

Private Thomas Lane VC

By Major Martin Everett

Private Thomas Lane VC initially served with the 67th (South Hampshire) Regiment, later 2nd Battalion The Hampshire regiment. He was born in May 1836 in Cork, Ireland. Little is known of his early life but at some stage he joined the 67th Regiment, in which he served in the Crimea. For these services he received the Crimean Medal with clasps for Alma, Inkerman and Sebastopol. Following a further period of service he went to China.

He received his Victoria Cross for distinguished gallantry during the 1860 campaign against the Chinese in the Gulf of Pechili. Together with Lieutenant Nathaniel Burslem of the 67th Regiment, he succeeded in swimming the ditches surrounding the North Taku Fort and during the assault, and before the entrance to the fort had been breached, they enlarged an opening in the wall through which they entered. In so doing, both were severely wounded. They were among the first British troops established on the walls of the fort. The garrison was captured and over 2,000 prisoners were taken. During the assault on the fort, 17 British soldiers were killed and 22 officers and 161 men were wounded.

Lane's VC was eventually presented to him on 28 February 1863.

Lane left the 67th Regiment and went to South Africa where he later served as a sergeant with the Natal Horse during the Anglo Zulu War. He received the South Africa Campaign Medal with the 1879 clasp. Rumours persist that Lane was court martialled for a bigamous marriage and that his VC was withdrawn, however, his records reveal that he was court-martialled for desertion from a unit known as Landry's Horse at Ladysmith. He was sentenced to four months hard labour on 27 July 1881 as he had also stolen a horse and weapons. Lane was ordered to return his VC to London for erasure but, curiously, no record exists of the medal actually being returned. His VC pension was stopped with effect from 7 April 1881. His South Africa Campaign Medal also appears to have been forfeited.

For reasons unknown to the author, Lane applied for a replacement VC, and his application appears to have been granted – which resulted in Lane being awarded two VCs although there appears to be no official record of the second issue. The original VC is owned by the Royal Hampshire Regiment but in 1909, twenty years after Lane's death, a Lieutenant in the Hampshire Regiment purchased a VC with Lane's name engraved on it for £20 in a South African pawn shop; this medal, presumably the replacement, has been authenticated and is now privately owned.

Lane died on 13 April 1889 at the Caernarvon Hospital, Kimberley, South Africa. He was buried the following day at Gladstone Cemetery, Kimberley in the RC Section, Row 4 Grave 23. A new headstone was erected on his grave in 1991.

There have been various suggestions that Lane fought at Isandlwana; this has not been verified. If this is the case, then there would have been two VC holders at Isandlwana, the other being Private Griffiths 1/24th who was killed at Isandlwana.

Lane's VC forfeiture was but one of a total of eight recorded. Since 1920 medal forfeitures were discontinued.