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SIR NEVILLE HOWSE AN ANZAC HERO



"I had performed this tremendous deed of valour while suffering from temporary insanity" Sir Neville Howse

The first Australian to be awarded a Victoria Cross was a surgeon. Sir Neville Reginald Howse served as a soldier-surgeon in the Boer War with the New South Wales Army Medical Corps. Captain Neville Howse displayed great courage at Vredefort, South Africa, on 24th July 1900, when he ventured onto the battlefield, under intense enemy fire, to rescue a wounded soldier. Even though his horse was shot out from under him, Captain Howse continued on foot, to treat the soldier's wounds and bring him to safety. His Victoria Cross was gazetted on 4th June 1901, and he remains the only Australian from the medical corps to have received such an honour. Alongside his heroism on the battlefield, Neville Howse dedicated his life to the improvement of trauma treatment and the advancement of prehospital care within the military environment. To Howse, the medical service was no mere human amenity for soldiers but a fundamental of fighting efficiency. Although an Englishman by birth, Neville Howse's dedication and bravery to the Anzac's cause makes him a true Australian hero.

Early Years

Neville Reginald Howse, born in Somerset, England on 26th October 1863, was the second of Dr Alfred and Lucy Howes's ten children. Like his father, Neville studied medicine at

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London Hospital and became a member of the Royal College of Surgeons. As a young man, Neville suffered ill health and was advised to move to Australia for the milder climate. He moved in 1889, becoming a respected and highly regarded doctor at Taree in the colony of New South Wales. In 1895 he visited England for postgraduate work in surgery and returned to Australia two years later, this time settling in the bustling town of Orange in western New South Wales.

Victoria Cross

While Neville was working at Orange Hospital in 1899, men were being urged by the government to join the forces being sent to the Boer War in South Africa. Neville wanted to contribute, and on 17th January 1900 he was commissioned Lieutenant in the New South Wales Medical Corps and sailed with the 2nd contingent for South Africa. After a month at sea, they arrived in Cape Town. It would be another two months, however, before Neville could begin treating soldiers, as he became ill. After re-joining his unit, Neville risked his own life to save a wounded man under heavy fire.

Noticing a trumpeter fall, Neville leapt onto a nearby horse, and dodging bullets, galloped toward the wounded man. Despite his horse being shot out from under him, Neville reached the man and bandaged his wound. Then, as shell-fire intensified, he heaved the man onto his back and hurried to a makeshift hospital in the safety of his own lines. Despite his severe wounds, the young trumpeter survived. Neville was awarded a Victoria Cross for his bravery in the field. Surgeon General William Williams, who witnessed the action, claimed that “no man, more worthily earned distinction, throughout the campaign” than Neville Howse.

Promoted to Captain, Neville returned to Australia in 1901. Later that year, at a ceremony at Victoria Barracks in Sydney, Lieutenant-Governor Sir Frederick Darley pinned a Victoria Cross to his uniform. Despite his extraordinary act of bravery, Neville always felt he was just doing his duty and was surprised by the attention he received. When he was asked to retell his story he modestly explained “It appears that a shell had fallen close to me. My horse reared, and I was thrown on my head. Suffering from concussion, and knowing not what I was doing, I had performed this tremendous deed of valour while suffering from temporary insanity.” After returning to Australia, he went back to South Africa as an honorary major in the Australian Army Medical Corps in February 1902, just as the war ended.

Companion of Bath

After the war, Neville became widely known in Orange for his skill as a surgeon and was twice mayor. On the 31st January 1905, Neville married Evelyn Gertrude Northcote Pilcher at Bathurst. He remained a major in the Australian Army Medical Corps Reserve. On the outbreak of war in 1914, Neville at once again volunteered for active service. Given the rank of Lieutenant-Colonel, he proceeded to Rabaul, New Guinea, as principal medical officer of the expeditionary troops. For this trip, on his initiative, Neville attained drugs and medical equipment suitable for a tropical campaign. Returning to Sydney in October, he was in time to sail with the First Australian Division, and in Egypt was chosen to be Assistant Director of Medical Services of the First Division.

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He was shocked at the Imperial Forces medical plan upon landing at Gallipoli and immediately obtained improvements in the arrangements for the evacuation of the Australian wounded. Neville took personal charge of the evacuation. Colonel Brudenell White described how Neville disregarded “orders in a manner quite shocking but strangely productive of results. Shells and bullets, he completely disregarded.” White added that Neville “to the wounded he was gentleness itself.” He was later given control of all medical services for the Australian and New Zealand Army Corps. On Gallipoli, he established the Anzac Medical Society which met regularly to disseminate knowledge among his officers. For his accomplishments at Anzac, he was created Companion of Bath.

Director General of Medical Services

Early in 1916 Surgeon General Fetherston held an inquiry into the organisation of the Australian Army Medical Services and as a result, Neville Howse was appointed Director General of Medical Services of the Australian and New Zealand forces in the Mediterranean. Holding the rank of Surgeon General, he made a vast improvement in the conditions in Egypt. In 1916 he was also the Medical Director of the Australian Imperial Forces in France. The way in which he organised medical services for the Anzac soldiers was so effective; it became a model for the other allied nations to follow. He introduced surgical teams in the field and developed resuscitation teams into each of his divisions. His valuable services were brought to the notice of the Secretary of State for War, and in 1917 he was created Knight Commander K.C.B. In 1919, he was made K.C.M.G. and Knight of Grace of the Order of St John of Jerusalem.

Politician

Neville returned to New South Wales in December 1919. In 1921 he was made Director General of Medical Services, as a regular major general stationed in Melbourne. From the day of his return, he spoke out in public about the achievement of the Australian Army Medical Corps in maintaining the health of the Australian Imperial Force and insisted the same must be done for all Australians in peacetime. As a regular officer he could not campaign in public, so resigned in 1922 and was elected to the House of Representatives for the seat of Calare, as a member of the Nationalist Party. In 1923 he was a member of the Australian delegation to the fourth Assembly of the League of Nations at Geneva. He was reappointed Director General of Medical Services on a part-time basis until he entered the cabinet in 1925. From January 1925, until March 1927, he was Minister for Defence and Minister for Health. In March 1927 he became Minister for Health and Repatriation. In the 1929 election, he lost his parliamentary seat.

In his brief parliamentary career, Neville was champion of the returned servicemen and was a pioneer for public health in Australia. He spoke on the need for the Commonwealth to improve public health, focusing on the treatment of cancer and venereal diseases and maternity allowances. With the purchase of £100,000 of radium, Neville set up one of the world's first radium banks. He helped found the Federal Health Council in 1925 and the College of Surgeons of Australasia in 1928. He went to England for medical treatment in 1930 and died of cancer on 19th September 1930. He was buried in Kensal Green Cemetery, London.

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Neville Howse had such a significant impact on improving the lives of Australians; first as a doctor, then a soldier and finally as a politician. His dedication to the Anzac cause and ensuring the safety of the troops was unrivalled. His successes in the words of another great Director General of Medical Services, Colonel R.M. Downes, “made him one of the outstanding Australians of the Great War....one of the most remarkable and self-sacrificing medical administrators any military force has ever known.”

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