

Korean War Veteran

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It's a long, long road

A long, long road for William Speakman, only surviving holder of the Victoria Cross awarded for gallantry in the Korean War, as he sets his mind on returning to Korea, with a special mission in mind

He did look tired, but not beaten, and he was in a wheelchair because of his worn and painful knees. We were drinking coffee together in the Lotte World Hotel in southern Seoul.

Though the hotel dining room offered some of the grandest European food in all of Asia he said he was eating only Korean vegetarian fare. He was trying to take down his weight and ease the strain on his knees.

At one point his eyes focused far, not in light distance, but in years, in decades, yet part of his gaze was steadily fixed upon his life's unfolding future.

"It's a long, long road," he said.

He almost sighed it.

I was having coffee with one of the finest gentlemen England has ever seen. His name is William Speakman, retired British Army sergeant. He is one of just four soldiers to have been awarded the Victoria Cross for gallantry in the Korean War.

Two of the awards were made posthumously, and the other soldier to be invested with one, Lieutenant Colonel James Power "Joe" Carne, commanding officer of the 1st Battalion Gloucesters, died in 1986 at the age of 80.



Two British Lions. William Speakman VC (right) is president of the British Korean War Veterans Association. Derek Kinne GC, is Patron of the association. Derek and his wife, Anne, reside in the wide open spaces of Colorado, for health and family reasons.

Derek Kinne was awarded the George Cross, Britain's highest award for gallantry not in the face of the enemy, nor as a combatant, but in his case the criteria should have been changed. Derek was serving with the Royal Northumberland Fusiliers and was captured in the Battle of the Imjin River in April, 1951. He tenaciously resisted and cursed and castigated his captors through nearly three horrible years in which he was repeatedly beaten, tortured, locked in solitary confinement, but refused to give in. He cursed his captors even on the day of his release. His rock hard tenacity, unyielding resistance while every day risking certain death by his obstinacy, won the respect and elevated the spirits of all of those who were confined in the same prison camp. He is, these days, soft spoken, and much a family man and gentleman in much earned and much needed retirement.

William Speakman was awarded the Victoria Cross for conspicuous gallantry, which he says was no more than exhibited by those who fought at his side, and that the waning minutes of which desperate time were a blur to him, as he had been

wounded and had lost blood and was exhausted. Here is a verbatim extract from his citation for the Commonwealth's highest award for gallantry:

At 1645 hrs. the enemy in their hundreds advanced in wave upon wave against the King's Own Scottish Borderers' positions, and by 1745 hrs. fierce hand-to-hand fighting was taking place on every position.

Private Speakman, a member of "B" Company, Headquarters, learning that the section holding the left shoulder of the company's position had been seriously depleted by casualties, had had its N.C.Os. wounded and was being over-run, decided on his own initiative to drive the enemy off the position and keep them off it. To effect this he collected quickly a large pile of grenades and a party of six men. Then, displaying complete disregard for his own personal safety, he led his party in a series of grenade charges against the enemy; and continued doing so as each successive wave of enemy reached the crest of the hill. The force and determination of his charges broke up each successive enemy onslaught and resulted in an ever-mounting pile of enemy dead.

Having led some ten charges, through withering enemy machine-gun and mortar fire, Private Speakman was eventually severely wounded in the leg. Undaunted by his wounds, he continued to lead charge after charge against the enemy, and it was only after a direct order from his superior officer that he agreed to pause for a first field dressing to be applied to his wounds. Having had his wounds bandaged, Private Speakman immediately rejoined his comrades and led them again and again forward in a series of grenade charges, up to the time of the withdrawal of his company at 2100 hrs.

Later that day after meeting Bill in the hotel in southern Seoul, or perhaps the next, I spoke with him at an event up on the Demilitarized Zone. He embarrassed me by saying that the work I was doing was meaningful and inspirational for other veterans. I looked away with utter humility, and thought he must have me confused with somebody else, or had heard some wrong stories about the humble volunteer work that I was doing.

I think then that I also embarrassed him when I replied that it was him who was an inspiration for all of us. He smiled a tad awkwardly when I said it. He is, despite more than sixty years of public adulation, a modest man.

Few know the story of this rough and ready soldier, who is gracious and soft spoken and fair and courteous.

Wounded on November 4, 1951, when he was leading a scratch team of comrades in the King's Own Scottish Borderers, repeatedly hitting back at enemy troops who

were attacking his company's position, he went home early in 1952 and was invested with the Victoria Cross by the youthful Queen Elizabeth II.

He was to have received it from her father, King George VI. Sadly for the Nation and the Commonwealth, the King passed away at the age of 56, following lung surgery and continued ill health that many thought to have been brought on by the strains of World War Two.

Princess Elizabeth had been on a royal tour in Kenya and returned immediately to assume the throne of Great Britain and the British Commonwealth.



William Speakman with his mother, Mrs. Hannah Houghton, outside Buckingham Palace after receiving the Victoria Cross from Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II.

Although the British Government and the British Army had no intention of letting him return to the war zone, Bill Speakman did return to Korea. He insisted on returning. He would have it no other way and the Army gave in. He was back in Korea in April, 1952, once again with the *Kosbies*.

Bill Speakman did not seek special privileges that the high decoration might warrant him. In the United Kingdom and Commonwealth nations, somebody invested with the Victoria Cross rates a salute from officers – *they* salute him, and there is nothing he could do about that.

But he lived a rugged soldier's life and at times he even got his "knuckles rapped" in the various ways all soldiers know who break sometimes from boredom and routine and strong restriction.

He completed 23 years of army service, much of it as a sergeant – and he earned every one of those three stripes the hard way, sometimes some of them more than once.



When Bill Speakman returned to Korea in the spring of 1952, he complained to comrades that he had to get out of England because everyone had treated him like a movie star. News reporters and photographers were always hounding him. There were endless requests to participate in charity events, private teas; there was great clamour for his company. Shown above in his Special Army Services uniform, which service he transferred to and served with in the jungles of Malaya, one would think wily producers might have sought out the robust six foot-six-inch

soldier as a potential movie star. The British Army had no jungle boots big enough to fit him so he wore boots with the toes cut out and suffered slashed and bruised feet on his deep patrols and missions.

He knew tough times as a father and family man while in England and worked very hard in different fields. Sometimes of economic necessity, he took on the commonest labor jobs that were available; worked two of them at once sometimes to make ends meet.

Later he served at sea as a purser. He rose to that post after demonstrating unique organizational, management and security skills, and a proclivity for dealing amicably with people.

He spent many years in South Africa, in security work, and as a civic government security official – again, skill and position that was hard earned, and much deserved.

I was surprised to learn that while he lived in South Africa he had taken up flying an ultralight plane, and enjoyed piloting the little ship over the country's expansive rolling land to its scenic mountains.

He is very well read, and could be a teacher of upper school students, or even of college students. He could teach them not just to love their books and learning, but also by daily demonstration of his personal example, how to comport themselves and bring credit to each other and their families.

And now, at 86 years of age, Bill is preparing to return to Korea once again. And he is set on teaching others a valuable lesson there, too.

To explain his circumstances, Bill just a few days ago became an “in” patient at the Royal Hospital Chelsea, the historic veterans care hospital that has operated in London for the past 323 years.

The Royal Chelsea was founded by Royal Warrant of King Charles II in 1681. Sir Christopher Wren, who also designed St. Paul's Cathedral and other great London edifices was the architect.

The hospital took in its first disabled veteran patients in February, 1692 and by the end of March of that year had admitted 476 “in” patients, or Chelsea Pensioners, as they are termed, filling all vacancies.

Today there are around 300 Chelsea Pensioners in residence, including Sergeant William Speakman, VC JP.

Bill had decided that in view of his current health and other circumstances it was best that he forego his independence, not become a possible burden to anyone else in his life, and accept the care that was available to him.

Bill said some time ago, through comrades in the newly formed British Korean War Veterans Association that he heads as its president, that he wished to participate in the Commonwealth veterans visit to Korea in April.

But in his desire to return again to Korea, he has a personal special mission.

He has written a letter to the Ministry of Patriots and Veterans Affairs, expressing his wish to donate all of his medals to the People of Korea, especially the children of Korea, that they will know and be inspired by the generosity and sacrifices of others from 25 nations, who traveled to Korea so long ago to evict invading enemies and bring succor to the suffering people.

We trust that he will not mind if we share the content of his letter that was sent to the MPVA's director of international affairs, which we were able to obtain through private sources:

Following my recent return as an IN pensioner to the Royal Chelsea hospital here in London, with the excellent care that I now have, I am feeling very well and positive and I am delighted that I am to return to the country of South Korea and its people, that I have over the years grown to venerate and love.

I am now looking forward with great anticipation to being with you in April 2015, as it is my wish to acknowledge the magnificent spirit of your people following the devastation of the conflict of over sixty years ago, to present my Victoria Cross together with all my other medals in the knowledge that it will inspire and foster the goodwill that is shown to British Korean War Veterans by the people of the Republic of Korea, especially the young children.

It has long been not only my dream, but my passionate wish to make this presentation by taking the opportunity of doing so in April.

Colonel Simon Bate OBE the Adjutant of the Royal Chelsea Hospital has encouraged and assisted me in making my wish come true during my visit.

May God bless you all.

Bill signed the letter as president of the British Korean War Veterans Association, which operations he continues to review from his new room in the Chelsea.

The journey to Korea will be very hard for him. He had surgery on one of the knees, which was replaced with an artificial appliance. However, surgery on the other knee was deemed too risky for him.

So he is still physically encumbered and most likely knows pain as well, but he will make the arduous journey.

Colonel Simon Bate, the adjutant of the Royal Chelsea Hospital is pulling all stops to assist him, including acquisition of necessary health and travel insurance, and in ensuring that he has a capable caregiver at his side.

The April revisit will not be Bill's final trip to Korea.

He may be able to visit again on another date. He will always be welcome.

He also has asked his friends to see to it that some day, he will truly make a final journey there, after he has passed away.

He has asked them to secure the necessary permissions to have his ashes placed upon the hill in Korea where he fought on the night of November 4, 1951, where he was wounded, and for which service superior officers in his unit and in his Division cited him for the Victoria Cross.

It is also the place where comrades died at his side, and, according to Bill, were doing the same thing he was doing in fighting off enemy attacks.

He has told his official biographer that when he was advised he would receive a high medal for his action that night, his first thought was, "What about the others?"

He was adamant in his belief that the others should receive one, too.

He says he has thought about them every day for the past 63 years.

It is a long, long road, indeed, as William Speakman said that morning in Korea in 2011.



William Speakman VC on his last visit to Korea in April, 2011, bussing the cheek of a young Korean student who presented him with packaged greeting cards from her class. To Bill's left is veteran Barney Dimmelow, then in his 90's. Barney had been a corporal in the Glosters Regiment. When the enemy first attacked the Gloucester companies in April, 1951, he was sent on a personal reconnaissance to the banks of the Imjin River to report on their numbers. Barney, then a big man, but less so in 2011, had barked into his wireless, "Thousands!" Like his comrades, after desperate battle for three days and fully out of ammunition, he was captured. He escaped twice on the march to the prison camp, was recaptured and beaten up. Barney Dimmelow died a few years ago. Bill was at his side, both of them in wheelchairs, throughout much of the 2011 revisit. The veteran in the Airborne Regiment beret is former Sergeant Frank Fallows, who is now the chairman of the British Korean War Veterans Association. In 2011 he was the designated caregiver for Mr. Speakman.