

Rear Admiral  
Henry James Raby VC, CB



# HERO *of the* MONTH

By Lord Ashcroft



Henry Raby was a remarkable man in many ways. Not only was he the very first Victoria Cross recipient ever to be presented with his award by Queen Victoria, but he was also the only one to be 'wounded' during an investiture.

While he was from a traditional British family, Henry James Raby was born in Boulogne, France, on September 26, 1827. He came from a line of influential industrialists: his grandfather, Alexander, had built a fortune around the iron industry in south Wales. However, after the depression that followed the Napoleonic Wars, the Raby family had hit hard times.

Another disaster occurred while Henry, his father Arthur and mother Henrietta (née Smith) were travelling around Europe in 1824 – their much-loved home in Llanelli, Cae Mawr Cottage, was destroyed in a fire.

Raby Jnr was educated at Sherborne School in Dorset before he joined the Royal Navy on March 8, 1842, aged 14. A Volunteer First Class, he was assigned to HMS *Monarch*. For the next 12 years he served on various ships and enjoyed several promotions.

On October 23, 1854, with the Crimean War raging, Lord Raglan called for naval assistance to reinforce land troops whose numbers had been ravaged by disease. A Naval Brigade was formed with sailors from four ships, including HMS *Wasp*, on which Raby served.

Raby, by then 27 and a lieutenant, arrived with the Naval Brigade in the Crimea in October 1854 and served on land, rather than at sea, for the remainder of the war. On November 5 that year he fought in the decisive Battle of Inkerman, which broke the will of the Russian Army to defeat the allies in the field.

## HARD FIGHTING

In June 1855, the Naval Brigade was instructed to provide manpower to form some of the ladder parties for the assault on Sevastopol. This involved a two-pronged Anglo-French attack on the Malakoff, a two-storey stone tower and the Redan, a triangular, purpose-built fort. The ladder parties faced a daunting challenge because they were at the front of the assault and

LEFT A depiction of Raby's VC act. (AUTHOR'S COLLECTION)

BELOW *Attaque de mamelon vert*, by Paul Alexandre Protais, depicting the French attack on two forts during the Battle of Malakoff, part of the Siege of Sevastopol.

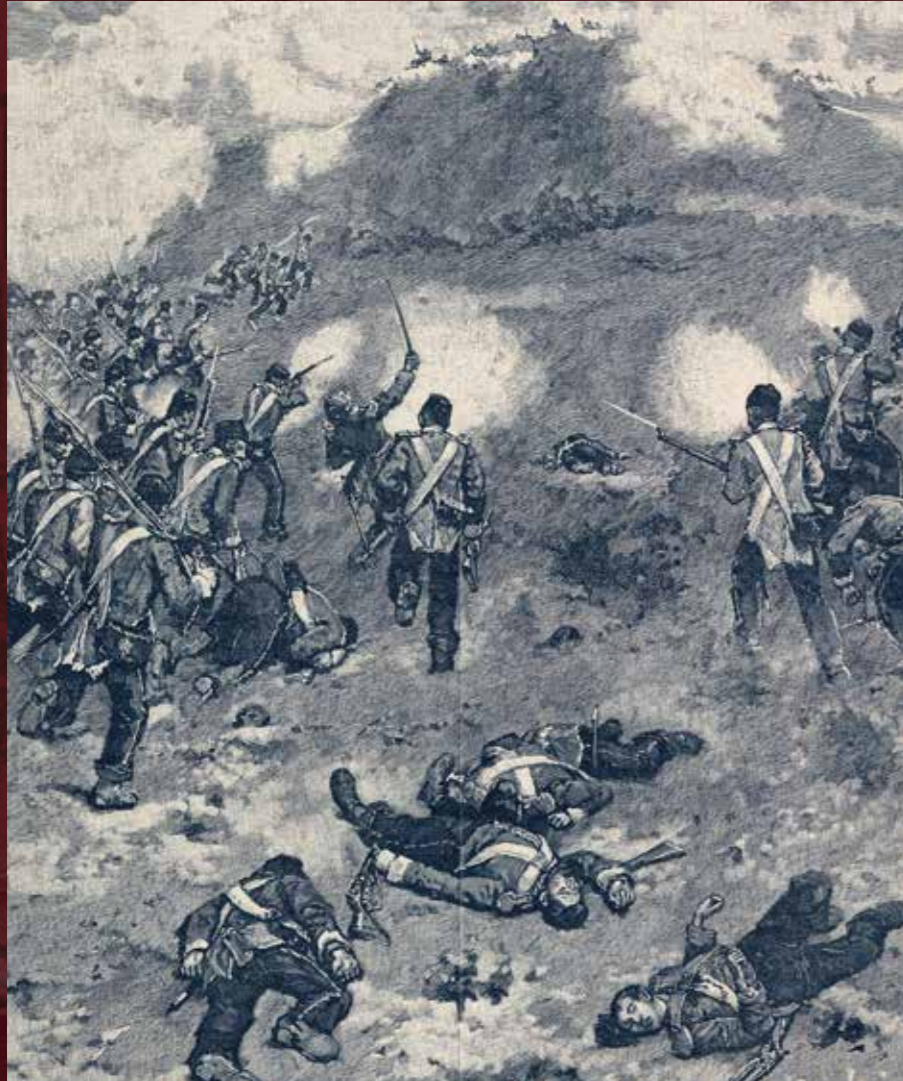
would endure the full might of the defensive fire. Indeed, ladder parties from years earlier had been known as the 'Forlorn Hope' because, for many, inclusion meant almost certain death in battle.

In the event, Raby was assigned to duties in the trenches besieging Sevastopol. On June 17, 1855, some 800 Allied guns began firing in a massive bombardment of the Russian forces. Although the latter's resistance was formidable, its soldiers soon started to run short of ammunition and the Allies began to get the upper hand. The next day, the Anglo-French force started a major offensive targeting both the Malakoff and the Redan. Both attacks went badly for the allies, with the men of the Naval and Rifle Brigades, along with the 57th Regiment, taking heavy casualties.

It was on June 18 that Raby took part in an action for which he would be awarded the VC. During the attack on the Redan, a soldier serving with the 57th Regiment became stranded in no-man's land having been seriously wounded. He had been shot through both legs but, despite clearly being in great pain, was sitting up and calling for assistance. Raby, along with another officer who had seen what had happened, seized the initiative and decided to rescue the wounded man, accompanied by two other seamen. ▶

*"Indeed, ladder parties from years earlier had been known as the 'Forlorn Hope' because, for many, inclusion meant almost certain death in battle"*





Climbing out of the forward trench, Raby and the other men faced a daunting challenge: the injured soldier was fully 70 yards (64m) away and the enemy had opened up a heavy fire from a position looking down on where he lay. Somehow the rescue party succeeded in reaching the trooper, lifting him up and, after supporting his injured legs, started scurrying back to their own lines. The enemy fire continued but they eventually managed to get their casualty back to a place of safety.

**MODEST HERO**

Sir Stephen Lushington (Raby's commanding officer) later prepared a report of the incident that noted the bravery of Raby and others. However, Raby became

ABOVE British troops assault the Redan. (TOPFOTO)

RIGHT Raby's medal group – note the blue VC ribbon, awarded to naval recipients until 1918. (AUTHOR)

OPPOSITE French troops clamber to storm one of Sebastopol's towers. (TOPFOTO)

aware of Lushington's report and tried to correct what he felt had been an injustice in the nomination because Lt Edward D'Eath, the first man to see that a soldier needed rescuing, had not been given sufficient credit for his bravery and nor had the two other sailors.



Having returned home after the war, Raby wrote directly to Lushington telling him: "I have only on my return to England become aware of your having already forwarded to Admiral Sir Edward Lyons, Commander in Chief of the Mediterranean Fleet, the names of such officers and men amongst those who had the honour of serving under your command in the Royal Navy Brigade who you consider to have deserved the distinction of the 'Victoria Cross' by any special act of 'valour or devotion to their country' in the presence of the enemy during the late war.

"Under these circumstances, I have the honour to request that you will allow me, in justice to the memory of my lamented comrade and brother officer the late Lieutenant Edward Hughes D'Eath, RN of Her Majesty's ship *Sidon*, to bring the following action to your notice.

"On the 18 June 1855, Lt D'Eath commanded the 4th party of seamen detailed to carry the scaling ladders to which party I had also the honour of being attached. In the morning soon after the repulse of the troops from the Redan, I was standing in the advanced sap [trench] in front of the Quarries when Lt D'Eath came to me and said that there was a soldier laying out in front of the sap badly wounded who he thought we might get in, and asked me if I would assist him to do so, to which I agreed readily. Lt D'Eath on again looking at the man considered that from his being wounded in the legs it would require more than ourselves to bring him in, he therefore asked John Taylor and Henry Curtis if they would volunteer to go with us, they immediately assented.

"As Lt D'Eath unfortunately fell victim to cholera soon after this event, I as the survivor take the liberty of laying this simple statement of the facts before you trusting that you consider it worthy of being classed with those 'deeds of valour'

which are already known to you [and] will be pleased to use your influence to procure the Honour of 'The Victoria Cross' for him and those others concerned. I feel that by the family of my friend the late Lt D'Eath nothing would be more highly prized than such a testimony to his bravery."

**A NEW AWARD**

At the actual time of Raby's heroism, the Victoria Cross did not exist, although, in fact, a new decoration, for everyone from the lowest ranks to the most senior officers, was under active consideration. The VC was eventually founded by a Royal Warrant of January 29, 1856 which, with 15 'rules and ordinances', created a new decoration to reward "individual instances of merit and valour".

It is likely that Lushington knew when he drew up his report that the VC was not able to be bestowed posthumously at that point, and so had not mentioned D'Eath in it. The lieutenant had died on August 7, 1855, thereby making him ineligible for the medal. In the event Raby, Taylor and Curtis were all honoured with the VC.

Eventually, the first awards of the Victoria Cross, including Raby's, were announced in the *London Gazette* on February 24, 1857. Four months later, on June 26, there was a wonderful gathering in Hyde Park for the first giving of the medals. Queen Victoria herself was on horseback and dressed in scarlet jacket, black skirt and plumed hat as she prepared for one of the most remarkable investitures in the history of the Royal Family. Her Majesty was about to bestow the award on 62 of the initial 111

**Victoria Cross Heroes Volume II**



Lord Ashcroft KCMG PC is a businessman, philanthropist, author and pollster. His sixth book on gallantry *Victoria Cross Heroes Volume II* was published in hardback in 2016 and is now available in paperback. For more information, visit [www.victoriacrossheroes2.com](http://www.victoriacrossheroes2.com)

Lord Ashcroft's VC and GC collection is on public display at the Imperial War Museum London. For more information, visit [www.iwm.org.uk/heroes](http://www.iwm.org.uk/heroes) and details of his VC collection may be found at [www.lordashcroftmedals.com](http://www.lordashcroftmedals.com) For more information on Lord Ashcroft's work, visit [www.lordashcroft.com](http://www.lordashcroft.com) Follow him on Twitter: @LordAshcroft



medal recipients in a ceremony attended by an estimated 4,000 troops and 12,000 spectators – just one of the recipients would go in the history books as the first ever man to receive the VC.

That honour was given to Henry Raby, then just three months short of his 30th birthday. By virtue of being the most senior officer in the most senior service (the Royal Navy), he was chosen as the first person to whom the Queen bent down towards from her horse in order to pin the VC firmly on his chest.

In fact, she was a little too firm as she thrust the medal forward and the investiture pin of Raby's medal shot through the thick jacket of his uniform and pierced his skin. As J D Davies notes in his book *Britannia's Dragon: A Naval History of Wales*: "The investiture proved to be rather more painful than the action for which he

was being rewarded, as the Queen pinned the medal straight into his chest."

Raby is said not to have flinched as the pin went deep into his skin but, in his latter years, joked that he had survived the VC action unscathed only to be wounded by the Queen. Raby received several other decorations from foreign countries, including the Légion d'honneur (3rd Class) from France for his valour during the war.

Raby went on to enjoy a distinguished career in the Royal Navy. While serving on the West Africa Station, he carried out work against the slave trade. In April 1861, he commanded the gunboats that seized and destroyed Porto Novo, the large slaving fort. During this fighting, he was involved in spiking one of the guns when it exploded, leaving him with facial injuries.

He was promoted to captain in November 1862, the year before he married Judith Foster in Holt Parish Church, Wiltshire. The couple went on to have three sons, including two who served in the armed forces. In October 1875, after more than 33 years' military service, Raby was appointed a Companion of the Order of the Bath (CB). He was placed on the retired list in 1877 but early the following year he was promoted to rear admiral.

Raby never forgot his Llanelli links: at the time of his investiture, he is believed to have owned 36 cottages in the town. In 1878, a year after retiring, he returned to Llanelli and was welcomed by an affectionate crowd.

In retirement, he spent most of his remaining years living in Southsea, Hampshire, where he was involved in several charities. He died on February 13, 1907, aged 79, and was buried in Highland Road Cemetery, Portsmouth, with full military honours.

I purchased Raby's medal group privately in 2011 and I feel privileged to own the gallantry and service medals of a man who will always have such a prominent place in any history of the VC. ●

