

Private Samuel
Parkes VC



HERO *of the* MONTH

By Lord Ashcroft



W. Simpson del. E. Walker lith.

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CHARGE OF THE LIGHT CAVALRY BRIGADE.

25th OCT. 1854.

UNDER MAJOR-GENERAL THE EARL OF CARDIGAN

Day & Son, 15, Pall Mall East

WILLIAM SIMPSON'S 1855 ILLUSTRATION 'CHARGE OF THE LIGHT CAVALRY BRIGADE, 25TH OCT. 1854, UNDER MAJOR-GENERAL THE EARL OF CARDIGAN', WHICH SHOWS THE RUSSIAN GUNS AHEAD OF AND ON THE FLANKS OF THE CHARGING LIGHT BRIGADE. SIMPSON WAS A SCOTTISH ARTIST AND JOURNALIST WHO HAD ACTUALLY WITNESSED THE BATTLE FIRSTHAND

"They were attacked by six Russians, whom Parkes kept at bay, and retired slowly, fighting, and defending the Trumpet-Major until deprived of his sword"

Samuel Parkes was the oldest man to be awarded the VC during the Crimean War, being decorated for outstanding bravery during the ill-fated Charge of the Light Brigade. During an eventful campaign, Parkes, who was 41 years old at the time of his VC action, was later a prisoner of war at a time when such a status was rare.

Parkes was born in Wigginton, Tamworth, Staffordshire, in September 1813, the son of Thomas Parkes, a labourer, and his wife, Lydia. He had been working as a labourer when he enlisted at Tamworth in the 4th Dragoons on July 30, 1831, aged 17 (although it appears he gave his age as 19).

A formidable figure standing 6ft 2in, he was initially posted to India. In 1839 he took part in the Afghanistan campaign and, in July of that year, played his part in the British capture of Ghuznee, the supposedly impregnable fort situated between Kabul and Kandahar. For his part in that triumph, he received the Ghuznee medal.

After his regiment's return to Britain in March 1842, Parkes served during the 'Rebecca Riots' in south Wales and later

in Ireland. In November 1848, he was sentenced at a Regimental Court Martial to 56 days imprisonment for being drunk on duty, one of a few run-ins that he had with military authority.

The Light Brigade charges

After the declaration of war by Britain and France on Russia on March 28, 1854 – the start of the Crimean War – Parkes was chosen by Colonel Lord [George] Paget, the regiment's commanding officer, to be his personal orderly – effectively his bodyguard. In mid-September, Allied forces made unopposed landings in the Crimea, with the 4th Light Dragoons arriving on September 15. On September 20, at the Battle of the Alma, the British inflicted a heavy defeat on the Russians, but the Allies did not follow up on this, so the enemy was given vital time to regroup.

The Charge of the Light Brigade took place on October 25. Lord Raglan, in overall command of the British forces, had intended to send the Light Brigade in pursuit of a retreating artillery battery – a task well-suited to such a force. However, due to a breakdown in communications, the brigade was sent into a full frontal

assault on a different, well-prepared battery. Of some 670 men who went into battle, some 110 were killed, 134 wounded and 57 captured.

It was during the thick of the fighting that Parkes showed such bravery that he was later awarded the VC. His citation, published on February 24, 1857, stated: "In the charge of the Light Cavalry Brigade at Balaklava, Trumpet-Major Crawford's horse fell, and dismounted him, and he lost his sword. He was attacked by two Cossacks, when Private Samuel Parkes (whose horse had been shot) saved his life, by placing himself between them and the Trumpet-Major, and drove them away by his sword. In attempting to follow the Light Cavalry Brigade in the retreat, they were attacked by six Russians, whom Parkes kept at bay, and retired slowly, fighting, and defending the Trumpet-Major for some time, until deprived of his sword by a shot."

In more detailed accounts provided by eyewitnesses, it seems that at one point Private John Edden – also from the 4th Dragoons and also, coincidentally, from Tamworth – had his horse shot from under him during the fighting. Edden and

Crawford – who had been wounded – assisted Parkes in trying to rescue the seriously wounded Major Halkett. Parkes refused an offer to surrender and fought on until he was wounded in his right hand by a shot.

Halkett did not survive the battle, but Edden managed to escape the scene. Parkes and Crawford were thought killed but, in fact, both had been taken prisoner. The pair were handed over by the Cossacks to the regular troops, who treated them well. General Liprandi, a Russian, is said to have looked at Parkes' huge frame and joked: "If you

are a Light Dragoon, what sort of men are your Heavy Dragoons?"

Death ride

Parkes and Crawford were held for a year and a day before being exchanged for Russian prisoners on October 26, 1856. Both men were then court-martialled at Scutari for being absent while prisoners but, when the circumstances of their disappearance became known, they were formally cleared and awarded full arrears of pay. Furthermore, a number of survivors from the battle provided statements

relating to Parkes' bravery at Balaklava and he was awarded the VC soon after the award was created.

Parkes did provide an account of the Battle of Balaklava, but this did not come until he filed an affidavit on June 2, 1863 as part of a lawsuit taken out by Lord Cardigan following criticism of him by Colonel Calthorpe. Parkes stated: 'I was twenty-six years and four months in the service and I have got the Victoria Cross. I remember the Charge of the Light Cavalry Brigade at Balaklava. I acted as orderly to Lord George Paget on that day, and took part in the charge.'

"I saw Lord Cardigan leave the Heavy Cavalry Brigade, ride through the right of our squadrons and give orders to Lord Paget that the Light Brigade should advance, and he ordered them to 'trot gallop.' At the time the first line of our cavalry was about 250 yards in front of our line. We then all charged, and as we passed the redoubts to our right and left they fired on us. When our line arrived past the redoubts and the smoke and dust had cleared away we saw no sign of the first line and could not imagine what had become of them. We continued our charge and reached the guns in front of us and got through them, cutting down the drivers and gunners and silencing the guns.

"Whilst we were so engaged we observed the 11th Hussars were being cut up by the enemy and a number of the 4th Light Dragoons, together with Lord Paget and myself, charged down to their

"I defended myself for a long time, but at length, whilst so engaged with a Cossack, a shot struck the hilt of my sword and wounded my hand"



ABOVE 'RETURN THROUGH THE VALLEY OF DEATH', AN 1876 LITHOGRAPH BY THOMAS JONES BARKER. VICTORIAN JOURNALIST JAMES DAFFORNE NOTED: "...WE BELIEVE THAT EVERY SOLDIER HERE INTRODUCED IS A PORTRAIT: THE PICTURE WAS PAINTED UNDER SUPERVISION OF LORD GEORGE HIMSELF, SO THAT THE WORK HAS NATIONAL HISTORIC INTEREST"



ABOVE ARGUABLY THE MOST DRAMATIC DEPICTION OF THE LEGENDARY CHARGE, RICHARD CATON WOODVILLE'S 1897 OIL PAINTING 'THE RELIEF OF THE LIGHT BRIGADE' SHOWS BRITISH CAVALRYMEN AS THEY REACHED THE FAR END OF THE VALLEY. THE PAINTING IS PART OF THE COLLECTION OF THE NATIONAL ARMY MUSEUM



ABOVE AND ABOVE RIGHT THE JOHN PLAYER & SONS CIGARETTE CARD COMMEMORATING SAMEUL PARKES' HEROIC VC ACTION. THE CARD IS NUMBER 5 IN THEIR 1914 VICTORIA CROSS SERIES. IT IS UNUSUAL IN THAT IT SHOWS PARKES EARNING HIS VC WHILE STILL MOUNTED, CONTRARY TO THE HISTORICAL FACTS COURTESY OF STEVE SNELLING
SAMUEL PARKES' MEDAL COLLECTION, COMPRISING HIS VICTORIA CROSS, GHUZZEE MEDAL, CRIMEAN MEDAL WITH CLASPS FOR SEVASTOPOL, BALAKLAVA AND ALMA, AND TURKISH CRIMEA MEDAL (THE LAST OF THESE WAS A TURKISH AWARD) COURTESY OF IWM

support. We then saw that the Russians had drawn back; but the same time we saw a regiment of Lancers in our rear. Lord Paget first thought they were the 17th Lancers, but on discovering they were the enemy's troops he called out to some officers near him: 'Where is Lord Cardigan?' and then I heard someone (whom I have always thought to be Captain Lowe) say, 'Lord Cardigan has gone back some time.'

"Lord Paget then ordered us to get through the Russians in the best way we could and so we retreated through the Russian cavalry, who opened up right and left and let us pass, showing no resistance to us. When we were retreating and just after I had passed the first redoubt, my horse was shot and we were attacked by the Cossacks. I defended myself for a long time, but at length, whilst so engaged with a Cossack, a shot struck the hilt of my sword and wounded my hand, two Russian officers galloped up, took me prisoner, and took me to General Liprandi.

"Later that evening he sent for me again, with others, and asked us many questions relevant to our positions and strength and also asked me whether we had made drunk before the charge. He further asked me whether it was Lord Cardigan who went to the rear on a chestnut horse with white legs: we said, 'Yes' and he then said: 'If he had not had a good horse, he would never have got back.'

"The water kegs, haversacks, etc, were taken from all the other prisoners, but the general then gave orders that mine should not be taken, and nothing was taken from me except my scabbard and belt. From the time we commenced to charge I did not see Lord Cardigan again until

my return to England. He gave no order to our line except the order to 'charge' as before stated."

Cardigan won the legal battle. Unfortunately, Parkes did not give a detailed account of his own VC action as it was not relevant to the court case.

Commemoration

Parkes was discharged from the army at his own request on December 1, 1857, while in possession of three good conduct badges. He had served for more than 26 years. On February 13, 1858, he married Ann Jeffrey, a Yorkshire farmer's daughter, at St George's Church, Hanover Square, London. The couple lived in the capital and Parkes worked for the Royal Parks, being stationed at Hampton Court Palace. In the same year, he was appointed as an inspector of the Hyde Park Constabulary.

Parkes died in Hyde Park, London, on November 15, 1864, aged 51. He was buried at Brompton Cemetery in Fulham. There are no known photographs of Parkes in existence. There was, however, a postcard published that depicted his VC action and also a painting of him by the artist Louis William Desanges that shows him defending his comrade.

The man who deserves credit for uncovering new information about Parkes' military career is Peter Elkin, the VC recipient's great, great, great nephew and the author of the book *Tamworth's Forgotten Hero*. Elkin discovered his illustrious ancestor's unmarked grave in 1999 and arranged for a memorial stone to be erected. Elkin also organised, in October 2004, to mark the 150th anniversary of the Light Brigade's ill-fated charge by having a plaque dedicated to Parkes' memory be placed inside St

Editha's Parish Church in Tamworth, where Parkes had been baptised.

Incidentally, the oldest man ever to be awarded the VC was Lieutenant William Raynor, who was two months short of his 62nd birthday when he was one of nine men who held out at their post for more than five hours against scores of rebels during the Indian Mutiny of 1857. Five of the defenders were killed during the fighting and one died shortly afterwards. Raynor and the two other survivors were awarded the VC in the days before it could be awarded posthumously. ●

Victoria Cross Heroes, Vol.2



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

in 2016 and is available in hardback and paperback. Visit victoriacrossheroes2.com. Lord Ashcroft's VC and GC collection is on public display at the Imperial War Museum. For more information, visit www.iwm.org.uk/heroes and details about his VC collection may be found at www.lordashcroftmedals.com. For more information on Lord Ashcroft's work, visit www.lordashcroft.com. Follow him on Twitter and/or Facebook @ LordAshcroft.

