A HEAVY BRIGADE CHARGER?

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ordered to provide volunteers for service with the 5th Dragoon Guards. Lemmon (alias Topham) was one of 15 volunteers from the 7th who were selected, transferring to the 5th Dragoon Guards (regimental number 1237) on April 1, 1854. The 5th Dragoon Guards left Queenstown on the 27th of May with a strength of 19 officers, 295 other ranks, and 295 horses. His 1870 officer’s papers confirm that Lemmon departed with his regiment.

The regiment’s commanding officer, the Hon. James Scarlett, was selected to command the Heavy Brigade while the regiment’s Major was selected to command the Cavalry Depot at Maidstone. Consequently, the 5th Dragoon Guards began their Crimea campaign without their two most senior officers. Major T. le Marchant, late 7th Dragoon Guards, was appointed commanding officer but this choice turned out to be unpopular and no one was disappointed to see him leave when his health broke down in August. However, this left the regiment without a field officer and command devolved to Captain A.V.D. Burton. Lack of an experienced commanding officer and illness was to cause the regiment much difficulty early in the campaign.

The 5th Dragoon Guards arrived in Varna on June 12th and settled into camp at Devna. Cholera broke out on about the 20th of July and the 5th Dragoon Guards suffered heavily, with several dozen men succumbing to the disease. This gave Lemmon his first chance for advancement and, according to the muster rolls, he was promoted to Corporal on August 13, 1854. (His 1870 officer’s papers indicate that he was promoted on the same day that he transferred to the 5th Dragoon Guards but this seems unlikely.) A much-reduced regiment departed for the Crimea on the 24th of September, landing on the 1st of October. They immediately proceeded to their camp on the plain of Balaklava as part of the Heavy Brigade. The 5th Dragoon Guards were still there when the most famous events of the war occurred.

On the morning of October 25th, the Russians attacked the Turkish outposts stationed on the south ridge of the plain, driving them off to the west. The Heavy Brigade, consisting of about 720 swords, was ordered to advance but quickly returned when it was realized that the Turkish positions were already lost despite a gallant defense by the 93rd Highlanders (the famous “Thin Red Line”). It was at this time that a large mass of Russian cavalry (estimated to number about 2,000) were observed coming

Figure 1: William Denis Lemmon.

William Denis Lemmon (Figure 1) was born on September 8, 1833 and enlisted in the 7th (Princess Royal) Dragoon Guards, then stationed in Ireland, on March 21, 1851 under the name “William Topham.” It’s unclear why Lemmon chose to enlist under a pseudonym but he also faked his birth date, giving this as August 29, 1832. At the time, soldiering in the ranks was considered a less than honorable profession and one could surmise that Lemmon’s decision to enlist was not approved by his family. Given his underage status, it seems possible that Lemmon was concealing his enlistment from his parents.

Russia declared war on Turkey in 1853 and it was under the pretext of defending Turkey that Britain, France, and Sardinia declared war with Russia in 1854. The 5th (Princess Charlotte of Wales) Dragoon Guards received orders to deploy on March 17th but were short of full establishment. The 5th, like the 7th, were stationed in Ireland and, as a result, the 7th Dragoon Guards were
over the summit of the north ridge. The numerically inferior Heavy Brigade was ordered to charge and soon engaged the Russian cavalry in mounted combat. The 5th Dragoon Guards were in the thick of the mêlée, yet despite the close quarters fighting, casualties on both sides were relatively light. Even many of those who were wounded were only slightly so and the poor quality of the swords used by both sides were later blamed. Still, the assault had the desired effect, and the Russians soon withdrew. It was after this successful “Charge of the Heavy Brigade” (Figure 2) that the more famous “Charge of the Light Brigade” occurred, during which the Light Brigade suffered appalling casualties. The Charge of the Light Brigade was supported by the Heavy Brigade, and it has been suggested that the Heavy Brigade sustained greater losses during this supporting action than they suffered during their own charge.

Cholera had taken its toll on the 5th Dragoon Guards before the battle. Of the 314 officers and men who were sent out with the regiment, only 188 were present to receive the clasp for Balaklava. Total regimental losses during the day’s events were three killed and 11 wounded.

On November 5th, the 5th Dragoon Guards participated in the Battle of Inkermann. The British cavalry was not heavily engaged, primarily being deployed to check the Russian cavalry, who were too intimidated by the events of the month before to press their attack.

The muster rolls indicate that Lemmon (alias ‘Topham’) was sent to Scutari on November 15, 1854, arriving back in England on February 28, 1855. Like many of his compatriots, Lemmon probably was suffering from cholera.

The regiment’s primary medal roll lists “Topham” as qualifying for the Inkermann clasp but not for the Balaklava clasp. In addition, the name “Topham” does not appear on the supplemental Balaklava roll. According to the muster rolls, Lemmon (alias “Topham”) was in the Crimea; however, they do not specify if he was on duty on October 25th. Given the considerable number of 5th Dragoon Guards who contracted cholera during the first few months of the war, Lemmon might have missed the battle due to illness. Alternatively, it’s possible that the rolls are incorrect. Since Lemmon left the Crimea a few weeks after the battle, he might have been overlooked when the Balaklava roll was compiled. The Balaklava clasp is listed on his 1870 officer’s papers. In addition, The Story of a Regiment of Horse (the regimental history of the 5th Dragoon Guards) states that Lemmon was present at the battle of Balaklava. Unfortunately, neither source is particularly reliable. The first source represents what Lemmon believed he was entitled to but not necessarily what he actually earned. The second source frequently has shown itself to be inaccurate when

Figure 2: The Charge of the Heavy Brigade at Balaklava.
relating the services of individual soldiers. Since he was present in the Crimea on October 25th, Lemmon could have thought himself entitled to the clasp even if his claim was not justified by the regulations. Without an indisputable source available, it might never be known with any certainty whether Lemmon participated in the "Charge of the Heavy Brigade."

After the war the 5th Dragoon Guards landed in Portsmouth on June 24, 1856, proceeding on to Aldershot, and it was on this date that Lemmon rejoined his regiment from depot service. Queen Victoria reviewed the troops at Aldershot on July 8th, thanking them for their efforts. Lemmon was promoted to Sergeant on June 8, 1855 and Troop Sergeant Major on August 9, 1857. He married Caroline Reilly on November 18, 1856 and they had eight children. It was at this time that Lemmon abandoned his alias. The April-June 1857 muster rolls (WO 12/327) (Figure 3) list him as “1237 Topham William” but then there is a note immediately under this identifying him as “alias W. Dennis Lemmon.” Although no reason is recorded, it could be theorized that Lemmon had achieved a considerable level of success in the army and no longer felt the need to hide his identity. Perhaps his recent marriage or pending birth of his first child (born September 28, 1857) forced him to admit his true identity. Whatever the case, he appears as “Lemmon” on the muster rolls after this date. It is interesting to note that “Topham” had the same regimental number as “Lemmon” (1237) as this lends credence to the two being the same man.

The 5th Dragoon Guards would not be again deployed overseas until 1893, and the remainder of Lemmon’s service was spent in England, Ireland, and Scotland. He was appointed Regimental Sergeant Major on August 13, 1862 and commissioned as Quartermaster on June 3, 1864. The Quartermaster almost inevitably was selected from a senior non-commissioned officer and, as Regimental Serjeant Major, it is not surprising that Lemmon was appointed. What is unusual is that Lemmon was appointed after only 13 years of service. No doubt, the Crimean War presented Lemmon with opportunities for rapid promotion and the poor educational backgrounds of most recruits in the mid-Nineteenth Century meant that relatively few soldiers could aspire to senior NCO status. Regardless, to become Regimental Serjeant Major after only 11 years and Quartermaster after only 13 years suggests that he was a man of exceptional abilities.

Lemmon was promoted Honorary Captain on June 25, 1881 and Honorary Major upon his retirement on August 24, 1881, having served an impressive 17 years as Quartermaster. Despite 30 years in the British Army, Lemmon did not qualify for the Long Service & Good Conduct Medal. Lemmon served for only 13 years in the ranks, while the Long Service & Good Conduct Medal required 18 years. Sadly, Lemmon did not have the opportunity to enjoy his retirement as he died in the spring of 1882. He was only 49 years of age.

**Lemmon’s Medals**

![Figure 3: Muster roll entry identifying Topham as Lemmon.](image)

![Figure 4: Lemmon’s Crimea Medal.](image)

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