

A FANTASTIC 1ST ROYAL DRAGOONS 'HEAVY BRIGADE' D.C.M. GROUP. SUFFERING SABRE WOUNDS TO HIS HAND AND FOOT, HE WAS TAKEN PRISONER DURING THE FAMOUS CHARGE AT BALAKLAVA, ONLY TO ESCAPE FROM THE CLUTCHES OF EIGHT COSSACKS, DESPATCHING TWO OF THEM DURING HIS FLIGHT. DETAILED LETTERS HE WROTE FROM THE CRIMEA WERE PUBLISHED IN HIS LOCAL NEWSPAPER



DISTINGUISHED CONDUCT MEDAL, V.R. 'JOHN THOMAS. 1ST RL. DRAGS.'; CRIMEA 1854-56, 3 CLASPS, BALAKLAVA, INKERMANN, SEBASTOPOL 'PTE. J. THOMAS 1ST RL. DRAGS.' CONTEMPORARILY ENGRAVED NAMING, TOP LUGS REMOVED; TURKISH CRIMEA 1855, SARDINIAN ISSUE, UNNAMED AS ISSUED, PLUGGED WITH SMALL RING SUSPENSION

John/Evan Thomas was born in Haverfordwest, Pembrokeshire. He was baptised 'Evan' and known locally by this name, but recorded as 'John' in all military records. Thomas attested for the 10th Hussars in 1838, and transferred to the 1st Royal Dragoons the following year. He served with the Regiment in the Crimea, and took part in the famous charge of the Heavy Brigade at Balaklava, 25 October 1854.

Thomas wrote to his mother during the Crimean war, and three of his letters were published in the local paper for Haverfordwest, as was a lengthy obituary after his death. The content of these letters is hugely interesting. Reading them it is apparent Thomas was clearly well educated, his letters giving an insight into the hopes and fears of a soldier in the ranks who

served throughout the Crimean War. The letters and obituary also reveal he was wounded by a sword cut to his hand and foot at Balaclava. Clearly only slightly wounded and therefore not on the casualty rolls. This again is most interesting to note because it is estimated that large numbers of other Officers and men did not report minor injuries. As such casualty rolls should only be looked at as a guide, giving only figures of soldiers who actually reported their injuries or they were injuries that would keep them of duty.

His initial letter describes the preparations for the attack on Sebastopol, battle of Alma, huge numbers of Russians and looking after his cousin who is dreadfully ill. He is confident in the superiority of the British Army but clearly not confident he will survive.

The second letter, written days after the battle of Balaclava gives an excellent description of the battle, his regiments role in it and just brutal it was; '*blood covering nearly every one of us..*'. What is also apparent is he is also very clearly aware of the 'bigger picture' during the battle.

The third letter talks of the siege of Sebastopol, receiving the Distinguished Conduct Medal – something he describes in detail. The horrors of burying the dead during a five hour truce and expecting a great attack to be made later that night. He also tells how by then (June 1855), there are only 97 left out of the 280 of the regiment who landed in the Crimea 12 months earlier!

Finally is Private Thomas's obituary from 1863. This gives a great deal of detail about the man and his service and in particular goes into great details about his exploits at Balaclava; being captured by Russians, killing his captures and escaping back to the British lines whilst pursued by Russian Cavalry. It also describes his wounds to hand and foot by Russian sabres during the battle.

PEMBROKESHIRE HERALD AND GENERAL ADVERTISER 27th OCTOBER 1854

'LETTER FROM THE CRIMEA;- The following letter from Mr. Evan Thomas, of the Globe Inn, in this town has been kindly handed us for insertion :-

Camp, Balaklava, in the Crimea October 7th, 1854.

Dear Mother;- I answer your last this day, after coming in from a three hours' engagement with enemy. There were only three thousand of the English army, and there were of the enemy about four thousand mounted Cossacks and about six thousand infantry numbering altogether about ten thousand. We drove them back to-day with severe loss, a number of enemy lying dead on the field, we having but four killed and one wounded, and they belonged to the 4th Royal Irish Dragoons. Balaklava is a village about four miles from Sebastopol; it mounted a battery twenty-eight guns, which we soon took; it is a harbour just below the harbour of Sebastopol. On the 12th of this month, Sebastopol is to be attack There are the greatest preparations making for the attack all the siege guns and battering trains are being removed from the vessels and placed on a hill, looking right into the town. During the time the guns being disembarked, we are keeping back the enemy, they are as numerous as the sand. I trust in god for we are only a mere handful to them, comparatively; but one of us can beat six of them. The first engagement. (I mean the battle of Alma) I did see, as none of the heavy cavalry were landed. 23rd Welsh Fusiliers were nearly all cut up - they eighteen officers, and a great many other regiments a deal of men but to see the thousands of Russians lay dead on the field was enough to show them what the Allied forces could do.

Dear Mother, - Should God spare my life, to see again, I shall have some awful tales to relate. about poor W----: I lay with him in camp on Adrianople road, near Varna. I was with him a night. He did not go with his regiment; he was left behind sick in the fever, and a pain in his side; last night I saw him I brought him a bottle of porter and some biscuits, and he was getting round fast. I wish he was here, for two of the family to wear a medal for Sebastopol;

but I think he will be up before attack commences. I received a paper from H. Hood. While I am writing this I have my belts and sword on waiting for another turn out. The horses are saddled day and night. Before you get this there will be a bravo fellow laid low, remember me to all my old friends. I must conclude (wishing it won't be my last)

My dear mother, your very affectionate son, EVAN THOMAS, 1st Royal Dragoons'



The following, written three days after the Battle of Balaklava:

PEMBROKESHIRE HERALD AND GENERAL ADVERTISER 17th NOVEMBER 1854

'LETTER FROM THE SEAT OF WAR, We have been kindly favoured with the following letter from Mr. Evan Thomas, of the Globe Inn, in this town, now serving in the 1st Dragoons, at the Crimea:-

Camp, near Sebastopol, Crimea, Oct. 28th, 1854.

My DEAR MOTHER, - In answer to your last letter, I which I received this morning, in the first place I must tell you that Willie is not come up yet. I must now let you know about the taking of Sebastopol. It is a most mighty strong place we have been at it ever since the morning of the 17th inst., and are at it still (this is the 28th), and it is not yet taken. Dear Mother, - I give God thanks that I am spared to write this letter. I will now inform you as well as I can the position the army occupied on the morning of the 25th, when the battle at Balaklava was fought. The infantry and artillery were with the guns that were playing on Sebastopol, the Dragoons, and the Heavy and Light Brigades about a mile behind them, then the 93rd Highlanders and the Horse Artillery behind us (the Dragoons), and about half-a- mile behind them were 600 Turks. They had the command of three high hills, with a fort on the top of each, and each fort mounting four 32-pound guns. We had to keep back the Russian reinforcements that were marching here from Odessa, and also 4,000 mounted Cossacks. You will no doubt have an account of it in the papers before you get this. On the approach of the enemy, which was at five o'clock in the morning, we were all ready for them; for ever since the cannonading began upon Sebastopol we have been mounted every morning at three o'clock, as we have been expecting this reinforcement every day. There were 22,000 came on us at five in the morning, with 48 pieces of field artillery: with them, and such an engagement

took place as was never witnessed before - not even at Waterloo. We had no infantry with us, only the 93rd Highlanders and the Turks on the hills, and before the battle was on one hour the Turks ran and left their guns on the hills. The Heavy Dragoons received orders from Lord Lucan to charge them and at 12 o'clock at mid-day my Regiment (1st Royal Dragoons), the Scots Greys, and the 4th Royal Irish Dragoon Guards, charged at twenty guns in front of us, and ten on our left and right, besides the infantry firing on us. We charged! - at this time it was awful slaughter - the field being covered with dead or wounded men and horses. I cannot half describe it to you ; - to see some running with their heads nearly blown off, others with arms and legs blown to pieces, and blood covering nearly every one of us. My regiment had ten horses killed, and twelve wounded. We only had two men killed, and eight wounded. The Colonel had his leg blown off; my Captain was shot through the leg and the man next me had his arm blown off; and we had two Captains and one Lieutenant wounded. Then the Light Dragoons charged, and they lost about 240 men. Our army lost altogether about 700, and the Russians 2000. I don't suppose such a sight was ever seen before. We fought hand to hand for about eight hours; then we gained the hills that the Turks lost. I got one sword cut on my foot. Balls and shells flew about us in such numbers, that there was not one that I have talked with since who expected to return to camp. We expect another engagement to-morrow. The walls of Sebastopol are 27 feet thick. There has been a continued roar of cannon since the 17th. Their army is innumerable. I am afraid there will yet be great bloodshed before we get possession of it. To-day the Russians lost 1,100 men coining out of Sebastopol. Please write to me by return, and send me a newspaper, and I trust I shall be spared to receive it. Good night! - going on guard right in sight of the enemy. Give my respects to all my old friends.'

Private Thomas almost certainly served in Captain William de Cardonnel Elmsall troop at Balaklava. The only other Captain if the 1st Dragoons who was wounded was Captain George Campbell. However he is specifically noted as wounded in the shoulder, whereas Thomas says his Captain was shot in the leg.



In another letter, Thomas describes showing his newly awarded D.C.M. to his nephew (who also served in the Crimea):

'Camp, near Balaklava, June 11th, 1855.

My Dear Mother:-I cannot make out the reason I have not received an answer to my last letter; but I hope I shall receive one shortly. In the first place I must tell you that Willy, my nephew, has been to visit me four times. Once he staid with me all night. He looks very well and I am glad to inform you that he had the pleasure of seeing his uncle with a medal on his breast - not the Crimean Medal, but one for Distinguished Bravery in the battle of Balaklava. On one side of it there are swords, shields, and trumpets; on the other side are the words - "For Distinguished Bravery in the Field"; and on the edge of it is my name and regiment. There were six given to each regiment; so I happened to be one of the six. I shall also get £5, which is to be given to each of the six men on leaving the regiment. At the end of the month we shall get the Crimea Medal and Clasps for Balaklava and Inkermann. So that will be a second for me, please God I live to wear them.

The Cholera is not so fierce as it was a week since. We had one case yesterday. That was the first time we (my regiment) have had this year.

The siege again commenced at two o'clock last Thursday (the 7th), and I hope that Sebastopol will be ours before you receive this. Yesterday I went to see the dead at the Mamelon Tower. The flag of truce was hoisted on the Mamelon for five hours. The Mamelon is what they call the round tower. There were a chain of sentries of English and another of Russians about 20 yards apart. The dead belonging to the Russians were carried to them to be buried, and they carried ours to us that were lying in their lines. It was the most awful sight I ever beheld. Nearly the whole of them were killed by shells and 64 pounders; some with half their heads blown off, legs off, entrails blown out, and mutilated in all shapes and forms. There was not much time for burying; so they would dig a whole about two feet deep and pop them in just as they fell- cloths and belts, and all they had on. We are now within four hundred yards of the round tower, and when we get it, I think the town will soon be ours, for from that tower we can blow their shipping out of the water. I believe this tower is to be stormed tonight, but it will be a great sacrifice of life.

General Brown is in the rear, coming down the north side, so we expect every hour again to shift for the field to meet him, and I hope, give them something they will not forget this time; but you will soon have the news from home, for it is past from here to London in eight hours.

Please tell Mr Sayers, carpenter, Shut Street, that I spend many an evening with his son, who is in the 8th Hussars, and that he is well. Please send me a newspaper, for I live in a little wooden cottage, which I built (with some spare wood from the huts) on my own ground: so myself an wife are quite comfortable. They call it the "House that Jack Built" but the proper name of it is Primrose Cottage, with grapes, &c. growing at the door.

We are only 97 living, out of 280 who left England twelve months ago. We have taken several prizes since the first of May. I enclose a Turkish Penny. Mind to write by return. Give my respects to my old friends. So I remain your affectionate son.

Evan Thomas, First Royal Dragoons'



Thomas was discharged 27 January 1863, having served 24 years and 50 days. He died of Typhus in November 1864. Thomas's obituary:

PEMBROKESHIRE HERALD AND GENERAL ADVERTISER, 11 NOVEMBER 1864

DEATH OF A CRIMEAN HERO. In our obituary of to-day we announce the death of Mr Evan Thomas, of this town, formerly a private in the 1st Royal Dragoons, who served with distinction through- out the whole of the Russian War. The deceased was the youngest son of the late Mr W. Thomas, of the Globe Inn, Upper Market-street, and at an early age entered the army as a private in the 'Oxford Bines,' but subsequently transferred himself to the Royal Dragoons. This regiment being retained almost exclusively for duty in the United Kingdom, his career as a soldier promised to be uneventful, until the breaking out of the war with Russia, when Mr Thomas embarked with his regiment for Turkey. He was present at all the engagements in the Crimea, and though he underwent the great hardships, he suffered not and was never absent from his post of duty from any case whatever. He was actively engaged in the memorable battle of Balaclava, and was one of the heavies' whose terrific charge scattered the Russian cavalry like chaff before the wind.



Towards the close of the celebrated charge of the Light brigade, Mr Thomas was taken by a hand of eight mounted Russian s. (his captors deprived him of his carbine, but allowed him to

retain his sword, probably thinking that further disarming was unnecessary, and that their prisoner would not attempt his escape in the face of such great odds. Mr Thomas, however, when marching to the Russian camp, with a Cossack on each side of him, and six others between him and the British lines thought of the severity with which Russians treated English prisoners, and to use his own words he came to the conclusion that it would be better to lose his life in an attempt to regain his liberty than to rot in a Russian prison. He drew his sword, and being an active as well as a powerful man, he quickly cut down the guard on each side of him, and putting spurs to his horse he galloped off for the British quarters. So rapidly was this daring feat performed, that Mr Thomas had ridden several yards before the Russians had recovered from their surprise. They commenced a pursuit, and fired several shots after him, but the British dragoon being the better mounted, increased the distance between himself and his pursuers at every stride. The unequal contest had been witnessed by the men of his own regiment and a large portion of the British army, who looked on anxiously, expecting to see their comrade fall beneath the Russian bullets. But on he rode, and as he approached the English lines, several dragoons who had mounted as quickly as possible, started off to his assistance, which however was not needed, as the Russians, seeing that they could not overtake him, gave up the pursuit and returned to their own camp. One shot struck Mr Thomas's horse, the only effect of which was to make it go faster. On reaching the English lines, he was received with the most deafening cheering: his comrades were overjoyed at his return, and also proud of the courage he had shown, and he received the warmest congratulations of several distinguished officers.

For this daring deed - one of the most prominent among numerous instances of individual bravery which the war produced - he received at the hands of the Queen a medal for 'distinguished bravery in the field.' In the battle of Balaklava, his regiment formed a support to the gallant 'six hundred' and though exposed to the tremendous fire of the Russian artillery, he passed through uninjured, but during the charge of the 'Heavies' he received a slight cut on the sword hand, and also a blow from a sabre on his boot, which penetrated the leather, but did not injury to his foot

He was a mild and inoffensive man, well built, and in all respects the beau ideal of a heavy dragoon. He was a great favourite in his regiment, and on the occasion of the Queen placing on his breast the medal for distinguished valour, he and five other veterans who were similarly decorated, were drawn in a carriage through the public streets by their comrades. After twenty-four year service, he was discharged about two years ago, with a pension of 1s a day. The rest, however, which he so much needed was of short duration. The rigour and hardships he experienced in the Crimea had laid the foundation of a fatal disease, and after an illness of a painful character he expired on Sunday last at the residence of his brother in Upper Market-street. In addition to the medal we have already mentioned, he had the Turkish medal, and the Crimean medal with three clasps. He was greatly respected by the friends of his youth, and not long ago they presented him with a silver watch, which bears an inscription testifying to their respect for him as a friend, and also their admiration of his courageous conduct in the battle field. The funeral of the deceased will take place on Thursday next.'



Sgt Maj Bailey who was also presented to the Queen in 1856

On 17th June 1856, shortly after returning home, Queen Victoria visited Aldershot and inspected the 1st Dragoon's (and others), speaking to men who had been wounded or had been decorated. It seems likely that Thomas's obituary is slightly confused in that it was his Thomas's Crimean Medal, not his Distinguished Conduct Medal that was presented to him by the Queen at this time. In Thomas's own words he had been presented his Distinguished Conduct Medal whilst in the Crimea. A note to this is that the Royal Collection contains at least two photographs of Decorated men of 1st Dragoon's she received at Aldershot (also of men of the 5th Dragoon's). These are available to view on their website but they are clear that only part of the photo collection has been published.

According to the Royal Collection; 'on their return from the Crimea she met a number of the veterans at Buckingham Palace, Chatham Military Hospital and Aldershot Garrison. Following these meetings she commissioned a series of photographs of the veterans from the photographers Joseph Cundall and Robert Howlett.'

It is therefore quite possible a photo of Thomas is held by them.

A really superb group for a historic action. All the more interesting because of the letters, which give a rare insight into what the recipient was like and also what is almost certainly the reason he was picked out to receive a medal for gallantry. This in itself is unfortunately a scarce thing with Crimean War DCM's.

D.C.M. recommendation dated 9 January 1855. 8 D.C.M.'s were awarded to the Regiment for the Crimean Campaign, according to Thomas, 6 of these were for Balaclava.

Condition VF, light contact marks. All with contemporary silver top ribbon buckles. Sold with a detailed file and CD of copied research and the Regimental History.