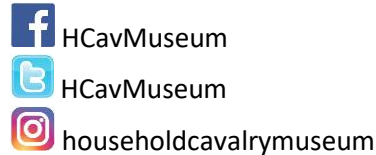




THE
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HOUSEHOLD CAVALRY ANECDOTES~NO 19

VICTOR McLAGLEN

The senior regiment of the Foot Guards is the Grenadiers Guards, which was formed by King Charles II at around the same time as he formed The Life Guards antecedent regiments.

However, unlike the Grenadiers who have had 14 Victoria Crosses awarded to their members, The Life Guards has none. The reason that is usually given for this discrepancy is that no Life Guard has even been put up for the VC because nothing is beyond the call of duty for a Household Cavalryman. Whether or not this is true, there have been plenty of gallant Life Guards whose exploits might, if badged to another regiment, have earned the much-coveted award.

But while the ultimate recognition for bravery has either eluded or been denied to Life Guards, the same cannot be said of the highest award for acting in a motion picture... the Oscar for Best Actor, which was presented to the former Trooper Victor McLaglen of the 1st Life Guards in 1935.

McLaglen was born in Stepney in 1886. In 1901 at the age of fourteen and very tall for his age, he enlisted in the 1st Life Guards in order to fight in the Second Boer War. Although he never left England, when his true age was discovered in 1904 he was discharged – but not before he had fought his way to being the Regiment's Boxing Champion.

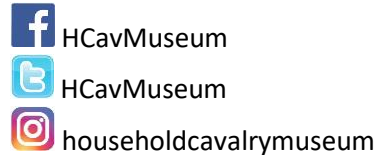
After a brief but successful career as a professional wrestler and boxer in a Canadian touring circus – including a six-round exhibition bout with the then World Heavyweight Boxing Champion whilst on a tour of the USA – and an even briefer spell as a Canadian policeman, McLaglen started travelling. He went first to Australia, where he worked as a gold prospector, then on to Tahiti, Fiji, Ceylon and India, where he got a job as physical training instructor to the Rajah of Akola, finally ending up in South Africa in 1913.

He returned to England the following year, on the outbreak of the First World War, and was commissioned into the 10th Battalion Middlesex Regiment where, despite his duties on the front line, he kept up his skills in the boxing ring. He ended the war as an Assistant Provost Marshal in Baghdad and the Heavyweight Champion of the British Army.



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Following his demobilisation, in 1920 McLaglen was talent spotted in a London boxing club by a British film producer looking for someone to play the lead in a costume romp about an aristocratic pugilist, *The Call of the Road*. Three of McLaglen's eight brothers (he also had a sister) were on the stage, which may have been why he agreed to audition. In any event, he got the part and his film career began.

Nineteen British silent movies later, in 1925 McLaglen decided to try his luck in Hollywood. He was immediately hired for the film *Unholy Three*, in which he was type-cast as a circus strongman; it wasn't long after that before he was put under contract by Fox. A hundred films were to follow, in many of which he was cast as a drunken Irishman (he was neither).

Although now largely forgotten by all but Hollywood film buffs, the three-times married McLaglen, who in 1933 took American citizenship, is the first – and to date only – Life Guard to have been awarded a Best Actor Oscar for his performance in *The Informer*, released in 1935. He is also the only Life Guard to have a Star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame.

The Grenadier Guards may have fourteen VCs, but they don't have either an Oscar or a Star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame. This story and the others in the series are drawn from my book *The Drum Horse in the Fountain*, available on Amazon.

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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  
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&  
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