

# Everard Lisle Phillipps VC

By

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*The gallant Ensign was killed in action shortly after earning the Victoria Cross at the Siege of Delhi in 1857 - but his family received the decoration in 1907 after a wait of fifty years! With privileged access to family correspondence, Brigadier Stuart Ryder traces the brief military career of the Leicestershire hero.*



Everard Lisle Phillipps VC  
28 May 1835 - 18 September 1857

## The early years

**E**VERARD was born at Grace Dieu Manor, Leicestershire, the family home of his parents, Ambrose and Laura Lisle Phillipps on 28 May 1835. He was the second son of this well-known and respected Catholic family. Children continued to bless the marriage until there were nine sons and seven daughters, the last child being born three years after Everard's untimely death.

The private education of this large family proved expensive. Everard joined his elder brother Ambrose at St Edmund's, Ware in 1847, and in 1849 they both left for Oscott where their brothers also were educated in turn. Their grandfather, Charles March Phillipps, helped out by paying some of the fees.

Following school, Everard stayed in Paris for some time, returning to sit an examination in Hindustani at Addiscombe, near Croydon, early in 1854. The purchase of a commission in a British Regiment was beyond the means of his father at that time, but a close friend, Lord Edward Howard, was able to use his influence to secure the offer of an Infantry Cadetship in the Bengali 11th Native Regiment, which formed part of the military forces of the East India Company.

Everard set sail for India on 17 October 1854. It was a painful parting from the heart of a close and happy family. His mother wrote of the occasion, 'Dear Everard bore the parting from us with great courage, though he seemed a good deal affected.' He was just nineteen as he set out on his great adventure.

## **Military control in India**

By 1855 The East India Company had virtually become the agent of the British Government in India - its employees becoming officials of a centralised bureaucracy whose reputation for integrity had become widely respected.

The Company's responsibilities stretched to keeping the peace, which made it responsible for the armies which each of the Presidencies - Bengal, Madras and Bombay - separately maintained. These armies were manned by native infantrymen, known as sepoy, and by native cavalrymen, sowars. Everard became an Ensign in the Bengali 11th Native Regiment. Each regiment had, in addition to British Officers, native officers, but the most senior amongst them were subordinate to the most junior British Officer and could not give orders even to the British sergeant-major.

Stationed in India, as military support to the Company's native armies, were various regiments of the British Army. At the time they were known as Queen's Regiments, serving for the period of their overseas tour under command of the Commander-in-Chief India. The ratio of the two forces had been fixed by a former Governor-General as one British to three native soldiers, and had never been more than one in four. But with the Crimean War drafting off men, in addition to those required to quell unrest in Burma and China, the ratio had been allowed to become almost one to eight - 40 160 European troops as against 311 000 native troops, amongst whom were 5 362 British officers.

Although at first acutely homesick, Everard settled down into the military routine of the 11th Native Regiment, finding time to become greatly enamoured of his Colonel's daughter, Agnes Rutherford, whose family did not want her to marry a Catholic ensign perpetually short of money. On his posting to Meerut early in 1857, however, he soon had more weighty military matters on his mind.

## **Massacre at Meerut**

At Meerut, the young Ensign found himself thrust headlong into the first skirmishes that were to escalate into the Great Mutiny of 1857. For around a year there had been a feeling of growing discontent in the air, as wild rumours spread about unpopular changes. It seemed that all that was needed to light the tinder of revolt was a major spark. The introduction of the new Enfield rifle, which had proved so effective in the Crimea, provided the spark. To load the rifle entailed extracting from a pouch a cartridge with a greased match at the top which was torn off with the teeth and then used to assist in ramming the bullet down the barrel. When a rumour spread that the grease on the cartridge was made from the fat of a cow or a pig - an abomination to Hindu and Muslim alike - the Indian regiments refused to accept the cartridge.

Matters came to a head in Meerut. Colonel George Carmichael Smith attempted to force 85 picked men, the elite of the 3rd Indian Light Cavalry, to except the cartridge. The sowars refused, were court-martialled and clapped in irons. The

following day, a Sunday, their roused comrades charged the prison and released the prisoners. The guard, provided by 20th Native Infantry, offered no resistance later that night, the men of the 20th and 11th Native Infantry broke into the bells-at-arms, the companies' armoury, where arms were stacked after parades. In his letter home dated 15 May the young Ensign described the events:

'On Sunday the 10th about five o'clock we were suddenly called to the Parade ground by our Colonel whom we found speaking to our men who were violently excited. We were ordered to search our lines for any arms there might be hid. While doing so, we heard a great shouting from the 20th parade and, on going to see what was the matter, found the 20th had seized their arms and were advancing loaded upon us. We (officers) at once went towards the arms, to prevent our men getting hold of theirs, and succeeded in so doing for nearly half an hour when the fire of the 20th became too thick and near for us to remain. Some of our men entreated Colonel Finnis to let them have their arms, saying they would stand by us and drive off the 20th. The Colonel would not trust them, upon which several sepoy forced us from the parade and thus saved our lives.

As we were mounting our horses the Colonel fell by my side, shot through the heart. The 20th afterwards put 15 bullets into him. As I mounted my horse, my servant, who was holding him, was knocked over, bullets falling as thick as peas. Had not the brutes been such infernally bad shots we would all have perished ... The sepoy were shooting every European they could meet and setting fire to their bungalows - the General and Brigadier General seemed quite paralysed, and for three mortal hours kept marching the Carabineers Rifles and Artillery backwards and forwards well to the rear of the fire.

At last, when we did reach the lines, not a sepoy was to be found. Every house was burnt to the ground, mine among the rest. Unfortunate ladies with babies in their arms were murdered or burnt ... five officers of the 20th were murdered and one wounded ... I have not been in bed since and this is Thursday, on Monday we went out to try to come up with the 11th and 20th and 3rd Cavalry. We killed a few of them, but the main body had made off for Delhi. I had the pleasure of killing two brutes, one of whom wounded my horse with his sword, whereupon I ran him through the body ... For the first three days I served with the Carabineers, now I am attached to the (60th) Rifles as orderly officer to Colonel Jones.

As soon as ever this row is over I shall retire from the Company's service ... Colonel Jones asked the Brigadier to attach me to him, which he has done, so I'm in his house now during the day, not at night. At night he goes about inspecting the sentries and I go with him ... He desires me to say that if you should see his brother or sister-in-law to say he's all right ... This outbreak just shows how the Company has endangered the country by their niggardly way of going on ... About 200 of the 11th sepoy have come back as they did not fire on their officers, and as some of them did their best to save us, are with those who come in by Sunday pardoned ... I had to go and read the proclamation to the ranks, certainly did not feel sure whether they would me shoot while doing so ... Try and get me a commission in The Queen's service ... Now perhaps I may fulfil your idea about distinguishing myself!! I tell you I never should at any rate with natives. Write and tell Grand Papa I'm all safe.

Ever dearest Mama,  
Your affectionate son  
Everard Lisle Phillipps'

Four days later, on 19 May, Everard wrote to his father on similar lines with the hope that one of his letters would arrive. He did not, however, miss the opportunity to stress the importance of transferring to the British Regiment, 60th Royal Rifles, writing,

'Being Orderly Officer to Colonel Jones may give me the opportunity to have a commission given to me, so much the better, but I may need to purchase as I want you at once to get me in the Regiment. If I am not granted a commission without purchase, I want you to use what I shall get out of the legacy which is settled on the younger children.'

Clearly Everard had abandoned the idea of ever serving with The East India Company again. He continued

'This ought to be the death blow of the company, their niggardly way of going on has brought it all about. All they care about are large dividends.'

## **Towards Delhi**

As expected, Orders soon arrived directing Brigadier-General Wilson to march, with as large a proportion as possible of the Meerut garrison, to join the Field Force which was being collected for the march on Delhi under the Commander-in-Chief in person.

Leaving two companies in Meerut, Lieutenant Colonel Jones, the Commanding Officer of the 60th, departed from Meerut at 6pm on 27 May with his troops, consisting of 16 officers, including the attached Ensign Phillipps, and 450 men. With them marched two Squadrons of the Carabineers, Tombs' Battery HA, Scott's Battery BA and two 18-pounder guns. The force marched by night and halted shortly after sunrise. On the 30th it encamped at Ghazeeooddeen-nuggar, on the left bank of the Hindun River, some nine miles from Delhi.

At 4pm a vedette (scout) rode in to report that the enemy was marching to attack. Bugles rang out, and the battalion had hardly fallen in when an 18-pounder shot carried off a leg from each of two Palkee bearers. The Hindun, a mere rivulet in May, was spanned at this point by a causeway - 600 yard in length - upon which two Companies of Riflemen at once advanced.

Everard described the incident in his letter to Mama dated 1 June:

'There's a causeway nearly a mile in length, at the end of which the enemy had placed one 9-pounder and one 8-inch howitzer which swept the causeway. On reaching the bridge the two companies extended, two more come in support and the long range of the rifles forced the enemy to abandon their guns. The Colonel sent me down to order the the two leading companies to reform on the causeway and take the guns at the point of the bayonets. One of the 11th colours was with the guns - the sepoy carried it off on our taking the guns, one sepoy, Dars Singh of the 11th, fired his musket into a cart full of ammunition. Captain Andrews, Wilton and myself and about nine men were round a tumbrel when it blew up. Andrews was blown to pieces and four men killed. Wilton's head was bruised - God only knows how I escaped. I'm merely bruised, just a little blood drawn from about five places. The poor 'Creeper', the horse I was riding, was shot in four places, in the rear fore-leg, in off hock, in hip and a fearful wound in the body. The shot that gave him the

last wound almost melted my scabbard, a narrow escape for my leg. A most fearful affair. When the explosion took place, I thought I was hit by a shell and expected to go to pieces every minute. When the smoke cleared up the enemy had retired to a village strongly walled, on rising ground about 200 yards off. We fire a few shots and cleared it at the point of a bayonet. The sepoys fought like fiends - in one place we left about 35 all dead in a heap, killed altogether 50 and lost five men of rifles ... altogether it was a sharp little action.'

Even in the most harrowing circumstances, thoughts of transferring were present. The letter continued:

'Mind you get me a commission in 60th Rifles. I've now seen service with them. I wrote to Papa about it by the last mail. I shall try to get Colonel Jones to recommend me ... he has mentioned me in the official report of the affair of the 30th May ... I will never serve with the native army again ...

The heat is awful and the quantity of water we drink is wonderful. Fancy a burning sun overhead and a burning village below in which we were for two mortal hours, men dying with thirst. I brought the men two skins of water from the river under a heavy fire of grape and round shot on my horse. I can't write any more. I want to get some sleep.'

Nevertheless, he managed a postscript:

'I may not live to write again. All I can do is to trust in the same God that preserved me out of the explosion of the ammunition cart. Don't be alarmed if you don't hear regularly, as the post is uncertain.'

The very next day, 2 June, Everard wrote to his Papa enclosing a letter from Colonel Jones to Colonel MacDonald, Equerry to the Duke of Cambridge, in which the Colonel gives an account of the skirmish on the causeway, mentioning Everard's role in glowing terms. Colonel Jones suggested Papa should take the letter to Colonel MacDonald, telling him that Everard wanted a commission in the Regiment. Everard pleaded:

'Get me a commission now and the fact of having attained it for service with the Regiment may be the making of me, and then perhaps Mama's dream of my distinguishing myself may come true. I never could in the Company's service in which I am determined not to remain one hour longer than necessary.'

Three days later, on 5 June, Ensign William Napier, who had lost a leg in the fighting on the Causeway, died of his wounds. Without delay, Colonel Jones took advantage of this unexpected vacancy. He wrote to Headquarters recommending that it should be filled by Ensign Phillipps forthwith. Everard's dearest wish, it seemed, was about to be granted.

## **Delhi besieged**

The city of Delhi was occupied by an enemy force of around 20 000 armed men, frequently reinforced from outside. The British Commander, Sir Henry Barnard, had to content himself with occupation of the Ridge from Flagstaff Tower on the left to Hindoo Rao's house on right, a position extending over a mile and a half of ground. To command the approaches from the city some light guns were placed along the Ridge, at the Mosque, and at Hindoo Rao's house. The distance from the nearest

battery - that at Hindoo Rao's house - to the walls of the city was about 1200 yards.

Ensign Phillipps continued to find time to report home about the activities of the 60th. On 8 July:

'I'm writing from Hindoo Rao's house, it's now our main picket. Shot and shell come rattling into it like blazes. We had some very heavy fighting on the 27th, the loss to the enemy very great, ours trifling ... We daily expect to make an attack. We were all named for an attack the other night, place to be taken by escalade, it was just put off.

What a state of anxiety everybody in England must be in. India hangs by a thread, a failure at Delhi and India is gone ... Nearly the whole of the Bengal army has mutinied, only some ten regiments out of the seventy-four have not as they were near Europeans who kept them in order ... I delight in the profession and life of a soldier ...

Since writing the above we've had another smart affair. Yesterday a picket of irregular cavalry of about 300 Delhi irregulars came into the camp. They were pursued and suffered heavily: about 2000 did not enter our camp; they funk'd ... A lot of sepoy's had got into a Serai and were firing on us. The only way up was by a narrow staircase, one at the time. Sikhs tried it and failed. The Commander brought up a couple of guns to batter down the place ... Captain Wilton and I (Wilton commands the company) went towards the guns with eight men just to see the place battered down, when all of a sudden we saw the Sikhs, bolting like mad, their Adjutant leading them. A sepoy mounted a gun, and as he waved his turban in triumph, fell shot through the heart by one of our eight men, who stood their ground well and we bayoneted every man of them. Lucky we were there: we had advanced to see the fun, contrary to orders, and saved the guns!

'Tis a glorious regiment the 60th Rifles, and Chamberlain, the Adjutant General who commanded, paid us all due compliments. Wilton's gun misfired as a sepoy was cutting at him. One of our men bayoneted him and saved Wilton's life. The loss of the enemy was 1000 killed and wounded; ours 200. We (Rifles) lost 17 men. There's not a single native regiment we can trust, except Sikhs and Goorkas. Irregulars are the greatest brutes of all.'

July 11th:

'I had to leave off yesterday as an order came to turn out ... My shoulder is not yet well from my wound on 19 June. I used my arm too soon ... Driving sepoy's out of their infernal villages is like rabbit shooting, taking them when they bolt.

There is no doubt about it, a failure here at Delhi and every native Prince would set up for himself ... The enemy fight like devils when behind walls, and when desperate, doubly so. That charge of theirs, at two of our guns when the Sikhs bolted, was as brave a thing as ever was done - 20 men charging 200.'

By September the assault of Delhi was at hand. Heavy fighting continued. On the same day, 10 September, Bugler Sutton and Rifleman Divane, of the 60th, both earned the Victoria Cross. The next day Everard wrote in his last letter addressed to his mother:

'I am writing under tremendous fire from city walls. We have advanced our position within two hundred yards. Four Batteries nearly ready to open and one mortar battery of ten mortars and some fifty guns in all. The whole of our

guns will open tomorrow at latest and in three days we shall be in Delhi ... Very hard work for all now. Not been in bed since 7th and this is 11th. One battery of ours just opened up.

I cannot write, such a row going on. Not heard from you since 10 July. I sincerely hope to hear about my commission and see myself in Gazette of 1 August. My best love to all at home.

Ever dearest Mamma,  
Your most affectionate son,  
Everard Lisle Phillipps.'

## **Assault on the Water Bastion**

Three days later the attack went in. Despite a storm of musketry from the parapets of the City, the ditch was reached. Ladders were quickly planted, and the riflemen were in an instant across the ditch and climbing the ramparts. The assailants, confronted with showers of grape and volleys of musketry, fell in crowds either dead or badly hit. The earth reeked with their blood.

According to the Annals of the 60th:

'Once inside the ramparts, Everard Phillipps, an officer formerly of the Indian Army, who had been attached to our Regiment since the departure from Meerut and received the vacancy created by Ensign Napier's death, carried the Water Bastion at the head of some Riflemen and turned the guns against the retreating enemy.'

There was rather more to it than that. According to a witness, the Water Bastion had been allotted to the 8th Queen's to storm, but they could not be induced to proceed. Ensign Phillipps thrust forward, getting a footing on the Bastion with the aid of seven Riflemen, the remainder following.

So ended the 14th. Initial success had been gallantly won but at great cost. The losses had been 1170 officers and men killed or wounded - not far short of 30 per cent of the assailants' strength.

## **The follow up**

On the 17th Colonel Jones pushed still further forward, occupying the Delhi Bank into which mortars were brought. From that position the 60th bombarded the King's Palace.

The next day Ensign Phillipps was killed in the streets in Delhi. He had been ordered into the City to attack a key place, which he did successfully. He then retired with his men down a street, where he halted and threw up a breastwork behind which they all sat down to recover. The Ensign left a tiny hole in the breastwork, not two inches wide, through which the sentry could look to see what was going on in the turmoil. When his turn came, a bullet struck him in the eye as he looked through the hole - death was instantaneous.

So ended the life of a very gallant officer who was a general favourite in the Regiment. 'His name', says Sir E T Thackeray, 'was proverbial in the Delhi Field Force for the number of gallant deeds performed by him during the siege.'

Ensign Phillipps was not, of course, the only one who displayed conspicuous gallantry during the Mutiny. The Victoria Cross was granted to seven members of the Battalion, authorised by the *London Gazette* of 20 January 1860, five of them elected

by their comrades under the terms of clause thirteen. According to the Annals of the 60th

‘it was intimated that Ensign E A Phillipps would also have received the Victoria Cross had he survived.’

## **Casualties**

The Army casualties during the assault and subsequent street fighting had been 1347, and from first to last during the siege 3854 killed or wounded. The casualties of the 60th from 30 May to 20 September were 137 officers and men killed and 252 wounded.

The General Order issued by General Archdale Wilson on the conclusion of the siege reported that ‘The 60th Royal Rifles have shown a glorious example in its splendid gallantry and its perfect discipline to the whole force.’ Lieutenant Colonel Jones received the brevet rank of Colonel and the CB for his outstanding leadership.\*

## **Family grief**

Writing from The Palace, Delhi on 25 September 1857, Lieutenant Colonel Jones informed Everard’s father of his son’s gallant death.

‘It may be some consolation to you to know’, he wrote, ‘that during the time he has done duty with my Regiment he has always behaved in the most gallant manner. He was a born soldier and fond of his profession and had it pleased God to have spared him he would have obtained a commission in the Corps and I should have been proud to have him as an officer of the Regiment. He was a universal favourite with the Officers of the Regt and they hoped and trusted he would have succeeded in obtaining what he wished. It is the wish of the Officers of the Battalion to have placed in any place you choose to select a tablet in his memory in testimony of the esteem in which your son was held by them all.’

## **Prospects of a decoration**

Such a glowing account of their son’s record of service in the 60th was a consolation to the distraught family. More letters arrived, written by comrades anxious to record their own glowing memories of their friend. One letter gave hope of official recognition of Everard’s gallantry at the Water Bastion. Lieutenant Gough wrote:

‘General Wilson has recommended Everard for the Victoria Cross for his conspicuous gallantry at the storming of the Water Bastion when he led the way with seven riflemen when the storming party could not be induced to proceed. The firing was the hottest old soldiers had ever seen, yet Everard was marvellously untouched.’

This encouraging news was confirmed in a letter received from Lieutenant H Möller of the late 11th Native Infantry.

‘It will be a great consolation to you to know that up to the day of Everard’s death, his conduct in the trying scenes he passed through had been such as to gain marked notice, his name being amongst those who were recommended for the Victoria Cross, a distinction that few of us have had the

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Footnote:

\* Later Lieutenant-General John Jones KCB, QMG in India.

good fortune to obtain.'

Naturally, Everard's parents were thrilled at the prospect of their son being honoured in this way, and wrote to Colonel Jones for confirmation. Surprisingly - in view of future events - Colonel Jones was dismissive. Writing from Meerut on 11 February 1858 - nearly five months after Everard's death - he commented

'... the communication you have received in regard to your son's name having been recommended for the Victoria Cross is the first I have heard of it, nor would such a thing be done without coming through his Commanding Officer. It may have been the talk of some young ones amongst themselves by which means Mr Gough may have heard of it. But in regard to Mr Möller stating it is an honour few of us have been able to obtain, he is one who is not likely ever to receive it.'

As later events proved, it was the Colonel who was out of touch.

### **Memorandum procedure**

It should be remembered that a General witnessing personally a deed of conspicuous gallantry in battle would have no need of a recommendation from the soldier's Commanding Officer - he could initiate it himself. It seems most likely this happened in the assault on the Water Bastion. It is known that General Wilson was well to the fore in the attack, with his eyes probably focused on events surrounding this key feature, the capture of which was vital to the success of the whole operation.

Perhaps it was remiss of General Wilson to mention to Colonel Jones his determination to recommend Ensign Phillipps for the Victoria Cross he so richly deserved, but there was a difficulty to be overcome - the decoration could only be granted to a living person!

But a compromise solution was at hand - the newly instituted memorandum procedure. There was one major drawback - the next of kin did not receive the decoration. The proposal was made by Mr Pennington, the person tasked with operating the system of awards, who drew attention to the analogous position in the case of the Order of the Bath. A memorandum would be published stating the person would have received the distinction had he survived.

The *London Gazette* dated 21 October 1859 listed the names of six members of the East India Armed Forces awarded the Victoria Cross. There followed a memorandum:

'Ensign Everard Aloysius Lisle Phillipps, of the 11th Regiment of Bengal Native Infantry, would have been recommended to Her Majesty for the decoration of the Victoria Cross, had he survived, for many gallant deeds which he performed during the Siege of Delhi, during which he was wounded three times. At the assault of that city he captured the Water Bastion with a small party of men, and was finally killed in the streets of Delhi on the 18 of September.'

The only other Memorandum published during the Indian Mutiny was in respect of Private Edward Spence, 42nd Regiment (later The Black Watch [Royal Highlanders]), for his gallant actions during the attack on Fort Ruhya on 15 April 1858, six months after Ensign Phillipps' death.

## 19th century VCs presented

During the rest of the 19th century the Memorandum procedure was used on just four occasions, twice after the disaster at Isandlwana in 1879, and twice in South Africa 1897. On 15 January 1907 it was announced in the *London Gazette* that

'The King has been graciously pleased to approve of the Decoration of the Victoria Cross being delivered to the representatives of the Officers and men who fell in the performance of acts of valour, and with reference to whom it was notified in the London Gazette that they would have been recommended to Her late Majesty for the Victoria Cross had they survived.'

Before the announcement, the Military Secretary's Branch (MS3) wrote to Major E March Phillipps de Lisle of the Leicestershire Imperial Yeomanry, on 2 January 1907, requesting him to forward the name and address of the nearest relative of the late Ensign Everard Aloysius Lisle Phillipps and whose next of kin at the time of his death had been his father Ambrose Lisle Phillipps Esq, then residing in Grace Dieu Manor, near Loughborough, Leicestershire.

In the intervening fifty years since Everard's death at Delhi, the Phillipps had changed their family name to de Lisle, and not only had father and mother died, but also Ambrose, the eldest son. The living members agreed that the Victoria Cross should be presented to Edwin de Lisle Esq, of Charnwood Lodge, Coalville, Leicestershire, as he was the oldest surviving brother of the deceased officer. The decoration remains in the possession of Edwin's grandson, Gerard de Lisle, of Quenby Hall, Leicestershire.

□