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# **"Sons of good Western stock" The South African War Artifacts of Private Alexander W. Stewart, Strathcona's Horse**

**Kyle McIntyre**

The approaching centenary of the South African War (1899-1902) means that the Canadian War Museum has begun to focus on the events of that conflict as they related to Canada. A recent fateful arrival into the museum's hands has been the collection of items which belonged to Private Alexander W. Stewart, who served with Strathcona's Horse during that war. (The regiment did not become *Lord Strathcona's Horse* until 1911.) In May 1996 Mrs. Margaret Bahm of Arnprior, Ontario, one of Stewart's daughters, presented the artifacts to the museum for consideration as additions to the National Collection. Amongst the items were Private Stewart's khaki tunic and breeches, his Stetson, his Queen's South Africa (QSA) Medal (a rare version), and assorted militaria (a Pom-Pom round, the bottom of a mess tin, and various souvenirs of service). These were accompanied by a package of papers and photographs relating to Stewart's service in the war.



and explain these valuable additions to the Canadian War Museum collection. Stewart's career in South Africa provides an archetype for the Canadian mounted infantryman in the South African War. For most of those familiar with the Boer War, it is probably the Second Battalion, Royal Canadian Regiment of Infantry at Paardeberg that comes to mind. However, it could be argued that it was the mounted infantry, to which Stewart belonged, that for his contemporaries best encapsulated the Canadian spirit at the turn of the century.

The Stewart collection is important and unusual because of its completeness and excellent condition. Authentic items of dress from this war, particularly those belonging to the rank and file, are becoming increasingly rare. The Stetson, tunic, and breeches are of the same style as those appearing in the photograph of Stewart and the young lady (who is identified as Lizzie Stewart on the back of the frame - see opposite page). The paper artifacts, the QSA medal, and records at the National Archives allow us to tell Stewart's story, and thus enhance

Strathcona's Horse had an association with Western Canada and its frontier character which was, in turn, a part of the experiences of the regiment's founder, Donald A. Smith, Lord Strathcona and Mount Royal. Smith made a reputation for himself in the Dominion through his endeavors with the Hudson's Bay Company and as the Member of Parliament for Selkirk, Manitoba. In 1870 Sir John A. Macdonald called upon Smith, along with two other special emissaries of the federal government, to help ease the tensions building between the Canadian government and the Métis in the Red River settlement.<sup>1</sup> The next year, when the ebbing Fenian movement in the United States threatened Canada one last time, Smith raised a body of volunteer mounted infantry from the employees of the Hudson's Bay Company to counter the problem along the border. The seed of an idea may have been planted at that time; it would be another 29 years before it came to fruition.

**Top right:** Private Stewart in a pre-campaign photograph. The tunic's stand-and-fall collar indicates that it was the type issued at Ottawa before the departure for South Africa. The rifle is a Snider-Enfield of the type that had been used by the Canadian militia since the 1860s, and here could be a studio prop. The Strathconas took the long Lee-Enfield .303 with them to South Africa. The holster held a Colt .44 single action army revolver, issued to all ranks of the regiment. The links that the Strathconas had with the North West Mounted Police are evident in the felt Stetson hat, which the NWMP had been wearing unofficially since the 1890s and which they adopted as their official headdress in 1903; and the so-called "Strathcona boots," which were adopted as the official footwear of NWMP in January 1901 and which are still worn today.

(Stewart Collection, Canadian War Museum)



**Above:** Stewart's Queen's South Africa Medal, with its four bars for "Belfast," "Orange Free State," "Natal," and "South Africa, 1901."

(Stewart Collection, CWM. Photograph for CWM by Jacqueline Vincent, Kalmara.)

**Bottom right:** Alexander and Lizzy Stewart (presumably a sister) probably taken after his return from South Africa. This is the uniform that was issued to him prior to the Strathconas' visit to London and their parade before the King in February 1901, and which is now in the national collection of the Canadian War Museum. (Stewart Collection, CWM)



In January 1900, as British forces struggled against an unexpectedly mobile Boer enemy, Lord Strathcona, now the Canadian High Commissioner in London, offered to personally finance a unit of mounted infantry. Strathcona would meet all expenses: arms, equipment, transportation. He wanted his regiment to be raised exclusively in western Canada, believing that troops modeled on the North West Mounted Police (NWMP) would be a better match against the Boer fighters than would traditional infantry.<sup>2</sup> A contemporary observer agreed with this premise, writing that "[a] regiment of scouts was a much needed thing in a war with a nation of scouts and spies."<sup>3</sup>

The High Commissioner gave the Canadian Militia Department full rein to organize and equip what he called "my little force for South Africa," but he wanted final say in the selection of officers.<sup>4</sup> Another legendary westerner, Superintendent Samuel B. Steele of the NWMP, was chosen as commanding officer. Hundreds of men (including 600 horsemen from Arizona, who were graciously declined) came forward for selection, "but the tests to which they were subjected were severe and only men of perfect physique, fine horsemanship, and...experience were accepted."<sup>5</sup>

Alexander Stewart was one of those who came forward for service – and almost did not make the cut. According to his personnel records, Stewart was a twenty-three-year-old prospector from Sand Point, Ontario, when he enlisted in Regina on 7 February 1900. At five feet, seven inches tall, he had a fair complexion, gray eyes, brown hair, and a vaccination mark on his right arm. The examining surgeon, a Dr. Bell of the NWMP, noted that the prospective recruit possessed a "sanguine temperament," and was sound of hearing, sight, heart, and lungs, and – happily for a mounted infantryman – was free from haemorrhoids and varix (varicose veins). Despite an overall satisfactory examination, the surgeon remarked in his report that Stewart's physique was "moderate, but I think he might be accepted."<sup>6</sup>

The other men who joined Stewart in Strathcona's Horse represented an odd mixture: mounted policemen, ranchers, teamsters, cowboys, and prospectors. All of them were acquainted with an adventurous, outdoors

lifestyle, one which was easily adaptable to the irregular role they were expected to play in South Africa. Complementing the characteristics of the riders were the horses purchased for the regiment. The animals were already broken and trained for the hard work of the ranch. Their agility and endurance were of particular note. When horse and rider were put together, the new regiment represented an almost ready-made force to counter the Boer commandos.

The recruits signed on strength at Regina were assigned to Troop 4, which was commanded by Lieutenant H.B.D. Ketchen, while Stewart's "A" Squadron was commanded by Major A.E. Snyder, an inspector with the NWMP.<sup>7</sup> The regiment did not assemble as a whole until February when it was brought together in Ottawa. Winter conditions in the capital were as expected: sub-zero temperatures, against which the men had only their issued kit and straw-lined bunks.

The uniforms handed out to the recruits at this time included two blue serge uniforms (white collars, red piping), two khaki duck uniforms, a wedge field service cap, Stetson, toque, overcoat, one pair of riding boots (known as "Strathcona boots," and intended for walking out and parades), and two pair of ankle boots (to be worn with black puttees). The blue serge jacket was issued specifically for the conditions in Ottawa and those expected aboard ship. The khaki duck tunic, of Canadian manufacture, had five buttons, a stand-and-fall collar, pleated breast pockets with buttoned flaps, and shirt pockets with plain flaps. "SH" insignia were attached to the shoulder straps; regimental insignia were placed on the collar and field service cap. (It would be discovered that the khaki quickly washed out of the uniforms in South Africa, turning them almost white.)<sup>8</sup>

Other equipment issued included a brown leather belt with S-buckle, haversack, water bottle, and a web bandolier. An unusual personal item given to each man was a buckskin tobacco pouch (which is included in the Stewart collection) containing two plugs of tobacco. A pipe, marked "Strathcona's Horse," accompanied this distinctive accoutrement. Finally, two weapons were issued: a Colt .44 revolver with a brown leather holster and pistol ammunition pouch (both of which attached to the waist belt), and a long Lee-Enfield .303 rifle.<sup>9</sup>

**Top right:** Private Stewart's tunic, with bandolier, and Queen's South Africa Medal. This is the tunic that was issued prior to the regiment's arrival in London. The bandolier, which could hold fifty rounds of ammunition, is of the pattern worn by British cavalry and mounted infantry between 1885 and 1903. The Royal North West Mounted Police adopted this style of bandolier in 1904, and continued to use it into the 1920s.

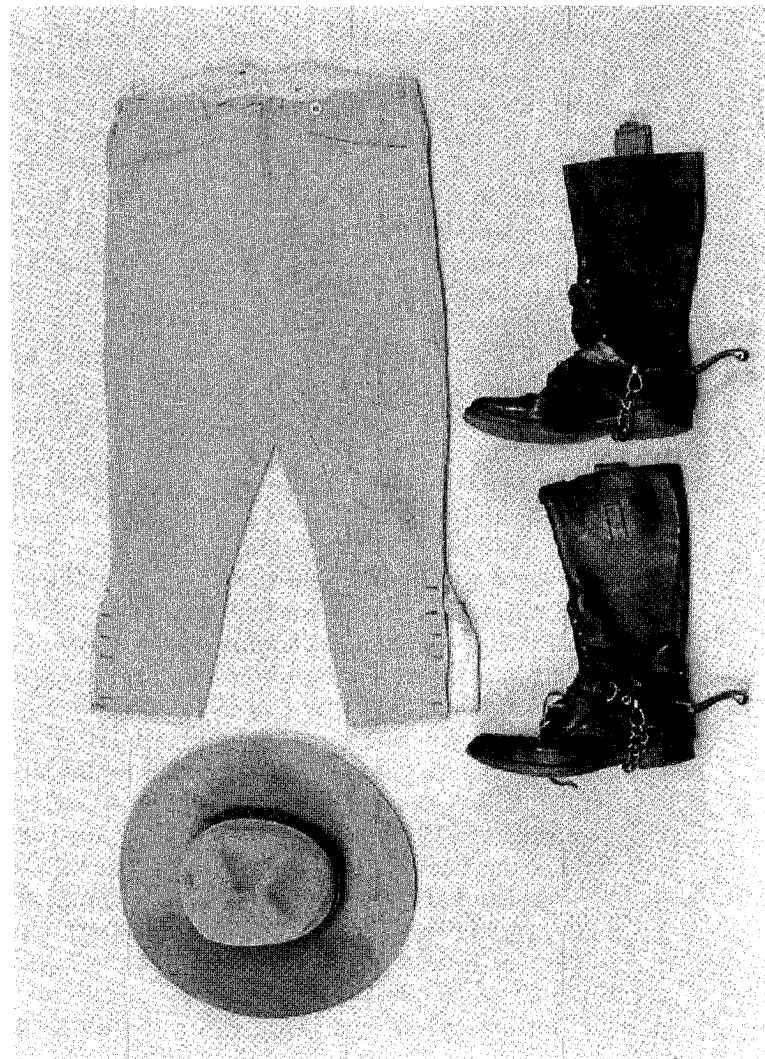
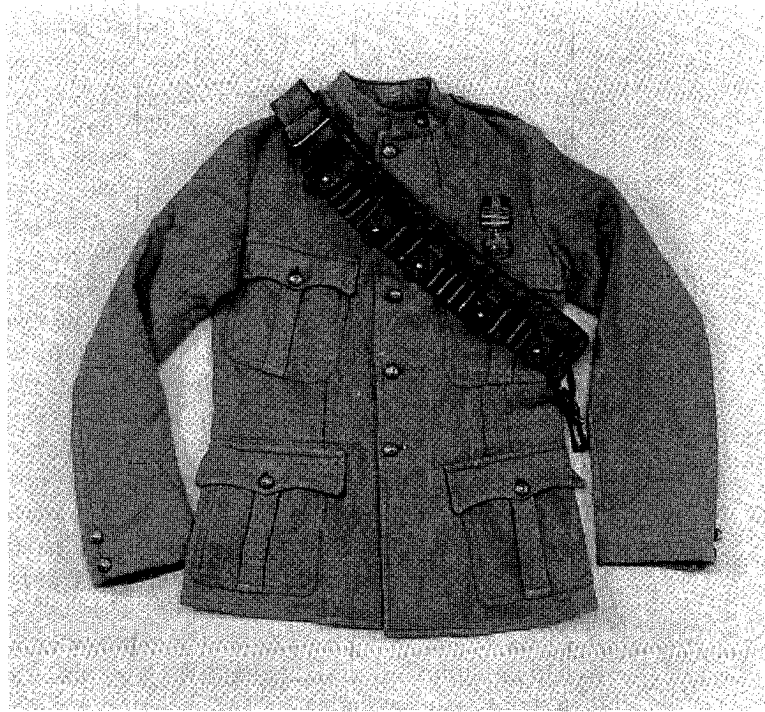
**Bottom right:** Stewart's breeches, Stetson, and well-worn Strathcona Boots.

*(Stewart Collection, CWM. Photographs for CWM by Jacqueline Vincent, Kalmara.)*

It will be seen below that having two weapons would prove of life-saving value to Private Stewart.

After the issue of kit, the Strathconas' stay in Ottawa was spent bringing recruits up to a better military standard. Many of the men were enthusiastic for service, but not tempered as soldiers. Stable duty, horse breaking, mounted and rifle drill, completing equipment for both men and horses, along with three days of parades on Parliament Hill preceded the regiment's departure for Halifax. After leaving the capital, the troops moved eastward to Montreal, where they witnessed elaborate celebrations for them throughout the city. For young men raised with the simple life of the ranch or mine, the bands and bunting must have been rather overwhelming. After Montreal, the Strathconas' final stretch through the Maritimes was accompanied by crowds and speeches at the major centres. When they finally reached Halifax, the turn-around for getting underway was quickly done, and on 17 March the regiment departed for the war.

The journey to Cape Town was uneventful, the time on board ship being filled with more training, and the sad task of destroying 164 of the regiment's horses as pneumonia spread amongst them. Writing to his parents on 10 April from Cape Town while waiting to disembark, Stewart observed that the regiment had a smooth passage, with "lots of good fun and lots of drill to keep us busy." He was, in fact, anxious to get to the front, and in his "P.S." Stewart explained that he "expect[ed] to see Kruger shortly."<sup>10</sup> Although he would, of course, never meet "Oom Paul," he would come dangerously close to two of his compatriots in a few months' time.





In contrast to the arrival of the other Canadian contingents, there was no fanfare in Cape Town for Strathcona's Horse. The day after writing to his parents, Stewart and his colleagues disembarked, unloading kit and horses, and marched to the camp at Green Point Common. There, more intensive training was undertaken. The stay at Green Point was unexpectedly long – five weeks – and the regiment's frustrations were heightened by finally being included in a plan to make a quick strike against a suspected Boer arms smuggling point at Koomati Poort, and then having the operation cancelled. It was later shipped to Durban, in Natal, for a second attempt at the same objective, but this plan was also cancelled. Strathcona's Horse then began to arrange itself in preparation for becoming part of General Sir Redvers Buller's Natal Field Force. The main responsibilities of the Canadians would be scouting and escort duty. (See South Africa map on page 72.)

The regiment's western Canadian connections were reinforced with its new assignment to the Third Mounted Brigade in Buller's army. Buller had experience with Canadian troops, having served in the Red River Expedition of 1870 as a captain in the 60th King's Royal Rifles. The Strathconas' association with Buller served to emphasize their romantic connection to the Canadian wilderness.

Buller's objective was the Boer centre at Lydenberg, Louis Botha's recruiting and supply depot in northern Transvaal. Throughout Buller's cautious advance towards the town, Strathcona's Horse remained in advance of the main British column. The regiment's first action came on Dominion Day near Watervaal. After this, constant fire fights erupted with the Boers harassing the column, and casualties began to mount. By 6 September Lydenberg was in British hands and Buller's mounted infantry was kept busy chasing the remnants of Botha's fleeing army. At one point in the pursuit east of Lydenberg it was alleged that some of the Gordon Highlanders made a 'stirrup charge' with Strathcona's Horse as the Canadians closed on the enemy. Steele was leading Private Stewart's "A" Squadron during this action.<sup>11</sup> The remainder of the Lydenberg campaign was composed of a series of skirmishes, with the Canadians maintaining aggressive contact with the enemy. In mid-October the Strathconas made a

piecemeal return to Pretoria to await their next assignment. Stewart's "A" Squadron, together with "C" Squadron, were the last to entrain for Pretoria. Stewart and his companions spent several days camped beside the rail line at Machadodorp, awaiting transport.

Once reunited, the regiment was assigned as reinforcements to General G. Barton near Frederikstad. The next challenge for the mounted infantrymen, one particularly suited to their training and perceived role, was the task of chasing after General Christian De Wet and his commandos. Small actions dominated this campaign, and it was during the assignment around Frederikstad that the Strathconas were introduced to the unpleasant task of farm burning, as initiated on the instructions of Major-General Herbert Kitchener, the new Commander-in-Chief in South Africa.

Through November, enteric fever and dysentery took its toll on the Canadians, but Stewart managed to escape the ravages of disease. As one of the healthy soldiers available, he was assigned to act as a special scout for an escort riding with a supply column from Potchefstroom to Klerksdorp. On 14 November, near Machavie Station, Private Stewart was caught by two Boers while working ahead of the other scouts. According to Sergeant Andrew Miller, one of Stewart's companions in the regiment, and a former schoolmate, there was an older and a younger Boer in the enemy party. They ordered Stewart to surrender, and he threw down his rifle before dismounting. As the younger man approached the Canadian, the older man ordered him to step back from the prisoner and then shot at Stewart, grazing his arm. In "Wild West" fashion, Stewart then drew his revolver and shot the younger man, who was about ten yards away. Stewart was unable to get a second shot away, as his revolver jammed. The surviving Boer then got off another shot, this time hitting Stewart in the chest. He then beat a hasty retreat at the approach of Stewart's companions. Stewart, although seriously wounded, survived the action; the younger Boer was not so lucky.<sup>12</sup>

Two days after the incident, Sergeant Miller related how Stewart was expected to receive the Distinguished Conduct Medal (DCM) for his actions. "My friends," wrote Miller, "are doing well in gaining honours. First Sergeant



*Strathcona's Horse in London prior to their return to Canada. Lord Strathcona is visible in the centre of the photo, white-haired and hatless, while Lieutenant-Colonel S.B. Steele stands to his left, with his back to the camera.*  
(John Edwards Leckie collection, NAC PA 181427)

Richardson, now it is Stewart."<sup>13</sup> The DCM was not awarded; rather, Stewart received a mention in despatches. After his son's return home Stewart's father petitioned Colonel Steele on the issue. Steele answered that the younger Stewart had received an MiD, and that he, Steele, had asked the adjutant general "to show some substantial mark of favour" towards all of the special scouts. That "mark of favour" Steele expected to be the DCM, "which they deserve if any men in the regiment does [sic]," but it was not forthcoming.<sup>14</sup>

While Private Stewart recovered from his wound, the rest of Strathcona's Horse continued with its assignments, which included some of the more unsavoury aspects of the war: rebel chasing, farm burning, and collecting civilians for shipment to concentration camps. These activities occupied the regiment's time for the remainder of its stay in South Africa. Some of the men, including Steele, were already planning to join Colonel Robert Baden-Powell and his South African Constabulary. The others made preparations for the end of service and a return

home. As the final days in South Africa neared, the men disposed of their horses to the re-mount officials at Kroonstaat, had a final inspection by Kitchener, and on 16 January, 1901, those from the regiment still in hospital, but ambulatory, rejoined the regiment. Stewart would have been amongst these men, owing to his later presence in Britain with Strathcona's Horse.

Lord Strathcona had arranged for his regiment to return to Canada via Britain. Before landing in England, the troops were issued with new uniforms. The Stetson, tunic, and breeches, which form part of the donation to the museum, are in such good condition probably because they constituted part of this refit, which was afforded by Strathcona in preparation for their welcome to London and parade before the King. On 15 February, the regiment was presented with colours by King Edward VII (an unusual act, as mounted infantry was not allowed to carry colours), and also with their campaign medals. Strathcona's Horse was the first regiment in the Empire to receive the new Queen's South Africa

Medal, and Private Stewart was the first man in the regiment called forward to receive his award.<sup>15</sup>

The QSA presented to the Strathconas represents a rare issue of the type, as it is stamped with the dates 1899-1900 – the time by which Britain expected the war to be over. Later issues had the date removed, leaving a “ghost” imprint of the years from the original mould, or were made from a new mould which had the wreathed hand of Britannia pointing to the F, instead of the original R, in SOUTH AFRICA. Most of the earlier and rarer medals in fact went to the Strathconas.<sup>16</sup>

A lavish reception was held for the men three days after the medal presentations. Strathcona himself met each man personally, shaking their hands as they entered the banquet at the Royal Palace Hotel. Stewart would have met Strathcona at this time, and joined in cheering his name during the toasts.<sup>17</sup> On 22 February the regiment finally left for Canada, receiving a large and boisterous send-off at Liverpool. Their ship reached Halifax on 8 March, and the next day Strathcona’s Horse was disbanded after a simple welcoming ceremony.

As the men moved westward towards Montreal large crowds continued to greet them along the way. When Montreal was finally reached, the real break-up of the unit took place. From Montreal, Private Stewart had a short trip up the Ottawa Valley to Arnprior, near to where his family lived. The hero’s return was covered in the local press, and he received “a hearty cheer...and...a good hand shake” from many in the crowd that awaited him. A formal reception at his home and a patriotic address of thanks from the mayor, Claude McClachlin, concluded the homecoming. Stewart was presented with a pocket knife and an inscribed gold watch, chain, and locket. Later, he would also receive \$400 from the Canadian Patriotic Fund Association, granted in lieu of a monthly allowance. This money was given because of the wounds he received in action.<sup>18</sup>

In February 1903, the Militia Department received a letter from Stewart asking if he was eligible for the “SOUTH AFRICA 1901” clasp to his QSA. Stewart had noticed some of his

comrades with the bar, and queried that, as he “served in that corps but saw only one month the first of 1901 am I entitled to the clasp.” The bar was duly issued and mailed to Stewart’s new residence at Elbow Crossing, near Saskatoon.<sup>19</sup>

Records from 1908 show that Alexander Stewart was living in Schreiber, Ontario, and working as a brakeman for the Canadian National Railway. According to his application to the British Ministry of Pensions in 1935, he had by then married Martha MacLean (on 6 December 1915) and had begun to raise a family of seven children: Elizabeth, Mildred, Alan, Margaret, Ernest, Malcolm, and Roberta May. It was from Margaret that the museum received the Stewart collection of artifacts.<sup>20</sup>

The importance of these items lies primarily in the story with which they are intimately connected. Private Stewart’s experience as a soldier is one which exemplified the aspirations and adventurous spirit that were characteristic of Canada at the turn of the century. As a writer at the time put it, Lord Strathcona “had been a pioneer, and he chose to send out pioneers to [South Africa]; and it was from the North, which is the region of natural romance in Canada, and from the West, which is the region of the nation’s greatest hope, that these pioneers were...selected.”<sup>21</sup> As the hundredth anniversary of the South African War draws nearer, it is well to remember the young men who went out on Canada’s first great military adventure, and to recall that they were our greatest military heroes until the shadows of the First World War fell across the nation. This the Stewart collection at the Canadian War Museum will continue to commemorate.

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## Notes

1. Strathcona would later see a similarity in the situations of the Canadian North West and the Boer republics, noting that, “[Boer President Paul] Kruger, like [Louis] Riel, has a complete misunderstanding of his position.” Beckles Willson, *The Life of Lord Strathcona and Mount Royal* (London: Cassell, 1915), p.513.
2. W.B. Fraser, *Always a Strathcona* (Calgary: Comprint Publishing, 1976), p.23.
3. T.B. Marquis, *Canada’s Sons on Kopje and Veldt* (Toronto: Canada’s Sons Publishing, nd), p.339.



4. Strathcona to Laurier, 19 January 1900, in Willson, pp.520-521.
5. Marquis, p.339.
6. National Archives of Canada (NAC), South African War Records, Record Group (RG) 38 IA, Volume 101 (microfilm T-2087).
7. "A" Squadron was initially to have Sam Hughes, a personal friend of Strathcona, as its captain, but Hughes refused any commission below command of a regiment.
8. Fraser, pp.31-32; Jack L. Summers and René Chartrand, *Military Uniforms in Canada, 1665-1970* (Ottawa: National Museums of Canada, 1981), p.120. The uniform's fading was an effect noted by Lieutenant-Colonel William Otter, commanding the Royal Canadian Regiment of Infantry in South Africa. In his general report, he wrote that the Canadian-made tunics, made of brown canvas, were "very stiff and harsh on the man's person." Lieutenant-Colonel T.D.B. Evan, commanding the Canadian Mounted Rifles in the war, observed that "the serge frocks issued by the Imperial Government proved more comfortable than the Canadian issue, the material of which was duck canvas." (Canada, Department of Militia and Defence, *Organization, Equipment, Despatch, and Service of the Canadian Contingents During the War in South Africa, 1899-1902* (Ottawa: S.E. Dawson, 1901 (Sessional Paper No.35a), pp.13 & 112.)
9. Summers and Chartrand, p.120; Carman Miller, *Painting the Map Red: Canada and the South African War, 1899-1902* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1993), p.296.
10. Canadian War Museum Archives (CWMA). Private Stewart to Mr. and Mrs. A. Stewart, 10 April 1900 (temporary listing IL-1996034/Bahm).
11. Miller, p.332.
12. CWMA. Sergeant Miller to Charles Juvet, 16 November 1900 (from a letter reproduced in the *Ottawa Citizen* (?), nd); Samuel B. Steele, *Forty Years in Canada* (Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson, 1915 [re-issued 1971]), p.354; Miller, p.344. Miller also writes that the bullet entered behind Stewart's left shoulder and exited at the breast. If accurate, this suggests Stewart had his back to the older Boer. This might explain how he was able to draw his revolver – holstered on his right hip and therefore concealed from view – and get almost two shots away before being struck himself. (CWMA, Miller to Juvet).
13. *Ibid.* Sergeant Arthur Richardson was the first member of a Canadian unit to win the Victoria Cross.
14. CWMA. A. Stewart to Colonel Steele, 14 October 1901.
15. CWMA. *Ottawa Citizen* (?), nd; from an unidentified newspaper clipping in the file.
16. Gary A. Roncetti and Edward E. Denby, *"The Canadians": Those Who Served in South Africa, 1899-1900* (Edward E. Denby and Associates, nd), p.1. See also H. Taprell Dorling, *Ribbons and Medals* (edited and revised by Alec A. Purvis, London: Osprey, 1983). p.58
17. Willson, p.532.
18. CWMA. *Ottawa Citizen*.
19. NAC, South African War Records. A.W. Stewart to Militia Department, nd. The missing bar was probably an oversight. The 1901 clasp was awarded to those troops who were not eligible for the King's South Africa Medal, Strathcona's Horse falling into this category.
20. NAC, Department of Veterans Affairs, South African Land Grants, RG 38, Volume 127, Number 4723; CWMA, British Ministry of Pensions, application by Alexander William Stewart, 23 May 1935.
21. Evans, pp.152-153.

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