

HIDDEN GEMS AND FORGOTTEN PEOPLE



CORPORAL JOHN LYONS – THE FIRST GREEN HOWARD TO BE AWARDED THE VICTORIA CROSS.

John Lyons was born in 1823 in Carlow, County Carlow in Ireland. He was a painter before he, and his younger brother, joined the regiment in 1842. While he was recognised as an excellent soldier and twice promoted he was also court-martialled three times for drunkenness. The photograph is reputed to have been taken after his death in 1867.

During the Crimean campaign Lyons fought with great tenacity at the Battle of the Alma and showed great skill as a marksman at the Battle of Inkermann. However his greatest act of bravery occurred on June 11th, 1855, in a trench near Sevastopol. During a Russian artillery barrage a live shell fell into the trench. Lyons immediately picked it up and threw it out saving the lives of over twenty men. His actions led to the Commander in Chief awarding Lyons £5.

In 1856 the Victoria Cross, was instituted. Lyons was the only man nominated by the Regiment to be retrospectively awarded the Victoria Cross. On June 26th, 1857, Queen Victoria personally presented Lyons with his Victoria Cross.

Soon after receiving his Victoria Cross Lyons left for India with the regiment. Four years later he was sent home to England suffering from muscular aches and pains. He was discharged from Netley Hospital on the December 6th, 1862, having been found unfit for military service on the grounds of, ‘chronic rheumatism attributed to long service and exposure overseas.’ Lyons returned to Ireland and died in Naas, Co. Kildare, on April 20th, 1867, aged 44 years.

Note:

The invention of the daguerreotype — the earliest photographic process — in 1839 brought portraiture to the masses. It was cheap to produce and enabled a family to have an affordable keepsake of their dead family members. The photographer often tried to make the recently deceased look like they were in a deep sleep and adults, like Lyons, were commonly posed in chairs. The fact that it is a post mortem image shows that this tough Irishman had returned home to a family who wanted a photograph to remember him by.

The photograph was purchased by Major M L Ferrar, who recalls in his book, ‘Bygone Days’, ‘When I was garrison adjutant of Dublin in 1897, an old pensioner who appeared to be in very poor circumstances came into my office at the Castle and said that he was David Lyons and brother of John Lyons, that he too had served in the Crimea and been wounded at the Redan. At the same time he took from his pocket a coloured daguerreotype in a pretty gilt frame, showing his brother in uniform wearing his Victoria Cross and Legion of Honour. He asked me to accept it, which I did, making him at the same time quite happy with half a sovereign...’ Ferrar later presented the photograph to the 1st Battalion and in time the photograph became part of the museum collection.

Serendipity is the great friend of the museum curator and clearly when Lyons’ brother arrived at Dublin Castle it was the greatest piece of luck that the museum’s great collector, Major Ferrar was on duty. This photograph of Lyons is now on show in our Crimean case. It is the story of the Regiment’s first Victoria Cross, of a rogue, brave Irishman and the lucky acquisition of this gilt edged daguerreotype which makes it an interesting object in the museum.

This information and photograph courtesy of the Green Howards Museum, www.greenhowards.org.uk