



Episode 003- Dr. Coulter's Acts of Gallantry

Introduction

You're listening to rememBURBANK, a podcast featuring stories from the history of Burbank, California, produced by the Burbank Public Library. Check out our digital collection of historical Burbank photos at BurbankinFocus.org.

Announcements

Just one announcement before today's story:

There's still time to sign up for this year's Summer Reading Club at the Burbank Library! From toddlers to adults, there is a summer reading program for every age level. Summer Storytime and weekly Family Shows are geared to Kindergarten and younger. Kids entering Grades 1-6 will visit the library for weekly entertainment and earn prizes for submitting book reports. Teen events include Book Café, Coding Class, Trivia Night, Scavenger Universe Lockdown, and prize drawings for teens submitting book reviews. And adults can attend programs, movies, and outdoor concerts and will be entered in the drawing for a grand prize by submitting 5 book reviews and completing a summer challenge. All programs are funded by the Friends of the Burbank Public Library and are free to the public. Online sign-ups can be found at burbanklibrary.org.

Story

And now for today's story:

Jackson Mayers, Ph.D published a book on Burbank history in the mid-1970s. It is called, aptly if a bit mundanely, *Burbank History*. It's a large book that takes the reader from the early days of Spanish California through to the mid-70s. If you would like to read it you can do so by borrowing a physical copy from the Burbank Central Library or, conveniently, read it online via the Burbankia website.

The book is chock full of details, and scattered throughout are some interesting little tidbits- small and interesting morsels of information that are just enough to make the reader think, "Now that's intriguing". But so many of these intriguing bits are brief leaving the reader craving more of the story.

For example:

On page 70 of Mayers' book the author writes: "In 1917 Dr. F.W. Coulter of Burbank was called to Buckingham Palace in London and presented with the Distinguished Conduct Medal. King George himself made the presentation for acts of gallantry by the Burbank physician during 1914-15 fighting in France."

That's it. That's all it says. Nothing about what "acts of gallantry" earned him the medal, just that King George V (the grandfather of today's Queen Elizabeth) presented the award at Buckingham Palace. Intrigued by this bit of information I decided to look into Frank Wesley Coulter.

To start with, let me explain what the Distinguished Conduct Medal was. Established in 1854 by Queen Victoria, it was awarded to Warrant Officers, Non-Commissioned Officers and men serving in any of the Sovereign's forces in the British Empire for "distinguished, gallant and good conduct in the field". Issued until 1993 it was the second highest award for gallantry in action that ranks below commissioned officers could receive, it was just one step below the prestigious Victoria Cross. In other words, it was a pretty big deal to be the recipient of the Distinguished Conduct Medal.

And to think that a Burbank physician had received it for "acts of gallantry during 1914-15 fighting in France"!

I can't help but wonder what went through Coulter's mind while he was being presented with the medal. Was there any feeling of pride or did he think that he had just done his duty and didn't serve to receive medals? Was he in awe of the splendor of Buckingham Palace surrounding him? And what was his impression of the King? He had to be aware of the honor being bestowed upon him, and by receiving the medal, he was entitled to use the post-nominal letters DCM.

But it wasn't an honor he actually received.

After checking the roll of recipients of the Distinguished Conduct Medal, and checking Canadian World War I records, I could not find any record of Coulter receiving the medal. I was, however, able to confirm through his military personnel record and through the *London Gazette* (one of the official journals of record of the British government) that he received the Military Medal in 1917. The Military Medal (with two capital M's) was a totally different medal from the Distinguished Conduct Medal. Kind of. I say "kind of" because when it was created in 1916, the Military Medal was created to meet the enormous demand for medals during the First World War. Established in 1916 by King George V and awarded for "acts of gallantry and devotion under fire", it ranked just below the Distinguished Conduct Medal. When it was first introduced it was unpopular because it was obviously created to save awarding too many Distinguished Conduct Medals.

I don't know how the non-factual statement of Coulter receiving the Distinguished Conduct Medal ended up in Mayers' book, because unfortunately, the author did not cite his source for the information. It could be that Mayers or his source was mistaken. It could be Mayers or his source made it up. Or it could even be that Coulter, his family or his friends fabricated and/or spread the misinformation. While I could not figure out how the false story came to be, I was able to find the real story.

Here's what really happened:

Born on June 19, 1888 in Nova Scotia, Frank Wesley Coulter was a telegraph operator before the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand and the subsequent outbreak of World War I. Enlisting on September 27, 1914 at age 26, he served in the 17th Battalion Canadian Expeditionary Force, also known as the Nova Scotia Highlanders, until April 1915 when he transferred to the 13th Battalion. His military records describe him as 5 ft. 9 in. tall, with fair complexion, blue eyes, fair or light brown hair, and a long scar on his right thigh.

During the early years of the war the Canadian Corps. was led by British generals, but in June of 1917 Lieutenant General Arthur Currie took command of the Canadian Corps. A month after taking command, Currie was given orders to capture the French coal-mining city of Lens. The real objective was to draw German troops away from a major Allied offensive taking place in Belgium. Rather than trying to capture the city, Currie believed the better plan was to capture the hill to the north - named Hill 70 because of its elevation 70 meters above sea level. He believed that by capturing the hill the Germans would have no choice but to counterattack thus forcing them to come out of their dugouts. The Canadians were successful in gaining and maintaining control of the hilltop, but at great cost. About 9,000 Canadians were killed or wounded while an estimated 25,000 Germans were killed or wounded. Many casualties were suffered from extensive use of poison gas, including the new German Yellow Cross shell containing the blistering agent sulfur mustard (or mustard gas).

It was during this battle that Frank Wesley Coulter was awarded the Military Medal. And he likely didn't go to Buckingham Palace to receive it as his military record indicates he received it in the field.

Besides earning him a medal, the Battle of Hill 70 had other lasting effects for Coulter. In February 1919, a year and a half after the battle, Coulter went to the hospital to be treated for tonsillitis. Less than a month later he was in isolation with mumps. After recovering from that, he still was not well and two months later he was transferred to another hospital with, quote, "debility", unquote. So what was causing all these health problems including sore throat, soreness and swelling in glands, tightness in chest, and coughing (occasionally with blood)? Mustard gas. Coulter had been on the receiving end of an attack of mustard gas from the Germans, presumably during the Battle of Hill 70, and that was causing all sorts of problems for him a year and a half later.

On October 7, 1919 Coulter was discharged due to being medically unfit. His discharge was mostly due to his lingering health issues as well as the end of the war, but probably also in part due to another note in his medical file which states: quote, "Man is a little nervous about himself", unquote.

Four years after being discharged, in December of 1923, Coulter boarded the Princess Adelaide and immigrated to the U.S. By 1930 he was living in a boarding house in Los Angeles, and by 1935 he had moved to Burbank where he operated a chiropractor practice. He married his former Los Angeles boarding house landlady who was also a chiropractor. (Interesting side note: Coulter's wife Madeline, was previously married to an FBI agent, back then called the Bureau of Investigation, who, after their divorce, was part of the team of agents who arrested George "Machine Gun" Kelly.)

Over the next few decades Dr. Coulter was a prominent member of the Burbank community, serving on the board of the Burbank Symphony Association including a term as president in 1953. This prominence helps to explain how he garnered a mention in Mayers book when it was published in 1974. By the mid-70s Dr. Coulter was retired and living in Santa Barbara where he remained until his death in June of 1978, just two weeks before his 90th birthday.

So the information in Mayers's book is incorrect. But while Frank Wesley Coulter may not have gone to Buckingham Palace to receive the Distinguished Conduct Medal from King Georg V, that does not make his contribution to the war effort or his contributions to Burbank any less noteworthy.

News from Burbank

And now for the news from Burbank.

Today's news comes from the December 18, 1953 edition of the *Los Angeles Times*:

Portal of Folded Wings Dedicated in Burbank.

Gen. Eaker Speaks at Ceremony Honoring Those Who Made American Aviation History.

"The Portal of the Folded Wings was dedicated yesterday at Valhalla Memorial Park in Burbank in a tribute to those who made American aviation history on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of powered flight.

Lt. Gen. Ira C Eaker, ret., chairman of the western Division of the 50th Anniversary of Powered Flight Committee, was the principal speaker at the ceremony.

'Let us all dedicate ourselves to the hope that the next half century of flight will see as much progress as the last,' said Gen. Eaker.

Special Tribute

Special Tribute was paid to the late Walter R. Brookins whose cremated remains are interred in the massive Portal of the Folded Wings Memorial. Brookins was the first civilian pilot instructor taught by Orville Wright.

His widow, Mrs. Mary Brookins, joined Gen. Eaker and others in placing wreaths on the plaque of her husband, who died last April 29.

On Program

Also participating in the program with music supplied by the Burbank Symphony Orchestra, Leo Damiani, conductor, were James N. Gillette, president of the Brookins-Lahm-Wright Aeronautical Foundation, sponsor of the program; Charles Taylor, who built the original Wright plane motor; Matilde Moissant, second woman licensed pilot in the United States; Anne Rambo, Governor of 99's, national women's flying organization, and Dot Lemon, director of the Aero Club of Southern California."

And that's the news from Burbank on December 18, 1953.

End Credits

rememBURBANK is researched, written, edited, and hosted, by Janae Kambestad, Local History Librarian at the Burbank Public Library. Funding for the podcast came from the Friends of the Burbank Public Library, a nonprofit group dedicated to promoting books and the library to the Burbank community. The proceeds from their fundraising efforts help fund Library programming and purchase special equipment for the library.

The music you hear now, and at the beginning of the podcast, is Burbank's official song "In Burbank" by Code Morgan.

You can find shownotes for this episode, learn more about the show, and view historical photos of Burbank at BurbankinFocus.org

Thank you for listening.