

# Khyber Pass

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This article is not going to be about the 1968 comedy movie "*Carry on up the Khyber*", or; to explore the cockney slang "*Taking a fall on your Khyber*", or; the merits of Pink Floyds song "*Up the Khyber*". We will however; have a visit to the real Khyber Pass.

At just 48km long and in places no more than 20 metres wide, the Khyber Pass has long occupied a vital strategic position as the principal route through the mountains that separate Pakistan and Afghanistan. The route across the mountains commences 15 km west of Peshawar in Pakistan and ends 48kms away at **Torkum in Afghanistan**. The inhabitants of villages in the Pass itself are mainly Afridi clansmen. Throughout the centuries, the Pashtun clans particularly the Afridis have regarded the Pass as their own preserve and have levied a toll on travellers for safe conduct. Exercises of authority over the Pass by others have been met with fierce resistance.

*"Every stone in the Khyber Pass has been soaked in blood"* George Molesworth 1919.

Early history indicates that the Indo-Aryans migrated to India **via the Pass**.

Invasions through the Pass begin with the conquests of **Alexander the Great 326BC**, and also include several later Muslim invasions into South Asia culminating with the establishment of the Mughul Empire from 1526. Going the other way, the British invaded Afghanistan through the Pass in 1842, 1878 and 1919.

## 1<sup>st</sup> Afghan War 1839-1842

The problems in Afghanistan began in 1837. With Russian backing, a Persian army besieged the city of Herat and the British government saw this as a threat to their interests in India. In addition, **Shah Shoojah**, a former monarch of Afghanistan had been exiled to India. A tripartite agreement between the British, **Shah Shoojah** and **Runjeet Singh**, a Sikh leader aimed to return **Shah Shoojah** to the Afghan throne thus making Afghanistan pro-British. A combined army (the Army of the Indus) of British and Indian forces was assembled to attempt to place **Shah Shoojah** back on the throne. The 13<sup>th</sup> Regiment of Foot under the command of Colonel Sale was selected to form part of the combined infantry forces. It was decided that the **Army should not**

approach Afghanistan through the Khyber Pass, as it was a dangerous and unpredictable passage through the mountains. The Army of Indus marched across Baluchian to pass through the Bolan Pass and reached Kandahar in April 1839. In June 1839 the Army moved towards Kabul with the 13<sup>th</sup> Regiment of foot seizing the fortress of Ghuznee on the way. On the 6<sup>th</sup> August 1839 Shah Shoojah entered the capital.

The next year saw the continued occupation of Kabul, Kandahar and Ghuznee by the Army of Indus. However; tensions within the country were starting to develop.

The growing tensions came to a head in early October 1841 when a small party from the 35<sup>th</sup> Native Infantry was attacked and suffered heavy losses at the Khoord Kabul Pass. After the 13<sup>th</sup> Regiment forced the reopening of the Pass and were camped at Gandamak, a full insurrection at Kabul took place with the overthrow of Shah Shoojah and the death of the British envoy. The 13<sup>th</sup> then retired to the fortress at Jellalabad of which at this stage was in ruins and surrounded by hostile Afghans. The British forces in Kabul including elements of the 44<sup>th</sup> Regiment of Foot had capitulated and subsequently over a number of weeks in January 1842 were all killed except Dr Bryon who managed to reach Jellalabad alive.

The Afghans were now turning their attention to the destruction of Jellalabad. The 13<sup>th</sup> remained steadfast as did the force located at Kandahar under the command of Brigadier Knott.

Meanwhile, troops from all over northern India had been ordered to proceed to Peshawar, the rendezvous area for the "Army of Retribution." The avenging force was to be commanded by Major General Pollock.

The Khyber Pass was the shortest route for the Army to get to Jellalabad and relieve the 13<sup>th</sup>.

On the 3<sup>rd</sup> January 1842, Brigadier Wilde set off with an advance force of Indian sepoy and forced his way through the Pass to reach Ali Masjidan on the 15<sup>th</sup>. With poor logistic planning he was unable to continue after being ambushed by the Afridis and the force returned to Peshawar on the 15<sup>th</sup>

January. The sorry state of his defeated troops had a detrimental effect on the sepoy soldiers assembled at Peshawar. This required Pollock to spend extra time to raise morale amongst his troops.

On the 5<sup>th</sup> April 1842, Pollock's Army of 8 Infantry Regiments, 3 Cavalry Regiments and 2 Batteries of Artillery totalling 8000 troops marched out for the Khyber Pass. The force included the British units 3<sup>rd</sup> Light Dragoons, 9<sup>th</sup>, 13<sup>th</sup> and 31<sup>st</sup> Regiments of foot.

Meanwhile; Brigadier Knott's force at Kandahar prepared to march to Kabul through Ghuznee, which had fallen to the Afghans in March. He sent the greater part of his force back to India via Quetta while he marched to Ghuznee in two columns with the 40<sup>th</sup> and 41<sup>st</sup> Regiments of Foot, his sepoy regiments and artillery. On the 5<sup>th</sup> September he drove the Afghans out of Ghuznee and pillaged the town. On the 17<sup>th</sup> September he arrived in Kabul to find to his dismay, Pollock had already arrived on the 15<sup>th</sup>. The progress of Pollack's force to Kabul was marked with the utmost savagery. In areas known to have supported the massacre of the Kabul garrison, whole populations were slaughtered and villages burnt.

British prisoners including Lady Sale were later recovered from Barmain and returned to Kabul on the 21<sup>st</sup> September. Pollock's army continued with vile retribution with villages being burnt and populations massacred. The main bazaar in Kabul, considered one of the finest in Asia was destroyed.



On the 12<sup>th</sup> October 1842, Pollock and Knott left Kabul with their troops and began the

retreat to India via Ganamak, Jellalabad and Peshawar. The Afghans harried the retreating force along the way especially at the Khyber Pass demonstrating the words of Lord Wellington *“It is easy to get into Afghanistan. The problem is getting out”*.

Today

After 1980, the Pass became a major route for refugees leaving, or later returning to Afghanistan and for guerrilla fighters entering Afghanistan. The area of the Pass has been connected with a counterfeit arms industry, making AK-47s. Martini-Henry rifles, pistols and sub machine guns using local steel and blacksmiths forges.



Oh, it drives me half crazy to think of the days I  
Went slap for the Ghazi, my sword at my side,  
When we rode Hell-for-leather  
Both squadrons together,  
That didn't care whether we lived or we died.  
But it's no use despairin', my wife must go charin'  
An' me commissairin' the pay-bills to better,  
So if me you be'old  
In the wet and the cold,  
By the Grand Metropold, won't you give me a letter?  
(~Full chorus~) Give 'im a letter --  
'Can't do no better,  
Late Troop-Sergeant-Major an' -- runs with a letter!  
Think what 'e's been,  
Think what 'e's seen,  
Think of his pension an' ----

**GAWD SAVE THE QUEEN.**

By Rudyard Kipling

Thank you Jeanette Lee for this poem.