

Major-General
George Alexander
Renny VC



HERO
of the
MONTH

By Lord Ashcroft



PRIOR TO HIS HEROIC ACTION DURING THE SIEGE OF DELHI, GEORGE RENNY SERVED IN THE SUTLEJ CAMPAIGN OF 1845-1846 AND WAS AT THE BATTLE OF SOBRAON ON FEBRUARY 10, 1846 TOPFOTO

The Victoria Cross awarded to Major-General George Renny is unique for two reasons. First, it was bestowed to an officer from the only native artillery troop to stay loyal during the Indian Mutiny. Second, it was stolen and only returned to the family five years later as a result of a stroke of good fortune. I purchased the medal group at a Spink auction in 2010 and I feel privileged to be the custodian of this brave officer's gallantry and service medals.

George Alexander Renny was born in Riga, Russia (now Latvia), on May 12, 1825. He was the son of Alexander Renny, a Scottish merchant living in Riga. However, when George was very young, his father died and his mother returned to Scotland with the family. He was then educated at Montrose Academy in Scotland and Addiscombe College in Surrey; the purpose of the latter institution was to train young officers to serve in the East India Company's private army in India. Renny was commissioned into the Bengal Horse Artillery as a Second Lieutenant in June 1844. He served during the Sutlej Campaign of 1845-1846, when he was present at the Battle of Sobraon on February 10, 1846.

In October 1846, Renny was promoted to lieutenant and he spent the next 11 years in India. He was married in Nainital, India, in October 1849, to Flora McWhirter, the daughter of Dr John McWhirter, who had been president of the Royal College of Physicians of Edinburgh. The couple went on to have three sons and three daughters.

By 1857, Renny held the command of the 5th Troop, 1st Brigade, Bengal Horse Artillery. On May 10 of that year, the Great Sepoy Mutiny began at Meerut, and it soon spread throughout the sub-continent. At this time, Renny was stationed in Jalandhar. On the night of June 7, he was first called into action, ordering his native gunners to fire upon the mutinous cavalry and infantry.

Large-Scale Uprising

There were soon mutinous outbreaks in 26 regiments of infantry, seven regiments of cavalry and eight companies of artillery. Yet Renny's troop remained loyal, the only battery of native artillery to do so. He marched with them to Delhi, arriving in late June, only to find that the city had fallen to the insurgents. On July 9, after an attack by the rebel cavalry on the right

of the British camp on the Delhi Ridge, it was thought advisable to take away the guns and horses of Renny's troop as a precaution in case they mutinied.

The native officers and men begged to be allowed to prove their loyalty, to no avail, and were placed in charge of the mortar battery on the ridge. During that evening, their allegiance was again tested when a group of insurgents approached and called out to them to join them inside the city's walls. The loyal native Indians replied that they obeyed orders only from their own officers. Instead, they returned to their mortar battery, which they worked and manned without relief until the siege came to an end.

Brigadier John Nicholson's Moveable Column arrived outside Delhi in August and, on September 4, a siege train of 32 howitzers and heavy mortars was delivered, along with more than 100 bullock carts of ammunition. This meant that an attack on the rebels inside the walled city was possible.

With the forward batteries complete, the bombardment of Delhi got underway on September 12. The agitators responded with a storm of mortar, artillery and musket fire that resulted in more than

300 British casualties. The battering of Delhi's defences continued and, on September 14, the all-out attack started.

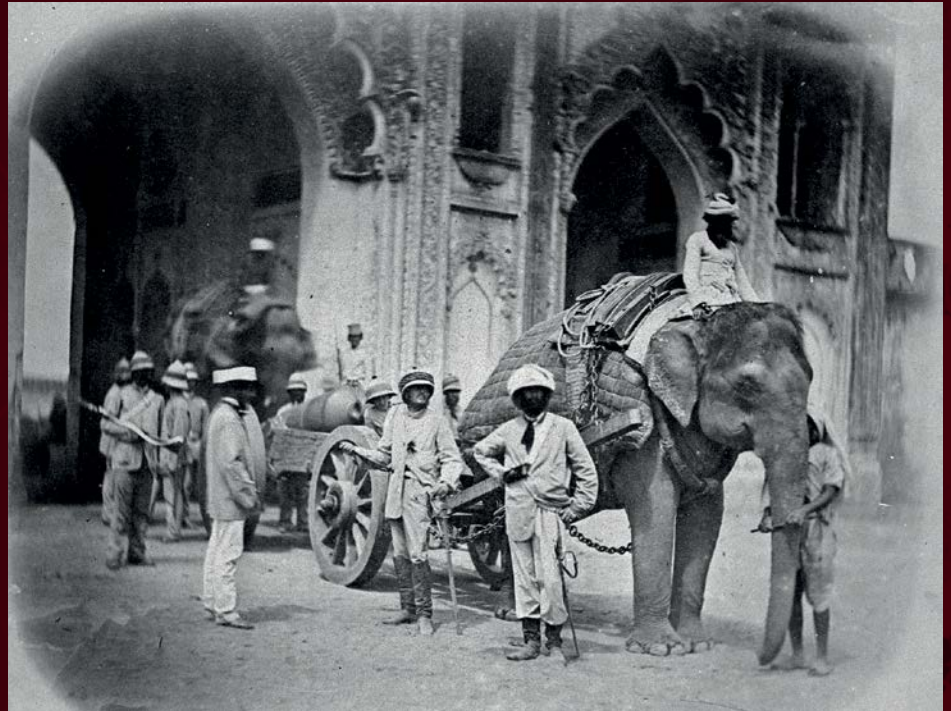
Into Battle

Renny, then 32 years old, had been given the command of No.4 Siege Battery and provided covering fire for the initial assault on the city. However, casualties were high. On the first day alone, the Delhi Field Force lost 36 officers and more than 1,000 other men were killed or wounded. Despite the high cost, the primary objectives had been achieved and, by noon, a solid base had been established from which to continue the attack.

On the afternoon of September 14, Renny and his men entered Delhi, carrying by hand a couple of 12-pounder mortars. Once inside the city proper, they used them to successfully shell several houses that were being used to shelter snipers.

The following day, the British consolidated their earlier gains, with further artillery fire directed at the centre of the city by Renny and his mobile troop. During the night and into the morning of the 16th, the rebels withdrew from the suburb of Kishanganj, leaving behind five heavy guns. These were soon put to good use, making a breach in the main magazine. A party of the fourth column was ordered to storm it and, by noon, the magazine was taken, along with 171 guns and howitzers, as well as a vast stock of ammunition.

During the afternoon of September 16, realising the enormity of their arms loss, the insurgents made a frantic attempt



AN ELEPHANT PULLING A FIELD GUN DURING THE LATTER STAGES OF THE INDIAN MUTINY NAM

to recapture the magazine, as well as the workshops adjoining it. Advancing under covering fire, they succeeded in seizing the workshops and seemed set to recapture the magazine.

VC Action

With the outcome of the battle finely balanced, Renny sprang into action. He leapt onto the magazine's burning roof and pelted the enemy with shells handed to him, their fuses already burning. As the enemy withdrew, Renny and his troops turned the mortars that had been captured in the magazine on to Fort Selinghur and

the Red Palace, commencing a major bombardment, which they continued for the next four days. Finally, on September 20 and after five days of fierce fighting, Delhi was taken.

Lieutenant Renny, who was mentioned in General Archdale Wilson's despatch, was promoted to Captain in April 1858 and then Brevet Major in July of the same year. With the city back under British control, he and his troops served in the subsequent operations in Muzaffarnagar District and in Rohilkhand. Their final engagement of the campaign was the action at Sisseah in January 1859.

Renny's men, whose loyalty had been total and owed a great deal to their commander's leadership, were singled out for rich praise. Every native officer received the Order of British India and every non-commissioned officer received the Indian Order of Merit for their services. Furthermore, following Delhi's capture, the native soldiers had their guns and horses restored to them.

Renny's VC was announced on April 12, 1859, when his citation stated: "The roof [of the magazine] having been again set on fire, Captain Renny [although he was a lieutenant at the time of the battle] with great gallantry mounted to the top of the wall of the magazine, and flung several shells with lighted fuses over into the midst of the enemy, which had an almost immediate effect, as the attack at once became feeble at that point, and soon after ceased there." He was presented with his decoration by Queen Victoria at



THE GEORGE RENNY MEDAL GROUP, WITH THE VICTORIA CROSS ON THE LEFT VIA LORD ASHCROFT



IN THE WEEKS LEADING UP TO THE BRITISH ASSAULT ON DELHI IN SEPTEMBER 1857, GUN BATTERIES WERE ESTABLISHED WITHIN CLOSE RANGE OF THE CITY WALLS NAM

an investiture at Home Park, Windsor, on November 9, 1860.

Second Lieutenant (later Colonel) Edward Thackeray of the Bengal Engineers, who had braved heavy enemy musketry to put out the fire on the thatched roof of the magazine at the time of Renny's VC action was also awarded Britain and the Commonwealth's premier gallantry award for bravery in the face of the enemy. However, his VC was not announced until April 29, 1862, nearly five years after his action.

In June 1867, Renny was promoted to Brevet Lieutenant-Colonel and, the following year, he served during the Hazara Campaign on the North West Frontier, as part of the expedition against the Bazoti Black Mountain tribes. This three-week campaign was the last of the 16 punitive expeditions carried out in the region over a 20-year period that qualified for the India General Service Medal's North West Frontier clasp. On July 30, 1868, a force of some 500 tribesmen had attacked the police station in the Agrore Valley and, for the next fortnight, the rebels carried out raids in the area.

Combat in the Mountains

A punitive force was assembled and Renny travelled the 65 miles (105km) from Rawalpindi to the base camp near the village of Koongullee. At 4am on October 3, 1868, the force set out from their camp, with Renny in command of 'D' Battery, F Brigade, Royal Horse Artillery. The force had its four 9-pounder guns and two 24-pounder howitzers

“Renny leapt onto the magazine's burning roof and pelted the enemy with shells being handed to him”

mounted on elephants. The following morning, Renny's battery went into action against the enemy, who were located on a knoll about 1,000 yards (915m) in front of the British position. The adversaries were driven off and, later in the campaign, Renny and his men attacked a redoubt called Muchaie Peak which, at 10,200ft (3,110m), became one of the highest points that a British force had ever operated. The assault was successful and with few casualties. For this role, Renny was mentioned in despatches by Major-General Alfred Wilde, according to the London Gazette of June 15, 1869.

Renny eventually retired from the military in December 1878, with the honorary rank of Major-General. He died at home in Bath, Somerset, on January 5, 1887, aged 61. Renny was buried in the city's Locksbrook Cemetery. There is a memorial in his honour in Freshford Church, Somerset, and his name is listed at the Royal Artillery Chapel, Woolwich, southeast London.

Stolen and Recovered

In 1978, Renny's medal group, including his VC, was stolen during a burglary from the family home in Waldringfield, Suffolk. However, in March 1983, a person using a metal detector on Sheen Common, London, located an unusual

object and this turned out to be the stolen Renny medal group. The discovery was subsequently publicised on March 22, 1983. A day later, the granddaughter-in-law of George Renny VC became aware of the find and claimed back the VC into the safety of the family.

Once recovered, the medal group went on loan to the Royal Artillery Museum in Woolwich, London, where it was displayed for several years. ●

Victoria Cross Heroes II



Lord Ashcroft KCMG PC is a businessman, philanthropist, author and pollster. His sixth book on gallantry, *Victoria Cross Heroes II*, was first published in 2016 and is available in hardback

and paperback. For more information, visit:

www.victoriacrossheroes2.com.

Lord Ashcroft's VC and GC collection is on public display

at the Imperial War Museum

London. For further details,

please visit: www.iwm.org.uk/heroes

Details of his VC collection may be found at:

www.lordashcroftmedals.com

For more information on

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