

The Nohoval resident who won the Victoria Cross

The life and career of John Sullivan

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On Tuesday 1st July 1884, a melancholy procession left the farm of John Sullivan, at Ballindeasig, and proceeded down the hill, passing the site of the current Rennies National School, before turning the corner towards Nohoval Village. Heading the procession was a coffin containing the body of Sullivan himself, and this was followed by a large crowd, which included Sullivan's two remaining orphaned daughters. Unusually for a funeral procession where the deceased was a Catholic, the cortege did



not stop at Nohoval Catholic Church, only completed 30 years previously. Instead, it proceeded to the graveyard in the grounds of Nohoval Church of Ireland, where presumably after prayers being recited by the crowd, the coffin was interred. The graveyard at Nohoval predates the Reformation and contains burials of both Catholics and Protestants. John Sullivan had been a native of Bantry. Retired from Britain's Royal Navy, he had only been living and farming in Ballindeasig for a short time. However, many present at his funeral on that Tuesday morning would have been aware of a significant fact about him – certainly the reporter for the Cork Weekly News who covered the funeral was aware. During the Crimean War, while serving with the Naval Brigade at Sevastopol, John Sullivan had been awarded the Victoria Cross – Britain's highest award for Bravery¹.

Left: John Sullivan, photographed c.1875

Early Life

According to research completed by Liam Loughman, Sullivan was most likely born in April 1831, in 'an old house at the foot of Ardnabhair, on the left of the boreen leading to the graveyard'². He joined the Royal Navy in 1847, when the Great Famine was at its height³. A career in the Military was one of the few means of escape for a young man at a time when Bantry had been particularly badly impacted by the Famine. He initially served as a 'ship's boy' aboard HMS Alarm but by 1852 he had been promoted to Ordinary Seaman and was serving aboard HMS Ganges. In March 1852 he joined the crew of HMS Rodney. In 1853, he had clearly decided to make a long-term career in the Royal Navy, signing on for another 7 years in July 1853.

¹ *Cork Weekly News*, 5 July 1884

² *The Nation*, 10 January 1880

³ *ibid*

Crimean War

In September 1854, HMS Rodney had been sent to the Black Sea, following Britain's entry into the Crimean War earlier that year⁴. This war had started in October 1853 following concerns about Russian territorial expansion into Turkey and the Ottoman Empire. A combined British and French force landed on the Crimean Peninsula and following the Battle of Alma, marched south towards the port of Sevastopol, Russia's main naval base. Following indecisive battles at Balaclava (during which the Charge of the Light Brigade took place) and Inkerman, the British and French armies laid siege to Sevastopol⁵.

In October 1854, John Sullivan volunteered to serve ashore at Sevastopol with the Naval Brigade. The brigade consisted of sailors and marines who were deployed on land-based operations. Sullivan was put in charge of one of the 68 pounder guns which had been landed from HMS Terrible and was being used to bombard Sevastopol. During the Battle of Inkerman, they helped to repel a Russian attack. In April 1855, Sullivan and his gun crew were transferred to 'No. 5 Greenhill Battery', which was shelling Sevastopol. This gun position was under constant bombardment from a Russian gun battery⁶.



Above: John Sullivan planting the flag while under heavy fire from Russia Infantry⁷

A contemporary account written by a British Officer – Colonel Cadogan - at the time, shows the conditions that the Naval Brigade artillery teams faced:

'Our batteries have continued blazing away ever since, and have done great execution, many of the Russian batteries being in the most complete ruin, and, with the exception of one or two, they none of them fire above one shot to five or ours. This weather is dreadfully trying in the trenches; and as

⁴ James W Bancroft, *The Victoria Cross in the Crimean War: The Men behind the Medals.* (Frontline Books 2018), p.59

⁵ [Crimean War - Wikipedia](#)

⁶ David Murphy, *Ireland and the Crimean War,* (Four Courts Press 2002), pp. 97-98; Richard Doherty & David Truesdale, *Irish Winners of the Victoria Cross,* (Four Courts Press, 2000), p.34

⁷ W Elliott & W Knollys, *The Victoria Cross heroes and how they obtained it – Crimea to Zululand,* (London 1880)

*an instance, I may mention that in one of the batteries which I visited in our right attack, the artillerymen serving the guns were standing almost up to their knees in water; unfortunately there was no help for it, as from the nature of the ground at this point it was impossible to drain the battery.*⁸

On 10th April 1855, the commanding officer of the Battery, Commander Kennedy, asked for a volunteer to go towards the Russian lines and place a flagstaff on a mound of earth to act as a firing point for the guns. This was required because the Russian positions on the other side of the hill were not visible. As the senior member of the gun crew, Sullivan volunteered to go. Despite being under constant rifle fire from Russian infantry, John Sullivan calmly climbed the hill and planted the flagstaff at its summit, even gathering stones to plant at the base of the flagstaff to secure it. Having completed the mission, he returned unhurt to Greenhill Battery. Commander Kennedy commended him for his bravery, and he was later mentioned in dispatches by Admiral Lyons – Commander of the British Mediterranean Fleet, who were present at Sevastopol⁹.

John Sullivan was awarded the Victoria Cross for his bravery during this mission, receiving the medal while serving on board HMS Prometheus, off the West Coast of Africa in February 1857¹⁰. The medal was presented to him by the commander of the Prometheus, Captain Charles Webley Hope.¹¹ The citation, discovered in Britain's National Archive in Kew by Shane McCormack, reads:

*'For having on 10th April 1855, deliberately placed a flag on a mound in a very exposed position under heavy fire, to enable Battery No 5 to open fire upon a concealed Russian Battery that was doing great execution on one of our advanced works. This was reported by Commander Kennedy, commanding the Battery. Commander Kennedy speaks of this act in high terms of praise and observed that John Sullivan's gallantry was always conspicuous*¹².

Colonel Cadogan reported two days later that the Naval Brigade had suffered heavy losses in the following days of April 1855, and that a further 200 men were required to be deployed from HMS Rodney to cover the losses¹³ John Sullivan would also be awarded the Crimean Medal with Inkerman and Sevastopol clasps – presented to all British personnel who were present at those battles, the Turkish Crimea medal, the Sardinian 'Al Valore' (the Kingdom of Sardinia had entered the war on the side of the allies – Sardinia would later form part of Italy), the French 'Legion d'Honneur'¹⁴.

By October 1857, John Sullivan had returned to Cork, where it is recorded that he married Mary Ann Mulville in the Parish of Tracton Abbey on 6th October¹⁵. It is unknown whether the marriage took place in the church at Minane Bridge or at Nohoval, nor is it known how the couple met. However, Sullivan's ships would presumably have docked at Queenstown (now Cobh) in Co. Cork, and it is most likely that they met during his periods of shore leave there.

⁸ Cadogan and Calthorpe, 'Cadogan's Crimea,' (Hamish Hamilton 1979 reprint), p.164

⁹ David Murphy, 'Ireland and the Crimean War,' (Four Courts Press 2002), pp. 97-98

¹⁰ James W Bancroft 'The Victoria Cross in the Crimean War: The Men behind the Medals.' (Frontline Books 2018), p.59

¹¹ <https://www.pdavis.nl/ShowShip.php?id=1925>

¹² *London Gazette* 24 February 1857

¹³ Cadogan and Calthorpe, 'Cadogan's Crimea,' (Hamish Hamilton 1979 reprint), p. 159

¹⁴ David Murphy, 'Ireland and the Crimean War,' (Four Courts Press 2002), pp. 97-98

¹⁵ <https://churchrecords.irishgenealogy.ie/>

Transatlantic Cable Expedition

By 1858, with the Crimean War over, John Sullivan was serving aboard HMS Gorgon¹⁶. This ship was being used as an escort vessel to HMS Agamemnon and USS Niagara – the two ships involved in the laying of the first transatlantic cable to facilitate sending of telegraphic messages from Europe, via Valentia Island, Co. Kerry, to Nova Scotia and on to the USA. This was the 2nd expedition to make this attempt, the first in 1857 had ended in disaster when the cable being laid had snapped¹⁷.

This 2nd expedition was successful, with the cable being successfully laid by August 5th, 1858, and Sullivan would have taken part in the service of thanksgiving aboard HMS Gorgon, at the end of which she fired a 21-gun salute¹⁸. On September 6th, HMS Gorgon was docked at Halifax, Nova Scotia. It was here that John Sullivan committed another act of bravery for which he was awarded a medal by the Royal Humane Society. The citation for this medal, as discovered in the London Metropolitan Archives by Shane McCormack, read:

'At Halifax, on the 6th of September 1858, John Martin, A.B (Able-Seaman) H.M.S. 'Gorgon', having been on leave, and returning on board at midnight intoxicated, accidentally fell into the harbour between the ship and the wharf. Mr. John Sullivan, boatswain of the same vessel, immediately jumped overboard, and although the man, being entirely unable to help himself, was sinking, he succeeded, by diving, in laying hold of his hair, bringing him to the surface, and supporting him in the water until a rope was thrown to his assistance, by which he was enabled to keep himself up until the man was hauled on board.

(Signed) Joseph Dayman, Commander

C. Albert, Master, H.M.S. 'Gorgon'¹⁹



*Above: HMS Gorgon, the support vessel on which John Sullivan served during the laying of the Transatlantic Cable and on board which he was awarded the Royal Humane Society Medal in 1858.
(Wikipedia Commons)*

¹⁶ James W Bancroft *'The Victoria Cross in the Crimean War: The Men behind the Medals.'* (Frontline Books 2018), p.59

¹⁷ John Steele Gordon, *'A thread across the ocean. The heroic story of the transatlantic cable'* (London 2002), pp.109-110

¹⁸ *Ibid* p.131

¹⁹ LMA/4517/B/01/01/008/16247

At around the same time as Sullivan's act of bravery took place, the team who had laid the transatlantic cable were discovering that their connection signal between Valentia and Nova Scotia had become too weak for messages to be intelligible, and a 2nd cable would need to be laid in 1859²⁰.

Later career

A first daughter, Hannah, had been born to John and Maryanne in 1859²¹. On 5th March 1860, their second daughter – also called Mary Ann – was baptized in the Parish of Tracton Abbey – again either in Minane Bridge or Nohoval²². By this time, John was serving on board HMS Illustrious, flag ship at Portsmouth. He had also been promoted to Bosun 2nd Class. In June 1862 he was assigned to the newly launched HMS Black Prince, which was assigned to the Channel Fleet, based close to home²³. This presumably gave him further opportunities to visit his wife on leave, particularly as HMS Black Prince was the flagship at Queenstown from May 1866 – June 1867²⁴. Their 3rd daughter Margaret was born in Queenstown on May 27th 1867²⁵. However, Margaret passed away at a very young age, being deceased by the time of the 1871 census.

Sullivan moved to HMS Indus in June 1867, the flagship of the Devonport Dockyard, based near Plymouth²⁶. It was presumably about this time that a letter was written on his behalf by a senior naval officer, which appears in his file, asking that a place be found for him on shore at the dockyard if one were to become available²⁷.

On the night of April 2nd, 1871 – Census night in England for that year, John Sullivan was serving aboard HMS Marlborough. He was listed on the census as a widower – however, it is not known on what date or where his wife passed away.²⁸ As such Sullivan was trying to arrange the care of his 2 surviving young daughters while still on active service with the Royal Navy. Sullivan continued to serve on board ships until March 1873 when he was appointed Chief Bosun at the Portsmouth Dockyard²⁹. In this role he would have been responsible for managing the stores at the dockyard. At a dinner in 1880, there were calls for him to be given a commission in the Royal Navy, has had happened with some other VC recipients³⁰. In the Census of 1881, he was living with his daughters Hannah, then aged 22 and Mary-Anne aged 20, on shore at Portsmouth³¹. Both of his daughters worked in the millinery trade.

²⁰ John Steele Gordon, *'A thread across the ocean. The heroic story of the transatlantic cable'* (London 2002), p.139

²¹ <https://ukcensusonline.com/census/1871/>

²² CR-RC-BA-455526 accessed at <https://churchrecords.irishgenealogy.ie>.

²³ James W Bancroft *'The Victoria Cross in the Crimean War: The Men behind the Medals.'* (Frontline Books 2018), p.59

²⁴ <https://www.pdavis.nl/ShowShip.php?id=1132>

²⁵ Cobh – Microfilm 04987/03 – accessed at registers.nli.ie.

²⁶ James W Bancroft *'The Victoria Cross in the Crimean War: The Men behind the Medals.'* (Frontline Books 2018), p.59

²⁷ ADM 139/46/4574; <https://discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk/details/r/C9525791>

²⁸ <https://ukcensusonline.com/census/1871/>

²⁹ James W Bancroft *'The Victoria Cross in the Crimean War: The Men behind the Medals.'* (Frontline Books 2018), p.59

³⁰ *The Nation* 10 January 1880

³¹ <https://ukcensusonline.com/census/1871/>

Retirement to Ballindeasig

In July 1883 Sullivan returned to shipboard life when he was posted aboard HMS Asia, the flagship based at Portsmouth³². It was to be the last ship he served on. In March 1884 he was sent to the Royal Naval Hospital Haslar, in Gosport, near Portsmouth for treatment for an unspecified illness. In April 1884 he was discharged from the Royal Navy as an invalid³³. In his naval record, a note was added that he was being permitted to be discharged with the highest pension he could be given, the equivalent amount that he would have received if he had remained in service until pensionable age. It also recorded that *'Admiral Herbert speaks in the highest terms of his zeal and efficiency'*. It was later claimed, after his death, that he had been awarded a £150 annuity from the Navy due to his service, plus a further £10 a year for having been awarded the Victoria Cross³⁴.

Following his discharge, John Sullivan returned to Tracton Parish. He rented a 44-acre farm from the Ballindeasig estate (now Tabor Lodge). The farmhouse that he rented was described as being *'fit for a gentleman's residence'* and it was stated that his landlord – John C. Hennessy, owner of the Ballindeasig Estate, held him *'in very high esteem'*, and that he was well liked in the neighbourhood, not only for his bravery and the medals that he had won, *'but also for his quiet and affable manner and obliging disposition'*³⁵.



Above: John Sullivan's medals on display in the Wardroom, HMS Nelson, Portsmouth
(<https://www.memorialsinportsmouth.co.uk/others/nelson/sullivan.htm>)

For several weeks in early 1884, John Sullivan had been unwell and was described as *'showing signs of mental depression'*. However, both of his daughters who were living with him at Ballindeasig later

³² James W Bancroft *'The Victoria Cross in the Crimean War: The Men behind the Medals.'* (Frontline Books 2018), p.59

³³ ADM 139/46/4574; <https://discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk/details/r/C9525791>

³⁴ ADM 139/46/4574; <https://discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk/details/r/C9525791>; *Cork Weekly News*, 5 July 1884

³⁵ *Cork Weekly News*, 5 July 1884

stated that there had been no indication that he would do himself an injury. On Friday 27th June 1884, he complained of headaches, and went to bed for much of the day. On the following day, Saturday 28th June, he was working in the kitchen garden, close to the house together with another man, named Duff. Sullivan sent Duff to get him some tobacco at Nohoval, and when Duff had returned, Sullivan left the garden, heading in the direction of the house. One of his daughters, Mary-Anne, saw him approaching the house, but after some time, when he had not come in, she went to look for him. She found him lying face down in a dyke in one of the fields, a few yards from the house. He had cut his own throat³⁶.

Dr. Rosslewin Morgan, the local Dispensary Doctor, who lived at Ballyfeard House, was sent for, and he pronounced John Sullivan dead at the scene. Dr. Morgan, himself an ex-British Army Surgeon, registered the death on that same day, describing the cause of death as 'Suicide', though adding that this was uncertified as no medical attendant had been present at the time that the injury had occurred³⁷.

Funeral at Nohoval

An inquest was convened in Ballyfeard on the following Tuesday, presumably taking place in the tiny courthouse in the village. The Coroner, M.J. Horgan presided. Mary-Anne Sullivan gave evidence of her discovery of her father's body. She described sending for the priest and for Dr. Morgan, though John Sullivan had passed away long before either of them arrived. A knife, found on the body, was presented at evidence by Sergeant O'Sullivan of the Royal Irish Constabulary, based at Ballyfeard Barracks. It was believed that it was the knife the deceased had used day-to-day to cut tobacco. Duff, the farm labourer, gave evidence of working with John Sullivan in the kitchen garden and who Sullivan had left him to go towards the house after Duff had fetched his tobacco. Duff then heard Mary-Anne Sullivan crying out and was therefore the second person to arrive at the scene of John Sullivan's death. Dr. Morgan then gave medical evidence as to the state of the wound and cause of death. The jury found that John Sullivan had taken his own life '*while labouring under temporary insanity*'³⁸. Possibly to provide some succor to the family, they expressed the opinion that the cause may have been the excessive heat of the sun. They also attached a rider to the verdict expressing a hope that '*in consideration of his great service, and that he was so short a time in receipt of his well-earned pension that the authorities would consider the claims of his orphan daughters who are rendered completely destitute by his very sad death*'. The coroner undertook to raise the matter with the Admiralty, who ran the Royal Navy³⁹. Possibly because of this statement at the inquest, Dr. Morgan returned to the register and deleted the first registration of death that he had completed for John Sullivan on 28th June. He recorded the death a second time, this time stating that the cause of death was '*hemorrhage from wound in throat – suicidal about half an hour*'⁴⁰.

³⁶ *Cork Weekly News*, 5 July 1884

³⁷https://civilrecords.irishgenealogy.ie/churchrecords/images/deaths_returns/deaths_1884/06311/4809670.pdf

³⁸ *Cork Weekly News*, 5 July 1884

³⁹ *Cork Examiner* 2 July 1884

⁴⁰https://civilrecords.irishgenealogy.ie/churchrecords/images/deaths_returns/deaths_1884/06303/4806852.pdf

Right: Michael Joseph Horgan, the Coroner who presided at the inquest on the body of John Sullivan. (Photo courtesy of Kevin Dwyer).



John Sullivan's funeral took place on the Tuesday afternoon, after the inquest. The reporter for the Cork Weekly News, who was present, later wrote:

'Notwithstanding that undisputed prejudice exists in the popular mind in the rural parts of the country against persons dying by their own hands, yet all such feeling had disappeared in the case of John Sullivan, whose mortal remains were on Tuesday followed to their last resting place at Nohoval by an immense cortege of sorrowing and sympathising people'⁴¹.

As the graveyard at Nohoval was in the grounds of the Church of Ireland, despite also containing Catholic burials, it would have been a matter for the Church of Ireland to grant permission for burial, rather than the Catholic church. The Rector, Rev. Richard Meade, who came from a military family, would likely have been sympathetic.⁴² It would seem likely that this was the reason that Nohoval was chosen, as the Catholic authorities may have sought to prevent a burial in consecrated ground, owing to Catholic teaching at the time⁴³. It seems likely, based on the newspaper report, that John Sullivan was waked at his house, and then conveyed to the graveyard at Nohoval where prayers were said by the local people without a funeral mass taking place or a priest being present at the graveside⁴⁴. While he was buried in consecrated ground, his grave remained unmarked.

Fate of the medals

It is likely that after his death, John Sullivan's daughters sold his medals for whatever funds they could raise. They eventually ended up in the hands of a collector in Nova Scotia. In December 1967, the Parliament of Nova Scotia wished to purchase a Victoria Cross won by William Hall, a native of Nova Scotia, in India in November 1857. Hall's VC was on display in the Wardroom of the Dockyard at Portsmouth (known as HMS Nelson). The Government in Nova Scotia offered to purchase John Sullivan's medals and trade them with HMS Nelson, given that John Sullivan had served at the Dockyard in Portsmouth for more than 10 years. This was agreed to, and John Sullivan's medals can still be seen on display in Wardroom at HMS Nelson, Portsmouth. There is some question over the authenticity of the Victoria Cross – it is believed that the medal on display is a replacement for the original⁴⁵. In Bantry, Sullivan is remembered on the Bantry Heritage Trail.⁴⁶

John Sullivan still lies in an unmarked grave in Nohoval Churchyard. June 2024 will be the 140th anniversary of his death. Perhaps it may be possible to erect a headstone to mark that anniversary.

⁴¹ *Cork Weekly News*, 5 July 1884

⁴² Rev. J. H. Cole *'Church and Parish Records of the United Diocese of Cork, Cloyne, and Ross'*, (Cork, 1903)

⁴³ Dine RL. 'You shall bury him: burial, suicide and the development of Catholic law and theology.' *Med Humanit.* 2020 Sep;46(3):299-310. doi: 10.1136/medhum-2018-011622. Epub 2019 Jul 26. PMID: 31350305.

⁴⁴ *Cork Weekly News*, 5 July 1884

⁴⁵ 'Two VCs Exchanged,' *The Navy News*, December 1967

⁴⁶ https://www.bantryhistorical.com/backend/web/img/exhibition/1620831876_Portrait%20final.pdf

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Above: Nohoval Churchyard, where John Sullivan was buried in an unmarked grave