

Lieutenant Colonel Nicholas Pennefather 1834-1905

83rd (County of Dublin) Regiment of Foot - 34th (Cumberland) Regiment of Foot

96th Regiment of Foot



Captain Nicholas Pennefather - Gibraltar 1867

Nicholas Pennefather was born 8th May 1834 at Cashel, County Cork, Ireland, son of Edward Pennefather 1788-1871 and Mary Pennefather (nee Mansergh) 1790-1844. Nicholas was the youngest and one of five children born to the couple between 1826 and 1836. Nicholas's siblings were Edward (dates unknown), Daniel 1826-1894, Thomas John 1827-1892, and Captain George Pennefather 65th Regiment 1831-1914.

By the mid-19th century, a significant part of the British Army was made up of regionally recruited line regiments of foot soldiers. These regiments totalling over 100, were key to Britain's defence and expansion around the world, especially during the height of the British Empire. In addition to the regiments of foot, other specialised army regiments included cavalry, artillery, and engineers.

Regiments of Foot often carried the name of the city, county, or region they were raised in, such as the 86th (Royal County Down) Regiment of Foot or the 89th (Princess Victoria's) Regiment of Foot, raised in Dublin in 1793. These regiments were often seen as representing their local communities, and soldiers were usually recruited from those areas. The regimental system fostered strong loyalty and esprit de corps among the soldiers, as regiments maintained distinct traditions, uniforms, and customs that reinforced their identity. Soldiers often stayed with the same regiment throughout their career, forming tight-knit groups with a powerful sense of camaraderie. Although it was customary practice for regiments to recruit the rank and file from local communities, this was not always true for their officers.

Having studied at the Dublin Military Academy, Dublin, Nicholas Pennefather attended the Royal Military College, Sandhurst, Surrey, passing his entrance examinations for the army 16th October 1855. The following year Nicholas joined the British army, purchasing a commission as Ensign in the 83rd (County of Dublin) Regiment of Foot, 19th August 1856.

The 83rd (County of Dublin) Regiment of Foot, had been established in 1793 during the French Revolutionary Wars. Raised to serve as part of Britain's efforts against Revolutionary France, it initially operated in the West Indies and Ireland. The regiment was involved in several key engagements, including the French campaigns in Egypt and the Peninsula War 1808-1814. During the 19th Century the regiment was garrisoned at various colonies throughout the world, including Ceylon, Canada, Gibraltar, and India, while maintaining a significant presence in Ireland. By the mid-19th century, it had become part of the British Army's regular forces.



Hand painted 83rd (County of Dublin) Regiment of Foot Emblem
Painted by Ensign George ES Cartwright circa 1867

Joining the 83rd Regiment's depot companies at Chatham, Kent, Nicholas began his training before joining the main regiment.

Regimental depot companies were typically based in Britain or Ireland, while the main forces of the regiment were deployed abroad. Their primary purpose was to recruit, train, and equip new soldiers before they joined their respective regiments at home or overseas.

Depot companies were responsible for maintaining the regimental records, handling logistics, and ensuring that new recruits and officers were adequately prepared for active service. They provided basic military training, including drill, marksmanship, and physical conditioning, as well as instruction in discipline and regimental traditions.

The depot companies also served as a haven for wounded or sick soldiers who had returned from overseas postings, offering a place for recovery and convalescence. During this period in British military history, the health of the British Army abroad faced significant challenges. The harsh climate often experienced abroad, coupled with unsanitary living conditions, led to widespread health issues among the troops. Tropical diseases such as malaria, cholera, dysentery, and typhoid were rampant, posing a constant threat to the soldiers.

Having joined his depot companies in December 1856, Nicholas passed his examination in the course of instruction in the use of the Enfield Pattern 1853 rifled musket. Although he didn't know it at the time, but this rifle or more precisely it's new ammunition, would be one of the reasons why Nicholas and the 83rd Regiment would soon find themselves fighting against British Native troops in India.

In May 1857, the War Office ordered the 83rd Regiment companies to hold themselves ready to join their headquarters in India. Earlier in the year, an uprising within the Bengal native army occurred in British ruled India. The rebellion grew quickly and with the British reacting slowly, it soon spread,

encouraging further Indian regiments to join the rebellion. With only 35,000 British soldiers on the whole of the Indian subcontinent widely scattered, British reinforcements were needed urgently.

Between July and October 1857, a total of 84 troopships left England bound for India, carrying a total of 32,600 troops. On one of those ships, the “Sedgemoor,” was the newly commissioned Ensigns Pennefather and Karlake, together with 134 other officers and men sent to reinforce the 83rd Regiment of Foot, already on active field service in India.

Arriving in India in January 1858, Nicholas was promoted to Lieutenant by purchase in the same month. Nicholas soon found himself in action, one of the 4,500 men that made up the British forces sent to re-take the fortified city of Kotah, held by a formidable force of over 15,000 Indian rebels. Following a short siege and successful assault, the city was taken back into British control 30th March 1858, but not before a large force of rebel soldiers had withdrawn from the city, under the cover of darkness.



The Indian Mutiny - The Capture of Delhi 1857, by Bequet Freres after R de Moraine

By August, a force of about 900 men under the personal command of General Roberts, who by a series of forced marches, had closed upon an estimated rebel force of 8,000 men near the village of Sanganeer. The regiment advanced to attack under heavy fire from the rebel artillery. Having inflicted heavy casualties on the rebels, nightfall once again allowed the rebels to withdraw.

On 14th August, the 83rd Regiment once again engaged a large enemy force, this time near the village of Kotaria. By evening, the 83rd had sustained a small loss of 22 killed and wounded, while the enemy over one thousand left dead on the field.

In 1861, with the Indian Mutiny (1857-59) put down and British rule restored throughout India, Nicholas, and twenty-seven other officers of the 83rd Regiment who had been engaged with the enemy during the mutiny, were presented with the Indian War Medal. With Nicholas that day, were Captain John Sprot and Lieutenant Frederick Karlake.



Lt. Pennefather



Lt. Karlake



Capt. Sprot

In the following year, the regiment returned to England where it assumed garrison duties for the next five years. Returning with the Headquarters of the regiment, Nicholas together with over 400 officers and men aboard the troopship "King Lear", arrived at Plymouth 16th May 1862, having left Bombay 10 weeks earlier. On a second transport ship, the "Cospatrick," a further 200 rank and file from the 83rd and other regiments, invalids, and 8 soldiers described as "insane", arrived back in England in the same month. It was reported that 11 soldiers had died on the voyage.

In August 1863, Nicholas was appointed as 83rd Regiment Instructor of Musketry, replacing Lieutenant William Forbes Anderson who was transferred to the School of Musketry at Hythe, Kent.

On 2nd August 1864, Nicholas married Catharine Butler, only child of the late Thomas Butler of Hythe and formerly Ivychurch, Kent.

In January 1866, the regiment who had been in England for four years returned to Ireland and was distributed Headquarters at the Curragh Barracks Kildare, three companies in Armagh, one company in Monaghan, two companies in Sligo and two companies in Boyle.

In March 1867, the depot companies of the 83rd Regiment were moved from Dublin to Colchester in England. In April, the regiment embarked the troopship "Himalaya" at Kingstown, Ireland, from where it was transported to Gibraltar. Replacing the 86th Regiment, the 83rd Regiment would spend the next three years on garrison duty at Gibraltar. On board the "Himalaya" that day, were 33 officers and 700 men making up the regiment, plus 66 women and 71 children family members.

Britain had taken control of Gibraltar in 1713 and thereafter had kept a military presence garrisoned there. During the Napoleonic Wars, Gibraltar had become an important base for the Royal Navy. Designated as one of four British fortresses (together with Halifax, Nova Scotia, Bermuda, and Malta). During the 19th century, the peacetime military garrison at Gibraltar fluctuated between 1,100 and 5,000 troops at any one time.

On 17th April 1867, Nicholas was promoted to Captain by purchase with the 83rd Regiment. In November 1867, however, Nicholas exchanged with a Captain John Francis Wyse from the 34th (Cumberland) Regiment of Foot. Captain Wyse was a veteran of the Crimean War with 13 years service in the army, when he exchanged into the 83rd Regiment.



Captain J F Wyse 34th Regiment exchanged
to the 83rd Regiment November 1867

At this time, it was customary practice for officers to exchange into different regiments when opportunities arose. This allowed officers to transfer between regiments, often with the mutual agreement of both parties and usually approved by higher command. The reasons for exchange could be strategic, social, financial, or personal.

From November 1867, the 34th Regiment was stationed at Portsmouth, Aldershot, and then Shorncliffe, Kent, until in September 1871 when they were transported to Ireland. In Ireland, the regiment was spread amongst different locations including Dublin, Newry, Kilkenny, Waterford, and Clonmel.

In April 1874, Nicholas was appointed Aide-de-Camp to Sir Richard Dennis Kelly KCB General Officer commanding Cork District in Ireland. In September 1875, Nicholas was appointed Staff Officer of Pensioners at Waterford Ireland, a position he held for 4 years.



Sir Richard Dennis Kelly Circa 1855

In June 1879, Nicholas was appointed as a Captain in the 96th Regiment of Foot, and in September was promoted to Major.

On 18th March 1882, Major Nicholas Pennefather retired from the army with the honorary rank of Lieutenant Colonel. In May 1884, Nicholas was appointed as honorary Treasurer of the Waterford Cricket and Lawn Tennis Club.

By 1891, Nicholas and his wife Catherine were living 29 High Street, New Romney, Kent, England.

Lieutenant Colonel Nicholas Pennefather died 12th February 1905 at his home Green Court, New Romney, Kent. He died of Pneumonia, following a bout of influenza. Nicholas was buried at St Nicholas's Churchyard, New Romney, Kent.

Catherine Pennefather died eleven years later, 16th May 1916, at her home in New Romney.

Researched and written by Gary Hynard 2025