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Richard D. Dunphy and The Prices and Prizes of War

Kevin P. Lavery
Gettysburg College

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Richard D. Dunphy and The Prices and Prizes of War

Abstract

Like many immigrants during the mid-nineteenth century, Irishman Richard D. Dunphy served his new country in the Civil War, albeit not entirely willingly. The wounds he sustained during the war were grave, including the loss of both arms. He received some reward for his sacrifice from his country: a monthly pension, a Medal of Honor, and a notability lacked by other faceless coal heavers. As with other great conflicts, the war played a pivotal role in the lives of its participants, especially in the case of Richard Dunphy. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

The Gettysburg Compiler, Civil War, Richard Dunphy, pensions, Union veterans, Medal of Honor, USS Hartford, Battle of Mobile Bay, Admiral David Farragut

Disciplines

History | Military History | United States History

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THE GETTYSBURG COMPILER

ON THE FRONT LINES OF HISTORY

Richard D. Dunphy and The Prices and Prizes of War

OCTOBER 16, 2013

By Kevin Lavery, '16

Like many immigrants during the mid-nineteenth century, Irishman Richard D. Dunphy served his new country in the Civil War, albeit not entirely willingly. The wounds he sustained during the war were grave, including the loss of both arms. He received some reward for his sacrifice from his country: a monthly pension, a Medal of Honor, and a notability lacked by other faceless coal heavers. As with other great conflicts, the war played a pivotal role in the lives of its participants, especially in the case of Richard Dunphy.



In 1863, after the passing of the Enrollment Act, Dunphy enlisted in the United States Navy. As a coal heaver, he served aboard Admiral David Farragut's flagship, USS *Hartford*. His most notable act of service was his valor during the Battle of Mobile

Bay. As Farragut was legendarily damning torpedoes aloft, it was Richard Dunphy and his fellow coal heavers who sweated and labored to fulfill the command below. During the confrontation with the CSS *Tennessee*, a burst of a shell caused irreparable damage to the young Irishman's arms. Three hours later, they had been amputated to within seven inches of the shoulder. Dunphy was discharged in January 1865 after spending most of the previous four months recovering in military hospitals.



For his service, Dunphy was presented with the Medal of Honor, along with eleven other Hartford sailors. His citation reads that “Dunphy performed his duties with skill and courage throughout this fierce engagement,” despite heavy shelling from Confederates gunboats. Actually obtaining the medal was complicated by the bureaucratic confusion accompanying the country's demilitarization, and he eventually had to petition Naval Secretary Gideon Welles directly.

Because of his severe wounds, Dunphy applied for an invalid's pension and received it. Over the course of his life, he intermittently petitioned for more money and fought with his wife over control of the pension. Most of the remaining records of his life deal with this pension, and although a boon to the injured veteran, it created tension within his family and became a way to fund his growing alcoholism.

By 1871, the Dunphy family had moved to Vallejo, California, the site of Mare Island Naval Shipyard. This shipyard had originally been commanded by Admiral Farragut, the same man Dunphy had served under during the war. Years later, several of Dunphy's sons would work at the shipyard as machinists and two of them joined the navy during the Spanish American War, continuing their father's legacy of service to the United States and the US Navy.

To the young Irishman, the loss of both arms and acquisition of a pension would be a turning point. Although he married and lived a relatively normal existence, his experience in the Civil War would never allow him an easy life.

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Richard D. Dunphy to Gideon Welles, February 6, 1866, GLCo8655, Gilder Lehrman Collection, Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, New York City.

"Special Trains Bring Thousands of War Veterans," *The San Francisco Call*, August 13, 1905.

Images:

Bow view of *USS Hartford* in commission at Mare Island, October 1899. File name: IX 13 Y-4, U.S. Navy Photo, October 1899.

"Farragut at Mobile Bay" *USS Hartford* and *USS Tennessee* at close quarters at Mobile Bay, August 5, 1864, from *Naval Records and Library*, Navy Department, from a painting by W.H. Overend "Naval Customs Traditions and Usage by Leland P. Lovette (1939)".