L CPL JOSEPH JOHN FARMER, VC, AHC
CENTENARY OF THE BATTLE OF MAJUBA 1881

LT COL W E I FORSYTHE-JAUCH, OBE, MA, MB, MFCM

Reproduction of a painting held in the RAMC Headquarters Mess VC Room, depicting the action resulting in the award of the Victoria Cross to L CPL Joseph John Farmer, AHC.

Joseph John Farmer was born on 5 May 1854. He attended a local school in Kings Cross, and thereafter was apprenticed to the building trade. However, at the age of 13 years he went to sea with the Mercantile Marine serving aboard English and American ships. In 1875 he was shipwrecked off the Isle of Wight, and again a year later in a hurricane off Hong Kong. He left the sea in 1878, and on returning home he fell ill with smallpox.

It was then that Farmer's career changed direction. Whilst still under medical care he saved the life of a delirious patient who tried to jump out of a window. When he had recovered from his illness, he took an appointment as a night porter to look after demented patients. Another similar appointment followed, and after having his interest in medical matters further awakened he joined the Army Hospital Corps on 27 February 1879. Following a course in anatomy and ambulance work he left for the Cape of Good Hope.

Private Farmer was present at the battle of Rorke's Drift in the Zulu War, and when the South African War broke out he served in a Field Hospital. He then served in the relief column sent to the beleaguered garrisons of Potchefstroom and Lydenburg, and saw action at Laing's Neck and again at Majuba Hill. This was a plateau topped hill considered to be easily defensible in the opinion of the Commander, Maj Gen Sir George Pomeroy Colley, by his force of 700 odd officers and men, elements of 58th, 60th and 92nd Regiments and the Naval Brigade. The Boers however climbed the hill at first unseen and pressed home their attack until on 27th February 1881 the defenders ammunition was all expended.

L CPL Farmer was giving first aid with another medical orderly assistant to Sir Arthur Landon of the Army Medical Directorate. Both were shot almost simultaneously, and Farmer realising what was happening waved a bandage and shouted to the Boers that they were shooting at wounded men. He was shot in the right wrist, dropped the bandage which he transferred to his other hand and continued to wave until that arm was shot through. Farmer was one of the few men to have survived what was a disastrous day.

The citation in the London Gazette was as follows:

"For conspicuous bravery during the engagements with the Boers at the Majuba Mountain when he showed a spirit of self abnegation and an example of cool courage which cannot be too highly commended. While the Boers closed with the British troops near the Wells, Corporal Farmer held a white flag over the wounded and when the arm holding the flag was shot through he called out that he had "another". He then raised the flag with the other arm and continued to do so until that one also was shot through".

Following his recovery L CPL Farmer was discharged from the Army, and joined the Corps of Commissioners, working in a manufacturing firm in Fulham.

Later in life Mr. Farmer, VC gave his own account of that day:

"When the Boers closed in with the British troops near the hills, another man and myself were helping Sir Arthur Landon of the Army Medical Directorate to tend the wounded, who were falling thick and fast. Both cried out that they were hit, and the soldier I was bandaging was, I believe, killed at the same moment. Sir Arthur Landon, I ought to say, was one of the best and bravest men who ever lived or died. Well, as soon as I saw what the Boers were about, I jumped up, waved the bandage I had been using — which might serve the purpose of a white flag — and shouted that they were shooting wounded men. The enemy either did not know the usages of civilised warfare, or, in their blind fury, they did not heed what they were about.

"Anyhow, a Boer took a pot-shot at me, and the bullet went through my right wrist. Here is the mark," he said. "The wound has affected the free use of my hand ever since, though not disabled it. As the official report of the affair by Maj Elliott says, I, on being hit in the right arm, called out 'I have another!' transferred the white 'flag' to the left hand, and continued to wave it".

"My Boer friend, however, was a persistent beggar, for he had another try, and this time he shot me through the left elbow joint. His endeavours rather

convinced me, notwithstanding opinions to the contrary, that the Boers are not such remarkably good shots as they are said to be. I was, however, placed hors de combat; but the surgeon, though himself mortally wounded, injected morphia to deaden the pain, and so the limbs were saved to me. The left arm is, however, a good deal wasted and crippled".

Joseph Farmer remained in employment in Fulham until he was 74 years old, and died two years later on 30 June 1930. The coffin was borne on a gun carriage through the streets of Fulham lined with people. His tombstone in Brompton Cemetery was a boulder with the inscription: "This rock was sent from the scene of the battle of Majuba Hill . . . erected by his family, old comrades in the Durban Light Infantry, together with comrades of his Corps and Fulham citizens. Rest in Peace".

Editor's note: It has been brought to the notice of Regimental Headquarters RAMC, through the medium of a report by "Peterborough" of the Daily Telegraph, that the Grave/Headstone is in dilapidated state. Action has been taken by RHQ RAMC for the grave to be tidied up, and for the inscription on the Majuba rock to be re-cut.

ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENTS

FRCS	CAPT S G MELLOR, MB, BS, RAMC.
MRCP(UK)	CAPT. R. WHITEOAK, MA, MB, BChir, RAMC.
MRCGP	CAPT R C C GROVES, MB, ChB, RAMC.
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