

VC Biog 9 Skinner, John K, Text to go

Morag Cross, 2 March 2014

***VC9.1

John Kendrick Skinner (1883-1918) of The King's Own Scottish Borderers was awarded the Victoria Cross for conspicuous and outstanding bravery in 1917. He led an apparently charmed life, as he survived being wounded on at least six different occasions, until his luck eventually ran out.

***VC9.2a or VC9.2b

His military service record reveals Skinner as rather boisterous, with a tendency to ignore regulations when he felt like it. He was a colourful character, a professional soldier before the war, who could either be labelled a 'jack the lad', or 'a bit of a rogue'. His fondness for risk-taking was given full rein during the war, which ironically brought out the best in his personality.

***VC9.3

Skinner was born near Maryhill Road, Glasgow in February, 1883, the third son of Walter and Mary Skinner, a tailor's pattern-cutter, and his first wife. Skinner's family suffered a string of tragic bereavements, including the death of his mother from tuberculosis when he was only six. His sister died aged twelve, and when Walter Skinner remarried, to his housekeeper, in 1893, three of their children died in infancy. Finally, Skinner's eldest brother also died of TB in 1907. [Sources: 1881, 1891, 1901 Census at www.ancestry.co.uk; 1911 Census, Statutory Register of Births, Marriages, and Deaths, at www.scotlandspeople.gov.uk].

***VC9.4

Having attended the highly-regarded Allan Glen's Boys School, Skinner was well-educated, and aged 16 was a member of the West of Scotland Artillery Militia. By this time, his father owned a high-quality gent's outfitters in Royal Exchange Square in Glasgow. Skinner's eldest brother, Peter, was apprenticed to their father in his teens, and it was possibly to avoid becoming a tailor, that Skinner decided the army was a more exciting career. Despite his father's Gaelic heritage, he preferred a Lowland regiment, and lied about his age to join The King's Own Scottish Borderers [KOSB] in Hamilton in December 1899. He stated that he was eighteen, and born in Tain, in Ross-shire, his father's native county. [Sources: 'Short Service Attestation, 26 Dec 1899', at *John Skinner: British Army WWI Service Records, 1914-1920*, at www.ancestry.co.uk; *The Scotsman*, 28 Mar 1918, p7; *Glasgow Herald*, 5 Oct 1917, p8].

***VC9.5

Almost immediately, in April 1900, he was sent to South Africa, and spent over two years there, fighting in the Boer War. Skinner was wounded on three occasions, setting himself a pattern for future conflicts. Another habit proved more problematic, as an officer recorded: 'His only fault is his inclination to drink ... he is very intelligent and hardworking and can turn his hand successfully to most things'. His liking for alcohol led to Skinner being reduced in rank more than once. [Sources: 'Letter, 21 March 1939, from KOSB Association', 'Employment Sheet, Army Form B2066', at *John Skinner: British Army WWI Service Records, 1914-1920*, at www.ancestry.co.uk].

*****VC9.6a and VC9.6b use both**

Skinner was posted with the 2nd Bn, KOSB to India and Burma from 1902-3, and then to Aden in the Middle East until 1906. He was promoted lance corporal in 1903, extended his service in 1904 to complete 8 years, and became a corporal in 1905. [Sources: 'Descriptive Return, Extending Service, Mar 1904', 'Letter, 21 March 1939, from KOSB Association' *John Skinner: British Army WWI Service Records, 1914-1920*, at www.ancestry.co.uk].

*****VC9.7**

Most of the period from 1906-1914 was spent in Britain and at various Irish garrison towns, where he qualified as a mounted infantryman. In 1911, despite his disciplinary record, he was re-engaged at Curragh Camp for another 11 years, with the 2nd Battalion. [Sources: 'Statement of Services, 15.9.1911', 'Company Conduct Sheet, Army Form B121', 'Military History Sheet, 09.1909', *John Skinner: British Army WWI Service Records, 1914-1920*, at www.ancestry.co.uk].

*****VC9.8**

The 2nd Battalion, The King's Own Scottish Borderers were sent to France as part of the British Expeditionary Force on 10 August, 1914. On active service, Skinner's true talents came into their own, and within weeks he was promoted to acting sergeant. For 'conspicuous gallantry and ability at Cuinchy on 12th October', when he had scouted a wood with his patrol after 'a very heavy' enemy engagement he was awarded the Distinguished Conduct Medal. This was the second-highest award for non-commissioned officers, after the Victoria Cross, and he received it from King George V in Glasgow in May, 1915. [Sources: 'Regimental Conduct Sheet, Army Form B120, 4 Jan 1914', *John Skinner: British Army WWI Service Records, 1914-1920*, at www.ancestry.co.uk; *London Gazette*, , Issue 29117, *Supplement* to 30 March, Published on 1 April, 1915, p3218; *Evening Telegraph*, 20 Aug 1915, p4; *Glasgow Herald*, 15 Sept 1917, p5].

*****VC9.9a and VC9.9b use both especially VC9.9a [gallantry citation]**

Skinner began appearing in the Scottish newspapers due to the number of occasions on which he was hospitalised, only to return fit for active duty. He had seen action at Mons, Bethune and Hill 60 (Ypres), at all of which he was wounded. After a brief spell as a private again, he regained his sergeant's stripes in July 1915. Among his battle scars were shrapnel wounds to his left foot, and gun shot wounds in his torso and head. [Sources: 'Regimental Conduct Sheet, Army Fo B120, 26.12.1914' and 'Statement of Services, 26.12.1914 and 4.1.1915, 28.7.1915', Casualty Form Active Service, Army Forms B103 for 1915, 1916, 1917', *John Skinner: British Army WWI Service Records, 1914-1920*, at www.ancestry.co.uk; *Evening Telegraph*, 20 Aug 1915, p4; *The Scotsman*, Sept 15 1917, p6].

*****VC9.10a or VC9.10b**

In June 1915, Skinner embarked for the Dardanelles to join the 1st Bn, KOSB, (to whom he was transferred), as part of the disastrous Gallipoli campaign. He was shortly afterward admitted to Nasrieh Primary School Hospital, Cairo with a bullet wound to his shoulder. Skinner reputedly had a 'competition' running with a friend, Company Sergeant-Major (CSM) Ross, to see who could acquire the most 'wound stripes', official badges on their sleeves denoting the number of injuries they had sustained. [Sources: Casualty Forms, Active Service and 'Continuation Sheet, 21.8.1915, 30.7.15',

John Skinner: British Army WWI Service Records, 1914-1920, at www.ancestry.co.uk; Personal Information, Ian Martin, Curator, King's Own Scottish Borderers Museum, Berwick-upon-Tweed, www.kosb.co.uk/museum.htm].

***VC9.11

Skinner's daring and reckless courage in constantly being in the forefront of the action resulted in three mentions in despatches, or official commendations. These same qualities served him well on 16 August, 1917, during the Battle of Passchendaele, when as Acting Company Sergeant Major at Wijdendrift, Belgium, he was awarded the VC. The German lines had been strengthened by 'concrete castles', or blockhouses, fortified machine-gun posts which were holding up the KOSB advance at Montmirail Farm. [Sources: Gerald Gliddon, 2005, *VCs Handbook: The Western Front 1914-1918*, Stroud, pp99-100; J P Lloyd, 1917, Press Release 'Tales of the VCs: CSM John Skinner and Sgt William Grimbaldeston', *Europeana 1914-1918 – Untold stories & official histories of WW1*, [Online Resource], at www.europeana1914-1918.eu].

***VC9.12

Soldier-journalist Lt James Price Lloyd was writing morale-boosting official press-releases for the War Office unit MI 7b (1), and he recounts the story: 'In spite of the fact that [Skinner] had been wounded in the head, he hastily collected six men and dashed towards the block houses. The first he captured single-handed'. The *Sunday Post* added a detail characteristic of Skinner's humorous disregard for consequences: 'He reappeared laboriously carrying two machine-guns, one under each arm, and followed by the whole garrison ... as prisoners', 37 men in all. He took the guns, because 'he did not like to come back without some trophies'. [Sources: *Sunday Post*, 16 Sept 1917, p3; Gerald Gliddon, 2005, *VCs Handbook: The Western Front 1914-1918*, Stroud, pp99-100; J P Lloyd, 1917, Press Release 'Tales of the VCs: CSM John Skinner and Sgt William Grimbaldeston', *Europeana 1914-1918 – Untold stories & official histories of WW1*, [Online Resource], at www.europeana1914-1918.eu; Jeremy Arter 2013, *Lt James Price Lloyd and the "Tales of the VC"*, The Welsh Experience of World War One, at <http://cymruww1.llgc.org.uk/>].

***VC9.13a and VC9.13b use both but especially VC9.13a as it is central to story

There was more to the story, as Lloyd continues: 'Leading his men against the remaining two [blockhouses] he skilfully cleared them, captured sixty prisoners [ie another 23, in addition to the first 37], three machine guns and two trench mortars.' During the same engagement, his fellow sergeant, CQMS William Grimbaldeston, also gained the VC. Skinner's father and stepmother only found he was to receive the VC from his fellow-soldiers home on leave. [Sources: *London Gazette*, Issue 30284, *Second Supplement* of 14 Sept, Published on 14 Sept 1917, p9533; J P Lloyd, 1917, Press Release 'Tales of the VCs: CSM John Skinner and Sgt William Grimbaldeston', *Europeana 1914-1918 – Untold stories & official histories of WW1*, [Online Resource], at www.europeana1914-1918.eu; *Sunday Post*, 16 Sept 1917, p3].

***VC9.14

During an open-air investiture at Buckingham Palace on 26 September 1917 (wearing seven wound stripes, according to the papers), Skinner received the decoration from the King. He was also presented to Glasgow City Council [the same day nurse Agnes Climie's death was announced, see

separate story], and visited his former schools. While home on leave, he also got married, on 29 September in Pollokshields, to Annie E. Young Lee, a shipbroker's clerk's daughter. In fact, John Skinner and his brother Walter Skinner junior, had married two sisters. Walter, a fireman, married Annie Lee's sister, Olivia, in 1905, which was presumably how John Skinner and his wife first met. [Sources: *The Times History of the War*, Vol 15, p234; 1881, 1901 Census at www.ancestry.co.uk; Statutory Register of Marriages, Deaths at www.scotlandspeople.gov.uk; *Evening Telegraph*, 4 Oct 1917, p2; *Glasgow Herald*, 4 Oct 1917, p4; 5 Oct 1917, p8; *The Scotsman*, 2 Oct 1917, p4; 5 Oct 1917, p3; *Yorkshire Evening Post*, 26 Sept 1917, p5; *Dundee Courier*, 27 Sept 1917, p2].

***VC9.15

In September, Skinner was promoted to 'Warrant Officer, Class I' and awarded the French Croix de Guerre for his VC actions. After leaving a posting in Edinburgh (as usual, ignoring military orders when they didn't suit his inclinations) to rejoin his unit in Belgium, Skinner's miraculous survival ran out. There are various accounts of how many times he was wounded, as the original VC news reports give 'six' as the number, yet he wore seven wound stripes at the Palace just ten days later, and this is the number quoted in his obituaries. Since then 'eight' has even been suggested. [Sources: 'Statement of Services' 'Military History Sheet, 17 Dec 1917', *John Skinner: British Army WWI Service Records, 1914-1920*, at www.ancestry.co.uk; *Evening Telegraph*, 26 Mar 1918; *The Scotsman*, 28 Mar 1918, p7; 'CSM John Kendrick Skinner, VC, DCM', *Pollokshields Heritage*, at www.pollokshieldsheritage.org/; 'Finding John Skinner', Blog entry in *Flanders Ramblings*, by 'Glenbanna', 18 Sept 2011, at <http://glenbanna.com/>; Wounded six times: *Evening Telegraph*, 20 Aug 1915, p4; *The Scotsman* Sep 15, 1917, p6; *Dundee Courier*, 15 Sept 1917, p3; *Edinburgh Evening News*, 15 Sept 1917, p4; *Glasgow Herald*, 15 Sept 1917, p5; *Sunday Post*, 16 Sept 1917, p3; Wounded seven times: *Yorkshire Evening Post*, 26 Sept 1917, p5; *Glasgow Herald*, Oct 5, 1917, p8; *Evening Telegraph*, 26 March 1918, p5; *The Scotsman*, 28 Mar 1918, p7; Wounded eight times: R E B Coombs, *Before Endeavours Fade* (quoted in blog entry by 'Robin', 1 Dec 2012, 'CSM John Skinner VC', at <http://www.free-at-last.co.uk>].

***VC9.16

While attempting to rescue a wounded man on 17 March 1918, Skinner was shot and killed. The Welsh padre who officiated at his full-scale military funeral wrote: 'They got his body down (though I am sorry to say they omitted to do the same for the man who rushed out to try to save him and was also shot), and six other VCs, all of the same 29th Division, bore him from the gun carriage to his grave at Vlamertinge. One of the [coffin] bearer VCs was a private soldier and another was a General'. It is thought to be unique for being the only occasion on which six Victoria Cross holders acted as pall-bearers. [Kenelm Swallow, 'I was there', and 'John Kendrick's Funeral', both quoted in *CSM John Kendrick Skinner, VC, DCM, King's Own Scottish Borderers*, Pollokshields Heritage, at www.pollokshieldsheritage.org/].

***VC9.17a and VC9.17b use both

CSM John Skinner VC, DCM, is buried in Vlamertinghe Military Cemetery, West-Vlaanderen, in Belgium. His effects, comprising 'Photos, cap badge, medal ribbons, charm, gold ring, watch', were sent to his widow, Annie Skinner. She was awarded a pension of 18/9d per week, never remarried and died in Glasgow in 1938, aged 59. [Sources: 'Ministry of Pensions, Widows Form 3, 30 Sept

1918', 'Private Property, Army Form B104-126', 'Effects Form 118A', *John Skinner: British Army WWI Service Records, 1914-1920*, at www.ancestry.co.uk; Statutory Register of Deaths, at www.scotlandspeople.gov.uk].

*****VC9.18a and VC9.18b**