

## Mid-Month Visit – May 2024

There were 78 Victoria Crosses awarded to soldiers for service in the South African War (1899-1902), and through my regular monthly newsletters, I have reported on a number of these. One award which has fascinated me since I first read Robin Smith's record in his book 'Practically Over', was the V.C. awarded to Sergeant Arthur Richardson of Lord Strathcona's Horse.



Ian Uys in his book 'Victoria Crosses of the Anglo-Boer War', recorded the following about Richardson (page 58) – *"He was born at Southport, near Liverpool, Lancashire, on September 23, 1872. Richardson went to Canada in 1892 and worked as a dentist at Stoney Mountain, Manitoba, before joining the North-West Mounted Police at Regina in May 1894. Posted to Battleford, he was promoted corporal in 1898. He joined Lord Strathcona's Horse, a Canadian cavalry unit, and was present in the advance by General Buller into the Transvaal."*

*Picture: Sergeant Arthur Richardson V.C.*

Before I get into the 'subject matter' of this newsletter, I want to quote what Robin Smith wrote which really drew my interest to the man. After being discharged in March 1901, Richardson returned to Canada. In 1907 he returned to England and settled in Liverpool, where, from accounts read, he became a recluse. Smith records (page 26) – *"During this period, another man named Arthur Richardson, a corporal in the Gordon Highlanders, began passing himself off as the winner of the Victoria Cross. He succeeded so well that, when he died, he was buried with military honours. Ironically, the real Arthur Richardson, V.C. was discovered marching in the funeral cortege of his imposter."*

Before carrying on with Richardson, the formation of Strathcona's Horse, the unit into which Richardson enrolled, had an interesting beginning. When war broke out in South Africa on 11 October 1899, Lord Strathcona was Canada's High Commissioner in London and was aware that many of the British Colonies had offered contingents to fight alongside British troops. However, the Canadian Government were divided about offering similar support. The book 'Our Little Army in the Field' by Brian A Reid takes up the story (page 38) – *"After discussions with the colonial secretary, Strathcona informed Prime Minister Laurier (Prime Minister of Canada) by telegram that he proposed to raise and equip, at his own expense, a regiment of mounted scouts for service in the British Army. On 10 January 1900 Lord Strathcona submitted his proposal to the War Office, which accepted it two days later."*



After the above force departed from Canada, Lord Strathcona raised another half company of men (50 men), as reinforcements for the main force, and Richardson was part of this contingent. When the 'reinforcements' arrived in South Africa they made their way to Standerton and were assigned to work with the South African Light Horse in raiding farms. Reid records in his book (page 142) – *"They arrived at Durban on 20 June and began to make their way north to join the regiment. By early June the draft had reached Standerton and was temporarily attached to the SALH (South African Light Horse). On the 5<sup>th</sup> July the troop accompanied Byng's men on a sweep to the north and west. At Wolwe Spruit, about 15 miles north of Standerton, the Canadians, who were the advanced guard, encountered the enemy. Adamson (Lieutenant Agar Adamson commanded the draft) decided to draw the Boers into a trap by feigning a retreat, while the SALH waited in ambush to take the Boers on each flank. Unfortunately, the plan went awry when the Boers dropped back and Adamson chose to pursue them. The situation went bad very quickly, the Boers began to press the troops from three sides, and three men were wounded. One of the wounded men, Private McArthur, whose horse had been killed, was in imminent danger of being captured. Sergeant Arthur Richardson rode back under heavy fire and rescued McArthur, covered by the fire of another wounded Strathcona, Private Sparks. Richardson's gallantry earned him the first Canadian Victoria Cross of the war."*

Being the person that I am, I now needed to find where Richardson's act of gallantry was performed.

So, where is Wolwe Spruit? It has been recorded – *"The clash took place north of Standerton along the Wolwespruit, in an area now largely under the water of the Grootdraai Dam."*

I have done some research and in doing so have consulted the 1:50 000 scale maps of the District. The 1:50 000 map (2629 CD) gives the Grootdraai Dam to the north-east of Standerton, and the middle of the dam is under 8 miles from Standerton.



*Picture: A memorial in Lydenburg to Sergeant Richardson V.C.*

From records consulted, I don't believe that this is where the action took place. So – I consulted other references to the Richardson action, and have come up with the following:

- The book by Reid records "... on 5 July the troops accompanied Byng's men on a sweep to the north and west. At Wolwe Spruit, about 15 miles north of Standerton ..."
- The book 'Always a Strathcona' by W.B. Fraser records (page 36) – "On July 5<sup>th</sup>, at Wolwe Spruit, about 15 miles north of Standerton ..."
- From the diary of George Bouwers, 'C' Squadron, Lord Strathcona's Horse – "July 5<sup>th</sup> 1900, 1, 2 and 3 Troops of 'C' Squadron going back to Waterval ... was sent on patrol and was in time to see a battle just north of this place." Waterval was a camp about 2.5 miles east of Val, on



the Waterval River, adjacent to the railway bridge, and is about 15 miles north-west of Standerton.

My interest in this man and his action has taken me to a number of detailed maps of the area of Standerton, especially to the north and north-west, and I believe I might have found where the action took place. The 1:50,000 map (2628 DB) indicates that there is a Wolwespruit, just off the Regional Road, the 547, between the farms Hartbeeskul (537IR) and Klipdrift (324IS) ... and this Wolwespruit is about 20 miles north-west of Standerton. So, with reference to the points above, I believe that this is the area where Richardson's act of bravery resulted in him being awarded the Victoria Cross.



Last week, together with a fellow Tour Guide, Colin Ross, we tried to find the area where the Wolwespruit and the Waterval River merge, and with limited time at our disposal, we identified the general area.

I am not sure how many of the 78 V.C. actions have unidentified locations where they occurred, but Richardson has certainly got my interest and attention. Colin and I are both committed to doing more research and exploration, and whatever we find we will share with our readers.

*Picture: Sergeant Richardson V.C.'s resting place in the St. James' Cemetery behind the Liverpool Anglican Church*

**REMEMBER** to keep an eye on our website ([www.battletoursza.com](http://www.battletoursza.com)) for regular updates and news.

**Allan Gordon**