

A FINE AND VERY SCARCE GORDON HIGHLANDERS NCO'S BOER WAR D.C.M. GROUP, ALMOST CERTAINLY FOR THE BATTLE OF MAGERSFONTEIN, THE RECIPIENT BEING MENTIONED IN A CONTEMPORARY SOURCE FOR HAVING GALLANTLY ATTENDED THE WOUNDED UNDER HEAVY AND DIRECTED RIFLE FIRE; AT ONE POINT A BULLET PASSING THROUGH HIS LEGS AND HITTING THE HIGHLANDER HE WAS ATTENDING. THE RECIPIENT, WHO WAS BORN IN INDIA, HAD JOINED THE GORDON'S AGED 14, PRESUMABLY THE SON OF A SOLDIER AND APPEARS IN VARIOUS NEWSPAPER ARTICLES IN THE LATE 1880'S AND 1890'S IN RELATION TO INTER REGIMENTAL SPORTING COMPETITIONS; CRICKET, GYMKHANA ETC. ON DISCHARGE HE WAS NOTED AS MUSICIAN AND BAND CONDUCTOR



DCM EDVII '673 SERJT: C.R. GILHAM. GORDON HIGHRS.', QUEEN SOUTH AFRICA 1899, 5 CLASPS CAPE COLONY, PAARDEBERG, DRIEFONTEIN, JOHANNESBURG, BELFAST '673 SGT C. GILHAM, GORDON HIGHRS.', KING'S SOUTH AFRICA MEDAL 2 CLASPS, '673 SERGT: C. GILHAM GORDON HIGHRS'

D.C.M. *London Gazette* 1 October 1901

M.I.D. *London Gazette* 10 September 1901

Charles Robert Gilham was born at Allahabad, East Indies on 4 November 1868; presumably the son of a soldier of the Gordon Highlanders who were then stationed in India. When he reached the age of 14 on 4 November 1882, he enlisted into the Gordon's as a Boy soldier at Edinburgh. A mere 4 feet, 6 inches on enlistment, on 19 December 1883, he joined his battalion in Egypt, serving there until April

1885, when he moved station to Upper Egypt, returning to Egypt again on 13 April 1885 and shortly afterward for home service. Serving in Malta from 21 September 1885, on his 18th birthday (4 November 1886), he was appointed to the rank of private and on 15 July the following year, to Lance Corporal. Reverting to the rank of Private on 7 November 1887, his papers do not show his further steps in rank. Serving in Ceylon between November 1888 and January 1892, he would serve in India between then and October 1898, taking part in the Chitral Relief Expedition of 1895, followed by the Punjab Frontier and Tirah Expeditions of 1897-98 (medal and 3 clasps). After a brief service in Egypt, in December 1898 he was back on Home Service, before leaving for service in South Africa (Boer War) in November 1899. During their service in South Africa, the 1st Gordon Highlanders took part in the disastrous battle of Magersfontein, Paardeberg, Hout Nek, Doornkop, Krugersdorp, Belfast and numerous smaller actions later in the war.

For his service, sergeant Gilham was mentioned in despatches and awarded the Distinguished Conduct Medal. As with most Boer War awards of the D.C.M., a recommendation for the award is unknown and this is further complicated by the fact that large numbers of awards made in late 1901 were for gallantry performed between late 1899 and 1901, therefore giving a large 'window' for pinning down a possible date or action. However Gilham is mentioned in 'With Methuen's Column on an Ambulance Train' in relation to the highlanders at that battle and his gallantry in attending wounded under heavy fire at Magersfontein:

"...The Boers were very kind to our wounded. They came out of the trenches and gave them water. They did not in any case shoot at our wounded men, but frequently shot at any one who came forward during the fight to bandage the wounded. The slightest movement, however, of the bonâ-fide combatants in our ranks drew a hail of bullets from the trenches. A Scotch sergeant, Gilham by name, a most kindly and courageous man, noticed that a comrade near him had been shot through the abdomen. He raised himself up from his recumbent position and began to bandage the wounded man. "Lie down you — fool," said the friend; "can't you see you are drawing the fire?" As he spoke a bullet passed between Gilham's knees and struck the wounded man. Soon afterwards an officer called out for a stretcher, so Gilham jumped up and put on his best "hundred" pace in a slanting run towards the ambulance waggons. Several other wounded men leapt up and joined him. One of them was immediately shot through the shoulder, and the good sergeant again stopped and bandaged him. The Boers had been watching him, and as he recommenced his devious course they sent two bullets through a bush two feet in front of him. These small bushes formed very inadequate cover, and the enemy, taking for granted that men were lying concealed behind them, fired repeatedly into the shrubs. In one case no less than eight Highlanders were shot behind one bush..."



This is not conclusive proof his award is for Magersfontein, however it is most likely. Sergeant Charles Gilham is the only highlander of any highland regiment (or medical) of that surname on the medal roll. His service papers noting he was a Musician and Band Conductor, also indicates he may well have served with medics/stretchers bearers during battle. Some other known examples of D.C.M.s for Magersfontein are also gazetted in September 1901.

Gilham was discharged in the rank of Sergeant at Pretoria on 23 July 1902, with the intention of remaining with Head Quarters, Rand Rifle Volunteers at Johannesburg. On discharge, his conduct was noted as 'Exemplary' and under special qualifications he is listed as: Musician, Band Conductor and Gymnastic Instructor. His trade was given as a musician. He had attended the course of Gymnastics at Aldershot in October 1881, gaining the 2nd Class certificate and the 1st Class certificate at Umballa in April 1892. Gilham's name appears in various newspaper articles in the late 1880's and 1890's in relation to inter regimental sporting competitions; cricket, gymkhana etc

THE GORDON HIGHLANDERS IN THE BOER WAR

The 1st Battalion had been abroad since 1882 serving in Egypt, Sudan, Malta, Ceylon and India. In 1898 they were to be sent home from India after 16 years overseas, and replaced by the 2nd Battalion who had remained in the UK since the First Boer War of 1881. When the 2nd arrived in India the two battalions briefly met each other, a rare occurrence, then the 1st headed off to the UK. They were in Edinburgh in Nov 1899 when they were ordered to sail to the Cape, the order being received on the 1st Nov, they sailed on the 'Cheshire' on the 9th Nov.

Magersfontein 11th Dec 1899

The Kimberley Relief Column commanded by Lord Methuen consisted of 3 brigades of British infantry, one of which, the Highland Brigade, was to be sacrificed in a badly planned battle against 8,000 Boers commanded by Cronje and De la Rey. The 1st Gordon Highlanders were not part of General Wauchope's Highland Brigade but were sent later into the battle.

Magersfontein kop is north of the Modder River and 27 km south of Kimberley. De la Rey repeated his tactic of placing the trenches at the foot of the hill rather than on top. This had been successful at the battle of Modder River and was to prove even more successful here. After a fairly fruitless artillery barrage on the 9th and 10th Dec the Highlanders approached the enemy in quarter-column before dawn on the 11th in a thunderstorm. At first light the killing started as the Boers, who were closer than expected, opened up a withering fire on the closely packed Scotsmen. Those that still lived threw themselves down to spend the rest of the day hardly daring to move.

It was into this terrible situation that the Gordons were sent. They did not have the advantage of surprise, or any form of cover. The Boer trenches extended over several kilometres curving round to fire on the British right flank. The Highlanders had been pinned down for 10 hours when the Boers made a push towards them. This caused some of the Seaforths to pull back and the Gordons tried to follow. The CO, Colonel Downman tried to prevent the retirement but was shot and mortally wounded. The Highlanders were in retreat and made themselves easy targets. In all, the British battalions lost 26 officers and 216 men killed, 42 officers and 609 men wounded.

The Casualties among the 1st Battalion Gordons were 3 officers and 4 men killed, 2 officers and 25 men wounded. Lieut-Col Downman, Captain Wingate and 2nd Lt James Campbell were killed. Captain W E Gordon was badly wounded but went on to win the VC the following year. Captain E Towse avoided serious injury and won the VC for rescuing his CO, Col Downman when he was mortally wounded.

Paardeberg, 22nd Feb 1900

The battle of Paardeberg took place over several days, between the 18th and 27th Feb 1900, and was a much needed victory for the British. Lord Roberts' Force had driven Cronje into his entrenched position along the Modder at Paardeberg. The Gordons were not so involved at first but on the night of the 22nd were ordered to relieve the 2nd Shropshire Light Infantry who had gained 200 yards of ground and dug themselves in. They crawled on their stomachs to reach the position and were soaked by a sudden thunderstorm. On 26th they supported the Canadian Regiment and helped establish a position close to the Boers. The morning of the 27th saw them advancing against heavy rifle fire to within 80 yards which soon caused the enemy to surrender on the same day, 27th Feb, the 9th anniversary of the battle of Majuba in which the Gordon Highlanders had been humiliated by the Boers. At Paardeberg the Gordons had 4 officers and 25 men wounded.



Hout Nek, 30th April 1900

Following the victory at Paardeberg, the 1st Battalion Gordons remained in the Infantry Division temporarily attached to Ian Hamilton's Mounted Infantry Division. They were in the 19th Brigade with the 2nd Duke of Cornwall's LI, the 2nd Shropshire LI and the Canadian Regiment, all commanded by Major-General Smith-Dorrien. This force of two divisions under Hamilton was heading north to Winburg when they came across a Boer army under Louis Botha at Hout Nek. In the battle a small band of 12 Gordons and 10 Kitchener's Horse under the command of Captain Towse VC, gained the summit of Mount Thaba but came face to face with 150 German mercenaries. They refused to surrender and opened fire on the enemy. Towse and his men made a heroic bayonet charge but in the hail of bullets the captain was blinded by a shot across his eyes. Their boldness paid off because the Germans turned and fled. The battle still continued but ended with a victory for Hamilton's men on 1st May.

Doornkop, 29th May 1900

Hamilton's Divisions crossed the Vaal from Orange Free State into Transvaal on 26th May with the task of smoothing the way for Roberts's Army heading towards Johannesburg. He came across a force of Boers entrenched on Doornkop, the very place where Jameson had surrendered 5 years earlier. A major driving force of the British in the Boer War of 1899-1902 was revenge for the two white flags of Majuba and Doornkop. The victory at Paardeberg had avenged Majuba, now Hamilton took it on himself to avenge Jameson's surrender.

Hamilton's cavalry experienced difficulty with a wide turning movement from the left so it was decided to send in the infantry with a frontal assault. The 1st Gordons and the City Imperial Volunteers were chosen for the task. The 4,000 Boers, led by Viljoen and De la Rey had set fire to the grassland in front of the kopje to blacken the area so that the British dressed in khaki would stand out and make easy targets. The Gordons, on the right advanced so steadily that many observers were astounded by their coolness. The writer March Phillipps had this to say:

"To walk steadily on through a fire of this sort, which gets hotter and better-aimed as he diminishes the distance between himself and the enemy, in expectation every instant of knowing 'what it feels like', is the highest test of courage that a soldier can give...Knowing exactly from experience what lay in front of them, these Gordons were as cool as cucumbers. As they lay among the stones with us before beginning the advance, I spoke to several, answering their questions and pointing them out the lie of the ground and the Boer position. You could not have detected the least trace of anxiety or concern in any of them. The front rank, when the order to advance was given, stepped down with a swing of the kilt and a swagger that only a Highland regiment has. 'Steady on the left', they took their dressing as they reached the flat. Someone sang out, 'When under fire wear a cheerful face' And the men laughingly passed the word along.

The Gordons and the CIV charged up the hillside without covering fire or artillery support. It was one of the last set piece battles of the war, magnificent but conducted with drill-book tactics. As they advanced against the rapid Mauser fire men were falling all along the line. The Gordons were ordered to fix bayonets and there was a sharp exchange of shots before the rifle fire died down. They were on the hill and the Boers were fleeing. The CIV had been more careful in their mode of attack, using fire and movement and what cover they could. They suffered far fewer casualties. The Gordons lost one officer and 19 men killed, with 9 officers and 70 men wounded. The officer killed was Captain St John Meyrick son of Sir Thomas Charlton-Meyrick of Apley Castle, Shropshire. Lt-Col H H Burney, Captains G Cameron, P S Allen, Lieut A Cameron were wounded as were Surgeon A H Benson and Dr R Hunter. There was a Volunteer Company of the Gordons that lost 3 officers, Capt J Buchanan and Lieuts Mackinnon and Forbes.

Krugersdorp, 11th July 1900

The 1st Gordons, the Shropshires and some artillery were sent by train to Krugersdorp on the 10th July. On the next day they were engaged against the enemy north-west of the town, at Doomboschfontein. Two of the guns of 78th Battery were stranded too far forward resulting in heavy casualties amongst the gunners. An artillery wagon was retrieved by Captains Younger and Allen then Captain Gordon ran out and tied a rope to one of the guns and with some of his men attempted to pull it back. Three men were shot and Captain Younger was mortally wounded. Both Captain Gordon and Captain Younger received the VC for their bravery.

RooiKopjes, 24th July 1900

Ladysmith was relieved at the end of February and the 2nd Battalion took part in Buller's march to the north. There was an action at Rooikopjes near Amersfoort on 24th July in which the Gordons proved

themselves again but lost 3 men killed and 12 wounded. The London Scottish Volunteer Company were prominent and their Captain Rodger was wounded and mentioned by Buller in his despatch.

Van Wyk's Vlei, 21st Aug 1900

The 2nd Battalion was in action more seriously at Van Wyk's Vlie in the Northern Cape on 21st Aug. The Gordons lost 9 killed and 9 wounded on this occasion, and two VCs were won by men of the King's Liverpool regiment.

Spitz Kop, 8th Sep 1900

In late August the 2nd were marching to Lydenburg when they were shelled by a Boer 6 inch gun from a distance of 7 miles. The Volunteer Company suffered badly with 3 killed and 16 wounded. On reaching the Lydenburg district they were sent into battle near Spitz Kop and were heavily engaged, ending up with 21 casualties. General Buller's despatch mentioned 6 officers, 2 NCOs and one private.

Koomati Poort, 30th Sep 1900

The two battalions met at Lydenburg in September. The last time they met was in India in 1898 when the 1st was relieved by the 2nd. On the 30th the 2nd were with Lieut-General Ian Hamilton's march to Koomati Poort when some Boer ammunition exploded and killed one man and injured 20. A few days later on 2nd Nov they were near Belfast fighting a rear-guard action and lost one killed, with one officer and 7 wounded.

Belfast, 7th-8th Jan 1901

The 1st Battalion were garrisoned in Belfast in Jan 1901 when it was attacked on the 7th and 8th. The battalion fought alongside the Royal Irish Regiment and they managed to repulse the Boers led by Viljoen. The Gordons' casualties were 3 killed and 14 wounded.



Sold with digital copy discharge papers, medal rolls etc. Gilham's India General Service Medal was sold at DNW on 26 June 2008