

Commentary

## My hero

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For the past 28 years I have talked about him, usually when people asked about the patients I treated as a hospital doctor or when asked about heroes. He was an inauspicious man, wrinkled by the years and with lungs which bore witness to decades of smoking. Late one night and after a long weekend on-call, I received a message from admissions telling me of his chest infection and asking where I wanted to send him. Wanting to reserve my acute beds for the more diagnostically challenging cases, I had him admitted to the geriatric ward at the rear of the Lagan Valley Hospital where I was doing my pre-registration house officer rotation in 1981.

When I got around to seeing him, he was sequestered in the corner of a four-bedded side ward with hospital pyjamas and nebuliser in place. I confirmed the bronchopneumonia and continued with my examination. When I got to his legs I was greeted with one gnarled limb that reminded me more of an old and disfigured oak tree. His left tibia had obviously been subjected to devastating trauma and threatened at any point to again poke back through the stretched and shiny skin.

“What’s this?” I asked.

“I got that at the Dardanelles,” he replied. “On them beaches. Our boys were blown to pieces.”

I immediately wished I had listened more during history lessons, but I recalled tales of the western Allies in 1915 sending a massive invasion force of troops to attempt to open up the Dardanelles strait. And how Turkish troops trapped the Allies on the beaches of the Gallipoli peninsula. And how this Battle of Gallipoli had severely damaged the career of a young Winston Churchill, then the First Lord of the Admiralty, who had eagerly promoted the use of Royal Navy sea power to force open the strait, and who had lost his job as a result. Losses had exceeded 25% of the troops sent, including over 4000 Irishmen dead.

The old man went on to describe how the bullets and shrapnel pierced his legs, but how he nevertheless made his way up to the armaments and managed to overcome one of the group of Turks who were decimating his colleagues. He looked down at the bed covers, almost embarrassed.

“Won the VC for that, I did. Sure an’ I’m the last surviving Irish World War I VC.”

First awarded in 1856 by Queen Victoria to reward acts of valour “in the face of the enemy” during the Crimean war, the Victoria Cross (VC) is the highest award for gallantry for enlisted service people fighting under the Crown (fig 1). The medals are cast from the bronze of the Russian cannons

captured in the siege of Sevastopol. A total of 1356 VCs have been awarded to 1353 individuals, too many of which were posthumous. The last awarded was to an Australian for deliberately drawing enemy fire to allow comrades to escape and then rescuing a wounded interpreter during the Afghanistan War in 2008.

“The Victoria Cross?” I asked, “Where is it?”

“The wife has it. At home”

I asked if she could bring it in. He agreed and I walked away, feeling I had just treated a giant of a man. A man who, as a teenager (I had calculated he must have been 16 at the time) had marched up a beach and secured a safe haven for his colleagues in the middle of a bloodbath and despite horrific injuries. My fatigue cleared. I felt larger myself for having met this figure. He lifted me.

The following day when I went to see him, an elderly woman sat by his bed. Her coat was worn and her stockings laddered. Her shoes had seen better days and her hands were the hands of someone who had fought for the right to reach her eighties.

“Show it to the doctor,” he said.

She reached into her pocket, pulled out a box and handed it to me. I opened the box and there was the medal. Unassuming. Even dirty. With a purple ribbon and inscribed simply “For Valour”. I held it, transfixed, and returned it to the wife.

“Thank you,” was all I could say.

My patient eventually recovered enough to go home and I wished him well. Life at the time was taken up with young family, postgraduate exams and plans some day to go to the USA. I forgot his name, but never his scarred legs nor his proud medal.

Years later, when I had moved to the United States and secured a career in the Pharmaceutical industry, when the kids were older and my World War II veteran father had died, I began to think more about my hero. I deeply regretted not remembering his name, for I would have liked to know what happened to him. About a year ago, I heard of a book “Irish winners of the Victoria Cross”. At last! My wife managed to secure a copy from some obscure source and I excitedly sat down

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Fig 1. The Victoria Cross. Reproduced with permission from The British Broadcasting Corporation ([www.bbc.co.uk/london/content/image\\_galleries/victoria\\_cross\\_gallery.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/london/content/image_galleries/victoria_cross_gallery.shtml))

and leafed to the section on medals won during the Gallipoli campaign. Of the 36 VCs awarded to Irishmen during World War I, four came out of the Dardanelles, and although all four survived the incident for which they were decorated, one did not survive the campaign and two were killed later in the war.

William Cosgrove was the only Irishman who was awarded a VC in the Dardanelles and survived the war to talk about it. I had my man! But wait – he died in 1936 in London. My search expanded to all Irish World War I VCs, Dardanelles or otherwise: none was alive in 1981. Since my patient was an Ulsterman, I expanded my search to all world war I VC winners. Perhaps he was listed not as Irish but as English. Again, none had survived to 1981. I wrote to the author of the book, hoping that there was a simple explanation. He provided one – there are con artists throughout history who have used

the story of war and heroic deeds to gain everything from a free bus ride to a seat at a restaurant table.

So where does this leave me? I still hope for a simple explanation, but it is almost impossible. I contacted the hospital in an effort to get his name, but although National Health staff have better things to do than search records for a list of 83-year olds admitted some time in 1981, they too drew a blank. I later heard that all VCs have the name of the recipient on the back: had I only thought to turn the medal over, I might have caught his game. But why would he have taken the risk? I can only think that the story and this medal (either fake or someone else's) was his way of holding captive the imaginations of those he shared his story with. When he sat at the bar every Friday evening and one of the lads said,

“C’mon, Tommy, tell us the story of how you won yon medal.”

And they’d sit transfixed as he described how he won the gun turret single-handed, as he did with me. And I assume his wife loved him enough to play along. He may well have been a World War I veteran, and perhaps even a brave and dashing one who was indeed injured while wearing the uniform. Perhaps his country abandoned him as we do so often the men who come back from war to face an ambivalent population. We may never know the true answer.

I no longer bring him up in conversation when asked “who is the most significant person you have met in your career?”, but part of me still wants to believe he was the hero I believed in a long time ago, so I can again glow in remembering when an old man with a bad leg lifted the spirits and imagination of a tired young doctor.

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