The Royal Naval surgeons in the battle of Coronel

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In Memoriam: the Royal Naval surgeons of HMS GOOD HOPE and HMS MONMOUTH.

Introduction

The battle of Coronel was the first British defeat in the First World War and is not often remembered. It played out in the southern Pacific Ocean, off the coast of Chile. On 1 November 1914, the Royal Navy (RN) confronted a German squadron outside the port of Coronel (36° 59' 26.24” S, 73° 37' 53.39” W), close to Chile’s second city of Concepción. The Germans won a resounding victory, sinking two of the four British ships (HMS GOOD HOPE and HMS MONMOUTH) with the loss of over 1600 lives. The British responded quickly and forcefully. They dispatched ships from the North Sea to the South Atlantic and confronted the Germans at the Falkland Islands five weeks later. This time, the British won. They sank four German ships, and more than 1800 German sailors were lost (1).

This article will attempt to look past the shadow of the narrative of important events (political, military or cultural), and instead focus on some of the protagonists in these events who participated decisively, but in an almost anonymous way. This participation has been essential and, frequently, their unknown contribution makes or breaks the efforts of these political or military leaders who are remembered in history books. It also means that these leading characters, whether the final result has been success or victory, can hold the highest places in the monuments erected to commemorate historical events. Behind the names and actions of the leaders or heroes, depending on the historical circumstances, can always be found the work, the spirit and, very often in military or naval history, the ultimate sacrifice of life in the fulfilment of duty, of these apparently secondary characters who are nearly always forgotten.

The sailors and officers who are the ‘Dramatis Personae’ of this battle now rest in the depths of the sea, amidst the ruins of their warships destroyed by enemy gunfire. These men performed their duties right to the end and were finally laid to rest in the deep water that covers all and gradually erodes the glorious remains of sunken ships, until time finally dissolves them completely. Among these sailors we should, as fellow doctors, commemorate the surgeons who, out of pure vocation or given the imperative of serving their country, enlisted as officers in warships to take care of the welfare of their crews and attend the wounds of those fallen in combat. However, from the mid-19th century, naval artillery acquired such an enormous destructive capacity, capable of penetrating even the most powerful armour plates, that during the short moments of naval engagement, shellfire created such a terrible level of destruction and horrific wounds that the surgeons’ task was almost impossible. This reality was succinctly reported in a brief, but exact, note published in the British Medical Journal (BMJ) at the beginning of 1920, concerning several surgeons killed in naval actions (2):

“The story of Coronel and the Falklands confirms the belief that in a general action the defeated side loses so heavily in ships that the work of the medical service is wiped out … that the number of casualties gives some idea of the condition to which the crew of a beaten ship that fights to the last is reduced.”

The surgeons’ destiny was to share the heroism of the entire crew, with the certainty of succumbing alongside them. The romantic times of surgeons working with rolled-up sleeves below decks healing or amputating limbs, as depicted in Lord Nelson’s time, were only reminders of the past; the tremendous destruction of 6-, 8- or 12-inch shells hindered, or made almost impossible, surgery in the sick bays of warships. This article proposes to resurrect the memory of five surgeons of the RN who perished while fulfilling their military duties alongside their comrades in arms at the Battle of Coronel. It is not the purpose of this article to narrate all the historical circumstances of the battle between the British Squadron under the command of Rear Admiral Sir Christopher Cradock and the German Fleet of the Pacific commanded by Vice Admiral Maximilian von Spee.
There is an extensive bibliography and collection of documents about this naval battle, but none of the books or papers published mentions the names of the five naval surgeons who gave their lives. However, a good analytical abstract of the battle can be found in an excellent paper written by Chilean Vice Admiral Gerald Wood McEwan, KCB (3). It was common in the First World War, on board the principal British warships, to find in the officer class two surgeons, the Staff or Chief Surgeon and an assistant Surgeon; the squadron’s flagship added a third Surgeon, the Fleet Surgeon. Naval surgeons followed a specific career path: they were commissioned in the RN having just graduated from Medical School, and it was common that after twelve years’ service, they were promoted to Staff Surgeons. By reviewing the naval careers of these doctors through screening reports in the BMJ, it is possible to track their careers through very limited personal detail such as universities attended, dates of exams before the Commissions of the Royal College of Surgeons and Royal College of Physicians, as well as the dates of their incorporation in the Royal Navy, and the ships they served on.

The surgeons of the Battle of Coronel

In HMS GOOD HOPE, Flagship of Admiral Cradock, the following men lost their lives: James J. Walsh, Fleet Surgeon (4); Francis C. Searle, Surgeon (5) and Fernand L. J. De Verteuil, Naval Reserve Surgeon (6).

Dr Walsh studied at the University of Ireland in Dublin, graduated as a physician and commissioned in the Navy in 1885. Surgeon Searle studied at St. Bartholomew’s Hospital in London, and enlisted in 1909, the same year of his graduation. Finally, Dr De Verteuil, at 35 years old, a native of Trinidad, belonged to an ancient noble French family. After having serving several years in the Royal Navy and retiring from the service, he settled in Vancouver where he practiced as an infectologist, making noteworthy contributions in comments and letters to the BMJ (7, 8, 9 and 10) and presenting a notable paper published in the Canadian Medical Association Journal (11). His letters and papers covered a range of aspects on the aetiology and treatment of leprosy, syphilis and yaws. He was also a pioneer in Canada in therapeutic applications of Roentgen rays (12). After war broke out he was reincorporated as

Figure 1. Dr De Verteuil, first in the last line from left to right; Dr Searle seated third from the right, second seated row.
Reserve Surgeon and assigned to HMS GOOD HOPE. He studied at the University of Edinburgh, graduating in 1901, and on 23 July 1909 was awarded his MD degree at the same University; his thesis won him recognition and a special prize from the Boards of Examiners (13). He also translated, in 1907/08, Paul Maisonneuve’s *Expérimentation sur la prophylaxie de la syphilis* (Paris, 1906) into English, and gave a copy to Haslar Library; the book is now in the Historic Collections library at the Institute of Naval Medicine.

In HMS MONMOUTH, the second of the ships lost at Coronel, the position of Staff Surgeon was filled by Dr Henry Woods, born in 1879, graduating as physician in 1909 at the University of Liverpool, joining the Royal Navy that same year (14, 15). His assistant surgeon was Dr Albert J. Tonkinson, 27 years old (16), who studied at the University of Birmingham, graduating in 1914. Just before enlisting he worked briefly as assistant physician in Pathology at the same University.

It was not possible to ascertain complete information on all the surgeons, but two of them were married (De Verteuil and Walsh) and two were Roman Catholics (De Verteuil and Woods). Figure 1 shows Drs De Verteuil and Searle on board HMS GOOD HOPE a few weeks before her sinking.

The BMJ published a reference to the loss of the five surgeons in very brief notes and without further commentary on two occasions. This can be explained by the fact that naval doctors killed in combat represented a minority in comparison with the much larger number of army doctors killed on the battlefields of the European Front (17, 18). The names of the surgeons lost at Coronel are registered on the Portsmouth and Plymouth Naval Memorials; they are also mentioned separately for Dr Woods in the Preston College Memorial and in the precincts of St. Wilfred’s Church, Cotton, Staffordshire; for Dr De Verteuil and for Dr Tonkinson in the Birmingham War Memorial.

**Remembrance**

Inspired by the circumstance of sailing off the precise location of the battle of Coronel, where HMS GOOD HOPE and HMS MONMOUTH rest in a silent tomb together with all hands, the author decided to hold a private memorial with his wife and a few other passengers on board SS RADIANCE OF THE SEAS at noon on 31 January 2009. One of the texts shared in the ceremony read as follows: “We therefore commit their bodies to the deep, to be turned into corruption, looking for resurrection, (when the Sea shall give up her dead) and the life of the world to come, through our Lord Jesus” (19). These words would depict a small, but meaningful homage, to the valour and sacrifice of Naval Surgeons, as we seek to record their memory in this journal for future generations of doctors.

**References**

12. The London Gazette. December 1, 1903;7937.

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