

# Captain Mitchell Memorial for Victoria Cross Action

A memorial to Captain Coulson Norman Mitchell, VC, MC, was unveiled on 14 October 2016 in France by the City of Escaudoeuvres. The memorial commemorates Captain Mitchell's heroic First World War action and his detachment in preventing the enemy from demolishing bridges across the Canal de l'Escaut that were vital to the Canadian advance. The city of Escaudoeuvres considers 9 October as their Liberation Day and conducts an annual ceremony on that day to honour Captain Mitchell.

Captain Mitchell is the only Canadian Military Engineer awarded the Victoria Cross. He was born in Winnipeg, Manitoba and graduated from the University of Manitoba in 1912 with a degree in engineering. He joined the Canadian Expeditionary Force as an engineer officer in January 1915 and served with the 1<sup>st</sup> Tunnelling Company, Canadian Engineers.

Captain Mitchell received the Military Cross for his actions in December 1916 at "The Bluff" in the Ypres Salient. He earned the Victoria Cross on the night of 8/9 October 1918 while leading a party of sappers on a reconnaissance mission near Cambrai in France. Included in the party were Sgt E. Jackson, Sapper L.G. Brewer and Sapper E.C. Murphy. Their task to support the advance of the Canadian 5<sup>th</sup> Infantry Brigade, was to venture beyond the Canadian front line to examine critical bridges and prevent their demolition. After finding one bridge destroyed, Mitchell moved on to the next, which spanned the Canal de l'Escaut. Running across the bridge in total darkness, Mitchell found that it had been prepared for demolition. With a non-commissioned officer, he cut the detonation wires and began to remove the explosive charges. When the Germans realized what was happening, they charged toward the bridge but were held off by Mitchell's sappers until reinforcements arrived. Saving the bridge over the Canal de l'Escaut contributed significantly to the success of the 5<sup>th</sup> Infantry Brigade's offensive operations.



## Citation:



*"For most conspicuous bravery and devotion to duty on the night of 8<sup>th</sup>-9<sup>th</sup> October 1918, at the Canal de L'Escaut, north-east of Cambrai.*

*He led a small party ahead of the first wave of infantry in order to examine the various bridges on the line of approach and, if possible, to prevent their demolition.*

*On reaching the canal, he found the bridge already blown up. Under a heavy barrage, he crossed to the next bridge, where he cut a number of 'lead' wires. Then, in total darkness and unaware of the position or strength of the enemy at the bridgehead, he dashed across the main bridge over the canal. This bridge was found to be heavily charged for demolition, and whilst Capt. Mitchell, assisted by his N.C.O., was cutting the wires, the enemy attempted to rush the*

*bridge in order to blow the charges, whereupon he at once dashed to the assistance of his sentry, who had been wounded, killed three of the enemy, captured 12, and maintained the bridgehead until reinforced. Then, under heavy fire, he continued his task of cutting wires and removing charges, which he well knew might at any moment have been fired by the enemy.*

*It was entirely due to his valour and decisive action that this important bridge across the canal was saved from destruction." (London Gazette, no.31155, 31 January 1919)*

Sergeant Jackson and Sapper Brewer were awarded the Distinguished Conduct Medal for their part in this action.