

Chief Officer of Coastguard James WALKER

- Medal: Egypt Medal 1882-9 (Dated Reverse)
- Bars: “ALEXANDRIA 11th JULY”, “THE NILE 1884-85”
- Named to: ***J.WALKER, ORD., H.M.S. “INVINCIBLE”***
- Naming: Engraved in heavy italics capitals.
- Verification: “ALEXANDRIA 11th JULY” on ADM 171/41.
“THE NILE 1884-85” on ADM 171/43 (Nile Flotilla).
96 medals with this combination.
- Documents: Copy Service Record from ADM 188/133 &
ADM 175/104.
Copy obituary notice from the Isle of Wight Times.
5th January 1933.
- Other Medal Khedive’s Bronze Star (1882)
- Entitlement:

James Walker was born in Fishponds near Bristol on 23rd June 1863. He joined the Royal Navy a few days before his sixteenth birthday on 19th June 1879 and was rated Boy 2nd class aboard the training ship *Impregnable* at Devonport. Ten days later he transferred to H.M.S. *Ganges*, another training ship, which in those days was moored at Falmouth in Cornwall. After a year of training he was advanced to Boy 1st class.

On 6th December 1880 James was drafted to his first ship, the broadside iron-clad *Invincible* (Captain *Hon.* Edmund Fremantle R.N.) in the Mediterranean. In early January 1881 she docked at Gibraltar where Fremantle turned over command to Captain Robert Fitzroy R.N. who had come out from England. It is possible that James joined the ship at Gibraltar at this time. Six months later he was advanced to Ordinary Seaman on attaining his eighteenth birthday.

At this period the Royal Navy had a training ship for Ordinary Seaman on the Mediterranean station, H.M.S. *Cruiser*, a screw sloop built in 1855. She spent her time cruising between the islands of the Mediterranean and Gibraltar and was intended to give young Ordinary Seaman a firm grounding in sail training which was regarded as the best method of producing good, all-round, sailors. James joined her on 6th November 1881 and was with her for five months before he returned to *Invincible* in March the following year.

In May 1882, growing political instability in Egypt came to a head when the Council of Ministers attempted to usurp the authority of the

Khedive. This move was lead by the Minister of War, Arabi Pasha, a leading Egyptian nationalist. Great Britain and France were concerned that an unstable Egypt would compromise the safety and integrity of the Suez Canal, which was essential to them not only from a financial point of view but also for the further expansion of their respective empires. Therefore they determined to send a joint naval expedition to North Africa to await further events and intervene if required.

The Mediterranean Fleet under Admiral Seymour with his Flag in *Alexandra* left Suda Bay in Crete and arrived off Alexandria on May 20th. H.M.S. *Invincible* was one of the eight ironclads present. On May 25th Seymour shifted his flag to *Invincible** and entered the inner harbour in order to present an allied ultimatum to the Khedive requiring the temporary banishment of Arabi into the interior and the resignation of the entire cabinet. Initially this ultimatum appeared to have been carried out but it proved impossible to form a new cabinet and just three days later Arabi was back in his position of Minister of War. An *impasse* had been reached so the Fleet was ordered to remain off Alexandria to await developments.

June 11th saw the outbreak of major violent disturbances in Alexandria which lead to the death of some European citizens and the destruction of property owned by non-Egyptians. Amongst those killed were Engineer James Pibworth R.N. of the *Superb* and two ratings from the *Helicon*. Many Europeans were evacuated from the city with the help of the Royal Navy.

Arabi, expecting a backlash from British forces, ordered the seaward defences of the port to be straightened and the guns prepared for action. Admiral Seymour responded by issuing an ultimatum on July 6th to stop this activity or risk war. Four days later, with no sign that defensive work had ceased, the Fleet prepared for action. *Invincible* and *Penelope* left the inner harbour on the night of July 10th and steamed out to lay off Fort Mex where they were joined by *Monarch* and came to anchor. On the following morning the ultimatum expired and the eight ironclads of the Mediterranean opened fire on the defences. *Monarch*, being a turret ship fought while underway but *Invincible* and *Penelope* fought at anchor using a hawser as a spring for manoeuvring.

The fight was fairly one sided and firing all but ceased at around one o'clock in the afternoon. As the firing died down twelve volunteers from *Invincible* were landed and entered the ruins of Fort Mex where they rendered two undamaged guns unusable. During the bombardment *Invincible* had been hit many times but her armour was breached by only a few shots. Six men of her complement were wounded.

Two days after the bombardment a Naval Brigade was landed from the ships of the Fleet in order to restore order in the city. A party from *Invincible* landed with a Gatling and was involved in further fighting which only stopped after the defeat of the Egyptian army at Tel-el-Kebir on September 13th.

* H.M.S. *Alexandra* drew to much water to enter the inner harbour at Alexandria.

Thus young James Walker received his baptism of fire. It is not known whether he saw service ashore following the bombardment but no *Invincible's* were present in the Naval Brigade which fought at Tel-el-Kebir. After the excitement of action he returned to the usual naval routine but his career took a different turn in February 1883 when he transferred to the Signals branch in the rate of Signalmán 3rd class. Only the brightest young men were chosen for signals. He progressed well and was advanced to Signalmán 2nd class on 1st July 1884.

At this time Egypt and the Sudan again become ravaged by war with the advent of The Mhadi and his followers which lead to battles being fought around the Red Sea port of Suakin and General Gordon becoming besieged in Khartoum. After much political vacillating it was decided to mount an expedition to extricate Gordon. General Wolseley decided that the expedition would proceed up the Nile and the Royal Navy was again called upon to supply personnel for this purpose. The new Commander-in-Chief Mediterranean, Lord John Hay, was very reluctant to supply a large force and in the end only around 300 Bluejackets and Royal Marines were supplied, their main duties being to survey the route and help the craft up cataracts on the river.

Thus Signalmán 2nd class James Walker was transferred to H.M.S. *Monarch* on 1st October 1884, the day he was awarded his first good conduct badge, for service in the Nile Flotilla as the force was to be styled. Messrs. Thomas Cook supplied two stern-wheelers and the Royal Navy eight pinnaces. The majority of the troops would be carried in 800 clinker built whalers manned not by the Royal Navy but by a force of Canadian boatmen specially recruited for the task.

By the time James joined the flotilla the main body was at Wadi Halfa above the second cataract and on October 14th the first of the whalers began to arrive there. We cannot be sure exactly where he served on the river but we know he must have come south of Asswan to qualify for the bar to his Egypt medal. We also know that he did not serve with the small Naval Brigade which fought at Abu Klea. The entire campaign, which was ultimately unsuccessful, was a hard and difficult one, not least as the force had to fight the desert, the river and the climate as well as The Mhadi's fanatical army.

James Walker returned to *Monarch* at the conclusion of the expedition and on 1st June 1885 was transferred to the *Hibernia* at Malta to await his return to England. He arrived home in July aboard H.M.S. *Neptune* and after a few days on the books of *Royal Adelaide* was transferred to H.M.S. *Duke of Wellington* at Portsmouth. Presumably he took some very welcome foreign service leave at this time.

His next posting couldn't have been more different than the deserts of Egypt. On 9th December 1885 he joined the gunboat *Mistletoe* (Commander Owen Tudor R.N.) on Fishery Protection duties based at Jersey in the Channel Islands. He may have found this duty rather tedious as he got into trouble and lost his good conduct badge in January 1887. This was reinstated however in September that year and in the following James was advanced Qualified Signalmán and then Leading Signalmán just before he left the ship in October 1888.

He was already familiar with his next ship, H.M.S. *Penelope*, as she had fought alongside *Invincible* at Alexandria seven years previously. He joined her at Portsmouth as she commissioned to serve as Receiving Ship at Simon's Bay, Cape of Good Hope, but he was only with her for five months before returning to *Duke of Wellington* at the end of March 1889. After this he served for three months in the *Agamemnon* (Captain Charles Cardle R.N.) of the Mediterranean Fleet, but attached to the East Indies and stationed at Zanzibar. In June 1889 he transferred to the Gun Vessel *Griffon* (Commander John Blaxland R.N.) of the East Indies squadron.

Griffon was largely employed on anti-slavery duties, a difficult task in the prevailing climate. In March 1890 she and H.M.S. *Sphinx* were fired on by the guns of the fort at Fao, which was under Turkish control, in the Persian Gulf. Fire was not returned and after some diplomatic activity the Royal Navy was welcomed at Fao with all honours, the commandant of the fort having been removed.

H.M.S. *Griffon* returned to England in September 1890 too pay off. She was disposed of shortly afterwards. The commission, which saw James receive his second good conduct badge, was his last in foreign waters.

On 15th October James was drafted to H.M.S. *Neptune* (Captain Uvedale Singleton R.N.), the Coast Guard ship at Holyhead in North Wales. Two weeks later he transferred into the Coast Guard in the rate of Boatman. He was initially stationed at Holyhead later transferring to Lynmouth (North Devon) and thence to Ilfracombe in September 1891. He was there for three and a half years before returning to Holyhead in April 1894 on advancement to Commissioned Boatman. His third good conduct badge arrived shortly after, but he lost this in May 1895 and had to wait six months for it to be returned.

In February 1897 James transferred to the Coast Guard station at St. Ann's Head on the western entrance to Milford Haven. Here he was stationed for five years. He left for the short trip down the coast to Rhossili on the Gower Peninsula in March 1902 and was there when he was advanced to Chief Boatman in September 1903.

The Coast Guard districts were reorganised at this juncture and the Welsh stations became part of the Western District. Shortly after his promotion James was transferred to Minehead in Somerset where he remained until September 1906.

After being in Coast Guard stations on the West coast for some sixteen years James headed south in September 1906 for Fairlight near Hastings in Sussex and was there when he was advanced to the warrant rank of Chief Officer of Coast Guard in December 1909. He was then transferred just up the coast to Pett.

On September 13th 1911 he was appointed to the Coast Guard station at Ryde, Isle of Wight and he was here when war broke out in 1914. During the war he was employed in the Examination service and would have had to board merchant as they entered the Solent prior to docking at Southampton or other ports. From 1916 to 1919 he was borne on the books of H.M.S. *President IV*.

James Walker was pensioned from the service on 28th June 1919 after forty years service. He was then a little over 56 years of age. On his retirement he was granted the rank of Commissioned Officer from Warrant rank. He continued to live in Ryde at Lumley House in Nelson Street, just a couple of hundred yards from the Esplanade, until his sudden death from Influenza on 30th December 1932 at the age of 69. He left a widow, one son and four daughters. The funeral service was held at St. James' church on Lind Street, where he had been a regular worshiper, a few days later and he was buried at Ryde cemetery.