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The Indian Mutiny

Private John Muir

42nd (Black Watch) Regiment of Foot

With the British Army currently battling a Pashtun insurgency in southern Afghanistan, it can be instructive to recall how the British Army has dealt with previous uprisings in southern Asia. In this extract from his unpublished memoirs¹, the late John Muir recounts his experiences as a private soldier in the 42nd Regiment during the Indian Mutiny of 1857, which was a serious challenge to British rule in India.

Muir, then 25-years-old, had enlisted at Edinburgh in the 25th (King's Own Borderers) Regiment in 1851 and subsequently saw service with his regiment in India, a period which coincided with the Crimean War (1855-56) in which the 42nd Regiment, to which he would later transfer, fought. We join him in England, still with the 25th, in 1857.

After a stay of two years in the Cottonspolis, we were ordered to Dover Castle, another Scotch Regiment, the Black Watch, being stationed in the Heights. It was but a short time after our arrival in Dover when the Indian Mutiny broke out, but owing to the Kings Own being just home, the war office could scarcely send us out again; but this was soon remedied, for on the 42nd receiving orders for India, volunteers of 5 years service were asked for from the Kings Own. About 70 of us volunteered from the 25th to the 42nd. I say us, for I was one of the seventy.

I well remember the day we left our old comrades: it was a Saturday afternoon and we marched from the Castle to the Heights to the strains of the bands of both regiments. All was bustle and excitement, orderlys running hither and thither, but at last all was ready and being conveyed by train to Portsmouth, we embarked there. It was in Portsmouth I donned for the first time the "garb of old Gaul" – the kilt, bonnet and feather.

We sailed from Portsmouth in the screw-steamer *Australia*, we coaled three times on the voyage viz: Cape Saint Vincent, Saint Simons Bay and Point de Galle. Calcutta was reached in 76 days and a few days after landing, we started for the seat of war. The railway conveyed us for about 100 miles into the interior, but thereafter the march began. We passed through Benaves, and Allahabad to Cawnpore. It was here I saw for the first time Sir Colin², and as many men of the regiment had been through the Crimea with him, the moment they saw him the whole regiment gave forth a hearty cheer.

It was at Cawnpore on the 6th of December we had our first engagement with the enemy. They had gathered here in force, the scene of the first bloody preliminaries of the meeting.

I may pause to say a little about our first brush with the "Pandies." We routed the Rebels in a very short time and following them for about 13 miles in the heat of a tropical sun was extremely hard work. The recall was sounded and we had all that distance to march back again to camp as it was perfectly dark, we were unable to find our quarters, so we were ordered by Sir Colin to pile arms and sleep in the open air all night; but in lieu of our tents, he kindly ordered each man to be served a glass of grog.

After the capture of Cawnpore, we marched out to Nana Sahib's Palace and blew it up. The villain had a well here, and like all Indian wells, it was very deep and wide. Into this place then he had put the most of his treasure. The Commander in Chief had received word of the same, so putting fatigue parties to work he determined to empty the well. Four windlasses were at once rigged up and the process of emptying the well commenced. We wrought night and day, day and night, and often would the soldier be talking of the sum they were likely to receive as the reward of their labours. Sir Colin encouraged these hopes in the men, for I have heard him say "Work away lads, you will be well paid for this". Thus fanned by the Commander in Chief himself, in whom the men had implicit confidence, the flames of their hopes rose higher as they neared the bottom of the well. Some of the men were heard to say if they received anything less than £50 it would be an injustice. While others whose bump of imagination had been more fully developed fixed the sum at £100, neither more nor less. I thought if we got about £10 it would be no more than we deserved.

However, when we arrived at a certain part of the well, it was found that in spite of our re-doubled exertions, we were unable to pump the well dry; the reason was soon found out – for the bottom of the well was below the level of the river consequently the water was poring in as fast as we were able to pump it out. The sappers now took charge and ultimately dug out £20,000. Where this money went to I know not, but of this I am certain that very little came my way. After my arrival in "Bonny Scotland" I received prize money of about £3-10/.

¹This paper was submitted to *United Service* by Colonel Donald Ramsay, OAM (Retd), a member of the Institute. The original memoir manuscript is held by Catherine Flanagan of Williamsburg, Virginia. A slightly longer extract covering Muir's service in both the 25th and 42nd Regiments was published in *The Red Hackle* May 2008 pp.23 – 25.

²Editor's note: This is a reference to the Commander-in-Chief, General Sir Colin Campbell, who had commanded the Highland Division during the Crimean War.

It had taken us 21 days to march from Calcutta to Cawnpore and on our arrival then we found the force under Sir Colin made up as follows: The 93rd, 53rd, 88th, 82nd and 32nd regiments; 4th Punjab rifles, 9th Lancers, Seik Calvary, Bengal Artillery, Naval Brigade under Capt. Peel, and 5 companies of our own regiment.

After the taking of Cawnpore, we scoured the country after which time I had an opportunity of seeing that most famous building – the Taj Mal. It is a magnificent mausoleum built about 200 years ago for a Queen by her adoring husband; lights are kept burning night and day and the natives spread their humble offering of flowers on the tomb of the Queen. The acoustics of this building are somewhat peculiar, the echo inside the building is so responsive that one is forced to speak in a whisper.

Of fighting in Agra then there was nil. About three months after the capture of Cawnpore, the troops under Sir Colin Campbell crossed the River Yamuna on a bridge of boats. The baggage of an ordinary European army is, and always has been, a hindrance to the movement of the troops; and its dimensions have always been cut as fine as its utility would allow, but the baggage of an Indian army – who can describe it? On this occasion, it stretched away for 13 miles a huge heterogenous mass of elephants, camels and bullock carts – while the odd parts of this serpent were filled in with water-carriers and attendants.

Continuing on our march, we arrived outside Lucknow and quartered at Dalkoushi. We were but a short time there when the General gave orders for the assault to take place. Our orders (the 42nd and 93rd) were to attack the Martineer in skirmishing order, and not to open fire until we were within 30 yards of the bungalow. Now when these orders were given out to us, I thought there would be some difficulty with this business – especially the getting over a wall in front of the bungalow; but the soldier has no business to think – he is merely a machine in the hands of capable – aye, and more often of incapable – officers.

*“Theirs not to make reply, theirs not to reason why
Theirs but to do and die”* [The Charge of the Light
Brigade (Tennyson)]

We advanced towards the Martineer and on a closer view of the mud wall, my doubts were dispelled, for the shot and shell had ploughed their way through the wall in many places; by these gaps we entered into the building and proceeded to the mud wall on the other side; here we stopped for there were large earthworks in front planted with cannon with a plain intervening. Under cover of the mud wall and bungalow we kept firing at the earthworks in front intending to hold what we had won rather than push forward.

The 93rd who were skirmishing away to the right came into touch with the bank of the river then making a dash at a earthwork in front they were soon masters of it; and great was our surprise to see instead of the turbans, the feather bonnets waving on the top of the earthworks.

With a cheer we at once rushed across the plain and

after some little difficulty owing to its height, we gained the top of the earthwork.

By this time, it was dark and I was put on sentry duty from 12 till 2, and soldier as I was, I felt a little strange. One did not know but some dark-skinned villain who perhaps had cut the throats of British women and children might be lurking to have a shot at me – but as there were double sentries on, the loneliness was not so oppressive.

At length daylight dawned and another day’s work was before us. During the attack on Banks Bungalow by the light company of the 42nd and the grenadier company of the 93rd, we became detached from the rest of the force, and continuing on we got into a street; we went up this street but had to persue street fighting tactics viz: one party walked on one side of the street the other on the opposite, but we still marched on – the bullets whistling about our heads still persuing our way we arrived at the head of the street which with another street formed a cross; but it was impossible to advance. The Sepoys³ and natives had taken possession of the opposite roofs with small cannon and with these they swept the street. What was to be done? We were but a handful of men in the midst of a rebel city, overhead a tropical sun pouring down its rays upon us; over against us the Sepoys ping, ping, ping with their rifles and small cannon. It was a dreadful time of suspense.

“Those behind cried forward”

“And those in front cried back” [Horatius Lines 419,
420 (Lord Macaulay)]

A rush was made into one of the houses and the roof gained but it was useless to try and dislodge the Sepoys – they were far too numerous.

What was to be done? Although we were British soldiers, we lost our machine-like propensity for the nonce, and showed ourselves men of like passion to other men. Our hopes and fears were cut short by the cry “We are surrounded, we are surrounded” for it was supposed the Rebels had sent a force to attack us in rear. We were commanded – for our officers were with us all this time – to go into the street, form a barricade, fix bayonets and charge front and rear. We were but a moment in the street when it was discovered this was but a panic and as the shot was flying along the street like hail, a rush was at once made back into the house.

Nature asserted itself superior to art; the officers lost all control of the men. We still held our own on the roof of the house, but the Sepoys and natives were so numerous we made no impression whatever on their number; by this time it was becoming dark and there seemed no visible way of escape from this death-trap. Suddenly the cry was “Fire” “Fire” and immediately a rush was made from the houses into the street; and then one of those unaccountable panics seized the men

³Editor’s note: Sepoys were private soldiers in the army of the East India Company. Sepoys stationed near Delhi had commenced the mutiny by rising against their British officers.

and everyone “took to his heels” as fast as he was able, down the street. I may say I never ran so quick in my life with sloped arms. Arriving at the foot of the street we stopped naturally like a flock of sheep. We soon discovered that some of our comrades were missing and immediately we proceeded up the street to rescue them.

The Sepoys had no sooner seen us “retreating” – if our race down the street may be called a “retreat” – than instantly they descended from the houses, surrounded our comrades and hacked them to pieces. On seeing us advancing again, they disappeared. We took up the bodies which were hacked in a frightful manner and carried them off.

A peculiar incident happened while we were in the street before the “retreat.” One of our company named Robert Holmes who had fought in the Crimea, in a spirit of bravado, and wanting to encourage the younger men, made a charge across the street from under the shelter of the verandah. He had scarcely got half way across when uttering a cry, and throwing up his arms, he dropped dead. Although he was one of our own company, the Captain would not allow any man to carry off the body – it was certain death to anyone attempting to do so, for anyone daring such a thing was the mark of a thousand rifles. A few days afterwards, when we had gained this part of the city, we found Robert Holmes’ feather-bonnet – all that remained of that foolhardy yet brave attempt.

After regaining the bottom of the street, we managed to get into touch with the rest of the forces.

Next day – at least it was a current topic in camp – that Sir Colin sent for the officers of those two companies and severely reprimanded them for such a useless attempt.

The next day as far as I can remember we fought our way to the Residency and as I was on sentry there, I had ample time to find the “Sermons in the stones and good in everything.”

The Residency, a mass almost of ruins, every square foot of the building showed the mark of shot or shell; and as I paced backwards and forwards, I could scarce keep from thinking of the noble band who held that place so long, who hoped against hope.

“For every hour some horseman came with tidings of dismay” [Horatius Lines 128, 129]

Yet they never wavered and for weary months they stood at bay like some noble stag which pursues o’er mount and fen turns at last on its persuers – even so had that noble band stemmed the flood of war and – but a soldier has no business to think, so I close the book of my memory and paced my weary round – a “machine” once more.

After seven days siege, the city was ours. After the taking of Lucknow, a brigade was formed of the 42nd, 93rd, and 79th Highlanders, 4th Punjab Rifles, 9th Lancers, some Engineers, Sappers and Miners, Probyn’s Horse, 2 Batteries Light Guns and an Elephant Battery under the command of General Walpole for the scouring of Oudh.

Nothing of any consequence occurred until the morning of April 15th, when as our forces were advancing through the jungle, the advance guard came across some Sepoys. Skirmishers were at once thrown out; and we drove them into a mud fort named Fort Rooyah. As the heavy guns were far behind, and the light ones of no use, the advance company of the 42nd were ordered by General Walpole to act as a storming party without ever the fort being reconnoitered. Of cover there was none except a ditch which alas! became the grave of many a gallant man. We crept into this ditch but it was useless for scarcely would a soldier show his head above the edge of the ditch to fire into the fort, than he would roll over a corpse. The bullets of the Mutineers were finding their mark every one of them, and as the fort was loop-holed, our bullets were being uselessly fired against the mud wall. It was at this time that Brigadier Adrian Hope, while in the act of mounting his horse, was shot with a musket ball. The General still persisted in storming the fort notwithstanding the large number of men we were losing. But at last, seeing our loss so large, while not a bullet of ours found a Sepoy, he ordered the recall which was obeyed and we retired some distance from the fort. Two Engineer Officers who had been with us in the ditch, now reported to General Walpole that they had noticed a part of the fort which might be knocked down by the light guns, the General, on hearing this, ordered two officers to reconnoitre the place again under an escort. Captain, now General, Sir John McLeod of our company was ordered to take 12 men to protect the Engineers while examining the fort, a 13th man was added by a Lieutenant Bramley who volunteered and was permitted to accompany this little force.

We gained the fatal ditch once more, for I was one of the thirteen, and kept firing away at the fort to employ the attention of the Sepoys while the Engineers took their survey. One of our men got wounded and at once without any orders from the Captain, four men proceeded to carry him out of the ditch. While they were taking off their groaning burden, suddenly, Lieut. Bramley was shot through the head; a private named Davis got the body on his back and crept out of the ditch. Six of us were now left when a private named Eddie was struck down. I got him on my back but before going, the Captain collected all the loaded guns together and fired them off while we retreated from the ditch. I may say that afterwards, Davis, who carried Lieut. Bramley’s body out, received the Victoria Cross for his gallantry.

I might well end this little episode at this point – at least for the credit of the General – but it may be better to give the sequel. We retired to camp a distance of about two miles, but about one o’clock in the morning we were aroused by the firing of cannon, everyone was on *qui vive* was it a night attack? But the boom of

“The distant and random gun”

“What the foe were sullenly firing” [The Burial of Sir John Moore at Coruna (Wolfe)]

died away and as it was not renewed we lay down again. In the morning it was discovered that the fort was empty and the firing during the night had been the Sepoys bidding us farewell.

Fatigue parties were at once sent out to demolish this thorn in our side, and strange yet true, to relate when this party had gone to the rear of the fort they found an opening through which our light battery might easily have driven.

This episode needs no comment – yet had the siege of Cawnpore, Lucknow and Delhi been conducted on like principles, India would yet be in the hands of Nana Sahib and his merciless crew, while the *Teringshi* would as of yet be confined to the sea coast.

The loss of Adrian Hope was a severe blow to the whole force, but more especially to the 93rd Regiment. He was a miniature Sir Colin one who had stood shoulder to shoulder with the men in the trenches before Sevastopol, one who had endeared himself to the whole regiment, for his relations with his men were more as a brother than an officer. The men were exasperated with General Walpole, and it wanted but the spark to set on fire their discontent: the loss of Adrian Hope was sufficient to fan it into a flame. It was galling to think of such a man passing through the Crimea, the actions at Cawnpore and Lucknow and to receive his mortal wound at the taking of a mud fort – Alas! All that has gone into the past and let the dead past bury its dead.

We followed up the Sepoys and coming up with them we took satisfaction for our temporary check at Fort Rooyah. Continuing our march we arrived at Bareilly, where the Commander-in-Chief awaited our arrival. It was intended to surround this town in order to cut off all fugitives.

The assault was ordered by the General in battle order, the Punjab Regiment being ordered to feel the way and skirmish, presently coming on some brick buildings they were repulsed by the defenders who were religious fanatics. The 42nd were ordered to their support, but we were perfectly “nonplussed” for it was impossible to distinguish ally from enemy, the Punjabs were so like the Mutineers. We were extracted from the difficulty by Sir Colin giving us the order to fire on everything in front. The taking of Bareilly occupied one day.

An excessively sultry evening followed this day, the camp was hushed in silence, all nature was still, not a frog croaked, and not a feather rustled, the branches of the trees ceased swaying to and fro. Dame Nature displayed all the symptoms of a coming storm.

“At last the Storm King came and he was tyrannous and strong”

“He struck with his o’ertaking wings and drove us South along”

[Rime of the Ancyent Marinere (Coleridge)]

And a storm the like of which I have never experienced burst upon us. The wind overturned tents like pieces of paper, the rain fell in torrents and very soon the whole camp was under water.

Such a picture as this might be seen in the tents which were still standing – the men with their knapsacks on the ground, the bedding and clothing on the top, and sitting upon these up to their knees in water was certainly an unenviable position.

But Sir Colin in his mindful way ordered each man a glass of grog.

The taking of Bareilly was practically the end of the Mutiny, at least its back was broken, and what remained to be done was merely the hunting down of the Mutineers.

While stationed at Bareilly, I took unwell and was ordered to Nanyu Tal one of the hill stations. After being there about five months, I rejoined the Regiment. Shortly afterwards we were ordered to the hill station of Dagshai and on our way thither we passed through Delhi.

As my time was expired, I claimed my discharge in a place called Unballa. We were sent down country partly by bullock-cart and partly by marching, passing through Lahore and Modtan then down the Indus – the barrier of Alexander the Great’s exploits – for 200 miles on a flat-bottomed steamer to Kurrachee, from there to Bombay and home to Gravesend in 134 days.

Notes on Agra

The heat in this place was very oppressive, as it was the hot season, and to make things worse, cholera broke out, the men going off at the rate of two and three a day.

I had a slight attack of this terrible scourge myself, but I am thankful to say I got all right again.

It was usual, at nights, to clear the barrack room, get a few members of the band, and start dancing to keep up the spirits of the men. I had been dancing one night and in the excitement I felt all right, but after “tattoo” while sitting on a form I began to feel rather queer. I then knew I had the cholera and immediately I was taken into hospital. I felt pains in the brawn of my legs, but they never passed the knees, and after passing about a week in hospital, I was discharged.

This pestilence cuts off people very suddenly. One night – while I was in hospital – a young man who had lately joined the regiment from home, was brought in after “tattoo”: as the pains gripped him, he jumped about the hospital in his agony, and for so doing received many “blessings” from those who wished to go to sleep but were unable to do so owing to his moans and noise. He was a corpse next forenoon.

The only time I got porridge in India was at this time in Agra. Captain Baird had managed to get some corn, and ordering the natives to grind it, we had porridge made for a morning or two.

We received orders to shift our camp a distance of about 4 miles, then the day after another 4 miles and so on, increasing the distance as we got stronger – these tactics are known as “dodging the cholera”. It was in this perfectly legitimate, yet not very dignified manner, we crept out of Agra.