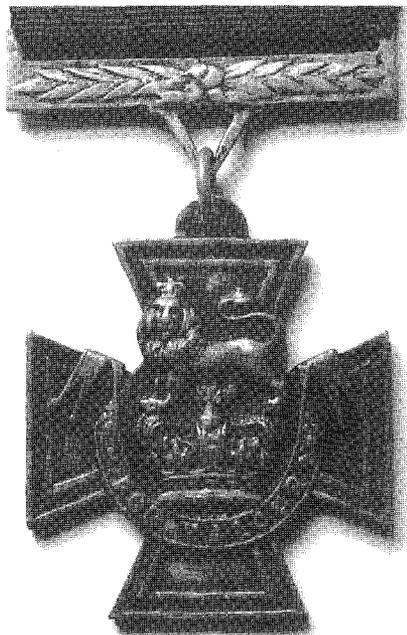


# Limerick and the Victoria Cross

**T**he institution of a new gallantry award, the Victoria Cross, was announced in the *London Gazette* on 5th February 1856. Queen Victoria presented Lieutenant (afterwards Rear-Admiral) H.J. Raby, Royal Navy, and the first recipient, with the Victoria Cross in a ceremony held in Hyde Park, London, on 26th June 1857. The Queen stated that the medal should be awarded to those who 'performed acts of outstanding gallantry'.



The Victoria Cross

While the Royal Warrant instituting the Victoria Cross had been issued in 1856, it was made retrospective to 1854 so that sailors and soldiers who had fought in the Crimean War would be eligible. Originally the medal was bestowed only upon those that survived; it was not until 1920 that an official amendment was made allowing the VC to be awarded posthumously.

The Victoria Cross consists of a Maltese cross of bronze, with the royal crest in the centre and underneath a scroll bearing the simple words 'For Valour'. The hand-engraved details of the recipient are on the reverse of the suspender bar with the date of the act in the reverse centre. Made of bronze taken from Russian guns captured at Sebastopol during the Crimean War, the decoration, hanging from a purple ribbon, is Britain's highest award for gallantry and heroism in battle. All Victoria Crosses awarded have been made by Hancocks and Company of London.

The Victoria Cross is awarded irrespective of colour, creed, sex or rank. It has yet to be awarded to a woman.

by Patrick McNamara

On the same day as Lieutenant H.J. Raby, Royal Navy, the first recipient, was awarded the decoration, two Limerick-born men were also conferred with it, William Coffey and Joseph Bradshaw.

## William Coffey

William Coffey was born in Knocklong, Co. Limerick on 5th August 1829. The son of James Coffey and Mary Larkin, he endured the drudgery and hardship of life working on a farm. He was cursed like so many young Irishmen of the period with the thought of travel lust, to see what lay on the other side of the hill, so on 24th November 1846 he enlisted, aged 17, in the 82nd Regiment. In April 1854, Private William Coffey, No. 3837, transferred to the 1st Battalion, 34th Regiment (later The Border Regiment) and served in the Crimea.

During the fighting at Sebastopol on 29th March 1855, Coffey threw a live shell, which had fallen into his trench, over the parapet. This brave action saved many lives. The incident came a week after the Russian night sortie of 22nd March. During the intervening period, the Allies had been pressing on with their siege operations against the town and against the Redan.



Reverse of William Coffey's Victoria Cross

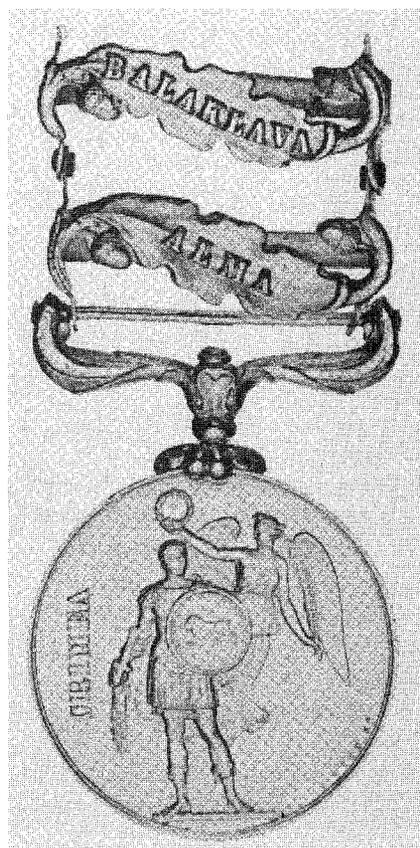
(King's Own Border Regiment & Border Regiment Museum)

Coffey was promoted to Corporal after winning his VC. He also received the *Medaille Militaire* (France) and the *Distinguished Conduct Medal*. For his action on 29th March, he was decorated by Queen Victoria at the first Victoria Cross investiture in Hyde Park on 26th June 1857.

William had a brother also serving in the Army. He was Sergeant Michael Coffey, who died of wounds sustained at Azimghur, India, on 25th May 1858.

William also served in India during the Mutiny and was present at the Siege of Lucknow. He was discharged on 21st December 1860. The Army was his life: he re-enlisted in the 75th Regiment (later the Gordon Highlanders) on 19th June 1861 and served with the 75th until July 1863 when he transferred back to the 82nd Foot. After serving in India again, he was declared unfit for duty at Jullundur on 10th July 1876 and sent back to Britain. He was finally invalided out of the Army at Netley Hospital on 25th August 1868.

William Coffey found it hard to cope with the transition to civilian life, so he became a Sergeant Instructor with the Militia in Sheffield. On 13th July 1875 he committed suicide by shooting himself at the Army Drill Hall, City Road, Sheffield.



Crimea War Medal, 1854 - 1856

He is buried in Spittal Cemetery, Chesterfield. His old regiment erected a new headstone there in September 1970. He was the first Limerick man to win the Victoria Cross.

William Coffee also held the Crimean Medal, Turkish Medal, Indian General Service Medal and the Long Service and Good Conduct Medal. His Victoria Cross was auctioned by Sothebys of London on 10th October 1969 and was purchased for £320. It is currently displayed in the Border Regiment Museum, Chesterfield, England.

### Joseph Bradshaw

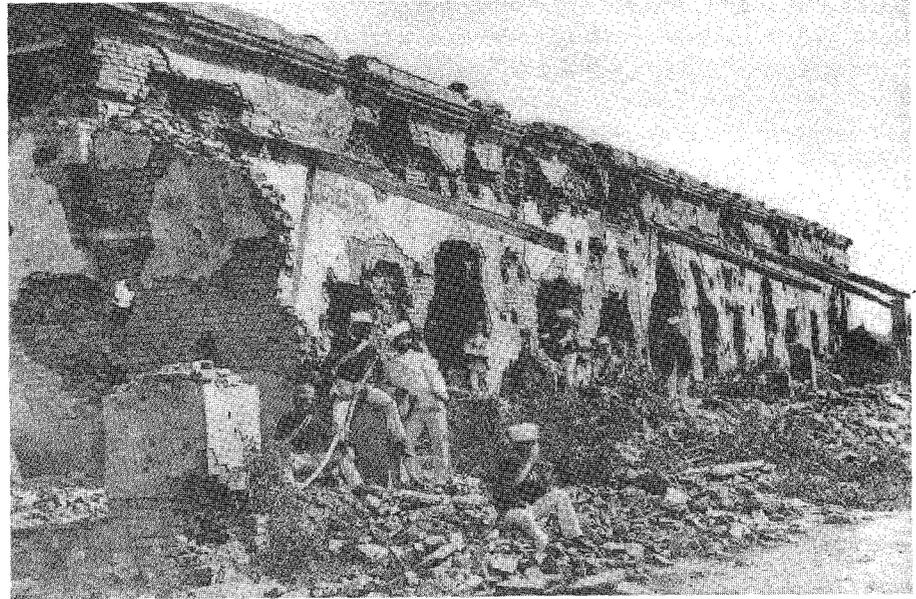
No. 3471 Private Joseph Bradshaw, 2nd Battalion Rifle Brigade, (Prince Consort's Own), was born in 1835 near Pallasgreen, Co. Limerick. Little is known about his early life apart from the fact that his father was a shopkeeper.

Just like William Coffee, Joseph Bradshaw also saw action in the Crimea and was also to win the coveted award. He was to earn the award for a deed performed on 22nd April 1855, when he and another private, on their own, attacked and captured a Russian rifle pit situated among the rocks overhanging Woronzoff Road. The pit was occupied every night by the Russians and its capture and subsequent destruction was of great importance. The official citation in *The London Gazette*, 24th February 1857, contained the following:

*A Russian Rifle Pit, situated among the rocks overhanging the Woronzoff Road between the 3rd parallel, Right Attack, and the Quarries (at that period in possession of the enemy), was occupied every night by the Russians, and their*



Joseph Bradshaw  
(Royal Green Jackets Museum)



Ruins of Lucknow, 1858: British troops with turbans around their caps relax after the defeat of the India Mutiny

(National Army Museum, Chelsea)

*Riflemen commanded a portion of the Left Attack, and impeded the work in a new Battery then being erected on the extreme right front of the 2nd parallel, Left Attack. It was carried in daylight on the 22nd of April 1855, by two Riflemen, one of whom was Private Bradshaw; he has since received the French War Medal. The Rifle Pit was subsequently destroyed on further support being obtained.*

Bradshaw was also awarded the *Medaille Militaire* (France) after he accompanied Captain Foreman, of the 2nd Battalion, on a night-time reconnaissance of the Russian advance works. He also held the Crimean War Medal with Sebastopol clasp, the Turkish Crimean Medal and the Sardinian Medal. Together with William Coffee, he was present at the first investiture of VC's in Hyde Park on 26th June 1857.

The 2nd Battalion of the Rifle Brigade was later posted to India and on arrival there, was immediately sent to Cawnpore, before going on to take part in the final capture of Lucknow. After the defeat of the insurgents at Lucknow, the Camel Corps was formed on 5th April 1858, consisting of 100 men and four officers from the 2nd and 3rd Rifle Brigade. Bradshaw joined the new force, which was commanded by Major Ross of the 3rd Battalion, and went on to receive the Central India clasp to his Mutiny Medal for his service, which included the capture of Calpee on 24th May 1858. Bradshaw also received the Indian General Service Medal.

After purchasing his discharge, he worked in Hartfordbridge on the Bramshill Park estate of Sir Anthony Gore, 13th Baronet, who had served with the Rifle Brigade in the Ashanti War.

Very little is known about Joseph Bradshaw. My research indicates that he had married and was the father of four sons, who were educated at the Duke of York's School, Chelsea, London.

He died on 21st March 1875 and his

VC was sold by his widow soon afterwards for £4. It is currently on display at the Royal Green Jackets Museum, Winchester.

Some publications indicate that he was buried in St. John's graveyard in Limerick, a fact I was unable to ascertain. He is however commemorated on the Rifle Brigade Memorial, Winchester Cathedral, England.

#### SOURCES:

Coffee VC File, Bradshaw VC File, VC and GC Collection, Department of Documents, Imperial War Museum, London  
Mrs. D. Grahame MVO, The Victoria Cross and George Cross Association, Horse Guards, Whitehall, London  
*The London Gazette*, 24th February 1857  
*The Register of the Victoria Cross*, This England Books, Cheltenham, 1988

(There were five further VCS awarded to Limerick men. These will be covered in future issues of the Old Limerick Journal).



India Mutiny Medal, 1857-1858