



HEADLINES FROM HISTORY

A military life



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Athlone's history has long been influenced by its military barracks and soldiers from the town have fought in conflicts around the world.

Among those soldiers was James Henry Crummer. Little is known of Crummer's early life, although some sources state that his parents were Samuel Crummer, whose normal place of residence was Birr, County Offaly, and Jane Sparke. Records in the British War Office give James Henry Crummer's date of birth as 31 October 1792 and they state that he was born on the Roscommon side of Athlone. Those same records state that he joined the British army as a volunteer in June 1805, although Crummer later stated that he enlisted in 1807. Either way, he was still a child when he signed up as a soldier, a not uncommon occurrence at the time.

Battle after battle

Crummer entered the 28th Regiment of Foot which was stationed in Offaly for a short period early in the 1800s. By then, Europe was entangled in the Napoleonic Wars in which France was fighting against ever-changing alliances of European powers. It was in 1807, a couple of months short of his fifteenth birthday, that Crummer first entered combat. In August 1807, Britain demanded that Denmark allow its naval fleet to be taken into British control, ostensibly to prevent it falling into French hands. When the Danes refused, British forces, including the 28th Regiment, began a combined land and naval attack on Copenhagen, the Danish capital. The British bombardment of the city caused many civilian casualties and it soon forced the Danes to surrender. Crummer's activities during the siege are unknown but, along with his regiment, he was subsequently stationed in Sweden before being deployed to Portugal and Spain.

Napoleon's France was then the dominant power in continental Europe, having invaded Portugal in 1807 and Spain a year later. Spain rebelled and, after Spanish forces defeated the French at the Battle of Bailén in 1808, it appealed to Britain for assistance. Soon after, British forces arrived in Spain and Portugal. Crummer, by then promoted to lieutenant, served in Spain, Portugal and France from 1808 to 1816, taking part in an estimated seventeen battles. Among those battles was that at Albuera, a small town in the south-west of Spain near the border with Portugal. On 16 May 1811, an allied Spanish, British and Portuguese force of around 35,000 soldiers held positions at Albuera and blocked the march of a French force of around 25,000 soldiers. The resulting battle was won by the allies but both sides suffered enormous casualties: each losing over 8,000 men killed, missing or wounded. Crummer was among the wounded; a musket ball passed through his left leg, fracturing bone on the way.

After a period of convalescence he returned to active service, only to be wounded again two years later at the Battle of Maya in the Pyrenees Mountains, another battle in which both sides suffered high numbers of casualties. Unfortunately for Crummer, he received a gunshot to the same leg that had been hit during the Battle of Albuera. Despite his wounds, Crummer remained at the front lines, fighting at the Battle of Waterloo in 1815 – a topic to which we will return in a later article.

A wound without end

Crummer was promoted to captain a month after Waterloo. He entered the Sandhurst Military Academy in 1818 and graduated in 1821. That year his regiment was deployed to the Ionian Islands off the west coast of Greece, which was then engaged in a war of independence against the Ottoman Empire. In support of that aim, Greece was receiving aid from many European powers, including Britain and France. Crummer was made commandant on the island of Kalamos, where he was tasked with protecting Greek refugees from attacks by Ottoman soldiers.



A scene from the Battle of Albuera, 1811. James Henry Crummer from Athlone was badly wounded during the battle.

While serving on Kalamos, Byron met Aikaterini Plessou, whom he married in March 1827. Soon after the couple moved to Corfu, where their first child, Amelia Helena, was born in 1828. Aikaterini would give birth to another ten children after Amelia Helena but only six would survive infancy. Crummer remained on active service and, in 1829, the growing family travelled to Ireland. It seems that Crummer was stationed in various locations during the next few years, including the west of Ireland and Fermoy. Yet Crummer was plagued by the wounds he received in Spain and his worsening health caused him to apply for a military pension in 1832. A doctor in Fermoy wrote that the leg wound received by Crummer in the Battle of Maya 'had remained open and pieces of bone frequently come away'. The doctor concluded that Crummer would soon be 'permanently disabled and unfit to perform efficiently the duties of a captain of infantry'.

Despite the doctor's testimony, Crummer's pension request was refused. Apparently, the request was dismissed because Crummer had waited too long to make a claim for the wound he received in Spain. There may have been other reasons

behind the refusal. Although little is known of Crummer's personality, contemporary accounts suggest that he was a compassionate individual, with one person describing him as a 'lively kind-hearted Irishman'. In 1830, according to the historian Errol Lea Scarlett, Crummer remitted a punishment of 300 lashes imposed on a young deserter. That decision had earned Crummer the disapproval of his superior officers.

New duties

In 1835, Crummer's regiment was posted to the Colony of New South Wales in Australia and so the family travelled to Sydney, arriving in October of that year. He was appointed a justice of the peace, assistant police magistrate and commander of an 'iron gang' at Newcastle, north of Sydney. In commanding an iron gang, Crummer was overseeing convicts who were being punished with hard labour. Each convict in the gang wore a set of leg irons and when being marched to work they were all chained together.

Crummer's humane treatment of convicts and settlers made him a popular figure in the locality and the Crummer family decided to settle in New South Wales. In 1839,

Crummer sold his commission in the British army and ceased military service in January 1840. Yet their circumstances worsened in 1844, when the government abolished the police magistracies in a few areas, including Newcastle. Crummer continued to carry out his previous duties without pay, a decision that was applauded by locals but which left his family dependent on income from their small farm in Newcastle. Fortunately, in 1849, an army colleague secured Crummer an appointment as a paid police magistrate at Maitland, not far from Newcastle.

In 1858, Crummer was transferred from Maitland to Port Macquarie, north of Newcastle, where he again worked as a police magistrate. By then, Crummer's health had declined noticeably and a contemporary account described him as 'old and shaky as well as ill'. He resigned in 1864 and died at Port Macquarie on 29 December 1867. His request for a burial with military honours was observed by six warders of the local jail, all former soldiers, who fired a volley over his grave. Aikaterini Plessou-Crummer remained in New South Wales until her death, aged 98, in 1907.

