



Sabretache

THE OFFICIAL JOURNAL OF
THE CALGARY MILITARY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

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April Extra I, 2020

John Colpitts Groome Harrison

**Corporal, North West Mounted Police
(Canada)**

**Trooper, Natal Police – Anglo Boer War
Lance Sergeant, Natal Police – Bam-
batha Rebellion 1906
(Killed in Action – 4 April 1906)**

Coronation Medal 1902

**Queens South Africa Medal - Transvaal and
Natal**

Natal Medal with 1906 clasp

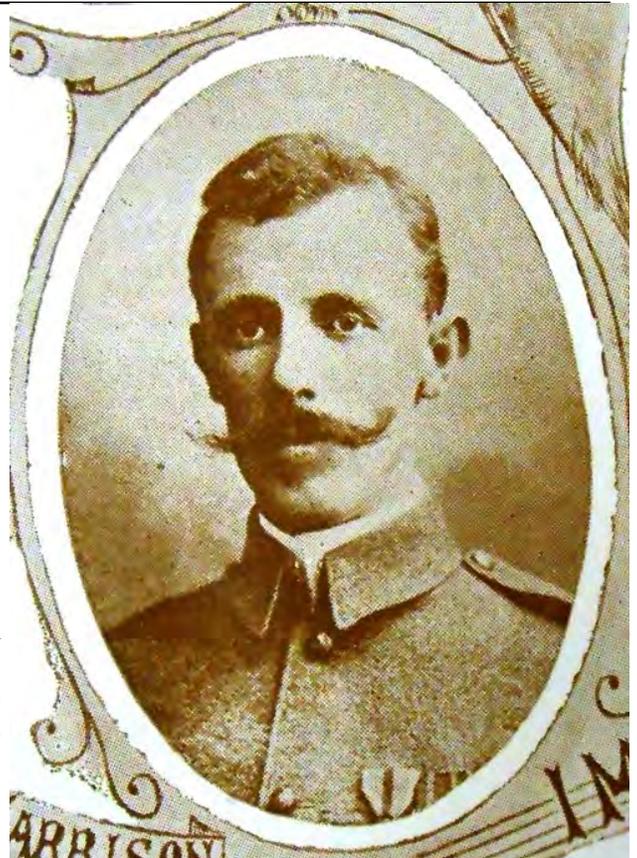
John Harrison was born in Croydon, Greater London on 11 October 1872 the son of John Colpitts Harrison, a Commercial Traveller by occupation, (after whom he was named) and his wife Emma Matilda Harrison. He was christened on 8 December 1872.

Eight years later, at the time of the 1881 census, Harrison and his family were resident at 2 Allandale Road, Croydon. The patriarch of the family was still a Commercial Traveller specialising in “soaps, candles etc.” and the family were complete with older sister Florence (15), younger sister Emma (6), Thomas Swainston Harrison (2) and Edwin Harrison (new born) joining John and their parents in the home. Emma Mason, a General Servant, rounded off the household indicating that it was a reasonably prosperous one.

Going about his days as an 8 year old school boy in bustling London would be a far cry to what was to follow in later life for John Harrison. There would have been no indication in his daily routine of what adventures the future would hold for him.

By the time the 1891 census rolled round Harrison was now an 18 year old young student living, together with his family at 16 The Waldon’s, in Croydon. He had been educated at Croydon where he became a school sportsman and a member of the School Cadet service.

What prompted Harrison to turn his sights to the west is unknown, possibly the influence of his Uncle Jack, resident in Canada was the cause, whatever the case may be, on 18 May 1893 he set sail from Liverpool aboard the Allan Line’s “Numidian” bound for Quebec via Montreal. What was the purpose of his trip? Harrison was destined for the North West Mounted Police, the famed Royal Mounties, where he intended to enrol for service.



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CALGARY MILITARY HISTORICAL SOCIETY
The SOCIETY

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Acknowledgements and Thanks

The March supplement was provided by President Dave Love.

This 1st April Extra was written by Rory from the [Boer War Forum](#). We thank him for allowing us to publish his work.

It was forwarded to us by long time member Mike Clare

We now need to take a step back in time to see what transpired to bring him to this point.

John Harrison's uncle Jack (Dyke) was in the employ of the Canada Government Agency, based at 15 Water Street, Liverpool, England. No doubt the two got talking as to what young Harrison would make of himself and, with no immediate prospects it was probably felt that joining the Mounties and moving to Canada for that purpose was a good idea. To this end Jack wrote away for enlistment papers for his nephew. The very comprehensive file on Harrison in the Canadian Archives picks up the story with Dyke writing to Fred White Esq., Controller, North West Mounted Police, Ottawa on 30 March 1893 as follows,

“Dear Mr White,

I have to thank you very much for your courtesy in sending me the forms. I enclose my nephew's application and Medical Certificate. The duplicate of the latter will be sent on in a few days. He is a very nice young fellow and I am sure that he will reflect credit on the force. Do your best for him and oblige (sic)”

Harrison wrote to his uncle at more or less the same time,

“Dear Uncle Jack,

My measurements are as follows, - height 6 ft. 1 ins. Chest 37 inches, round the shoulders 44 inches, all taken next to the skin; weight is about 11 ½ stone. In athletics, during the past 2 years I was there, I secured the Challenge Cup (about 350 boys). In 1st year I got the long and high jumps and was second in the 100 yards. In the last year I was more successful and secured the high and long jumps, the 100 yards and the hurdle race and was second in throwing the cricket ball. I also hold the school records for the 100 yards and the long jump. I have also an honour cup for football and have taken 4 prizes at cricket. I shall be 20 ½ by May. Shall not start riding till after Christmas and shall go to a Riding School.
Hoping you are quite well.

P.S. I have not had any serious illness since the typhoid when I was 12, caused by bad drains at the school I was then at, several other boys having it at the same time, causing the school to break up”

The Medical Examination referred to earlier took place at 42 London Road in Croydon and was conducted by Dr. Henry Horsley on 23 March 1893. It confirmed that Harrison was 20 years of age and that his muscular development was Fair (“I must say good” is the comment). He had no previous occupation and his Intelligence was Good with a Sanguine Temperament. Physically he had Light Brown hair, a Fair complexion, greenish brown eyes, perfect feet, a healthy heart, healthy lungs and 3 good scars. By way of Body Marks it was noted that “he has not any”

Dr Horsley remarked that “The applicant has always enjoyed good health. He has been used to athletic sports”

Likewise Harrison's Application for Engagement in the N.W. Mounted Police Force confirmed the details provided above going on to say that he was Single, understood the care and management of horses and could ride well.

On 17 May 1893 Dyke wrote again to Fred White attaching the duplicate copies alluded to and confirming that Harrison was "sailing by the Allan Steamer "Numidian" tomorrow and he is booked through to Regina. Will you kindly instruct the authorities there to put him through."

On the same day Jack Dyke shot off an epistle to Mr. Stomshorn, a resident of Regina which read as follows

"The bearer, my nephew, Mr. J.C.G. Harrison, is going out to join the North West Mounted Police. Eventually, if he likes the country, he will take up farming, and he will have sufficient means to make a good start.

I suppose there will be no difficulty about his being taken on the force, but if there should be any of course he will want something to do, and I shall be glad if you can put him with some good farmer. However, as I written out about him I do not anticipate that he will need to trouble you."

That Dyke was a man of influence there could be no doubt but his letter also suggests that Harrison's acceptance into the N.W.M.P., was not guaranteed.

A telegram sent from Regina on 30 May 1893 to Alex Calder, Main Street, Winnipeg asks that "If Mr. J.C. Groome Harrison offers for engagement send him up"

Having safely reached his destination and his path having been made clear for him Harrison took the Oath of Allegiance and Oath of Office at Regina on 5 June 1893. With this he was assigned no. 2910 and the rank of Constable attached to Depot Division.

And so commenced the career of John Harrison; nothing of any major import seems to have clouded his efforts until the day dawned almost three years later, on 28 May 1896, when a Board of Enquiry was convened to investigate and inquire into an accident that took place involving Harrison. At the time he was stationed at Battleford.

Dr. Pace the attending Surgeon, in his report, stated that, "on April 20th last Constable Harrison met with an accident whilst playing football. The accident proved to be a subluxation of the left knee. I find that this joint has always been more or less weak Const. Harrison stating to me that often before he has felt as though something was getting out of place, but that he could always manage to work it back. He has now almost completely recovered. The injury may, however, at anytime occur from very slight cause."

Harrison, in his statement had the following to say:

On the evening of the 20th April last I was playing football (practising) I put my right foot in a hole and ... to twist my left knee. I could not straighten it. I departed and saw the Doctor about half an hour after it happened. Next morning I went into hospital before being released to light duty."

The Board, after considering the evidence, pronounced its findings; "No. 2910 Const. Harrison met with an accident whilst playing football. That he has now almost completely recovered but that a very slight cause may at anytime produce a recurrence of the injury. The Board also finds that Const. Harrison has no claim against the Government for such injury."

With that out of the way Harrison continued with his duties. Whether or not the threat of his injury possibly recurring was to blame or not, he decided, not long after, that he would seek his discharge from the Mounties by purchase.

The necessary Board looking into this request found that his account and pay had been settled up and that his discharge could and would take place on 28 May 1897. His conduct during his three years and 360 days of service was rated as Very Good. Harrison's service record indicated that he had been promoted to the rank of Acting Corporal . on May 11th, 1897, 25 days short of discharge.

There were only two instances where he "blotted his copy book" by running foul of the regulations. The first was in December 1893, six months into his service, when he "Was inattentive on his ride and did spit in the ranks on the morning of the 6th instant" For this crime he was awarded Confinement to Barracks of 3 days"

The other occasion was on 26 November 1896 when he "Did have his saddle in a dirty condition at the inspection on 24th instant." As punishment he was awarded 2 days C.B.

Having cut ties with the N.W.M.P. Harrison took passage back to his home country aboard the "Indiana" via Montreal to Liverpool arriving on 19 June 1897. He was, doubtless, welcomed back into the bosom of his family.



Having tired of his exertions on the America continent he now, still imbued with a spirit of adventure, set course for the Dark Continent, where on 22 February 1898 in Pietermaritzburg, South Africa he enrolled with the Natal Police, Zululand Division for service and was awarded no. 2085 and the rank of Trooper..

Harrison, as he went about his duties, was not to know that, in a mere eighteen months time, he would be caught up in the Anglo Boer War which raged between the two Boer Republics and the might of the Empire from October 1899 until peace was finally achieved on 31 May 1902. Harrison and his Police colleagues were mobilised to take part in this conflict on 11 October 1899. He was discharged on 1 March 1901 but re-enlisted at some stage. As a combatant he was to see service in the Natal and the Transvaal earning himself the Queens South Africa medal with those clasps for his efforts.

A singular honour came his way when, in 1902, he was part of the ten man Natal Police contingent under Inspector Mardall, who attended the Coronation of King Edward VII in London. By all accounts this was a trying but happy time, trying in the sense that Edward took ill prior to his Coronation and the whole thing had to be postponed for several months. The contingents from all over the Empire were thus incommoded and had to while away the time at the Alexandra Park Camp (a tented village) until he was ready to take up his crown some months later. For his attendance at the ceremony Harrison was entitled to wear and was awarded the 1902 Coronation Medal.



Back in South Africa and having seemingly found his niche Harrison resumed service with the Natal Police being promoted to the rank of Lance Sergeant, no doubt in recognition of his abilities. He was placed in command of the Polela detachment.

Natal was, however, not a very safe place to be in the early years of the 20th century. Trouble had been brewing amongst the Zulu tribe for quite some time with matters coming to a head after the imposition of a poll tax in 1906. Effectively this meant that £1 had to be paid in respect of each native male. This was to be collected and handed to the Magistrates when they did their rounds in the rural areas of Natal. This met with resistance from some quarters and led to whole scale rebellion amongst some of the tribes especially that under an upstart Chief, Bambatha of the AmaZondi.

What happened and the relevance it holds for Harrison is best described by quoting from various authoritative publications written after the events transpired. The first is an extract from Walter Bosman's book, The Natal Rebellion of 1906. In it he quotes from Colonel Mansel of the Natal Police's official report of the resistance he met on his return to Greytown on the night of 4th April 1906,

"Acting on attached wire, I thought it necessary to proceed to Keat's Drift to bring back the Europeans, male and female, who were detained at that place, and who were unable to get away owing to the road being occupied by the enemy. For this purpose I took the greater part of the Natal Police that were with me, viz.: 5 Officers and 146 non-commissioned Officers and men. This force started about 2.45 p.m. and reached Keat's Drift about 4.30 p.m. without having been molested in any way, though the road goes through dense bush, and every precaution was taken. There was delay in getting the three ladies and European boy away, and it must have been fully 6.15 p.m. before we started, and we were considerably delayed on the road. Every possible precaution was taken to guard against surprise, but the nature of the country prevented flankers being thrown out. It was half moon. The advance guard was a short distance ahead when suddenly a dense body of kaffirs rushed out of the bush between the advance and the main party. The kaffirs went straight for the rear of the advance guard.

The guard immediately turned and fought their way back to the main body of which I was riding at the head. I immediately dismounted the men and opened fire thus assisting the advance guard to get back. The kaffirs were checked on the road by this fire, but worked round the bush and got on both our flanks. There were a good many guns among the kaffirs, with such they opened a heavy fire. The kaffirs got within a few yards of the column, but the bush was so dense we seldom got a sight of them. It was a very hot corner for some time, probably about half an hour. Our fire gradually got their attack under, when we resumed our advance, they following us for some distance firing and shouting obscene epithets. After this we were not followed further. The following ladies were in a carriage: Mesdames Hunter, Marshall and Borham with her small son. These ladies all behaved with the greatest courage and gave up their carriage for the dead and wounded and walked fully eight miles on foot. I regret to say our loss was severe, being as follows:-



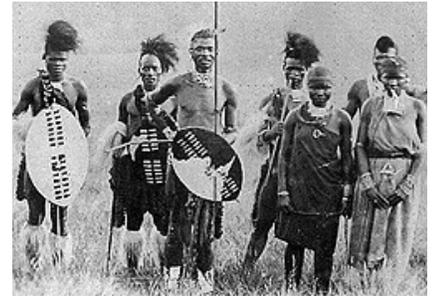
King Edward VII Coronation Parade

Killed: - **Lance Sergeant Harrison** and Troopers Ashton and Greenwood.
Missing: - Sergeant Brown.

That fatal day had dawned – John Harrison had succumbed in the skirmish detailed above. His exploits which traversed the globe and which took him to the Rockies in Canada and the heat of the African bush were at an end.

The official historian charged with producing the definitive book on the Bambatha Rebellion was James Stuart, in his History of the Zulu Rebellion published in 1913 he gave the following account of the action wherein Harrison so bravely lost his life on 4 April 1906:

“Intelligence was received by Mansel (Col. Natal Police) the same afternoon by wire from Keate’s Drift, to the effect that the European men and women, who had taken refuge there, were unable to proceed through Mpanza valley to Greytown, owing to insufficiency of escort. On account of the hostile attitude assumed by Bambatha, whose fastnesses were not more than seven or eight miles from Keate’s Drift, the position of the ladies was considered to be unsafe. Mansel accordingly decided, without, however, submitting the matter for instructions, to bring in the fugitives. Shortly before 3 p.m. a column, consisting of 5 Officers and 146 non – commissioned Officers and men, left for the purpose. A few men, together with some Nonquai (Zululand Native Police) were left in charge of the camp.



The force, with Mansel in command, not having seen anything of the enemy, although it had passed through Mpanza valley, arrived at the Drift at 4.30 p.m. It left again at 6.15, escorting the ladies and child. The latter travelling in an open carriage drawn by two horses. Mpanza hotel was reached just after sunset. A short halt was made, when the column continued its march along the road. There was an advance guard of 26 men. The carriage occupied a position in the centre of the main body. Every precaution was taken. Connecting files were posted between the guard and main body (about 150 yards apart) but, in Mpanza valley and for some miles further on, the nature of the country was such that flankers could not be thrown out.

The density of the bush about that part is remarkable. The trees, though not more than twenty feet high, are so closely intermingled, some of thorn others of cactus variety, as to make it difficult for a man to make his way through, even on foot. Add to this, a three strand wire fence running 5 yards from the road on either side – the road itself not being more than thirty feet wide – and the predicament the column would be in, in the event of attack at night, can better be imagined than described. The worst is what actually did happen. After the force had marched barely a mile from the hotel Major Dimmick, 100 to 150 yards ahead of the main body, was passing through the worst section of the forest along the route, and one of the nastiest spots to be found in either Natal or Zululand – the time being about 8 p.m. – a sudden and determined rush was made by the natives at the right rear of the guard. As they rushed, they simultaneously shouted, at the top of their voices, their newly –adopted war-cry “Usutu”. Almost instantly the rest of the right flank of the guard was attacked. Every horse took fright, and, although each man was marching with his rifle drawn, it was impossible to use it. The attack had come from the higher side of the road, where the whole of the enemy, about 150 in number, were in hiding, the spot being beside a huge solitary rock at the foot of a steep, bush-covered hill, known by the natives as Hlenyane. The enemies object was evidently to cut the advanced guard off the main body.

Owing to the narrowness of the road, the way it was hemmed in by the bush on either side, and the darkness – there being but half moon, with clouds about – the guard succeeded, only with great difficulty and after considerable delay, in making their way back to the main body. As it was, the leading section was completely cut off, and, with three horses wounded, made its way to the camp as best it could.

The tactics of the enemy were evidently to deal first with the horse, then with the man, after bringing the latter on to a level with himself. Sergt. E. N Brown, Lance Sergeant J.C.G. Harrison, and Troopers A.H. Ashton and J.P. Greenwood were killed outright, whilst four were wounded

Major Holt of the Natal Police, writing after the incident, had the following to add, *“Again the main body of the police were ordered from Pietermaritzburg to the thorn valley, where a force of 180 men arrived, and moved out in the direction of Botha's farm overlooking the Impanza road leading to the hotel. The rebels had cut the telegraph wires from Grey town to Keate's Drift, but a message sent via Umsinga and Pietermaritzburg from Keate's Drift was received by the police appealing for help for some women and a child who were unable to get away owing to a crowd of hostile natives blocking the road.*

Colonel Mansel, who was in charge of the police, decided to go to their assistance at once. They went cheerfully, in spite of the fact that they were already dog-tired, having been travelling all night and moving continuously ; but for four of them it was the valley of death.



Colonel Mansel & members of Natal Police

As they approached the Impanza Hotel they surprised two natives on horseback, who abandoned their animals hurriedly and bolted into the dense thorns, the horses being secured by the police. At the hotel there was an amazing scene of wreckage. It had been left unguarded since the occupants made their hasty flight to Keate's Drift, and the natives, discovering it was at their mercy, had broken into the place. How many of them entered it cannot be guessed, but when they left it everything breakable was broken. They discovered the liquor, and one may form an idea of the wildness of the scene when it is stated that they drank whisky and other intoxicants to the value of nearly a hundred pounds.

There was an ostrich farm adjoining the hotel, and the natives had ruthlessly stripped the tails of as many birds as they could catch, feathers being left strewn on the ground. An ox had been slaughtered the Zulu develops a craving for meat when under the influence of alcohol and its remains were scattered about.

Armed natives were seen on the ridges in the distance, and it was clear that the police would have been attacked on the road had their manoeuvre not been sudden and unexpected. Before nightfall they pushed on to Keate's Drift, where it was found that Sub-Inspector Ottley and his detachment had made a very rapid march from Umsinga and barricaded the hotel. There were three ladies there, Mrs. Marshall, Mrs. Hunter, and Mrs. Borham, together with a European child. Colonel Mansel desired to convey them back to the camp at the other side of the Impanza Valley, and for a while there was difficulty in persuading them to leave shelter, but at last a carriage was procured and they got into it.

Darkness was now falling, and the return journey had to be made through the snake-infested valley along the tortuous track overhung on one side by mountainous slopes covered with boulders, and sloping away on the other side into the lower part of the valley. Before they started on their ride they knew there was a horde of natives hanging about, many of them under the influence of liquor, and all of them only waiting a suitable opportunity to plunge their assegais into the body of a white man. An ancient native not in sympathy with Bambata's doings, warned the police that they would be attacked in the Impanza Valley, and that as the track was narrow and the men would not be able to turn easily, the rebels would rush at the rear-guard.

Every possible precaution was taken against a surprise, but the nature of the country prevented flankers from being thrown out. Dense bushes of prickly thorn skirted the track in places, and orders were given that whenever these thick clumps were approached the men were to dismount and fix bayonets.

A more trying situation for the nerves of the men would be difficult to imagine. The first part of the ride, as far as the dismantled hotel, was accomplished in safety, and there Mrs. Marshall desired to search for a number of her wedding presents, including some which she treasured highly. As the place had been turned upside down by the Zulus this occupied about half an hour. Just prior to the halt one or two natives had been seen hurrying along in the half light shed by the moon.

A few of the wedding presents having been recovered, the force left the hotel and mounted the hill leading to the camp. There were four men ahead acting as scouts. Fifty yards behind them came the advance guard under the command of Inspector Dimmick, and another 150 or 200 yards in the rear was the main body with Colonel Mansel in charge, the carriage containing the ladies and child being in their midst. The little procession had gone a few hundred yards and arrived at a bend in the road with a towering hill at one side, when suddenly a dense mass of kafirs rushed out of the thorns at the foot of the hill.

The natives, who had been lying in wait, went straight for the rear of the advance guard and at a close range fired a volley. Nearly every one of them seemed to be armed, and a hail of badly aimed bullets whizzed past. Several horses crumpled up in a few seconds, and one man was hit. The police, being mounted, with their reins in one hand and a rifle in the other, were at a disadvantage.



The first volley was followed by a wild dash on the part of the natives, who got to close quarters with their assegais. Half maddened with drink looted at the hotel, and wholly savage, they stabbed and threw their weapons with considerable effect.

It must be recorded to the credit of the white men that though the attack came with dramatic suddenness after a long ride, during which they were held in constant suspense, they acted as calmly as though they had been on the parade ground. Riderless and wounded horses began to plunge about in the dark, but there was not the least suggestion of confusion amongst the men.

The advance guard turned immediately the attack was made, and as the Zulus rushed in they clubbed them with the butt-end of their rifles. Steadily they fought their way back towards the main body, which had quickly dismounted and begun to shoot at the black, moving mass. The kafirs, between two fires, were checked to some extent, and the advance guard pushed their way through them, and then in a temporary lull of hostilities formed up awaiting orders. Some of the men who had been dismounted were picked up, and Trumpeter Milton, who had been badly stabbed in the back, was placed on a horse. Their rifles were hastily slung alongside the saddles, and drawing their revolvers, they made a quick rush to the main body.

After their first check the natives worked round the bush and attacked both flanks, sometimes getting within a few yards of the column, but the thorns were so thick at that point that they could rarely be seen.

It was a very hot corner for some time, and to this day nobody knows how long the skirmish lasted. There was neither time nor opportunity to look at watches, but apparently the firing lasted about half an hour. The Zulus had chosen an excellent position for their attack, the bush and darkness giving them such an advantage that they might have been able to wipe out the whole column had their heads been cooler and their aim more accurate. Gradually they retired farther into the thorns, where it was practically impossible to follow them. The troopers took the attack so lightly that an attempt was made to induce the natives to charge again, but without avail. The Zulu war-cry was heard at first, and later deep voices were heard shouting Ngene (which meant "Come along into the bush"), but they did not venture into the roadway again.

After a considerable pause, it being still uncertain what the natives' next move would be, the officers discussed the situation, and the sad task of picking up the dead and wounded was performed. Each of the dead men had between twenty and thirty assegai wounds, the natives having stood over their bodies as soon as they fell and stabbed them time after time. It was found that the casualties were:

Killed. Lance-Sergeant Harrison and Troopers Ashton and Greenwood.

Wounded. Major Dimmick, Troopers Dove, Braull, and Emanuel, and Trumpeter Milton. Missing. Sergeant Brown.

Eventually the advance was resumed, although, had the ladies not been present, the force would undoubtedly have remained there until daylight and raided Bambata's location. The ladies had displayed remarkable coolness during the attack, and when the march was resumed they got out of their carriage, which was utilized for conveying the dead and wounded. For some distance the natives followed, dodging from bush to bush, firing occasionally, though without effect, and hurling abuse; but after a while they disappeared altogether. The ladies covered the rest of the journey about eight miles out of the Impanza Valley on horseback, and camp was reached at 2 a.m., the troopers being thoroughly exhausted.



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Natal Police Force

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An article in the Natal Witness of the period described Harrison, fittingly, as a “dashing soldier” – he was awarded the Natal Medal with 1906 clasp, posthumously.



Medals of John Colpitts Groome Harrison

Corporal, North West Mounted Police (Canada)
Trooper, Natal Police – Anglo Boer War
Lance Sergeant, Natal Police – Bambatha Rebellion 1906
(Killed in Action – 4 April 1906)

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