

Michael James O'Rourke

b. 19/03/1878 Limerick, Ireland. d. 06/12/1957 Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada

Michael James O'Rourke (1878-1957) was born on 19th March 1878 in Limerick, Ireland.

His date of birth is a little unclear as his military records state 1879 and his death certificate state 3rd March 1874.

His father was James O'Rourke and his mother was Catherine nee Baker. Michael lost both of his parents by the age of 11. He had two sisters, one of whom was called Sadie.

Michael served for four years in the Royal Munster Fusiliers before emigrating to Canada before 1914.

He settled in Vancouver, British Columbia and became a lumberjack and later a tunneller working on the Connaught Tunnel in Rogers Pass for the Canadian Pacific Railway and the British Columbia Electric tunnel in Coquitlam. He also worked in mines at Fernie, British Columbia.

He enlisted with 104th Regiment Westminster Fusiliers of Canada in British Columbia February 1915. On 26th February he enlisted in the Canadian Expeditionary Force at Vancouver and joined 47th Battalion in March.

He sailed for Britain with 7th Battalion in April, arriving on 6th May.

He transferred to 30th Reserve Battalion in June and was fined 7 days pay for drunkenness and abusive language. He sailed for France on 22nd August, joining the front on 29th of the same month.

He was awarded the Military Medal for his actions on 8th September 1916 at Mouquet Farm during the Battle of the Somme. He led the men in his sector over the parapet and maintained his position well in advance. He bombed the enemy for three hours from several points of vantage until he ran out of bombs and sent a Lewis gunner for more, but he was killed. A gunner from 4th Battalion volunteered to go, but he too was killed. O'Rourke spotted a German in a sap and killed him with a bomb found nearby.

He returned to the Battalion and took part in the Battle of Vimy Ridge in April 1917.

During the period 15th – 17th August 1917 at Hill 70 near Lens, France, Private O'Rourke, who was a stretcher-bearer, worked unceasingly for three days and nights bringing in the wounded, dressing their wounds and getting them food and water. During the whole of this period the area in which he worked was swept by heavy machine-gun and rifle fire and on several occasions, he was knocked down and partially buried by enemy shells. His courage and devotion in carrying out his rescue work in spite of exhaustion and incessant heavy fire inspired all ranks and undoubtedly saved many lives.

He began to suffer from severe sciatica and was also gassed during the Third Battle of Ypres in October 1917 and was granted 2 weeks' leave and was posted to Canadian Discharge Hospital on 1st December. He received the VC from King George V at Buckingham Palace on 5th December.

Michael sailed for Canada from Liverpool on 23rd December 1917, arriving 6th January 1918 for ten weeks' furlough. He reported for duty in March, and was posted to Special Service Company at

Vancouver on 2nd April and to 11th Battalion, Canadian Garrison Regiment CEF at Vancouver on 1st May. His sciatica saw him only fit for Home Service and he was discharged in July 1918.

Michael then held several jobs in California before working in fisheries in British Columbia. He became a longshoreman at Vancouver Docks, working the grain elevators and was known locally as "King of the Waterfront", but continued to suffer from bronchitis, and his doctors recommended a 10% disability pension. It was refused due to his drinking, but he appealed the decision, and was awarded a pension of \$10 a month following an intervention by the Governor General of Canada. He was awarded a further 5% in 1926 due to chronic bronchitis.

It is likely he was suffering from is now known as PTSD and became an alcoholic. He never married, and it is rumoured he used his VC as surety for his drinks tab.

He refused to attend the 1929 VC Dinner at the House of Lords as he didn't have a suit. His friends bought him one, but the day before the train was due to leave, he disappeared for two weeks. His seat was left open for him. Michael was later invited to meet Princess Elizabeth, the future Queen, and Prince Philip on their Royal Tour to Vancouver in 1951, but he refused saying "They wouldn't want to meet an old blatherskite like me."

In 1953, he was admitted to the Veterans Hospital again after becoming intoxicated. He had been badly beaten up and his optic nerves were damaged. He spent a month in hospital before being transferred under the Mental Health Act to the George Derby Facility in Burnaby, British Columbia, where he was diagnosed with senility and arteriosclerosis. As neither friends or family were prepared to care for him, he signed over his power of attorney, pensions and VC gratuity to the hospital in exchange for his care.

By 1956, he was living with his sister, Sadie, and had been battling illness for a long time. When he was invited to that year's VC Centenary Celebrations in Hyde Park, London, he refused. He believed it was an attempt to get him committed to the Essondale Mental Hospital. By the time his friends convinced him it was genuine all spaces had been booked. However, a Vancouver doctor paid the airfare and Michael arrived just in time for the ceremonies.

Michael died at his sister's house in Vancouver on 6th December 1957. His funeral was attended by a large number of dignitaries and dockworkers and 7th Battalion veterans. He was buried in Forest Lawn Memorial Park, North Burnaby, near Vancouver. In addition to his VC and MM, he was also awarded the 1914-15 Star, British War Medal 1914-20, Victory Medal 1914-19, George VI Coronation Medal 1937 and Elizabeth II Coronation Medal 1953. His VC was reported stolen from his room at Haden Hotel, Vancouver in May 1926, but it seems more likely he lost it or pawned it. The Regiment made an extensive search for the medal without success. The officers purchased a high quality unnamed replica, but it was not an official replacement.

The location of the original VC is not known. Since 1926 it has never been sold openly and is possibly in a private collection, but more likely it was lost.

LOCATION OF MEDAL: NOT PUBLICLY HELD.

BURIAL PLACE: FOREST LAWN MEMORIAL PARK, BURNABY, BRITISH COLUMBIA, CANADA