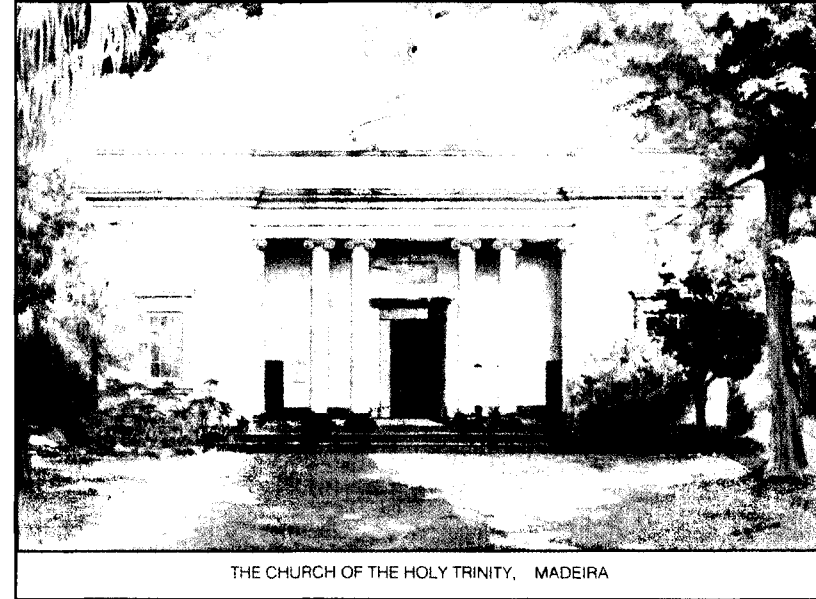


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**CECIL WILLIAM BUCKLEY  
THE FIRST GAZETTED VC**



THE CHURCH OF THE HOLY TRINITY, MADEIRA

This spring my wife and I took our regular holiday to our favourite island of Madeira. Before leaving, I decided to give myself a small project- namely to seek out the grave of Cecil William Buckley, the first man to be announced in the London Gazette of 24 February 1857. I had long been intrigued why one of the original VCs should be laid to rest on this far-off Portuguese island.

I found Holy Trinity, "The English Church", in a narrow turning off a side road climbing away from the centre of the main town of Funchal. The church was built in 1822 after the occupation by the British during the Napoleonic Wars.

Ringing the bell at the gate of the British Cemetery situated further up the street, I was expecting a long and uncomfortable search; I was relieved to find Buckley's grave (no. 429) almost immediately. The simple cross was fashioned from the local black volcanic rock and the engraved lettering was as fresh and clear as the day it was carved. Across the arm of the cross, the inscription read IN MEMORY OF CAPTAIN WILLIAM BUCKLEY VC RN. DIED DECr 7th 1872 AGED 42.

Engraved on the plinth and base of the stone were the names of Buckley's two sons. AND OF PERCY FALCON HIS ELDEST SON BORN AUG 9TH 1867. DIED AT FUNCHAL, JUN 28TH 1899. AND ALSO OF FRANK HIS INFANT SON BORN DECr 20th 1871- DIED FEB 5TH 1873.

This last inscription was particularly poignant for father and son died within two months of each other.

Cecil William Buckley was born in the hamlet of Catcott near Bridgend, Somerset on 7 October 1828 to Joseph and Mary (née Bury). He joined the Royal Navy in 1845 (some sources say 1843), and served as a Midshipman on the old frigate Tweed and the gunboat Cormorant. The posting was the American Station, which mostly involved intercepting slave ships from West Africa. It was while serving on the Cormorant that he was commended for his part in an attack on a Brazilian fort at the mouth of the River Paranagua and the destruction of several slavers in July 1850.

He briefly joined the Miranda in 1850 and then served on the Pacific Station as Mate on the Daedalus from July 1851 to November 1853. After serving abroad for so many years, he was transferred to Devonport and the battleship Royal George, the largest ship on which he served. His stay was short-lived for, on 11 January 1854, Buckley was promoted to Lieutenant and rejoined the 14-gun steam corvette, Miranda, commanded by Captain E.M.Lyons.

Although Britain was not at war with Russia, there was a general drift towards a conflict and the navy began its preparations. The Baltic was seen as the main theatre for confrontation and when war was declared, Admiral Sir Charles Napier set sail in March from Spithead with an impressive fleet.

Departing separately was a small squadron comprising the Eurydice, a 26-gun steam ship, the 16-gun screw corvette Brisk and the Miranda. They were bound for Archangel, in the Arctic Circle, the only Russian port still open for trade. By 26 June they were anchored in the White Sea off Archangel and began their blockade.

After exchanging fire with shore batteries in the woods that lined the shore and with a fortified monastery which guarded the mouth of the Dvina River, landing parties completed their destruction. The town itself was up the river and the only vessel with a shallow enough draft to attack the port was the Miranda.

Under covering fire from the Miranda, parties of blue jackets and marines landed and set fire to stores and government buildings, and several ships were sunk. Although he did not know it at the time, this expedition prepared Buckley for greater feats against the Russians.

Having suffered no fatalities in this side-show, the British squadron returned to England in September, relying on nature to keep Archangel ice-bound for the following eight months.

The following May found the Miranda in the Black Sea theatre of war against Russia. Since the invasion of the Crimean peninsula, the navy had been confined to ineffectually bombarding the forts guarding the entrance to Sebastopol harbour. They were far more effective when they were brought ashore with their large guns to augment the army's artillery on the front-line on the plain above Sebastopol. This was not,

however, what the Royal Navy was about and a more appropriate target was sought.

On 22 May 1855, sixty ships of the allied fleet sailed for the port of Kerch on the extreme eastern end of the Crimea. Most supplies to the beleaguered Sebastopol came by this route so any disruption would cause the enemy a major problem. Taken off guard, the Russians put up little resistance and retired, having blown up their magazines and forts. Landing parties destroyed stores and government buildings. Unfortunately, there was also much plundering and destruction of civilian property, of which a shocked William Howard Russell reported in *The Times*.

On 25 May, *Miranda* led a flotilla of the smaller steam ships into the Sea of Azov and in a week sank four steamers, 246 merchant vessels and captured grain and powder stores and over 17,000 tons of coal. Still the navy encountered no seaborne opposition for all the operations were carried out by landing parties.

On 29 May, Lieutenant Buckley, accompanied by Lieutenant Hugh Burgoyne of the *Swallow* and Gunner John Roberts of *Ardent*, rowed ashore at the town of Genichi, where they were out of covering fire range of their ships offshore. Despite the close presence of enemy soldiers and under heavy fire, the three sailors set fire to granaries and ammunition stores using their lighted cigars. They managed to embark safely, narrowly avoiding being cut off by a party of Cossacks.

On the night of 3 June, Buckley repeated this daring action when he landed at the strongly fortified town of Taganrog, which was under bombardment from an allied squadron. Accompanied by the *Miranda's* Boatswain, Henry Cooper, Buckley was rowed ashore by a four-oared gig. The town was occupied by 3000 Russian troops, but Buckley and Roberts managed to land at several places and wreak havoc with their fire-raising.

These, and other similar raids, caused great consternation to the Russians, who seemed powerless to prevent them. They also resulted in the awarding of eight Victoria Crosses to the Royal Navy including Cecil Buckley.

The expedition returned to Balaclava on 12 June, leaving behind a small allied squadron in the Sea of Azov and Turkish troops occupying Kerch.

One of the ships left behind was the 6-gun sloop *Snake*, the command of which was given to Buckley. He was again mentioned in despatches for his part in the continuing operations in the area.

With the fall of Sebastopol signalling the end to hostilities on the Crimean peninsula, many of the Royal Navy ships withdrew to Malta. It was here on 28 January 1856 that Buckley was inducted into the Freemasons, as were many naval personnel.

Promotion followed and he was made Commander on 27 February 1856 and given the command of the steam sloop *Merlin* on the West Coast of Africa and Cape of Good Hope Station. Here he received his Victoria Cross from the commanding admiral, Sir Henry Keppel. A further move put him in command of Keppel's flagship *Forte* at Cape Town on 25 January 1860.

He then commanded *HMS Persian* and was promoted to Captain on 16 April 1862. On 30 August 1865, Cecil Buckley married Catherine Senhouse Falcon from Doynton, Gloucestershire and a year later was father to a daughter, Cecil Isabel. The following year a son was born named Percy Falcon.

The family had little time together for, in 1867, Captain Buckley was given command of *HMS Pylades* and sent to the Pacific Station until 1871. His inexorable rise seems to have stalled as he was censured by the Board of Admiralty for neglecting gunnery practice and, in a separate incident, reprimanded for

the tone of a letter that he wrote to the Board. Whilst in command of Pylades, however, he did leave his mark on posterity: during surveying the coast of British Columbia, a Captain Pender named one of the features Buckley Point.

His long posting away from home came to an end when, in December 1871, he was given command of the battleship Valiant, a drill ship lying in the Shannon for the Fleet Reserve men in the Southern Irish coastguard. It was becoming apparent that Buckley was an ailing man and in September 1872 he was admitted to Stonehouse Hospital, Plymouth.

His condition was diagnosed as terminal and he retired from the navy on 18 October. Accompanied by his wife and family, now increased with an infant son named Frank, Buckley went to Funchal on Madeira, where he died on 7 December.

Although his death certificate does not give a cause of death, it seems most likely that he died of cancer. The following day he was laid to rest in the British Cemetery.

Brian Best