

Echoes from the Past.

AN EPISODE OF THE SECOND AFGHAN WAR, 1878-79.

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Retired Pay.

THIS Campaign may be considered, from a general point of view, as a side issue of the Russo-Turkish Conflict of '77-'78. Russia's answer to England's introduction of Indian troops to the Mediterranean, and her checkmate to Russia's attempt to occupy Constantinople at the end of the war, was intrigue with the Ameer of Afghanistan; and the effort of the Government of India to meet this countermove by the dispatch of the Neville-Chamberlain Mission to Kabul having failed, no resource was left to them but to bring the Ameer to account for receiving overtures from Russia, and for his failure to observe the conditions of an existing treaty with the British Government.

It was at this crisis that about mid-October, 1878, the Battery of Garrison Artillery—13/8 R.A. under the designation of the time, and the last to be stationed on the Malabar Coast at Cannanore—was placed under orders with the writer in medical charge, then serving with his Regiment (48th) 1st Northamptonshire at the same station, to form one of three divisions of a siege train proceeding via Sukkur on the Indus to Quetta, and thence to Kandahar, as part of the Southern expeditionary force under the command of Sir Donald Stewart.

It may well be supposed that, in so remote a station, then in communication with Bombay and the outer world only by a weekly coasting steamer, the means of supplying even an incomplete medical equipment were scanty, and of providing camp requisites for officers in an emergency nil.

However, Indents "to be completed hereafter" were submitted for various items of marching outfit, and the regimental and other stores having at short notice supplied all that was possible, the battery sailed on the 22nd for Bombay and Karachi—1,000 miles—in the I.T.S. "Tenasserim," arriving at the latter port on October 28.

Here we were compelled to rest on our oars till November 25—a whole month—awaiting orders, and during concentration of the field force at Sukkur. Here also the long wait enabled us to complete some necessaries of personal outfit, purchase ponies, &c., Fortunately, too, a short time before, the then new Indus Valley

railway was linked up with Karachi, so that we were enabled with comparative ease to join the base of supplies at Sukkur on November 27, and here we remained encamped till December 16.

In the interval, during which several Punjab details passed through, a great number of camp followers and transport animals—elephants, camels, and draught bullocks for the siege train among them—had accumulated. Two divisions of the siege train were present, 13/8 and 16/8 R.A., the first, as above stated, being in the writer's medical charge.

13/8 was equipped with 24-pounders, drawn by bullocks and obtained most of its medical and general supplies, camp equipage, and personnel on indent from Multan.

The sanitary condition of the camp at Sukkur was far from satisfactory, though every effort was made to mitigate the evils incidental to the gradual concentration of troops, followers and transport animals within a limited area, near a native town ignoring the most elementary hygiene, and during the prevalence of raw, damp weather in the Indus Valley at midwinter, to all of which occasional rain was superadded.

One officer suffered from dysentery and was left, on departure of his unit (13/8), apparently convalescent attached to 16/8 R.A. which was destined to follow, but, under altered arrangements, did not proceed from Sukkur, 13/8 marching out first.

Ague, as well as dysentery, the first especially, was rife among the troops during the halt at Sukkur, to such an extent in one British Infantry Regiment as to prevent its dispatch to the front. 13/8 R. A. (siege-train unit) marched out with several men convalescent from fever, carried in doolies the first day; but, with the change from the unfavourable hygienic conditions at Sukkur to the invigorating breezes of the interior, they had quite recuperated after the second day. The men had, moreover, come, as stated, from the particularly enervating climate of the Malabar Coast.

Four ordinary marches (December 16 to 20) brought the Battery, via Shikarpur—half way, and head-quarters of the Civil administration of Upper Sind—to Jacobabad, where a day's halt was made, December 21 to 22.

The plains of Upper Sind bordering on the Indus are extensively flooded during the heavy rains, at other times scanty, which fall during a short period in the late autumn, the flood rising to a height of 3 ft. or more, as proved by mud marks on the trees.

In the Kutch desert, and elsewhere to a lesser extent, during the later drying up, the whole plain presents a remarkable

appearance in what is called locally the "Put," that is the shrunken clay surface, intersected with cracks or minor crevasses, and, in most places that are not sandy or widely crevassed, facilitating the movement of traffic over the hard-baked level ground.

Jacobabad, our halting ground at this juncture, founded by General Jacob in 1847, and till recently head-quarters of three regiments of Scinde Horse, is encircled by a deep fosse to intercept storm-water, and its sun-proof bungalows, further protected by leafy trees, suggest that the designers of such massive, almost cyclopean, buildings thought originally they had come to stay. The station is now, however, under newer dispositions, shorn of its ancient prestige, its traditions surviving only with the 35th Scinde Horse (late Bombay 5th Cavalry), now a movable unit, and no longer in occupation of its old head-quarters.

Here we were on the confines, within a few miles, of the Kutch Desert, one of the hottest regions of the globe, the station registering in past years a temperature of 126° F. in the shade during the hottest months. It has a wide range of temperature at all seasons, from frosts at night in midwinter to intense heat of the sun through mid-hours of the day.

DESERT MARCH—EN ROUTE TO DADUR, DECEMBER 22, '78
TO JANUARY 3, '79.

We resumed our march on December 22, and next day crossed the Baluch frontier. The progress of the guns with bullock draught was painfully slow, even though this was facilitated by laying brushwood over the sandy reaches in places, and by manipulation of the gun-carriages by the gunners themselves. In the same way the heavier 40-pounders ahead of us in the Bolan Pass were literally hauled up the river's bed with the aid of escorting infantry, after the elephants had given out through foot soreness. Sandy ground when it occurred implied slower and shorter marches, but one march towards the end (9th day) with better going over the "Put" extended to 27 miles, through a waterless region, between 3 p.m. one day and 8 a.m. the next, when extremes of heat and cold were very noticeable. Dadur, ten marches (= 100 miles) from Jacobabad, and about 150 miles from Sukkur on the Indus, was reached on January 3, 1879.

We had so far the usual proportion of doolies with Kahars, whose occupation sometimes extended to burying camels, or repairing roads, in standing camp. The Kajawas borne by the

camels were cumbrous and heavy, and the same may be said of the doolies, so that man and beast alike were overloaded, but with more disastrous results for the camel.

The general health was good during our period of duress in the desert, and it seemed that, in spite of extremes of temperature, the tonic effects of the first move out of Sukkur Camp were daily intensified.

In such a locality it became imperative to supervise closely the drinking-water supply from wells near villages—previously inspected, however, under Q.M.G's. authority—and accordingly, at all the halting grounds chatties filled with drinking water immediately after arrival were treated with alum, procured on emergency from the local bazaar, and stood to cool—an expedient, it may be observed, always feasible within Indian limits, and to which, as well as to the atmospheric conditions, the writer attributes a high degree of salubrity in the Battery personnel under rather trying circumstances.

The most conspicuous and painful object during the desert march was the camel, struggling with starvation on the scanty scrub, or collapsing under heavy loads, dying daily by the score, and encumbering the track by his bulk and putrescence. At Dadur a dead camel was found in a nullah which supplied the drinking-water. Boxes of ammunition were seen hourly dropped on the plain, and at one spot on the wayside a mound indicated the grave of an isolated transport officer, who found the burden and heat of the previous day too much for him. A pariah dog prowling about at night dragged out a kerosine lamp from under the fly of a Cabul tent, to satisfy his voracious appetite.

The situation at Dadur looked comparatively inviting on arrival, in sight as it was of snow on the mountains, and of the mouth of the Bolan pass, three miles distant, whence issued a copious supply of pure water from the Bolan river, distributed by conduits over the low ground, for irrigation of crops and domestic purposes. After some time, however, fever recurred to a slight extent, and a fatality from high temperature was once expected, but the patient, a gunner, rallied, and his convalescence was a subject of congratulation to the man by General Phayre when inspecting the camp about the same time.

Kandahar having unexpectedly submitted early in January, 1879, and a siege-train, as such, being no longer necessary, our long wait at Dadur till February 25—nearly two months—was determined by some hesitancy on the part of the authorities as to further disposal of 13/8 R.A. At length it was considered that

there were already enough mouths to feed under the then slow and imperfect means of transport and communication over a stretch of 400 miles from the Indus to Kandahar, and so a middle course was adopted, the personnel of the battery, the writer included, being ordered back to India, and the guns parked at Quetta.

At this early period of the campaign it should be borne in mind that Quetta was little more than a Brahui village, only occupied the previous year (1877), and that the Sibi-Hurnai line connecting with the Indian system did not then exist, though a few months afterwards it was pushed on rapidly from the Indus Valley Railway, at a point below Sukkur, at the rate of a mile a day, and supplemented by an alternative line through the Bolan pass to Quetta and even beyond, as far as Chaman in later years—thus facilitating greatly the transport of troops and material in the later phases of the campaign (1879-80), and ever since.

Return March.—The battery personnel, leaving Dadur on February 25, 1879, did not retrace their former route through the desert, but followed a more direct newly laid plough-track via Bagh, shorter by some miles than the Eastern route, by which they came, and remote from villages, as far as Jacobabad. It was on one of these marches that a strange incident, not unknown elsewhere, happened; when, in the darkness of early morning, the main party missing the track at some distance from the camp which they had just quitted, and again recovering the track in daylight, took a backward course through misjudging the cardinal points, so that, after a march of several miles, the party actually struck the camping-ground, easily recognized, which they had left some hours before—having thus moved in a semi-circle and doubled a march of sixteen miles to no purpose.

The writer, fortunately, did not share in this mishap, being saved from it by attention to his special duties at the last moment, and followed the right course with the Battery transport and officer in charge.

We re-crossed the frontier near Jacobabad on March 5, ten marches from Dadur, en route to Bombay and Deolali, via the Indus Valley railway to Karachi, all of us much benefited by the five months change to the frontier, and without the loss of a man or a follower. At Dadur a few followers suffered from frost-bite, and an officer was attacked by dysentery at Sukkur as noted.

We had special instructions from Army Head-quarters to distribute quinine, from an extra supply, to natives other than our own followers requiring it medicinally, and several of them from time to time took advantage of the concession.

APPENDIX.

Incidentally to the mention of Sind, I may be permitted to refer to the adjacent minor State of Kutch Bhuj, whose capital, Bhuj itself, was once a British frontier station up to the time of the annexation of Sind and expropriation of its Ameers, after Lord Napier's Campaign of 1843.

Bhuj lies directly south of Karachi, approached thirty miles inland, from Mandavi, a port of call for weekly steamers plying between Bombay and the former port. The occasion of the writer's visit to Bhuj in the cold season of 1898—twenty years exactly after the events above recorded on the Afghan frontier—was an official inspection from Bombay of the Native Regiment (Indian Army) stationed there, during which one took special note of the gradual extension of British conquest all along the Indian frontier.

This small State was administered by a native prince, then a young man versed in English social customs, and, as well as his younger brother, speaking our language perfectly.

The European cemetery at Bhuj is a standing well-preserved memorial of our occupation in the twenties and thirties of the last century, all other European buildings having by this time vanished. The station comprises, besides the N. I. Lines, the Raja's palace and a picturesque old Indian fort, with investing curtain and battlements, crowning a hill of considerable height.

The surrounding country abounds in game of all sorts, big and small, in the pursuit of which the Raja gave every encouragement, personal and other, to the British officers, and even shared the hospitality of their mess—a truly Arcadian life for them which they were always loth to exchange for the routine of another station.

