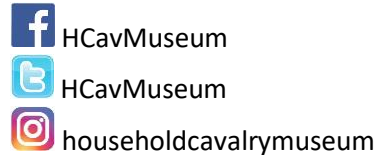




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Podcast 10 ~ HOUSEHOLD CAVALRY ANECDOTES

In this week's podcast, I'm going to tell you about the life and death of a very remarkable Life Guard.

THIS SPORTING LIFE

The tradition of harbouring and fostering sporting ability in the Regiments of the Household Cavalry is a long one and starts with **Corporal of Horse Jack Shaw** of the 2nd Life Guards.

However, until the institution of the Victoria Cross in 1857, most of the military and sporting deeds of private soldiers and NCOs went unremarked by the public; an 'other ranker' with a profile that was unrelated to his military service was an even rarer creature. One such was Jack Shaw who, in his lifetime, was famed as a prize fighter and artist's model, as well as being recognised by Lord Macaulay as one of the heroes of the Battle of Waterloo. Were that not enough, he would later be immortalised by Charles Dickens in *Bleak House*.

A prosperous Nottinghamshire farmer's son, Shaw was a sickly child whose life was feared for by the local Doctor, who prescribed 'a liberal supply of new milk' to save his life. His father assigned young Jack a cow for his exclusive use and the weakling child grew into a strapping adolescent weighing fifteen stone and standing just over six feet. Had he been born one hundred and fifty years later, he would undoubtedly have been a pin-up boy for the Milk Marketing Board and their 'Drink-a-Pinta-Milk-a-Day' advertisement, although his pugnacious behaviour at school might have caused the Board some embarrassment.

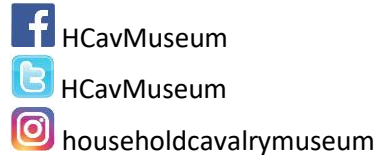
Apprenticed to a wheelwright at the age of thirteen, Shaw lost his place for fighting with his fellow apprentices and returned home in disgrace. He then turned his pugilistic hands to estate carpentry at Woolaton Hall, where he might have remained for the rest of his life had he not gone to the Nottingham Goose Fair. There, at the urging of his friends, he climbed into the ring for a prize fight with a local man much older and three stone heavier than himself. After several rounds, Shaw was starting to flag when a voice from the crowd yelled:

'Youngster, do not give in, fight slow and careful, and you are sure to lick him as my name is Jem Belcher'.



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This encouragement from the Champion of All England must have inspired the young carpenter, for he went on to win the fight.

Nothing further is known about Shaw's nascent boxing career until, two months short of his eighteenth birthday, he enlisted in the 2nd Life Guards. Soon after joining the Regiment, then stationed at Regent's Park Barracks, there was an incident which marked him out as a natural boxer and launched his career in the ring: three yobs in Portman Square were shouting insults at passing soldiers and mocking their red tunics. Unfortunately for them, Shaw was one of the soldiers and, in short order, he knocked out all of them.

This feat soon came to the ears of the officers of the 2nd Life Guards, some of whom were sporting Corinthians and keen supporters of the 'noble art'. In no time at all, the necessary financial arrangements were made for Shaw to train at London's leading boxing hall, Fives Court in Little St. Martin Street. His success there prompted his commanding officer, Lieutenant Colonel Robert Barton, a well-heeled sponsor of boxers, to send him to Jackson's Rooms in Bond Street.

Jackson's was a fashionable club and boxing academy which had been established in 1795 by the then Champion of All England, 'Gentleman' John Jackson. Under the guidance of Jackson himself, Shaw started fighting under the nickname of 'The Milling Life Guardsman.' In due course, and thanks to Jackson's teaching, Shaw defeated the African-American boxer, Tom 'The Moor' Molineaux and 'Captain Barclay' alternatively known as Captain Robert Barclay Allardice of the 23rd Regiment of Foot (later The Royal Welch Fusiliers), a claimant to the throne of Scotland and reputedly the best amateur boxer in the country.

During his time at Jackson's, Shaw's handsome face and rippling physique also came to the attention of London's artistic elite and, when not boxing or carrying out his (light) duties in the 2nd Life Guards, he developed a profitable side-line as an artist's model, posing for Sir Edwin Landseer, Benjamin Haydon (in whose studio he met the poet, Sir Walter Scott), John Higton and William Etty, a noted painter of male nudes.

Back in the boxing ring, Shaw's only recorded defeat took place at The Royal Tennis Court when he was pitted against Jem Belcher's younger brother, Tom. Despite being defeated in this contest, on 12th July 1812 at Coombe Warren, Kingston-upon-Thames, Shaw faced the professional boxer, William 'Bill' Burrows, in his first bare-knuckle fight: thirteen rounds and seventeen minutes later Burrows' second threw in the towel. This result put Shaw in contention for the Championship of All England.



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Unfortunately, Napoleon intervened and Shaw, recently promoted to Corporal of Horse, was sent with his Squadron (as part of the composite Household Brigade) to the Peninsular in October 1812. The following year the British Army crossed the Pyrenees and Napoleon abdicated, but Shaw did not return with his comrades to England. Instead, he accompanied Major General the Hon Sir William Ponsonby to Paris, where the General (who would be killed at Waterloo) was tasked by Wellington with making the preparations for the Congress of Vienna and Shaw had the opportunity to fence with some French Cuirassiers; it was an experience that was to stand him in good stead two years later.

Early in 1815 Shaw returned to England, re-joined his Regiment and resumed his boxing career. On the 18th April 1815, in front of a large crowd on Hounslow Heath, he faced 'Ned' Painter. Over the next twenty-eight minutes Painter was knocked down ten times by Shaw; on the back of this success, Shaw proposed to challenge Tom Cribb for the All England Championship but, once again, Napoleon intervened.

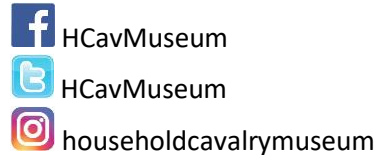
With the French Emperor once again on the loose, on the 1st May 1815 the 2nd Life Guards sailed for Ostend and the Waterloo Campaign. Following the inconclusive clash at Quatre Bras, on the 17th June at Genappe the 1st and 2nd Life Guards charged the advancing French to help cover the Allies' fighting withdrawal to Waterloo. It was an action that earned the praise of the Earl of Uxbridge, the Allied cavalry commander, and a chest wound for Shaw. However, it was not nearly serious enough to keep the challenger for the All England crown from battle the next day so, after his wound had been dressed, he returned to front line duty with his Regiment.

What followed on 18th June 1815 is the stuff of both myths and legends, including the stories that Shaw and some of his colleagues had started the day by making very free with a rum ration, which they had been sent to collect, and that later in the morning the same group had been happily looting a dairy when they were rudely interrupted by the opening salvo of the battle. True or false, by the time the French attack started, Shaw was in the saddle with his sword drawn, ready when the order came from Lord Uxbridge for both of the British Brigades of Heavy Cavalry – the Union and the Household – to disrupt the attack by D'Erlon's Corps on the centre of the Allied line at La Haye Sainte farm. For the 2nd Life Guards this involved a charge at the French 1st Regiment of Cuirassiers, accoutred in steel breast-and-back plates (a fashion later adopted by the 1st and 2nd Life Guards); based on his experiences in Paris, Shaw had already advised his Troop to aim their sword cuts at the base of a Cuirassier's head, a spot which was unprotected by either cuirass or helmet.



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The 2nd Life Guards duly smashed into the Cuirassiers, the effect being like ‘an irresistible force meeting an immovable object’. Some of the Cuirassiers fled whilst others stood their ground. One such was a Frenchman who openly challenged Shaw to single combat. It was not a wise move on his part for, as the Cuirassier lunged, Shaw parried his blade and then brought his own sword down on the man’s helmet, cleaving his head in half such that his ‘face fell off like a bit of an apple’. Eight more Cuirassiers now challenged Shaw and each in turn was despatched by a simple if unorthodox technique of swordsmanship: Shaw punched each in the face with the hilt of his sword and then sliced through their exposed necks as they turned their backs. The last man called out in English with an Irish accent:

‘Damn you, I will stop your crowing’.

He too fell like the rest.

Fired by their success in disrupting D’Erlon’s attack and routing the French cavalry, but against orders, both Brigades of Heavy Cavalry continued their charge into the French Grand Battery and on into the artillery waggon train behind it. That it was a terrible mistake became clear when the intermingled and thoroughly exhausted British Cavalry Brigades were counter-charged by two and half thousand fresh French cavalry consisting of Lancers and more Cuirassiers. Shaw found himself cut off from his Troop but continued with his slaughter of the French until his sword blade snapped. Undaunted, he then used the sword hilt as a club and, when that was dashed from his hand, ripped off his helmet and swung that as a weapon. In the end, with more than twenty sword wounds, Shaw was finally felled from his saddle by a wounded French drummer-boy’s pistol shot.

Mortally wounded, Shaw was dragged towards the French rear where he was dumped onto a dung heap. Here, he was joined by another wounded Life Guard. On seeing this man Shaw looked up and said:

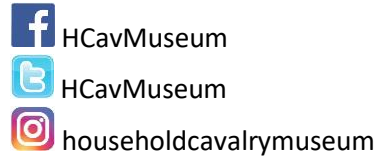
‘Ah, my dear fellow, I’m done for’.

When he was found the next morning by British troops, Shaw was indeed dead.



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But that was not by any means the end of Corporal of Horse Jack Shaw. Initially, his body was buried in a marked grave (an unusual event in itself) at La Haye Sainte on the day after the battle but, several years later, it was disinterred for reburial in England. Shaw mythology asserts that this was done at the urging of Sir Walter Scott, who had been somewhat obsessed with Shaw since he'd met him in Haydon's studio, and further asserts that Scott acquired Shaw's skull and kept it in his library at Abbotsford where it 'remains to the present day'. History does not relate what happened to the rest of Shaw's bones. Meanwhile two plaster casts were made of the skull, one of which is now in the Household Cavalry Museum and the other was believed to be in the collection of the Royal United Services Institution's along with the skeleton of Napoleon's horse, *Marengo*.

It has recently emerged, however, that Shaw's skull at Abbotsford is one of the plaster casts and that Shaw's actual skull was the one held by the RUSI, although how the museum acquired it remains a mystery. In 1898, the then curator of the RUSI museum seems to have been queasy at exhibiting the human remains of 'a British soldier' and he arranged with the incumbent of Shaw's home church at Cossall in Lincolnshire to give the remains a decent burial 'close to the pillar near the font' and 'adjacent to the Memorial to him'. This was done quietly on 21st June 1898. In addition to the monument in Shaw's memory at Cossall Church there is a street named after him in, of all places and for no apparent reason, Prestonpans.

However, the last words on the remarkable Corporal of Horse Jack Shaw are best left to Charles Dickens who, in *Bleak House*, has Inspector Bucket say:

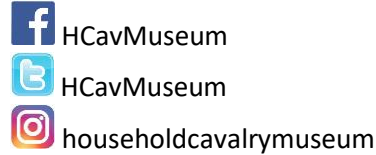
... old Shaw, the Life Guardsman, why, he's the model of the British Army itself. Ladies and gentlemen, I'd give a fifty pun' note to be such a figure of a man.

This story, along with the rest of the series, is drawn from my book *The Drum Horse in the Fountain*, which is available from Amazon and all good bookshop – should they ever open again... next week I will be talking about the remarkable Colonel David Smiley of The Blues.



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**‘NOT A LOT OF PEOPLE KNOW THIS...’**

**A weekly series of podcasts about the Regiments of the Household Cavalry  
written and recorded by  
Regimental Historian, Christopher Joll, formerly of The Life Guards**

**These anecdotes are drawn from  
Christopher Joll’s recently published books:**

*The Drum Horse in the Fountain: Tales of the Heroes & Rogues in the Guards*  
&  
*Spoils of War: The Treasures, Trophies & Trivia of the British Army*

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