# The Moral Tragedy of War

## *The Story of A Distinguished WWI Recipient of the Victoria Cross and the Discovery of a Lost Family Connection*

**By William J Anhorn K.C.**
**ICD.D**




*William J. Anhorn was born and raised in Medicine Hat, Alberta and graduated with a Bachelor of Arts degree (Political Science) from the University of Calgary and a Bachelor of Laws degree from the University of Alberta. He returned to his hometown of Medicine Hat in 1976 and practiced law for over 35 years as a senior partner with the Law firm of Pritchard and Company. He retired in 2012 and he and his wife Joan Elaine Anhorn (Medlicott), a retired teacher, continue to reside there.*

*Always having had a keen interest in history and more recently genealogy, he has researched and written a series of articles on his own family and his extended family (Medlicott/McIvor) and their history. He has also written numerous articles on other topics of interest to him.*

*He also has a passionate interest in the history of Medicine Hat and has researched and written several articles in relation to local history. He currently is a member of the Medicine Hat Genealogical Society and Chairman of the Historical and Heritage Resource Management Committee of the Medicine Hat Exhibition and Stampede Company.*

*He is also a frequent contributor to the Alberta Genealogical Society newsletter- Relatively Speaking*

## "*History and genealogy often intersect with interesting results*"

I have always enjoyed reading about history and more recently I became fascinated with the history of WWI. This was prompted by the discovery of pictures of my wife's grandfather and great uncle, Thomas and Edward Medlicott, who were members of the Canadian Expeditionary Force[1] and who served gallantly overseas in the Great War. Recently, I had occasion to travel to France and Belgium and visited the Vimy Ridge Canadian War Memorial and famous WWI landmarks and cemeteries including familiar places or names like Ypres, Passchendaele and the infamous Hill 60 among many others. This evoked an even greater interest and passion in this remarkable chapter of our world history.



History, for most people, starts with learning about their own family and their roots. Taking nostalgic images and historical family photographs and recording information of milestone events like marriages and birthdates are a common practice.

[1] Both Edward and Thomas Medlicott were repatriated to Canada during the war, as they were no longer fit for active duty due to the nature of their war injuries. They both sustained a serious "GSW" (which is an acronym for gunshot wound). They were both hospitalized in England and then later at the Ogden Convalescent Hospital in Calgary, Alberta. (see also, Footnote 2)

There has been a general appeal to preserve family history often by creating a family tree or pedigree, which is passed down from generation to generation. It creates a sense of belonging as it connects you to the past and evokes pride in our heritage. My recent interest in genealogy, (which is well documented on my personal blog at http://wjanhorn.ca) is in reality simply, a subcategory of history.[2]

Part of the fascination with genealogy and creating a family tree is discovering various family relationships, which you didn't know you had. With DNA testing now being readily available and quite affordable, more and more people are exploring their heritage and finding relatives or family connections that they never knew existed. All of which is quite exciting!



Even more fascinating is discovering a distant relationship with a famous person or perhaps, if you are lucky even royalty! For example, in an earlier article entitled " A Dream Come True", I was able to establish a clear familial connection between my wife, Joan Elaine Medlicott and Lady Diana, Princess of Wales.

I have continued on with my exploration of the Medlicott family, for what purpose I am not exactly sure, but I find it to be an enjoyable pastime as I identify

[2] See my article, "The Medlicott Brothers Go To War" for a detailed account of their involvement in the Great War. (Simply click on the blue title)

and place on the Medlicott family tree or pedigree another family member through the search and retention capability offered by ancestry.ca. I am constantly reminded as I carry on this research, how many others are fascinated with this "hobby" as they endeavour to "populate" their own family tree. In the back of everyone's mind is the hope of finding someone who has had an interesting life or story to tell or someone who has distinguished themselves academically or in some other manner, in order to bring honor to their family name.

A recent discovery is worthy of being documented as I found that a distant relative in WWI was awarded the rare Victoria Cross for gallantry and bravery. His story is worth sharing as we approach November 11th and honour those who paid the ultimate sacrifice for love of country and discover one of the many "real" moral tragedies of war.



## The Victoria Cross

***"For Courage and Gallantry in the Presence of the Enemy"***



Victoria Cross (VC)

The **Victoria Cross** (**VC**) is the highest and most prestigious award of the military orders, decorations and medals issued by the United Kingdom. It is awarded for courage and gallantry "in the presence of the enemy" to members of the British and Commonwealth Armed Forces and is most often awarded posthumously. It may be awarded to a person of any military rank in any service and to civilians under military command although no civilian has received the award since 1879. It is often referred to among military circles simply as the "VC".

Queen Victoria to honour acts of valour introduced the VC medal on 29 January 1856 during the Crimean War. Since that time, the medal has been awarded 1,355 individual recipients and as a result is one of the most esteemed military honours. Owing to its historical significance and rarity, the VC is one of the world's most prized medals and a number of public and private collections are devoted to the Victoria

Cross, including a significant collection in the Imperial War Museum.

In 1854, after 39 years of peace, Britain found itself fighting a major war against Russia. The Crimean War was one of the first wars with modern reporting, and the dispatch of several correspondents described many acts of bravery and valour by British servicemen that went unrewarded due to the lack of any official standardized system for recognition of bravery or gallantry within the British Armed Forces. Prior to this, only officers of field rank were eligible for military honours for bravery in the form of the Order of the Bath and those of a lesser rank were generally ignored. Other countries such as France and the Netherlands and other European countries had awards that did not discriminate against class or rank; for example, France awarded the Legion of Honour, (established 1802) and The Netherlands gave the Order of William (established in 1815).

With the newspaper accounts of the gallantry of many non-commissioned officers, there was a growing feeling among the public and in the Royal family that a new award was needed to recognise incidents of gallantry that were unconnected with the length of a man's service or his rank in the military. As a result, Queen Victoria issued a royal directive or warrant on January 29th 1856 officially creating this medal of gallantry and bravery. The order was backdated to 1854 to recognise acts of valour during the Crimean War.

Queen Victoria had earlier instructed the British War Office to strike a new medal that would not recognise bravery without regard to birth or class. The medal was meant to be a simple decoration that would be highly prized and eagerly sought after by those in the military services. To maintain its

simplicity, Queen Victoria, under the guidance of Prince Albert vetoed the suggestion that the award be called *The Military Order of Victoria* and instead suggested simply that the medal be called *Victoria Cross*. The original warrant stated that the Victoria Cross would only be awarded to officers and men who had served in the presence of the enemy and had performed some single act of valour or devotion. The first award ceremony was held on 26 June 1857 at which Queen Victoria invested 62 of the 111 Crimean recipients in a ceremony in Hyde Park, London.

This brings me to the Medlicott family history and the discovery of a connection to an esteemed Victoria Cross recipient.

## Thomas Hawkins Mottershead (1892-1917)-"A Gallant Hero"

Thomas Mottershead was born at 6 Vine Street, Widnes, Cheshire on 17th January 1892 and was one of 10 children born to Thomas and Lucy Hawkins Mottershead.

His early education was at the Simms Cross Council School in Widnes, where, in due course, his academic performance gained him entry to Widnes Technical School in 1907. For the next three years, he studied engineering both in school and privately, obtaining several certificates of skilled competence in engineering theory and practice; and on leaving school he was apprenticed as a pipe fitter to Widnes Alkali Works. He continued in his spare time to study engineering and this resulted in membership of the Amalgamated Society of Engineers, and he gained employment with Cammell Lairds in Birkenhead. He played football as a junior and was also deeply religious, becoming a Bible reader at St Paul's Sunday School.

On 10th February 1914, Thomas married Lilian Medlicott Bree, a childhood sweetheart, and in the following year, they had a child, Sydney Thomas Mottershead. Seeking to better his position, he travelled south and took a temporary job as a garage motor mechanic in Andover, Hampshire in the summer of 1914. Then, with a friend from Widnes, he made his way to Portsmouth to attempt to gain employment in the Portsmouth Naval Dockyard. Their arrival coincided with the outbreak of WWI and both Mottershead and his friend, Frank Moore, enlisted with the Royal Flying Corps on 10th August 1914. He was now assigned to No 1396 Air Mechanic Class, and was posted to Central Flying School, Upavon, and in September, arranged for his wife and son to join him there.

For the next eighteen months, he served on the maintenance staff, gaining promotion to Corporal on 15th September 1915; acting Sergeant on 1st January 1916, and Sergeant on 1st April 1916. Although an accomplished aircraft mechanic, he was determined to become a pilot and in May 1916, after much perseverance on his part, he was accepted into the Royal Flying Corp and commenced pilot training. Due to his superb technical knowledge and prior experience with aircraft, he proved to be an excellent pilot and obtained a 2nd Class Pilot's Certificate on the 9th of June 1916.



He then spent a month as a flying instructor, but on July 4th, 1916 in company with three other NCO pilots – Flight Sergeant JTB McCudden MM (later VC, DSO, MC, MM), Sergeant Pateman, and Sgt. Haxton – he was posted to France and the RFC Pilot's Pool at St Omer, arriving there on July 5th. Mottershead was then posted to 25 Squadron at Auchel, France for operational duties.

With the Battle of the Somme raging, he was put straight into the action, having been allotted an experienced observer-gunner, Lieutenant W. E. Harper. For the following two months, he proved himself as a very competent and skilled pilot and quickly developed a reputation for cool courage under fire.

On September 22nd, 1916, his bravery would earn him his first gallantry award. Flying FE2B, 6998, with 2nd Lieutenant Street as an observer, he was detailed to bomb the railway station at Samain. Diving to 1,500 feet over the objective, he bombed an ammunition train and destroyed it; then he flew very low over a second train and raked it with machine gun fire. As he climbed away, a German Fokker scout attacked his aircraft, but by clever manoeuvring he outfought the German monoplane and Street shot it down.

For this, Mottershead was awarded the DCM, with the citation in the London Gazette on 14th November 1916.



He spent two weeks on leave over the Christmas holidays with his wife and young son, taking time to visit his old school where he was persuaded to give the pupils a brief account of his exploits with the Royal Flying Corp.

He returned to his squadron on January 1st, 1917.

## *“One of the Bravest Men who had ever Fallen in War.”*

**Captain George James Mahoney-Jones, 20th Sqdn. Royal Flying Corps**[3]

A short 7 days later, on Sunday, January 7th, 1917 near Ploegsteert Wood, Belgium, Sergeant Mottershead was on patrol in FE-2d (serial number A39) with observer Lt. W.E. Gower, when two German Albatros D.III aircraft engaged them in combat.

Lt. Gower managed to hit one airplane with machine gun fire and put it out of action. The German 'ace' Lieutenant Walter Göttsch, having been credited with 20 victories, was flying the second German plane. The decorated German pilot hit Mottershead's aircraft, piercing the airplane’s fuel tank causing the plane to catch on fire. Engulfed in flames and with Gower being unable to extinguish the fire with a handheld fire extinguisher, Sergeant Mottershead was severely burned. Despite his injuries, he nevertheless was still able to continue to fly the aircraft and managed to take his crippled plane back behind the Allied lines and make a successful forced landing. However, due to the intensity of the fire, the weakened undercarriage of the airplane collapsed on touching the ground.

The observer, Lt. Gower was thrown clear of the wreckage but Sgt. Mottershead was pinned in the cockpit. He was subsequently rescued and hospitalized but he died five days later as a result of the severe burns he had suffered as a result of the crash landing.

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[3] Captain George James Mahoney-Jones, 20th Sqdn.-Royal Flying Corps was killed in action in France on April 7th, 1917. He is buried at Bailleul Communal Cemetery, Bailleul, France alongside one of the most decorated pilots of his squadron-Sgt. Thomas Mottershead.

On January 13th, 1917, Thomas Hawkins Mottershead was laid to rest with full military honours in Bailleul Communal Cemetery, Bailleul, France. Captain Mahoney-Jones, his unit commander, wrote a letter to Thomas' wife, Lilian Medlicott Mottershead on January 14th stating…"*we sorrowfully knew that we had laid to rest one of the bravest men who had ever fallen in war.*"

On February 12th, 1917 came the announcement of the posthumous award of the Victoria Cross to Sgt. Thomas Mottershead. Lt. Gower for his part in the action was awarded the Military Cross.

This VC recipient has the distinction of being the only one that was awarded to a Royal Flying Corp non-commissioned officer during all of WWI.

At a ceremony at Hyde Park, London, England on June 2nd 2017, King George V presented the Victoria Cross to Lilian Medlicott Mottershead.



The Victoria Cross Citation reads as follows:

"*For most conspicuous bravery, endurance and skill when attacked at an altitude of 9,000 feet, the petrol tank was pierced and the machine set on fire. Enveloped in flames, which his observer, Lt. Gower was unable to subdue, this very gallant soldier succeeded in bringing his aeroplane back to our lines, and though he made a successful landing, the machine collapsed on touching the ground, pinning him beneath the wreckage from which he was subsequently rescued. Though suffering extreme torture from burns, Sgt. Mottershead showed the most conspicuous presence of mind in the careful selection of a landing place, and his wonderful endurance and fortitude undoubtedly saved the life of his observer. He has since succumbed to his injur*ies.

In addition to his VC and DCM, Thomas Mottershead was awarded the British War Medal 1914-20 and Victory Medal 1914-19. His medals were purchased privately in 1994 by Lord Michael Ashcroft and are now displayed in the Ashcroft Gallery, Imperial War Museum, London, England.

A statue honouring Thomas Mottershead VC, DCM was unveiled in Victoria Park, Widnes, Cheshire on April 1st 1918, and a scholarship at Widnes Technical School was also established in his honour.

A stunning portrait of Sgt. Thomas Hawkins Mottershead stands in the Imperial War Museum, London, England and pays a lasting tribute to this great WWI war hero and Victoria Cross Recipient.



***Thomas Hawkins Mottershead (1892-1917) VC DSM***

**Finding a Lost Medlicott Family Connection**

Based on a Family Relationship Chart, Lilian Medlicott Mottershead would be the second cousin (2x removed) to my wife, Joan Elaine Medlicott. Lilian was the daughter of Elizabeth Medlicott, who was the sister of Joan's great grandfather, Edward Medlicott.

Therein lies the recently discovered **Medlicott** family relationship to a Distinguished WWI Veteran and Honoured Recipient of the Victoria Cross.

But more importantly, this amazing discovery and the telling of a simple story like that of Thomas Hawkins Mottershead identifies a real life character. It humanizes this deadly conflict and puts in greater perspective the human cost of war, by portraying someone who was a real person, who like all of us, had hopes, dreams and aspirations.

These "dreams" were dashed in a few cataclysmic seconds over the skies of Belgium, and for those loved ones that were left behind, his wife Lilian and infant son Sidney Thomas Mottershead, began the start of a real life tragedy-one of the many moral tragedies of war.

**LEST WE FORGET!**

William J. Anhorn K.C. ICD.D