receive the Victoria Cross.

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