Corporal Filip Konowal, VC

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Victoria Cross Background: The Victoria Cross (VC), instituted in 1856 by Queen Victoria, is the Commonwealth's highest military decoration for valour. It is awarded in recognition of the most exceptional bravery displayed in the presence of the enemy, although in rare instances the decoration has been given to mark other courageous acts.

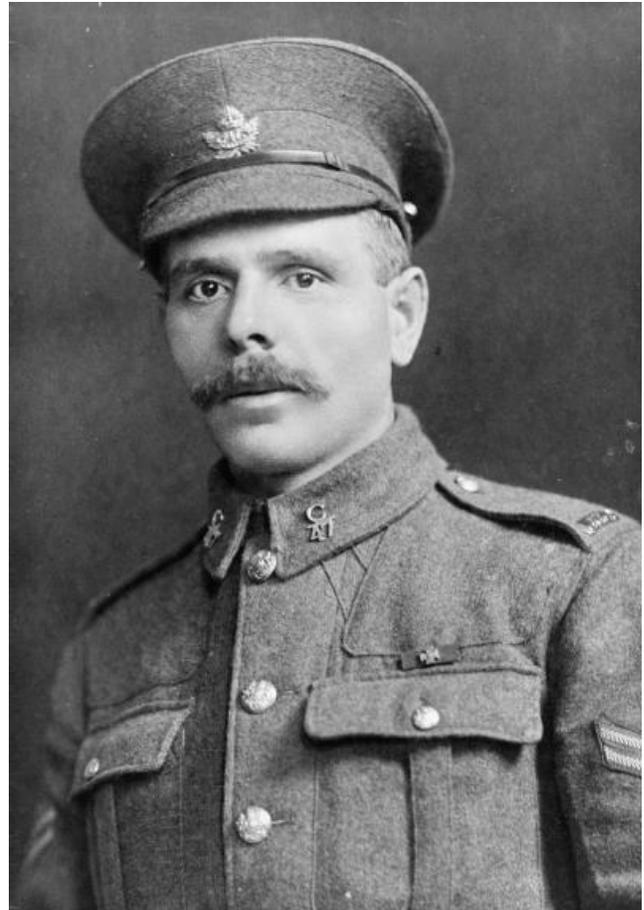Since its inception during the Crimean War, the VC has been awarded 1,356 times, 300 of them posthumously. Depending on which of a variety of sources is cited and on the selection criteria applied, somewhere between 94 and 98 Victoria Crosses have been awarded to Canadians or to others serving with the Canadian Forces.

A distinctly Canadian version of the medal was introduced in 1993. To date no one has been awarded the Canadian medal.

Corporal Filp Konowal: Of Ukranian heritage, Filip Konowal was born in Kedeski, Russia on March 25, 1887, and came to Canada about 1913. Having been trained as a bayonet instructor, he enlisted in the Canadian Expeditionary Force in 1915, served with the 47th Infantry Battalion, and eventually was promoted to the rank of corporal.

VC Citation: Corporal Konowal earned the Victoria Cross for his actions from 22 to 24 August 1917 while leading his section in overcoming German resistance on Hill 70, near Lens in France.

"For most conspicuous bravery and leadership when in charge of a section in attack. His section had the difficult task of mopping up cellars, craters and machine-gun emplacements.

Under his able direction all resistance was overcome successfully, and heavy casualties inflicted on the enemy. In one cellar he himself bayonetted three enemy and attacked single-handed seven others in a crater, killing them all.

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On reaching the objective, a machine-gun was holding up the right flank, causing many casualties. Cpl. Konowal rushed forward and entered the emplacement, killed the crew, and brought the gun back to our lines.

The next day he again attacked single-handed another machine-gun emplacement, killed three of the crew, and destroyed the gun and emplacement with explosives.

This non-commissioned officer alone killed at least sixteen of the enemy, and during the two days' actual fighting carried on continuously his good work until severely wounded.

London Gazette, no.30400, 26 November 1917

He was presented his medal by King George V who remarked, *"Your exploit is one of the most daring and heroic in the history of my army. For this, accept my thanks."*

Post War: After being hospitalized in England, Konowal was officially assigned for a time as an assistant to the military attache of the Russian Embassy in London. Later he was transferred to the 1st Canadian Reserve Battalion, served with the Canadian Forestry Corps and eventually with the Canadian Siberian Expeditionary Force.

He returned to Vancouver on June 20, 1919, after soldiering for three years and 357 days in the ranks of the Canadian Army, one of as many as 10,000 Ukrainian Canadians who had so served.

Honourably discharged, Konowal was subsequently troubled by medical and other problems, most thought to be a consequence of his war wounds. Nevertheless, by 1928, he had begun to rebuild his life. He enlisted in the Ottawa-based Governor General's Foot Guards. He re-married in 1934, taking for his second wife a widow, Juliette Leduc-Auger. (His first wife, Anna, and their daughter, Maria, were lost in Ukraine during the Stalinist regime.)

Thanks to the intervention of another Victoria Cross winner, and also a member of the Governor General's Foot Guards, Major Milton Fowler Gregg, Sergeant-at-Arms of the House of Commons (1934-44), Konowal found employment as a junior caretaker in the House of Commons, a humble job, but, in the years of the Great Depression, a welcome one. Spotted washing floors of the Parliament building by Prime Minister William Lyon Mackenzie King, Konowal was reassigned as the special custodian of Room No. 16, the Prime Minister's office, a post he held until his death.

Konowal was again acknowledged for his valour during the 1939 Royal Tour when His Majesty King George VI shook his hand during the dedication of the National War Memorial, in Ottawa. He also kept in touch with his wartime comrades, even attempting to fight for Canada during the Second World War, an impossibility given his age.

On December 20, 1945, Konowal joined the Hull, Quebec, branch of The Canadian Legion of the British Empire Service League, recording on his application for membership that he had been born on September 15,1888 [in Kudkiv, Ukraine], had been wounded in the war, was receiving a disability allowance and working as a cleaner in the House of Commons. Required to state why he was discharged he wrote simply, *"War was finish"*.

Konowal was invited to participate in a ceremony marking the 100th anniversary of the institution of the Victoria Cross, held in London in 1956. Too poor to travel to England on his own resources -- even though Ottawa offered to cover the actual transportation costs -- Konowal

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turned to his fellow Ukrainian Canadian veterans for help. With the financial assistance of Ukrainian Canadian branches of The Royal Canadian Legion he was able to go overseas. On May 17, 1956 he wrote to the president of Branch 360, Mr. Stephen Pawluk, to thank all those who helped make that trip possible:

> *Please be kind enough to extend my thanks to every Ukrainian Canadian Legion Branch ... I was very surprised and I was not expecting that much. I knew I had friends amongst the Ukrainian people but I never thought they could do so much for a poor fellow like me.*

On June 25, 1956 Konowal joined 300 other Victoria Cross winners from around the world at a formal tea party at Westminster Hall hosted by the British Prime Minister, Sir Anthony Eden. On 26 June he participated in a march-past at Hyde Park, reviewed by Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II and Prince Philip, followed by an afternoon garden party.

Filip Konowal died on June 3, 1959, aged 72. Konowal was buried from the St. John the Baptist Ukrainian Catholic Church, with full military honours by his regiment, in Lot 502, Section A, at the Notre Dame Cemetery, in Ottawa. His wife, who died at age 86, was buried beside him on March 3, 1987.

Gravesite:

Cpl. Konowal's Headstone

Medal Location: His medals are held by the Canadian War Museum.

Konowal's Medal Set

Post Script: In the battle for Hill 70 six members of the Corps received the Victoria Cross for their conspicuous gallantry between 15 and 24 August – Major Okill Massey Learmonth, Company Sergeant-Major Robert Hill Hanna, Sergeant Frederick Hobson, Corporal Konowal and Privates Harry Brown and Michael James O'Rourke.

The Royal Canadian Legion Branch 360 (Konowal Branch) in Toronto made him its patron in 1953. The Legion helped established the Konowal Prize, an annual scholarship grant at the Royal Military College of Canada.

Memorial plaques have been unveiled in the Cartier Square drill hall of the Governor General's Foot Guards in Ottawa; at Legion Branch 360 (Konowal Branch) in Toronto; at the Royal Westminster Regiment's armoury in New Westminster, B.C.; on a cairn at Selo Ukraina Memorial Park, near Dauphin, Manitoba; and, in

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2001, at Konowal's place of birth, <u>Kutkivtsi</u>, Ukraine.

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