



11 November 2009 EMBARGOED UNTIL 1.30PM

Honouring New Zealand's only Gallipoli Victoria Cross recipient

Wellington: New Zealand's only Gallipoli Victoria Cross recipient, Cyril Bassett VC, was honoured on Armistice Day today with the launch of a new secondary schools speech competition: The National Bank RSA Cyril Bassett VC Speech Competition.

Veterans Affairs Minister Judith Collins launched the new RSA speech competition at a commemoration event attended by Cyril Bassett's daughter and grand-daughter.

The National Bank RSA Cyril Bassett VC Speech Competition is a tribute to Cyril Bassett, VC, (1882-1983) who was the only New Zealander at Gallipoli to be awarded the Victoria Cross, and a career-long staff member at The National Bank.

One historian summed Mr Bassett's contribution at Gallipoli in 1915: "During the ferocious battle for Chunuk Bair, Mr Bassett and a handful of companions laid and subsequently repaired a telephone wire to the front line. In full daylight and under continuous and heavy fire, Bassett 'dashed and then crept, then dashed and crept again, up to the forward line'. The lines were cut again and again, but Bassett and his fellow linesmen went out day and night to mend them. He was always modest about his actions, later claiming, 'It was just that I was so short that the bullets passed over me.'¹

He reportedly was always reluctant to talk about the VC award saying, 'All my mates ever got were wooden crosses.'

The National Bank RSA Cyril Bassett VC Speech Competition invites Year 12 and year 13 secondary school students to pay tribute to the men and women who made sacrifices, and in many cases died, in the service of New Zealand. Students will initially compete in regional competitions, and then a national final in the lead-up to ANZAC Day in 2010. The competition winner will travel to Gallipoli to attend the 2010 ANZAC commemorations, and will also win a cash prize for the school and a laptop computer and digital camera so they can record their experiences at the hallowed ground where so many New Zealanders lost their lives.

RNZRSA National President Robin Klitscher said, "The RSA is pleased to partner with The National Bank to honour both the deeds and the memory of Cyril Bassett VC, and to provide young New Zealanders with the opportunity to research and speak to an indelible aspect of our nation's ANZAC heritage. We know that young people are interested – we see this each ANZAC Day. We are also aware of the tremendous talent in our secondary schools. The winner of the Speech Competition will be a worthy Youth Ambassador for New Zealand at Gallipoli next ANZAC Day."

ANZ National Deputy Chief Executive Officer Steven Fyfe said The National Bank was honoured to be working in partnership with the RSA to promote amongst young New Zealanders a deeper understanding and appreciation of the sacrifices made by Cyril Bassett, VC, and the many men and women who have served New Zealand in wars and armed conflicts overseas.

"The National Bank has a proud history in New Zealand dating back to the early 1870s and Cyril Bassett VC is one of hundreds of our staff who have served our country overseas over that time.



"Cyril Bassett was a life-long and loyal staff member of The National Bank, and we wanted to honour him and ensure his incredible achievements endure in the collective memories of New Zealanders for the years to come. We believe his contribution at Gallipoli is one of the great untold stories of New Zealand heroism," Steven Fyfe said.

Media enquiries

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About the National Bank RSA Cyril Bassett VC Speech Competition 2010
www.rsa.org.nz

About Victoria Cross winners at Gallipoli
<http://www.anzacsite.gov.au/5environment/vc/bassett.html>

Images of Cyril Bassett VC are available on request from Astrid Smeele

BIOGRAPHY: Cyril Royston Guyton Bassett VC 1892 – 1983: Banker, soldier

Cyril Royston Guyton Bassett was born at Auckland, New Zealand, on 3 January 1892, the son of Frederick Charles Bassett, a printer, and his wife, Harriet Adelle Powley. Cyril attended Grafton School, Auckland Grammar School and the Auckland Technical College. In 1908 he was employed as a clerk at the Newton branch of the National Bank of New Zealand. His first military service was from 1909 to 1911 with the Auckland College Rifles Volunteers, and then with the Auckland Divisional Signal Company from 1911 to 1914.

On 10 August 1914 Bassett was attested as a sapper in the New Zealand Divisional Signal Company, at that time attached to the Corps of New Zealand Engineers. He sailed with the New Zealand Expeditionary Force on 16 October that year. Following divisional training in Egypt, the company was thrust into the fighting at Gallipoli when it landed on 25 April 1915. Between 7 and 9 August 1915 Bassett, now a corporal, was involved in an action that won him the Victoria Cross, the first awarded to a New Zealand serviceman in the First World War.

During the ferocious battle for Chunuk Bair, he and a handful of companions laid and subsequently repaired a telephone wire to the front line. In full daylight and under continuous and heavy fire, Bassett 'dashed and then crept, then dashed and crept again, up to the forward line'. The lines were cut again and again, but Bassett and his fellow linesmen went out day and night to mend them. He was always modest about his actions, later claiming, 'It was just that I was so short that the bullets passed over me.'

Bassett was evacuated through illness to Britain on 13 August 1915. He rejoined his unit in France in June 1916, and on 21 September 1917 was commissioned as a second lieutenant. He was twice wounded in action on the western front and returned to New Zealand in December 1918. Before his release from the NZEF in January 1919 he was promoted to full lieutenant.

After the war Bassett resumed his career with the National Bank, serving in Auckland and as manager in Paeroa. He retained his link with the military by joining the Territorial Force. In July 1925 he was posted to the reserve of officers and in December 1929 to the retired list. On 19 January 1926 Bassett married Ruth Louise Grant at St David's Church, Auckland. In 1939 he was promoted to manager of the Town Hall branch of the National Bank in Auckland.

After the outbreak of the Second World War, Bassett was recalled to the National Military Reserve as a lieutenant. He spent the war years in New Zealand, working in signals and eventually achieving the rank of lieutenant colonel with command of Northern Military District Signals. He was posted to the reserve in December 1943 and placed on the retired list in 1948. Throughout his military career he was regarded as a popular and hard-working officer.

Cyril Bassett retired from banking in January 1952. During his retirement he served the Devonport community as a justice of the peace. He died on 9 January 1983 at his home in Stanley Bay, Auckland, at the age of 91, survived by his wife and two daughters.

Bassett had been the only New Zealander serving in a New Zealand unit to win the Victoria Cross at Gallipoli. He had been reluctant, however, to talk about the award saying, 'All my mates ever got were wooden crosses.'

Following his death, his widow donated the Bassett VC Memorial Trophy to the Royal New Zealand Corps of Signals; the trophy depicts Bassett laying a line at Gallipoli. It is awarded annually to the corps' most outstanding corporal - the rank Bassett held when he won his Victoria Cross.

Barber, Laurie. 'Bassett, Cyril Royston Guyton 1892 - 1983'. *Dictionary of New Zealand Biography*, updated 22 June 2007. <http://www.dnzb.govt.nz>