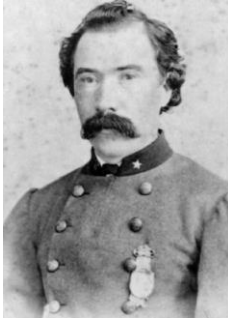


Richard William “Dick” Dowling, Major 1st Texas Heavy Artillery (The Davis Guard)



Richard William Dowling was born in 1837 in County Galway, Ireland. He migrated with his parents and siblings to the United States in 1846 during Ireland’s Great Famine. By 1857, he was settled in Houston, Texas and married to Elizabeth Odlum.

Dowling was a good businessman. At the age of 23, he owned several successful saloons. The most famous of these was The Bank of Bacchus located in Houston on Courthouse Square. It was noted for its hospitality and was a popular social gathering spot in the 1860’s.

Prior to the War of Southern Independence, Dowling enlisted in a Texas Unit known as the Davis Guard. Because of his leadership abilities, he was quickly made 1st Lieutenant of the Company. On October 26, 1861, the Davis Guard was commissioned into the Confederate Army as the 1st Texas Heavy Artillery. During the CSA’s successful Battle of Galveston in January of 1863, the Davis Guard (as they would be known) earned a reputation as a highly skilled unit.

When the Confederates recaptured Galveston, Union General Benjamin Butler became determined to take it back. His plan was to send troops to occupy Houston and cut off all supplies to the island. So, after Vicksburg fell in July, he sent gunboats and transports loaded with troops to the area.

Protecting Fort Griffin at Sabine Pass was Co. F of the 1st Texas Heavy Artillery (Davis Guard) with 6 cannons and two cotton clad gunboats, the *Uncle Ben* and the *Josiah Belle*. Co. F was made up of young Irish immigrants that had been recruited from the docks of Houston and Galveston. And their accuracy on the guns had been honed to perfection by Lt. Dick Dowling. He had set up markers in the channel for target practice and the men could fire rounds that dominated the entire pass. A two-thousand yard width!

On September 8, 1863, the Union Naval Fleet entered the Pass. They fired upon the fort several times, but Lt. Dowling instructed his men to stay hidden in the fort until the gunboats came into the area of the river that was their practice range. So, when there was no return fire, the Union gunboats continued up the river thinking the fort was abandoned. As the *USS Sachiem* moved into the “practice area”, Lt Dowling gave the order to begin the attack. The Davis Guard, as Co. F had become known, fired 140 rounds in a 45-minute time period without stopping to swab their cannons. Two Union gunboats were destroyed and two captured. The Union transports hurriedly retreated out of the Pass and returned to New Orleans. The North lost over 50 men while the Davis Guard sustained no injuries.

Lt. Dowling and his men became instant heroes. But here is where the facts begin to blend into lore. Notables began comparing the battle to the Battle of Thermopylae. The Confederate Government also hailed the battle as “one of the most brilliant and heroic achievements in the history of war.” Newspapers carried the story for weeks. According to Rice University, the stories about the battle continued to spread for over 30 years taking on mythic proportions. Perhaps this is why the statistics of the battle has so many versions. Lt. Dowling’s report stated that there were 22 vessels in the Union fleet. But the varying quotes as to the count of the soldiers on the boats were from 4,000 to 20,000. The total prisoner count also changes from 235 to 400. Even the members of Co. F that actually fought was stated anywhere from 41 to 47 men.

However, Co. F had given Texas and the Confederacy a resounding victory! And their heroism could not go without a show of appreciation. So, they were presented with the Davis Guard Medal. And here again, the accounts differ. The most common perception is that the Confederate Government issued the medal. However, research shows that it was the residents of the City of Houston that actually commissioned and financed the medal. It was presented on the one-year anniversary of the battle. The medals were silver medallions engraved by Charles Gottchalk with the letters “D G” on the front and the date of the battle on the back. Each hung from a green ribbon in honor of the Irish nationality of the Co. F soldiers. The Confederacy issued an official resolution on February 8,

1864, stating that gratitude was due to the Davis Guards for their action at Sabine Pass. And after the medal was given, the Confederate Government sanctioned it. So, the Davis Guard Medal became a “semi-official” award.

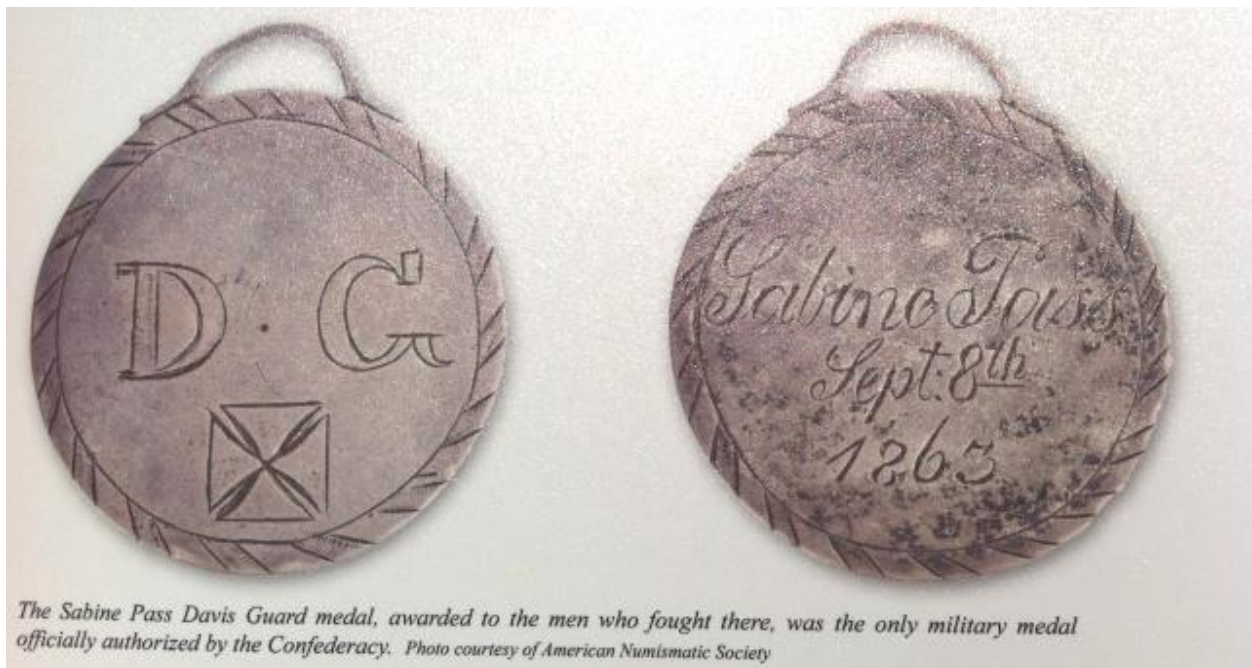
However, the story does not stop there-- How the medal was made is also unknown. The most common version is that the medal was made from a Mexican coin that had been planed down and then engraved. But after another medal surfaced for sale in 2007, experts examined the dimensions in relation to other known authentic ones. They ascertained that it is a possibility that the medals were actually cast from Mexican silver because they are so close in dimension. There are also reports that two medals were made of gold for the officers. But this can not be confirmed.

An additional mystery concerns the Davis Guard Medal given to President Jefferson Davis as an honorary member of the unit. It is a fact that it was stolen by Union soldiers. But one circulated story is that it was taken from him when he was arrested. However, he stated that his wife had possession of the medal. And after his capture, “some officers were sent to examine her luggage” and “pillaged from her trunks...the medal to which I have referred.” President Davis later found out that it had been sold and made an unsuccessful search to recover it. In 1875, he was given a replacement medal. But according to Bertram Hayes-Davis his gg grandson, its location is also unknown.

Today, only 8 Davis Guard Medals are known to exist---5 are in museums and 3 in private collections. One of the medals belongs to the UDC and is on display in the Texas Civil War Museum of Fort Worth. Four others are owned by the American Numismatic Society displayed in their New York museum, one of which can be traced back to its original owner, Lt. Dick Dowling.

After the Battle of Sabine Pass, Lt. Dowling was promoted to Major and spent the balance of the War recruiting troops for the State of Texas. He returned to his businesses in Houston after the War. And, his saloon, The Bank of Bacchus, became a favored meeting place for Veterans. Even though the South was under Reconstruction, Dowling’s wealth grew which allowed him to be successful in other ventures such as real estate, construction and oil & gas.

Major Dowling died from yellow fever on September 23, 1867. He was only 30 years old and survived by his wife and two children, Mary Anne and Felize. His grave is located in St. Vincent’s Cemetery in Houston, Texas. Several monuments were erected to his memory in both Texas and Ireland. Sadly, some of them have been taken down! However, Major Dowling and the Davis Guard’s motto lives on---“*Victory or Death!*”



The Sabine Pass Davis Guard medal, awarded to the men who fought there, was the only military medal officially authorized by the Confederacy. Photo courtesy of American Numismatic Society



(Reproduction of the Davis Guard Medal)

Researched and written by Ella Hanna