

First Sikh War Military Pensioners in Western Australia

By Peter Conole

The Sikh Wars were perhaps the most bloody and closely fought conflicts to occur in British-dominated India before the Great Mutiny of 1857. Numerous books have been written about the struggles, including official, non-official and revisionist histories and formal memoirs of some participants. Masses of archival materials have survived in both Britain and India. The best general account is still that of Sir John Fortescue (1)

A very short, bland summary must suffice. Britain dominated most of India by the 1830s and had a rather cordial relationship with the Sikh kingdom in the Punjab. The death of the renowned Ranjit Singh led to a ferocious internal struggle for power and the triumph of a militarist faction. British officials dabbled in the chaos, then found themselves scrambling to mount a defence when the Sikh army crossed the Sutlej River to do battle in late 1845 (2).



Photo of General Sir Hugh Gough

The British put together a mixed army with a solid core of British troops. The senior commander, that rough diamond Sir Hugh Gough, at first lacked sufficient artillery but managed to win two initial victories at Mudki and Ferozeshah. The second was a desperate and shambolic business. His subordinate Sir Harry Smith won a third major battle at Aliwal and then assisted Gough, who at last had the necessary artillery, to inflict a crushing defeat on the Sikhs at Sabraon.

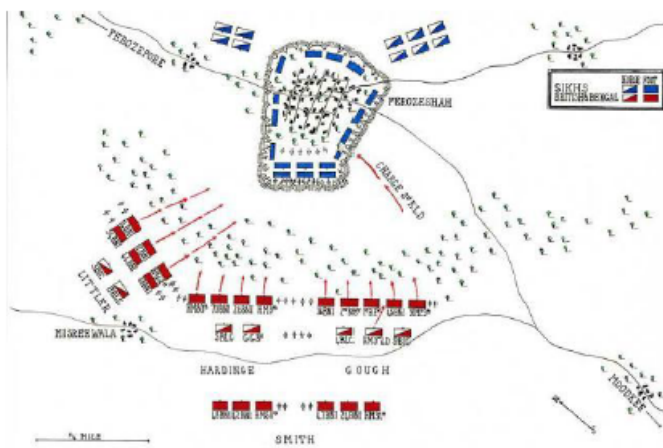


Portrait of General Sir Harry Smith

As Fortescue very firmly stated, General Gough's *"great initial difficulty was that his artillery was so inferior in numbers and weight of metal to that of the Sikhs..."*. Fortunately, the British infantry outclassed their opponents. It is perhaps important to emphasise that the British Army shortage *re* cannons often cost them dearly from the

Napoleonic Wars onwards until as late as World War I. The key reason for the problem? As the senior service and the most vital factor in defence, the Royal Navy came first at budget time (3).

The peace terms did not finalise the issue; a second war two years later ended in the annexation of the Sikh realm. All the same, after hostilities in the sternly contested first war ceased, a General Order dated April 17, 1846 sanctioned the award of what was called the Sutlej Campaign Medal. It was the first British decoration that provided for the issue of bars to both officers and men. There were four in all, one for each large-scale engagement. The diademed head of Queen Victoria is on the obverse of the medal, the figure of Victory on the reverse with the simple legend 'Army of the Sutlej' inscribed around the circumference (4).



So much for the brief summary of events. In general terms, the war boiled down to simple, head-on confrontations in the battles mentioned. The British victory was dearly bought and the European regiments – especially the infantry – paid a heavy price. According to Fortescue the key actions alone “cost well over six thousand casualties, and

of these over thirty-four hundred had fallen upon the Europeans. Other petty affairs and sickness must have swelled that number to nearly four thousand...” He then indicates that British regiments of both cavalry and infantry were also understrength from the start, perhaps no more than 9000 officers and men in all (5).

Fortescue's assessment reflects reality but probably does not adequately describe the original cause of the numbers problem. A considerable number of soldiers will have been absent because of illness or detached duties, issues which are more fully explained below. A tragic incident came as a sort of grim finale to the war soon after the peace treaty was signed. When after the officers and men of one regiment (the brave, battered 50th of Foot) returned to the major base at Ludhiana their cantonment was hit by a ferocious storm on May 20, 1846. Nearly a hundred soldiers and dependent wives and children were killed and several hundred injured (6).



Battle of Ferozeshah. Picture appears to portray the second day. The unit in the painting may be the 62nd Regiment based on their buff facings and the buff colour of the regimental flag. The British figures in the foreground appear to members of the light company. By Henry Martens - Unknown, Public Domain, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=7838434>

The following regiments of British infantry, which are the focus of this

article, were engaged in the major battles:

9th Regiment – at Mudki, Ferozeshah, Sabraon;

10th Regiment – at Sabraon;

29th Regiment – at Ferozeshah, Sabraon;

31st Regiment (scoring a maximum risk quartet) – at Mudki, Ferozeshah, Aliwal, Sabraon;

50th Regiment (a second maximum risk quartet) – at Mudki, Ferozeshah, Aliwal, Sabraon;

53rd Regiment – at Aliwal, Sabraon;

62nd Regiment – at Ferozeshah, Sabraon;

80th Regiment – at Ferozeshah, Sabraon.

A search through the large scale study of M.S.James indicates that over 70 soldiers from the eight regiments listed above who arrived in WA as military pensioners were serving in the crucial years 1845-1846. In theory they could all have been entitled to the Sutlej campaign medal and relevant bars for particular battles. In practice quite a few soldiers did not receive any known decorations or mentions of service in that war – about 21 men in all.

The archival research carried out by James indicates that it is unlikely all of them were left off medal lists by accident. Other factors may have been at work, as hinted at in a previous paragraph. Poor health is one. For example, Corporal William Harris of the 53rd suffered from epilepsy. That may have kept him out of action (7).

It is perhaps safe to assume, as did the knowing Fortescue, that illness of one kind or another limited the capabilities of many men. Byron Farwell outlined the issues with brutal

frankness in his popular study of the Victorian Age army: *“In every campaign illnesses accounted for more casualties than wounds inflicted by enemies...the medical and sanitary standards of the army were incredibly low”* (8).

Some men may have been unable to go on active service in the year 1845 because of the effects of injuries received in earlier conflicts. Sergeant Patrick Bannon of the 50th Foot is one possibility – wounded at Punniar in the short, sharp Mahratta war of 1843 (9).

A few others may have been on detached service, such as garrison duty at various places in India or elsewhere. Such detachments (one or two companies) from various regiments were sent to WA itself for local defence purposes (10).

The following is a list of the men who are known to have served in the First Sikh War before making the voyage to WA as military pensioners:

9th Regiment of Foot: William Butler, Hugh Devitt, James Fahey, Peter Farmer, Owen Griffin (wounded at Ferozeshah), Robert Hulme, John Robinson, James Stark (wounded at Mudki);

10th Regiment of Foot: John Barron, Patrick Hayes (wounded at Sabraon), Michael Howard, James Judge, Thomas Kelly, Patrick McCann, John Meredith, Robert Richardson (wounded at Sabraon), John Sullivan (wounded), Michael Walsh, William White (wounded);

29th Regiment of Foot: Matthew Goodbody, Bernard Kain, Thomas McGloughlin, William Savage (wounded at Ferozeshah);

31st Regiment of Foot: James Cunningham, John Day, John Gallagher, Robert Weldon (wounded), James Whitely (wounded at Mudki);

50th Regiment of Foot: William Davey, Robert Arnott (wounded at Ferozeshah), George Knockton, George Gorman, Bernard McCaffrey (wounded), Edward McSherry (wounded at Ferozeshah), William Pelcher (wounded at Ferozeshah), Thomas Ray, Thomas Pollitt (wounded at Ferozeshah), William Smith (wounded at Mudki), Richard Sutcliffe (wounded at Ferozeshah); William McDonald;

53rd Regiment of Foot: Thomas Pike (possibly wounded in the First Sikh War);

62nd Regiment of Foot: Edward Glushon, Charles Insley;

80th Regiment of Foot: John Heveran (wounded, Ferozeshah) Charles Fordham (wounded), Edmond Goodall, Robert Hill, Philip O'Reilly, John Tunny (11).

Notes

(1) Sir John Fortescue, *A History of the British Army* (MacMillan and Co. London, 1927), Vol.12, pp343-391

(2) B.Whitburn, *Bright Eyes of Danger* (Helion and Company, Solihull, England, 2015), pp97-120

(3) Fortescue, Vol.12, p369. It is worth noting that the British captured about 230 artillery pieces in the four large battles. The older version of the name of the decisive Sabraon affair– Sobraon – has been given up in favour of the one used by Whitburn

(4) Major L.L.Gordon, *British Battles and Medals* (Spink and Son LTD, London, 1979), pp148-150

(5) Fortescue, Vol.12, p390

(6) Whitburn, pp178-179

(7) M.S.James, *A Superior body of Men* (AuthorHouse, 2016), pp350-351

(8) B.Farwell, *For Queen and Country* (Allen Lane, London, 1981), p179

(9) James, pp28

(10) Just one example: a company of the 51st Regiment (not in the Sikh War) served in WA in the 1840s. See E.S. and C.G.S.Whiteley, *The Military Establishment in Western Australia, 1829-1863* (Hesperian Press, 2010), pp73-75

(11) Information on J.Heveran courtesy D.Oldman and M.Burton.