

THE MEDICAL VICTORIA CROSSES

The Indian Mutiny 1857 – 1858

PH Starling

Director, Army Medical Services Museum, Keogh Barracks, Ash Vale

Introduction

With the British Army barely recovered from the campaign in the Crimea, unrest was gradually fermenting in the Indian sub-continent. The causes of this unrest are complex and include annexation of those Indian States whose ruler died without a natural heir [1]. This policy instilled fear in the population that their customs and rule would be replaced by those of the British Government. In the East India Company the Sepoys considered themselves the real rulers, the European officers in many cases being old and infirm due to long years on the Indian sub-continent [2].

Perhaps one of the most widely known contributing factors to the mutiny and perhaps the catalyst to the unrest, was the issue of the cartridges for the new Enfield Rifle. The Enfield was scheduled to replace existing small arms in India in 1854 but the Crimean campaign and the need for the new rifles there, delayed the arrival of the first batch in India until the Spring of 1856 [3]; this first batch being issued to British Troops. By May 1857, 12,000 Enfield rifles had arrived in India but the majority remained in Magazines. The cartridge for the rifle was of paper construction and was loaded by the process of biting off the tip of the cartridge, pouring powder down the barrel and then the remaining cartridge containing the ball, forced down the barrel by the ramrod [3]. To enhance the loading of the paper cartridge into the barrel, it was greased. Although a warning had been issued by the authorities that the grease used should not offend the Indian castes, this seems to have been ignored.

When the first Indian troops were summoned for instruction in the new weapon the rumour circulated that the cartridge was greased with a mixture of both pig and cow fat. The Sepoys refused to handle even ungreased cartridges and as a consequence many were arrested. On 10 May 1857 the Sepoys mutinied at Meerut choosing a time when the European Officers and their families would be at church parade and therefore unarmed. They attacked the Europeans, murdering them and their families and then burnt their houses [2]. They then advanced on the jail and freed their previously imprisoned fellow soldiers. From the jail they then made their way to the armouries which they broke open and in the early hours of the next day made their way towards Delhi [3].

Delhi

The mutineers captured Delhi on 11 May; there were few European troops in this ancient capital and the majority that were there were slaughtered unless they managed to escape. The mutineers quickly managed to break open the main powder magazine and prepared themselves for the assault that the British must surely make. The assault did come, in September 1857, after a siege of several months. One of the regiments taking part in the

siege and assault upon Delhi was the 61st Regiment of Foot, which formed part of No. 5 Column under Brigadier Longfield and they were to assault through the Kashmir Gate and on into the city [4]. The regiment had a Surgeon, Ludovic Charles Stewart and three Assistant Surgeons, Robert McNab, Alfred Hayte and Herbert Taylor Reade [5].

Herbert Taylor Reade

Herbert Taylor Reade was born at Perth, Upper Canada on 20 September 1828. His father was Surgeon George Hume Reade who at the time of Herbert's birth, was employed in the Military Department of Canada and subsequently died at Scutari in 1854 [6]. After his schooling and medical education, Reade applied to join the army and was appointed an Acting Assistant Surgeon on 9 August 1850 and then Assistant Surgeon to the 61st Regiment of Foot on 8 November 1850. He served at Home until 20 January 1857 when he embarked for Bengal [7]. The records of the regiment show that whilst preparing for the assault on Delhi, Reade and his colleagues had sickness as well as battle injuries to deal with. On most days men are listed as having 'died' including from Cholera [4].

On 14 September Reade followed the assaulting troops through the Kashmir Gate as No. 5 Column followed in the wake of No. 3. The fighting was intense as the columns spread out to capture their various objectives (Figure 1). The first part of the citation for Reade's Victoria Cross bears testimony to this:



Figure 1. Herbert Taylor Reade in the action that resulted in award of the Victoria Cross

During the siege of Delhi, on the 14th of September 1857, while Surgeon Reade was attending to the wounded, at the end of one of the streets in the city, a party of rebels advanced from the direction of the Bank, and having established themselves in the houses in the street, commenced firing from the roofs. The wounded were thus in very great danger, and would have fallen into the hands of the enemy, had not Surgeon Reade drawn his sword, and calling upon the few soldiers who were near to follow, succeeded, under a very heavy fire, in dislodging the rebels from their position.

Surgeon Reade's party consisted of about ten in all, of whom two were killed, and five or six wounded [8].

Corresponding Author: Captain (Retd) PH Starling MA, DHMSA, FRHistS, Director, Army Medical Services Museum, Keogh Barracks, Ash Vale, Aldershot GU12 5RQ
Email: armymedicalmuseum@btinternet.com
Tel: 01252 868820 Fax: 01252 868832

It is said that Reade himself killed two Sepoys [9]. On 16 September a Party of the 61st under command of Colonel Deacon and accompanied by Punjabis and Baluchis stormed and captured the magazine. Reade accompanied this party as the second part of his citation testifies:

Surgeon Reade also accompanied the regiment at the assault of Delhi, and, on the morning of the 16th September, 1857, was one of the first up at the breach in the magazine, which was stormed by the 61st Regiment and Belooch Battalion, upon which occasion he, with a serjeant of the 61st Regiment, spiked one of the enemy's guns [8].

It would be 1861 before the announcement of the award appeared in the London Gazette. This was due to a delay in the submission brought about by a combination of sickness amongst the 61st Commanding Officer and then a frequent change of commanding officer. By the time the recommendation was made it was felt that the delay was too great and the award should not be made but Reade himself made a representation to the Director General who passed it on to Sidney Herbert, in January 1861, who felt there was good cause for the award and as the delay was not of Reade's doing, a recommendation was made[8].

By now Reade had been promoted to Surgeon, had undertaken an appointment as a Staff Surgeon for fourteen months and then back to the 61st Regiment until December 1861 when he returned to the Staff. These appointments had included Mauritius and England. He returned to India in 1864 followed by a return to England in November 1869 and then to the Straits Settlements as a Surgeon Major but in September 1873 was returned to England 'sick'. He remained in England until July 1880 when he was sent to the West Indies in the rank of Deputy Surgeon General. During

this appointment he was 'brought to notice for his indefatigable devotion to duty during epidemic of Yellow Fever 1881'. Once again his own sickness necessitated his return to England in November 1881 followed by being placed on 'half pay' in September 1883 for 13 months. Restored to the rank of Deputy Surgeon General on 13 October 1884 he served on the home establishment until 31 December 1887 when he retired in the rank of Surgeon General [7].

Surgeon General Herbert Taylor Reade died on 23 June 1897 at Sunnylands, Lower Weston, Somerset and was buried in Locksbrook cemetery, Upper Bristol Road, Bath. He is commemorated by a plaque at the Royal Canadian Legion, Beckwith Street East, Perth Ontario and his medals are in the Soldiers of Gloucester Regimental Museum [10].

References

1. Haythornthwaite PJ. The Colonial Wars Source Book Caxton Editions, 2000; London p. 98
2. Cole DH, Priestley EC. An Outline of British Military History 1660 – 1937 Sifton Praed & Co, 1937; London p. 199
3. David S. The Indian Mutiny 1857 Viking, 2002; London
4. 61st Foot in India – <http://glosters.tripod.com/index>
5. Hart HG. The New Annual Army List and Militia List 1857 John Murray, 1857; London : entry for 61st Foot
6. Medical Officers of the British Army 1660-1960, Vol 1 The Wellcome Library, 1968; London: entry 3671
7. Army Medical Services Museum, Herbert Taylor Reade service record
8. The National Archives, WO32/7348
9. Griffiths CJ. A Narrative of the Siege of Delhi, with an account of the Mutiny at Ferozepore in 1857 John Murray, 1910; London p. 163
10. Army Medical Services Museum, Herbert Taylor Reade VC File