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ACROSS THE ISLAND

Famous War Event Recalled In Letter

By NEIL A. MATHESON

THERE ARE many interesting historical references at the Matheson home in Southport – some are sent by column readers – but one of the most treasured is a letter written by Robert Murray, who participated in “The Charge of the Light Brigade”, that suicidal action of the Crimea war.

Adding sentimental interest to the letter is the fact it was written by a grand uncle of the late Mrs. Matheson, the great grand uncle of my daughters. The letter was written to his father, whose name I cannot now recall. Robert Murray, incidentally, was a brother of the Rev. James Murray who preached one time in the church at Montrose, P.E.I. I recall seeing his picture when our family worshipped there one summer Sunday several years ago.

This letter has been in our home for many years – there are also three medals from the Crimea – but my interest was stirred anew when I saw a colorful film on the Light Brigade charge when I was in Virginia last Christmas season. My son-in-law, Lieutenant Jack Crelling, took me to Fort Belvoir for the rather colorful film.

Of course the movie overplays some of the scenes – the English officers responsible are made to look even stupider than they indeed must have been to order such an action. But some of the action is superbly colorful, and very realistic considering the problems involved.

Story Is Recalled

TO RECAP for a moment, for the benefit of those who have, perhaps, never read the old story of 120 years ago, the Russians were holding the hills on either side of a two-mile long valley. Their guns firing from the slopes commanded the valley. In addition Russian guns were also trained on the advancing cavalry from their front.

The old poem said “Cannon to right of them, cannon to left of them, cannon in front of them volleyed and thundered.”

The Light Brigade – I believe the number was 600 mounted men – was ordered to charge into this “valley of death” as it was well named.

Murray tells the story of the charge simply and modestly.

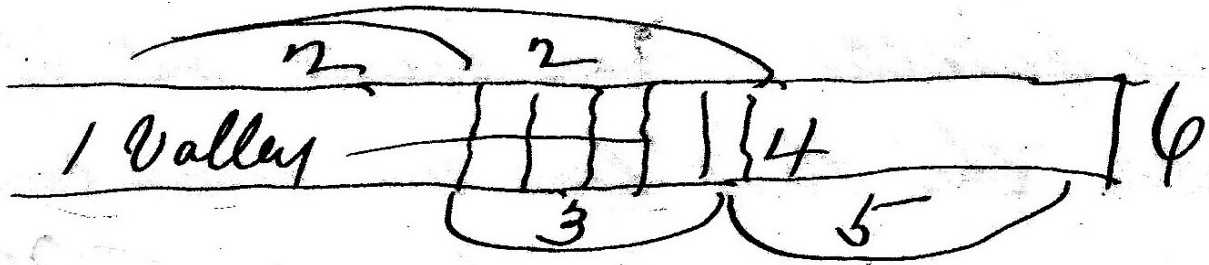
There had been some skirmishing with the Russians, some British forts had been lost.

Then he says:

“The Light Brigade advanced, after we retook some of our forts, and we got orders to charge the guns.

Murderous Cross Fire

THERE WAS a cross fire all the way for about two miles and it was a wonder that any of us escaped with his life.”



Referring to the simple illustration above, Murray explained:

No. 1 was – The valley we charged down

No. 2 – Battery of 12 guns firing on us

No. 3 – Battery of six guns firing on us

No. 4 – Line of the enemy’s infantry file firing on us, about 6,000 men in all

No. 5 – The enemy’s cavalry

No. 6 – The enemy’s guns, about 40 of them

“We took the guns, but we could not bring them away with us, said Murray who was with the now storied Light Brigade.

“On looking around we saw about 2,000 of their lancers coming to attack us.”

Young Murray nonchalantly says that the light cavalry had actually charged through the valley which one chronicler termed “The jaws of death, the gates of hell”, and still constituted an effective fighting force, even though the ranks of the brigade were decimated by the deadly cross fire of the Russian artillery.

“In that part of the engagement”, he said in his letter “We lost 32 men killed, 15 wounded and six taken prisoner.” This was in his section or group of the brigade.

Murray did have a narrow escape. “My horse and I escaped, thank God, but very narrowly. A musket ball struck me on the shoulder but it did not break my skin, though it tore my jacket a little. One of the Lancers took my busby off my head with his lance, while I was parrying some of the other lances from my breast.”

Brigade Is Destroyed

Then the young Scot added “The other regiments suffered severely, as well as us. In fact the Light Brigade is destroyed.”

Murray reports in his letter to his Dad, “An officer standing on the side of the hill when we were launching the attack said: ‘There goes our gallant Light Brigade and scarcely a man will come back.’

“The officer was right. It was the maddest thing ever done, the like of it had never been known before, charging into such a fire with the musket balls and large shell and grape shot going about us like hailstones.”

I’m not sure of the significance of the next paragraph, but young Murray told his Dad:

“But we gained our point, we retook our forts and encamped in the valley, and we still keep it though we have shifted our camp. WE are close to Sevastopol now.”

Our office encyclopaedia says the siege of Sevastopol ended with the Allies entering on September 9, 1855, a burning, empty city, in defense of which the Russians had lost 102,670 men.

With the old letter is a cluster of medals listing Inkerman, Alma and Balaklava.