

WAR IN BURMA - THE AWARD OF THE VICTORIA CROSS TO FERDINAND SIMEON LEQUESNE

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Introduction

Britain had been engaged in fighting in Burma on a small scale since the late 18th century but fighting intensified in the 19th century into what became known as the First, Second and Third Burmese Wars, after which Upper Burma was annexed by the British on 1st January 1886. The Third Burma War had taken a heavy toll on the combined British and Indian force, mainly from sickness with epidemics of malaria, dysentery and typhoid fever resulting in heavy wastage. The terrain dictated that the method of evacuation of the casualties was initially by hand but later by pony and elephant. Where possible rivers were used and large steamers were employed as floating hospitals [1]. The rate of admission for disease per 1000 strength in 1888 was 2367.45 and a death rate of 48.49; the following year things were slightly better with 2144.55 admissions per 1000 and 30.19 deaths [1]. After the Third Burma War there were further expeditions, conducted in the main to control the hill tribesmen, and it is one such expedition, the Kachin Hills Expedition of 1893, that is detailed here.

Kachin Hills Expedition

The Kachin Hills form a mountainous district of Upper Burma inhabited by the Kachin people who had been raiding columns and settlements for some years. Numerous small actions and two large expeditions were mounted against the Kachins to bring the major troubles to a halt, which happened in March 1893. There re-occurred some minor troubles for some years after, necessitating a strong police force remaining in the area for some years.

One such expedition was sent to destroy the village of Tartan which had been rebuilt by the rebels after its destruction in February 1889. The force consisted of 2nd Norfolk Regiment and sixty men of the 42nd Ghurkha Light Infantry. The whole force was commanded by Captain Otway Mayne, 2nd Norfolks with 25 year old Surgeon Captain Ferdinand LeQuesne as the medical officer [2].

Ferdinand Simeon LeQuesne

LeQuesne was born in Jersey on the 25th December 1863, the third son of Lieutenant Colonel Giffard N LeQuesne, a retired Royal Jersey Artillery officer and Augusta W LeQuesne, née Simeon. He was initially educated in the Channel Islands and later underwent medical training at Kings College Hospital. He qualified as a licentiate of the Society of Apothecaries in 1885; MRCS in 1886 and a Licentiate of the Royal College of Physicians, also in 1886. Commissioned as a Surgeon Captain on 28th July 1886 he was attached to the 2nd Norfolk's and proceeded with them to Burma [3].

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LeQuesne's presence on the return to Tartan on the 4th May was regarded more as a morale booster than a necessity. The Chins were not expected to fight but to follow their practice of abandoning their village on the approach of the column. By 0930am the column was above what looked like the abandoned village and Captain Mayne deployed his forces and the final advance into the village began. When almost at the bottom of the hill the troops discovered two fortified stockades which immediately came to life as heavy fire poured from them. One of the first to fall was 2nd Lieutenant Michel, leading the main party forward. Forced to withdraw, the troops pulled back with Michel's body but he still remained exposed to the Chin fire. A Private Charles Crampion went and fetched LeQuesne to treat Michel's wounds¹. Here he dressed the wounds aided by Crampion and two Gurkhas, all the time under constant Chin fire (Figure 1). After about ten minutes LeQuesne and his helpers brought Michel's body under cover. Observing this brave act, from a position about thirty yards away, was Captain Mayne, who himself was wounded. LeQuesne now dashed across the fire swept hillside to Mayne's side and commenced dressing his wounds at which point he himself was wounded. Mayne's own statement testifies to the bravery of LeQuesne.

"...the splendid coolness and gallantry displayed by Surgeon LeQuesne in attending to the wounded, he himself being exposed during the whole time to a very hot fire, under which several men dropped; this was more especially the case while attending to 2nd Lieutenant Michel, owing to his extremely exposed position. I consider that Surgeon LeQuesne's conduct is deserving of the highest possible recognition" [4]

By now some eleven officers and men had been killed and with only two doolies, Captain Westmoreland, on whom command now rested, decided that withdrawal was the only option [5]. This, the force did, leaving Tartan burning once again. Some days later a force returned again to the scene of the action and destroyed the now unoccupied stockades.

On 29th October 1889 LeQuesne's name appeared in the London Gazette with notification of the award of the Victoria Cross.

'Displayed conspicuous bravery and devotion to duty during the attack on the village of Tartan, by a column of the Chin Field Force, on 4th May 1889, in having remained for the space of about ten minutes in a very exposed position (within five yards of the loopholed stockade from which the enemy was firing), dressing with perfect coolness and self-possession the wounds from which Second Lieut. Michel, Norfolk Regiment, shortly afterwards died. Surgeon LeQuesne was himself severely wounded later on whilst attending to the wounds of another officer.'

The Victoria Cross was presented to him by General BL Gordon at Rangoon in December 1889.

¹Private Crampion was recommended for the Victoria Cross for his actions but was awarded the Distinguished Conduct Medal (DCM). He was awarded a bar to the DCM during the Anglo Boer War.



Figure 1. Ferdinand LeQuesne attending to the wounded under fire.

LeQuesne recovered from his wounds and took part in further actions in Burma including with the Chin Lushai Field Force in 1890, the Wuntho Field Force in 1891 and the Kaukwee Expedition. He was awarded the Indian General Service Medal 1854-95 with three clasps and was further 'Mentioned in Despatches'. After a year in England from 1893 to 1894 India beckoned again and service in Bengal until 1900 and then the Punjab until 1901, during which time he was promoted to the rank of Major, in May 1898. In November 1901, with the Anglo Boer War almost three years old, LeQuesne found himself in South Africa, where he served until 1902 and was awarded the Queens South Africa Medal with clasps for Cape Colony, 1901 and 1902 and was once again 'Mentioned in Despatches'.

After a further two years in England he returned to Bengal until 1909, being promoted Lieutenant Colonel in 1906. With the outbreak of war in 1914 LeQuesne joined the BEF, serving in the war until 1918, when he retired. On retirement he took up the post, amongst others, of Honorary Surgeon to the Metropolitan Hospital London. His recreations were shooting, racquets and lawn tennis; presumably he developed his love for the former whilst in India. He remained a bachelor throughout his life [6].

Ferdinand Simeon LeQuesne died on 14th April 1950, aged 86 at 6 Victoria Square, Clifton, Bristol. He was buried at Canford Cemetery, Westbury-on-Trym, Bristol, on 19th April 1950.

References

1. Cantlie, N. *A History of the Army Medical Department*. London: Churchill Livingstone, 1974
2. Snelling, Stephen, *The First Chin Hills Expedition 1888-89*. (Coin & Medal News, 1988.
3. Drew, Robert (Ed) *Commissioned Officers in the Medical Services of the British Army 1660-1960 vol 1*. London: The Wellcome Historical Medical Library, 1968
4. Statement by Captain O Mayne 2nd Norfolk Regiment regarding operations on 4th May 1889. The National Archives, WO32/7404
5. Copy of the report by Captain CH Westmoreland, 42nd Goorkha Light Infantry, Fort White, dated 5 May 1889 to District Staff Officer Chin Field Force. The National Archives, WO32/7404
6. LeQuesne VC File, Army Medical Services Museum