

Major John Philip Bohun Forster 1834-1878

Crimean War - Siege of Sebastopol - Mauritius - India - Gibraltar
4th (Kings Own) Regiment of Foot - 83rd (County of Dublin) Regiment of Foot



Major John P B Forster Gibraltar circa 1868

Born 16th July 1834 at Ditchingham, Norfolk, John Philip Bohun Forster was one of two children born to Major Peter Forster 1770-1845 and Clara Susan Forster (nee Bohun) 1800-1881. John had a sister, Elizabeth Clara Forster 1837-1917 who died a spinster in Plomesgate, Suffolk, in 1917.

Educated at Eton between 1847 and 1850, John joined the 4th (King's Own) Regiment of Foot as Ensign by purchase, 10th July 1852.

By the mid-19th century, a significant part of the British Army was made up of regionally recruited line regiments of foot soldiers. These regiments totalling over 100, were key to Britain's defence and expansion around the world, especially during the height of the British Empire. In addition to the regiments of foot, other specialised army regiments included Cavalry, Artillery, and Engineers.

Regiments of foot often carried the name of the city, county, or region they were raised in, such as the 14th (The Buckinghamshire) Regiment of Foot or the 66th (The Berkshire) Regiment of Foot. These regiments were often seen as representing their local communities, and soldiers were usually recruited from those areas. The regimental system fostered strong loyalty and esprit de corps among the soldiers, as regiments maintained distinct traditions, uniforms, and customs that reinforced their identity. Soldiers often stayed with the same regiment throughout their career, forming tight-knit groups with a strong sense of camaraderie. Although it was common practice for regiments to recruit the rank and file from local communities, this was not always true for their officers.

The 4th (King's Own) Regiment was originally formed in 1680 to defend Tangier, a British possession in North Africa. It was initially known as the 2nd Tangier Regiment and later became the 4th Regiment of Foot.

Up until 1871, the British Army recruited its officers primarily through patronage and purchase. The system of purchase allowed wealthy individuals to buy a commission in the army with a specific regiment, often with little or no military experience. Many officers came from the aristocracy and gentry, with family connections being a significant advantage. Officers could purchase higher ranks

by paying larger sums, which was sometimes used as a form of investment for securing status or further opportunities.

Those wealthy enough to afford a commission, typically joined a regiment as an Ensign, the lowest ranked officer. The cost of an ensigncy in 1852 was £400, which is the equivalent to £70,000 today. Having joined a regiment, officers could buy a promotion as and when more senior positions became available. It was also common practice for officers to exchange into different regiments when opportunities arose, exchanging with an officer of the same rank, either to improve the chance of promotion or as a way of being posted to a new or more desirable location.

When John joined the 4th (King's Own) Regiment in July 1852, it was stationed at various camps throughout the Midlands, before being moved to Scotland in May 1853. Garrisoned at Edinburgh Castle, within eight months of arriving in Edinburgh, it was reported that the 4th Regiment was under orders for Constantinople, where it would form part of the British forces being prepared to attack the Russian army at Sebastopol, in the Crimea.

In October 1853, the Ottoman Empire had declared war on Russia. The Crimean War 1853–1855 was primarily caused by long-standing tensions between major European powers over influence in the declining Ottoman Empire. At its heart, the war stemmed from a power struggle between Russia and the Ottoman Empire, with Britain and France becoming involved to counterbalance Russian ambitions.

One immediate cause was a religious dispute over the rights of Christian minorities in the Holy Land, then under Ottoman control. Russia claimed to protect Orthodox Christians, while France supported Catholic interests. This dispute escalated diplomatic tensions and highlighted broader strategic concerns.

Russia, under Tsar Nicholas I, sought to expand its influence over the Balkans and gain control of access to the Mediterranean through the Turkish Straits. This was part of a wider ambition to increase Russian power in southeastern Europe as the Ottoman Empire weakened. In July 1853, Russia occupied the Danubian Principalities (modern-day Romania), prompting the Ottomans to declare war in October.

Britain and France, wary of Russian expansion and the threat to the balance of power in Europe, allied with the Ottoman Empire. They feared Russian control of Constantinople would give it dominance over Mediterranean trade routes and threaten British interests in India.

The war eventually centered on the Crimean Peninsula, where key battles occurred, particularly the Battle of Alma 20th September 1854, and Siege of Sebastopol 17th October 1854 - 9th September 1855.

In early 1854, a local Edinburgh newspaper reported that the 4th Regiment was preparing for war, it wrote:

“the regiment, garrisoned at Edinburgh Castle, sent out recruiting parties to make up the strength of the regiment to 1000 men”.

Recruiting parties would have used various methods, including public announcements, posters, and one-on-one recruitment, sometimes employing persuasive tactics and exaggerating benefits. Cash bounties were also a significant draw, but also promises of adventure, rapid promotion, and better living conditions were used to entice men to enlist.

On Wednesday 9th March 1854, the 4th (King's Own) Regiment of Foot had embarked the “Golden Fleece” steamship, for transport to Malta before travelling onto Constantinople. The three-mile route to Granton docks from the Edinburgh Castle, was lined by an estimated 30,000 spectators and well-wishers. The strength of the regiment that embarked that day was 37 officers, 47 sergeants, 16 drummers and 850 men.

By 25th March 1854, the regiment had reached Malta where it disembarked for three weeks, before travelling onto Gallipoli in mid-April. Gallipoli was a major encampment for British and French troops during the Crimean War. While at Gallipoli, the regiment built a defensive line across the narrow neck of the peninsula, known as the "Bulair Line," which still exists today. During his time at Gallipoli, John was promoted to Lieutenant 15th August without purchase. Being promoted "without purchase," although not uncommon, was usually reserved for officers showing great promise or particularly good service.

The King's Own were brigaded with Gloucesters and the Essex Regiment and finally reached the Crimea on 14th September 1854.



The Battle of Alma Crimean War 20th September 1854

On 28th September, elements of the 4th King's Own, had been moved up to trenches within 1,000 yards of the besieged city of Sebastopol. In a letter from the front 22nd November 1854, a corporal wrote to his wife:

"I am writing this letter on my knee in the trenches, it is raining heavily, and I have my blanket over my head and my Brown Bess by my side. I look at the town through a telescope, and such destruction my eyes never beheld. A large barracks has been knocked to pieces, and the houses are riddled and knocked down. On 28th September we sat down in front of the town, on the 20th day after we opened fire, and are not yet in. The winter is settling in severe." (Mat Hogan Corporal 4th King's Own Regiment)

By 11th December, the King's Own were in trenches 250-300 yards from the Russian defences. In another letter from the front, a soldier from the 4th Regiment complained:

"I cannot boast any longer of buoyant hopes and cheerful prospects for the future, neither can I say a word of my good health, for the winter is set in with extreme severity, and we are neither clothed, nor housed, nor fed for it. We are in tents off duty, but they are afloat, and we have to lay down in mud with nothing but a blanket." (Robert Leeder Corporal 4th King's Own Regiment)

Within weeks of writing this letter Robert Leeder died from dysentery, he was 40 years old.

During this period in British military history, the health of the army abroad faced significant challenges. The harsh climate often experienced abroad, coupled with unsanitary living conditions, led to widespread health issues among the troops. Diseases such as malaria, cholera, dysentery, and typhoid were rampant, posing a constant threat to the soldiers.

At a time when the military might of Britain, with its modern weapons and tactics, was far superior to many of its adversaries, deaths from disease far exceeded any that occurred on the battlefield. The Crimean War not only highlighted the British army's failure to adequately supply warm clothing and food, but also their inability to treat soldiers who suffered from disease or the conditions. Of the 22,000 deaths suffered by the British army in Crimea, only 5,000 were due to battlefield injuries, while the rest 17,000 were due to illness from diseases, and the effects of the harsh winter conditions.

Towards the end of March 1855, the left wing of the King's Own, including the 20-year-old Lieutenant John Forster, left Gallipoli to join headquarters before Sebastopol. On 1st May 1855, John was promoted in the field to Captain by purchase.



Russian Defences at Sebastopol 1855

Over the next five months, John Forster and the rest of the King's Own Regiment endured the constant threat of death and severe conditions of the trench warfare that had become a stalemate, with the British and French forces failing to break through the Russian defences.

After 337 days, however, the siege of Sebastopol ended when the city finally fell 9th September 1855, but only after the Russians abandoned their positions, blowing up their powder magazines and retreating to the north. The main objective of the siege was the destruction of the Russian fleet and docks. On 28 February 1856, multiple mines blew up the five docks, the canal, and three locks at Sebastopol.

The Crimean War was finally ended by peace negotiations at the Congress of Paris which resulted in the signing of the Treaty of Paris 30th March 1856. The war now ended, the 4th (King's Own) Regiment returned to England aboard the steamship "Exmouth", arriving at Portsmouth 20th July 1856, with half of the men that had embarked two years previously. Of the 340 men lost on the campaign, only thirty-eight had been killed in action at Alma and Sebastopol.

For his part in the Crimean War, John received the Turkish Crimean War Medal and Crimea Medal with Sebastopol clasp.

Following their return to England, the regiment spent some time camped at Aldershot, and 2nd August 1856, formed part of a 21,000 strong company of regiments that were inspected by Queen Victoria. By the end of August, the King's Own were transported to Ireland by special trains from Aldershot, arriving in Kingstown Ireland 25th August, and then onto the Curragh Army Camp.

Within nine months of arriving in Ireland, the King's Own Regiment was embarking at Kingstown, aboard the troopship "Lord Raglan," bound for Mauritius in the East Indies. On board that day 23rd May 1857, were 728 rank and file, 46 women and 71 children.

Formerly part of the French colonial empire, British rule in Mauritius was established after the Invasion of Isle de France in November 1810, and legally by the subsequent Treaty of Paris in 1814. By maintaining a royal navy and military force on the Island, Britain was in a position to protect their main sea route from England to British India, a crucial shipping and naval route.

Coinciding with the beginning of the Indian Mutiny, it was thought that the King's Own Regiment maybe diverted to India but sailed onto Mauritius, where it arrived sometime in July 1857. Due to the worsening situation in India, and the need for more reinforcements, on 5th September 1857, 16 officers and 320 rank and file, under the command of Major Willoughby, of the 4th King's Own Regiment were shipped from Mauritius to India. Captain Forster remained in Mauritius with the rest of the regiment, until he returned to England.

In January 1860, newspapers reported the arrival at Bombay of 285 troops of the 1st Battalion 4th King's Own from England, under the command of Captain John Philip Bohun Forster.

In 1861, John once again returned to England, and 28th August 1861 he married Catherine Anne Mary Welch, eldest daughter of George A W Welch of Gloucestershire, at St James Church, London.

Having return to India once more to rejoin his regiment, John and Catherine had a daughter Catherine Ann Mary Lees Forster, born 22nd August 1862 in Hyderabad. In 1864, the couple had a son Philip Byron Bohun Forster, born 25th May 1864 at Poona, India. In November the same year, John was granted 15 months leave on what was described as "private affairs", during which time he and his family returned to England. The term "private affairs" was often used as a euphemism for sick leave, hiding the fact that many officers needed to return home for treatment or to recover from illness.

In April 1865, John and Catherine had another son, John Augusta Henry Forster born in York.

On 7th April 1865, John was promoted to Major without purchase, he was 31 years old and had served with the 4th (King's Own) Regiment of Foot for 13 years.

In August the same year, John exchanged into the 83rd (County of Dublin) Regiment of Foot, at the time stationed in England. In January 1866, the regiment was shipped from Liverpool to Ireland, where it would stay until April 1867.

After a brief stay in Ireland, the 83rd Regiment including John, embarked at Kingstown in April 1867 and were conveyed by the troopship "Himalaya" to Gibraltar. Relieving the 86th (Royal County Down) Regiment in the Casemate Barracks, the 83rd Regiment would spend the next 3 years on garrison duty at Gibraltar.

During the same month John and Catherine had their fourth child, a daughter Emily Anne Mary Forster born in Cheltenham in 1867.

Britain had taken control of Gibraltar in 1713 and thereafter had retained a military presence there. During the Napoleonic Wars, Gibraltar had become an important base for the Royal Navy. During the 19th century, the peacetime military garrison in Gibraltar fluctuated between 1,100 and 5,000 troops at any one time.

While stationed on Gibraltar, John and Catherine had a fifth child, a son Peter Edward Calpe Forster in April 1868. In September 1868, Major John Philip Bohun Forster retired from the army, aged

thirty-four. The couple and their five children left Gibraltar and moved back to England, where they lived in Aldeburgh Suffolk.

Sadly, in April 1869, the couple's daughter Emily Forster died at Great Yarmouth aged two years old. In June 1869, the couple had another daughter Susan Mary Parry Forster born in Aldeburgh, and then 18th March 1871 a daughter stillborn.

Major John Philip Bohun Forster died 11th January 1878 in Aldeburgh Suffolk, he was forty-three years old. The cause of John's death was listed as Cancer Haemorrhage Syncope. John was buried in St Peter and St Paul's Church, Aldeburgh, Suffolk.

John's wife Catherine died 3rd August 1909, at Bristol.



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Researched and written by Gary Hynard 2025

