



THE MASONIC HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF NEW SOUTH WALES

PAPER No. 64

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DATE: 1 October 2000

MAJOR-GENERAL SIR NEVILLE REGINALD HOWSE, V.C., K.C.B., K.C.M.G., K.St.G., F.R.C.S., L.R.C.P. (1863-1930)



Neville Reginald Howse

Neville Howse was the first Australian soldier to win a Victoria Cross.

He was born on 26 October 1863 in Stogursey in the English county of Somerset and, after schooling in Taunton, he gained the medical diplomas of M.R.C.S. and L.R.C.P. in 1886.

He emigrated to New South Wales in 1889 and established a medical practice in the north coast town of Taree.

In 1895, he returned to England for further study to obtain his F.R.C.S. and, after his return to New South Wales, he began a medical practice in the central west town of Orange.

In January 1900, he was commissioned a Lieutenant in the New South Wales Army Medical Corps and he sailed to the Boer War with the 2nd contingent which arrived in South Africa on 22 February 1900.

The Principal Medical Officer was Bro. Lieutenant-Colonel William 'Mo' Williams, a member of the Harmony Lodge of Australia No. 5, United Grand Lodge of New South Wales.

Williams' work was outstanding and much of Howse's later success was due to his influence.

On 24 July 1900, a mounted infantry brigade, which included a detachment from the Medical Corps, was engaged against an enemy force in the Orange Free State near Vredefort when Howse saw a trumpeter in the front line fall wounded. He galloped to his aid under heavy enemy crossfire and, after his horse had been shot dead, Howse proceeded on foot to the trumpeter, tended his wounds and brought him back to safety. His bravery earned him the Victoria Cross, the only one ever awarded to a medical member of the Australian forces.

He returned to Sydney and was promoted to Captain in October 1900 and, in February 1902, with the rank of honorary Major, he returned to South Africa.

After the war, Dr Howse returned to his practice and, subsequently, he was twice elected Mayor of the Municipality of Orange.

He remained a member of the Australian Army Medical Corps Reserve with the rank of Major.

At the outbreak of the First World War he immediately returned to duty and sailed for New Guinea as the Principal Medical Officer with the Australian Naval and Military Expeditionary Force.

His Second-in-Command was Captain Dr. Frederick Maguire who was to become the Grand Master of the United Grand Lodge of New South Wales.

Howse returned to Sydney in time to sail for Egypt with the 1st Division of the Australian Imperial Force.

He landed at Gallipoli on 25 April 1915 and was Mentioned in Despatches and created a Companion of the Order of the Bath for his outstanding work in personally attending the wounded and organising medical activities.

Howse then replaced his old commander, Bro. Major-General Sir William Williams, K.C.M.G., C.B., K.St.J., and there was some acrimony between the two, although they shared a capacity to identify problems quickly and provide solutions.

The historian Charles Bean said of Howse:

Unquestionably the A.I.F. also owed its physique and morale partly to the will and ability of Surgeon-General Howse.

In January 1917, Howse was appointed a Knight Commander of the Order of the Bath and promoted to Major-General.

His A.I.F. appointment terminated on 1 January 1920 and after a brief return to private practice, in July 1921 he was appointed Director-General of Medical Services in the Australian Military Forces.

He resigned the following year after his election to the House of Representatives for the seat of Calare which included the town of Orange.

At various times he held the portfolios Defence, Home and Territories and Health in the governments led by Bros. Earle Page and Stanley Bruce.

He was defeated at the 1929 elections and, in ill health, left for England in February 1930.

He died of cancer in London on 19 September 1930 and was buried in Kensal Green Cemetery.

There are memorials to Howse at the Orange Base Hospital, the Orange Sub-branch of the Returned Services League and there is a commemorative plaque in the Australian Institute of Anatomy.

There is a painting of Howse winning the V.C. by Bro. Sir William Dargie in the Royal Medical Army Corps headquarters in London.

Bro. Neville Reginald Howse was initiated at Orange in Lodge Ophir No. 17, United Grand Lodge of New South Wales on 29 August 1901.

He was passed to the Second Degree on 16 January 1902 and raised a Master Mason on 9 April 1903.

Bro. Howse was elected Junior Warden in 1908 and was installed as Master of the lodge on 28 October 1909.

A 45 cent postage stamp was issued by Australia Post on 24 July 2000 to commemorate the centenary of Wor. Bro. Howse's Victoria Cross.
