Two B.C. VC heroes to be posthumously honored by regiment

A memorial will honor a corporal and a major who received Canada's highest honor in separate wars.

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Vancouver Sun

Nearly 80 years to the day after he single-handedly destroyed two machine gun nests and killed 17 enemy soldiers, one of B.C.'s dozen Victoria Cross winners will finally be honored by the regiment he served.

Corporal Filip Konowal, a Ukrainian immigrant, received lots of accolades back east, where he moved and ultimately died.

But by a quirk of geographic and historic fate, his heroism was never properly marked by the Royal Westminster Regiment, the unit he served under when he stormed up Vimy Ridge during the First World War.

Today, members of the regiment, the Ukrainian community, veterans of several wars and the Ukrainian ambassador to Canada will gather in New Westminster to pay homage to Konowal and another VC winner, Major Jack Mahony, who earned his battle honor in Italy during the Second World War.

Last year, a war of words erupted over a proposal to erect a trilingual memorial for Konowal. Although the regimental association wanted the plaque in English, French and Ukrainian, some retired military commanders objected, saying the regiment's plaques had always been in English.

The dispute, which also angered the Ukrainian-Canadian community, has now been settled and the memorial will use all three languages. Ukrainian ambassador Volodyyr Furkalo will preside at the ceremony along with Supreme Court Justice John Sopinka, a Ukrainian-Canadian. Military commanders from Edmonton and federal, provincial and civic politicians will also be there.

There are still people alive who remember the actions of Konowal and Mahony, who were the only "Westies" to receive the Victoria Cross.

Art Castle, who will be 100 years old this summer, told historians he owed his life to Konowal during the intense and murderous battle for Vimy Ridge. Like colleagues who served with Mahony, Castle will be at Saturday's ceremony in which a memorial cairn to the two heroes will be unveiled.

Lieutenant-Colonel (retired) Jerry Gangur, who is organizing the event, said the regiment overlooked setting up a memorial for many years, although both men are well-recorded in the regiment's history books.

"We felt it was time we should honor these two men," he said. "We didn't mean for it to be so long in coming."

The memorial was sparked by members of the Ukrainian community, who wanted to honor Konowal, an immigrant who moved to Canada in 1913.

The geographic quirk in all of this is that Konowal first came to Canada through Vancouver, where he worked for several years as a logger. But he later moved to the Ottawa area, where he joined the Governor-General's Foot Guard when the First World War broke

For Valor

The Victoria Cross is the highest decoration for valor in the British and Commonwealth armed forces.

❑ It was instituted by Queen Victoria in 1856.

❑ The cross is made of brass taken from Russian cannon captured during the Crimean War.
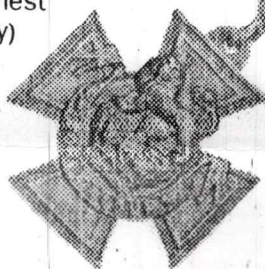
❑ Only 1,348 medals have been handed out.

❑ Ninety-four of them were awarded to Canadians in two world wars.

❑ Twelve soldiers attached to B.C. regiments received the award.

❑ Five people born in British Columbia received the VC.

❑ Of those, only Ernest (Smokey) Smith and Cecil Merritt are still alive.

out. While awaiting orders in London, Konowal was sectioned off and posted to the 47th Battalion — later renamed the Royal Westminster Regiment of B.C.

Konowal's exploits, which took place over April 21 and 22, 1917, are well documented. On the first day, he killed three German soldiers he surprised in a basement, and later destroyed a machine gun nest guarded by seven soldiers. On the following day, he was captured enroute to destroy another machine gun nest, but escaped, killed his captors and went on to complete his mission. The following day, he was shot in the face by a sniper and spent three months recovering. He carried a bullet in his head for the rest of his life.

After he returned from the war, Konowal got into a fight and killed a man and was sentenced to eight years in a mental institution. His head wound from the war was later operated on, and after his release, he was reinstated in the army.

Konowal previously served in the Imperial Russian Army, and after Vimy Ridge did a tour with the Canadian Expeditionary Force in Russia. He died in 1959 in Ottawa.

Mahony, a former *Province* reporter, was decorated with the Victoria Cross for his service at the Melfa River bridgehead in the Liri Valley in May 1944. During five intense hours at the bridgehead, Mahony was injured but remained at his post and refused medical help. He was born in New Westminster and died in London, Ont., in 1990.

The ceremony will start today at 11 a.m. at the Royal Westminster Regiment Armory at Sixth Street and Queens Avenue.