

Filip Konowal Exhibit
Transcript of Radio Interview
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It's nine minutes past five, and thank you for joining us for hour three of this Monday edition of the drive-home show.

Well, Canada's only Ukrainian-born Victoria Cross winner received a dual posthumous honour today. First World War Corporal Filip Konowal, honoured both in Ottawa and in his Ukrainian birthplace. Konowal won the Cross of Valour during a 1917 battle in France in which he destroyed two machine-gun nests before being wounded. Now, typically, Victoria Cross winners would retire from combat, but Konowal was later to fight at Vimy Ridge. Now, making that award today on behalf of the National Council of Veteran Associations is Cliff Chadderton, Chief Executive Officer of The War Amps and Chairman of the National Council. He joins us now by telephone.

Mr. Chadderton, good afternoon.

Cliff Chadderton

Yes, good afternoon Rick.

Gibbons

Could you tell us a little bit more about Corporal Filip Konowal.

Cliff Chadderton

Oh yea, this is a fascinating story. You've got a VC winner, you've got the murder of a gangster in Hull, and you've even got Prime Minister Mackenzie King involved.

Gibbons

Wow, you've got to connect the dots for us there, you've really intrigued me.

Cliff Chadderton

Well, he came home after winning his VC. He had been wounded, but they sort of patched him up, or thought they had. He got into a fight over in Hull when he was protecting a friend of his who was being murdered, actually, by a man by the name of Artich, who was a leading gangster in Hull. What Konowal did was disarm this gangster, take a butcher knife away from him, and suffer some cuts on his own hands, but he killed the gangster, and then was tried for murder. He was found not guilty on grounds of insanity, but spent six years in an insane asylum in Quebec. Eventually, he

was released on the evidence of the doctor who had treated him for his head wounds in World War I.

Gibbons

Wow!

Chadderton

Then when eh got out in the 'hungry '30s,' had trouble getting a job. Milton Gregg, who was also a Victoria Cross winner, was in charge of the janitorial staff in the House of Commons, so they found a job for Konowal. One day he was wearing his Victoria Cross ribbon, when he ran into Mackenzie King, who said, "What are you doing with that ribbon?" He said, "I earned it." The rest was history. Mackenzie King said, "From now on you will be my custodian in my offices in the East Block."

In the meantime, Konowal found that his wife in Russia, whom he'd left behind to come to Canada, to bring her later, had been starved to death by the Communists. His daughter had been sent to the camps. He married a wonderful lady in Hull, who was a widow, then spent the rest of his life around the House of Commons. I knew Konowal personally, because I was the Secretary of a parliamentary committee and I would see him occasionally. He wouldn't talk to very many people. I was on crutches because I had an artificial leg and it wasn't working. When I saw him, I would say "Da Vica," which is hello in Russian, and he'd say "Da Vica" back again and we'd exchange greetings – "Orocho" which means "I'm fine." He also would tell me, and not very many other people, the story of how he won the VC. We had 64 Victoria Cross winners, but in my mind, he ranks right up there with the first four or five of those because they were trapped in a trench and the officer had laid down in the trench and was not going to do anything. Konowal said, well, the heck with you, and he charged a German machine-gun nest, killed them, and got back to his trench, and the next morning he had to do it all over again. This time he was wounded.

So that's the story of his war record, but what really bothers us, and the reason we're very keen about doing something now is that, most people, if you mention Konowal's name and they know it at all, they said, "Oh, he was that murderer," or, "He was that bum that was hanging around the House of Commons," and none of that is true. He was a great family man. It was not murder. He'd gone to the defence of his friend and had killed the attacker, so that's why I say, I think it's a great story.

Today, in the Ukraine, they were commemorating a memorial to him, so the National Council of Veteran Association in Canada visited the display that is at the Bytown Museum, and we presented a very similar plaque to his granddaughter, Claudette Wright, who lives in Orleans.

Gibbons

You know, it's amazing. Filip Konowal – this is a name that I really haven't, probably ever, come across in the past. Yet, if he was in the United States, he would be feted as a national war hero. He is certainly not a household name in Canada, the country he chose to live in until his death in 1959. What does that tell us about ourselves? I mean, we are a country that has, I think, always been reluctant to recognize our war heroes.

Chadderton

I think that's true, and I think that, in this case, quite frankly, there were a couple of extra strikes against him. For one thing, he was a Russian, and he spoke broken English. Secondly, when he got into this, call it a "scrape" in Hull, there was no one that would come to his defence, even though he had been a Victoria Cross winner, until he had gone through hell in an insane asylum, for six years, when a Doctor Wallace of Ottawa, who had operated on him in France, said "Wait a minute, I remember that war wound, and it was a concussion." So Filip Konowal ended up with what we called a "short fuse," but he also ended up on the wrong end of the stick from a point of view of the public. They said, "Oh well, you know, we don't want to recognize a fellow like that, he's not somebody about whom you should be too proud" and, of course, the exact opposite is the truth.

Gibbons

It would make a fine movie, wouldn't it?

Chadderton

Oh, it certainly would