

**OUTSTANDING RORKES DRIFT DEFENDERS SOUTH AFRICA 1879 MEDAL.
POSTHUMOUSLY MENTIONED IN DESPATCHES, HIS DEATH IS RECORDED
IN THE CENTRE OF LADY BUTLERS FAMOUS PAINTING**



SOUTH AFRICA 1877-79, CLASP 1879 'L.A.BYRNE'

Louis Alexander Byrne, Civilian Acting Store-Keeper, Commissariat & Transport Department. Born Ireland .1857, 7th child of Richard Clark Byrne, a Ship owner and Merchant in Cardiff and Maria Byrne. It is not known when he came to South Africa, but in 1878 he held a government appointment in the Natal Civil Service at Pietermaritzburg, Natal. When War with the Zulus looked inevitable, Byrne gave up his job in Pietermaritzburg to join the Commissariat and Transport Department as a Civil Volunteer, after a call was made for volunteers who knew the Country well and could be trained quickly in Commissariat work. Presumably he hoped to get an official appointment at the front as did many adventuress young men at this time.

Along with Commissariat Dalton, Byrne rode from Pietermaritzburg to Helpmakaar on 1st Jan 1879 in the pouring rain and then on to Rorke's Drift Mission Station at some point between then and 9th January. At Rorke's Drift, Byrne roll was as Civilian Acting/Store-Keeper, which despite its title meant he had the status of a junior Officer. Byrne, along with Commissaries Dalton and Dunne were instrumental in laying down defences prior to and was present during the defence of Rorke's Drift 22- 23rd January 1879.

During the battle itself, Byrne was noted as using a rifle and to good effect, when he was killed; 'Having played a leading part in building up the original barricades, the young man put himself at the forefront of the firing line. When one of the sick men, Corporal Scammell of the Natal Native Contingent was dragging himself from the hospital to take a place at the wall, he was hit in the back by a bullet and fell close to Byrne moaning for water. Byrne opened his water bottle and bent down to give him a drink' but as he was rising he was shot through the head and fell dead on Scammell. This scene being depicted in centre of Lady Butler's famous Rorke's Drift painting



Louis Byrne was the only civilian to be killed during the action and was Mentioned in despatches Natal 1879 posthumously.

For some unknown reason Louis Byrne was buried just outside the tiny cemetery made for the other British dead Rorke's Drift Mission Station; but his name was inscribed on the monument, which was carved with pieces of broken bayonet by Bandsman Mellisop of 2/24th Foot. His name is now commemorated on the Rorke's Drift Cemetery Memorial, Natal, South Africa.

"The Graphic; June 28, 1879, P.629

ASSISTANT COMMISSARY LOUIS ALEXANDER BYRNE

One of the gallant defenders of Rorke's Drift, was only twenty-two years of age, and was the fifth son of Mr. Richard Clark Byrne, of Cardiff. From the commencement of hostilities he had been most eager to take part in the defence, and during the attack he behaved most gallantly; his name being included in Lieut. Chard's report to Lord Chelmsford as one of those who had most distinguished themselves. The attack on the little hastily constructed fort commenced about 4 p.m., and in the course of the first two hours the Zulus obtained possession of a portion of the lines, so that the defenders were exposed to a cross fire. Soon after this one of the men who was in an exposed position received a severe wound, and cried out for a drink of water, Mr. Byrne, who had been using his rifle splendidly, happened to be close by, and immediately fetched it for him, and it was while holding the cup to the lips of his wounded comrade that a Zulu bullet struck him in the head. He fell without a cry, and apparently died without a pang, and his body, with that of other gallant soldiers who fell in the same engagement, lies buried close by the Fort, the place being at present marked only by simple wooden cross."



ASSISTANT COMMISSARY LOUIS ALEXANDER BYRNE
Killed at Rorke's Drift, Jan. 22

Along with 14 others, Byrne is Mentioned in Despatches by Lieutenant Chard in his official report published in the London Gazette 15th March 1879;

'Of the steadiness and gallant behaviour of the 'whole garrison I cannot speak too highly. I wish especially to bring to your notice the conduct of: .. Acting Store Keeper Byrne (killed)'..

In a letter, Lieutenant Chard described to Commissary-General Strickland, how, under the threat of the Zulu attack, Commissary Dunne, along with Mr Byrne were:

".. greatly instrumental in forming the entrenchment of biscuit boxes which were in all probability the means of our successful defence..."



Medal late issue officially impressed circa 1900+. No rank or unit impressed on medal as would be expected for a civilian receiving the QSA era medal. You'll note the rim is slightly thicker and the claw more rounded, both characteristics noted on medals issued late 1900+, these impressed named also; See pics of Byrne's medal next to a late issue to Trooper Barnes NMR's, an Isandhlwana casualty (I have images of other later impressed examples)

Although one would initially expect to find him, Byrne isn't on the published SA 1879 roll or that in the PRO. This is not that unusual and one probable reason for Byrne's omission from the roll is simply down to his Civilian Volunteer status.



BYRNE MEDAL

BARNES MEDAL

At the time of his death, Byrne himself was a Civilian Volunteer not officially attached to and on the pay list of the Commissariat & Transport Department, from which his medal would have been issued. Therefore he would not be on that roll sent in at the end of the Campaign and therefore his relatives would have had to apply for the medal. Large numbers of others had to send individual applications in and equally large numbers just didn't bother, or decided to in old age, with the odd medal being issued as late as the 1930's!

Interestingly the medal came with a miniature SA 1879 and a miniature QSA, both with a ribbon brooch of the same type and the same as the Byrne's medal, suggesting they had always been together.

Condition of the medal is GVF, with minor wear, all with original ribbons. The non military award is a festival of Britain medal for the Borough of Portadown, dated 1951, which suggests Irish origin. Clearly a very important medal and been on the roll and issued 1880-3, it would retail at £50,000+. Although such is the interest of Rorke's Drift, this may be a little conservative.

