



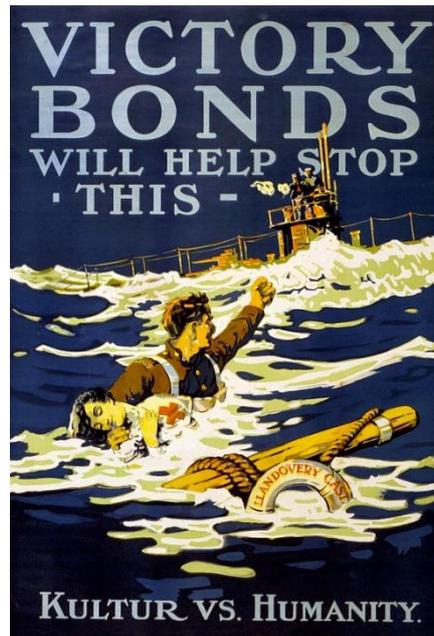
## MAJOR THOMAS LYON CANADIAN ARMY MEDICAL CORPS



Great War soldiers qualified for the British War Medal and the Victory Medal pair in any number of different ways, but Tom Lyon's contribution may have been rather greater than some. He was born in Edinburgh in 1882, the younger son of a grocer, and he first trained as a pharmacist, but he then studied medicine at Edinburgh University and graduated MB ChB in 1907, adding his MD in 1910. He then emigrated to Canada, arriving at Montreal in September 1912.

He originally practised in some of the remote pioneer communities, first at Cranbrook, then at Bull River, and then at Creston. He is mentioned in a local history : "There is record of five doctors starting up practices in Bull River at different times but none of them stayed very long. There was either too small a population in the area or the people were too healthy, probably a combination of both. First, Dr Lyon came in 1912 but left for Creston in early 1913..." However, even Creston did not hold him for long, because in April 1915 he volunteered for the Canadian Expeditionary Force and was promptly shipped to England.

Tom's first appointment was as Commanding Officer of Monks Horton Convalescent Hospital, a 650-bed tented hospital which opened in May 1915. He then served at the Canadian General Hospital in Salonika from June 1916 for almost a year until he fell seriously ill with pneumonia, and he was evacuated aboard HM Hospital Ship *Dover Castle*. He had a very narrow escape because on 26 May 1917, having just delivered him to Malta, *Dover Castle* was torpedoed and sunk by Kapitänleutnant Karl Neumann's U-Boat *UC-67* as she sailed on for Gibraltar. Tom was eventually declared fit for general service again in September 1917, and now found himself on the strength of the Canadian hospital ships. Promoted to Major, he joined the medical staff aboard HM Hospital Ship *Llandoverly Castle* at the end of March 1918. The War might then have had less than eight more months to run, but Tom was about to be embroiled in one of its most infamous episodes.



Towards the end of June 1918 *Llandovery Castle* set off from Halifax to bring Canadian casualties home from Liverpool. Since this was the outward journey, she only had 258 people on board : the 164 crew, together with 7 officers and 73 other ranks of the Canadian Medical Corps, and 14 nurses. Unfortunately for her, the German intelligence service was convinced that the Allies were using the outward journeys of their hospital ships to smuggle troops and munitions over to Europe, and their local agents concluded that *Llandovery Castle* was about to undertake such a run : they had wrongly identified the 7 Canadian doctors as American airmen. That “intelligence” was signalled to the commander of U-Boat *U-86*, 27-year-old Oberleutnant Helmut Patzig, who had already sunk 16 Allied merchant ships since being given command six months earlier. Patzig immediately took post some seventy miles off the coast of Ireland, and lay in wait.

*Llandovery Castle* came into view at about nine-thirty at night, on 27 June. In accordance with the Hague Convention rules for hospital ships she was lit up like a Christmas tree, with huge red crosses on both sides illuminated by electric lights, another huge electric cross over the bridge, and strings of white and green lights along each side. Patzig only needed one torpedo, which struck *Llandovery Castle* amidships and caused such damage that she sank in about ten minutes. There were nineteen lifeboats on board, each capable of taking 52 people, and although some were destroyed by the explosion there was no panic on board and five lifeboats were successfully launched. The 14 nurses all climbed into the same boat but it did not pull away quickly enough, and they all drowned when it became one of the two boats to be pulled under by the sinking ship.

Patzig now surfaced, and had some of the survivors hauled aboard to give him formal confirmation that he had in fact sunk a disguised troopship. Tom Lyon was among Patzig’s reluctant guests in the conning tower, where he was accused of being an American airman. His response was greeted with hostile incredulity, and he was so roughly treated that he fell and broke his leg before being bundled back into his lifeboat. Still on the surface, *U-86* then moved off as Patzig considered the disastrous implications of his mistake. It did not take him long. The remaining lifeboats were still circling and picking up survivors when the submarine reappeared at full speed, clearly intent on destroying them, and it missed Tom’s lifeboat by less than a yard. His lifeboat raised sail and made off with all speed, but a few moments later the submarine’s big gun fired at it, and two shells passed immediately overhead just as it disappeared into the darkness. Satisfied that he had actually

destroyed it, Patzig then turned the big gun on the other lifeboats, and twelve more shells at close range blew them and all of their occupants to pieces.

When dawn broke there was no further sign of *U-86*. The only lifeboat still afloat contained the Captain, 4 officers including Tom, and 19 men : these 24 were the only survivors of the 258 people who had been aboard *Llandoverly Castle*. They were to sail for 36 hours before being picked up by the Royal Navy destroyer *Lysander* and put ashore at Plymouth. Tom was discharged from hospital two months later, and served as President of a Standing Medical Board at Borden before sailing back to Halifax in July 1919, but Canada still had two more requirements of him.

The British had imported thousands of labourers from China, using them to dig trenches and graves, and to build and maintain roads and railways. At the Armistice the entire Chinese Labour Corps became surplus to requirements, and its members were invited to go back where they came from. Most of them flatly refused, so they were all interned and sent home under guard by various routes : nearly 50,000 of them were transported to Vancouver, to be put aboard ships to China. Tom now joined the medical staff of the Chinese Repatriation Camp, supporting the Special Guard which had been hurriedly formed to handle this distasteful duty. It was yet another hour that would not rank among Britain's finest : the last of the Chinese embarked on 4 April 1920, whereupon the entire Special Guard was promptly disbanded, and Tom was finally demobilized a fortnight later.



However, there remained outstanding the matter of Helmut Patzig. Already the holder of the Iron Cross 1<sup>st</sup> Class, he had been awarded the Hohenzollern Knights Cross with Swords two weeks after he sank *Llandoverly Castle*, and he was promoted to Kapitänleutnant on 21 February 1920. He was now living back at his home in Danzig, where he was born, and where he was widely regarded as an appropriately decorated hero. In May 1920 his was one of the 7 names of alleged war criminals on a list which the British gave to the Germans. Another of the 7 names was that of Karl Neumann, who had sunk *Dover Castle* just after she had delivered Tom to Malta. The Allies left the Germans to deal with their own countrymen, and the way that the Imperial Court of Justice in Leipzig then determined the cases might explain why a very different approach was taken at Nuremberg in 1945.

Neumann was promptly acquitted, after the Court accepted that he was only obeying orders : the German Admiralty had directed that hospital ships which might have been carrying troops or ammunition were fair game, and should not be given the benefit of any doubt. Patzig would therefore have been acquitted of the same charge, but he could not be compelled to appear because he lived in Danzig, which was now outside the jurisdiction of the German courts. The German authorities therefore decided to arrest Patzig's two lieutenants instead, Ludwig Dithmar and Johan Boldt, and asked for British witnesses to be sent to Leipzig to give evidence.

The Captain of *Llandoverly Castle* had died before the trial began in 1923, and Tom was therefore brought over from Canada to be a senior witness for the prosecution. Dithmar and Boldt both refused to give any evidence at all, but the Court had no difficulty with the facts of the case because the evidence given by the British and Canadian witnesses was entirely consistent with the evidence given by German witnesses from the crew of *U-86*. The Court concluded that, like Patzig, the two defendants had no personal responsibility at all for the actual sinking of *Llandoverly Castle* : what was at issue was their personal responsibility for what happened afterwards.

The Court decided that the killing of the survivors of the sinking was clearly homicide by Patzig, and the two silent but defiant defendants were unarguably guilty as his accessories. They were each sent down for 4 years, a sentence which was greeted by such immediate public outrage that for their own safety Tom and the other witnesses had to be smuggled out by a side-door, closely guarded by armed German police. Dithmar and Boldt do not appear to have been quite as closely guarded, since they promptly “escaped” and never spent any time in prison.

Tom returned to Canada, and settled in Victoria, where his medical practice flourished. He retired in England before the next War, and lived quietly in Deal, in Kent, where he died on 24 May 1948. He had never married, and he left the entire residue of his estate to the Edinburgh Merchant Company “to be used for the educational benefit of orphans of members of His Majesty’s Armed Forces and of the Mercantile Marine” : the Trust in his name survives to this day, and currently stands at over £250,000.

Tom was considerably outlived by his nemesis : Helmut Patzig died in 1984, at the age of 93. In 1931 Germany proclaimed an amnesty for all alleged war crimes which had had a political character, and the outstanding case against Patzig was promptly dropped : it was accepted that after he realised that he had sunk a genuine hospital ship in error, the intention behind his decision to eliminate the survivors was to prevent a new propaganda campaign against Germany, and his actions had therefore been purely political and not at all criminal. He returned to submarines in the next War, serving in the Kriegsmarine as Fregattenkapitän in command of 26 U-boat Flotilla until he was discharged in March 1945, having earned a Merit Cross and another Iron Cross.



By way of contrast, Tom’s entire contribution only earned him two medals, the common or garden Squeak and Wilfred. Perhaps it is as well that a worthy man is no less worthy for lack of recognition.

**Author:** Dan Lyon is retired lawyer, Territorial Army Major and served resolute researcher of the men and women behind the Great War medals earned by the greater Lyon family and his findings have been regularly published in the Journal of the Orders and Medals Research Society since 1989

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**Sources** : Tom's CEF Service Record at Library & Archives Canada RG150 Box 5816-25 ; Census of Scotland 1861-1911 ; Census of Canada 1921 ; *Scandinavian* Passenger List 29 Sep 1912 ; *British Medical Register* 1915-1948 ; Sir Andrew McPhail *Official History of the Canadian Forces* ; *New York Times* 2 Jul 1918 ; Claud Mullins *The Leipzig Trials* ; Gudmundur Helgason's *uboat.net* archive ; Tom's gravestone in Hamilton Road Cemetery in Deal, Kent.