

## THE MEDICAL VICTORIA CROSSES

### Surgeon James Mouat

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#### Introduction

Prior to 1856 the honours available to be awarded for exceptional service and bravery to officers of the British Army were the Order of the Bath, Brevet Promotion and a Mention in Despatches. The medical officer, whose status in the army was lower than that of other officers, remained ineligible for the Order of the Bath until 1849 when a five page article appeared in the *Lancet* pressing for recognition of Medical Officers like their combatant counterparts. This cry was eventually taken up in the War Department and on 16th August 1850 the *London Gazette* announced that the Order of the Bath would henceforth be awarded to medical officers.

There was still a need for a bravery award available to all ranks of the army and navy and Captain GT Scobell MP, a retired naval officer, moved in Parliament on 19th December 1854 that some form of order of merit be instituted for personal gallantry.

In early January 1855 the Duke of Newcastle took up the cry and wrote to Prince Albert pressing for a new gallantry award. There was much correspondence between Windsor and the War Department and over the ensuing months a design was approved and manufactured. Queen Victoria herself took great interest in the new award and made various recommendations about its design and manufacture. She eventually signed the Royal Warrant instituting this new award on 29th January 1856; The Victoria Cross was born. It is made from bronze, originally taken

from Russian canon captured in the Crimea but it has since transpired that bronze from Chinese canon has also been used. The ribbon was red for the army and blue for the navy but it is now red for all three services (Fig 1). The first investiture, by Victoria herself, took place on 26th June 1857 in Hyde Park and included the award to Assistant Surgeon Thomas Hale.

Initially the cross could not be awarded posthumously but there was much controversy during the South African war about awards to deceased personnel, which would continue until 1920 when a new Royal Warrant officially stated that the award could be recommended and made posthumously, although in reality it had been since the South African War.

#### Surgeon James Mouat

During the Crimean campaign there were three awards to medical officers of the army and it is fitting that we should look at the first award. James Mouat was born on 14th April 1815 at Chatham in Kent. He was the son of Surgeon James Mouat who had joined the Army as a Hospital Mate in 1812 and at the time of young James' birth was serving as an Assistant Surgeon in the 25th Dragoons. The young James was educated at University College Hospital London which he entered in 1832 aged 16 years, having been nominated by R Dent Esq. Other brothers would follow him into UCL shortly after and Frederick John Mouat would pursue a distinguished career in the Indian Medical Service.

During his time at UCL he resided both at 73 Great Portland Street and Charlotte Street, Portland Place. During the 1832-33 session he attended classes in Anatomy, Chemistry and *Materia Medica*, followed in the 1833-34 session by Anatomy demonstrations and Chemistry again. These were followed over the subsequent years by Practice of Medicine, Surgery, Botany, Midwifery and Medical Jurisprudence. He eventually qualified MRCS in 1837. He seems an average student having not been awarded any prizes for his studies.

A year after qualification James applied for and was accepted as an Assistant Surgeon in the army and served initially in 44th Foot from 14th December 1838 until August 1839. During this time the 44th Foot were stationed at Chinsurah, in India and served under surgeon John Harcourt and with assistant surgeon William Balfour. Cholera broke out during which 250 men died within 3 months. In January 1839 the regiment moved to Kurnaul en route to Afghanistan with the 3rd Infantry Brigade.

On 9th August 1839 Mouat transferred to 4th Foot, also stationed in India and in 1839 at Bangalore. They too suffered the scourges of Cholera, a disease that Mouat would encounter on a much larger scale during his later service in the Crimea. Mouat stayed with the 4th Foot until 3rd November 1848 when he transferred to the 9th Foot as the surgeon with David Anderson as his assistant. During this period his father was also serving in India, as a surgeon with 15th Dragoons but in December 1848 he died whilst on passage to England.

In 1848 the 9th Foot was serving at Newry and for the next few years they continued to serve in Ireland at various locations until they embarked for Malta in March 1854. Soon after, James Mouat had transferred to 6th Dragoons, the regiment with which he would eventually serve during the early days of the Crimean



Figure 1. The Victoria Cross

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campaign. At the time of their embarkation, 31st May 1854, they had a strength of 19 officers and 295 men but not all of them would disembark at Varna some 6 weeks later, for some members of the Headquarters of the regiment, being conveyed aboard the transport *Europa*, perished in a fire which engulfed the ship. These included the commanding officer, veterinary surgeon and sixteen men.

Soon after landing bowel complaints manifested themselves amongst the regiment and the camp was moved to higher ground but these complaints prevailed and cholera appeared, killing four of the men. On 25th September the regiment embarked at Varna and landed at Balaklava on 1st October, where it encamped on the plain in front of the village of Kadekoi, eventually moving up to the heights before Sebastopol on 28th October. Disease continued to spread through the regiment whilst it engaged in frequent patrols and pickets and then the battle of Balaclava where two men were killed by pistol shot and fourteen wounded.

The charge of the Light Brigade, on 25th October 1854 will forever take its place in British military history, perhaps helped by Tennyson's poem. One of the many wounded resulting from the charge, which eventually found themselves staggering back down the valley was Captain William Morris, the acting CO of the 17th Lancers. Morris had been severely wounded; his skull was laid bare by a Russian lance, his right arm had a sword wound, including an oblique fracture and one or more of his ribs were fractured on the left side

There are conflicting theories regarding who found Morris first but it is generally accepted that Lord Scarlett himself sent Surgeon Mouat down to the valley floor to tend the wounds of this gallant officer. Mouat rode to where Morris had finally collapsed and joined by Sgt Wooden of the 17th Lancers, tended his wounds (Fig 2). Controversy now exists regarding what actually happened next; one account states that Mouat and Wooden were attacked by Cossacks and that Mouat drew his sword to fight them off but it is doubtful that the Cossacks penetrated that far down the valley. Whatever the circumstances Morris was carried off the field and eventually made a full recovery.



Figure 2 Artist's impression of James Mouat and Sgt Wooden rescuing Morris (from the author's collection.)

The London Gazette of 4th June 1858 announced the award of the Victoria Cross to Surgeon Mouat with the following citation.

*For having voluntarily proceeded to the assistance of Lieut-Col (sic) Morris CB, 17th Lancers, who was lying dangerously wounded in an exposed position after the retreat of the Light Cavalry at the battle of Balaklava, and having dressed that officer's wounds, in the presence of and under heavy fire of the enemy. Thus by stopping a severe haemorrhage he assisted in saving that officer's life.*

Wooden initially got nothing but on seeing the announcement



Figure 3. James Mouat (from Fosters Netley Collection of Carte de Visit. RAMC Collection)

of the award to Mouat applied for the VC himself (as you could in the early years) and was eventually awarded it.

On his return from the Crimea Mouat went on Half Pay in December 1856, was re-instated to full pay March 1858 and promoted to Deputy Inspector General on 1st October 1858 (Fig 3). On 6th October 1859 he married, in Dublin, Adela Rosa Ellen, the daughter of Reverend Nicholas Tindall.

Mouat's next experience of campaigning was during the New Zealand Wars of 1860-61, where he served under General Pratt and again in 1863-65 during the operations in the Waikato, Taranaki and Tauranga Districts. During the latter he was repeatedly mentioned in despatches and received the thanks of the New Zealand Government for *special and valuable services rendered in the Colony*. His official report of the medical aspects of the war was published in 1865 as the *Medical and Surgical History of the New Zealand War*. In October 1864 he was promoted to Inspector General of Hospitals and in 1867 found himself serving in Aldershot and then went on to half pay from March 1868 to April 1870. In 1871 he was briefly in India and eventually retired in 1876. In 1888 he was appointed an Honorary Surgeon to the Queen and made a Knight Commander of the Bath in 1894. He died on 4th January 1899 at his home at 108 Palace Gardens Terrace, aged 83. His death certificate records the cause of death as *Morbus Cordis Hemiplegia*. He was buried in Kensal Green Cemetery, London. The Victoria Cross medal group of Surgeon Mouat is now on display in the Army Medical Services Museum (Fig 4).



Figure 4. The James Mouat Medal Collection in the AMS Museum