Tommy Ricketts, V.C.
Newfoundland War Hero and Pharmacist
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Introduction

Tommy Ricketts was the youngest member of the British military to receive the Victoria Cross in the First World War, and is certainly one of Newfoundland’s most celebrated war heroes (Riggs, 2011). A slightly lesser known fact is that following the war, he trained as a pharmacist and operated a drugstore in St. John’s from 1934 until his death in 1967 (Morrissey, 2007). From the perspective of a graduate of the Memorial University School of Pharmacy, the name and story of Tommy Ricketts does not appear to be particularly well known among today’s generation of pharmacy students and practitioners. As such, I decided it would be worthwhile to learn more about the life and exploits of Tommy Ricketts. In doing so, I hope to offer a portrait of a man who had a significant impact on both Newfoundland’s military and healthcare history.

Early Life and Military Service

Thomas R. “Tommy” Ricketts was born on April 15, 1901 in Middle Arm, White Bay in the Colony of Newfoundland, apparently a “village of four families” (Riggs, 2011; “The Victoria Cross and the White Bay Boy Who Won It,” 1919). Like many of his generation, he was filled with a patriotic desire to serve “King and country” with the outbreak of the First World War. Following in the footsteps of his older brother, Tommy signed up for duty with the Royal Newfoundland Regiment on September 2, 1916 and was given the regimental number 3102 (Riggs, 2011). As was often the case, the fifteen year-old Ricketts “told officials he was the required 18” (Walsh, 1981).

Ricketts departed Newfoundland for Europe in January of 1917; he trained in Scotland for several months before being sent to France that June. He suffered a bullet wound to the leg in November 1917, and was sent to England to recuperate (Riggs,
2011). Following his convalescence, Ricketts was returned to active duty in April 1918 (Riggs, 2011).

The actions for which Tommy would ultimately be known occurred on October 14, 1918 in Ledeghem, Belgium (Riggs, 2011). British forces were attempting to advance, however, by 11:30 in the morning they were held back “by persistent and well directed fire at practically point blank range from a German battery” (Murphy, 1919). According to the official record:

Ricketts immediately volunteered to go forward with his section commander and a Lewis gun to outflank the battery. Advancing by short rushes under heavy fire from enemy machine guns and a hostile battery, their ammunition was exhausted when they were still three hundred yards from the battery… Ricketts immediately realizing the situation, doubled back a hundred yards under heavy machine gun fire, procured further ammunition, dashed back to the Lewis gun, and by very accurate fire drove the enemy and gun teams into a farm. (“The Victoria Cross and the White Bay Boy Who Won It,” 1919).

As a result of Ricketts actions, British forces were able to advance, taking “four field guns, four machine guns and eight prisoners” (Murphy, 1919). His actions were said to have “undoubtedly saved many lives” (“The Victoria Cross and the White Bay Boy Who Won It,” 1919).

For his actions of October 1918, Tommy was awarded with the Croix de Guerre from the French government (“The Victoria Cross and the White Bay Boy Who Won It,” 1919). However, his generally better known honour came on January 19, 1919 when he was presented the Victoria Cross by King George V (Murphy, 1919). This occurred at
Sandringham Castle one day before Ricketts was scheduled to return to Newfoundland. The timing is often noted as the King presented Tommy with the award one day after learning that his son had been killed in action (House, 1999). The award is notable as “[Britain’s] highest award for gallantry” to be “awarded only in exceptional circumstances” (The Royal Household, n.d.). From there began a life of glory that Tommy spent most of his time trying to avoid.

**After the War**

Three months following his winning of the Victoria Cross, Tommy was promoted to Sergeant and set out to return to Newfoundland. It has frequently been noted that as his ship approached the shore of St. John’s, then-journalist Joseph R. Smallwood rowed out “to have a chat with the war hero” (Dooley, 2007). Rather than returning to Middle Arm, arrangements were made for Tommy to complete high school at Field College; he boarded with teacher George House so “he could get some help with homework” (House, 1999). During this period, Edward House (George’s son) described Tommy as enjoying fishing and rugby, and being proficient with the “saw, hammer, and axe” (House, 1999).

Upon completion of “the Grade XI standard,” he became one of the first students of the Memorial University College in 1925 (House, 1999). Accounts vary regarding his time at Memorial, however it is generally agreed that he moved on to a “pharmacy apprenticeship at [the] T. McMurdo & Co.” drugstore (Riggs, 2011). This eventually led to the opening of his own drugstore at “the corner of Water and Job streets” in 1934 (Dooley, 2007; Morrissey, 2007). A year prior, he married Edna Edwards of St. John’s; they would eventually have two children (Riggs, 2011).
A Life of Service

In the years he operated his pharmacy, Tommy was described as “a very private person,” but also “a kind-hearted man who enjoyed chatting with customers” (Dooley, 2007; Harrington, 1988). A dedicated pharmacist, he contributed to the profession through taking on apprentices himself, such as his final apprentice, Mr. Brian Healy. Mr. Healy describes the pharmacy world of Tommy’s day as being quite different from contemporary practice, with pharmacists often being the first point of care for injured patients who could not afford the services of a physician (B. Healy, personal communication, January 19, 2016). Mr. Healy has been quoted in The Telegram stating:

From colicky babies, to children with their cuts and their bruises, and to older people with their arthritic joints … his very gentle care was the first stop for many to recovery. To quote one of his customers, who after Mr. Ricketts had dressed his wounds looked over to him and said ‘My God, Tommy, from beggars to kings, you serves [sic] us all.” (Morrissey, 2007).

Tommy Ricketts wartime heroics made him something of a celebrity in St. John’s. As previously noted, he preferred to keep his privacy and avoided the spotlight. One of the more memorable instances of this was his apparent refusal to meet with then Princess Elizabeth on a visit to St. John’s (Riggs, 2011). The future Queen apparently parked outside Ricketts’ drugstore until he reluctantly emerged for a brief meeting. Additionally, people were known to stand and applaud upon his entry to cinemas during his day (B. Healy, personal communication, January 19, 2016).

As can be expected, Tommy did not enjoy talking about the war. Another former apprentice of Ricketts, Neil Curtis is quoted as saying, “… he liked talking about old
cars. But every time I brought up how he won the VC, he’d just walk away” (Dooley, 2007). Ricketts’ son noted that Tommy “kept [his] medals in a drawer,” and cannot recall “his ever wearing them” (Morrissey, 2007).

Tommy Ricketts passed away on February 10, 1967; he apparently died on-the-job, “[collapsing] on the floor of his shop” (Winter, 2014, p. 307). He was given a state funeral, which was attended by numerous dignitaries including the Premier and Lieutenant-Governor (“State Funeral in Honour of the Late Sergeant Thomas Ricketts, V.C.,” 1967). A “parkette monument” was placed at the site of his pharmacy some years later (Morrissey, 2007).

Memorials

The main monument to the life of Tommy Ricketts is the previously mentioned monument at the site of his drugstore on the corner of Water and Job Streets in St. John’s (National Geographic, 2016). In 2007, the monument was restored and rededicated in an initiative “spearheaded by the Johnson Family Foundation” (Dooley, 2007). The current version of the monument includes a picture of the boy soldier, along with photographs of his two main medals (Morrissey, 2007). As well, the boardroom at the offices of the Newfoundland and Labrador Pharmacy Board bears his name (D. Rowe, personal communication, January 24, 2016). Additionally, Ricketts Road in St. John’s was apparently named in Tommy’s honour (White, 1988).

Interestingly, there was even a monument to Tommy Ricketts while he was still alive. Apparently a school was built in his honour in Seal Cove (not far from Middle Arm) in 1921. The building was eventually torn down, but the commemorative plaque inside was placed in the nearby Church of England School (“Plaque for a Hero: Atlantic
Today

It is quite clear that Tommy Ricketts was a hero of Newfoundland, a staple of downtown St. John’s, and a prominent member of the pharmacy community. However, my experience has been that he is largely unknown among my generation. Despite the excellent memorials that already exist, I believe that at least one more needs to be made. The Memorial University of Newfoundland “was raised by the People of Newfoundland as a Memorial to the fallen in the Great Wars” (Memorial University of Newfoundland, 2016). As a man who bravely served in World War I, and contributed to the training of numerous other pharmacists, the most fitting tribute to the memory of Tommy Ricketts would be to name the School of Pharmacy or some aspect therein in his honour. As we approach the one-hundredth anniversary of his heroic deeds in Belgium, such an honour would ensure that Ricketts’ service to Newfoundland and the profession of pharmacy are remembered by future generations.
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Appendix A

Tommy Ricketts in his Pharmacy (circa 1950s)

(Winter, 2015)
Appendix B

Tommy Ricketts Monument (taken by author on March 11, 2016)
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