

# Victoria Cross Online

## THE VICTORIA CROSSES OF MELVILL & COGHILL



Issue 29 February 2025

**ISANDLWANA 22 JANUARY 1879**  
**ZULU WAR**

**NEIL THORNTON**  
**MICHAEL DENIGAN**



# EDITOR'S COMMENTS

Welcome to the 29th edition of Victoria Cross Online Magazine. This month sees a fabulous article by Michael Denigan, who is based in the United States, who has recently collaborated with Neil Thornton on an upcoming book which focuses on the story of Melville VC and Coghill VC. The book will be published shortly by Neil's publishing company Barnthorn Publishing.

Michael kindly agreed to write a piece which gives a hint to the content of the book, and hope it causes many of you to add the book to your libraries.

There is also the next three entries into my own series on the Royal Marines Victoria Crosses. The stories of Lewis Halliday VC from the Boxer Rebellion in China, Walter Parker VC at Gallipoli and Francis Harvey VC during the Battle of Jutland are all featured.

There is also the addition of other VC related stories including the upcoming sale of the Charles Cowley VC medal group at Noonans on 11<sup>th</sup> March 2025



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# iSandhlwana

By Michael Denigan

22 January 1879 marked one of the worst defeats of the Victorian era for the British Army. At the Battle of iSandlwana, a force of over 20,000 Zulu warriors overran a British encampment defended by six companies of regular infantry from the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalions 24<sup>th</sup> Regiment of Foot supported by two Royal Artillery guns, a mixed force of mounted white Volunteers and a substantial force of African auxiliaries. This defensive force was almost completely destroyed with only a few traumatized survivors making their way to safety.

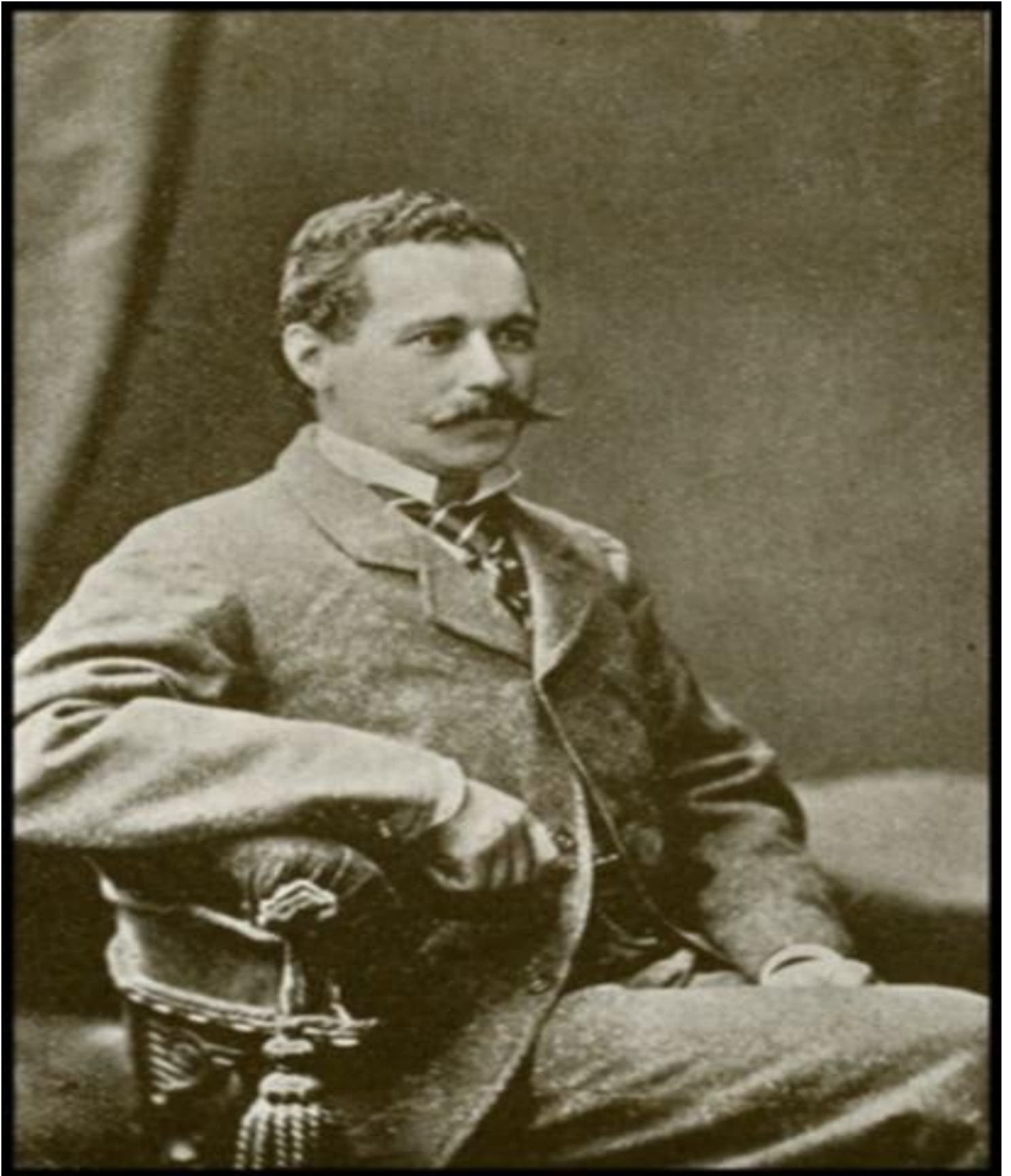
The purpose of this article is not to provide a general history of the war, but rather to outline the outstanding contributions of two Lieutenants who served in the 24<sup>th</sup> Regiment of foot; Lieut. Teignmouth Melvill VC and Lieut. Nevill Coghill VC. Both Officers would receive the Victoria Cross posthumously for their valiant actions. Their award – and the history of such – is a fascinating story in and of itself. It is the subject of the upcoming book available from Barnthorn Publishers by Neil Thornton and I; The Victoria Crosses of Melvill and Coghill.

Melvill was the son of a senior official in the East India Trading Company. He had served with the 1/24<sup>th</sup> since he graduated Cambridge in 1865, including assignments in Ireland, Malta, and Gibraltar, where he was pointed Adjutant. He finally was posted to South Africa, in 1875.

In February of the following year, he married and by the time of the Zulu War was father to two sons. He had given up the chance to attend the Staff College to serve with his regiment throughout the Ninth Cape Frontier War. He was widely regarded as a highly competent Officer and was serving as Adutant of the 1/24<sup>th</sup> at the beginning of the Anglo Zulu War.

# Isandhlwana

By Michael Denigan



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In January of 1879, Nevill Coghill was a twenty-seven year old Officer who had spent the previous eight years on active duty following a two year stint in the militia. A native of Dublin, Ireland, he had graduated Sandhurst and received his commission in the 24<sup>th</sup> Regiment, joining his regiment at Gibraltar before deploying to South Africa. He had proved adept at staff work, and had quickly been appointed as Aide-de-Camp to General Sir Arthur Cunynghame, a roll he held all throughout the Ninth Cape Frontier War in which his regiment so well distinguished itself.

He had returned to England with General Cunynghame after his replacement by the-then General Frederick Thesiger, later to become Lord Chelmsford, only to hurry back to the Cape upon receiving word of the impending invasion of Zululand. His new posting was to Pietermaritzburg as Aide-de-Camp to Sir Bartle Frere but he quickly obtained a leave of absence to join his regiment in preparation for the invasion, taking up yet another staff position as Orderly Officer to Colonel Glyn.

It is far beyond the scope of this article to give an outline of the complexities of the Anglo Zulu War. For such, I would recommend readers to any of the excellent works by Ian James Knight, particularly Zulu Rising. Suffice to say, the British Government in Natal, South Africa, under Sir Bartle Frere, pushed a war of highly questionable justification against King Cetshwayo and the Zulu Empire. The Zulus were perhaps the most militant of all the warrior tribes in South Africa. They fought in highly disciplined formations with cowhide shields and small, short stabbing spears known as iklwas. They also had an abundance of older firearms.



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Despite their military prowess, they had never shown any inclination of hostility to the British government.

Nonetheless, early 1879 saw a major invasion force of some 16,500 men under Lord Frederick Thesiger Chelmsford poised to cross the Buffalo River which divided Natal from the land controlled by the Zulus. On January 11<sup>th</sup>, the central column of this invasion force – including the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion 24<sup>th</sup> Regiment – crossed without opposition. The central column, accompanied by Lord Chelmsford, advanced into the heart of Zululand, pitching camp near a strangely shaped mountain known as iSandlwana on the 20<sup>th</sup>. The 24<sup>th</sup> Regiment wore a distinctive brass Sphinx device on their collars. Many of the Officers and men remarked upon how similar iSandlwana mountain appeared to this device.

After establishing the camp at iSandlwana, Lord Chelmsford deployed two battalions of the Natal Native Contingent (locally raised African auxiliaries) under Major Dartnell to scout ahead on the 21<sup>st</sup>. While thus deployed, they encountered a large number of Zulu warriors who did not attack. Major Dartnell sent back to iSandlwana camp for assistance.

Lord Chelmsford was awakened in the middle of the night but reacted immediately. So far, he had been entirely unable to locate or draw the main Zulu armies in battle. Here was the opportunity he had been looking for. He hastily assembled a column to reinforce Major Dartnell. This included the bulk of his Royal Artillery and all of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion 24<sup>th</sup> Regiment, save for one company on guard duty. He left behind a defensive garrison at iSandlwana camp consisting of five companies of the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion 24<sup>th</sup> Regiment, one company of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion, two Royal Artillery guns, a small force of assorted mounted white Volunteers as well as African Infantry auxiliaries from the Natal Native Contingent. The camp was left in command of Lieut. Col. Henry Pulleine of the 1/24<sup>th</sup>.

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Pulleine was a career Army Officer who had spent the majority of his time in various staff positions. He had served with the 24<sup>th</sup> since 1858 where he had distinguished himself as a highly skilled and efficient administrator by raising two irregular corps during the Ninth Cape Frontier War; “Pulleine’s Rangers”, subsequently the Transkei Rifles, and the Frontier Light Horse.

Pulleine was supported by the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion Adjutant, Lieut. Melvill. Lieut. Coghill had recently injured his knee (chasing a chicken) and was also left behind in camp. After Lord Chelmsford’s departure, the morning routine at iSandlwana continued as normal. Reveille was sounded at 4 am and the night picquets from the 24<sup>th</sup> were relieved.

Lieut. Coghill was all but incapacitated due to his knee injury and found himself working in the Column Office throughout the morning of the 22<sup>nd</sup>. As such, he would not play much of a role in the coming battle. As an Aide-de-Camp he was detached from his Regiment and held no command, fulfilling the duties of a Staff Officer. This morning he found himself engaged in organizing rations to resupply Major Dartnell’s force as well as the Natal Native Contingent Companies still left in camp. Through the concerted efforts of Lieut. Coghill and Quartermaster Bloomfield of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion 24<sup>th</sup>, this was handled in a timely manner and the wagon departed in the wake of Lord Chelmsford’s column.

The mundane duties of the morning were interrupted at approximately 8 am as reports of Zulus appearing on the iNyoni heights just to the north of the camp trickled in. A mounted orderly rode into camp and reported to Lieut. Coghill who, in turn, made his report to Colonel Pulleine. The alarm was sounded and the men of the 24<sup>th</sup> stood to. However, the masses of Zulus seen on the skyline didn’t move to immediately threaten the camp but after some time fell back out of sight.



# Isandhlwana

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# iSandhlwana

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Prior to his departure, Lord Chelmsford had ordered Lieut. Col. Anthony Durnford and his column of Natal Native Horse, Natal Native Contingent and a Rocket Battery to move up to iSandlwana camp. Durnford was a larger than life character, a Royal Engineer who had spent most of his career in overseas assignments but had yet to command in a major engagement. Durnford arrived somewhere between 10-10:30 a.m.

Durnford reacted quickly to the reports of Zulus being sighted to the north. The warriors had retired from sight and he feared they would threaten the rear of Lord Chelmsford's force. Durnford intended to ride out of camp to pursue the retiring warriors and requested Infantry support from Pulleine. Pulleine, who had clear orders to defend the camp, was reluctant. Lieut. Melvill, the experienced Adjutant, stepped in and told Durnford "Colonel, I really do not think Colonel Pulleine would be doing right to send any men out of Camp when his orders are to "defend the Camp."

Durnford backed down but requested Pulleine support him if he were to run into difficulty. It speaks volumes for Melvill's experience and credibility that he was able to politely but firmly speak to a senior Officer in such a manner.

At around 11.30 a.m. Durnford's troops moved out in two separate patrols. The first, under Capt. Barton, was sent over the iNyoni to the north to scour the plain beyond. The second, Durnford in command, proceeded east to intercept the warriors he feared were threatening the rear of Lord Chelmsford's column.

A short time after Durnford rode off, the sound of gunfire came echoing over the distant hills to the north. Several moments later, two riders came into view galloping towards Column Headquarters. Capt. George Shepstone, Durnford's Political Officer, breathlessly asked for the Officer in command, saying 'I'm not an alarmist, sir, but the Zulus are in such black masses over there, such long black lines that you have to give us all the assistance you can. They are now fast driving our men this way.'

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A Staff Officer – Coghill, perhaps, scoffed at this. But as he spoke, the Natal Native Horse crested the iNyoni, firing back in the direction of the advancing Zulus. The report had not been exaggerated in the slightest.

Some four or five miles from camp, Capt. Barton's patrol had stumbled upon the entire Zulu Impi, some 20,000 strong, and in the process had inadvertently triggered the Battle of iSandlwana. The two-seven pounder guns of N Battery, 5<sup>th</sup> Brigade Royal Artillery, were deployed to a knoll several hundred yards from camp. The five companies of the 1-24<sup>th</sup> and the company of the 2-24<sup>th</sup> in camp were deployed to the left and right of the guns, oriented north. The infantry line extended almost a mile, taking advantage of the terrain to control the dead ground. As hundreds of Zulu warriors loomed into view, the Royal Artillery opened fire.

Some four or five miles from the camp, Capt. Barton's patrol had stumbled upon the entire Zulu Impi, some 20,000 strong, and in the process had inadvertently triggered the Battle of iSandlwana.

The Zulus traditionally fought in a formation known as the 'Horns of the Buffalo'. The 'chest' or main body engaged and fixed the enemy while the 'left horn' and 'right horn' encircled to strike from behind. The 'loins' consisted of a robust reserve. Few in camp realized this at the time, but the 'right horn' intended to circle behind iSandlwana to strike the camp from behind.

Lieut. Melvill was next ordered to ride up to the Tahelane Spur, an extension of the iNyoni Ridge, to recall two advanced companies of the 1-24<sup>th</sup> Regiment deployed in a forward position to command the high ground. Pulleine feared they would be cut off by the rapid Zulu advance. These companies withdrew in some semblance of good order and fell into place into the defensive line below the heights.



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Meanwhile, Durnford had proceeded east only to withdraw before heavy opposition. His Rocket Battery was swept away. The Natal Native Horse performed well, showing great courage and discipline. However, the left horn was in close pursuit and continued advancing south across the plain spanning the eastern face of iSandlwana camp, entirely outflanking Pulleine's line. Orders were given to withdraw the companies on the right flank, reorienting their positions to face east to deal with the oncoming threat. The entire defensive line began curving down to the south. From this point on, the remainder of the battle became a desperate attempt to shore up the rapidly collapsing right flank against the outflanking left horn. The far right (southern) flank of the British line was shored up by Durnford and his mounted men who took up position along the banks of the dried watercourse known as the Nyogane Donga. Here they were joined by a force of mounted Volunteers. On the left flank, the advance of the warriors caused the companies to the left of the guns to slowly retire in the direction of iSandlwana. On the extreme left, Capt. Younghusband's C Company began to retire onto the slopes of the mountain itself.

The developing crisis reached a peak as Durnford's force began to run short on ammunition. Unable to locate their ammunition wagons or obtain resupply from the 24<sup>th</sup> Regimental stores, Durnford knew he could not hold his position any longer. He gave the order to abandon the donga and fall back on the camp. As necessary as the order was, the withdrawal of the mounted men left Pulleine's right flank entirely open. The warriors of the left horn ferociously exploited this gap, following close in on Durnford's heels. Pulleine was left with little choice but to attempt to withdraw his infantry back towards the camp. Perhaps his intent was to form square around the ammunition wagons and used massed firepower to hold back the attack. It was clear the camp and its precious stores were lost.

# Isandhlwana

By Michael Denigan

Bugle calls sounded up and down the British firing line and the warriors of the Zulu chest and left horn saw the Infantry companies begin to contract together. Simultaneously, the inDuna of the uKhandempemvu regiment, uMkosana, attempted to rally his warriors as they sheltered from the devastating British firepower. He ran out in front of his men, “calling out that they would get the whole impi beaten and must come on.” His ferocity inspired his warriors to reignite their attack and they surged forward with a renewed vengeance. At this pivotal moment, uMkosana was shot down, but he had succeeded in rallying a failing attack.

‘At the sound of a bugle,’ recalled the uKhandempemvu warrior Umhoti, ‘the firing ceased at a breath, and the whole British force rose from the ground and retired on the tents. Like a flame the whole Zulu force sprang to its feet and darted upon them.’

Meanwhile, Colonel Durnford and his mounted men had reached the camp itself. Durnford rode off in search of Pulleine while the Volunteers attempted to briefly to form a perimeter in front of the 1/24th Camp. The Natal Native Contingent and Natal Native Horse had fought bravely thus far. But now, seeing the 24th Regiment driven in with the Zulus in close pursuit, they realized the battle was lost and they began fleeing en masse in the direction of the road to Rorke’s Drift along with most of the civilians and unattached men in camp.

At this critical moment, the right horn completed their encircling movement. They had descended into the Manzimnyama River Valley to appear in the rear of the British camp, charging home to cut off any attempt of escape. Their appearance marked the end of any hope of avoiding utter annihilation.



# Isandhlwana

By Michael Denigan

Some stayed and fought to hold back the right horn as it materialized from the Manzimnyama River Valley. Captain Shepstone rallied a mixed group of Natal Native Contingent and Natal Native Horse personnel under the south-western face of iSandhlwana where they sold their lives dearly.

For most though, the battle was clearly lost and to remain behind would only ensure certain death. As the right horn emerged and began to enter the camp from the rear, the trickle of fugitives along the western slopes became a flood. The earliest of these men made their way out along the road to Rorke's Drift but the right horn swept Shepstone's men aside and pushed across, forcing the bulk of the fugitives to cut across country to the southwest along a route known today as Fugitives' Trail. To be without a horse on this trail was all but certain death. The guns of the Royal Artillery, attempting to make their escape, were brought to bay along this blood-soaked trail.

As the right and left horns met, they effectively sealed off the camp and the groups of men still left alive fighting within. This late stage of the battle is shrouded in mystery to this day but from the groups of bodies found afterwards and from Zulu accounts at least some of the final moments can be discerned.

On foot, the infantrymen of the 24th were unable to flee. Their only hope was to fight back-to-back with the bayonet, using what ammunition they had left to buy a few more seconds of precious time.

Even at the end, their discipline and courage served them well. As the line was driven in, groups of Infantry rallied to their Officers and NCOs and fought with a savage and desperate ferocity. A significant number of the Natal Carbineers and the Natal Mounted Police rallied to Colonel Durnford next to the road and the 1/24th camp. Today, Zulu praise singers tell of the courage of the 'Zebras' – called so due to their black uniforms with white trim.

# Isandhlwana

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Numerous Zulu sources describe a significant stand forming on the saddle itself. A significant number of the 24<sup>th</sup> Regiment possessed enough ammunition to fight their way onto the saddle and through the wagon park amidst the broken ground just above the wagon track. They put up a ferocious last stand, fighting back to back with their bayonets until they were at last overrun. Capt. Reginald Younghusband and C Company had withdrawn onto the slope of iSandlwana itself. They took up a position on the shelf just below the southeastern face of the mountain and held out until their ammunition was expended. They then charged down the slope to their deaths with fixed bayonets.

The shattered remnants of the 24<sup>th</sup> were driven up and over the saddle and into the Manzimnyama River Valley. A series of running fights along the western slopes marked the true last stand of the 24<sup>th</sup>. The survivors made their way down the western slopes along Fugitives' Trail towards the Manzimnyama stream, in the direction of the dubious safety of Rorke's Drift. Exhausted, traumatized, wounded, and likely not a cartridge between them, a group of some forty men were finally brought to bay on the banks of the Manzimnyama. Very possibly among their number was Lieut. Edgar Oliphant Anstey, Capt. Mostyn's subaltern. Here was the true last stand of the 24<sup>th</sup> – hardly the glorious last stand on the Colours so beloved by the Victorians.

Durnford and Pulleine were dead along with approximately 850 European combatants and at least 470 African soldiers of the Natal Native Contingent and the Natal Native Horse. To this date, only 250 British survivors of iSandlwana have been identified, including 92 Europeans.

The Zulu losses were at least 1,000 warriors dead, with perhaps a further 1,500 wounded in the fighting. It is said that part of old Africa died on the field of iSandlwana that day.



# Isandhlwana

By Michael Denigan

But what of Melvill and Coghill?

At some point in the battle, possibly when the severity of the situation became clear, Lieut. Coghill managed to mount his horse. As the firing line began to collapse, he came across Col. Glyn's groom, Private John Williams, and ordered him to pack up his master's tent into a nearby wagon. This done, he ordered Williams and the other grooms to take their horses to the rear of the camp. A rather strange order to give under the circumstances; it is entirely possible Coghill was simply not aware of the grim reality of the situation.

The role that Melvill played for most of the battle is not recorded. However, he presumably spent the battle by Pulleine's side, continuing his duties as Adjutant. In the moments after Durnford withdrew, leaving the right flank of the British entirely open, the situation quickly became critical. Things quickly fell apart, and defending the camp was no longer possible. Pulleine's only remaining option was to rally as many men as he could for a stand.

The 1st Battalion had left their Regimental colour at Helpmekaar, but they had brought their Queen's Colour with them as they moved forward to Isandhlwana. This, together with the 2nd Battalion's Colours, were located behind the camp in their guard of their respective battalion. As the British line retracted, Lieutenant Melvill, as adjutant, either took the initiative or was ordered to retrieve the 1st Battalion Queen's colour from the guard tent.

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The theory that Melvill took the colour for the purpose of a rally is not only possible, but quite probable when the account of Private Williams is considered. Col. Glyn's tent would have been pitched in roughly the same area as Lord Chelmsford's tent and Column Headquarters. Williams had kept a spare mount tied to the wagon in which Col. Glyn's tenting was loaded and from here, in his own words, he 'then saw Lieutenant Melvill leaving Camp with the Queen's Colour.' Coghill was close behind.

The evidence of Private Williams is critical in tracing Melvill's purpose for initially seizing the Colour. For Williams to have seen Melvill ride past towards the saddle, the Adjutant must have first retrieved the cased Queen's Colour from the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion Guard Tent and ridden back north towards the frontline before turning about and departing the camp. Therefore, Melvill's initial intent must have been to bring the Queen's Colour towards the front as a rallying point as opposed to immediately trying to carry it to safety.

With no credible surviving witnesses, it is a matter of conjecture as to whether or not he was ordered to cut his way out with the Colour or took the initiative, as Adjutant, to save the Colour when all was clearly lost.

It is occasionally claimed that Melvill took the colour as a pretext to save his own life but this allegation has little basis in reality; the colour is extremely cumbersome and bulky, even cased, and only a truly superb horseman could hope to navigate the broken terrain along the Fugitives' Trail with it balanced across his saddlebow. One Corporal of the 1/24th, James Waddington, attested with pride of Lieutenants Melvill and Coghill that 'They were two of the finest Lieutenants we had.'



# Isandhlwana

By Michael Denigan

Coghill did not leave the camp with Melvill, but rather several moments behind. As the Zulu right horn had already closed the road to Rorke's Drift, first Melvill and then Coghill joined the stream of men and animals making their way along the broken ground of Fugitives' Trail.

The interpreter James Brickhill provides a riveting description of their flight along Fugitives' Trail.

“Our flight I never shall forget; no path, no track, boulders everywhere. On we were borne, now into some dry torrent bed, now wending our way amongst trees of stunted growth, so that, unless you make the best use of your eyes, you were in constant danger of colliding against some tree or finding yourself unhorsed at the bottom of a ravine. Our way was strewn with shields, assegais, blankets, hats, clothing of all descriptions, guns, ammunition belts and saddles, which horses had managed to kick off, revolvers and belts and I don't know not what else. Our stampede was composed of mules, with and without pack saddles, oxen and horses in all stages of equipment, and flying men all strangely intermingled, man and beast, apparently all impressed with the danger which surrounded us...

...A little further I found Mr Melvill carrying the Colours was just in front of me. We pursued our course for some distance when Melvill, in turning to me said ‘Mr. Brickhill, have you seen anything of my sword back there’. After glancing back on our path for his satisfaction I explained that I had not. He must have lost it before he got onto our track...

Reaching the Buffalo River, the harried survivors were faced with an even worse obstacle. The river was in full flood, the rapids cascading violently. But with the Zulus in close pursuit, hesitation meant certain death. Brickhill continued...

# Isandhlwana

By Michael Denigan

“Reaching the Buffalo, we found it rolling high. No time for choosing the best crossing place then. There were the Zulus in running lines, making for the stiller water higher up. My horse plunged in, swimming at once, but had scarcely gone six yards before he stumbled over something large and nearly fell into the rushing stream beyond. I clutched his mane and guided the rein with great care; yet four times I thought that all was lost. Not ten yards below was a waterfall, in the pool of which three riderless horses were swirling round and round.”

Lieut. Higginson had managed to navigate the gauntlet along Fugitives’ Trail and he met Lieuts. Melvill and Coghill near the river. He recorded “As we got to the river I met Lieutenants Melville and Coghill, the former officer carrying the Queen’s Colour in a case. As I overtook them they were agreeing to stand by each other if either were hurt. We got down to the bank at last, and a frightful scene it was—men and horses all struggling together in the river.”

There was nothing left for Melvill and Coghill but to spur their horses on into the raging river. Lieut. Higginson also made it to the water’s edge here in safety. Higginson spurred his horse into the torrent just behind the mount of Lieut. Cochrane, Durnford’s Regular Army Staff Officer. Higginson was thrown from his horse after it struck a large stone in the middle of the river. He was dragged down by his rifle and ammunition but discarded them at once. He was carried a good distance downriver by the rapids but he was able to seize ahold of a large rock. He wiped the water from his eyes to see his horse being stolen on the far bank.

# Isandhlwana

By Michael Denigan

Higginson also caught side of Lieut. Melvill being swept downstream towards him, as he had also been thrown from his horse. Melvill still clutched the Queen's Colour in a death grip and called to Higginson to grab onto it. Higginson tried to seize the cased Colour but the force pulled him off the rock and into a comparatively calm but deep patch of water. Here, desperately treading for water, they were forced to let go of the waterlogged Colour lest they lose their own lives. At least it would not fall into enemy hands.

Lieut. Coghill had been more fortunate. He had reached the far bank of the river in safety. However, looking back, he saw the plight of his brother Officer. Without the slightest concern for his injured knee, he turned his horse about and rode after Melvill, spurring back down into the waters of the Buffalo. A number of Zulus on the far side of the river opened fire and one of their shots killed Coghill's horse.

The three struggling men somehow managed to claw their way onto the Natal side of the Buffalo river in safety. They were exhausted and half-drowned but there wasn't a moment to rest. The Officers began making their way up the steep slope leading up from the water's edge when, to their horror, they saw a number of Zulus in close pursuit.

Coghill could scarcely walk given his injured knee and it speaks volumes to Melvill's courage that he refused to leave his injured brother Officer.

Coghill called out "Here they come!" Higginson turned to see two warriors closing in. He turned to Melvill and said, "For God's sake fire; you both have revolvers!"

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By Michael Denigan

The two 24th Officers fired and dropped their men at 30 paces but they had reached their physical limit. Melvill said, “I am done up, I can go no further.” Higginson took leave of his comrades and scrambled up the slope until he found a group of survivors from the Natal Native Horse who had managed to cross the river in some semblance of order and actually provide some measure of covering fire until they ran short of ammunition. With no ammunition, physically and mentally exhausted, there was little Higginson or any other man could do. Higginson seized the tail of a horse and ran on, leaving Melvill and Coghill to their fate.

It is usually assumed that Melvill and Coghill died alone, their backs against the rocks by which they were found. Their killers are thought to be Zulus who pursued the men across the river, or perhaps Natal natives threatened into finishing off any white stragglers.

They may not have been alone when they fell, however. Lieut. Hillier of the Native Contingent wrote Melvill and Coghill were found lying “behind the bodies of two soldiers, where they had made a stand.”

Possibly these were men of the Mounted Infantry or Artillery. William Marshall, an N Battery gunner, was found lying around 150 yards away, by the bank of the Buffalo, identified by a childhood friend in the 17th Lancers, by his curly dark hair. Another Royal Artilleryman, Gunner William Roscoe, was tentatively identified by Henry Fynn among a group of five Europeans on the bank. Fynn also believed several African wagon drivers were killed near the two Lieutenants. The final moments of these Officers will forever be lost to history, but it's clear that a number of exhausted fugitives were finished off on the Natal side of the river after the main body of fugitives crossed.



# Isandhlwana

By Michael Denigan

Two weeks after the battle the bodies of both Lieutenants were found and buried. The Colour was subsequently found and recovered from the river. It was returned with great honours to the remainder of the 24th Regiment of Foot. Today, it hangs in the Cathedral at Brecon, a reminder of the valour of all those killed in action on 22 January 1879.

In 1907, Lieuts. Melvill and Coghill would be among the first to receive the Victoria Cross posthumously. The story of how they would come to receive their awards is a story as rich and as fascinating as the story of their heroism at iSandlwana. It is a story that will be told in full, for the first time, in the upcoming book I have had the pleasure of assisting Neil Thornton in researching and writing. I hope it will shed some light on the story of these two brave Officers and their ultimate sacrifice – for Queen, for Country and for each other.

I am indebted to Michael Denigan for taking the time to write this fabulous article to accompany the impending publication of his book in collaboration with Neil Thornton on Melvill and Coghill.

Please click on the following link if you wish to pre-order a copy of the book

<https://www.barnthornpublishing.co.uk/product-page/the-victoria-crosses-of-melvill-coghill-by-n-thornton-and-m-denigan>

It will also be available shortly via Amazon.

# Royal Marines VCs

## 4. Lewis Halliday VC



Sir Lewis Stratford Tollemache Halliday (1870-1966) was born on the 14th May 1870 in Medstead, Hampshire, the eldest son of Lieutenant-Colonel Stratford C. Halliday, Royal Artillery. He was educated at Elizabeth College, Guernsey, and entered the Royal Marine Light Infantry on 1st September 1889. In 1898, he received a promotion to Captain.

On the 29th May 1900, he landed at Taku, China from the HMS Orlando, in command of 50 men of the Royal Marine Light Infantry, and proceeded to Peking as Legation Guard. In the resulting defence of Peking, Halliday would be awarded the Victoria Cross (London Gazette, 1st January 1901) for the following action.

On 24th June 1900 at Peking, China, an attack was made on the British Legation by the Boxers who set fire to the stables and occupied some of the other buildings. It being imperative to drive the enemy out, a hole was knocked in the Legation wall and 20 men of the RMLI went in. Captain Halliday, leading a party of six men, was involved in desperate fighting and was severely wounded but despite his injuries, he killed four of the enemy. Finally, unable to carry on any further, he ordered his men to go on without him, after which he returned to the legation alone, telling his men 'carry on and not mind him', so as not to diminish the number of men engaged in the sortie. He walked 3 miles unaided to the hospital although his shoulder was half blown out and his left lung punctured.

# Royal Marines VCs

## 4. Lewis Halliday VC

He would receive his medal from King Edward VII at St James Palace, London on 25th July 1901, and would also receive the China Medal with clasp and received the Brevet of Major for his distinguished service in the field. In 1904, he was given command of a unit of his corps on board the "Empress of India". In 1908, he married Florence Clara, the eldest daughter of Brigadier-General William Budgen, DSO, and they went on to have a son. Sadly, Florence died shortly afterwards. From 1908 to 1911, he was Commander of a Company of Gentleman Cadets at the Royal Military College, Sandhurst, and GSO, 2nd Grade.

In 1912, he was appointed to serve on the Staff of the Royal Naval War College, and also on the Royal Naval War Staff, and in 1914, he was created a Companion of Bath. Halliday remarried in 1916 to Violet, daughter of Major Victor Blake, who hailed from Hayling Island, Hampshire. Halliday was later knighted, and until very recently held the distinction of being the oldest living Victoria Cross recipient. Halliday died on 9th March 1966 in Dorking Hospital, Surrey, aged 95. Following a cremation at Randalls Park Crematorium in Leatherhead, his ashes were interred in Medstead Cemetery, Hampshire. His medals are held and displayed by the Royal Marines Museum, Southsea.

**Captain (now Brevet Major)  
Lewis Stratford Tollenmache  
Halliday, Royal Marine  
Light Infantry**

On the 24th June, 1900, the enemy, consisting of Boxers and Imperial troops, made a fierce attack on the west wall of the British Legation, setting fire to the West Gate of the south stable quarters, and taking cover in the buildings which adjoined the wall.

The fire, which spread to part of the stables, and through which and the smoke a galling fire was kept up by the Imperial troops, was with difficulty extinguished, and as the presence of the enemy in the adjoining buildings was a grave danger to the Legation, a sortie was organized to drive them out. A hole was made in the Legation Wall, and Captain Halliday, in command of twenty Marines, led the way into the buildings and almost immediately engaged a party of the enemy.

Before he could use his revolver, however, he was shot through the left shoulder, at point blank range, the bullet fracturing the shoulder and carrying away part of the lung. Notwithstanding the extremely severe nature of his wound, Captain Halliday killed three of his assailants, and telling his men to "carry on and not mind him," walked back unaided to the hospital, refusing escort and aid so as not to diminish the number of men engaged in the sortie.

# Royal Marines VCs

## 4. Lewis Halliday VC





# Royal Marines VCs

## 4. VC



Grave Photo courtesy of Kevin Brazier.

General Sir L. S. T. Hailley VC KC8, Royal Marines  
 Victoria Cross (Copy), The Most Honourable Order Of The Bath (Knight Commander's Neck Badge and Breast Star), China War Medal 1900 with clasp 'Defense of Legations, 1914-15 Star, British War Medal 1914-20, Victory Medal, Jubilee Medal 1935, Coronation Medal 1937, Coronation Medal 1953

Medal Group Image courtesy of Thomas Stewart

# Royal Marines VCs

## 5. Walter Parker VC



Walter Richard Parker (1881-1936) was born on 20th September 1881, at 5 Agnes Street, Grantham, Lincolnshire, the eldest of eight children to Richard and Kate Parker. Educated at Grantham elementary school, he was later employed as a coremaker at Stanton Ironworks Foundry. In 1902 he married Olive (nee Orchard), the daughter of Stapleford's station master. They went on to have six children, three sons and three daughters. Tragically, all three of his sons died young.

Parker enlisted in the Royal Marines and rose to the rank of lance corporal prior to the outbreak of World War One. On the outbreak of the war, Parker was part of the Royal Marine Light Infantry which formed part of the Royal Naval Division which was posted to the Dardanelles.

On the night of 30th April/1st May 1915 at Gaba Tepe, Gallipoli, Turkey, Lance-Corporal Parker, a volunteer stretcher-bearer, went out with a party of NCOs and men to take ammunition, water and medical stores to an isolated trench containing about 40 men and several wounded. There were no communication trenches leading to the trench, and several men had already been killed in an attempt to reach it.



# Royal Marines VCs

## 5. Walter Parker VC

After crossing an area of about 400 yards swept by machine-gun and rifle fire, Lance-Corporal Parker was alone, the rest of the party having been killed or wounded. On his arrival he gave assistance to the wounded and when the trench was finally evacuated early the next morning, he helped to remove and attend the casualties, although he himself was seriously wounded.

By the time of his gazetting for the Victoria Cross in the London Gazette on 22nd June 1917, Walter had been invalided out of the Army due to the severity of his wounds. He was presented with VC by King George V at Buckingham Palace on 21st July 1917.

After the war, Parker struggled bravely to overcome his injuries. He was elected to the local pensions tribunal and became president of the Stapleford branch of the Royal British Legion. His later years, however, were characterised by his declining health. His daughter, Vera Constance (christened in honour of his VC), born in 1919 described her father as "a very sick man for a lot of years...when he knew he was dying, he set out to try and get my mother a pension. But the authorities said he had survived too long for his death to have been caused by his war wounds. When his doctor heard, he hit the roof. He said that he had treated him and that he was a complete wreck. He said it was a miracle that he had lived so long."

Walter Parker passed away at his home in Derby Street, Stapleford, on 28th November 1936, aged 55. His coffin, draped with a Union Jack, was carried to Stapleford Cemetery by eight Royal Marine NCOs from Eastney Barracks, Portsmouth. His medals were presented by his family to the Royal Marines Museum. The Museum will be moved to the Portsmouth Dockyard from Southsea in the next few years.



# Royal Marines VCs

## 5. Walter Parker VC



# Royal Marines VCs

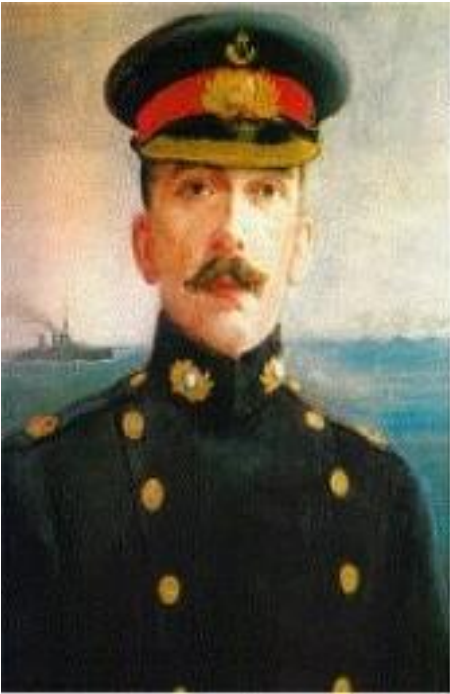
## 5. Walter Parker VC



Medal Group Image courtesy of Thomas Stewart

# Royal Marines VCs

## 6. Francis Harvey VC



Francis John William Harvey (1873-1916), the only Royal Marine to earn the VC during a “big ship” action, was born on 29th April 1873 at Kirkdale Villa, Upper Sydenham, Kent, the son of Commander John William Francis Harvey RN and Elizabeth Edwards Lavington nee Penny. At the age of 11, his family moved to Courtney Lodge, Southsea, he entered Portsmouth Grammar School, following in his father’s footsteps. Francis was a talented linguist. He passed out 33rd out of 693 candidates for Sandhurst and 2nd out of 12 accepted for officer training in the Royal Marine Light Infantry.

He chose the Marines, keeping up the family traditions. He was appointed 2nd Lieutenant in the Portsmouth Division RMLI on 1st September 1892, and attended the Royal Naval College and, on his return, in the following July, was promoted Lieutenant. Before taking his first sea-going appointment aboard HMS Wildfire in October 1894, he found time to gain a qualification in military law. He also studied naval gunnery and became an expert. Following courses on HMS Excellent, he passed as an instructor in January 1896 and, after nearly two years aboard HMS Phaeton, he was appointed Assistant Instructor of Gunnery at Plymouth Division.

A brief spell on HMS Edgar was followed by an appointment to HMS Diadem of the Channel Fleet, during which he was promoted to Captain. After a gunnery refresher course, he joined HMS Royal Sovereign, the first of several big ship appointments between 1903 and 1909, including the Duke of Edinburgh, St George and Inflexible. In 1910, he became Instructor of Gunnery at Chatham, being promoted Major the following year.



# Royal Marines VCs

## 6. Francis Harvey VC

Glowing reports of his abilities saw him get the plum job in the new battlecruiser HMS Lion, which he joined as senior marine officer on 12th February 1913, two weeks before Admiral Beatty hoisted his flag. It was to be his final appointment.

After 22 years of peace time service, he finally went to war in August 1914. By the end of the month, he had received his baptism of fire at the Battle of Heligoland Bight when Lion's guns accounted for the cruisers Koln and Ariadne. In January the following year, he was in action in the Battle of the Dogger Bank, where the Lion destroyed the battlecruiser Blucher.

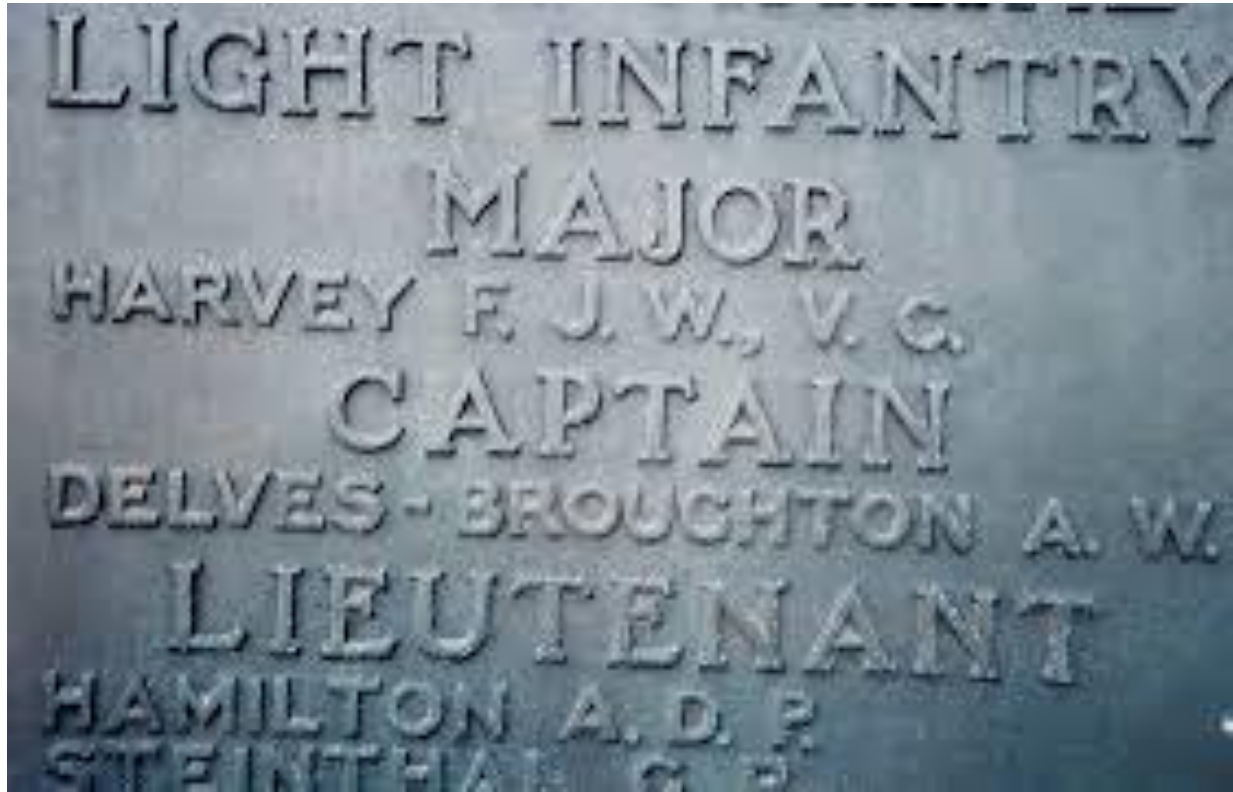
On 31st May 1916, during the Battle of Jutland, Harvey, although mortally wounded by German shellfire, ordered the magazine of Q turret on the battlecruiser Lion to be flooded. This action prevented the tons of cordite stored there from catastrophically detonating in an explosion that would have destroyed the vessel and all aboard her. Although he succumbed to his injuries seconds later, his dying act may have saved over a thousand lives and prompted Winston Churchill to later comment: "In the long, rough, glorious history of the Royal Marines there is no name and no deed which in its character and consequences ranks above this".

Harvey was buried at sea from the quarterdeck of HMS Lion on 1st June 1916, along with 98 other men. Harvey, who was married with a son, was posthumously mentioned in Admiral Jellicoe's Jutland despatch. His VC, gazetted on 15th September 1916, was presented to his widow, Ethel nee Edye, at Buckingham Palace on 29th November 1916. In time, his medal, together with his 1914-15 Star, British War Medal 1914-20, and Victory Medal 1914-19, passed to his son, Lieutenant-Colonel John Malcolm Harvey, the King's Regiment. Six years before his death in 1979, he presented them to the Royal Marines Museum, Southsea, Hampshire.



# Royal Marines VCs

## 6. Francis Harvey VC



# Royal Marines VCs

## 6. Francis Harvey VC



Medal Group Image courtesy of Thomas Stewart



# Pontefract Blue Plaques

Beginning on Wednesday 12<sup>th</sup> February, the town of Pontefract in West Yorkshire is starting a series of unveilings of blue plaques to honour the history of the town. The plan includes the nine recipients of the Victoria Cross who all served in the Kings Own Yorkshire Light Infantry Regiment.

The work is the culmination of eight months work by the Pontefract Civic Society who were awarded a government grant of £5,000. The project has further been supported by the Mayor of West Yorkshire, Tracey Brabin, and Wakefield Council.

The plaques will all be unveiled on appropriate buildings with connections to the subjects of the plaques.



# Cowley VC Auction

On 11<sup>th</sup> March 2025, the Victoria Cross awarded to Charles Cowley will be auctioned at Noonans in Mayfair, London with an estimate of £180,000 - £220,000. It is understood that the next of kin were never issued with Cowley's First World War trio of campaign medals.

On the night of 24th April/25th April 1916 in Mesopotamia, an attempt was made to reprovision the force besieged at Kut-el-Amara. Lieutenant-Commander Cowley, with a lieutenant (Humphrey Osbaldston Brooke Firman VC) (commanding SS Julnar), a sub-lieutenant and 12 ratings, started off with 210 tons of stores up the River Tigris. Unfortunately Julnar was attacked almost at once by Turkish machine-guns and artillery. At Magasis, steel hawsers stretched across the river halted the expedition, the enemy opened fire at point-blank range and Julnar's bridge was smashed. Julnar's commander Firman VC was killed, also several of his crew; Lieutenant-Commander Cowley was taken prisoner with the other survivors and almost certainly executed by the Turks.

Cowley's body was said to have been buried at Fallahiya near the scene of his murder, although no grave was ever found. His VC was presented to his mother by Rear Admiral Drury Wake, Senior Naval Officer, Persian Gulf, in Basra, on 25th August 1917, by which time she was well aware of the rumours surrounding her son's death. Investigations continued until 1920, when it was wound up. No one was ever prosecuted for the murder of the "Pirate of Basra". He is commemorated on the Basra Memorial.





# Cowley VC Auction



Images of the Cowley VC courtesy of Noonans