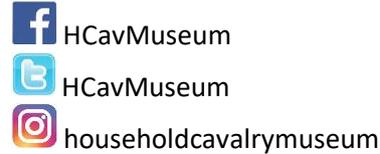




THE
HOUSEHOLD
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MUSEUM

Horse Guards, Whitehall, London, SW1A 2AX



The Household Cavalry has, like the rest of the Army, produced a fair number of heroes and rogues, not to mention eccentrics, some of whom I will be talking about next week, but in one regard it holds a record that no other unit in Britain's armed services can match...

A NIGHT AT THE OSCARS

In 1901, at the age of fourteen and very tall for his age, **Trooper Victor McLaglen** 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.

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.

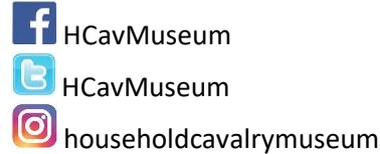
Nineteen British silent movies later, in 1925 McLaglen decided to try his luck in Hollywood. He was immediately hired for the film *Unholy Three*, in which he was type-cast as a circus strongman; it wasn't long after that before he was put under contract by Fox. A hundred films were to follow, in many 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



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Guard to have been awarded an Oscar for Best Actor in a Leading Role Oscar for his performance in the 1935 film, *The Informer*. He also has a Star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame.

Possibly better remembered is the ex-Blue and Welshman, **Trooper Ray Milland**. Born in 1907, Milland – whose birth name was Alfred Reginald Jones – joined the Royal Horse Guards in 1925, becoming an accomplished marksman. However, following a ‘walk-out’ with the American actress, Estelle Brody, who told him that with his good looks he should be in films not in the Household Cavalry, in 1928 he bought himself out of the Army.

He may have been encouraged to do this by the fact that his name was mud in The Blues, following an incident during the Escort for the State Visit of the King of Afghanistan. Milland, still at this point called Jones, was drunk on parade and during the Escort lost control of his horse which bolted. In his own words:

I went right through the Mounted Band... The Drum Horse, who was at least nineteen years old, ended up in the [Queen Victoria] Memorial fountain, and I finished up in Buckingham Palace courtyard, alone and without a friend in the world.

This incident resulted in him being confined to barracks for three weeks.

The following year Jones got an uncredited part as an extra in the British silent film, *Piccadilly*. Like Victor McLaglen, whose career took off because of his boxing abilities, Jones’s first break came in 1929 when his skills with a rifle got him a part in *The Informer*. Whilst on the set, he was asked to test for a role in *The Flying Scotsman*, which was being shot on an adjacent stage. The test was successful, he changed his name to Milland and never looked back.

After completing four films in which he had an acting role, and believing that he was being hired because of his handsome face rather than his stage craft, Milland joined a theatrical touring company, taking the second lead in *The Woman in Room 13*. During one performance of the play, he tripped on a piece of stage carpeting and ended up in the orchestra pit then, in the final act, accidentally spat his false teeth into a copper bowl; the resulting clang ‘brought the house down’. After just five weeks touring with *The Woman in Room 13*, Milland left the play, confident that he had mastered his craft sufficiently for Hollywood. Shortly afterwards, he accepted a nine-month contract offer from Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer and moved to the West Coast of America. Although his acting was strongly criticised in front of the whole crew by



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the director of his first Hollywood film, *Son of India*, within seven years – and with a period without work in 1932 during which he returned to England – he had become a ‘leading man’.

Milland first film in a starring role was *Bulldog Drummond Escapes* in which he played the eponymous, stiff-upper-lipped hero. The screenplay was based on the books by ‘Sapper’, alternatively known as [H C McNeile, who had modelled his main character on his friend Gerard Fairlie of the Scots Guards](#). Despite its success, in the films that followed Milland only twice more played an officer, one of whom was an American pilot and the other an Hungarian hussar in *Hotel Imperial*, a film set on the 1917 Russo-Austrian frontier.

In this role, as Lieutenant Namassy, Milland had to lead a cavalry charge against the Russians: the scene required Milland at some point to jump from his horse. As a former Household Cavalryman, albeit one with a chequered record as a jockey, Milland refused the offer of a stunt double. This decision very nearly ended in disaster when, during shooting, his saddle slipped whilst he was galloping towards the enemy and he was catapulted off his horse onto a pile of masonry rubble. Milland was unconscious for twenty-four hours and in hospital for weeks recovering from broken bones and skin lacerations.

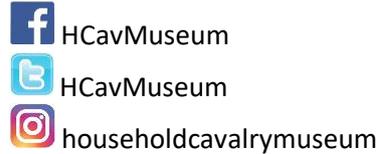
Unaffected by this accident, Milland’s Hollywood career continued to prosper and climaxed with a Best Actor Oscar for his performance in Billy Wilder’s *The Lost Weekend*. The leading role of the drunken Don Birnham called for far greater acting skills than he had previously had to deliver, so Milland decided that – in the manner of later ‘method actors’ – he needed first-hand experience of alcoholism. Accordingly, he arranged to spend a night on a psychiatric ward for alcoholics with *delirium tremens*: he left the hospital, severely shaken by the experience, at three o’clock in the morning. In the event, so convincing was his Oscar-winning performance, that he was for a long time afterwards dogged by erroneous rumours that he was indeed an alcoholic.

One of Milland’s last films as an actor, before he turned to directing, was Alfred Hitchcock’s 1954 *Dial M for Murder*, in which he starred alongside Grace Kelly, who two years later would become Her Serene Highness Princess Grace of Monaco. Hedda Hopper, the scurrilous Hollywood gossip columnist, alleged that the handsome Milland and the beautiful Kelly had had an affair during filming, something which they both denied. Whether or not the story is true, Milland did play opposite some of the most beautiful stars in Hollywood including Lana Turner, Marlene Dietrich, Ginger Rogers, Jane Wyman, Loretta Young and Veronica Lake.



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Given that some of these ladies lacked a spotless reputation when it came to amorous affairs with their co-stars, it is remarkable that Milland remained married for fifty-four years to his first and only wife. This is surely a record in Hollywood not to mention The Blues.

Next week, I am going to be talking about eccentric Household Cavalrymen, some of whom should never have been let loose on the public...

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‘NOT A LOT OF PEOPLE KNOW THIS...’

**A weekly series of podcasts about the Regiments of the Household Cavalry
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