

Limerick Recipients of the Victoria Cross: John Danagher and Nathaniel Burslem

John Danagher VC
(1860 – 1919)

by Patrick J. McNamara

In the Richard Doherty & David Truesdale book, *Irish Winners of the Victoria Cross*, the entry for John Danagher states that he died in Limerick on 9th January 1919 and has no memorial. As a military historian, this was news to me. I had never come across the story of a VC recipient buried in Limerick, more especially buried in an unmarked grave. I contacted The Victoria Cross and George Cross Association, London, with the intention of obtaining any information they held on John Danagher VC. All the Association had on file was the citation for the Award and very little else. The only other information they had on him stated that he was born in Limerick in 1860.

Mrs. D. Graham, MVO, Secretary of the Association, in the course of correspondence, requested me to do some research into his background and if I was successful they would be grateful for any information I could supply for their records. This was a challenge I could not refuse.

There are no documented civil records available in Ireland before 1864. One has to depend on church records for information earlier than that date and they are extremely accurate. There is only one recorded John Danagher baptism in the City of Limerick for the year 1860. The baptismal records in St. Mary's Catholic church, Athlunkard Street, includes an entry stating that John Danagher was baptised there on 15th May 1860, the son of Patrick Danagher and Bridget Tuohy. The baptismal registers of St. Mary's Catholic church, begun in 1745, contain the date of baptism (not birth), parents' names, sponsors names and name of the priest who administered the sacrament. Baptism took place very soon after birth, because of the high rate of infant mortality, sometimes on the same day as birth, but seldom more than a few days afterwards.

Irish Winners of the Victoria Cross also states that Danagher was educated at the Christian Brothers School, Edward Street,

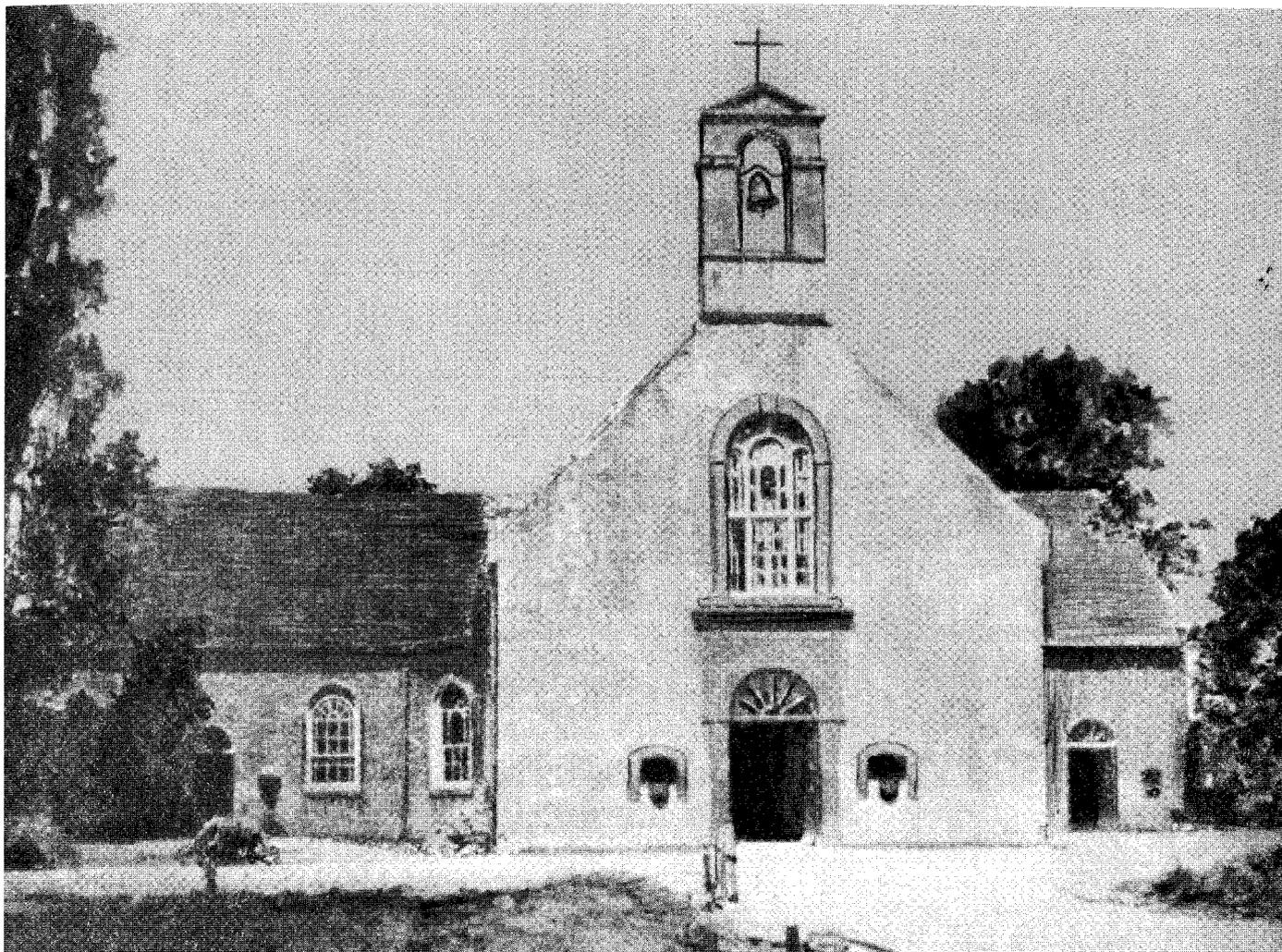
Limerick. I checked the annals and history of the Christian Brothers in Limerick, which dated from June 1816, and consulted survey maps of the period, but I was unable to locate ANY school on Edward Street.

It is logical to assume that John Danagher, baptised in the parish of St. Mary's, attended the Christian Brothers school in Quay Lane. The school, originally the city court house in St. Mary's Parish, was purchased from Limerick Corporation by the Christian Brothers and opened as a school in February 1845.

John Danagher went to South Africa to 'seek his fortune' soon after completing his schooling. In 1877 the Crown annexed the Transvaal and opposition to this move grew among the Boers, culminating in the First Boer War and the besieging of British garrisons, including that at Pretoria. One of the colonial units raised in defence of Pretoria by the pro-British population was Nourse's Horse. Among the 60 men to sign on was a 20-year-old Limerickman, John Danagher.

On 16th January 1881, a mounted column under Colonel Gildea left Pretoria at dawn. Seven miles out, an orderly of Nourse's Horse galloped up and told them that a number of Boers were occupying a strong position on the slopes of Elandsfontein Ridge. Colonel Gildea led the column to the neighbourhood of the ridge and deployed his forces: the 94th Mounted Infantry, the 2nd Royal Scots Fusiliers, the Carbineers and Nourse's Horse. The Carbineers under Captain Sanctuary were to guard Quagga's Poort, whereas men of Nourse's Horse under Glynne were to ascend the ridge and assault the enemy. The Boers were spread along the ridge, but concentrated in an area near two stone kraals and schanzes (wall structures). As the 25 men of Glynne's force advanced, the enemy opened a heavy fire. At 8 am, one of the British 9-pounders opened up and bombarded the ridge for 20 minutes. The Boers were scattered and many sought refuge behind the kraal walls. Nourse's men advanced until they had

taken almost two-thirds of the ridge. The guns were then moved up and the red-coated men of the 94th Mounted Infantry under Lieutenant O'Grady advanced. As they approached the Boer positions, many of the men daubed their white helmets with mud to make themselves less conspicuous. At 10 am, the men of Nourse's Horse were close to the enemy kraals and schanzes, and the Scots Fusiliers were brought in to support them. Suddenly a large party of Boers were seen coming over Quagga's Poort, from the eastern side of Pretoria. Most of the Carbineers had left their post to aid the 49th Regiment. Soon afterwards, further Boers reinforcements from the southern area came over the Nek. Colonel Bellairs CB, and his aide-de-camp arrived and ordered Colonel Gildea to withdraw his forces. Nourse's Horse did this, reluctantly, as they were subjected to intensive fire from Boers who, emboldened by the retirement, came out from cover. One man of Nourse's Horse was killed and three wounded. The column then formed up, the Mounted Infantry and Carbineers on the centre and left, Nourse's Horse on the right front and flank. As the column left it was discovered that three men were missing, two fusiliers and one man of the 94th. They were believed to be lying wounded at the base of Elandsfontein Ridge. Twelve mounted infantrymen from the 94th Regiment and four men of Nourse's Horse dismounted and took cover. They deployed in skirmishing order when 60 Boers opened fire from some bushes 600 yards away. Directly ahead of the Boers and some 100 yards from them, lay the two wounded fusiliers, Byrne and Davis. Two men mounted on the right of the skirmishing party and rode toward the Boers' position. One was John Danagher of Nourse's Horse and the other was Lance Corporal James Murray of the Connaught Rangers. As they left, Murray's horse was shot under him, but he continued on foot. They advanced into the heavy fire for 500 yards before reaching the men. Danagher and Murray found one man dead and the other wounded in the head. Murray stopped to raise Byrne's head and, while kneeling, was shot in his right side. He collapsed beside the man he



Old St. Mary's church

(Limerick Museum)

had come to rescue. Realising it would be useless for Danagher to proceed with the rescue in the face of such heavy fire, Murray ordered him to take the rifles and retire. Danagher stood for a few moments over his fallen companion, fired a few shots at the enemy, then gathered up all the rifles and calmly marched back to his lines. Byrne died before the Boers could reach him. Murray and Davis were taken with Byrne's body on an oxhide to the Boer camp on the mountaintop. They were well treated and, because of their wounds, the Boer Commandant allowed them to return to Pretoria under a flag of truce. Byrne's body was also returned. Davis died five days after returning to the garrison.

In March 1881, Danagher resigned from Nourse's Horse, which was disbanded following the end of the Siege of Pretoria. He subsequently joined the 2nd Battalion, The Connaught Rangers on 23rd April 1881, giving his trade as groom. Colonel Gildea recommended both Danagher and Murray for the Victoria Cross and his report was supported by Lieutenant O'Grady of the 94th. Danagher returned to Ireland with his regiment and on 23rd August 1882, Earl Spencer KG, 5th Earl and Viceroy of Ireland, paraded all the troops of the Curragh and Newbridge on the General Parade Ground, Curragh Camp, in order to witness the

presentation of the Victoria Cross to Danagher. Before retiring from the army he was recommended for Meritorious Service by General Sir Archibald Hunter. He also held the Long Service and Good Conduct Medal. Shortly after, John married Bridget Connolly and was stationed for a time in Templemore, Co. Tipperary, where his son Patrick was born and baptised on 28th November 1886, in the church of the Sacred Heart.

The entry for John Danagher in the Richard Doherty & David Truesdale book, *Irish Winners of the Victoria Cross*, indicates that he died in Ireland on 9th January 1919, and has no memorial.

My research indicates that after retiring from the army, he went to live in Portsmouth, England, and in 1911 he became the licensee of *The Falcon* public house, 74 King's Rd., Southsea. He next became the licensee of *The Dog & Duck*, 115 Fratton Road, Landport, Portsmouth. After a long illness, John died in on 9th January 1919. *The Evening News* (Portsmouth) on the 11th January 1919 carried his obituary: *DANAGHER; on January 9th, 1919 at the Dog and Duck, Fratton Road, John Danagher VC, late 2nd Connaught Rangers, the dearly beloved husband of Bridget Danagher, passed peacefully away, aged 58 years. R.I.P.*

His body lay overnight in St. John's Cathedral, Edinburgh Road, Portsea. His

coffin was draped with the Union Jack with his VC pinned on it. It was conveyed to the grave on an army gun carriage drawn by a pair of horses, escorted by an outrider. Four sergeants from the Connaught Rangers sent from Dover and two sergeants from the Leinster Regiment acted as pallbearers. The service was conducted by Father Twomey. Three volleys were fired over the grave and four Sergeants sounded the Last Post. John was buried in Milton Cemetery, Portsmouth, Plot M, Row 1, Grave 6. He had served in 2nd Battalion, Connaught Rangers for 27 years, of which 19 were spent in Egypt and India, retiring with the rank of Sergeant in 1908 and resided in Portsmouth.

John Danagher VC was the father of one daughter and eight sons. Six of his sons served during the First World War:

Patrick, a Sergeant, died of wounds at Suvla Bay, Gallipoli, whilst serving with 5th Battalion Connaught Rangers on 23rd August 1915. He has no known grave and is commemorated on Special Memorial B.2., 7th Field Ambulance Cemetery, Turkey, and on the WWI Memorial Plaque in St. John's Roman Catholic Cathedral, Portsmouth.

John Joseph also served with the Connaught Rangers during WWI. He retired as a Sergeant Major and died 16th January 1936.

Francis, a Corporal, served with the Royal Munster Fusiliers during WWI and was a prisoner of war for four years.

George, a Lieutenant in the Royal Munster Fusiliers during WWI, was wounded in France.

Arthur served as a Captain in the Indian Army during WWI.

Ambrose served with the 6th Hampshire Regiment in WWI.

On the death of John Danagher, the tenancy of the *Dog and Duck* was taken over by his widow, Bridget, who retained it until her death on 24th January 1936. The *Dog and Duck* public house is now the site of the National Westminster Bank, Fratton Rd., Portsmouth.

The Hampshire Telegraph of 16th November 1971 had the following:

Mrs. J. Danagher presented her father-in-law's medals to the Army Museum.

Nathaniel Burslem VC (1838 – 1865)

Nathaniel Burslem was born in Limerick on 2nd February 1838, the son of George James Burslem of Staffordshire and Susan Vokes of Limerick. They were married in Dublin on 15th March 1836.

On 12th February 1858, Nathaniel was appointed Ensign in the 67th (South Hampshire) Regiment of Foot. After initial service in Britain, he was posted to China with the rank of Lieutenant, where he was to win the Victoria Cross.

In October 1856, Chinese authorities in Canton boarded the British ship *Arrow* and charged its crew with smuggling. The British, aided by the French, used the incident to launch an offensive, precipitating the Second Opium War.

A British Expeditionary Force under General Sir Hope Grant landed at Pehtang in the Gulf of Pechihli on 1st August 1860. After disembarking, the troops spent the following days at Pehtang before advancing on 12th August. After dispersing enemy cavalry, the troops reached Sin-Ho, and two days later captured Tangku. After the Battle of Tangku, the Allies proceeded to attack the Taku Forts. The British were to attack the uppermost fort on the left bank of the Peiho River, about two miles from Tangku. On 20th August 1860 artillery batteries were brought up to within 800 yards of the fort. Later that day the Chinese opened fire from the fort. The Chinese bombardment was answered by salvos from Armstrong guns at 2000 yards range, which soon silenced the fort's guns. During the night, batteries were constructed for the heavy guns and mortars, which were then put in place ready for an assault the following day. It had been arranged with the Navy that gunboats would cross the bar of the river that morning and engage the outer North Fort and the flanks of the outer South Fort at the same time as the attack on the inner North Fort began. At 5 am, however, the Chinese opened fire upon the troops from all their forts and the guns of the allies were forced to reply an hour earlier than had been intended. About an hour later,



The Victoria Cross

an immense explosion took place as a result of a magazine being hit, but it was another hour before the Chinese guns were silenced. A storming party from the 44th and 67th Regiments was formed and the final guns were advanced to within 500 yards of the uppermost fort of the Chinese. The ladders placed against the walls were pulled into the fort or thrown over. Several groups of men attempted to storm the embrasure made by the guns, but they were forced back by heavy fire. At the same time, the Chinese fire was so accurate that the Sappers could not lay down their pontoon bridges. At this point, Sir Robert Napier ordered the guns to be brought up to within 30 yards of the gate in order to create a breach. A space sufficient to admit one man was soon made. The wall that the troops faced was protected by two ditches, 20 feet apart and filled with water. Private Lane and Lieutenant Burslem of the 67th Regiment displayed great gallantry in swimming the ditches of the fort and attempting, during the assault and before an entrance had been effected by anyone, to enlarge an opening in the wall, through which they eventually entered. In doing so, they were both severely wounded. They were among the first British troops established on the walls of the fort. The first man in was a Frenchman, who climbed to the top of the parapet where for some time he stood alone, firing rifles that were passed up to him by his comrades. He was soon speared to death. Another Frenchman, pick-axe in hand, attempted to cut away the top of the wall. He was shot and Lieutenant Burslem caught hold of his pick and continued the work. Meanwhile, Lieutenant Rogers of the 44th Regiment was attempting to scale the wall, with little success until Lieutenant Lenon of the 67th came to his aid. Lenon forced his sword into the wall, allowing Rogers to use it to lever himself up onto the wall and through the embrasure. He then assisted Lenon in lowering the drawbridge to the fort. Other British troops soon followed, crossing a nearby French pontoon bridge. The garrison was soon driven back and the fort captured. Soon afterwards the outer fort was attacked and captured. Over 2000 Tartars were captured during the action.

Later that day it was noted that the garrisons of the south forts were abandoning them and the Allies soon crossed the river and occupied them, capturing 400 guns. During the assault on the North Fort, 17 British soldiers were killed and 22 officers and 161 men wounded.

Lieutenant Burslem was wounded in three places during the assault on the fort and was mentioned in despatches.

In 1860, after British and French troops had occupied Peking and burned the Summer Palace, the Chinese finally agreed to ratify the Treaty of Tientsin, which had been signed in 1858. The Opium Wars resulted in massive gains in both trading privileges and territory for the British, including the acquisition of the Chinese territory of Kowloon and Stonecutters Island and in 1898 they obtained the New Territories under a 99-year lease. Hong Kong was ceded to the British by the Treaty of Nanking in 1842, which ended the First Opium War. Later negotiations legalized the importation of opium.

Nathaniel Burslem was present at the surrender of Peking and was appointed Captain on 20th November 1860.

For Acts of Bravery performed on 21st August 1860, both he and Private Thomas Lane, 67th Regiment, were awarded the Victoria Cross. The *London Gazette*, 13th August 1861 carried the citation:

For distinguished gallantry in swimming the Ditches of the North Taku Fort, and persevering in attempting during the assault, and before the entrance of the Fort had been effected by anyone, to enlarge an opening in the wall, through which they eventually entered, and, in doing so, were both severely wounded.

Burslem received his VC from Lieutenant General Sir W. F. Williams, KCB in September 1862. He was also the holder of the China Medal with clasps for Taku and Peking.

In 1864 he retired through the sale of his commission. The following year, with his brother John Godolphin Burslem, he moved to New Zealand where he took up farming. He died in July 1865 when he drowned in the Thames River near Auckland, while attempting to cross the waters in a small sailing boat. His body was washed ashore on 14th July and was buried soon after in an unknown location.

His Victoria Cross is currently displayed in the Royal Hampshire Regiment Museum, Winchester, England.

SOURCES:

Recommendations concerning officers and men for operations at the Taku Forts, China, WO32/7356, PRO, Burslem VC File, B114 Box 11, 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*, 13th August 1861; *The Register of the Victoria Cross*, This England Books, Cheltenham, 1988; *Regimental History, The Royal Hampshire Regiment*, Vol 1, 1702-1914, C.T. Atkinson, The University Press, Glasgow, 1950.