

THE EXTREMELY RARE VC ACTION MAORI WARS 1863 DCM PAIR TO A PRIVATE OF THE 65TH FOR HIS GALLANTRY IN STAYING WITH HIS WOUNDED OFFICER AND CARRYING HIM TO SAFETY THE FOLLOWING MORNING, ONE OF JUST 22 DCMS AWARDED FOR THE NEW ZEALAND WARS, OF WHICH 7 ARE KNOWN



DISTINGUISHED CONDUCT MEDAL V.R. 'BENJN THOMAS 65TH REGT'; NEW ZEALAND MEDAL 1861-1866 '3214 BENJN THOMAS 65TH REGT'. D.C.M. OFFICIALLY IMPRESSED, SECOND RENAMED IN A CONTEMPORARY STYLE

Benjamin Thomas was born in Leominster, England in March 1836. He enlisted in the 65th Regiment of Foot at Parkhurst on 31 October 1854, stating his occupation as Labourer and age at 18 years, 7 months. He embarked for New Zealand from Portsmouth on the 'Euphrates' on 26 December 1854 and arrived in Auckland on 26 April 1855. Private Thomas' detachment was immediately posted to disturbances in the Taranaki region. They served at Waireka in March 1860 and returned to Auckland in 1863. Later that year a detachment of the 65th Regiment (including Private Thomas) sent to man Alexandra Redoubt, overlooking the Waikato River near Tuakau, South of Auckland. From here they took part in a number of engagements and small skirmishes in the surrounding bush against hostile Maori who had been attacking supply lines and local settlers.

On 7 September 1863, in response to a request for assistance, a party of 50 soldiers from the 65th Regiment of Foot led by Captains Swift and Butler set forth from Alexandra Redoubt to Camerontown, 8 miles distant. After some time the troops encountered a raiding party of 300 hostile Maori who had been attacking the Commissariat depot at Camerontown. The Maori were positioned in large trees and dense bush on either side of the path to be used by the soldiers. A horrific volley of

fire ensued and both officers in the detachment fell seriously wounded. Colour Sergeant McKenna assumed command of the party and charged the Maori who had temporarily retreated into the bush. Four Privates (including Private Thomas) under the command of Lance Corporal Ryan remained with the two wounded officers whilst McKenna and the balance of the Imperials pursued the Maoris through the bush. As night set in Captain Swift died and Corporal Ryan and two Privates (Cole and Talbot) returned to Alexandra Redoubt. The Maoris had doubled back around the party led by McKenna and were now scouring the bush for the two officers and those that had remained with them, necessitating the men to constantly find new cover.



Privates Thomas and Bulford remained with Lieutenant Butler and, as Lieutenant Butler complained bitterly of the cold, Private Thomas removed his wool short and greatcoat and covered Lieutenant Butler with them. Eventually Thomas and Bulford decided to carry Lieutenant Butler to Alexandra Redoubt. They made their way through the dense bush and arrived near the Redoubt at sunrise the next morning. Lieutenant Butler subsequently recovered from his wounds.

Private Thomas later served in the engagement at Rangiriri in November 1863 before the Regiment was posted to Te Awamutu in 1864. It was here on 18 June 1864 that he was presented with his Distinguished Conduct Medal by Lieutenant General Sir Duncan Cameron in respect of his bravery at Camerontown on 7 to 8 September 1863. McKenna and Ryan were awarded the Victoria Cross and 5 DCMs were awarded. Private Thomas took his discharge with gratuity at Otahuhu Camp, Auckland on 31 August 1865. He appears to have joined the Waikato Militia and subsequently the Forest Rangers (as had his colleague Col Sgt McKenna VC). Benjamin Thomas was given a Military Land Grant and died in Auckland on 14 January 1896.

<https://vcgca.org/our-people/profile/1171/Edward-McKENNA>



Enclosures to No. 24.

COLONEL WYATT TO THE ASSISTANT MILITARY SECRETARY.

Camp, Queen's Redoubt,
September 11th, 1863.

SIR,—

In accordance with the wishes of the Lieutenant-General, I have called upon Color Sergeant E. McKenna to furnish me with a report of the action at Cameron on the 7th instant.

From the corroborative statements made to me by Lieutenant Warren, who had ample opportunities of acquiring full information of the various events and places, while in command of the detachment, 65th Regt., that proceeded from the Alexandra Redoubt in search of the missing, on the 8th, (under Colonel Murray), and subsequently on the 9th, I am perfectly satisfied with the truthfulness of the appended letter.

As acts of daring and gallantry are sure to be appreciated, I trust the Lieutenant-General will be pleased to bring this instance to the notice of His Royal Highness the Field Marshal commanding in Chief, for some special mark of approval on the part of Her Majesty, for his gallant conduct, after both his officers had been shot, in charging through the position of an enemy heavily outnumbering him, and drawing off his small force through a broken and rugged country, with the loss of but one man killed and another missing.

As soon as I can obtain the necessary documents from the officer commanding at Tuakau, I will not fail to bring to the notice of the Lieutenant-General the gallant conduct of Lance Corporal Ryan and Privates William Bulford and John Talbot, who removed the body of their Captain from the field of action, and remained with it all night in the bush, surrounded by the enemy, and also that of Privates Benjamin Thomas and John Cole, who after remaining all night in the fern with Lieutenant Butler, who was badly wounded, in the morning carried him several miles towards the 65th Camp, until met by the reinforcement under Colonel Murray proceeding to their assistance.

I would also beg to bring to the notice of the Lieutenant-General the conduct of Drummer Henry Welsh, who, when Private Grace was killed, picked up his rifle and emptied his pouch of any ammunition and copper caps, under a galling fire, and thus prevented the enemy from obtaining that trophy, and I trust that the cool and determined bravery of the small parties under the command of Color Sergeant McKenna and Sergeant Meara will be favourably considered and honorably mentioned.

Only one rifle was captured by the enemy, that of Private Bellringer, who was killed when with the advance Guard, which was then fearfully outnumbered and hardly pressed by the enemy, and slowly retiring in skirmishing order.

I sincerely trust and hope the Lieutenant-General will make a favorable mention to His Royal Highness of Lieutenant Butler, who in the late, and already in the present war, has proved himself a most promising officer, and unsurpassed for coolness and conduct under trying circumstances.

From my knowledge of the late Captain Swift, I may safely say that I considered him one of the best Officers I ever had the honor of commanding, and one who held a high position in the estimation of every individual in the 65th Regiment.

I have, &c.,

ALFRED F. W. WYATT,

Colonel and Lieutenant-Colonel Commanding 65th Regiment.

The Assistant Military Secretary.

As Thomas was discharged in New Zealand, his Maori Wars medal would have been issued there but it is not clear whether his medal would have been named to the 65th, or the Forest Rangers, both of which would have been locally engraved, or to the Waikato Militia, which would be Impressed. Thomas's medal is renamed in a contemporary style, similar to officially renamed and issued in the 1870's. During this period medals issued in New Zealand were officially engraved using renamed medals and a large number of medals were issued this way, so it is possible Thomas either applied later for a medal or for a replacement. However the archives in New Zealand holds applications for these medals and so far, no application has been found for Thomas. As such, though the medals have been known in major collections for a long time, they are priced as the D.C.M. and a contemporary but unofficially renamed Maori Wars medal would be.

A LEEDS MAN IN THE NEW ZEALAND WAR.

Colour Sergeant McKenna, who writes the following despatch is a Leeds man:—He enlisted for the 66th Regiment at Leeds, early in 1845, served in Ireland and England until the 18th May, 1846, when he embarked with the head-quarters of his corps for New Zealand, in the troop ship Java, arriving at Auckland on the 27th Nov. the same year. Since that time (a period of nearly seventeen years) he has been stationed in different parts of the island, being present in the Taranaki war of 1860-1.

Alexandra Redoubt, Takanu,
September 8th, 1863.

Sir,—I beg to state for the information of the Lieut. General Commanding, that at one o'clock p.m., on the 7th September, 1863, I proceeded under command of Captain Swift, with the force as per margin,* to attack a party of natives who had set fire to the friendly native pah, erected on the Township of Cameron for the purpose of trying to rescue Mr. Armitage and a party of friendly natives who were known to have been down there, also a quantity of commissariat supplies, brought up from Waiuku.

Proceeding in skirmishing order, we arrived about half-past two o'clock p.m., at the skirt of the bush leading to the ranges on which the pah was situated, and after an half hour's struggle through the bush, we came to a clearing, halting, the captain ordered our half ration of rum to be distributed, sending on the advance guard immediately after. When on having proceeded a few hundred yards, it became apparent that the advance guard had lost, or struck off the track, but that we had gained it. I then proposed to Captain Swift to advance and not as scout to the party, to which he immediately assented, cautioning me not to proceed more than thirty yards in front of the main body. After advancing in this order for about three quarters of a mile, I observed tracks of natives, and in large numbers; this I pointed out to the captain, and a little further on I heard the natives in loud debate, on which (expecting that they were returning on the track that we were pursuing), I again informed Captain Swift, who ordered the men to lie down in the bush, at the same time ordering them not to fire until he gave the word of command; however, on finding that the natives were not advancing, I crept up to within twelve yards of them, when, from their conversation, I judged they were under the influence of liquor. Captain Swift immediately called to advance, ordering the men to "fix bayonets and charge," we advanced to within six yards of them when they opened a most terrific fire; Capt. Swift and Lieut. Butler were at this time leading on the men, and after receiving the enemy's fire, the men gave a cheer and returned it in grand style, Lieut. Butler shooting down a native on his right, turned his revolver to the left—as quick as thought, I saw him come on his knee, at the same time discharging the remainder of the barrels of his revolver, bringing another native down at the same time that he fell himself. Seeing that he was wounded, I ordered Corporal Ryan and one of the men to take him to the rear, when he ordered me to lead the men to the front; on turning to my left I found Captain Swift mortally wounded: and after speaking a few words to him, he desired me to take his revolver and lead on the men, as at that time I was loading. With one loud hurra we charged, burning to avenge our officers. I now found myself in an open clearing of a few yards, the rebels flying to cover on our front and left, where they opened fire on my small party, who at this time numbered two sergeants, one bugler, and thirty-five men. Seeing that we were greatly outnumbered, I determined to hold on our position, if possible, until dark, trusting that the men in charge of Captain Swift and Lieutenant Butler had retired well to the rear, and been joined by our lost advance guard; if so, I knew they would be able to make well towards the Redoubt before darkness set in, when probably I should be able to join them; but I found at about a quarter to six o'clock that the enemy had got round to our rear, thereby

cutting off our retreat by the way we came. I immediately ordered a charge, but was met by a volley that killed one and wounded three men. On trying again, I found it hopeless to attempt it; I therefore determined to retreat down the hill which was covered with fern, and sending on our wounded, I threw out a line of skirmishers, ordering the front rank to "fire and retire." In this order we retired down the hill in a steady and orderly manner, the natives coming out of the bush and raining down a complete shower of bullets on us, when, although we were not above 100 or 150 yards from them, not a man was hit. At this time it was near dark, but we managed to scramble through the bush until at last we lost the track, when I ordered the men around me, and told them I should stay there until morning, ordering not a word to be spoken or a pipe to be lighted. I now found that four of the men were missing, and knowing that it would be completely useless to attempt, at that time, to find them, I determined to wait until morning, hoping in the meantime to hear them about in the bush. At a quarter to five o'clock a.m., on the morning of the 8th, we commenced to try and gain a track out of the bush, and at about eight o'clock a.m. we succeeded, and were met about half-way from the Redoubt by Colonel Murray and his party, and then learned that our esteemed captain was dead. After detailing a man to return as guide to Colonel Murray, I continued my march to the camp, which we reached at about eleven a.m., completely exhausted. I am sorry to report our casualties (as per margin†) were very great, but taking into consideration the number to which we were opposed, being near seven to one, we have every reason to be thankful that it was not greater. I hope it may not appear presumptuous on my part to bear testimony to the cool and gallant manner displayed by the late Captain Swift, and Lieutenant Butler in this desperate affair; the Captain issuing his command as if on parade, and even when wounded, refusing to take one man from the force to carry him to the rear, until he was told that I would not be able to keep my position much longer; and Lieut. Butler, even when brought on his knee, in the coolest manner possible, deliberately fired the shots from his revolver into a crowd of Maories.

I need scarcely add, that the men behaved most gallantly; in fact it would be impossible to recapitulate the many acts of individual courage, when each man emulated the other in acts of heroic bravery.

I however beg to bring to your favourable consideration the valuable assistance I received from Sergt. Bracegirdle, who supported me throughout in a most intrepid manner; as also Lance Corporal Ryan, Privates William Bulford, John Talbot, John Cole, and Benjamin Thomas, for the devotion they manifested to their officers, by staying with them until 7.30 p.m. on the night of the 7th inst. Captain Swift died at that time, after which they hid his body in the bush and waited till morning, and then, carrying Lieut. Butler in their arms, they returned, meeting Col. Murray and force, Corporal Ryan returned with Colonel Murray and pointed out the spot in which Captain Swift's body was hid.

I also beg to enclose the report of Sergeant Mearns, in charge of our advance guard; also a plan of the scene of action.

I have the honor to be, Sir, your obedient servant,



Condition VF, claw tightened on D.C.M. Sold with copy research, including 'Private Benjamin Thomas D.C.M., a long forgotten hero' by Aubrey Bairstow in *Volunteers*, 1997; v.23. Ex Corbett collection and Mackrell Collections, Auckland. Nobles auctions 2005

Just 22 DCMs were awarded for the New Zealand Wars, of which 4 are privately held and only 7 are known.