

China link in Victoria Cross legend

Historian says the medal is cast from cannons seized in an Anglo-French raid in 1860 on Taku forts, Tianjin

■ **BRITAIN**
Kelvin Chan in London

A historian has debunked the legend surrounding Britain's most distinguished war medal, saying the metal used to cast the Victoria Cross comes from two cannons captured in China, and not, as widely believed, from Russia.

John Glanfield, author of a recently published book that examines the origins of the Victoria Cross, says new evidence points to the cannons being captured by Anglo-French forces in a battle for the Taku forts near Tianjin (天津) in 1860, one of the last battles of the second opium war.

That contradicts the long-held belief that the cannons were captured in battle against the Russians at Sebastopol in 1855 during the Crimean war.

Glanfield has told Victoria Cross experts of his findings and they are "absolutely amazed that at last we've been able to cast this light on a tremendously strong legend - that they came from Russia".

He was somewhat surprised himself, because while he and a few other experts knew the cannons were actually Chinese, "the presumption was that the Russians must have captured them in some earlier Sino-Russian war".

The Victoria Cross is the highest honour awarded to British and Commonwealth soldiers for valour "in the face of the enemy".

In Glanfield's book - *Bravest of the Brave, the Story of the Victoria Cross*, published in December - he wrote that there was no evidence showing the two cannons came from the Crimean war, although he was not able to pin down the origins by the time of publication. But he continued his research and in the past few weeks found evidence pointing to their Chinese origins.

In his book, Glanfield also cites research showing a third, mystery cannon was used to make the cross from its creation in 1856 until it was used up in 1914, when the armoury started using the two Chinese cannons.

There is compelling evidence, Glanfield said, that the two cannons - now stored at the Royal Artillery Museum in Woolwich, London - were captured by an 18,000 strong Anglo-French expeditionary force. The troops, on their way to Beijing, had sailed up the Hai estuary and on August 21, 1860, attacked the formidable Taku forts guarding



John Glanfield says nearly every Victoria Cross since 1914 came from these Chinese cannons. Below: the destroyed Taku forts in 1860. Photos: Geoff Pugh/The Daily Telegraph, SCMP Picture



the river. A lucky shot took out the fort's ammunition dump.

The troops continued on to Beijing, infamously looting the city, and burning down the Summer Palace and Old Summer Palace.

A year later, 200 to 300 Chinese cannons captured in the battle arrived by ship at Woolwich arsenal, according to a contemporary news report that Glanfield found, which also featured drawings of captured weaponry resembling the two cannons.

The arsenal had also received a big shipment of captured Russian weapons in

1857. Captured cannons were typically melted down to make new weapons, but Glanfield said Russian metal was preferred.

"I'm afraid to say Chinese cannons were dangerous. The Chinese metal carried impurities, and those impurities made it of less strength," he said.

Therefore, it is highly likely only the Chinese cannons were left by 1914, when the order came down that more metal was needed for the Victoria Cross.

Arsenal staff probably mistakenly assumed that the cannons they chose were Russian, he said.

"The fact is those two guns, in all logic, can only have come from the Taku fort action."

He plans to publish his findings in a specialist journal.

SITE OF FIRST WORLD WAR HERO'S EXPLOIT PINPOINTED

Researchers say they believe they have found the site where Sergeant Alvin York single-handedly captured more than 100 German soldiers during the first world war in one of the US military's most storied exploits.

The precise location of the fight, immortalised in a 1941 Oscar-winning film starring Gary Cooper, has long been disputed, but two researchers from York's home state of Tennessee say they unearthed spent shell casings they believe to be from his rifle this month from a site near Chatel-Chery, France.

"They were buried six to nine inches below the surface," said Michael Birdwell, associate professor of history at Tennessee Tech University in Cookeville. "We're 80 per cent certain that we have found the right location."

York was part of an October 8, 1918, surprise rear

attack on a row of German machine gunners. When the sergeant in command was killed, York - then a corporal - used the raccoon-hunting skills he honed in the backwoods of Tennessee to pick off at least 20 gunners, shooting them when they raised their heads to aim.

A total of 132 German soldiers either surrendered or were captured. York, who marched the German POWs to the US lines, was awarded the Medal of Honour and promoted to sergeant.

Researchers reviewed York's journal, French and German trench maps and maps drawn by his commanding officer.

They superimposed that historical data onto a modern topographic map and downloaded it to a hand-held global positioning system device.

Associated Press

Forum fails to recognise water as a human right

■ **ENVIRONMENT**
Associated Press in Mexico City

Delegates at a forum on the world's water crisis approved a final declaration that endorses the building of hydroelectric dams but makes no reference to private investment or demands that access to water be recognised as a human right.

Representatives of 148 countries approved the declaration on Wednesday at the end of the week-long forum. Four countries - Cuba, Bolivia, Venezuela and Uruguay - approved it with reservations, stating in a separate declaration that "access to water with quality, quantity and equity, constitutes a fundamental human right".

The statement described hydroelectric dams as "innovative practices" and "acknowledged the importance and implementation" of such projects, despite the criticism that big dams have drawn from environmentalists for decades.

Diplomats close to negotiations on the document, released at the end of the 4th World Water Forum, said the dam clause had been inserted at the insistence of Turkey, a close US ally. Turkish officials would not comment.

The most noteworthy omission was the lack of any reference to private investment in water.

This year's declaration reflected anti-privatisation sentiments, which dominated the water forum, noting that "governments have the primary role in promoting improved access to safe drinking water".

Violent protests in countries including Bolivia and Guatemala have led private firms to withdraw from some contracts and to be more cautious about signing new ones.

But the apparent anti-privatisation victory at the forum may be more apparent than real.

Private firms have vastly increased their sales of bottled water in the developing world in recent years, in what some see as a "stealth" privatisation of water services in countries where tap water is unsafe.

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