

A Possible Third Double Victoria Cross for the Army Medical Services?

M Hinton¹, PH Starling²

¹Doctoral student in the Department of War Studies, Kings College, London; ²Director AMS Museum, Keogh Barracks, Ash Vale

Introduction

It is well known that of the three men to have won a bar to the Victoria Cross, two were members of the Royal Army Medical Corps - Captain Noel Godfrey Chavasse and Lieutenant Colonel Arthur Martin-Leake; a truly remarkable achievement for such a small Corps.

The Maori Land Wars

Since the publication of a paper on the award of the Victoria Cross to medical officers during the New Zealand Wars (Maori Land War) 1863-1866 in this journal [1], further information has come to light from the *British Medical Journal* archive which suggests the RAMC almost had a third double VC award. Assistant Surgeon Manley won the Victoria Cross during an attack on a Maori fort on 29 April 1864 when amongst other things he risked his life to save Commander Hay RN. Drs James Mouat VC and William Alexander Mackinnon were also present, and both distinguished themselves by their courage on that occasion. Dr Mackinnon, later Sir William, had a long and successful army career becoming the Director General of the Army Medical Service from 1889 to 1896. He died on 28 October 1897 and an obituary in the *British Medical Journal*, included the following contribution from an unnamed 'distinguished civil surgeon'.

"Few, if any, in the Department which he adorned, possessed a longer record of active military service, extending as it did throughout the whole term of the Crimean war, the Indian mutiny, the New Zealand war, and the Ashanti campaign. In New Zealand he had an experience such as can fall to few, and is perhaps unique, for in the attack up a chief's Pah the combatant officers having been one by one disabled he took command himself and captured the position. After the fight he treated as a surgeon several of those he had himself wounded in the earlier part of the day. For this campaign he received his C.B., although I believe he was offered the alternative of a Victoria Cross, which he afterwards regretted he did not accept instead". [2]

On reading this notice Dr Mouat, who was by then a retired Surgeon General, was prompted to write a letter to the journal's editor in which he described the events of the 24 April 1864 in more detail which also provides the additional information that

he, Mouat, was offered a bar to the Cross that he won during the Battle of Balaklava on 25 October 1854 [3].

"... I feel constrained to correct some singular inaccuracies in the latter portion of your obituary notice of my distinguished friend Sir William Mackinnon. For instance, at the Gate Pah you state, 'The combatant officers having one by one been disabled, he took command himself and captured the position.' This is so absurd and ridiculous an assertion that it scarcely needs contradiction; but as I was present on the occasion referred to, and Dr. Mackinnon was serving under my orders, I had better state what actually occurred. Dr. Mackinnon and myself accompanied the troops into action, taking up a position in rear of the supports. When the attacking party, and the supports who rushed in with them, were driven out of the Pah we found ourselves and a number of wounded men, isolated and absolutely unprotected, a panic having seized the retreating troops. At that moment a body of natives emerged from the Pah and were making direct for us. We never for a moment thought of abandoning our helpless charge, and I directed the two men who so manfully stood by us to fire. Mackinnon hastily snatching a rifle from one of the fugitives, also fired, and wounded the leading chief in the heel. Our perilous position having been perceived by the General" a hundred men of the Naval Brigade were hastily dispatched to our assistance. The next morning he informed me of his intention of recommending us, as well as another medical officer (Dr Manley) who accompanied the storming party into the Pah, for the Victoria Cross. I pointed out that I already possessed it, and did not feel justified in accepting further distinction merely for doing my duty in not deserting my post. He replied, 'But what about Mackinnon — do you think he would be satisfied with the Order of the Bath?' When I mentioned this to Mackinnon he at once acquiesced. The General alluded to it in an official memorandum to the Military Secretary, in the following terms. 'Dr. Mouat invariably accompanied the force operating in the field under my command, and I wish to mention an act of conspicuous bravery when Dr. Mackinnon and himself remained (after the retreat of the troops), attending the wounded men who had fallen near the entrenchments, exposed all the time to a close fire from the enemy's works, and in so dangerous a position that Dr. Mackinnon at one time was obliged to snatch a rifle and fire to keep back the enemy, mortally wounding a well-known leading chief. For his gallantry on this occasion Dr. Mackinnon was appointed a Companion of the Bath." [4]. So had Mouat chosen otherwise the RAMC would have had three double VCs within its ranks.

**Corresponding Author: Captain (Retd) PH Starling MA
DHMSA FRHistS, Director Army Medical Services Museum,
Keogh Barracks, Ash Vale, Aldershot GU12 5RQ
Tel: 01252 868820 Fax: 01252 868832
Email: armymedicalmuseum@btinternet.com**

*Sir Duncan Alexander Cameron (1808-88) served in the Crimean campaign and was recommended for the Victoria Cross for his exploits in a minor victory in the Maori war at Koheoa on 17 July 1863.



Figure 1. Marble Plaque commemorating Mackinnon in the library of the AMS Museum

William Alexander Mackinnon

William McKinnon was born on 27 June 1830 on the Isle of Skye, the son of the Reverend J. Mackinnon. He studied medicine at Glasgow and Edinburgh and on 18th February 1853 joined the army as an Assistant Surgeon on the Staff. A year later, as a true Highlander he was appointed as an Assistant Surgeon to the 42nd Regiment. With the regiment he served in the Crimea and was present during the battles of the Alma, Balaklava and the siege of Sevastopol. In 1857 Mackinnon left the army for a few months but rejoined in October of the same year as the Assistant Surgeon to 29th Foot. Various campaigns and promotions followed, including the Maori Land War and also the Ashanti Campaign when he was the senior medical officer. On 7 May 1889 he was appointed Director General Army Medical Services in succession of Sir Thomas Crawford (Figure 1 & 2) [5]. William Mackinnon died a bachelor on 28 October 1897, at his residence, 28 Evelyn Gardens, London and was cremated at Woking; his ashes being scattered on his beloved Isle of Skye [2].



Figure 2. William Alexander Mackinnon (AMS Museum)

References

1. Starling PH. The New Zealand Wars. *J R Army Med Corps* 2010; 156(1): 54-56
2. *British Medical Journal* November 1897 (ii): 1376.
3. Starling PH. Surgeon James Mouat. *J R Army Medical Corps* 2007; 153 (2):131-132.
4. *British Medical Journal* 1897(ii) :1458-9
5. Mackinnon service record - AMS Museum