John Fox-Russell, VC MC, RAMC (1893-1917) A Forgotten Hero of Military Medicine

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SUMMARY: The chance finding of the grave of Captain John Fox-Russell, VC, MC in the British Military Cemetery in Beer Sheva, Israel led the author to research the life of this medical hero.

Introduction

At the end of a journey to the Beer Sheva, while studying the medical aspects of Allenby's Palestine Campaigns, I visited the British Military Cemetery for those who were killed in the area during these campaigns. What began as an aimless visit, soon became a search for RAMC servicemen who might be buried there. An hour later, I stood in front of a tombstone of Captain John Fox-Russell, VC, MC (Fig 1) on which was written:

"He gave his life for others; greater love hath no man than this:

That was the moment when I began to walk in the footsteps of John Fox-Russell, one of my heroes in military medicine.

Fig 1. John Fox-Russell's tomb

The Victoria Cross (VC) is the highest recognition of courage on the battlefield awarded in the British Empire. During a whole century, 1845-1945, only 39 RAMC members were awarded the VC, apparently a very small number (1). In part, it may be explained by the inability of non-medical combatants to judge the merits of medical officers and medical orderlies who are engaged in the difficult, tedious and risky task of rescuing the lives of injured soldiers. Thus, to be a hero of military medicine, one has to be a man of great virtues: dedication, excellence, devotion and courage.

John Fox-Russell is presented here as a unique example of a hero of military medicine, unfortunately forgotten.

Fig 2. John Fox-Russell VC, MC, RAMC
From *The Lancet*, Feb 2, 1918

Biography

John Fox-Russell (Fig 2), was born in Holyhead, Anglesey, England, January 27th 1893. He was the eldest son of Dr & Mrs Fox-Russell. He studied at Magdalen

College Choir School, Oxford and St. Bees School. While at St. Bees, he joined the Cadet Force, showing great interest in military science. In 1909 John Fox-Russell became one of the youngest students ever to be accepted for medical studies into the Middlesex Hospital Medical School in London. While in medical school, he joined the

University of London Officers' Training Course and later obtained a commission in the 6th (Caernarvonshire and Anglesey Territorial) battalion of the Royal Welsh Fusiliers (RWF).

Upon the outbreak of the War in 1914, John left his medical studies and joined his battalion as a 2nd

Fig 3. Map of the Third Battle of GAZA

lieutenant. He was promoted on January 27th 1915 to Captain. After the first phase of the war, John Fox-Russell returned to the medical school, graduated, became MRCS and commissioned to the RAMC. First he was attached to a battery of Royal Field Artillery, but soon applied to be transferred to his old unit. When his request was granted, he joined the 6th RWF, a battalion in the 158th Infantry Brigade of the 53rd Welsh Division, then a part of the Egypt Expeditionary Force, becoming the medical officer of the battalion. On September 16th 1916, before leaving for Egypt, he married Alma Taylor of Tunbridge Wells, Kent (2, 3).

At the time when John Fox-Russell joined his old unit in Egypt, the British intention was to open a new front in the Middle East, as fighting in the European Western Front had come to a standstill.

On March 26th 1917, the British troops attacked for the first time the fortified town of Gaza. The 53rd Welsh Division, consisting of the 158th, 159th and 160th brigades, was a part of the offensive. The 6th RWF, Fox-Russell's battalion, was one of the four battalions of the 158th.

The brigade was directed to Ali Muntar ridge, a hill overlooking the open plain. The battalions advanced under heavy fire, but at the bottom of the hill the forces encountered cactus hedges and progress became slow. From that time on, fighting continued with heavy casualties on both sides. At dusk, the efforts were successful: at 17:30 the Ali Muntar ridge was in British hands, but it was too late: General Dobbel, the Commander-in-Chief, decided due to misinformation, to withdraw. The British casualties during the first battle of Gaza were 523 killed, 2932 wounded and 512 missing.

Field Marshall Sir Archibald Wavell wrote in his "Palestine Campaigns": "Capture of Ali Muntar by the 53rd Division will bear comparison with the classic exploits of British Infantry. The approach was over bare ground against an enemy strongly posted and entrenched, with numerous machine guns and a powerful artillery. The enemy's main position was a difficult target. The hostile trenches were hard to detect. The last part of the assault was blind fighting uphill through cactus hedges against machine guns and riflemen. There was no shade and no water." (4)

Captain John Fox-Russell of the 6th RWF of the 158th brigade won the Military Cross (MC) "for conspicuous gallantry and devotion to duty. He showed the greatest courage and skill in collecting wounded men of all regiments and in dressing them under continuing shell and rifle fire." (5)

The second battle in Gaza was launched on April 17th 1917. Again there was no victory. In this battle, the 53rd Division fought on "Samson's Ridge" as a secondary force and could not make any deep impression in the Turkish defence. This time most of the casualties were in the 54th Division.

During June 1917, General Allenby became

Commander-in-Chief of the EEF. After assuming command, General Allenby dedicated himself to the study of the previous defeats in Gaza. He came to the conclusion that another direct attack on Gaza might be a mistake, and the main thrust should be directed against Beer Sheva.

On October 31st 1917, the campaign known as the Third Battle of Gaza was launched (Fig 3). The XX Corps which consisted of the 10th, 53rd, 60th and 74th Divisions attacked Beer Sheva. The attack was a resounding success, but in order to secure the advance to the North, the high ridge north of Beer Sheva had to be captured. The Turks who also realized the importance of the ridge, reinforced it immediately with three infantry divisions, mainly its key position, the hill of Tel Khuweilfeh.

For five very hot and dry days and nights, the battle over Tel Khuweilfeh continued: series of local attacks and counter attacks inflicted heavy casualties on both sides, British and Turks. Tel Khuweilfeh was eventually captured by British troops on November 7th. The 158th brigade paid a very high price in this battle: 36 officers and 584 men of other ranks were killed or wounded (6, 7).

Among the officers who were killed, on November 6th during the battle on the ridge of Tel Khuweilfeh, was John Fox-Russell, the MO of the 6th RWF, who had suffered many of the casualties.

John Fox-Russell was awarded posthumously the VC "for most conspicuous bravery displayed in action until he was killed. Captain Russell repeatedly went out to tend to the wounded under murderous fire from snipers and machine guns, and in many cases where no other means were at hand, carried them in himself, although almost exhausted. He showed the highest possible valour." (8)

In the obituary in the *Lancet* on February 2nd 1918 it was written:

"He was a man of strong will and high ideals and likely to play a leading part in any sphere of life." (2)

A real hero of military medicine.

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