

LIEUTENANT GORDON MURIEL FLOWERDEW VC (1894-99)

Gordon Muriel Flowerdew was born in Billingsford, Norfolk, England on 2 January 1885. He was educated at Framlingham College, Suffolk along with 9 of his brothers, which must be something of a record.

In 1903 he went to Canada, where he lived at Duck Lake, Saskatchewan; Queensbay, Kootenay Lake; and Wallachin, British Columbia. In 1914 he enlisted in the 31st British Columbia Horse, later transferring to Lord Strathcona's Horse. He rose quickly through the ranks and was commissioned as an officer in 1916. In January 1918 Flowerdew was given command of C Squadron, Lord Strathcona's Horse.

For most of the war, the Canadian Cavalry Corps was not involved in much direct fighting, because of the static nature of the warfare. However, when the Germans launched Operation Michael and began a rapid advance in the spring of 1918, cavalry again became an important factor. On 30 March 1918, as the Germans approached Moreuil and threatened to cross the L'Avre River, the last natural barrier before Amiens, the Canadian Cavalry Corps was assigned the task of stopping them. As the Germans began to enter Moreuil Wood from the east, Flowerdew's squadron rode around the wood and approached the Germans' flank from the north. Flowerdew ordered a cavalry charge.

Riding into the fire of five infantry companies and an artillery battery, the squadron suffered atrocious casualties (more than half of the men in C Squadron were killed), and Flowerdew himself was fatally wounded. However, the cavalry charge so unnerved the Germans that they were never able to capture Moreuil Wood, and their advance turned into a retreat in early April. Lieutenant Flowerdew died of wounds on the following day (Easter Day).

His citation reads :

For most conspicuous bravery and dash when in command of a squadron detailed for special service of a very important nature. On reaching the first objective, Lieutenant Flowerdew saw two lines of the enemy, each about sixty strong, with machine guns in the centre and flanks, one line about two hundred yards behind the other. Realizing the critical nature of the operation and how many depended upon it, Lieutenant Flowerdew ordered a troop under Lieutenant Harvey to dismount and carry out a special movement while he led the remaining three troops to the charge. The squadron (less one troop) passed over both lines, killing many of the enemy with the sword, and wheeling about galloped at them again. Although the squadron had then lost about 70 percent of its number, killed and wounded, from rifle and machine gun fire directed on it from the front and both flanks, the enemy broke and retired. The survivors then established themselves in a position, where later they were joined, after much hand-to-hand fighting, by Lieutenant Harvey's party. Lieutenant Flowerdew was dangerously wounded through both thighs during the operation, but continued to cheer on his men. There can be no doubt that this officer's great valour was the prime factor in the capture of the position.

The cavalry charge led by Flowerdew was the last cavalry charge in military history.

Interestingly, one of the earliest paintings (1919) by **Sir Alfred Munnings (1891-92)** was of the cavalry charge in which Flowerdew won his VC in 1918. A copy of this painting was presented to the College on 1 July 1991 by Lt Col Coupland of the Canadian High Commission. The original hangs in the Canadian War Museum in Ottawa. A nephew of Gordon Flowerdew, **Group Captain L.L. Flowerdew (33-35)**, represented the family. See bottom of article for further picture of this painting.



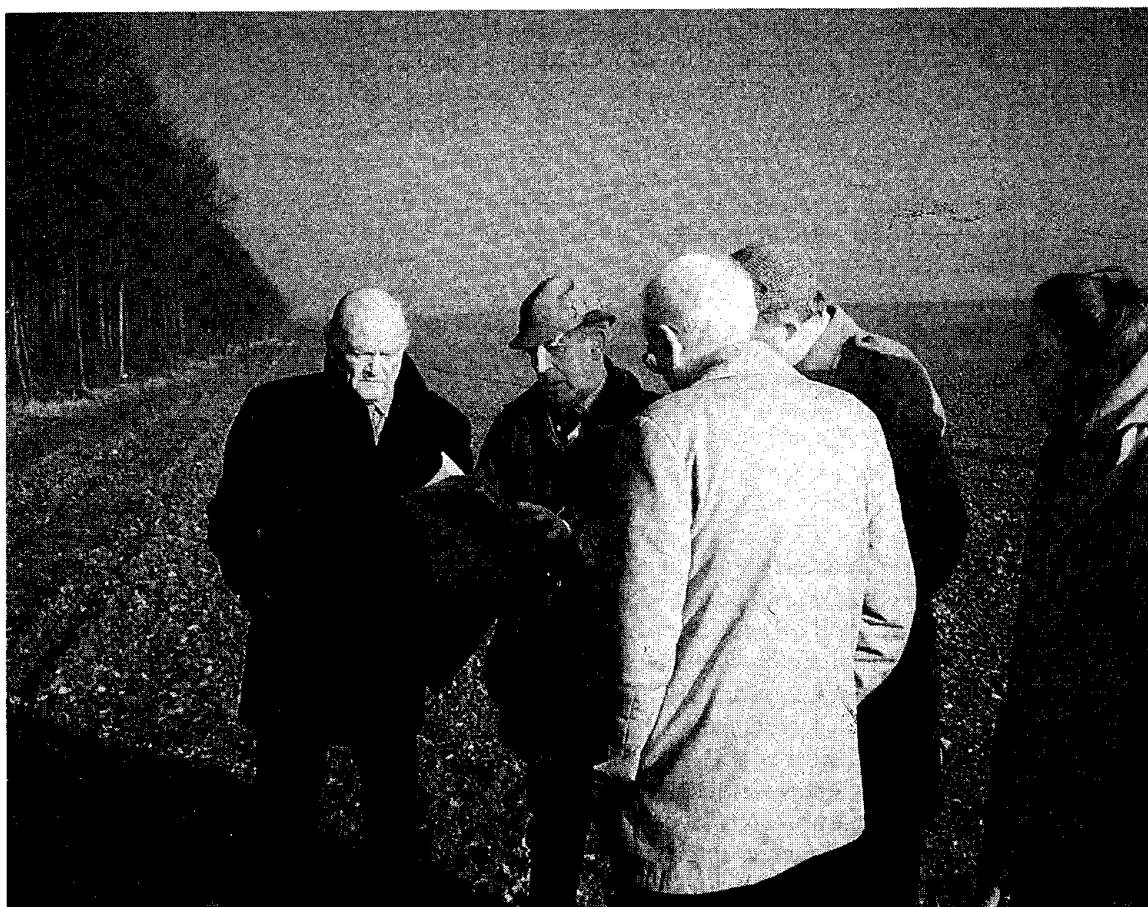
A simple wooden cross, which originally marked the resting place of Flowerdew, was brought from France in 1933 to hang in the College Chapel near the War Memorial. Note that on the cross he is referred to as Captain. It is believed that he was promoted after the action and before he died the following day.



He is buried at Namps-au-Val British Cemetery, eleven miles south west of Amiens, France.



The following photos were taken from the Autumn 1994 OF Magazine, which contains details of a trip made to France to commemorate 50th anniversary.



*General Sir Pat Howard Dobson and fellow travellers at
Moreuil Wood where Flowerdew won his VC.*

*The full OF party: Neville Bromage, Peter Lloyd-Bostock, Alan Dods,
Sir Pat and Fergus Dempster at Flowerdew's grave.*



The following pictures were taken at the presentation ceremony held at the College on 3 February 2003.



If anyone wants to read a very detailed description of the battle in which Flowerdew so heroically died, I would recommend reading Captain J.R. Grodzinski's small book entitled "The Battle of Moreuil Wood", which you can read on-line at http://www.strathconas.ca/pdf_files/the_battle_of_moreuil_wood.pdf

Also see <http://www.oldframlinghamian.com/article.php?story=2004052911320598> for further information on his VC being presented to the Imperial War Museum.

David Lebbell (K41-46) spotted that a new play has been written by Canadian playwright Stephen Massicotte called "Mary's Wedding". The play is part love story, part history lesson and part a moving memorial to the human cost of war. One of the central characters is Flowerdew. The following review is taken from the Canadian Theatrical Encyclopaedia :-

Mary's Wedding by Stephen Massicotte was one of four mainstage productions premiered by playRites '02, Alberta Theatre Project's annual festival of new plays. It is a moving, lyrical two-hander, with a flexible use of dream-time that takes the action into a broad historical dimension in terms of a relationship between a young farmer and a recent English immigrant to Canada. It begins on the evening before Mary's wedding in 1920, and tracks back to show her first meeting with Charlie, their growing attraction, and his departure for the war. The war scenes are intercut with the love scenes, one dimension of time informing the other to suggest that Mary is dreaming Charlie's horrific experiences in the trenches, just as he is dreaming his memory of her. Remembering their love is her way of saying goodbye, although this love will always inform her life.

The play opens with the young Charlie introducing himself candidly to the audience: "Hello, out there. Thank you for coming. Before we begin, there is something I have to tell you. Tonight is just a dream. I ask you to remember that. It begins at the end and ends at the beginning. There are sad parts. Don't let that stop you from dreaming it too." He in effect invites the audience to participate in his story, as it intersects with that of Mary. They meet during a thunderstorm, which anticipates the shell barrage that Charlie will endure during the war. The romantic proclivities of both are tested by reality: Charlie will indeed perform a "Charge of the Light Brigade" into death at Morieu Wood, and Mary will be tempted to perform the Lady of Shalott. Mary's Wedding does not succumb to sentiment, however. It shows how memory informs the present, and how it becomes a means of survival.

Charlie's relationship with his sergeant and mentor, Gordon Muriel Flowerdew, provides another means of survival. The role of Flowerdew is played by the actress who plays Mary, suggesting that Charlie's sweetheart informs even his interaction with other men. The character of Flowerdew is historically based: he was awarded a posthumous Victoria Cross for leading the last cavalry charge in military history. On March 30, 1918, Lord Strathcona's Horse played a critical role in one of the last German offense attempts of WWI and held back advancing enemy forces at Moreuil Wood in France. Nearly half the 100 men in the C Squadron were killed.

The play requires a simple but evocative set design that imagines the prairie landscape, a barn where the couple meets and where Mary remembers, and the trenches in which Charlie comes to terms with his role as a killer of other young men. The soundscape counterpoints the thunder which terrifies Mary, and the guns of war.

In his program note for the ATP premiere, Massicotte accounts for the origins of the play in a failed relationship:

So this was going to be a war play. However, I was in love when I wrote it and I thought it was more of a love to end all loves. This is not that love story but the more I loved her, the more Mary and Charlie loved each other. The more I longed to return to her, the more they longed to return to each other. So the war play became a love story. I wrote it to forget her and to get her back and to remember her and to let her go.

Mary's Wedding won the Alberta Playwriting Competition in 2000, and its evolution provides an insight into the way in which Canadian plays come to fruition: it was written with the assistance of the Alberta Foundation for the Arts, performed at Workshop West's Springboards New Play Festival in Edmonton, workshopped at the 2001 Banff playRites Colony, and presented as a Platform Play at playRites in 2001. It evolved in yet more rehearsal rewrites under the watchful eyes of ATP dramaturg Vanessa Porteous and director Gina Wilkinson. It has since been produced across Canada in at least ten regional theatres, the National Arts Centre (directed by Marti Maraden), and in the United States, England, and Scotland.

I'm also indebted to **Howard Thistlewood (K66-73)** for providing a copy of the attached essay written by Stephen Hume, who is a journalist with the Vancouver Sun. It's an interesting read on the affect war can have on a town and majors on Flowerdew's achievements
<http://www.oldframlinghamian.com/article.php?story=20061204160820393>

I'm also indebted to the author Stephen Hume for allowing us to show the essay on the website. This essay appears in his book "Bush Telegraph" which was published by Harbour Publishing, Maderia Park in 1999.

The photograph below was taken by the son of **Peter Scotchmer (R31-38)** of Peter's wife Grace, standing by the famous original painting of Flowerdew's Charge by **Sir Alfred Munnings (1891-92)**. The picture was taken in the vaults of the Canadian War Museum, where over 40 Munnings paintings are stored.



On Easter Sunday 2008, Brough Scott wrote a full page article in the Sunday Telegraph about his grandfather, his horse and the battle for Moreuil Wood. The following is an exchange of correspondence between **Jim Blythe (K48-54)** and Brough Scott :-

Dear Sir, The Mighty Warrior – 23.03.2008 – Brough Scott.

Brough Scott describes vividly the lot of the Cavalry Charger in WW1. It is not enviable. He mentions the last great cavalry charge at Moreuil Wood led by Lt. Gordon Muriel Flowerdew, of Lord Strathcona's Horse. Flowerdew enlisted as a private in 1914 and was commissioned in 1916. Flowerdew commanded a squadron at the action to take Moreuil Wood, and he ordered one troop, under Lt. Fred. Harvey, V.C. (Harvey was already a V.C. from 1917) to dismount and deploy in a special movement, whilst Flowerdew led the other three troops in the charge. The enemy had two rows of machine guns at 200 yards apart and a massive amount of carnage followed, men and horses decimated. It did however throw the enemy into disarray and was the turning point in halting the German Spring Offensive.

Harvey, meanwhile followed up with much hand to hand skirmishing, and came across the mortally wounded Flowerdew, shot through both thighs and life ebbing away. 'Carry on – we've won', were Flowerdew's last recorded words. General Seely promoted him to Captain in the field, and in April 1918 the V.C. was posthumously awarded for his gallantry.

Sir Alfred Munnings' picture of Warrior was one of 45 commissioned by the Canadian Government from the artist and I beg to offer that the finest of them all was of the Charge at Moreuil Wood, led by Lt. Flowerdew. Munnings was educated at Framlingham College and interestingly all ten sons of A.J.B. Flowerdew were also educated there. Munnings contemporary was the fifth, Edgar, Gordon was the eighth.

The Flowerdew V.C., along with two others (all won by pupils of the school in nineteen months) are in the Framlingham Cabinet at the Imperial War Museum.

Brough Scott spoke at a ceremony at the College when Flowerdew's medal was returned after a loan period at the Regimental Museum, in Calgary. A replica was presented to the Commanding Officer. A visit to either museum should be a must.

Jim Blythe O.F.

Reply from Brough Scott :-

Dear Jim,

Thanks for your interest in the piece I wrote last week.

I very much share your feelings about the horror of what happened that day. But I do think it is worth recording that the Munnings picture of the Flowerdew charge was painted from memory, Munnings had left the active group on Wednesday 27th March. It was also a wholly idealised version of what happened.

In fact, as detailed in pages 312 -318 of my book Galloper Jack (Macmillans 2003 – still available on Amazon!) the charge was a total wipe out because Flowerdew's squadron, detailed to encircle the wood down the eastern side, came up out of a dip to be greeted by rows of machine guns and small mortars drawn up ready for a rumoured tank attack coming down the road south west from Demuin. They never had a chance – Flowerdew was hit almost straightaway and only two people got through. The citation, written by my grandfather, about them galloping over the enemy guns, is just wishful thinking.

However Flowerdew did not die that day. He was moved some five miles west to a clearing station. Fred Harvey, who had been moved to the same place after being hit through the shoulder, saw him that evening and thought he might pull through. Sadly he didn't and died on the Monday.

A group including members of my family, of the Strathconas and Fred Harvey's nephew are going out this weekend to pay our respects on this 90th anniversary.

All the very best, Brough Scott

Follow up reply from Jim Blythe :-

Dear Brough, thank you so much for taking the time to contact me personally about my comments concerning your article. I did realise of course that Munnings did the painting of the charge from memory, but obviously if he had been withdrawn, it would have been artistic licence as well !! That of course ran through much of his work, painting what the observer wanted to see. He was a lovable rascal, and was particularly outspoken when elected as the President of the Royal Academy, in collaboration with, and no doubt egged by Winston Churchill, he slammed modern art. This was 46 years after he first had a picture accepted by the Academy.

Much of my information about Flowerdew's VC was extracted from the citation in the Gazette, and once again if I had given a little more thought it would have been apparent that your Grandfather provided this. In this respect Jack and Munnings had much in common !!

Thank you once again for resurrecting the whole story. Heroes, men and beasts, do not receive enough attention in this day and age. One for all and all for one has been replaced by all for me. I have the book you wrote and I shall get another copy and give it to the College library for posterity. If you had already done so then mine can be a back-up.

I hope you have a most successful and fulfilling weekend and will look for a sequel to last Sunday's article in the ST at a future date. Jim Blythe.