

Voice From The Ranks – A Testimony of the Crimea

By Sergeant-Major Timothy Gowing, 7th Foot, Royal Fusiliers

“For thou hast girded me with strength unto the battle: thou hast subdued under me those that rose up against me” Psalm 18:39



Sgt-Major Gowing



The Battle of the Alma, 20 September 1854

The 7th Royal Fusiliers and the Coldstream Guards attack Russian-held heights at the Battle of the Alma during the Crimean War (1854-1856)¹

Voice From The Ranks and Faith Forged in “the fiery trial” 1 Peter 4:12

The book *Voice From The Ranks: a personal account of the Crimean Campaign*² by Sergeant-Major Timothy Gowing is an infantryman’s eye-view of the Crimean War. The book is also a testimony of a young man coming to know the Lord Jesus Christ under the “*the fiery trial*” 1 Peter 4:12 of the Crimea.

Godly Parents and a Call to Arms

Timothy Gowing was born in 1834, the eldest son of John Gowing a Baptist minister. He grew up in Suffolk and Norfolk and joined the Royal Fusiliers in January 1854, at the age of nineteen. The Royal Fusiliers formed part of the elite Light Division. Gowing’s book *Voice From The Ranks* was republished by The Folio Society of London in 1954 on the centenary of the Crimean War. There were still people alive then who remembered Gowing vividly, as a man of striking appearance and personality, about six feet tall and of outstanding strength but also “*an extremely religious man [who] rarely drank anything stronger than tea or coffee.*” In that way God did enable Timothy Gowing to experience in “*the day of battle*” Zechariah 14:3 of the Crimea Psalm 18:39 “*For thou hast girded me with strength unto the battle: thou hast subdued under me those that rose up against me.*”

Enduring Hardness

The Preface to *Voice From The Ranks* outlines the author's experiences in the Crimea.

I took part in some of the most desperate scenes in the Crimea - at the Alma I was one of those who led the way up the fatal Heights; at Inkerman I was in the thick of the fight and was wounded. I was beside that Christian hero Captain Hedley Vicars when he fell in his country's cause...I was also engaged in those memorable struggles that were carried on night after night, and day after day, before Sevastopol, and was wounded a second time in that bloody attack on the Redan...

The letters to my parents from the seat of war in the Crimea I have ventured to publish, trusting they will prove of more than passing interest and set more than one thinking, 'Where is my boy tonight?' Many of them were written under great difficulty in a bleak tent or hut with the thermometer far below freezing point, with my wet rags frozen on my back; often my overcoat stiff with frost.

Sergeant Gowing's Crimean experiences thereby cast him as a tough-minded role model for today's believer. **"Thou therefore endure hardness, as a good soldier of Jesus Christ"** 2 Timothy 2:3.

Devoted Son

The Sergeant's letters to his parents invariably spoke of his very deep affection for them, a testimony to his Christian home upbringing. His letter from *Camp before Sevastopol, June 28th 1855* is typical.

I will write as often as I can...Although I wear a red coat, I hope there is a warm heart beating beneath it. I must conclude with love to all, and a double allowance for poor mother. Believe me ever, dear Parents, Your affectionate son, T. Gowing, Sergeant, Royal Fusiliers.

As Solomon said, which words like Sergeant Gowing, today's believer should remember **"Hearken unto thy father that begat thee, and despise not thy mother when she is old"** Proverbs 23:22.

The River Alma and a Faithful Witness

The first major battle of the Crimean War was the crossing of the River Alma on September 20th 1854. Sergeant Gowing's closest friend at that time was a Christian soldier who doubtless influenced Gowing's later conversion. Their last conversation took place the night before the battle.

Getting hold of my arm, he stopped, looked me full in the face, and twice repeated the solemn words: 'Eternity, Eternity, know and seek the Lord while He may be found. Call upon Him while He is near, for you cannot tell what tomorrow will bring forth, and it may be too late then.'

The soldier was right, as Paul shows. **"(For he saith, I have heard thee in a time accepted, and in the day of salvation have I succoured thee: behold, now is the accepted time; behold, now is the day of salvation.)"** 2 Corinthians 6:2.

The Light Division crossed the Alma under heavy fire. Gowing recalled:

Presently [the enemy] began to pitch their shot and shell right amongst us, and our men began to fall. I know that I felt horribly sick-a cold shivering running through my veins...Up to the river we rushed and got ready for a swim, pulling off knapsacks and camp kettles. A number of our poor fellows were...shot down with grape and canister - which came amongst us like hail - while attempting to cross...Into the river we dashed, nearly up to our armpits, with our ammunition and rifles on top of our heads to keep them dry, scrambled out the best way we could...and commenced to ascend the hill. From east to west the enemy's batteries were served with great rapidity...the guns; the thunderbolts of war were...not far apart - and death loves a crowd...[I]n all, some 42 guns were raining death and destruction upon us...

The Light Division gained the heights above the Alma but suffered severely. The Royal Fusiliers sustained over 50% casualties, among them Sergeant Gowing's Christian friend. Gowing recalled:

I found him close to the river, dead...He was now in the presence of his glorified Captain; he was as brave as a lion, but a faithful disciple...I sat down beside him and thought my heart would break as I recalled some of his sayings, particularly his talk to me at midnight of the 19th.

Sergeant Gowing's friend died a faithful witness. Today's believer should aim for the same testimony.

"I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith: Henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, shall give me at that day: and not to me only, but unto all them also that love his appearing" 2 Timothy 4:7-8.

Siege, Deprivation, Disease and the Soldiers' Battle of Inkerman

The Allies besieged the town of Sevastopol after the Alma. The siege was grim, as Gowing recalled:

We found it no child's play dragging heavy siege guns up from Balaclava...up to our ankles in mud which stuck like glue. Often on arrival in camp we found but little to eat...then off again to help get the guns and mortars into their respective batteries, exposed all the time to the enemy's fire...

Our numbers began to get very scanty - cholera was daily finding its victims. It never left us from the time we were in Turkey...Nearly all of us were suffering more or less from ague, fever or colds, but it was no use complaining - the doctors had little or no medicine to give. Our fellows were dropping off fast with dysentery and diarrhoea; but, all that could stuck to it manfully.

Today's believer should stick to it manfully according to his commission from the Lord as Paul exhorts.

"Take heed to the ministry which thou hast received in the Lord, that thou fulfil it" Colossians 4:17.

On the 25th October 1854, Gowing witnessed the ill-fated 'Charge of the Light Brigade' from the heights above Balaclava but the infantry bore the brunt of the fighting. Gowing described what came to be known as 'the soldiers' battle' of Inkerman, fought on November 5th 1854.

Inkerman will not admit of much description, particularly from one who was in the thick of it...for the fog was so dense that one could not see, at times, twenty yards. On came the Russian columns; but they had to go back time after time much quicker than they came. The bayonet was used with terrible effect by all regiments. The enemy...were met by British cold steel and were hurled...from the field.

Today's believer should be able to wield ***"the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God"*** Ephesians 6:17 against the enemy with like terrible effect ***"For the word of God is quick, and powerful, and sharper than any twoedged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart"*** Hebrews 4:12.

A Soldier and a Gentleman

Sergeant Gowing was bayoneted in each thigh at Inkerman and 'cas-evaced' by sea to Malta, where he wrote to his parents. His letter indicates that the renowned Miss Nightingale's reforms had taken effect.

I have the best of attention and, what's more, a pretty young lady for my nurse. You know, father, that soldiers have an eye to pretty girls [no change there in 160 years ☺]; but woe be to the man who would attempt to molest one of these dear creatures, for they are worth their weight in gold... That is:

"...intreat...The elder women as mothers; the younger as sisters, with all purity" 1 Timothy 5:1-2.

Another Faithful Witness and Undoubted Influence

Gowing returned to the front early in 1855 and met Captain Hedley Vicars of the 97th Regiment.

Gowing wrote *That night I met for the first time that noble-minded man, Captain Hedley Vicars. He and I had a long chat in the trench...I told him about my comrade at the Alma. 'Well Sergeant,' he said, 'the Lord's time is the right time; who is the best off now, you or he?'*...

He invited me...to his tent for prayer, as he told me a few who loved the Lord met there as often as they could. I did not profess anything at the time, but was going against light and knowledge. I went once and only once before he was killed. He was a Christian, and was not ashamed of his Master, but yet a most determined soldier for his country. *light and knowledge are in Jesus Christ 2 Corinthians 4:6.*

Captain Vicars was killed on March 22nd 1855. His testimony remains. ***"According to my earnest expectation and my hope, that in nothing I shall be ashamed, but that with all boldness, as always, so now also Christ shall be magnified in my body, whether it be by life, or by death"*** Philippians 1:20.

Sevastopol, First Assault, June 18th 1855

The first attempt to capture Sevastopol was a disaster. Gowing, however, recalled the men's resolve.

It did not last much more than half an hour, and our loss (killed, wounded, and missing) was 7,988 French and British. Our men had been crushed beneath a terrific fire, but not subdued...Although they had just thrashed us, we were not going to give up the game for one black eye.

The men had the spirit of David, which is most applicable for today's believer. **"In the day when I cried thou answeredst me, and strengthenedst me with strength in my soul"** Psalm 138:3.

Sevastopol, Second Assault, September 8th 1855

The second and final assault went in on September 8th 1855. The British objective was the Redan, one of the city's main forts. Gowing was saved by this time and it appears so were other soldiers. He wrote:

I know I tried to pray, begged the Lord to forgive my sins for His great name's sake, and asked for His protecting arm around me, and strength of mind and body to do my duty to my Queen and Country...

On the night of the 7th September [the soldiers] assembled in hundreds in front of their lines and committed themselves into the hands of an all-wise God in prayer and praise, while others burst forth into the National Anthem. Such were the men who stormed Sevastopol.

They trusted God's promise as today's believer should. **"Whoso offereth praise glorifieth me: and to him that ordereth his conversation aright will I shew the salvation of God"** Psalm 50:23.

Sergeant Gowing was among those who reached the Redan, where he received five separate wounds but sent a letter to his parents on 14th September 1855 expressing his thankfulness to God.

The fighting, dear Parents, in the interior of the Redan was desperate...I cannot express my gratitude to the King of Kings and Lord of Lords, who shielded my life-I hope for some good purpose... Gowing's sense of being saved to serve is also evident in a letter to his parents dated March 1856, at the war's end.

Truly I have had a merciful God watching over me and am spared, I hope, for some good purpose, for this wonderful God of ours can see from the beginning to the end; He is the same unchanging God that the Patriarchs trusted in.

God's good purpose for Timothy Gowing was as He promised His disciples. **"But ye shall receive power, after that the Holy Ghost is come upon you: and ye shall be witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judaea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth"** Acts 1:8.

Some Good Purpose Fulfilled and a Tough-minded Role Model

Timothy Gowing remained in the army after the Crimea and served for a total of 22 years, 18 of them in India. He was promoted to Colour Sergeant, then Sergeant Major and twice offered a commission, which he declined partly for family reasons. Although his military career flourished, Gowing's personal life was dogged by tragedy. He was widowed twice and of his 19 children by his first two wives, 18 predeceased him, seven dying in one day from cholera, in India. Nevertheless, he kept the faith and after leaving the army sold many copies of his book *Voice From The Ranks* to the workers in the offices and factories of Lancashire where he settled. Gowing's testimony and those of his comrade who died at the Alma and Captain Vicars no doubt continued to challenge the hearts and minds of ordinary folk. In that way Timothy Gowing fulfilled God's purpose for him as among **"witnesses unto me"** Acts 1:8.

Sergeant Major Gowing's home call came on February 3rd 1908. The old soldier passed away aged 73, survived by his third wife, Elizabeth and a son from his second marriage. As indicated, see **Enduring Hardness**, Sergeant Major Gowing was indeed a tough-minded role model for today's believer as Paul exhorts. **"Thou therefore endure hardness, as a good soldier of Jesus Christ"** 2 Timothy 2:3.

References

¹ prints.national-army-museum.ac.uk/image/327335/e-walker-the-battle-of-the-alma-20-september-1854

² www.historyhome.co.uk/forpol/crimea/gowing/voiceov.htm