



Victoria Crosses Awarded for Valour in Japan: Duncan Boyes, Thomas Pride, William Seeley and Robert Gray

著者	Ruxton Ian
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IAN RUXTON

INTRODUCTION

THE VICTORIA CROSS (V.C.) is Britain's highest military decoration, awarded for valour 'in the face of the enemy'. It may be awarded to a person of any military rank, and to civilians under military command. It is first in the order of wear of decorations. There have been four V.C.s awarded for action in Japan, though only two have been awarded to Britons: Duncan Boyes and Thomas Pride.¹ The other two were awarded to an American (William Seeley)² and a Canadian (Robert Gray),³ and as such they could not be subjects for portraits within the criteria for the *Britain & Japan: Biographical Portraits* series.

This essay focuses on Duncan Boyes V.C., being the best known – and arguably most tragic – of the quartet. It will not go into the reasons for the naval bombardment of Kagoshima (1863) and the naval and military action at Shimonoseki (1864), which have been fully explained and discussed elsewhere.⁴

DUNCAN BOYES (1846–69)



Duncan Gordon Boyes in his midshipman's uniform

Duncan Gordon Boyes was born at 3 Paragon Buildings, Bath Road, Cheltenham, Gloucestershire, the son of John Boyes on 5 November 1846. His sister Louisa Mary was later to marry Thomas James Young, who won a V.C. at Lucknow during the Indian Mutiny on 16 November 1857. Duncan was educated at Cheltenham College (founded 1841), noted for its classical and military traditions.⁵ From there he joined the Royal Navy via North Grove House Academy. He was first assigned to HMS *Euryalus* on the East Indies station.

Duncan Boyes was a midshipman throughout his brief naval career. This rank has no equivalent in the other two services. It is an officer's rank, above naval cadet and below sub-lieutenant. In effect it is an 'officer-in-training', and Boyes would have expected promotion in due course, regardless of his glorious feat performed at the age of seventeen. Depending on the size of the unit to which a midshipman ('middy' in the jargon of the period) is attached, he may mess in the officer's wardroom in a small ship, or with the lower ranks in a larger ship such as the HMS *Euryalus*.

There have so far been six Royal Navy ships named *Euryalus* after one of Jason's Argonauts. The one on which Boyes served was the second of that name, weighed 2,371 tons, and was Admiral Sir Augustus Leopold Küper's⁶ flagship at the bombardment of Kagoshima on 16 August 1863, and at Shimonoseki on 5–6 September 1864.⁷ She was commanded by Captain Alexander and headed the nine-ship British squadron at Shimonoseki. (Küper was in overall command of the international squadron, comprising British, French, Dutch and American warships.) Built at Chatham in 1853, this *Euryalus* was a wooden screw frigate with thirty-five guns and a crew of 515, and had arrived at Yokohama on 14 September 1862, the day on which the Namamugi incident (Charles Richardson's murder on the

Tōkaidō highway) occurred. She was paid off at Portsmouth on 23 September 1865, the day after the award ceremony for Boyes, Pride and Seeley, and broken up in 1867.

MEDAL CITATION

The medal citation for Boyes was published, as is customary, in the *London Gazette* on 21 April 1865 and read as follows:

For the conspicuous gallantry, which, according to the testimony of Capt. Alexander C.B., at that time Flag Captain to Vice-Admiral Sir Augustus Küper K.C.B., Mr. Boyes displayed in the capture of the enemy's stockade. He carried a Colour [Union flag] with the leading company, kept it in advance of all, in the face of the thickest fire, his Colour-Sergeants having fallen, one mortally, the other dangerously wounded, and he was only detained from proceeding yet further by the orders of his superior officer. The Colour he carried was six times pierced by musket balls.⁸

The courage shown by Boyes met the basic criterion for the award of the Victoria Cross of valour 'in the face of the enemy'. He is also mentioned by name in Sir Ernest Satow's memoir *A Diplomat in Japan* (Chapter X, p. 112), since Satow was at Shimonoseki that day: 'Lieutenant Edwards and Crowdy of the Engineers were ahead with a middy named D.G. Boyes, who carried the colours most gallantly; he afterwards received the V.C. for conduct very plucky in one so young.'



The Naval Brigade and Marines storm the stockade at Shimonoseki, 6 September 1864. From a sketch by Charles Wirgman in the *Illustrated London News* of 10 December 1864. Boyes is probably the man holding the Union flag in the centre of the sketch.

INVESTITURE

Duncan Boyes was invested with his V.C. on 22 September 1865 by Admiral Sir Michael Seymour G.C.B. (Commander-in-Chief, Portsmouth) on the Common at Southsea, a seaside resort within Portsmouth, together with Thomas Pride and William Seeley, the other two winners of the medal at Shimonoseki. Thomas Pride (1835–93) was Captain of the After Guard and one of the two colour sergeants who accompanied Boyes in action, and kept the flag flying despite being severely wounded in the chest by a musket ball. William Henry Harrison Seeley (1840–1914) was an Ordinary Seaman of the *Euryalus* and the first American to receive the V.C., gained for a daring reconnaissance to ascertain the enemy's position, and for taking part in the final assault despite being wounded by grape shot in the right arm.⁹ (There is no mention of Boyes being wounded, and he appears not to have been.)

The ceremony was 'public and formal' by special command of Queen Victoria, and it was attended by huge numbers of people, including two veterans of the Crimean War (1854–6), Hugh Talbot Burgoyne V.C. and John Commerell V.C.¹⁰ (The medal had originally been founded by Royal Warrant of Queen Victoria issued on 29 January 1856 to honour acts of valour during the Crimean War.)

BOYES AFTER THE INVESTITURE



Boyes in civilian clothes

Duncan Boyes's short life took a turn for the worse after the high point of the investiture. On 9 February 1867 he and another midshipman serving in the *Cadmus* were court-martialed for disobedience of the Commander-in-Chief's Standing Order after they broke in to the naval yard at Bermuda after 11 p.m., presumably attempting

to return to their ship. The warder at the main gate had previously refused them admittance since they did not have a pass. Both men admitted their guilt and were sentenced to be dismissed from the Royal Navy.

While the disobedience was clear and a serious breach of regulations occurred, the punishment meted out was harsh (in keeping with naval discipline at the time) and there were apparently no second chances allowed, nor – curiously – was the fact that Boyes was a recipient of the Victoria Cross enough to save him. Was Boyes perhaps rather arrogant and unrepentant? John Winton commented: ‘It seems an astonishingly harsh punishment for what on paper was merely the aftermath of a midshipmen’s run ashore, but obviously there was more to the story than appears.’¹¹

Whatever the truth may be, the deep disgrace of dismissal (and presumably the loss of a career which meant so much to him) was too much to bear for Boyes. He began to suffer severe fits of depression and turned to alcohol for solace. For the sake of his health he went to New Zealand to work with his elder brothers on their sheep station at Kawarau Falls near Queenstown in Otago province, but the scandal followed him there. He suffered a complete nervous breakdown and took his own life on 28 January 1869 at Dunedin on the South Island of New Zealand, aged just twenty-two years and two months. On his death certificate the cause was listed as ‘delirium tremens’ (a psychotic condition common in alcoholics involving tremors, hallucinations, anxiety and disorientation).

Duncan Boyes was at first buried locally in the Southern cemetery ‘Viking style’ (i.e. with just a stone at his head and feet), but the grave fell into disrepair. On 4 May 1954 the Dunedin Returned Serviceman’s Association (R.S.A.) in recognition of his V.C. reinterred his remains in the servicemen’s section of the Anderson’s Bay cemetery, Tomahawk Road, Dunedin, where he rests to this day. The inscription on the grave reads simply: “MIDN. D.G. BOYES V.C. R.N. DIED 28–1–1869. AGED 22 YRS.”

THE MEDAL

Duncan Boyes’ medal was sold by order of Cheltenham College Council at Spink’s & Co., the London auctioneer, on 21 July 1998 for £51,000. The medal had lain in a bank vault for about twenty years prior to that, having been acquired by the public school for £2,000 in 1978.¹² The sale was reported in the *Times* and other local and national newspapers including the *Gloucestershire Echo* the following day. The buyer was anonymous, but was said to be a private collector of V.C.s.¹³

In April 2004, Framlingham College loaned their two Victoria Cross medals to the Imperial War Museum for permanent display. In the same year the BBC reported that a descendant of Duncan Boyes (his great great nephew Charles Bayfield) had organized the publication of posters depicting nine V.C. holders, including Boyes, on the London Underground to celebrate their valour.¹⁴

The private collector turned out to be Lord Ashcroft, who had begun his collection in 1986. He donated £5 million to the Imperial War Museum in London and his collection is on long-term loan there in the Lord Ashcroft Gallery, opened by H.R.H. the Princess Royal in November 2010. His collection includes more than 190 medals, estimated to be worth more than £30 million, and is the largest collection of V.C.s in the world. It is displayed alongside the forty-eight V.C.s and thirty-one G.C.s (George Crosses) already in the care of the museum.¹⁵

ENDNOTES

- ¹ 'Thomas Pride was a Dorset man, born at Oldbridge, near Wareham, Dorset, on 29 March 1835. He joined the Navy on 17 February 1854 and was one of the first young men to undergo a seaman's training in HMS *Illustrious* at Portsmouth, under Captain Robert Harris; *Illustrious* was the first proper boys' training ship in the Royal Navy. After his wound at Shimonoseki he was invalided to the hospital ship *Melville* in Hong Kong in January 1865 and subsequently discharged from the Navy in January 1866. He had married a Dorset girl, Mary Eliza Croombes, at St. Mary's, Wareham, in 1861 and when he left the Navy he went back to Dorset, becoming keeper of the Waterloo Tollgate at Longfleet, near Poole. He died at Parkstone, Dorset, on 16 July 1893, and was buried at All Saints, Branksome.' (John Winton, *The Victoria Cross at Sea*, London: Michael Joseph Ltd., 1978, pp. 76–77, hereafter 'Winton'.)
- ² 'William Henry Harrison Seeley was born at Topsham, Maine, on 1 May 1840 and was the first American citizen to win the Victoria Cross. At the time, American nationals were forbidden to enlist in the British Services and, ironically, had Seeley set foot on the American ship in the squadron off Shimonoseki he would have been liable to arrest. His first record in the Navy was when he joined *Imperieuse*, flagship on the China Station, on 17 July 1860. Possibly he joined from a merchant ship on the China coast. He transferred to her from *Euryalus* when she relieved *Imperieuse* on 17th November 1862. He was discharged from *Euryalus* on paying off, and went back to the United States. His V.C. pension and his naval pension, amounting to £22 10s a quarter, were paid to him through the British Consul in Boston. He married and very probably had at least one son and a daughter. He died of a cerebral haemorrhage at 26 Barrows Street, Dedham, Massachusetts, on 1 October 1914. His death certificate gives his precise age as '74 years, 4 months, 11 days', from which his birthdate can be computed, and described him as a widower. He was buried in the Evergreen Cemetery, Stoughton, Massachusetts.' (Winton, p. 77.)

- ³ Robert Hampton ‘Hammy’ Gray, V.C., D.S.C. (1917–45) was a Canadian member of the Fleet Air Arm, and one of only two members of that service to be decorated with a V.C. during the Second World War. He sank a Japanese destroyer, the *Amakusa*, on 9 August 1945 at Onagawa Bay in Miyagi prefecture. His plane, a Corsair, crashed into the sea and his remains were never found.
- ⁴ See for example Sir Ernest Satow, *A Diplomat in Japan*, (1st edition London: Seeley Service & Co., 1921 with many other editions), Chapters VIII– XI. In outline, Kagoshima was bombarded because the Satsuma clan refused to consider demands for compensation for Charles Richardson’s murder, while Shimonoseki was attacked to keep the Kanmon straits between Kyushu and Honshu open to foreign shipping after the Choshu clan had attacked some ships in the previous year.
- ⁵ Cheltenham College has a very strong military tradition, including fourteen Victoria Cross holders, behind only Eton (thirty-seven), Harrow (twenty), Haileybury (seventeen) and Wellington (fifteen). (See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_Victoria_Crosses_by_school accessed 17 August 2015.) It also has connections with Japan through Sir Charles Eliot (1862–1931, Ambassador to Japan, 1919–25), Major-General Francis Stewart Gilderoy Piggott (1883–1966) and his son Major-General Francis James Claude Piggott (1910–96).
- ⁶ See the entry about Küper by ‘J.K.L.’ (John Knox Laughton) in the *Dictionary of National Biography*.
- ⁷ See Sir Hugh Cortazzi, ‘The British Bombardment of Kagoshima, 1863: Admiral Sir L. Kuper and Lt. Colonel Neale’, Appendix One; and ‘The Naval and Military Action at Shimonoseki’, Appendix Two; in Hugh Cortazzi ed., *British Envoys in Japan 1859–1972*, (Global Oriental for the Japan Society, 2004).
- ⁸ *London Gazette*, 21 April 1865, No. 22960, p. 2130. The citations are also here for Thomas Pride ‘who supported Mr. Boyes in the gallant rush which he made in advance of the attack’ and for William Seeley ‘[f]or the intelligence and daring which, according to the testimony of Lieutenant Edwards, Commanding the Third Company, he exhibited in ascertaining the enemy’s position, and for continuing to retain his position in front, during the advance, after he had been wounded in the arm’.
- ⁹ See Admiral Küper’s report (‘Despatches reporting Operations at Shimonoseki’) in the *London Gazette*, 18 November 1864, No. 22913, pp. 5467–5473.
- ¹⁰ Winton, pp. 75–6.
- ¹¹ Winton, p. 76.
- ¹² A letter from the late Brigadier John H. Montagu (Old Cheltonian) to the author dated 3 December 1998 reads: ‘You are quite correct in believing that I was involved in the sale of the Boyes VC. I could see no sense in having it just lying in a vault in Lloyds Bank, and I therefore recommended to the College Council that it be sold, and the proceeds go towards funding a scholarship in his name. My proposal was accepted...’ The letter also mentions the idea of a display of V.C.s and other medals awarded to distinguished former pupils in the College Library, subject

to costs associated with getting adequate insurance cover, i.e. a burglar proof cabinet.

- ¹³ At that time I was living in Kitakyushu city very close to Shimonoseki (as I still do), and as an Old Cheltonian (former pupil of Cheltenham College) with a particular research interest in Sir Ernest Satow and his account of the *Bakumatsu* 1861–69 contained in *A Diplomat in Japan*, I expressed my concern at the sale in an article, which I was invited to write for the former pupils' magazine *Cheltonian Society News* 1998–9 (No. 19). A response in the following issue (1999–2000, No. 20) suggested that Boyes had a long record of insubordination from his first days in the Royal Navy – something which I have been unable to confirm – and implying that he had in fact got his just deserts. In order to clarify the matter, I expanded my article in the *Cheltonian Society News* and uploaded it to the web, where it can still be found at <http://www.dhs.kyutech.ac.jp/~ruxton/boyes.html> .
- ¹⁴ http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/england/gloucestershire/3991993.stm 'Rail posters tell brave stories', BBC News, 8 November 2004. Accessed 17 August 2015. See also *Gloucestershire Echo*, 10 November 2004.
- ¹⁵ <http://www.lordashcroftmedals.com/about/lord-ashcroft-gallery/> accessed 17 August 2015.