THE RE-OCCUPATION OF WANA.

By "TOTEM."

FOREWORD.

Since 1860 there has been trouble over Wana; a bone of contention between the British Government and the Afghan Ruler, with the local inhabitants assisting matters by promises, treachery, raids and false agreements.

Wana itself is situated on a large plain, some 4,500 feet high, surrounded by hills rising to 11,000 feet in places and about fifteen miles from the present Afghan boundary.

In 1893 an agreement on the boundary question with the Afghan King and the demarcation of the Durand Line (boundary line) was made, and Wana was occupied next year by a considerable force escorting the Boundary Commission. On November 3 a fierce attack broke into the camp, but was driven off by daylight. Wana reappeared in the limelight.
at intervals up to 1914; for instance in 1904 the Political Agent there was murdered. It was only held by militia until 1917 when a punitive force occupied a camp there for a short while in relief of the militia under whose control the area was being maintained.

In May, 1919, Wana Fort simultaneously with all other posts was evacuated. The Garrison under Major G. H. Russell (now Colonel commanding the 4/12 Frontier Force Rifles in Razmak) was heavily attacked and only eventually got away with difficulty. The exploit is described as one of the finest recorded on the Indian Frontier.

Since that date Wana has been unoccupied by any regular military force and has remained a constant source of intrigue and intelligence for the Border tribes and Afghans, and one of the open routes of possible invasion.

In continuance of the present policy of a series of large garrisons with strong striking forces moving over good roads, the re-occupation of Wana had been decided on for March, 1930. But with the rush of events in Afghanistan and the proclamation of the present King the aspect of affairs was altered and the immediate re-occupation by a brigade from Manzai was ordered for the beginning of November, 1929.

The political folk, however, had been squaring up matters with all the local inhabitants, and the march and re-occupation was carried out without a shot being fired.

The sketch map on page 346 shows our route.

**Preparation.**

"Turring" said the telephone.

"Speak to D.I.K., sir," said the husky voice of the exchange operator.

"Hullo! is that you, Totem?" said the voice of Loquans, the D.A.D., "the A.D. wants to speak to you."

"Good morning, Totem," said the voice of the A.D., "I want you to take over Command of No. 00 Field Ambulance temporarily. Will you take forty-eight hours' notice now to move? You will get your orders shortly."

"All right, sir, I am ready to move at six hours' notice, any time."

Back to his room hurries Totem to give orders for packing:

(a) Kit to take on a trek of indefinite duration and definite destination, such as buckets, basin, squash racquet, revolver, golf clubs and paint box.

(b) All other "penates" including sketches, motor accessories, carpenter's tools and a dozen other things to be left behind.

Then followed three days filled with rumours of every kind, and yet two days more of post office holiday, with more rumours, which held up the arrival of orders.

Totem seizes on the orders and finds he should leave at once for Manzai; in vain he applies to the S.S.O. for transport, every car is booked, and
reluctantly he decides to unleash his good old "Henry" for the trip in spite of carboned cylinders, knocking big ends and wobbling wheels. A hurried repair of the most obvious defects leaves "Henry" ready for the journey next day.

Next day "Henry" repays the attention by shedding a brake drum and flattening two tyres, but lands Totem safely at Manzai and his new ambulance.

Here there is constant bustle and scurry, comings and goings, secret orders, ration indents, disposal of kits, arrivals of all kinds and conditions of men, vehicles and equipment.

Totem has his hands full of matters of military and of State importance such as the following:

(1) Quartermaster: "Shall the men take their spare pants, sir, or pack them in their kits?"

(2) O.C., C.I.M.H. (on telephone): "When you go, will you give me the fire buckets you have in your lines?"

(3) Medical Officer: "Must I take only sixty pounds of kit or can I take my bed, table, chair, library and eiderdown?"

(4) Letter from the Local Audit Officer in pencil:
"Reference your No. XY 123 dated the 1st April, 1908, and this office reply thereto, AB098 dated the 1st August, 1921. It is observed that you state that you have paid No. 33333 A/O HAR JIT the sum of annas two and pies six. Please issue a certificate that you have actually paid this amount to this man. It is noted that you have failed to dot the i and cross the t!!!"

(5) Medical Officer (on last morning before march):
"I have to report, sir, that I have found three cases of mumps in the S—— P—— and there are fifty contacts."

(6) Assistant Surgeon (19.45 hours on evening before the march commences): "The barber reports, sir, that he will not come to Wana with the unit unless he gets eight annas instead of six annas per man."

However the medically trained brain of Totem manages to grapple with each of these vast medical problems in turn and the Unit is ready to march at 07.00 hours on the fateful 1st of November, 1929.

### The Opening Phase.

"Panch baje hai, Sahib." (5 o'clock, sir.) The raucous voice of the bearer and the rattle of the chota hazri tray break in on Totem's sweet early morning thoughts.

A hurried shave, look at the cold bath, a breakfast of burnt egg and uncooked bacon and Totem garbs himself once more in the dress of the march.

At the Unit, final touches are being put to the preparations and all is soon ready for the start.

The water pakhals, smelling alound of chlorine, are emptied and refilled.
The sweepers' brooms give their final sweep and are safely stowed away in the sweepers' cart. The box of office records and files is packed in a less safe place, in the hope that it may be lost. The cart containing the P.C. oil, used for driving away mosquitoes at night, drives away men and mules by its strong citronella smell. The unit hockey sticks are carefully packed, and finally the C.O.'s baggage is really stowed away and all is ready.

The advance guard detachment, with stretchers, sweepers, water-testing box and marking flags flying, marches off to join the advance guard. "Fall in the main party." The ambulance "falls in" and with Totem marching at its head, moves off to the place of assembly and the starting point. A short halt is called to allow a gunner's mule to kick all its baggage and trappings on to the road.

The eagle eye of Totem suddenly spots the ambulance rear guard party under a Sub-Assistant Surgeon marching with his main body. "What the — do you think you are doing here? Why don't you join the rear guard?" "Sir," he replies, "I do not know what rear guard is, nor how to find same. ! ! !" Totem recovers presently, and leads his men on through bucking mules and swearing gunners, through jammed mule carts, past harassed marshalling officers, to the starting point.

The march commences.

The March.

Tramp, tramp, tramp, tramp. The Column swings along with its battalions in front, its train transport in the middle and its motors in the rear, raising a cloud of dust three to four miles long. "Boots, boots, boots, moving up and down again," below; "Dust, dust, dust, dust, swirling up and up again," above. Up past Khirgi, that well-hated spot which nine years ago was a huge hot camp, and into the gorges of the Tak-ki-Zam, over the Kiriwan bridge to that narrow cleft cut by the river through a huge ridge and called the Hinistangi. Picketing was carried out, but this area, once so dangerous, is now guarded by a permanent Scouts post at Jandola.

Totem as S.M.O., rode forward to reach the advance guard at the first camp at Jandola. A harassed Staff Captain walks about, with long strides and marking flags, on a stony football ground; and the new camp site is ready for the units of the Column.

Totem goes off to see that the water supply and its chlorination tests are satisfactory. He finds the Sappers actively erecting their pumps and canvas tanks, and his own S.A.S. busy doing chlorine tests by a small channel immediately below the camp site. He decides that a sentry is needed where the channel crosses under the road, and, pursuing the Staff Captain, states his demand.

"But the water supply is in the river bed," says the S.C. "I put it there."
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"No, it's in that little channel below the crest of the hill," says T. "I have seen it." Hurriedly the harassed S.C. rushes with T. to the spot indicated and falls red-faced on the senior Sapper officer.

"I say, I say, why have you put the water point here?"

"Well, because this is the most convenient place; here is water, up there is the camp and here are my tanks ready," says Sapper.

"Well," says S.C., "joking apart, we're friends and all that, but it is my job to site all water points."

"No it isn't," says Sapper; "it's my job to run the water."

"Oh no, it's my responsibility," says S.C., "and I put it over there."

"What do you know about water?" says Sapper. "How do you know if it is suitable?"

Totem being senior to both, treads firmly on this sparkling conversation, and drags the S.C. away to show him his other sanitary arrangements.

Four hours later the scene is very different.

With clinking picks and shovels fatigue parties are building the perimeter walls; the sick parade is being seen at the ambulance; the ration lorries are discharging their contents; the men have fed and the officers have lunched; a hundred oil-cookers add their perfume and colour to the scene; pickets are out guarding the area and the Column Team is beating the Scouts on the football ground.

"Stand to." 18 hours. A hush falls over the whole camp as every man falls in at his post and stays quiet and watchful; those on the perimeter examining the rapidly darkening landscape and those on internal duties ready for emergencies, until the order "Stand down" is given by the Commander as he makes his inspection rounds.

At 03.00 hours (3 a.m.) Totem finds that once more his hip bone has made contact with a nice sharp flint, and his attention is directed to the noises of the camp; the snore, snore, snore from one fellow medico; the cough, cough, cough from a patient in the next tent; the shsh, shsh, shsh of a whispered conversation of the assistant surgeon interviewing a sick man; the clink, clink clink of syces hammering picketing pegs home again; the composite hum of snores, snorts, coughs and groans that sleeping soldiers always make.

Totem hears close to his head splashings and other horrible sounds of washing and finds the early birds already at their ablutions. A fierce "chup raho" (keep quiet) readily dissolves the meeting only to disclose further sounds of chatting and a soft roaring noise. He looks out further and finds a full session of cooks and others round the oil-cookers disturbing the stillness with their noises and the air with their flames and smoke. The sudden apparition of an infuriated Totem in blue pyjamas is quite enough to disperse the merry meeting.

It is now 05.30 hours, and the camp begins to stir into life; coughings, hoickings, spittings and chatterings increase all round; the hammering of picketing pegs raises a continuous musical tinkle; oil-cookers begin to clatter,
roar and smoke and finally, the first whistle of the transport officer produces a curious muffled roar mixed with soft whinnies and neighs as 500 mules realize that food is approaching. At last the day breaks and life is resumed in earnest.

The day's march was from Jandola to Splitoi, and through the famous Shahur Tangi; a rocky defile three miles long, with the road cut out of the hill-sides and the gravelled river-bed winding deep below. A nasty place and requiring careful picketing. The Column did this march in two sections, one advanced guard picketing up to and another through the Tangi, while the Scouts assisted on one flank and the aeroplanes patrolled close overhead. A fascinating sight it was to see the Column swinging down into the entrance to the Tangi with its gaunt barren coloured rocks and later crawling up like a gigantic centipede through the neck of the Tangi.

![Image of Shahur Tangi](image_url)

**Fig. 1—The Shahur Tangi. The column crawling up the road.**

Camp cleaning at Jandola occupied Totem until the rear guard was ready to move, so mounting his trusty steed he caught up the plodding main body at the entrance to the Tangi and the advance guard at the new camp site. A yet more stony site, on a plateau close by the Scouts' post, overlooking the rugged west entrance to the Shahur Tangi. It is on record that floods rise from the dry river bed to seventy feet deep at this entrance and that during one "show" a thousand camels were swept away.

Camp sights and sounds repeat themselves; patients are seen and evacuated to Manzai by motor ambulance and lorry; the fouling of the
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water supply and a slight difficulty with the local cultivators is cleared up by the A.P.O. (Assistant Political Officer); life settles readily into normal camp routine and "Totem" and his fellow medicos have a hot bath.

Of the march next day to Sarwekai little need be said. A flattish road winding up an open valley of the river, every pool of which swarms with fish. An easy march to a camp site near the landing ground one mile west of Sarwekai Fort, and a camp springing into being with rapid routine.

At Sarwekai, a day of rest, dust, routine work and football against the Scouts. The water supply was from the river bed, the drinking point where water first bubbled from the gravel, animal and washing points below this. After thorough inspection Totem decides to discontinue chlorination. He revisits the point four hours later to see that all is well, and finds:

(1) Two men of his unit washing at the drinking point;
(2) A series of pools dug in the gravel thirty yards above the drinking point and men washing various portions of their anatomy therein.

After recovering his breath, he decides to continue chlorination. When walking back to camp Totem notices some vultures round a group of bushes 100 yards from camp. Investigation shows that the local meat-merchant has opened his goat-shop there with results indescribable. Totem cannot speak Pushtu, and saving his breath, makes other arrangements.

Towards evening the members of the mess gather round for the odd spot of refreshment. Pointing to the mess table, a table groaning with a
wonderful assortment of bottles of all shapes and size, the Colonel remarks, "It is a good thing to realize that we really are travelling light and with the minimum of kit."

From Sarwekai the Column, rousing itself at dawn with the muffled roar and whinnies of the hungry mules, marched to Dargai Oba; an interesting march, done at considerable pace, over a series of barren hills, up a long winding incline to a two-mile series of steep curves dropping down to the Dargai Oba valley. A fascinating picture it was from the top of the hill with the curves of the road dropping down, down the barren brown bare hills and a jumbled maze of blue hills filling the distance.

**Fig. 3.—Gibraltar Picket.** The commanding feature South of the Camp with the Wana Toi flowing round its foot.

Dargai Oba: a picturesque camp site in a horseshoe of hillock with the river bed to the east and barren hills rising steep from this, but a camp site often sniped at night. The water supply was a magnificent spring bubbling from the rock and well protected. Below this a vivid area of green contrasted strongly with the bare brown hills but alas! was covered with clouds of locusts. The ambulance was well placed on a series of terraces with the tent flaps carefully lowered to hide the medicos' comfort from the envious eyes of battalion officers sleeping on the open stony hillside.

The night passed without an incident.

A distinctly uninteresting march next brings the Column to Kharab Kot, a dusty, smoky camp on the ruins of a village, windy and bare. The water
supply was of interest being from a kharaze. These kharazes are small water channels cut right through the hills, sometimes for miles and perhaps 80 to 100 feet below the ground level. They are made entirely by hand labour, vertical shafts being cut down to the channel level every thirty or forty yards. Water may be carried right across from one valley to another by this means. Very strict tribal laws govern all the water supplies and non-compliance with the laws always leads to trouble and fighting.

**The Last Lap.**

Thankfully rising from an uncomfortable night the Column prepares to complete the last stage. The advance guard has gone; the mules have been lured to their loads; the cleaning of the camp site has begun; the patients have been packed into the lorries returning to Manzai; the main body is falling in ready to move and Totem is patting himself on the back because all the "bandobast" is working to plan.

![Fig. 4.—The Fort Wana. Note the water-tanks in the front.](image)

"X Battalion's sanitary area has been left uncleansed," reports the assistant surgeon.

"Haven't you made any proper litter disposal area?" asks a gunner officer.

"I have just found another case of mumps," reports a medical officer, with a grin spreading over his face; "and a man with a burnt foot who cannot walk."

Totem ceases patting himself on the back and gets down to business.
The column gets started and at a fast pace swings along under the frowning sheer rocky mass of the Tora Tiza, into the valley of the Wana Toi. The advance guard is a couple of miles ahead, picketing the route; so Totem, anxious to be the first medical officer to enter Wana, rides on to join the ambulance advance guard detachment.

A halt is called for a while at Tiarza, while the armoured cars move forward and the troops picket the sides of the final gateway on to the Wana plain. When this is done the remainder move rapidly forward, round the bend to the left, over the Wana Toi, and emerge on the eastern edge of a huge plain dotted with numerous villages and an amazingly clear circle of blue hills surrounding it. In the middle distance can be seen the squat form of Wana Fort and bounding the western horizon the blue hills of the Durand line (Afghan border). The plain is cut by many nullahs and is covered with small brown shrub which fills the whole air with a scent of thyme.

Arrived at the camping area the Staff Captain is seen once more busy with marking flags, long strides, picks and a choice selection of words; having marked out the complete camp area according to the pre-arranged plan, his selection of words increases in volume when told by the political officer, “You can’t put your camp there because you must not go within 800 yards of that village.” The S.C. re-arranges the camp site.

Meanwhile Totem rides forward to the fort to see the well which is to be the entire water supply. The well has recently yielded a wonderful assortment of treasure trove, thrown in when Major Russell evacuated the fort; tins of milk, ammunition boxes, and aeroplane bombs, etc.

The Column arrives and each unit settles down for the night in its appointed area, and the march for the re-occupation is finished.

Next day all are busy settling down: the perimeter is being built; the bazaar springs into being; the transport animals are resting; the sappers are collecting bricks for their mess from the old fort ruins; the medical inspection room is filled with patients and Totem is wrestling with correspondence.

“Will you see Captain Black, sir,” says the Orderly Medical Officer. “He has got that axillary abscess; would you like to open it or shall I do it?”

Totem examines it; eagerly he seizes a knife and falling upon the unlucky Black, ruthlessly opens the abscess.

The tale is told, Totem has done the first operation in re-occupied Wana.