

## ASSISTANT SURGEON CAMPBELL MELLIS DOUGLAS: BRAVERY AT SEA

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The Andaman Islands consist of four main islands and numerous smaller ones, situated in the Indian Ocean between Indian and Thailand; they are now part of India having passed to them from Britain on Independence in 1947. In 1867 the main islands Great and Lesser Andaman were covered in dense luxuriant tropical growth and were inhabited by 'the lowest kind of savages'.

The British had had an interest in the islands since 1789 when they opened a small settlement named Port Blair after Lieutenant Archibald Blair, sent to survey the islands during the Indian Mutiny when mutineers were deported there. In 1867 the 2nd battalion of 24th Regiment were stationed in Rangoon but kept a detachment of three officers and one hundred men at Port Blair. This detachment was commanded by Captain WJ Dakeyne and included some men of the Naval Brigade plus a regiment of native infantry. A Superintendent, Major B Ford, maintained the authority of British rule.

A ship, *Assam Valley* was on passage past Andaman when, having lost its main topsail yard, the Captain decided to put into the southern end of Lesser Andaman and cut a new one. At 1145am on 21st March 1867 *Assam Valley* launched a boat containing the Captain, WH Manley, the 2nd Officer Edward Madden and the ship's carpenter, plus five seamen, muskets, rope and tools to cut the spar.

The remaining ships crew saw them land and drag their boat up on to the beach and disappear into the tree line. About an hour later the Chief Officer George Bruford, on the Poop deck of the *Assam Valley*, spied through his telescope a number of natives milling about the boat. Shortly after, the boat was dragged away. It was obvious to Bruford that all was not well. Where was his Captain and crew? Bruford decided to remain in the vicinity for two further days but with still no sign of the party he set sail for his planned destination, Akyab, where he landed on 5th April. At the subsequent enquiry Bruford stated that he thought it unwise to send a further party ashore, there being no arms left aboard and he felt that there would be reluctance amongst the remaining crew to go ashore.

Despite the delay it was felt important that a search should be made for the missing crew members. Telegraphs were immediately despatched to the Superintendent at Port Blair ordering him to initiate a search. On 16th April he despatched *HM Steam Surveying Ship Sylvia*, at the time in Port Blair, to Lesser Andaman in the hope that he might discover some clues to the whereabouts of the men of the *Assam Valley*. The *Sylvia*

returned on the evening of the 18th and although the crew could not put ashore due to the heavy swell, evidence of the crew of the *Assam Valley*, rope and a sailor's cap, was seen on the beach.

It was decided that a further search was necessary and on 6th May the steamer *Arracan* set sail with a party of troops from 2/24th Regiment under command of Lieutenant WL Much. Accompanying the infantrymen was the Assistant Surgeon of 2/24th, Campbell Mellis Douglas, 7 men of the Naval Brigade and 8 Indian Sappers. The *Arracan* arrived off Lesser Andaman at dawn on 7th May and launched cutters and a gig to try to land ashore. The surf was rough but Lt Much accompanied by seven men of the Naval Brigade and five Indian Sappers managed to get his boat in close enough to allow the party to jump out into approximately five feet of water. With their rifles and ammunition above their heads they waded ashore. Lt Much then moved his party along the shore in the direction of where they believed the *Assam Valley* crew had disappeared. After a short distance a skull was found followed by a sailor's ankle boot and a little further on the white painted planking of a boat. Lt Much and his party felt that they were now close to solving the mystery.

Shortly after, some aborigines were spotted in the jungle but when approached they fired a volley of arrows at the search party. The natives then appeared to be moving and Lt Much, believing that their intent might be to outflank him and finding himself short of ammunition decided it was time to re-board the boats, so signalled them to come inshore. Since their landing some two hours previously, the surf had increased in ferocity and as the first cutter came in towards the shore it was upset and all the occupants thrown into the water. The lucky ones amongst them managed to reach shore but some, too exhausted, drowned despite the efforts of Douglas in trying to rescue them, in which he suffered a blow to the head. It was obviously too rough to embark and Lt Much moved his party off along the shore in the hope of finding calmer waters. Unknown to them they were being shadowed by the natives, but a boatload of 2/24th moved parallel to them, firing on the natives as they went. It was whilst moving along the beach that Much's party discovered four more bodies, partially buried in the sand, along with a blue seaman's jacket.

The situation was now getting desperate. The natives were closing in, ammunition had almost run out and there was no hope of getting a boat in through the surf. The boats offshore frantically signalled for Lt Much's party to retrace their steps back along the shore to where they had first landed some five hours previously. There the cutter, waiting offshore, sent in a raft with ammunition aboard. Lt Much and three others got aboard the raft but as it was hauled through the surf it was swamped and everyone was swept overboard, all managing to swim ashore again.

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Somehow Douglas had managed to swim through the surf to the gig and taking command of it, started back to the shore. The initial attempt failed, as the boat became water logged but battling again through the surf a second attempt was successful and five of the shore party were taken off as the remainder provided covering fire. After transferring the five to a cutter, Douglas and his crew made a third and final successful attempt to bring the remainder off the island. They eventually arrived aboard the steamer at 5pm, some eight and a half hours after first leaving.

Much immediately wrote his report, commending Douglas and others for their bravery. The military authorities were not the only people to consider Douglas' bravery; the General Court of the Royal Humane Society also wished to recognise his bravery and awarded him their silver medal.

Lieutenant Much's report eventually reached the War Department and Douglas and others were considered for awards. On 17th December 1867 the War Office published the announcement of the award of the Victoria Cross to Douglas and four privates of the 2nd/24th Foot.

*The Queen has been graciously pleased to signify Her intention to confer the decoration of the Victoria Cross on the undermentioned Officer and Private Soldiers of Her Majesty's Army, whose claims to the same have been submitted for Her Majesty's approval, for their gallant conduct at the Little Andaman island, as recorded against their names, viz. :-*

***Of the 2nd Battalion, 24th Regiment Assistant-Surgeon Campbell Mellis Douglas, M.D. and Privates Thomas Murphy, James Cooper, David Bell and William Griffiths. For the very daring and gallant manner in which, on 7th of May 1867, they risked their lives in manning a boat and proceeding through a dangerous surf to the rescue of some of their comrades, who formed part of an expedition which had been sent to the Island of Little Andaman, by order of the Chief Commissioner of British Burmah, with the view of ascertaining the fate of the Commander and seven of the crew of the ship "Assam Valley", who had landed there, and were supposed to have been murdered by the natives.***

***The officer who commanded the troops on the occasion reports: "About an hour later in the day, Dr. Douglas, 2nd Battalion, 24th Regiment, and the four Privates referred to,***

***gallantly manning the second gig, made their way through the surf almost to the shore, but finding their boat was half filled with water, they retired. A second attempt made by Dr. Douglas and party proved successful, five of us being safely passed through the surf to the boats outside. A third and last trip got the whole of the party left on shore safe to the boats."***

***It is stated that Dr. Douglas accomplished these trips through the surf to the shore by no extraordinary exertion. He stood in the bows of the boat and worked her in an intrepid and seamanlike manner, cool to a degree, as if what he was then doing was an ordinary act of every-day life. The four Privates behaved in an equally cool and collected manner, rowing through the roughest surf when the slightest hesitation or want of pluck on the part of any one of them would have been attended by the gravest results. It is reported that seventeen officers and men were thus saved from what must otherwise have been a fearful risk, if not certainty of death.***

## CAMPBELL MELLIS DOUGLAS

Campbell Mellis Douglas was born on 5th August 1840 at Grosse Isle, Quebec Canada. His parents were Dr George Mellis Douglas MD and Charlotte Saxton Douglas. He was educated at St John's College, Laval University, Quebec and Edinburgh University where he gained his MD in 1861 and LRCS. Douglas was appointed an Assistant Surgeon on 1st October 1862 and transferred to the 24th Regiment on 22nd May 1863. At that time the regiment was at Mauritius. As has been stated, it was whilst with the 24th Regiment that he took part in the Andaman Islands Expedition.

After the expedition Douglas remained with the 24th until 31st October 1871 when he was appointed as Assistant Surgeon, Staff and then to the Royal Artillery on 31st August 1872 proceeding with them to Nova Scotia on 2nd January 1873. He became a Surgeon, Army Medical Department on 1st March 1873. During his time in North America he met and married Eleanor McMaster, the widow of Valentine McMaster VC MD, who was awarded a VC for the Indian Mutiny. She had two children by her first marriage and with Douglas had three further sons and a daughter.

On 10th April 1878 the Douglas family came home for two years and then proceeded to Bombay where he stayed for a further two years. In October 1882 Douglas, now in the rank of Surgeon Lieutenant Colonel, came home on leave and retired in the Honorary rank of Brigade Surgeon. In his retirement he was not idle; he returned to Canada and served in the 2nd Reil Expedition in 1885 and then took up private practice in Lakefield Ontario before returning to England. Once in England he held posts as the Depot Medical Officer at both Berwick on Tweed and Perth, eventually retiring in 1902. During the time of his retirement from the army until his death, he wrote books on medical subjects and canoeing and pursued his love of canoeing by crossing the English Channel in 1895 having also canoed in North America.

Campbell Mellis Douglas died on 31st December 1909 whilst at his daughter's home, Birdwood, Horrington, near Wells, Somerset. He was buried in Wells Cemetery.

His medals passed to his son George and now reside in the Canadian War Museum.