

# THE YOUNGEST VICTORIA CROSS: THE AWARD OF THE VICTORIA CROSS TO ANDREW FITZGIBBON

PH Starling

Director, Army Medical Services Museum, Ash Vale

### Introduction

On 6th July 1858, Lord Elgin entered into a peace treaty with the Chinese at Tientsin, following unrest and fighting that had been going on for some years, including the seizure, by the Chinese, of the vessel the Arrow on 8th October 1856 and their subsequent refusal to release the boat or its crew. This unrest had been brewing in some circles since the 1st China War. The seizure of the Arrow resulted in various British expeditions and landings until the eventual signing of the treaty. The treaty should have been ratified the following year at Peking but the envoys were denied entrance to the Pie-Ho river and when a British Force attempted to force a passage they were fired on by the guns in the Taku forts. A force of sailors and marines were landed with the purpose of capturing the forts and silencing the guns but it became bogged down in the mud flats before the fort and suffered many casualties. The remainder of the force withdrew without having achieved their aim. The public mood was for revenge but initially in March 1860 a despatch was sent to Peking requesting an apology for the actions at Taku, plus reparations and the final ratification of the treaty.

As a consequence of the non-compliance to the British requests, an expeditionary force was assembled at Hong Kong under Lieutenant General Sir J Hope Grant. Inspector General WM Muir CB was appointed Principal Medical Officer, Deputy Inspector Currie his Field Inspector and Staff Surgeon Rutherford the Sanitary Officer.



Figure 1. Artist's depiction of Andrew Fitzgibbon at the North Taku Fort (HQ Officers Mess)

Corresponding Author: Captain (Retd) P.H. Starling.  
DHMSA, FRHistS, Director, Army Medical Services Museum  
Keogh Barracks, Ash Vale, Aldershot, GU12 5RQ  
Tel. 94229 5320 Fax. 94229 5332  
Email: armymedicalmuseum@btinternet.com

Besides the enormous amount of ordnance stores and ammunition, a large quantity of medical supplies and equipment was assembled at Hong Kong and two hospital ships, Mauritius and Melbourne were fitted out. Further ships would be added at a later date. Hong Kong was to provide hospital accommodation for 100,000 sick and wounded.

Forty Medical Officers plus Purveyors, Dispensers and a large detachment of the Army Hospital Corps were embarked to provide care for the sick and wounded.

This was to be no repetition of the Crimean campaign. Each regiment and detachment was provided with adequate medical supplies and there was great emphasis on disease prevention, hence the appointment of a Sanitary Officer. Despite this early planning and preparation some bowel complaints did appear on arrival of the troops at Talien Wan.

### The Taku Forts

The three Taku Forts guarded the entrance to the Pie-Ho River and were formidable structures. Each fort, two on the northern bank and one on the southern was protected by wide double ditches always kept full of water and supplemented by rows of sharpened bamboo stakes. Guns were mounted in embrasures but pointed down river, the direction of an expected attack. From the land ward side there were vast salt flats and swamps with the only approach route to the fort being along causeways. It was planned that the northern fort should be captured first to enable enfilade fire to be brought to bear on the southern fort. Pontoons and scaling ladders were constructed to help surmount the ditches and scale the walls of the fort.

### Andrew Fitzgibbon

Andrew Fitzgibbon was born at Petoragurh, Bengal on 13th May 1845 to William and Elisa Fitzgibbon and was baptised by HA Loveday, at Almorah on the 21st July of the same year. At the time of his birth his father's occupation is listed as Quartermaster Sergeant in the Kumaon Provisional Battalion, [1] one of the East India Company's local battalions.

There are no records of Andrew's early life but he was admitted to the Bengal Subordinate Medical Department at Barrackpore, on 15th July 1859 as a Hospital Apprentice, having passed the prescribed examination. [2] As a Hospital Apprentice he did not appear on the Bengal Army List until 1862 so details of his early military career are scant. It was not long after that, that his association with the 67th Regiment was formed.

Prior to their landing in China the 67th Regiment had spent many years abroad. Previously stationed in Trinidad, they departed there in February 1857, reaching Plymouth a month later. Their stay in England was brief for in September 1858 they embarked at Portsmouth for India, reaching Calcutta on 14th December and then assembling at Barrackpore. It was less than a year later that the regiment found itself disembarking at Canton with a strength of 34 Officers and 805 other ranks. It was probably at Barrackpore that Andrew Fitzgibbon was

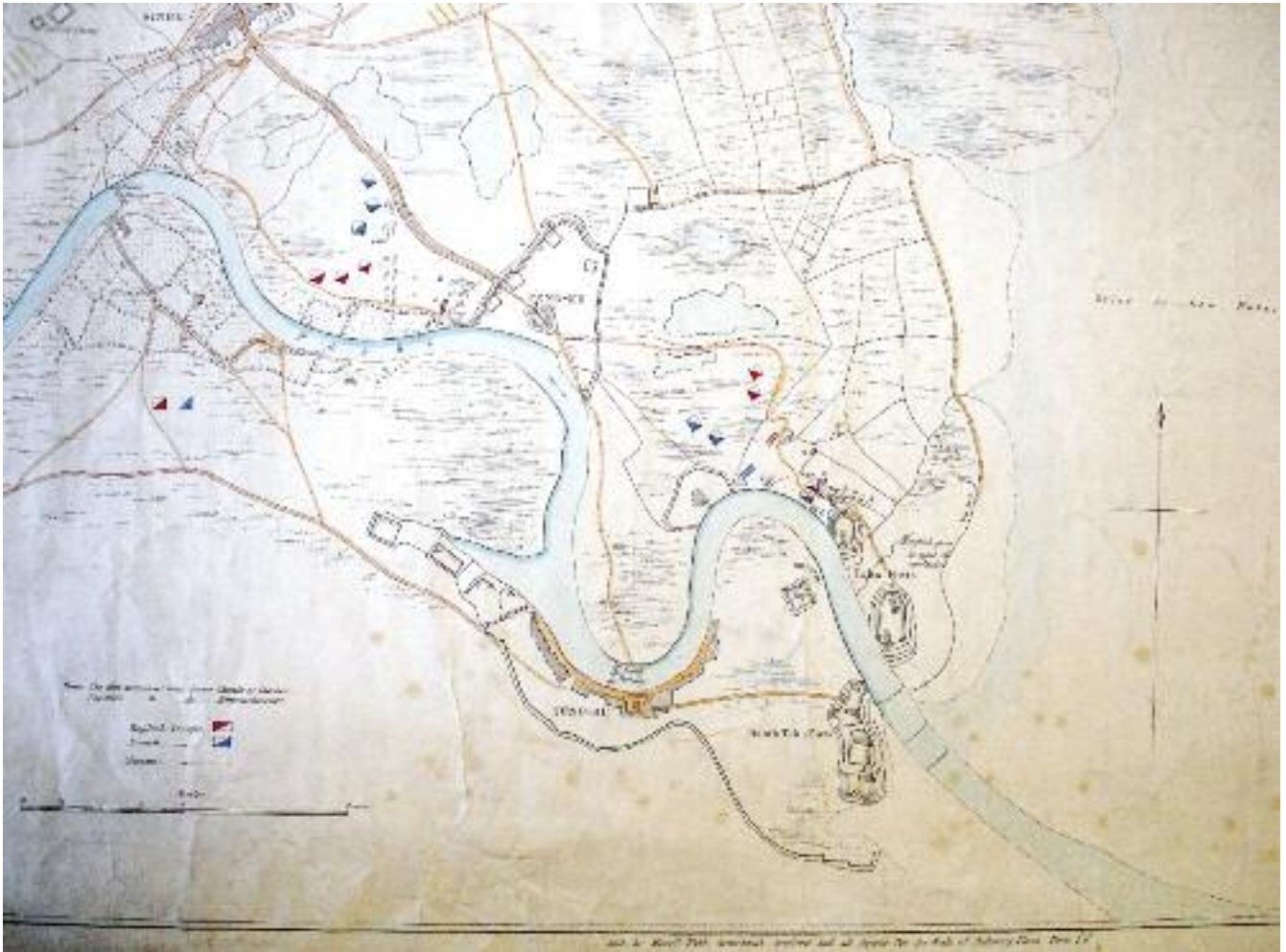


Figure 2. Contemporary map of the Taku Forts. (Author's collection)

attached to them, prior to their departure. [3] After spending the winter in Canton and brought up to strength with drafts sent out from England the regiment, along with the 99th was sent to occupy the island of Chusan. In June they moved to Talien Wan Bay and on 30th July landed at Peh-tang, a few miles up the coast. With this unopposed landing the plan was to move on to the forts at Taku and attack them from behind. The 67th were dressed in lightweight summer jackets and wicker helmets and carried their greatcoats, three days rations and 56 rounds of ammunition for their Enfield rifles. [4]

By 12th August the unloading of stores was finished and the advance began. After clearing the village of Sin-ho the attack on the forts was postponed to allow the canals between Sin-ho and the forts to be bridged. The operation against the upper fort recommenced with much vigour on 21st August with the attacking force breaching the formidable obstacles that protected the fort and eventually an officer and private soldier of the 67th succeeded in getting inside the walls of the fort.

Fitzgibbon had accompanied a wing of the 67th and found himself quite close to the walls. Assistant Surgeon Ross directed him to go and treat a wounded dhoolie bearer so he left cover and traversed the ground under a heavy fire and bandaged the wounded bearer. [5] He then noticed that an artilleryman had fallen wounded and rushed to his aid. After successfully treating him and as he was returning his bandages to his haversack, he himself was wounded. The ball entered his right forearm and lodged at his elbow. [6] Fitzgibbon now left the field of battle and sought treatment from Surgeon Lamprey. [7] [8] Total casualties for the attack were 201 killed and wounded. [9]

Five members of the 67th Regiment were recommended for the award of the Victoria Cross for their actions on the 21st and Fitzgibbon was amongst them [10]. Sir John Hope Grant wrote

to Horse Guards recommending him for the Victoria Cross and a board met on 21 April 1861 to consider all the evidence. The board was satisfied that this young soldier warranted the award of a Victoria Cross and submitted the recommendation to Queen Victoria on 7th August 1861. The citation appeared in the London Gazette of 13th August 1861.

Hospital Apprentice Arthur (sic) Fitzgibbon, Indian Medical Establishment.

*"For having behaved with great coolness and courage at the capture of North Taku Fort on the 21st August 1860. On the morning of that day he accompanied a wing of the 67th Regiment when it took up a position within 500 yards of the Fort. Having quitted cover, he proceeded under a very heavy fire, to attend to a Doolie-bearer, whose wound he had been directed to bind up; and, while the regiment was advancing under the enemy's fire, he ran across the open to another wounded man; in doing which he was himself severely wounded".*

At the time of the award Fitzgibbon was aged 15 years and 100 days old.

Back in India by 1862 he next served at the Depot Hospital Raneegunge and in 1863 was with B Battery 5th Royal Horse Artillery Brigade. This was followed by postings to Peshawar (1864), the 20th Hussars (1866) and promotion to Assistant Apothecary on 12th January 1867, becoming a 2nd Class Assistant Apothecary in 1868. On 3rd May 1869 he married Mary Amelia Coleman, the 20-year-old daughter of Geoffrey Coleman, at St John's Church, Peshawar, they eventually had two children.

From 1870-1872 he was at the Civil Dispensary, Mussoorie and also in 1872, having completed five years service he became an Assistant Apothecary 1st Class. It was evidently not uncommon for Apothecaries to hold the post of Civil Surgeon

and Fitzgibbon did this until 1879 when he is listed as being at the Rest Hospital Jumrood. At some time he was at the Lundi Kotal Field Hospital and it was there that his conduct became questionable.

The Adjutant General in India wrote on 12th September 1879 that although not found drunk on duty Fitzgibbon was found to have drunk sufficient to render him unfit for his duties, the letter being accompanied by two statements, one from Surgeon Major J Wallace and the other from Dr LH Ker Innes, both stating that Fitzgibbon was 'addicted to intemperate habits' and that it was unsafe to employ a medical subordinate of 'notoriously intemperate habits, on hospital duties where the lives of so many sick British soldiers are concerned'.

Fitzgibbon did not seem to want to change his habits despite being given the opportunity to do so. In view of this it was recommended that he be removed from military duties. Although his service did not warrant a gratuity or any form of pension, a letter was written to the Secretary of State for India, by the Finance Department on 25th February 1880, requesting that consideration be given for the award of a Special Compassionate Allowance of Rs 25 a month in view of his gallant service. The India Office agreed to this on 29th April.

Andrew Fitzgibbon died of a stroke on 7th March 1883, in Delhi and was buried in the Old Delhi Military Cemetery.

The whereabouts of his Victoria Cross and other medals is unknown; some say they are buried with him. No photograph or image has ever been traced.

## References

1. Baptisms Solemnised at Almorah. Bengal Ecclesiastical Record. Fitzgibbon File, AMS Museum
2. Order signed by HM Norman, Major on behalf of the Commander in Chief.
3. The Royal Hampshire Regiment. Volume 1 to 1914. CT Atkinson 1950
4. Ibid
5. Ross, Alexander Clark. Born 24 July 1828. Assistant Surgeon 1 July 1853. 67th Ft 30 November 1855. Served China 1860-61. Retired in the rank of Surgeon Major 28 January 1875. Died 16 April 1879. Medical Officers in the British Army 1660-1960. Vol 1 entry 5156. Wellcome, London 1968.
6. Statement supplied by Ross. TNA WO32/7357
7. Lamprey, Jones. Born 16 October 1824. Assistant Surgeon 8 October 1850. Surgeon 3 November 1857. 67th Ft 24 September 1859. China 1860. retired 16 October 1884. Died 29 October 1900. Medical Officers of the British Army Vol 1660-1960 Vol 1 entry 5023.
8. Statement supplied by Lamprey. TNA WO32/7357
9. Medical History of the War in North China. Muir W.M., Inspector General. In Medical and Sanitary Report for the Army. HMSO, London 1860.
10. The others being Lts Burslem and Lemon, Ensign Chaplin and Pte Lane.