SURGEON JOSEPH JEE, V.C.

Miss ISOBEL RAE

The Victoria Cross awarded to Surgeon Joseph Jee during the Indian Mutiny is now on loan exhibition at the Royal Army Medical College, where a sketch depicting the exploit which gained him the medal has long been on view.

Although Surgeon Jee was serving with the 78th Regiment (the Seaforth Highlanders) when he won his V.C. he was an Englishman, born in Warwickshire, who had studied medicine at London, Edinburgh and Paris. When he joined the army in 1842 he was posted to the 15th Hussars as Assistant-Surgeon, and it was not until 1854, when he reached the rank of Surgeon, that he was transferred to the Seaforth Highlanders. With his new regiment he went through the Persian campaign of 1857, winning the Persian Military Medal with two bars, and having his charger shot under him at the battle of Kooshat. Then, in May of that same year, 1857, came the most testing assignment of his career; with his regiment he sailed for India.

When the “78th” arrived at Bombay they were greeted by the most astounding news: the entire Bengal army had mutinied, seized Delhi, and killed many Europeans. Almost at once orders were received to march to Allahabad to join General Havelock, and when the Regiment reached him at the end of June the news was even worse, for Cawnpore and Lucknow were now besieged, and the garrison of Cawnpore massacred. In spite of the fact that the monsoon season had commenced, and the intense midsummer heat was accompanied by torrential rain, there was nothing to be done but advance, and for three days the men waded through a sea of mud.

The first encounter with the rebel sepoys was on 12th July at Futtehpore. Although Havelock’s column had marched 19 miles in such heat that 12 men had died of heatstroke, he at once attacked and dispersed the mutineers. The enemy, however, was not defeated, and, after resting his men on 13th July, Havelock marched on again and dislodged the sepoys from the bridge of Pandoo Nuddee, a victory which had the unfortunate result of rousing Nana Sahib to a terrible vengeance—he ordered the immediate massacre of all the English women and children left in Cawnpore.

This Havelock could not know, and so his troops marched grimly forward, hoping to avenge the men of the garrison and save their wives and children. In such circumstances the battle for Cawnpore, when it came, could not be anything but fierce and bloody. When it ended, the “78th,” who had “charged with the bayonet, the pipes sounding the piproch,” received the special thanks of General Havelock. Next day rejoicing turned to grief when the soldiers entered the now deserted city of Cawnpore and discovered there, thrown into a well, the bodies of the murdered English women and children, over 200 in all. The sight was enough to impel the men, weary as they were, to march on with all speed to the relief of Lucknow, where the gallant little band under Sir Henry Lawrence was still besieged in the Residency. But this they were unable to do, as within a matter of days they had to fight an outbreak of cholera as well as the enemy, and on 13th August there was nothing for it but to re-cross the Ganges, return to Cawnpore and await the arrival of reinforcements. These arrived
with Sir James Outram at the beginning of September, and on the morning of 21st September another advance on Lucknow began.

Once more Havelock’s column crossed the Ganges, once more the men marched through days of tropical rain and heat until, on 25th September, they arrived before Lucknow and found it strongly defended. Even when the Char Bagh bridge over the canal had been taken, the Residency was still two miles away, and the road was so well guarded by barricades and snipers, that it was obvious that the main body of the relieving force must make a détour to avoid it. While this was taking place the men of the “78th” were left to defend the bridge, and soon the enemy, seeing their exposed position, trained guns and musketry on it, but the bridge was held, the guns silenced, and two 9-pounders captured at the point of the bayonet, after the Regiment had made three charges—successful, but terribly costly in dead and wounded.

Surgeon Jee, through all this, was always at his post; “by great exertion and devoted exposure” he attended the wounded, he had them carried from the bridge in cots and on the backs of their comrades, and after that he rounded up his dhooly-bearers who had fled in terror. Later that day, while attempting to get the wounded to the Residency, he found himself besieged in the Mote Mehal, and there, to quote the citation of his award:

“he remained during the whole night and following morning, voluntarily and repeatedly exposing himself to a heavy fire in proceeding to dress the wounded men who fell while serving a 24-pounder in a most exposed position. He eventually succeeded in taking many of the wounded through a cross-fire of ordnance and musketry safely into the Residency, by the river bank, although repeatedly warned not to make the perilous attempt.”

Surgeon Jee’s V.C. was awarded “for most conspicuous gallantry and important services on the entry of the relieving force into Lucknow on 25th September 1857,” and a little later, after Sir James Outram, in a Field Order on 26th September, had specially mentioned the 78th Highlanders “who had led the advance on the Residency,” the Victoria Cross was conferred upon the Regiment as a body. The Regiment had then to choose one man to wear the medal on its behalf, and, by ballot, it selected Jee’s junior, Assistant-Surgeon M’Master, who had “exposed himself with intrepidity to the fire of the enemy” when bringing in and attending to the wounded at Lucknow.

Surgeon Jee remained with the “78th” for another seven years, and then transferred to the Royal Dragoons, and in 1868 he became Deputy Inspector-General of Army Hospitals. It is good to know that after he retired he enjoyed many years of well-earned leisure. He married, and went to live in Leicestershire, and continued his favourite pursuits of fishing, especially salmon-fishing, and shooting; in one year at Monte Carlo he won both the Grand Prix and the handicap prize in the international pigeon-shooting contest. He died on 17th March, 1899.