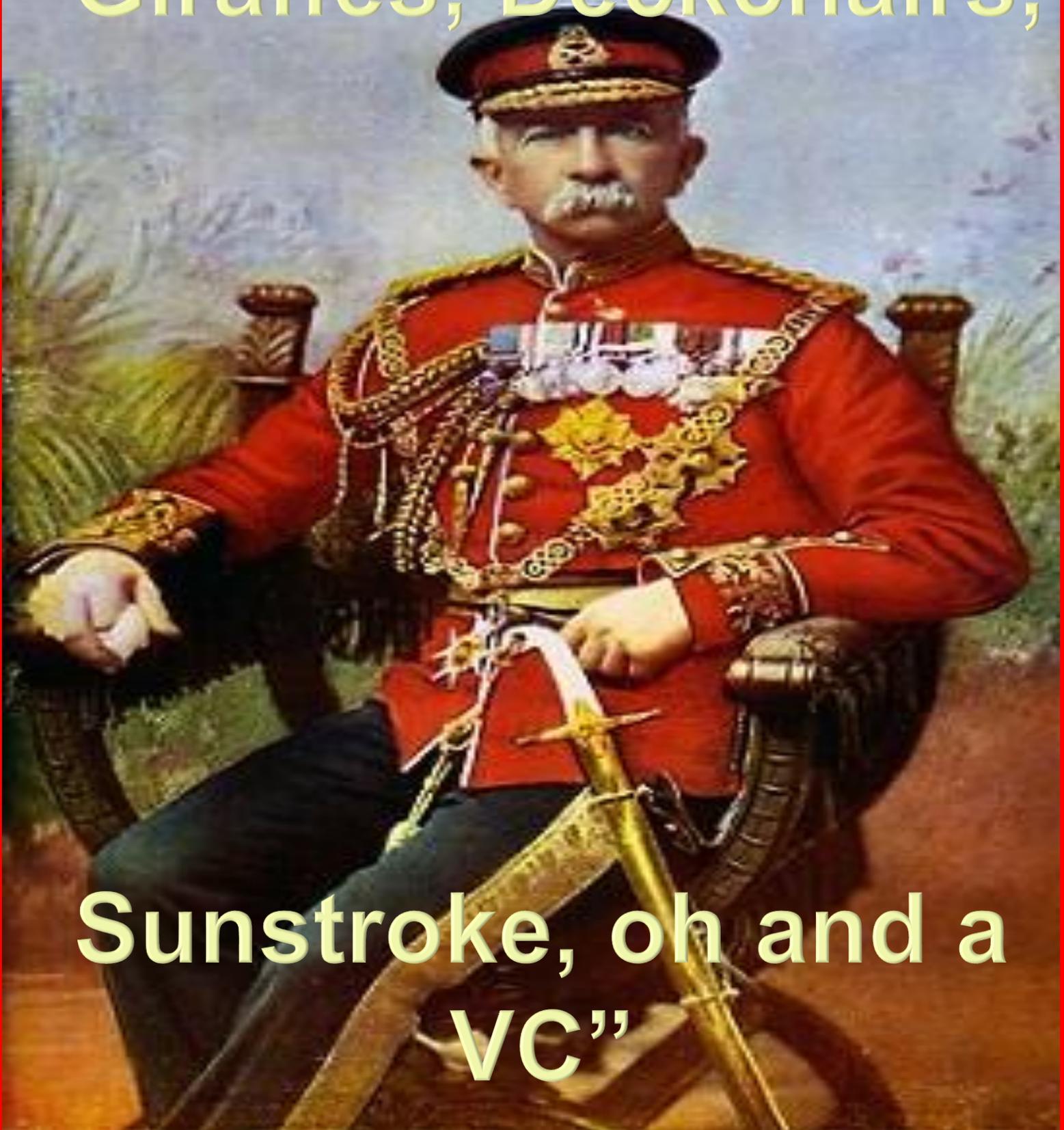


“Giraffes, Deckchairs,



Sunstroke, oh and a  
VC”

Victoria Cross Online  
Issue 3 December 2022

## EDITOR'S COMMENTS

Welcome to the December edition of the Victoria Cross Online magazine.

Kevin Brazier, author of "The Complete Victoria Cross" has provided a fascinating article on Henry Evelyn Wood VC, and Brian Drummond gives an insight into some new research around Henry Tombs VC. Ned Malet de Carteret has also provided a second article on Anders Lassen VC.

There is another spotlight on the work of military grave restorer Steve Davies, and probably one of his most spectacular yet in Brighton, Sussex. Thanks also to Stephen More for an article on his What3Words project, and Richard Pursehouse for a nicely timed article on "The Christmas Truce of 1914" and its connections with Walter Congreve VC.



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# Sir Evelyn Wood VC; Midshipman to Field Marshal By Kevin Brazier

Sir Evelyn Wood probably earned the VC five times during his military career. Wood, along with Wolseley and Lord Frederick Roberts was one of the three great Victorian generals. So how did this vain, deaf, accident-prone hypochondriac who fought in nine wars, over a dozen battles, being wounded 6 times, rise from Midshipman to Field Marshal? Who, it was said was so vain he even wore his medals on his Pyjamas! This was almost certainly untrue, but he did have his medal ribbons mounted on black cloth to make it look like he had more!

Henry Evelyn Wood, as he was christened when born on 9<sup>th</sup> February 1838 at Cressing, near Braintree in Essex, was the youngest of 13 children, 7 of whom would not live beyond their 17<sup>th</sup> birthday. Four of his sisters, however went on to have interesting lives of their own. His father was Sir John Page Wood, Chaplain and Private Secretary to Queen Caroline, and his mother was Emma Caroline Mitchell.

In 1853 his uncle, Captain Frederick Mitchell took command of the ship and Wood graduated to Midshipman at the end of the year. When war with Russia was declared in March 1854, HMS *Queen* was part of the fleet that bombarded Sebastopol during the long siege of the city. After silencing four of their batteries Wood believed that the Russian gunners were not as well trained as our own, but he would soon have cause to change his view on this. Having survived his first action Wood was almost killed by one of his own crew.



# Sir Evelyn Wood VC; Midshipman to Field Marshal By Kevin Brazier

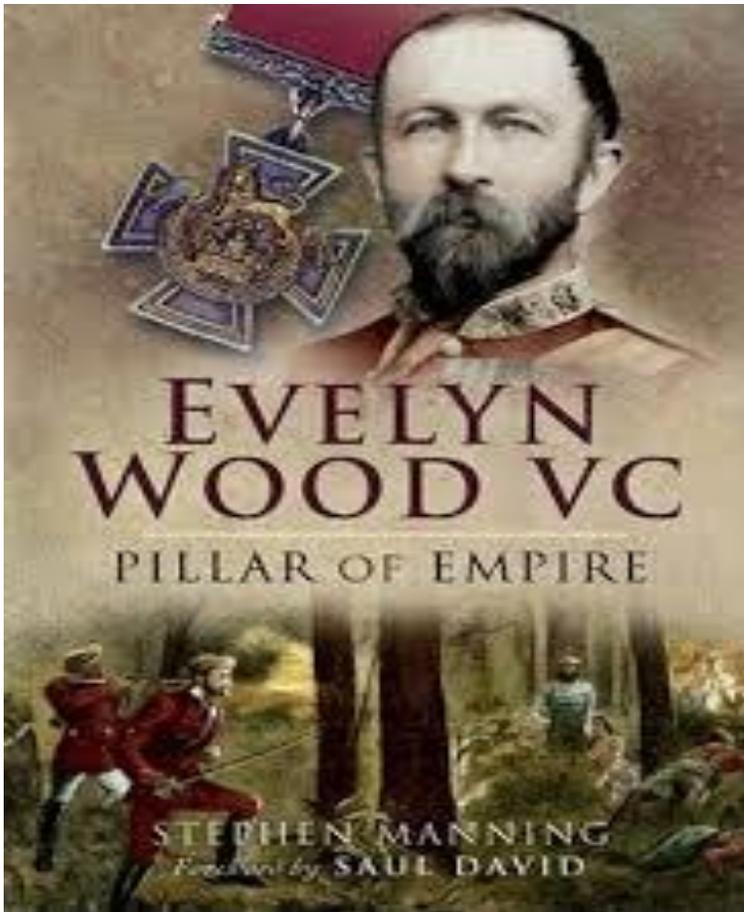
Every evening the 25 midshipmen would play 'follow the leader', pursuing each other around the more dangerous parts of the ship. Evelyn did not enjoy this game, as he suffered from giddiness when high up in the rigging. One evening in July Wood had crawled from the main yard to the brace, where he was resting, when a shipmate opened the quarter-gallery window and so startled him that he fell over 40 feet into the water. His head narrowly missing an open gun port, which would have undoubtedly killed him if he had hit it. Shocked, he had some difficulty swimming back to the ship and climbing aboard. His only injury was bloody shins.

Having survived his tomfoolery, Wood, with the rest of the ship's company now faced an even greater danger; Cholera had broken-out in the British camp in August. The French flagship saw the first sign of it among the fleet, losing 140 men. The British flagship *Britannia* lost 10% of her crew.

Only two ships were not affected, HMS *London*, and HMS *Queen*. Within days many ships had insufficient men fit to work the sails. The 16 year old Wood was sent to HMS *Britannia* to assist in running the ship, but was soon involved in burying the dead, which went on for days.

In September 1854 British and French forces were landed at Kalamita Bay, and by the 19<sup>th</sup> were marching off to Sebastopol. The next day saw the Battle of the Alma, which Wood was able to watch from the *Queen's* top mast (despite the giddiness no doubt). He later recalled how he thought Lord Raglan had advanced further forward than was safe for a General; something he would face criticism for himself in the Zulu War! After the battle Wood was sent ashore to view the field and spent the next 3 days helping to bury the dead.

# Sir Evelyn Wood VC; Midshipman to Field Marshal By Kevin Brazier



In October Wood joined the Naval Brigade which was sent ashore to help with the bombardment of the Great Redan at Sebastopol. Commanding the 21-gun battery was Captain William Peel who would be awarded the VC for his actions in the Crimea. Wood and Edward St. John Daniel another midshipman became devoted to Peel and would become his aides-de camp in April the following year.

Despite the terrible winter of 1854-55, they were constantly on duty in the trenches. Peel later recalled that Wood did not miss a day's duty in nine months. It was this sustained exposure to cannon fire that undoubtedly contributed to his deafness.

During one artillery exchange on 18<sup>th</sup> October, while Wood was at lunch an enemy shell exploded overhead setting the thatch of a powder magazine on fire, Wood climbed onto the roof and stamped out the fire (Peel would later recommend him for the VC for this act and for bringing up ammunition under fire). The two young midshipmen seemed to vie with each other in acts of bravery. They would bring up ammunition or repair a damaged parapet under fire. Peel was perplexed by their devotion; they were risking their lives to just impress him.

# Sir Evelyn Wood VC; Midshipman to Field Marshal By Kevin Brazier



On one occasion, the Russian guns succeeded in bringing down the Union Flag which was flying above Peel's battery, Wood jumped up, picked up the flag and re-mounted it on the parapet. He had just climbed down when another shell hit the staff, so Wood went back up a second, and indeed a third time to re-place it, finally with no staff left Evelyn spread the flag over the top of the parapet to the cheers of the gunners. All this time he was under fire. Surely another act worthy of the VC? During the winter Wood, like so many others suffered from constant diarrhoea.

In the following summer of 1855, the Allies attempted a number of abortive attacks on the Russian defences. On the 18<sup>th</sup> June, the British made a suicidal assault on the Redan, during which they suffered heavy casualties. The Naval Brigade carried the scaling ladders and the now 17 year old Wood was the only one to reach the Redan, despite being wounded twice (he undoubtedly should have been awarded the VC for this action). After this action Wood became something of a celebrity, being visited by all sorts of officers, both British and French.

# Sir Evelyn Wood VC; Midshipman to Field Marshal By Kevin Brazier

Evelyn Wood was sent home to recuperate from his injuries and was reflecting on his future, having tasted the excitement of fighting on land he decided to resign his commission in the Navy and apply to join the Army. His outstanding service gained him a cornetsy without purchase in the 13<sup>th</sup> Light Dragoons.

Upon joining his new regiment he was promptly sent back to the Crimea as reinforcements to fill the losses from the Charge of the Light Brigade. Unfortunately for Wood, he was struck down with both typhoid and pneumonia, spending five months recovering at Scutari. This was just the start of his life-long battle against sickness and accidents. During the next 50 years Wood was inflicted with malaria, dysentery, sunstroke, blinding headaches, deafness, toothache, stomach and eye problems and to crown it all, ingrowing toe nails!

By the time he had recovered the war was over and he returned to England. Despite being recommended for the VC and probably earning it 4 times during the war (although like all the other Crimea VCs he would have only ever have received one), when the VC was introduced in 1856 Wood would miss out on it as he had by then left the navy and joined the army and as each service and regiment was trying to get their 'own man' an award the navy would not pursue his claim. But he was awarded a Turkish Medal and the Legion d'Honneur.

In 1857 he exchanged into the 17<sup>th</sup> Lancers who were being sent to quell the Indian Mutiny. On arrival he purchased a horse which he called 'Pig' as it would eat any food within reach.



# Sir Evelyn Wood VC; Midshipman to Field Marshal By Kevin Brazier



A wealthy uncle had purchased a promotion to lieutenant for him and as he could read and write Hindustani Wood was appointed interpreter. This led to secondment to the 3<sup>rd</sup> Bombay Cavalry.

At some point while in India he was challenge to ride a giraffe. Now, this was not a good idea for the ever accident-prone Evelyn as it was only going to end one way, and sure enough he ended up on the ground with a bloody nose, cut lips and cheeks, and was unable to work for a week! It is not recorded what his commanding officer thought of this. By the middle of March the British force including Evelyn's troop of 100 men were after a group of rebels under the command of Tatyá Tope. There followed a period of 11 months of pursuit in the most unforgiving terrain. Many of the men including Wood suffered from sunstroke.

Wood's grave in Aldershot Military Cemetery (Kevin Brazier)

# Sir Evelyn Wood VC; Midshipman to Field Marshal By Kevin Brazier

Then on 19<sup>th</sup> October at Sindwaho, he single handedly attacked and drove off a body of the enemy for which he was highly praised with a mention in despatches.

In December 1858 a band of rebels captured Chemmun Singh a pro-British local Chief. They took him into the jungle where they intended to hang him. Wood set out with 15 men to free him. Intelligence reports put the rebel band at about 25 men, so he was confident he could surprise them. They set off at 9pm and after three hours they could see the light of a camp fire. Evelyn decided to leave three men with the horses and led the rest towards to fire. A slow approach got Wood to within 10 yards of the camp, only to discover that there were between 70-80 rebels. With these odds Evelyn considered retreat, but felt this would not only discredit him, but would certainly lead to Singh being killed. Thus he resolved that a surprise attack was the only option.

He called his small party together and before they realised the size of the enemy force ordered them to get ready, but as one of his men cocked the hammer of his rifle, a sentry called out 'Who is that?' Evelyn replied, 'We are the Government', and shouted for his men to charge. Wood led from the front only to tripped over a sleeping rebel and fell headlong into a hollow. He was joined by his sergeant and a private, who had fallen over the same man. In the noise and confusion the rebels awoke and the majority fled thinking they were being attacked by a much larger force. Evelyn got up only to discover he was being attacked by a rebel. The two men cut and thrust at each other but their sword blows were deflected by the foliage. Finally, by crouching down, Wood was able to wound his man in the thigh; the rebel staggered into the path of Wood's Sergeant who cut at him but also caught his sword in the trees.

# Sir Evelyn Wood VC; Midshipman to Field Marshal By Kevin Brazier

Wood ran after the two men and fell into a drainage ditch with them. After a few seconds scrabbling around the sergeant killed the rebel. Evelyn emerged breathless, muddy and bloody to discover the rebels had gone and the prisoner alive. The remainder of this men who had held back until now, joined him. So, with only two men he has routed a group of 70-80 rebels, freed their prisoner and earned himself the Victoria Cross.

The VC was for this action and for that on 19<sup>th</sup> October at Sindwaho. The award itself was something of an anti-climax as it was sent to him by registered post, and he did not receive it until July 1862 as it had been sent to him in India and Wood had been invalided home by the time it had arrived!

Back in England, Wood exchanged into the infantry, purchasing a captaincy in the 73<sup>rd</sup> Regiment of Foot, primarily to get into the Staff College at Camberley. During this time he would make many influential contacts, most notable being Garnet Wolseley, who at first was impressed by Woods energy, intelligence and infectious good humour, but as time passed became less impressed with him. He was also promoted to Brevet-Major at just 24 years of age!

He was again injured while hunting in 1863, falling from his horse and being kicked in the head, but was hunting again within 3 weeks. Evelyn graduated at the end of 1864 and was sent to Ireland as ADC to Colonel Napier. However, the Irish climate did not suit him and he spent more time in London due to poor health. In 1866 the 73<sup>rd</sup> had been sent to Hong Kong and Wood exchanged into the 17<sup>th</sup> Regiment at Aldershot where he was responsible for cooking.

# Sir Evelyn Wood VC; Midshipman to Field Marshal By Kevin Brazier

He admitted he was terrible at cooking. He was put in charge of Military Drawing (which was his worst subject at Staff Collage). Perhaps fortunately for the officers and men a vacancy for Brigade-Major became available and Wood was accepted for the post.

All through 1868 Wood suffered with stomach pains and, because he was ill for so long he seriously considered leaving the Army and qualifying for the Bar. It was not until he took prescribed doses of opium that he recovered sufficiently to enable himself to continue with his military duties.

By 1873 Wood was married (from which he would have three sons and three daughters, one of which he called Victoria, but it remains unsure if the vain Wood named her after his Queen, or his medal). He had also been promoted to Brevet-Lieutenant-Colonel. He was chosen by Wolseley to be his Transport Officer for the Ashanti Campaign of 1873-74, after which both men emerged as public figures. Mentioned in despatches and with a fresh wound, made by a nail fired from a blunderbuss Wood was made a Companion of the Bath and Brevet-Colonel of the 90<sup>th</sup> Regiment.

A series of staff appointments led to him being sent to South Africa in 1878 as Colonel of the 90<sup>th</sup>, and he took part in the Ninth Frontier War, although it was more a series of skirmishes than a war. During which Evelyn failed to hear a challenge from a sentry and was fired upon by his own men. Lt. Col. Theisiger (soon to be Lord Chelmsford) commanding for the first time came to rely on the experienced Wood and the two became friends.

# Sir Evelyn Wood VC; Midshipman to Field Marshal By Kevin Brazier

The next perceived conflict was Zululand and Wood persuaded Theisiger that the Field Force should march to Natal rather than attempt the complications of sea transport. The column marched 500 miles over rough terrain and crossed 37 rivers. By the time they reached Pietermaritzburg, all had been toughened by the experience and had learned to 'rough-it'.

Wood summed it up by saying; 'a healthy climate, with proper sanitary arrangements and the absence of public-houses, made the young soldiers improve out of all recognition.' Considering Wood's many ailments it's amazing he made the 500 mile trip himself!

Before the war even got going Evelyn, accident-prone as ever was nearly killed by a runaway wagon which he jump onto in an attempt to stop it. The Zulu War was to become graveyard of reputations for many of its commanders, not least Lord Chelmsford.

After the disaster at Isandlwana in January, and while waiting reinforcements Chelmsford bolstered Wood's force with all the volunteer cavalry. His wish was for Wood's successful raiding to increase in order to divert Zulu attention away from the south, where Chelmsford was about to lead a column to relieve Pearson at Eshowe.

Wood made several raids to harass the Zulus and capture their cattle. It was during this time that the Zulus named him Lakuni, the name of the very hard wood used to make the Zulu crushing weapon the Knobkerrie. In March Cetchwayo's brother Prince Hamu agreed to come over to Wood with all his warriors and his 300 wives!

# Sir Evelyn Wood VC; Midshipman to Field Marshal By Kevin Brazier

On 28<sup>th</sup> March Wood led a column to attack the Zulu stronghold at Hlobane. Hlobane Mountain was like Table Mountain at the Cape and a formidable position. It rose 1,500 feet above the surrounding plain, three miles long and about a mile wide. Narrow tracks led to the summit, which was a plateau littered with boulders and scrub.

Having been to the plateau myself, I can't imagine a harder objective more unsuited for mounted troops, but Wood decided not to take any infantry except for his native irregulars. The debacle that followed left a question mark about Wood's state of mind; he ignored standard military practice and had no control over the fighting. He adopted a floating form of command which meant he was distant and unable to influence events.

Lt.-Col. Russell would attack from the west while Lt. Col. Redvers Buller's force would attack from the East. Wood and his small entourage (Three staff officers and 8 mounted men from the 90<sup>th</sup>) made their way leisurely to the base of the mountain with the intention of following Buller's route to the summit.

Flattened grass, discarded bits of equipment as well as the odd dead horse made it an easy trail to follow and soon they heard the sound of gunfire from above. Shortly afterwards they came upon the Border Horse riding towards them claiming to have lost their way. Wood had to forcefully persuade their commander Lt. Col. Weatherley to turn about and accompany him to the summit. With Wood and his staff in the lead, they began to climb when a volley of shots rang out from some rocks and caves above them.

# Sir Evelyn Wood VC; Midshipman to Field Marshal By Kevin Brazier

To Wood's horror, his trusted interpreter and political officer, Mr. Lloyd had been mortally wounded. Wood had him taken to a nearby kraal, where most of the party had taken cover. Advancing again Wood's horse was shot from under him, pinning him down. It took him a few minutes to free himself and he ordered Weatherly's men to flush out the Zulus, this they refused to do, so Captain Campbell, together with another staff officer, Lt. Henry Lyons and Private Edmund Fowler of the escort charged in, but Campbell was killed by a point-blank shot. Lyons and Fowler would be awarded the VC for this action (recommended by Wood).

Wood seems to have had something of a mental breakdown at this point, as with an uncontrolled battle raging on the plateau above him and a large Zulu force approaching him, he goes into meltdown and orders his two friends to be buried, and for his bugler Walkinshaw to fetch his bible from his dead horse. With no digging tools Wood orders his Zulu irregulars to use their assegais to dig the graves. When the two bodies were lowered in, the grave was too short and some further digging was needed, once filled in Wood read a short service.

Six men from the Border Horse were killed and eight wounded while this was going on. Wood now ordered the Border Horse to join Buller on the summit while he and his escort retraced their step back down the mountain. Within a short time of the Border Horse reaching the summit they were all but wiped out.

# Sir Evelyn Wood VC; Midshipman to Field Marshal By Kevin Brazier

Wood's small group made their way slowly westward unaware that 20,000 Zulus were swiftly approaching from the south. Although Buller, on top of the plateau had observed them for some time, but Wood who was nearer was completely oblivious to the danger until one of his Zulu scouts spotted them, this galvanised Wood into action and his party swiftly made their way back to the Zunguin Range running the gauntlet of the Zulu vanguard, and from there sent some of his escort back to Khambula with the news of the approaching Zulus. Wood then watched as Buller's command got decimation as it tried to climb down from Hlobane on the aptly named Devil's Pass. Buller would be awarded the Victoria Cross for his actions this day.

When both Buller and Wood met at Khambula, Wood, to his shame sought to cover up his mistakes by embellishing the deaths of Campbell and Lloyd, both sons of wealthy and influential families. He also unfairly laid blame on Weatherley and the Border Horse, most of who were conveniently killed. Another close friend of Wood's was killed at Hlobane, Piet Uys.

But luck was on Wood's side. Hlobane was mostly a colonial affair and as there were no correspondents with him, it did not receive much coverage in the British press, and his mishandling of the assault on Hlobane was conveniently overshadowed by the events of the next day. The Zulus, fired-up by their success at Hlobane attacked the well-prepared British Laager at Khambula. The Zulus suffered the greatest defeat of the war and Wood was justly able to claim great credit for this.

# Sir Evelyn Wood VC; Midshipman to Field Marshal By Kevin Brazier

If indeed he had suffered a breakdown the day before he had made a remarkable recovery. His handling of the firepower was effective and he timed his counter-attacks to perfection. Typically he even managed to get involved in the fighting on the front line.

When a soldier of the 13<sup>th</sup> Regiment fell wounded in the open while retiring from the cattle laager, Wood had to be restrained from running out from the barricades to rescue him. He also joined in the firing and managed to kill four Zulus, one of them a chief.

Having sent out a series of bayonet charges to clear the Zulus from positions which were close to the laager, Wood felt that the attacks were lessening and ordered Buller's mounted men to charge, thirsting for revenge the horsemen chased and killed until darkness forced them to stop. Khambula was the turning point of the war and it convinced Cetshwayo that he could never win against the firepower of the Martini-Henry, Gatling Gun and artillery.

The next two months were spent stockpiling supplies for the second invasion. When at last, the invasion started, Wood's No. 4 Column was renamed 'The Flying Column' effectively making it an independent command. This created a great deal of resentment among the senior officers. Much of the fighting was done by Wood's column to the annoyance of those officers looking to advance their careers.

However, almost immediately things went wrong, the advance was slow, largely due to the number of wagons and then on 1<sup>st</sup> June Louis Napoleon the Prince Imperial was killed while on reconnaissance, Wood's men finding his body the next day.

# Sir Evelyn Wood VC; Midshipman to Field Marshal By Kevin Brazier

But by July Wood's column found itself at Ulundi and joined with Lord Chelmsford. During the battle Wood stayed by the side of his general.

Wood rightly believed that the Zulus were reluctantly forced into fighting at Ulundi, saying; 'The Regiments came on in a hurried, disorderly manner, which contrasted strongly with the methodical, steady order in which they advanced at Khambula.'

With Ulundi the war was over and Wood was looking forward to going home to England. Both Chelmsford and his replacement Wolseley were lavish in their praise for Wood and his men. Wolseley went so far as to say; 'You and Buller have been the only bright spots in this miserable war, and all through I have felt proud that I numbered you amongst my friends, and companion-in-arms'.

Once back in England Wood was made Knight Commander of Bath for his service, he attended numerous dinners in his honour and was a guest of both the Queen and Disraeli. However there was no promotion.

Six months later Wood was on his way back to South Africa as a personal favour for the Queen to take Empress Eugenie on a Pilgrimage to see where her son Louis Napoleon had been killed during the second invasion of Zululand. The party, some 80 strong also included Mrs. Campbell, the widow of Wood's staff officer and friend. When they arrived at Cape Town, Wood paid a visit to Cetshwayo.

The group left Pietermaritzburg on 29<sup>th</sup> April 1880 on what was to be a 500 mile round-trip. First they went to Utrecht, where the entire population turned out to greet them. Wood was re-united with some of his old irregulars and met members of Piet Uys' family, who accompanied them to Khambula. Here they erected a memorial stone near the graves by the old camp.

# Sir Evelyn Wood VC; Midshipman to Field Marshal By Kevin Brazier

On 21<sup>st</sup> May Mrs. Campbell was taken to Hlobane where a headstone was placed on the grave of her husband and Llewellyn Lloyd. Some of the party, including Empress Eugenie actually climbed up the Devil's Pass to the summit. Finally, they reached the site where the Prince Imperial was killed. Another memorial stone was laid and the empress planted cuttings of a tree she brought from the family estate at Camden Place in Chislehurst. The party had returned to England by the end of July.

Wood was not finished with South Africa just yet, for within six weeks of the start of the First Boer War he was back, and soon after his arrival General Sir George Colley, the Army Commander was killed with many of his men at Majuba Hill in February 1881. As a result, Wood was sworn in as Acting Governor of Natal and Administrator of the Transvaal and given the local rank of Major-General, at 43 the youngest person to have attained that rank.

He became unpopular in the Colony and among his fellow officers when, under instructions from the British Government he negotiated peace with the Boers to end the war. This infuriated Wolseley who not only believed Wood had negotiated the peace on his own initiative but also believed that a military victory was possible. Something, as it turned-out would prove not to be so easy during the Second Boer War.

He was reunited with his old friend Buller for a short time, when Buller took over running the Military, and together they took the opportunity to visit the battlefields of Rorke's Drift and iSandlwana, interviewing participants from both sides. Wood then rode on to the site of the Prince Imperial death and had it photographed for the Empress.

# Sir Evelyn Wood VC; Midshipman to Field Marshal By Kevin Brazier

Wood was offered the Governorship of Natal, but declined it, and in February 1882 he left South Africa for the last time. Although Wolseley had come to dislike Wood personally, he employed him in the war against Arabi Pasha in 1882, but Evelyn would never see action under Wolseley. The result of this campaign was the British annexing of Egypt and appointing Wood as Commander-in-Chief of the new Egyptian Army.

This new service was made attractive to seconded British Officers who received higher pay and Egyptian ranks one or two grades higher than British Army rank. This resulted in success with a less corrupt and better disciplined army. Wood also managed to get sunstroke while visiting the Pyramids!

Evelyn Wood's final campaign was the attempted relief of Khartoum in 1884-1885. During which the ever accident-prone Wood injured one of his fingers in a folding chair! Although the rest of this career was long and filled with interesting appointments, his days of campaigning were over.

He spent the remainder of his career working on reforms, mainly in welfare for the men, Permanent barracks, better sanitary care and food. He believed officers should be trained centrally and not by the regimental colonels. He saw to it that the army took part in large scale manoeuvres, where the three arms could work together. In fact we owe Salisbury plain to him. He also believed in the men doing as much rifle fire as possible, the British soldier fired more live rounds in practice than any other army in the world at this time.

# Sir Evelyn Wood VC; Midshipman to Field Marshal By Kevin Brazier

So, it could be argued that the ‘mad minute’ at the battle of Mons was also due his work. But he was not just about spending money; he could save it too. When he was at the Southern Command he found that the army and navy were paying different amounts for their meat, so he got a better deal by having them buy it from the same supplier.

In 1903 he was promoted to Field Marshal, but he retired the following year, in his old age he wrote books, not least his 1906 autobiography ‘From Midshipman to Field Marshal’ which was so long it was published in two volumes! It had to be reprinted in its first year. He delivered speeches and eulogies to old comrades whom he out lived. He indulged in his favourite pastime of foxhunting right up until his death. He saw the start and end of the Great War and died aged 81 at his Essex home on 2<sup>nd</sup> December 1919 during the flu pandemic.

Field Marshal Sir Evelyn Wood VC was buried with full military honours at Aldershot Military Cemetery on 6<sup>th</sup> December 1919, and was laid to rest with his wife. His VC and other medals are now held by the National Army Museum, but sadly not on display. I was however, lucky enough to hold them when I volunteered at the National Army Museum.



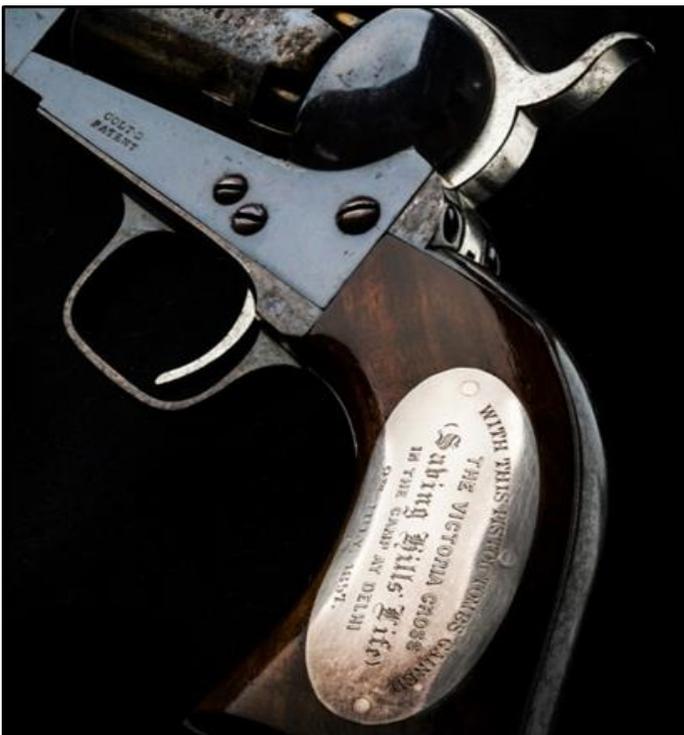
Kevin Brazier wrote his first book aged 50 entitled “The Complete Victoria Cross” and has since published works on the George Cross, Pour le Merite, and the three volume Knights Cross. His most recent publication is “Victoria Crosses of the Zulu and Boer Wars”. Kevin has several other VC books in the pipeline as well as a US Medal of Honor book. If you wish to purchase one of his books please contact Kevin on [kib1856@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:kib1856@yahoo.co.uk)

# Major Henry “Harry” Tombs VC

By Brian Drummond



On the 27<sup>th</sup> June 2017 the revolver used by Major Henry ‘Harry’ Tombs VC at his Victoria Cross action at the Siege of Delhi on the 9<sup>th</sup> July 1857 was featured on ‘The Explora’ website in an article entitled, ‘A Trio of Rare Colt Revolvers’. The revolver was a .36 Navy Colt revolver which was manufactured at the Colt factory in London between the period 1853 and 1856. The British Navy and Army ordered a combined 18,000 of these revolvers but in the end, they never adopted it as the official sidearm of the military establishment. This accounts for the short-term manufacture of these revolvers in London, as Samuel Colt closed the factory and shipped all the manufacturing machinery back to the USA.



## A Brief Account of the Victoria Cross action

On the 9<sup>th</sup> July 1857, Major Henry Tombs placed Lieutenant James Hills (later Lieutenant General Sir James Hills-Johnes VC) in command of two guns of his battery in a specially selected and dangerous position (The Mound) during the Siege of Delhi in order to be ready at a moment

# Major Henry “Harry” Tombs VC

By Brian Drummond

Numb. 22131.

2049



## The London Gazette.

Published by Authority.

TUESDAY, APRIL 27, 1858.

*War-Office, 24th April, 1858.*

THE Queen has been graciously pleased to signify Her intention to confer the Decoration of the Victoria Cross on the under-mentioned Officers, Non-Commissioned Officers, and Men of Her Majesty's and of the East India Company's Armies, who have been recommended to Her Majesty for that Decoration, in accordance with the rules laid down in Her Majesty's Warrant instituting the same, on account of Acts of Bravery performed by them in India, as recorded against their several names; viz.:

Regiment or Corps.	Rank and Name.	Act of Bravery for which recommended.
Bengal Artillery ...	Lieutenant-Colonel Henry Tombs, C.B., and Lieutenant James Hills Date of Act of Bravery, 9th July, 1857	For very gallant conduct on the part of Lieutenant Hills before Delhi, in defending the position assigned to him in case of alarm, and for noble behaviour on the part of Lieutenant-Colonel Tombs in twice coming to his subaltern's rescue, and on each occasion killing his man. (See despatch of Lieutenant-Colonel Mackenzie, Commanding 1st Brigade Horse Artillery, dated Camp, near Delhi, 10th July, 1857, published in the Supplement to the London Gazette of the 16th January, 1858.)

notice to move to any given location in case of an emergency. It was during this action that whilst on picket duty with his two guns on a hill near the camp, that his force was suddenly attacked by rebel cavalry.

Heavy rain had driven the officers and men not on duty to the shelter of their tents. Among them was Major Henry Tombs who was in the Artillery mess tent, when a trooper of the 9th Irregular Cavalry rode up in a state of high excitement and asked the way to the General's quarters. Major Tombs questioned the trooper who stated that the enemy were in front of our picquet's. Major Tombs rushed to his own tent, gathered up his sword and revolver, and ordering his horse to be brought after him, walked down to the Mound Picquets. As he approached the post, he saw the Carabineers drawn up in mounted array, and the gun crews preparing for action.

# Major Henry “Harry” Tombs VC

By Brian Drummond

## Presentation of the Victoria Cross

Henry Tombs was presented with his Victoria Cross on the 27<sup>th</sup> April 1858 in India, however the location and by who has not been determined. Her Majesty Queen Victoria conferred the Victoria Cross to him for his, “*nobel behaviour*” before Delhi on the 9<sup>th</sup> July 1857.

## Previous examples of his bravery

### 17<sup>th</sup> June at the Idgha Mosque

On the 17<sup>th</sup> the mutineers mounted an attack on the Metcalfe piquet supported by heavy artillery fire. This attack was driven back but not before it was realised that it was a diversionary attack to conceal the construction of an artillery battery which would be capable of threatening the right end of the ridge at the Mohammedan Mosque, called the Eidgah (Idgha) Mosque in the suburbs. The mosque was a strong fortified position located on a knoll in front of and between the Lahore Gate and Garstin Bastion. Once this threat had been recognised two columns led by Major Henry Tombs left from the camp to attack the Eidgha Mosque and Major Reid of the Gurkhas who left from Hindu Rao’s House to attack the area of the Kishenganj. These two columns caused considerable loss to the mutineers and destroyed the battery under construction at the mosque, capturing the one gun, a 9 pounder that had been positioned in the mosque. Major Henry Tombs had two horses shot from under him and was slightly wounded during this action.

That evening in the officer’s mess Sir Henry Bernard personally thanked the Major for the gallantry which he had displayed and proposed his health;

# Major Henry “Harry” Tombs VC

By Brian Drummond

*‘The hero of the day was Harry Tombs ... an unusually handsome man and a thorough soldier. His gallantry in the attack in the Idgah was the talk of the camp. I had always heard of Tombs as one of the best officers in the regiment, and it was with feelings of respectful admiration that I made his acquaintance. As a cool, bold leader of men Tombs was unsurpassed; no fire, however hot, and no crisis, however unexpected, could take him by surprise. He grasped the situation in a moment and issued his orders without hesitation, inspiring all ranks with confidence in his power and capacity. He was something of a martinet, and was more feared than liked by his men until they realised what a grand leader he was, when they gave him their entire confidence and were ready to follow him anywhere and everywhere.’ The men got to worship him’.*

On the night of the 4<sup>th</sup> July the sound of the mutineers’ guns were heard to the rear of the camp. Shortly after 2am a force was assembled with the intention of overtaking and cutting off the mutineers as they returned to Delhi. This small force commanded by Major Coke consisted of 1,500 men from cavalry, artillery and infantry units, they at once set off in the direction of Alipore. After three miles of marching & as dawn was breaking news was received that the mutineers had plundered the town and were retreating to the city laden with booty. Major Coke then changed direction with the cavalry in front, the infantry in the centre and the Major Tombs guns bringing up the rear. They advanced for approximately two miles over swampy ground to the canal. When they got near the canal and in the shade of the trees Major Coke rode ahead to reconnoitre, on his return ordered the guns to the front. The six guns led by Major Tombs came thundering along the road & passed with a cheer, they crossed the bridge at full pace, wheeled to the left and immediately came into action, firing on the mutineers. Taken by complete surprise they turned and fled towards the city leaving hundreds of dead on the ground

# Major Henry “Harry” Tombs VC

By Brian Drummond

## Illness and the death of the great man

On the 11<sup>th</sup> February 1874 Henry left Lucknow on sick leave but by the time he reached Marseilles his illness had become so serious that he underwent an operation in Paris. He was told that his illness was incurable, possibly a cancer in the brain or the throat. He bore this crushing blow with the utmost fortitude and resignation, and went to Newport, Isle of Wight, to end his days. His sufferings became more intense, but he endured them without hope of relief and without complaining, *“in the true spirit of a brave Christian soldier”*, and on Sunday the 2<sup>nd</sup> August 1874 Henry passed away aged only 49 at his home, ‘Gladstone Villa’ on Saint John’s Road in Newport.

During his late illness Her Majesty Queen Victoria is said to have *‘constantly inquired after him’*, and on his death expressed much sorrow at the great loss which Her Majesty, the Army and his family had sustained.

Major-General Tombs VC CB KCB is buried at Mount Joy Cemetery, Carisbrooke, on the Isle of Wight on the 6<sup>th</sup> Aug 1874.

## Another VC in the family

During the Great War his grandson Joseph Harcourt Tombs received the Victoria Cross for actions on the 16<sup>th</sup> June 1915 near Rue du Bois, France. Lance-Corporal Tombs of the 1st Battalion, The King's (Liverpool Regiment) citation was published in a Supplement to The London Gazette of the 23<sup>rd</sup> July 1915, Issue number 29240 on page 7280 and reads;

*“On his own initiative he crawled out repeatedly under a very heavy shell and machine gun fire, to bring in wounded men who were lying about 100 yards in front of our trenches. He rescued four men, one of whom he dragged back by means of a rifle sling placed round his own neck and the man’s body. This man was so severely wounded that unless he had been immediately attended to he must have died.”*

Click on the links left to find out more about Henry and Joseph Harcourt Tombs VC

[https://victoriacrossonline.co.uk/?page\\_id=17615](https://victoriacrossonline.co.uk/?page_id=17615)

[https://victoriacrossonline.co.uk/?page\\_id=17625](https://victoriacrossonline.co.uk/?page_id=17625)

# Lennox VC Grave



In May 2018, Military Grave Restorer Steve Davies undertook his largest and possibly most challenging VC grave to date. In what was Steve's 25<sup>th</sup> VC project, he decided to tackle the grave of Sir Wilbraham Oates Lennox VC who lays at rest in Woodvale Cemetery, Brighton. As you can see from the before photo (left), the grave had basically collapsed and was in a dreadful state. After 3 years of gaining permissions and funding from the Royal Engineers Association and The Remembrance Trust, the work could commence. The biggest challenge was to reset the cross on its 9 tonne base. With the help of the 70 Gurkha Parachute Squadron and a JCB, the 500kg cross was placed back in its rightful position. The outcome was a spectacular result and a credit to Steve.

# Anders Lassen VC MC\*\*

By Ned Malet de Carteret

I first came across the name of Anders Lassen VC nearly 40 years ago as I discovered the story of Operation Bassalt (3/4 October, 1942) which took place on my neighbouring Channel Island of Sark (the island was granted to my de Carteret ancestor, Helier, Seigneur of St Ouen, by Queen Elizabeth 1 in 1565 and sold by John, Lord Carteret, in 1721). Anders has become something of a constant in my collective memory of VC heroes.

Over the years I have acquired more knowledge by reading about the exploits of No 62 Commando, more frequently known as the Small Scale Raiding Force (SSRF). It was founded by Captain (later Major) Gus March-Phillips, DSO, MBE, with his No 2 Lieutenant (later Major) Geoffrey Appleyard, DSO, MC and Bar (the book "Geoffrey" written by his father J.E. Appleyard). Both of these brave men would be killed during the war.

Anders Frederick Emil Victor Schau Lassen was born on 22nd September, 1920 in South Zealand in Denmark. He and his younger brother Frants were keen hunters and Anders was highly proficient with both bow and arrow and the knife.

In January 1941 after spending time as a merchant seaman, Anders joined the SOE. From there he became a member of the SSRF. Their operations were numerous, but the first, Operation Postmaster, is just an unbelievably fantastic story.

During the raid, Anders killed a German soldier by using his knife for the first time and five prisoners were tied up with rope, only one would leave the island. This raid was the final straw for Hitler, following on from the Dieppe and Lofoten raids, he issued the famous Commando order. Anders was promoted Lieutenant on 20th November, 1942 and awarded the Military Cross on 7th December.

In March 1943 he was posted to the Special Air Service and in the May he joined the Special Boat Squadron (SBS) in the Mediterranean, under the command of Lt. Colonel (later Brigadier and 2nd Earl) George Jellicoe, DSO. Anders once punched Jellicoe and floored him, alcohol was involved. He was very lucky not to have suffered any disciplinary consequences.

The operations of the SBS in this theatre are too numerous to recount during the 18 months that Anders served there. Suffice it to say that he received two bars to his Military Cross.

On the night of 8/9 April 1945, Anders and his men of M Squadron landed at Lake Commacchio in the North East of the country, just north of Ravenna. The account of the action as follows is taken with kind permission from "Special Forces Hero " by Thomas Harder, published in 2021.

“Lassen himself led the last of four groups – seventeen men divided into two patrols – which would disembark on the shores of Commachio and Porto Garibaldi and from there headed north-west along the coast to Commachio. Their job was to kill as many Germans as possible, take prisoners for interrogation and cause maximum confusion. Lassen led E patrol, ten men and himself. Lieutenant Turnbull, a newcomer to the SBS, had six men under him in Y patrol. They sailed in folboats guided by two fishermen Ettore Tomasi and Mario Foschini Cavalieri.

As Lassen led his men ashore, they first had to cross a canal that ran parallel to the shore, before moving up a road which was about 15 feet wide. This too ran parallel to the railway track on a low dam, with the canal to the west and a flooded area of six-foot-deep mud to the east. Lassen sent two scouts up the road, followed by the rest of E patrol, with Y patrol about 100 yards further back. He himself was in the rear of E patrol from where he could maintain contact with Y as well.

After about 500 yards, the raiders were challenged by a guard shouting from a dug-in machine gun post. Lassen did not entirely trust the fishermen and he had left them with the boats. The force's only Italian speaking member, Private Freddie Green was sent up to join the scouts. He told the guards that he and his comrades were fishermen from Sant Alberto on their way to Commachio. At first the Turkmen sentry seemed to be convinced, but just as the raiders started to advance, two machine guns in the post opened fire.

The opening salvo wounded the two scouts and Freddie Crouch, and alerted the two machine gun posts further up the road. The three posts had been positioned to fire over each other. The raiders returned fire; it was a hugely confusing situation – but Lassen acted quickly to save his men.

Lassen had been just behind Green when he tried to fool the sentries. When the machine guns had opened fire, he had thrown himself to the ground. Now he ran towards the machine gun position and threw two hand grenades in quick succession before storming it, followed by his men. Lassen was known for his ability to throw far and accurately, and the grenades did their job. Four Turkmenian soldiers were killed, either by grenade or by bullets.

The two machine gun posts further up the road opened fire as did a fourth position slightly to the left of the road. Lassen rushed the second position and threw three hand grenades. Firing a green flare and urging on his comrades with “Come on! Forward, you bastards!” Two of the defenders were killed and the other two were taken prisoner.

In the meantime, the third machine-gun position in the row, as well as the fourth, further back in the dark, had sent up flares. Heavy fire from them killed two of the patrol and wounded two others. The total force was down to ten men armed with handguns, a Bren gun and hand grenades.

Lassen's force open fire on the third position, and from inside it their heard the cry of “Kamerad”, the standard call meaning the crew wanted to surrender. Lassen stood up, but ordered his men to stay under cover. He stepped onto the road and ran towards the machine-gun position. He stopped around three yards away and shouted in German to the defenders that they should come out. At that, a machine-gun opened fire from the left side of the post. Maybe it was a trick by the defenders, or maybe there were unsettled to see Lassen running, towards them holding weapons whilst unseen was still firing on them. When the shots were fired, Lassen threw a grenade into the post and wounded some of the defenders. One of the machine-guns continued to fire, but the raiders responded in kind- and it fell silent.

After ‘a few seconds but it seemed like twenty minutes’ the raiders heard Lassen shouting: SBS! Major Lassen wounded! Stephenson, whose grenades he had taken, was the first to react. “I heard him shout again so I went across to the pill box, you’ve got to make your mind up”. Stephenson found Lassen lying on his back, apparently unconscious, to the right of the entrance to the post. He had been hit by gunfire in the side of the abdomen or groin.

Stephenson put his arm under Lassen and supported him on his knee, trying to lift him up. Lassen started to talk. He said that he was dying and that Stephenson should leave him, because trying to evacuate him would just put the other raiders' lives at risk. Stephenson was to tell Lieutenant Turnbull to take command and continue the attack. Stephenson reached into his back pocket and fished out the morphine tablets that raiders always carried with them on operations/ He placed one on Lassen's tongue. He again tried to lift the wounded man up to carry him back to the others. But Stephenson was not a big man and had difficulty in lifting the wounded Lassen, who weighed around 12 ½ stone. At last, another raider joined them. Stephenson wanted him to help carry Lassen, but the man said "Oh, he's dead, there's no point."

Anders body was initially recovered by the priest of the town of Commacchio and buried there. He was later re-interred in the CWGC Argenta Gap cemetery. I have long wanted to visit the site of his final battle and grave. Anders is the only member of the SAS to be awarded a Victoria Cross and one of three Danes. Anders was a complex character, often insubordinate, a huge drinker and an all-round action man. He was extremely handsome and very active with women. I salute you Anders, you often come to mind, one of the bravest of the brave. The Operation Bassalt photographs are from this year's commemorative ceremony, courtesy of Russell Doherty, resident of sister island of Guernsey.

Ned Malet de Carteret

December, 2022

St. Helier. Jersey

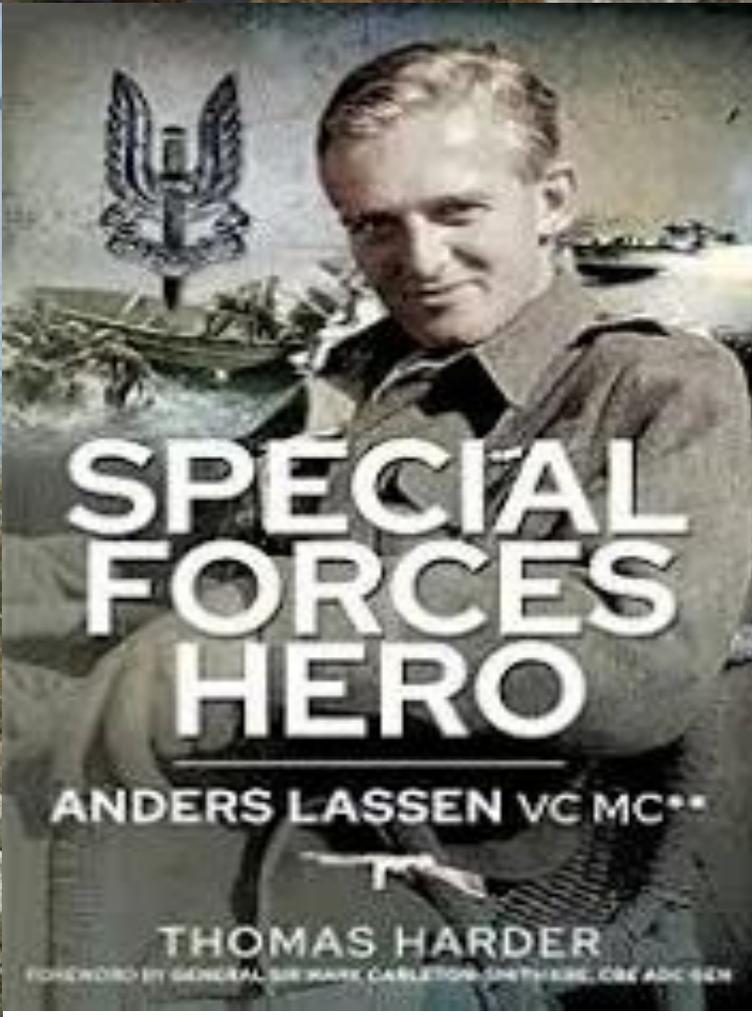




Image of Anders Lassen VC MC\*\* Grave at Argenta Gap War Cemetery courtesy of Daniele Casaretti. Image of the Lassen VC MC\*\* Medal Group courtesy of the Danish Resistance Museum, Copenhagen, Denmark

# What3Words

By Stephen More

I recently travelled from my home in Geelong, down the Great Ocean Road (world's longest WW1 memorial), to Warrnambool for a holiday and whilst there I went to pay my respects at the grave of Charles Pye VC. It took me (& my wife) nearly two hours to locate his grave and it was annoying that there was no better system to locate a grave than old out of date cemetery maps and worn out or missing markers. While searching for a better way to accurately map cemeteries I discovered an app called What3words and thought that it could be the answer.

During the Covid lockdowns here in Victoria, Australia in 2020 I was looking for a project to fill in my time.

Over a six month period, using Kevin Braziers book "The Complete Victoria Cross" as my chronological record, I began the task of giving each and every Victoria Cross resting place a What3words address. Kevin kindly emailed me copies of cemetery maps and I relied heavily on the online resources of Findagrave, Google, Wikipedia, Google Earth/Street View and the CWGC website to triangulate the locations of these graves on the What3words website.

Starting at Charles Lucas at #1 <https://w3w.co/finger.reflector.swoop> and finishing with Cameron Baird at #1362

<https://w3w.co/dude.artless.sweetly>

To date I have 1067 addresses completed. The majority of those missing from my list are on the sub-continent where it is difficult to get quality photos and information of the graves. Others have no known grave or are buried at sea.

This link is the updated list of the resting places which can be opened on the app <https://what3words.com/list/2096882141>

If you are looking to pay your respects at a VC resting place, feel free to use this What3words database to save you time searching out these brave men.

Any comments and location address adjustments are welcomed and can be sent to me at [stephenmore269@gmail.com](mailto:stephenmore269@gmail.com)

Some of the notable graves for me are:

Cameron Baird <https://w3w.co/dude.artless.sweetly>



Charles Upham VC <https://w3w.co/linked.deeper.sleeps>



# A Christmas Truce

By Richard Pursehouse and Ben Cunliffe



For over a century there have been various stories of unofficial truces between the British and German soldiers on Christmas Day 1914, and similar, although less frequent, stories the following Christmas and beyond.

What did those who witnessed the spontaneous events think? There are too many letters home from ordinary soldiers and officers to dismiss the claims, many of which were published in local and national newspapers.

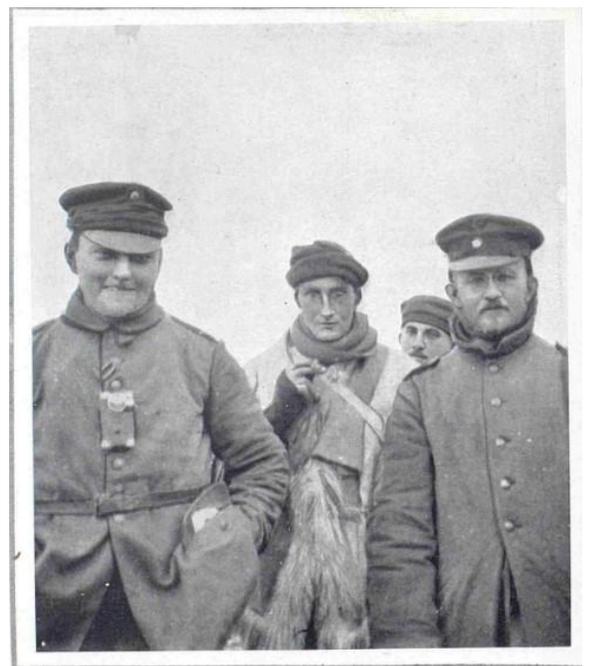
Bizarrely, today we would think that these stories should have been censored or suppressed, but at the time the national newspapers such as the Daily Mirror, The Times and the Daily Mail were 'informally advised' that their support for the British war effort was their patriotic duty; when the press barons such as Beaverbrook and Northcliffe complained that the provincial

newspapers were not subject to the same ‘advice’ they were told bluntly that the government had more pressing issues to deal with than monitoring hundreds of smaller newspapers.

The provincial newspaper editors were more realistic and pragmatic – negativity and lack of support for ‘our boys’ would affect circulation.

Major-General Walter Congreve VC (pictured right), from Stowe-by-Chartley near Stafford, knew he could not stop the fraternisation, and even wrote home to his wife Lady Celia Congreve. Lady Congreve was a fundraiser, organiser of ‘comfort funds’, sandbag sewing meetings, and was eventually awarded the French Croix de Guerre when as a V.A.D. nurse she helped to evacuate wounded from a hospital in Nancy that had been bombed.

Her husband’s letter refers to what he experienced first-hand, although he was too sensible to put himself in a position to be captured by the Germans, remaining in his headquarters. His letter still survives today in the Staffordshire Records Office, an incredible microcosm of what happened:



## ***Xmas Day 1914***

*Darling dear – as I cannot be with you all, the next best thing is to write to you for so I get closer.*

*We have had a “seasonable weather” day – which means sharp frost & fog & never a smitch of sun. I went to church with 2 of my battalions in an enormous factory room & after lunch took down to the N. Staffords in my old trenches at Rue du Bois, Mother’s gifts of toffee, sweets, cigarettes, pencils, handkerchiefs & writing paper.*

*There I found an extraordinary state of affairs – this a.m. a German shouted out that they wanted a day’s truce & would one come out if he did; so very cautiously one of our men lifted himself above the parapet & saw a German doing the same. Both got out, then more, & finally all day long in that particular place they have been walking about together all day giving each other cigars & singing songs. Officers as well as men were out & the German Colonel himself was talking to one of our Captains.*

*My informant, one of the men, said he had had a fine day of it & had “smoked a cigar with the best shot in the German army, then not more than 18. They say he’s killed more of our men than any other 12 together but I know now where he shoots from & I hope we down him tomorrow”.*

*I hope devoutly they will – next door the 2 battalions opposite each other were shooting away all day & so I hear it was further north, 1st R.B. (Rifle Brigade, his son Billy’s regiment; Billy would also be awarded the Victoria Cross in 1916 to go with his DSO and MC) playing football with the Germans opposite them - next Regiments shooting each other.*

*I was invited to go & see the Germans myself but refrained as I thought they might not be able to resist a General.*