

Full honors for 'Charlie' Rutherford VC

By Adam Brown

Local dignitaries, scores of soldiers, legionnaires, friends and family gathered in Colborne yesterday at the funeral of one of Canada's most renowned war heroes.

Charles Smith Rutherford died Sunday at the age of 97, the last surviving First World War veteran to hold the most prestigious military medal in the Commonwealth — the Victoria Cross.

Police cordoned off streets surrounding the packed Colborne United Church. A silent crowd, wearing poppies, lined the streets to hear loudspeakers echo Rev. Victor Parsons' eulogy.

"In his lifetime, the most astounding technological changes in human history have taken place," the minister intoned. "He has walked with royalty, rubbed shoulders with the political and military leaders of our nation, yet he remained a humble person, never wanting to be elevated above his peers."

Northumberland MP Christine Stewart, Northumberland MPP Joan Fawcett and Cobourg Mayor Angus Read bowed their heads in prayer alongside Rutherford's friends and family.

Members of Charles Rutherford VC Branch 187, Royal Canadian Legion, Colborne, were out in force.

Interment was at Colborne United Cemetery.

Colborne Reeve Walter Rutherford mourned the loss of his uncle.

"He was a fine man," he said.

Rutherford's niece, Chris Chad, commented, "He was one of a vanishing breed of men. He was gentle, kind and considerate. He always put himself second."

Chad said Rutherford rarely talked about his wartime achievements.

"It wasn't until I became an adult that I realized what a valorous person he was."

Rutherford's son, Andrew, said his father was opposed to violence.

"It's kind of ironic that his honors were from the war," he observed.

Andrew said his father visited wartime Europe as a civilian before deciding that the war effort was honorable.

In March 1916, Rutherford, then 24, left the farm to enlist in the Queen's Own Rifles. He was later transferred to the 5th Canadian Mounted Rifles in France. He was wounded in trench fighting and, after recovering, returned to fight in the Battle of Vimy Ridge in 1917. In June 1917, he was wounded again and put out of action for two months.

Aug. 26, 1918 was the day he won the Victoria Cross.

By that time a 26-year-old lieutenant, Rutherford was in charge of an assault on the French town of Monchy-le-Preux. After a slow advance, Rutherford decided to scout ahead by himself. After a brief reconnaissance, he returned to find his men had departed for safer ground. Not realizing the situation, Rutherford pressed ahead.

He saw a troop of soldiers ahead. As he got closer, "I realized they were all Germans," he said in a 1984 interview.

Rutherford, a lone Canadian soldier, found himself in the midst of 45 German troops, including two officers and three machine-gun crews.

"I knew if I hesitated, they'd start shooting at me," he said. "So I walked on up brazenly and said, 'You men are my prisoners.'"

Rutherford was gesturing wildly with his revolver, indicating to the men that they were surrounded. The incredulous German officers ordered their men to throw down their weapons and surrender.

Rutherford also received the Military Cross and the Military Medal during his duty overseas.

"Mr. Rutherford knew everybody in the Colborne area," said the minister, his voice echoing over the loudspeakers at the funeral. "His name will always be held in great

esteem by all who knew him."

As a Canadian flag and Rutherford's Victoria Cross were presented to the family, an elderly legionnaire leaned over and said to a young man, "Take a long look at that medal; you'll never see one like that again as long as you live."

On Tuesday, Northumberland County council stood for a moment of silence in Cobourg, and Stewart gave praise to the late hero in the House of Commons.



Memento — Andrew Rutherford, the only son of the late Charles Rutherford, receives the Canadian flag which draped his father's coffin from Capt. J.P.B. DesLauriers, First Canadian Signals Regiment.

Photo by Kevin DeRoy

MAR 18 1992



Last post — Major Steve Brand, of the Queens Own Rifles, right, holds the Victoria Cross and other medals of Capt. Charles

Rutherford as family and friends pay their last respects yesterday afternoon at Colborne Union Cemetery.

Photo by Kevin Deroy

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