Perspective isn’t everything, but it helps. The November 11th cere-
monies that occur all around
the world challenge us to examine our
present against the sacrifices and strug-
gles of the past.

My grandfather, Dr. Francis Alexan-
der Carron Scrimger, served as a sur-
geon on the front lines in the 1st World
War and received a Victoria Cross at
the 2nd battle of Ypres. Throughout
my growing up I always mar-
velled at this fact, even as I
struggled to understand it. Most, if not all, of the ac-
counts I read of Victoria
Cross recipients described
fighting men, in desperate,
occasionally hopeless, situa-
tions, who, with no heed for
their own safety, tackled the
enemy against all odds, more
often than not, paying for it
with their lives. How then
did this highest of honours
come to be awarded to a
behind-the-lines physician?

On the day he won his
VC, two armies were dug in
mere 100s of yards apart, in a
devastated landscape of muddy trench-
es and bombed-out buildings. Furious
communications behind both lines flew
back and forth as men and machines
moved from one position to another,
attempting to seize the initiative from
any slight weakness in the adversary.
Snipers and shelling enveloped all. Into
this mix, on the morning of April 25th,
1915, clouds of chlorine gas were
released from behind enemy lines, and
driffed on a gentle killing breeze onto
the dug-in Canadians.

Dr. Scrimger was in charge of an
Advanced Dressing Station in an out-
building ironically called “Mousetrap
Farm.” From there he tended the wound-
ed, who streamed in from the front, treat-
ing them as facilities and the chaos per-
mitted. They had been under continuous
attack for 3 days, and now the gas attack
and a renewed barrage forced the evacu-
ation of the wounded, as the front moved
perilously close. One man with a severe
head wound was in danger of being left
behind, and Dr. Scrimger, braving heavy
shell fire, carried him to tem-
porary “cover” in the lee of a
shell hole, where he protected
him with his body until help
could arrive.

His citation notes these
actions but goes on to say
that the VC was also being
awarded for “…the greatest
devotion to duty among the
wounded at the front.” This
phrase has been for me the
key to understanding. He
was, in the end, simply being
a physician, and continuing
to be one, without faltering,
under the most extraordinary
of conditions. This is what
brought him to the attention
of his superiors, and is the feature of
this scrap of family history that reaches
across 90 years to touch me.

I would not wish it on anyone to
have to pass such baptisms of fire as
were experienced by my grandfather
and his colleagues, but I draw some
comfort from his example when I get
tired, when some clinical priority dis-
rupts my plans, or when my capacities
are tested and I am called upon to dis-
play “clinical courage.” On November
11th each year I don’t think about war,
I think about what it means to be a
doctor.