

An Unfortunate Life

Ron Sutton

When reading about the history of our Pensioner Guards we sometimes find a statement that is intriguing and requires further investigation. This is true when we look at the various ways our brave soldiers met their maker. We have the Guard that got drunk and on the way home fell into a puddle of water and drowned, another came to grief when a horse harnessed to a sulky bolted. This story follows the circumstances of one of our own who was killed by a Sikh.¹

The Background

The Mararajah of the Punjab, Ranjit Singh established and built up the powerful Sikh Army, the “Khalsa” over the twenty years of his reign. It had taken his towering personality to control the turbulent “Khalsa” he had established. Until the death of Ranjit Singh, relations between the Sikhs and the British East India Company had been harmonious. Ranjit Singh co-operated with the British during the First Afghan War and the Sind War. However, Ranjit Singh’s death in 1839 triggered acrimonious disputes within his family and with the powerful “Khalsa”, an institution motivated by aggressive antipathy to the British. Six years later, this built up aggression led to the war that broke out in 1845.

The core of the “Khalsa” was its body of infantry regiments modeled, equipped and trained as European troops even wearing red jackets and blue trousers. The traditional weapon of the Sikh warrior is the “Kirpan”, a

curved sword kept razor sharp. In battle, at the first opportunity the Sikh warriors would abandon their muskets and engage in hand-to-hand combat with sword and shield. Horrific cutting wounds, severing limbs and heads, were a frightful feature of the Sikh Wars in which neither side gave quarter to the enemy.

On the 11th December 1845, the Sikh Army crossed the Sutlej River to attack the British garrisons in the towns of Ferozehore, Ludhiana and Ambala. The first Sikh War had begun.

The Commander

The Commander of the British forces was General Sir Hugh Gough, an Irishman. Hugh Gough was born in Woodstown, County Limerick on the 3rd November 1779. After obtaining his commission in the Army he served with the 78th (Highlanders) at the Cape of Good Hope and then with the 87th (Royal Irish Fusiliers) in the West Indies. In 1809 he served with Wellington in the Peninsular Wars where he was severely wounded having his horse shot from under him. He was again wounded at the battle of Nivelles. After some years away from active service, he was promoted Major General in 1830 and in 1837 was sent to India to take command of the Mysore division of the Army. The China War intervened and he was dispatched to China as Commander in Chief of the British Forces. For his numerous achievements and victories including the capture of the Canton forts he was created a baronet.

He returned to India in 1843 as Commander in Chief of the British

¹ The Veteran’s, a history of the Enrolled Pensioner Force in Western Australia, 1850-1880, Broomhall, FH, Hesperian Press, pB262.

forces. Gough was immensely popular with his troops for whose welfare he was constantly solicitous. The troops admired his bravery, in action wearing a conspicuous white coat he would draw fire away from his soldiers. In response to the Sikh threat, Gough mobilized a combined strength of British and Bengal force of 12,000 troops and 42 guns. He designated this force the "Army of Sutlej". The Sikhs had 10,000 Cavalry 4000 infantry and 22 guns under the command of Lal Singh.

On the 18th December 1845 after a long day's march, the Army of the Sutlej approached the small town of Moodkee. The combatants met at nightfall on the south bank of the Sutlej River. Gough's tactics were based on launching headlong attacks and, as a consequence, his casualties were high. He commanded the British/Indian army at 6 of the 7 major battles of the First Sikh war with his final battle at Goojerat decisively winning the war. He again commanded the British forces in the 1848 war and subsequently his peerage was raised to that of Viscount and promoted to Field Marshall. He died on the 2nd March 1869.

The Regiment

The 50th (Queen's Own) Regiment was originally raised as the 52nd Regiment of Foot, but was renumbered in 1757 following the disbandment of the existing 50th and 51st Regiments. It spent most of the Seven Years War in England, raiding the French coast in 1757 and fighting in Germany in 1760. The regiment was deployed to Jamaica in 1772 and then to New York in 1776. At this point, troops were transferred to

other regiments so that a new regiment could be raised in England therefore; the unit in name did not see action in the American Revolutionary War. In 1782 the unit became the 50th (West Kent) Regiment of Foot. During the Napoleonic Wars, the regiment saw action in Egypt, Denmark and the Peninsular War, including the Battle of Corunna. After a battle in the Peninsular War the regiment was nicknamed the Dirty Half – Hundred: the regiment had worn uniform with black facings and when they wiped their faces the dye stained their skin. In 1827 the unit became the 50th (Duke of Clarence's) Regiment of Foot and then in 1831 as the 50th (Queen's Own) Regiment of Foot in honour of King William the Fourth's wife Queen Adelaide. The unit escorted convicts to Australia in the 1830's and then was deployed to India in 1841. The regiment was garrisoned at Dum Dum in the Punjab district and fought with distinction in the Gwalior campaign in 1843.

In 1845 the regiment was placed under command of General Hugh Gough in his Army of the Sutlej. The unit was allocated to the 2nd Brigade under Colonel Wheeler with the 42nd Regiment of Foot and the 48th Bengal Native Infantry. The brigade was in the 1st Infantry Division under Command Major General Sir Harry Smith. At the commencement of hostilities at Moodkee the regiment was in the thick of the battle. As the infantry advanced on the Sikh positions, Wheeler's Brigade on the right of the line was threatened by a mass of Sikh cavalry forcing the Brigade to form squares. With the Sikhs driven off, the order was then

given to form line and continue the advance; only the 50th complied leaving the other two regiments in square. The Divisional Commander, General Harry Smith seized one of the 50th's colours and led the regiment into the Sikh lines. The infantry attack drove the Sikhs from their positions after savage hand to hand fighting. The 50th suffered 109 casualties. Reinforcements arrived and the 50th again saw action at Ferozeshah on the 21st-23rd December 1845, Aliwal on the 28th January 1846 and Sobranan on the 10th February 1846. The four battles earned the regiment Battle Honours for each battle. The regiment returned to England and after a short stint in Malta were soon in the thick of battle again in the Crimea at Alma, Inkerman and Sevastopol. In 1860 they were back in Australia and in 1864 in New Zealand fighting the Maori Wars. In 1881 the unit amalgamated with the 97th (Earl of Ulster's) Regiment of Foot to form the Queen's Own (Royal West Kent Regiment). The present unit, The Princess of Wales Royal Regiment (Queens and Hampshires) named for Princess Diana can trace its origins to the 50th (Queens Own) Regiment of Foot.

The Soldier

William Smith was born in Merton, County of Surrey, England. On the 22nd May 1843 at age 19 years he enlisted in the 50th Regiment of Foot in London for a bounty of three pounds seventeen shillings and sixpence. His records show he was 5' 7¹/₄" in height with fresh complexion, brown eyes and brown hair. He was stationed at Chatham as a reinforcement until he embarked from Gravesend for Bengal on the 9th

September 1843. He arrived in Bengal on the 17th January 1844 and joined his regiment at Dum Dum. He remained at the Dum Dum garrison for the period February – December 1844. His unit was later to join the Army of Sutlej in 1845 and on the 18th December he was in the Battle of Moodkee one of the fiercest encounters of the First Sikh War. He was wounded in battle at Moodkee. It appears he remained in India to at least October 1845 as he was noted as being at Ludhiana, India on the 8th October 1845. The 50th Regiment of Foot returned to England and their home base was at Maidstone, County Kent. William's daughter Elizabeth was born in Maidstone in 1850.

He was subsequently discharged and awarded a military pension. In 1859 he joined the Enrolled Pensioner Guard Force and joined the convict ship "*Sultana*" arriving in the Swan River Colony with his wife and daughter on the 19th August 1859. He was granted a block of land at Butler's Swamp, Claremont and became friends with fellow Enrolled Guard John Atkinson. More bad luck was to follow William as his wife died in Dongara when his daughter was about fifteen years old.

He then left Western Australia after about five or six years to try his luck on the Victorian Goldfields at Benalla.

The statement in the "Veteran's" that William was killed by a Sikh is viewed with some scepticism by William's descendants. William was not the most law abiding of citizens and he did spend some time incarcerated in Perth. It appears he also ran into trouble with the law in

Victoria. It is believed he returned to India for a period of time then back to Western Australia where his trail runs cold.

His daughter subsequently married and William's destiny was fulfilled with the many descendants now living in Western Australia.

Footnote: William Smith would have qualified for the award of the Sutlej Campaign Medal 1845-46. The medal would have the first battle ("Moodkee 1845") engraved on the reverse side and if by chance he did participate in the other three battles they would have been on clasps attached to the ribbon.

Acknowledgment

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