

Medical service fatalities in the Crimea

by Martyn Lovell

SURGEON W.P. WARD of the 17th Foot's four-clasp Crimea Medal 1854-56 and Turkish Crimea Medal sold at DNW in September 2005. He had been with the Ordnance Medical Department as assistant surgeon, and was promoted and reassigned after Surgeon Walter Simpson of the 17th Foot died in the camp before Sebastopol on 31 May 1855, presumably of cholera.

William Pearson Ward was born in Dublin in February 1825. He joined the Ordnance Medical Department as assistant surgeon on 14 June 1847. He had qualified MRCS in 1846 and LSA (Apothecary) in 1847, and took a university medical degree in 1858. Ward returned to the Royal Artillery as surgeon on 1 June 1860, became surgeon major on 14 June 1867 and retired on half

the assault on the Redan on 8 September and that he was also present at the bombardment and surrender of Kinbourn, a Russian naval station and arsenal about 100 miles north west of the Crimea on the mainland of Ukraine, on 17 October 1855.



Naming on Surgeon Ward's medals

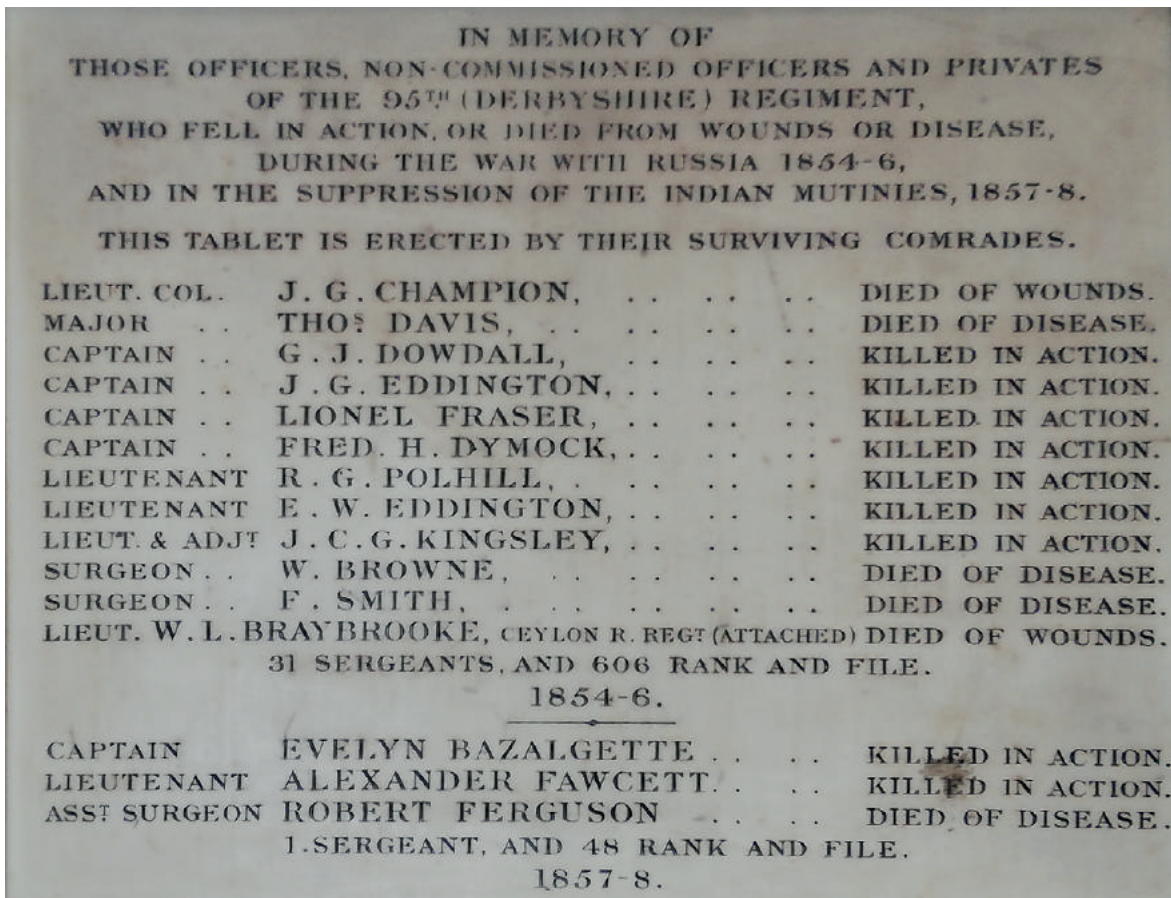


Surgeon Ward's Crimea pair both engraved: SGN.
W.P. WARD 17TH REGT.

pay with the honorary rank of brigade surgeon on 27 February 1880. He was awarded the Legion of Honour, Knight 5th Class (*The London Gazette*, 4 August 1856). He died on 29 September 1909 and his obituary in the *British Medical Journal (BMJ)* of 30 October 1909 mentions his four-clasp Crimea Medal and states that he was present at the repulse of the sortie on 26 October 1854,

A memorial was erected at the Royal Victoria Military Hospital, Netley near Southampton, to the memory of the medical officers (MOs) who died during the Crimea War. It had a Gothic look to it and was 60 feet tall, standing in open ground surrounded by trees. It was quite close to the officers' mess that is now a development of luxury apartments. The memorial was constructed of Portland stone and was unveiled in 1864, but was demolished in 1973 as it was in a dangerous state. By this time Netley Hospital itself, which was one of the largest buildings of the 19th century, had already been demolished. The seven plaques on which were inscribed the names of the deceased have been lost, but a plaque detailing the memorial can be seen at the Museum of Military Medicine just outside Aldershot. The museum also holds the casket that was buried beneath Netley's foundation stone and a few other pieces from the hospital, although the foundation stone itself has recently been returned to what is now the Victoria Park.

The memorial can be looked at as a starting point for studying the roll of the MOs who died in the Crimea. Fifty-five names are mentioned on the Netley Cemetery website.¹ The word 'Crimea' appears 1,591 times in a digital search of the *BMJ*



Derby Cathedral memorial to the 95th (Derbyshire) Regiment which helps emphasise that surgeons tended to die of disease while other officers died in action

and gives additional details. Another valuable source of information is *The Crimean Doctors* by John Shepherd, a retired general surgeon from Liverpool, who said that it took him ten years to write this large work that was published in 1991 by the Liverpool University Press. He lists 76 medics but he does not collate the places or causes of death.

The majority of deaths of both medical personnel and soldiers were caused by disease. Of the 55 MOs on the Netley memorial, 52 died of disease, two were killed and one was drowned. Assistant Surgeon O'Leary of the 68th Foot was mentioned in the *BMJ* of 28 September 1864 as the first officer killed in the trenches; he was cut in half by a cannon ball while treating an injured seaman. Edward Le Blanc of the 9th Regiment was killed by a French sentry; his obituary in the *Lancet* of April 1855 states that he did not respond to a challenge when he wandered into the French camp, and elsewhere he is described as having been partially sighted and deaf. General Thomas Spence drowned in HMS

Prince, a store ship purchased from the General Screw Steam Shipping Company, which sank in Balaclava harbour in the storm on 14 November 1854; his name is on the memorial, unlike the newly-qualified ship's doctor John Salter who also drowned but does not seem to have had military rank.

A small number of medics whose deaths are associated with the Crimea are not commemorated on the Netley Memorial. The *BMJ* of 12 July 1856 reported the death on landing at Portsmouth on 29 June 1856 of Alexander Johnson, MD, assistant surgeon to the 68th Foot. Others of the 68th were said to have been invalided home and subsequently died: John Flewitt, a hospital dresser, and Andrew McKutcheon, an assistant surgeon, died 'at home' of disease contracted while on service. Two others did not actually make it to the Crimea, dying at Varna in Bulgaria of cholera when fighting started on the Danube. Hector Gavin was a member of the Sanitary Commission carrying out a quality inspection when he was shot by



The Crimea War Memorial, Royal Victoria Military Hospital, Netley

accident by his brother on 20 April 1855; he is the only one found with mention of a pension – £50 paid to his wife (*BMJ*, 11 July 1857).

Deaths can be considered in relation to different hospitals. The naval hospital at Therapia was on the north shore of the Bosphorus and was considered to be dilapidated and unhealthy. A naval surgeon, who may have become unwell while attached to the Marines at Balaclava, and three other naval surgeons died there. The Renkioi Hospital, approximately four days sailing from the Crimea, was a prefabricated building of a pioneering design by Isambard

Kingdom Brunel. It was new and healthy, staffed by civilian doctors and there was only one death among the approximately 60 medical personnel. The largest hospital was at Scutari in Turkey where 20 MOs died compared to 30 who died in the Crimea itself. British doctors were also attached to help the Turkish army, with initially 44 civilians, of whom ten were from the Indian Medical Service, and five from the Army Medical Department. Seven civilian doctors died.

The total number of doctors reported as having been employed in the Crimea varies. I have seen the number of Army MOs put at

between 720 and 742, with a total of around 844 including landed Navy medics, plus an additional 104 civilians. It is generally agreed that the death rate of the British force in the Crimea was about 20.7%, 102,000 deaths (*BMJ*, 6 February 1858 and a similar figure in other sources). Seventy-six medics out of the total of 948 died, a death rate of 8% that is said to be more than the average mortality rate for combatant officers. The plaque in Derby Cathedral to the 95th Foot records the loss of one surgeon and also of his replacement.

In terms of the ranks of the 76 who died, there were two inspector generals, five staff surgeons, 16 surgeons, 33 assistant surgeons, five dressers (probably medical students), three were concerned with medicines/pharmacy, and the remaining 12 were civilians, with one attached Turk and Hector Gavin from the Sanitary Commission. There is little recorded for lower ranks like dressers. The cause of death is not recorded in 27 cases, mainly lower ranks, but these probably died of disease. Of the known causes 21 were from cholera, 13 from fevers which may have included malaria, four from typhoid, two from typhus, and six violent deaths including one suicide and four 'miscellaneous'.

German sources quoted in the *BMJ* (22 March 1879, p 451) indicate that in five campaigns in the 19th century for which figures were available, the mortality rate of MOs was generally twice that of other officers. It is interesting to note that there were 28 MO deaths in the Indian Mutiny,

the total force being some 40,000. The French, whose force in the Crimea was often three times the size of the British, list 76 medical officer casualties, although this list covers military surgeons and may exclude lower ranks (*BMJ*, 19 February 1887, p 421).

Those who did not reach the Crimea did not receive a medal. One such was Assistant Surgeon James Elliott, who died of fever in prison on 21 November 1855 at Marshalsea, Southwark. He had been court-martialled for the poor care given to one private soldier during the hard winter of 1854, but according to the *BMJ* of 21 December 1855 he had otherwise been diligent. As Elliott was healthy when he was detained I have not included him in the final numbers.

Editor's note

A detailed roll of the 76 medics, including those remembered on the Netley Memorial, can be found in the 'Members' Area' of the Society's website.

Acknowledgement

With thanks to Peter Starling for his advice and photographs of the memorial, and to J.A. Shepherd for his help in compiling the roll.

Notes

¹ <https://www.netley-military-cemetery.co.uk/hospital-buildings/the-crimean-war-memorial-and-the-officers-mess/>

Book notice

The Orders, Decorations and Medals of The Lebanon by Elie A. Ghossoub with Edward J. Emering and Owain Raw-Rees (2019). Printed by Dar El Kotob s.a., ISBN 978-9953-0-4397-5. Hard Back (A4), 384 pages, Euros 85 plus p&p from France or US\$90 plus p&p from Lebanon. Enquiries to the author 00961-3-655048 (inc Whatsapp) or eghossoub@gmail.com

A definitive reference book, wholly bilingual in Arabic and English, and profusely illustrated in colour, on the awards of the Republic of Lebanon. The book is divided into four sections: awards from the French Mandate period; official awards since independence in November 1943; United Nations and affiliated nations related awards; and unofficial awards, both religious and civil, local and international. Where available the decrees and regulations pertaining to the awards are included along with a selection of award certificates.

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