

# VICE ADMIRAL J J KENNEDY CB, A 19TH CENTURY NAVAL CAREER

*James T Day*

I have been inspired by Else Churchill's recent article on 'Medals and Memorabilia' in the December 2014 issue of the *Genealogists Magazine* to write about my great grandfather's medals. When I was 18 years old my grandfather gave me the medals which had been awarded to his father, John James Kennedy. He must have decided that I would be a better custodian than my Mother, an only child. In this I hope I proved him correct. I still have the medals and it was this gift, more than any other factor, which probably inspired my interest in genealogy many years ago.

John James Kennedy was born on the 21 April 1821, the only son of the Venerable James Kennedy, Archdeacon of Waterford Cathedral in Southern Ireland and Elizabeth his wife. He must have decided at an early age to join the Royal Navy because on 7 June 1833, at the age of 12, he entered the Royal Naval College at Portsmouth, now the Portsmouth Naval Museum. At that time the Royal Naval College took 50 entrants per year, of which 25 had to be the sons of serving, retired or deceased officers. The cost for the son of a civilian was £125 pa, whereas the son of a serving officer paid £80 pa and of a deceased or retired officer £50 pa. John James's father, would therefore have had to have paid £250 to put his son through Naval College, probably the equivalent of £20,000 in today's money.<sup>1</sup>

It was the practice in those days to enter the Navy as young as possible, even to the extent of falsifying one's age. The crucial step was promotion to post-captain, i.e. to become eligible to command a ship in the rank of Captain. Once an officer had reached that rank a comfortable future was assured, even if he never again achieved active employment, since the so-called 'half-pay',

which was more than half in fact, was quite adequate to live on. Once on the post-captains' list, advancement was entirely by seniority and a man had only to stay alive to be sure in time of becoming an Admiral of the Fleet. Potential officers entering the Navy were, therefore, anxious to be commissioned as Lieutenants at the earliest possible age. The minimum age for promotion to Lieutenant was nineteen. However, to obtain a Lieutenant's commission it was necessary to present captains' certificates showing six years satisfactory naval service, hence the need to go to sea as soon as possible.



1. Lieutenant John James Kennedy RN.

Life on board a man of war was dangerous and uncomfortable. Ships could remain at sea for months on end. The food was coarse and stale, and not much of it, the drinking water polluted.

Drunkenness, thieving, and bullying were rife. Flogging continued to be a frequently awarded punishment, especially in ships which had been commissioned with difficulty. There were also still many severe, if not actually, brutal Captains in the service.

However, ships which were not difficult to commission and which were manned for the most part by men accustomed to discipline were often, especially if commanded by first-rate officers, places in which the infliction of corporal punishment was exceptional. A boy Volunteer such as John James Kennedy would be in a privileged position. He would not have to suffer quite the same privations and punishments as the lower deck, although he might be birched over the cabin gun, - 'married to the gunner's daughter' as the slang phrase went, - or sent to the masthead for a few hours to cool any youthful ardour. He would live in the Midshipman's mess and would be treated as a young gentleman and, if lucky, the captain would do his best to turn him into an acceptable naval officer

John James stayed at the Naval College for two years and then embarked as a Volunteer on board the *Magicienne* 24 guns, employed off the coasts of Spain and Portugal. Becoming a Midshipman in November 1837 he proceeded in the *Favorite* 18 guns to the East Indies where in October 1839 he joined the *Wellesley* 72 guns. Whilst on board the *Wellesley* he took part in 1840 in the Opium war against China.

For several years prior to 1820, opium had been exported from India to China, where the drug was admitted subject to a fixed duty. In 1820, however, the Chinese Government banned the trade although it continued to flourish illegally. Finally in 1838 the Chinese began to impose stricter measures, the outcome of which was that all opium then in British ships at Canton, some 20,000 chests worth £2,500,000, had to be surrendered and was destroyed. The British abandoned Canton and withdrew to the harbour of Hong Kong, which became daily more and more a British centre. However, the continuing hostility of the Chinese to any form of trade eventually led to a blockade of Canton and the subsequent war.

John James' service in the ensuing conflict is described in O'Byrne's Naval Biography as follows:

'Mr Kennedy served as Mate, either in the boats or on shore, at the first capture of Chusan; the attack upon the enemy's forts at Chuenpee and the Bogue, as also upon their camp, fort and the ship 'Cambridge', bearing the Chinese Admiral's flag, below Whampoa Reach, where 98 guns were in the whole destroyed; the towing of *HMS Sulphur* from under the fire of a masked battery; the storming of the heights above Canton in May 1841; and the reduction of Amoy, the recapture of Chusan, the storming of Chinghae (where he commanded the barge), and the occupation of Ningpo. He obtained his present rank (of Lieutenant) 8 Oct 1841; returned to England at the conclusion of the war in the 'Blenheim' 72, Capt. Sir Thomas Herbert; and from 12 June 1843, until paid off in the summer of 1847, was employed at the Cape of Good Hope as Second and First Lieutenant of the 'Conway' 26, Capt. Wm. Kelly. Lieut. Kennedy holds testimonials of the highest description from Sir Gordon Bremmer, Sir Thos. Maitland and Sir Thos. Herbert, the former of whom had his broad pennant on board the 'Wellesley'; and he has been awarded a first class certificate for his proficiency in naval gunnery.'

His first medal, the China 1842 medal, was for this service. This medal is inscribed around the rim, 'J.J. KENNEDY COLL. MATE H.M.S WELLESLEY'; 'coll mate' stands for 'College Mate' which indicates that he had graduated from the Portsmouth College.

His next action whilst on the Cape of Good Hope station in 1845 was at the bombardment of Tamatave, a town on the east coast of Madagascar. The ruler of Madagascar, Queen Ranavalona, was causing trouble for the European traders and so in 1845 the *Conway*, Captain William Kelly, and two French ships were sent to negotiate with her. Their commanders did their best to induce the Queen by peaceful representation to adopt a less aggressive policy. When this failed they bombarded the Tamatave forts and on 15 June a party of 350 men was landed to capture them. During this engagement

'... a ludicrous and rather childish quarrel broke out between the allies. A flag staff standing on the main

fort was shot through and fell outwards between the main fort and the outwork. Two British seamen, and a midshipman and two or three Frenchmen made a rush for the fallen flag and began a fierce struggle for it under heavy fire. They were about to settle the dispute with cutlasses when Lieutenant John James Kennedy leapt down among the combatants and with his knife cut the flag in two, giving half to each party. Kennedy was subsequently wounded.<sup>2</sup>

I have always thought that this action deserved a medal!

After a spell at the naval gunnery school, *HMS Excellent*, at Portsmouth, John James Kennedy was made First Lieutenant of the *London* 90, which was on station in the Mediterranean when the Crimean war broke out. The Emperor Nicholas of Russia had deemed that the moment was favourable to annex a large portion of the ailing Turkish Empire, including Constantinople. In view of the possibility that the Russian fleet from Sebastopol might hazard a sudden raid on Constantinople, Great Britain and France decided to despatch a combined fleet into the Bosphorus.

I have previously written of John James' service in the Crimean War in the *Genealogists Magazine*, (Vol. 31, Number 3, Sep. 2013) but some of it is worth repeating because it has a bearing on his medals.

He was part of the 1000 strong sailors and 50 officers of the Naval Brigade that were landed to take part in the siege of Sebastopol. Sailors manned thirty seven of the eighty guns in action, including Naval thirty-two pounders that replaced twenty two guns disabled in the batteries. John James served for the whole year that the Naval Brigade were on shore, from 1 October 1854 until 15 September 1855, including the battle of Inkerman. A contemporary witness (the wife of Colonel Duberly) to the aftermath of this battle (5 November) describing the horror wrote:

'Monday 6th. Henry told me that Alma was child's play to this! Compressed into a space not much exceeding a square half mile, lay about 5000 Russians, some say 6000; above 2000 of our own men, exclusive of French, of whom I believe there were 3000; lines

upon lines of artillery horses, heaps upon heaps of slain, lying in every attitude and congregated in masses - some on their sides, others with hands stiffening on the triggers of their muskets; some rolled up as if they died in mortal pain, others smiling placidly as though still dreaming of home: while round the batteries man and horse piled in heaps, wounds and blood - a ghastly and horrible sight.'<sup>3</sup>

On 13 November 1854 John James was promoted to Commander, '*for courage and endurance displayed by him whilst serving in the Naval Brigade in the trenches before Sebastopol*'. Shortly afterwards, on 1 February 1855, he was appointed Commander (i.e. second in command) of *HMS Agamemnon* 91, flagship of Rear Admiral Sir Edmund Lyons GCB, Commander in Chief. *HMS Agamemnon* had been laid down in Woolwich in 1849 and launched in 1852, the first ship of the line to be designed for screw and sail. It was later to be used for laying the first Atlantic Telegraph Cable.

On 1 October he was at last given command of his own ship, *HMS Curlew*, a sloop of 22 guns. The *Curlew* was one of a number of gunboats which took part in the naval actions in October 1855 in the Sea of Azoff. These actions destroyed the large quantity of late season harvest which had been collected in the Gheisk-Limam area. The intention of the Russians had been to transport these stores across the frozen Sea of Azoff during the winter months, thinking they were safe from attack by sea because of the shallowness of the water. For his part in this action Commander Kennedy, as the second in command was, along with others, mentioned in despatches to the Admiralty and was subsequently promoted to Captain.<sup>4</sup>

John James Kennedy gained bars to his Crimea medal for Azoff, Sebastopol and Inkermann. He was awarded the Order of the Bath, the Legion of Honour as well as the British, Turkish and Sardinian medals for the Crimea and the Order of Medidjie, Turkey. In addition he also had the China medal for his service in China in 1840. The Sardinian Medal was actually a decoration for 'valour' for the 'Expedition to the East'. There were only 30 awarded to the navy, each with an individual citation. John Kennedy's read as follows:

‘Captain John James Kennedy RN served on shore from the time of the landing to the debarkation of the Naval Brigade. He bore a part in every bombardment and is represented by Rear Admiral Sir Stephen Lushington to have set a most praiseworthy example of courage and endurance’. The medal is inscribed on the back, ‘Capt John James Kennedy CB Naval Brigade’. The British Crimea Medal with the Azoff bar is very rare (about 2000) and very few of these were inscribed. J J K’s is inscribed around the rim, ‘J. J. Kennedy, Commander of *HMS Agamemnon*’.<sup>5</sup>

The unofficial New Navy List (1841-1856) says of J J Kennedy, ‘Mate of *Wellesley* and officially noticed at the capture of Amoy and Chinghae (1841); Lieutenant of *Conway* and wounded in both legs at attack on batteries at Tamatave, Madagascar (1845); Senior Lieutenant of *London* and promoted for services at the bombardment of Fort Constantine (1854)’.

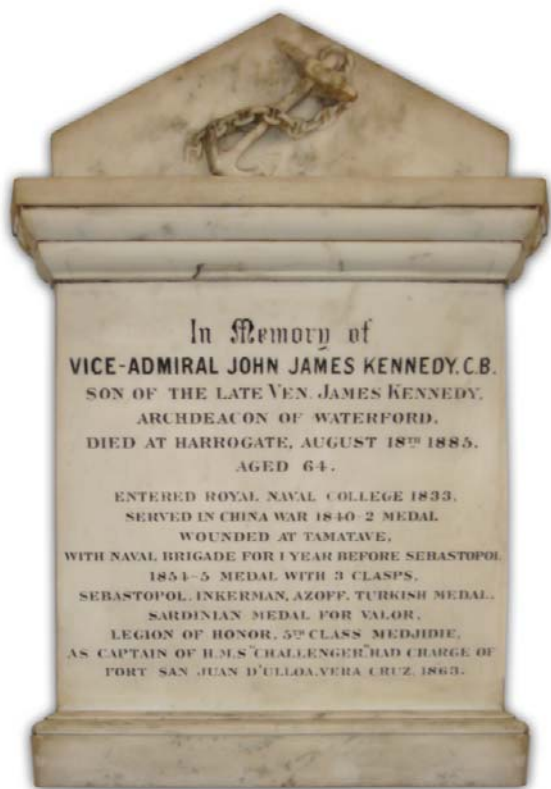
In 1861 Napoleon III had begun a Latin American venture by proposing to make the Austrian Archduke, Ferdinand Maximilian Josef, emperor of Mexico, hoping by this means to check the growing influence of the United States in Latin America. The following year Great Britain contributed a battalion of Marines and three ships from the North America and West Indies squadron to the joint exercise with Spain and France to extract payment of indemnities for their residents in Mexico, who had suffered during the civil commotions prior to the election of President

Benito Juarez. The flagship of the group was the *Challenger* 22 guns, screw, commanded by Captain John James Kennedy, CB, bearing the broad pennant of Commodore Hugh Dunlop from Jamaica. The British participated in the occupation of Vera Cruz but very wisely decided, in concert with Spain, to withdraw in the following April. As soon as the US had concluded its Civil War, it forced the French to withdraw from Mexico with disastrous consequences, both to France and to Napoleon III’s protégé, Maximilian, who, having been abandoned, was executed by Juarez.

Kennedy’s subsequent career was with the coast guard services, at that time a branch of the Royal Navy. In January 1866 he was Captain of the *Frederick William*, 3241 tons, 500 HP, based at Foynes, on the river Shannon, southern Ireland. His final posting in September 1868 was to the *Valiant*, 4063 tons, 800 HP, for a further three years coast guard duty before retiring as a Captain in 1871. Prior to that, in April 1870, he had been awarded a special Good Service Pension of £150pa for distinguished service at sea. That, together with his Captain’s pension of around £500pa, would have made him comfortably off. Having during his long service achieved the rank of post Captain, he gradually progressed up the promotional ladder in retirement until in February 1879 he became a Vice Admiral on a pension of £725pa plus his Good Service Pension of £150pa.



2. Medals of Vice Admiral J J Kennedy.  
L-R: Order of Bath, Legion of Honour, China 1842, British Crimea, Order of Medjidie (Turkey), Sardinian Medal for valour, Turkish Crimea.



3. Plaque in St Ann's Church, Portsmouth Dockyard.

On 21 April 1866 he had married at Christ Church, Cheltenham, Isabella Frances Evans, the daughter of the Reverend Francis Evans, who was descended from a line of Herefordshire churchmen. By her he had three children who survived, my grandfather being the eldest.

The Admiral died at Harrogate on 18 August 1885 at the age of sixty four. There is a plaque to his memory in the RN church of St Ann's in the dockyard at Portsmouth. I only discovered this plaque late into my researches. Had I discovered it earlier it would have saved me a lot of work!

### Notes

1. Measuring Worth - purchasing power of the pound.
2. *The Royal Navy* Vol. Six by William Laird Clowes.
3. *Mrs Duberley's War* by Christine Kelly.
4. *London Gazette*, 8 December 1855.
5. Naval Campaign Medals to 1854.

### Other Sources

- The Long Arm of Empire*, by Richard Brooks.  
 The Russian War 1855 - Navy Records Society vol. LXXXV.  
*Crimea*, by Trevor Royal.  
 Navy Lists.  
 Lieutenants' Passing Certificates.  
 O'Byrnes Naval Biography.  
*London Gazette*.

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