John Handran (1852–1885)
Medal of Honor Recipient
Submitted by Pat Dalpiaz
Photograph by E. H. Hart
John Handran, Medal of Honor Recipient
1852–1885

On September 14, 2021, 136 years after John Handran’s passing, his descendants and others gathered to celebrate John’s life along at Calvary Cemetery in Gloucester. The celebration included the dedication of a Medal of Honor memorial plaque in honor of his bravery and service to country.

In every person’s life there is a story, and this is the story of a hero.

John Handran was lost at sea aboard the Schooner Cleopatra in late December 1885, leaving behind a wife and three very young children. No one knows how long the fishing trip had been at the time of the accident, but it is certain he and the rest of the crew were not home for Christmas that year.

A storm came up and swept three men into the ocean, John Handran was one of them. Another crewman died on the deck. A distress flag was raised and seen by a British vessel, the Lord Gough. As they prepared to send a rescue boat, the distress flag was taken down. The potential rescuers were confused by this but continued their mission. Apparently, the captain and crew of the Cleopatra took down the distress flag so as not to put other sailors in danger by attempting to rescue them. This seems a very brave decision and speaks to the nature of Gloucester fishermen. The remaining crewmen were rescued and delivered to the Philadelphia port.

John understood the dangers of his livelihood all too well and he acted accordingly by taking out an insurance policy on himself from an organization called the
Massachusetts Catholic Order of the Foresters. They were extensive in detail just like today’s insurance companies use our habits to determine risk and calculate cost. The details provide a rich picture of this man and his family. One of the questions in the medical examination area of the papers asks: “Does the applicant use ardent spirits, beer or tobacco?” John’s answer is difficult to decipher as it is smudged, but it was not a simple “No”. He was 5’3” and 132 lbs.--not a big guy at all. This policy was only 5 months old when he died and paid his widow Sarah one thousand dollars.

These papers also indicate that John’s father and two brothers were both “drowned at sea”--the fishing life took a devastating toll on this family. John’s certificate of death from the Order of Foresters says “Handran was drowned at sea. He was washed from the deck of the vessel and sank after a few moments of struggle. This is the testimony of some of the crew who have come home.”

John died at sea as a recipient of a peace-time Medal of Honor awarded by President Ulysses S. Grant for heroism in rescuing a shipmate who was swept off the US Steamer Franklin near Lisbon Portugal in 1876. From the New York Herald: “poor Henry O’Neil seemed about to pay with his life the penalty for having gone to sea

Photo #: NH53945 USS Franklin, circa 1880s

Notice of John Handran’s Medal of Honor, General Orders and Circulars Issued by the Navy Department from 1863 to 1887, United States. Navy Dept, Thompson, Magnus S. https://books.google.com
without learning to swim” when two sailors “were soon in the water making for the spot. One of them, Edward Madden, held a rope’s end. The rope proved too short, the icy waters chilled him, to let go of the rope was to lose his own life, and he returned. The other, John Handran, seaman, kept on with vigorous strokes. This was not the first time he had risked his life to save a shipmate. As he approached the drowning man with admirable coolness he kept clear of his struggling efforts to clutch, swimming round until he could grasp him with his right hand just so as to keep his mouth above water.”

It seems fated that John should drown at sea, leaving a very proud story for his children and their descendants. Undoubtedly, John would not have thought his actions were heroic, but it’s a story that needs to be told after all these years gone by.
On that day in September, his great-grandchildren Janet Curran McDermott (and family); Anne Curran Coyle (and family); Leo Egan and Father Brennan O.F.M. traveled to Gloucester to join cousin Pat Dalpiaz and her husband Jim for the ceremony which was led by Cape Ann Veterans Services.

Instrumental in this recognition was the Congressional Medal of Honor Society who also sent representative Bill Sweeney. This honor nearly 136 years in the making is of major significance to the history of Gloucester, its military, and fishing families.

Submitted by: Pat Dalpiaz

For Further Reading and Sources:
Cape Ann Advertiser, January 1, 1886.
General Orders and Circulars Issued by the Navy Department from 1863 to 1887, United States. Navy Dept, Thompson, Magnus S. (https://books.google.com)
George Handran, Personal communications with the author.
USS Franklin (1867-1915) Photographed by E. H. Hart, 1162 Broadway, New York, probably at the Norfolk Navy Yard, Virginia, circa the 1880s. U.S. Naval Historical Center Photograph, NH 53945. A public domain photo as the work of the U.S. federal government.