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# MICHAEL MAGNER VC

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## INTRODUCTION

In 1868 the British Army mounted an expedition to release British prisoners unjustly held for over four years by King Theodore of Abyssinia. The campaign consisted of a march of more than 650 kilometres across unknown territory in tropical conditions to King Theodore's capital, the fortress of Magdala. The campaign turned out to be essentially a logistical operation with some heavy fighting outside Magdala. In the final assault on Magdala, two soldiers of the 33rd Regiment were awarded the Victoria Cross. Drummer Michael Magner was one of the men decorated and he later came to Australia where he lived his last years in Victoria. The Victoria Cross awarded to Michael Magner is in the custody of the Museum of Victoria.



## MICHAEL MAGNER

Michael Magner was born Michael Barry in Fermanagh, Ireland on 21 June 1840, the son of Edward Barry, gentleman and his wife Margaret (nee Magner)! Edward Barry may have been the brother of Sir Redmond Barry.<sup>2</sup> Michael Barry enlisted in the British Army at Fremoy, in Ireland on 11 October 1854 at the age of 14 years. Although the reason has never been made clear, he enlisted under the name Magner which was his mother's maiden name. In January 1868, Michael Magner was a Drummer in the 33rd Regiment which was assembling at Annesley Bay on the Red Sea for an expedition preparing to march to Magdala, the capital of King Theodore's Abyssinia.

## KING THEODORE

In 1818, a child by the name of Kasa was born to a lowly family in Abyssinia. An intelligent child, Kasa managed to get into a monastery school where he gained literacy skills which were a great advantage in a country where few could read or write. The monastery he was at was sacked by raiders and although he did not give up his Christian faith he became a soldier of fortune. However, the intelligent Kasa was more than just a bandit and by 1855 his conquests put him in a position where he could proclaim himself King. He took the name Theodore claiming to be the new Messiah in Solomon's line. King Theodore, an experienced soldier, was a remarkable man who had a "quick ungovernable temper which he had never found it necessary to curb".<sup>3</sup>

1. Much of the biographical information is from the files created by Canon W. M. Lummis, MC and held by the Military Historical Society in London. The curator, Dennis Pillinger was kind enough to provide copies.
2. The family thought at one time that his father may have been Sir Redmond Barry. A letter to Canon Lummis from John A. Feely, Chief Librarian, State Library of Victoria, dated 5 February 1964 states this was unlikely.
3. Frederick Myatt, *The March to Magdala*, London, 1970, p 31 This is the most comprehensive modern account of the expedition.

Theodore was a militant Christian who next turned his military skills against the non-Christian Gallas tribe to his south which he defeated. The Gallas retreated expecting that once King Theodore had his victory, he would withdraw back to the north. But King Theodore decided to establish a permanent headquarters in a stronghold deep in Gallas territory which he named Magdala. A small European community developed at Magdala where King Theodore collected a competent European workforce which was treated with every consideration. Captain Charles Duncan Cameron reached Magdala in October 1862 and presented himself to the court of King Theodore where he was well received as British Consul.

### **KING THEODORE'S LETTER**

In early 1863, King Theodore gave a letter to both Charles Cameron and to a Frenchman who was unofficially looking after French interests, to forward to their respective governments. In the letters, King Theodore suggested that England and France as Christian nations should support the Christian King Theodore in a campaign against Islam. The French did not recognise their representative and returned the letter unopened. In London, the Foreign Office was aghast at the suggestion and ignored the request. King Theodore took the lack of a reply from London as a direct insult against himself from Queen Victoria. He promptly slapped Charles Cameron and three other Europeans in irons where they joined two missionaries who had already incurred King Theodore's displeasure.

### **BRITISH REACTION**

The arrest of the British Consul caused a great sensation in England in 1864 and 1865. The action was seen as a gratuitous insult but the problem was to determine what action should be taken. An envoy was dispatched to negotiate the release of the prisoners but it was not until March 1866 that he was able to meet with King Theodore. For a short period, Charles Cameron and the other prisoners were released from their chains but on 17

April 1866 Charles Cameron, the envoy and the other Europeans were all rearrested, chained and locked up in Magdala. Since diplomacy had failed to resolve the problem, the British then sought a military solution.

### **MARCH TO MAGDALA**

The British force of 10,000 European and Indian troops assembled under the command of Lieutenant General Lord Napier at Annesley Bay in January 1868. It was 650 kilometres to Magdala so the force moved in stages towards its destination leaving supply dumps along the route guarded by strong detachments of troops. A considerable dump was established at Senafe about 100 kilometres inland and it was here that Lieutenant Colonel Alexander Roberts Dunn, VC was accidentally killed. Dunn had been born in Canada and had won the Victoria Cross as a Lieutenant with the 11th Hussars during the Charge of the Light Brigade on 25 October 1854. He joined the 33rd Regiment in 1864 and was commanding the regiment when he died from gunshot wounds accidentally caused by his own weapon. He was buried at Senafe and the 33rd Regiment under the command of Major Cooper continued towards Magdala.<sup>4</sup>

The force arrived at the plateau of Dalanta about eight miles from Magdala on 7 April. By this stage, because of the detachments left to guard the lines of communication, the force numbered only 4000 strong. Between Dalanta and Magdala was a 1200 metre drop to the Bachelo River which was crossed on 10 April. The 4th (Kings Own) Regiment advanced towards the Arogi plateau which was separated by a ravine from the Islamgi plateau on which Magdala was situated. The climb up the Arogi plateau was exhausting and due to a misunderstanding the baggage of the army ascended via an easier route and reached position before the infantry. King Theodore saw the opportunity but by the time he attacked the Kings Own was in position and with Sikh support, destroyed the Abyssinian forces.

4. *Ibid*, p 96-97

## MAGDALA

The British at Arogi on 10 April inflicted such a crushing defeat on Theodore's army that "only about 600 of the 5000 who sallied out remained".<sup>5</sup> During the following two days, letters were exchanged between Lord Napier and King Theodore which resulted in the release of all the European prisoners including the British Consul, Charles Cameron. King Theodore was not willing to surrender and on the morning of 13 April gathered his men and told them "that he himself intended to die fighting in Magdala, but that any man not wishing to stay with him could go".<sup>6</sup> Most of King Theodore's soldiers scattered leaving him with about 100 men to defend the fortress.

On the plateau below Magdala, Lord Napier was receiving the exact opposite information. It was being reported that the morale of the Abyssinian forces was fast recovering and that the lightly wounded were rejoining King Theodore. Lord Napier decided that it was time to take Magdala and King Theodore by force. He selected the 33rd Regiment to lead the assault. The regiment had been formed as Huntington's Regiment in 1702 and was given the title of the 33rd Foot in 1751. In the Army reorganisation of 1881, it assumed the name of The Duke of Wellington's Regiment (West Riding) and today serves under that title in the British Army as a regiment of the Kings Division.<sup>7</sup>

## THE ASSAULT

In 1868, the 33rd was considered a hard-case Regiment and contained "a large proportion of Irish"<sup>8</sup> including Michael Magner and Private James Bergin. The 33rd faced a formidable task with Magdala situated about 100 metres above the Islamgi plateau and only approachable by an extremely steep and

rugged path. There were two lines of defence with a gate in each. The first gate had a 5 metre porch partly filled with blocks of stones and protected by strong fences with fire through loop-holes. At this critical stage of the battle it was found that the engineers did not have any powder to blow the gate. The troops of the 33rd moved along the wall seeking a place to climb. James Bergin found a place and with some difficulty was able to help Michael Magner onto the top of the wall. Bergin was then hoisted up from below by other men and both Magner and Bergin proceeded to fire on the Abyssinians who abandoned the gate. The second gate was quickly captured by which stage all resistance had collapsed. Behind the second gate was found the body of King Theodore who had taken his own life thus ending the campaign.

The 33rd suffered only five wounded in the total British casualties of 10 wounded and five injured with no deaths. A reporter with the expedition commented that "as it turned out, the danger was slight, but this does not detract in any way from the way in which the regiment went up to the assault" The official historians came to the same conclusion, "This fortress, although so easily carried, was very strong, even when its artificial defences were reached. Its position . . . might have been made almost impregnable!"<sup>10</sup>

5. Donald Featherstone, *Colonial Small Wars 1837-1901*, 1974, p 105

6. Myatt, *op. cit.*, p 156

7. H. L. Wicks, *Regiments of Foot*, Reading, Berks, 1974, p 49-51

8. James Lunt, *The Duke of Wellington's Regiment* (West Riding), London, 1971, p 55

9. G. A. Henty, *The March to Magdala*, London, 1868, p 406

10. Major T. J. Holland & Captain H. Hozier, *Record of the Expedition to Abyssinia*, London, 1870, Vol. 2, p 56

## THE VICTORIA CROSS

In his dispatch written the day after the fall of Magdala, Lord Napier wrote to London reporting the success of the expedition. At the end of the dispatch he mentioned a number of officers and also brought “especially to notice No. 3691 Drummer Michael Magner and No. 949 Private James Bergin, 33rd Regiment, the two men who first forced an entrance to the extreme and turned the gate”<sup>11</sup> In his final dispatch for the campaign written near the Red Sea on 1 June 1868, Lord Napier again brought to notice the conduct of Michael Magner and James Bergin.<sup>12</sup> As a result, four months after the battle, both Michael Magner and James Bergin were awarded the Victoria Cross for their gallantry at Magdala. The citation stated:—

Drummer Michael MAGNER  
Private James BERGIN  
33rd Regiment

For their conspicuous gallantry in the assault on Magdala on 13th April, 1868.

Lieutenant-General Lord Napier reports that, whilst the head of the column was jammed by the obstacles at the gate, a small stream of officers and men of the 33rd Regiment and an officer of Engineers, breaking away from the main approach to Magdala and climbing up a cliff, reached the defences, and forced their way over the wall, and through a strong and thorny fence, thus turning the defenders at the gateway.

The first two men to enter, and the first in Magdala, were Drummer Magner and Private Bergin of the 33rd Regiment.”<sup>13</sup>

Michael Magner and James Bergin were also the first two men of the 33rd Regiment to win the Victoria Cross.



11. *London Gazette*, 16 June 1868, p 3368

12. *Ibid*, 30 June 1868 p 3673. In this dispatch Lord Napier incorrectly names Michael Magner.

13. *Ibid*, 28 July 1868

## **MARRIAGE AND IMMIGRATION**

Michael Magner returned to England with the 33rd Regiment. He was still with the 33rd in 1873 when the Regimental Marriage Register records his marriage at Colchester to Margaret Carroll on 26 May of that year. There was eight children from the marriage, four boys and four girls. In 1886, Michael Magner and his family were in Tasmania where they stayed for seven years. In 1893 the family moved to Victoria and took up residence in St. George's Road, North Fitzroy where on 6 February 1897 at the age of 56, Michael Magner died. His wife Margaret lived in North Fitzroy until her death in 1916. Michael Magner, his wife and two of their children are buried in the same grave in a Roman Catholic section of the Melbourne General Cemetery.<sup>14</sup> The gravestone indicates that he had won the Victoria Cross. The grave is well kept being regularly maintained by the Office of Australian War Graves.

## **MUSEUM OF VICTORIA**

In addition to the Victoria Cross, Michael Magner also received the Abyssinian Campaign Medal. Unfortunately the Victoria Cross and the campaign medal became separated probably after his death. The Victoria Cross at some stage was acquired by a Victorian medal collector George Henry Wannemacher. When Wannemacher died in August 1930, he left his medal collection including the Victoria Cross of Michael Magner to the Art Gallery of Victoria!<sup>15</sup> Due to several administrative changes since 1930, the Victoria Cross is now in the custody of the Museum of Victoria although it has not been on public display for many years.

## **CONCLUSION**

Michael Magner was one of many ex-soldiers who after honourable service in the British Army settled in Victoria. Although several other Victoria Cross winners spent some time in Victoria he is one of only three winners of the award prior to the 1914-1918 War to die in Victoria. The Victoria Crosses of the other two winners are also in museums but not in Victoria. One is on display in the Light Infantry Museum in England and the other was recently presented to the Australian War Memorial in Canberra!<sup>16</sup> The Museum of Victoria is fortunate to have such a unique medal from a campaign over a century ago in a country that is sadly still in the news because of famine.

14. Roman Catholic Section CC, Grave No. 300

15. The author John Winton in a letter dated 18 March 1985 informed me of the Wannemacher bequest. The medal bequest is mentioned in the Melbourne Argus, 10 December 1930, p 6

16. William Napier won the Victoria Cross in the Indian Mutiny in 1858, He died at Rochester in 1908 and his medals are in the Light Infantry Museum. The Victoria Cross won by Thomas Grady in the Crimea in 1854 was presented to the Australian War Memorial in January 1985. He died in South Melbourne in 1891 and is also buried in a Roman Catholic section of Melbourne General Cemetery.