

# The First Hundred Years: The Gurkhas in Nepal, at Delhi and Gallipoli.

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Part 2: The Siege of Delhi, ever wonder why the Gurkhas didn't mutiny in 1857? Here's what I found out.

## The First Regiments.



The Battle of Sobraon 10 February 1846. Coloured aquatint by J Harris after H Martens, published by Rudolph Ackermann, 1 January 1848. Online collection NAM. 1971-02-33-392-1

The superb fighting qualities of the Gurkhas were obvious to all who had fought against them during the arduous and thankless Nepalese campaign. Not least Frederick Young, who was kept a prisoner of the Gurkhas for a year, during which time captor and POW developed a mutual respect for each other's fighting spirit. At the end of the year Young was released and obtained permission to form a "Local Native" battalion made out of the men of the disbanded Gurkha army. In 1815 this battalion was raised at Sirmoor, and others besides were created at or around the same time. Young would command the Sirmoors for over 20 years, creating a regimental

depot at Dahara Dun. Two years later in 1817 they fought against the resurgent Marathas, the battalion was successively employed with distinction, changing names a few times and by the First Sikh War were already becoming proud of their own regimental traditions. During the Battle of Aliwal they temporarily lost their regimental colour, the Sirmoors could not leave the field with this stain on their honour, and in the following counterattack regained the flag. After seeing their courage first hand at Sobraon Lord Gough wrote:

“They vied in ardent courage with The Grenadiers and, armed with the short weapon of their mountains, were a terror to the Sikhs”.

It was soon obvious that these were no longer just another native regiment, indeed they were not even that, for they were classified as an irregular hill force and so most wore dark green uniforms and were paid less than Sepoys. Although no one knew it this narrow distinction would have far reaching effects on the mentality of the Gurkha regiments regarding their identity.



Veterans of the 2nd Gurkha Rifles who served during the “Indian Mutiny” online collection, NAM. 1985-07-27-1

On 15 July 1850 after an already remarkable 35 year service a resolution of the Governor General established the Gurkha “local battalions” (Nasiri, Sirmoor and Kumaon) as regular units of the EIC army of Bengal. Now no longer low paid irregulars but proper Company soldiers, regimental pride began to soar to new heights. General Napier put it succinctly in the House of Lords in 1852:

“they are excellent soldiers... Everybody says their courage is equal to that of our own men; they have no caste, so there is no difficulty as to their food; they mess and do everything without

causing any difficulty, and they are excessively attached to the European troops; they feel the greatest possible pride in the British uniform. When I turned a Goorkah [sic] regiment into the 66th, their delight at wearing the red coat was great”

Nevertheless their elevation to full fledged “Native infantry” immediately highlighted an interesting quirk that had grown in the Gurkha regiments during their initial service.

### **Gurkha not Purbyia.**

It was soon becoming obvious that the Gurkhas were a good investment. Not only were they becoming as vaunted as the Sikhs in feats of arms but they were easier to maintain than other company troops. They truly adopted and adapted to being not just company soldiers but indeed shied away from identifying themselves as native troops, and naturally gravitated towards British soldiers. As Napier said, when the Nasiri battalion became the 66th “Gurkha” Regiment they took pride in being “Lal Kurti Paltan” the “Red Coat Regiment”. This growing sense of individuality was extremely marked amongst the Gurkha battalions, so that they would resent being treated like Sepoys or even being trained with them. During an small arms course at Ambala just before the year 1857, Lt Duncan Macintyre reported that the elements of the three battalions present had requested to pitch their tents with the British, the motive would reveal not only Gurkha sentiments regarding their status in the army, born of their long initial estrangement from the company army, in which their own traditions were born, but would also highlight a worrisome issue:

“The reason stated was that they did not like being mixed up with the “Kala Log” (black fellows), as they called the Poorbeah sepoy [purbiya, meaning eastern, referred to Brahmans and Rajputs from Oudh who made up the majority of the Bengal Native Infantry], whom they reported to be showing a very bad feeling in their conversations regarding the use of greased cartridges. At the same time they requested that the cartridges might at once be served out to them, in order to show the Poorbeah’s [sic] that they had no fellow feeling whatever with them on the cartridge question”

It is more or less well known that the issue with the paper cartridges did not have the kickoff effect on the “Indian Mutiny” hitherto ascribed to it. Indeed, though the issue was real, the material part was largely dealt with by the time the “Great Indian Rebellion” or “War of Independence” broke out in May 1857. Again Napier seems to hint that there was more to it than this when he warned in 1850 that there were problems “rising on the horizon” and indeed the larger cause of the mutiny was more complex, and exacerbated by the increasing breakdown of relations between the sepoy and their British officers. What is certain is that in simple terms it was a military mutiny, that was taken advantage of by local rulers eager to get rid of the British. At Ambala the new un-greased cartridges began to be issued, but despite the fire having been put out, the spirit engendered by the insensitive and insulting ignorance of the Indian Army’s many faiths had done its work. Indeed there were precedents of this sort of ignorant stupidity as far back as 1806. The ordinary soldiers had through the fear of being tricked into losing caste and being forcibly converted to Christianity, realised that they could no longer trust their British officers.

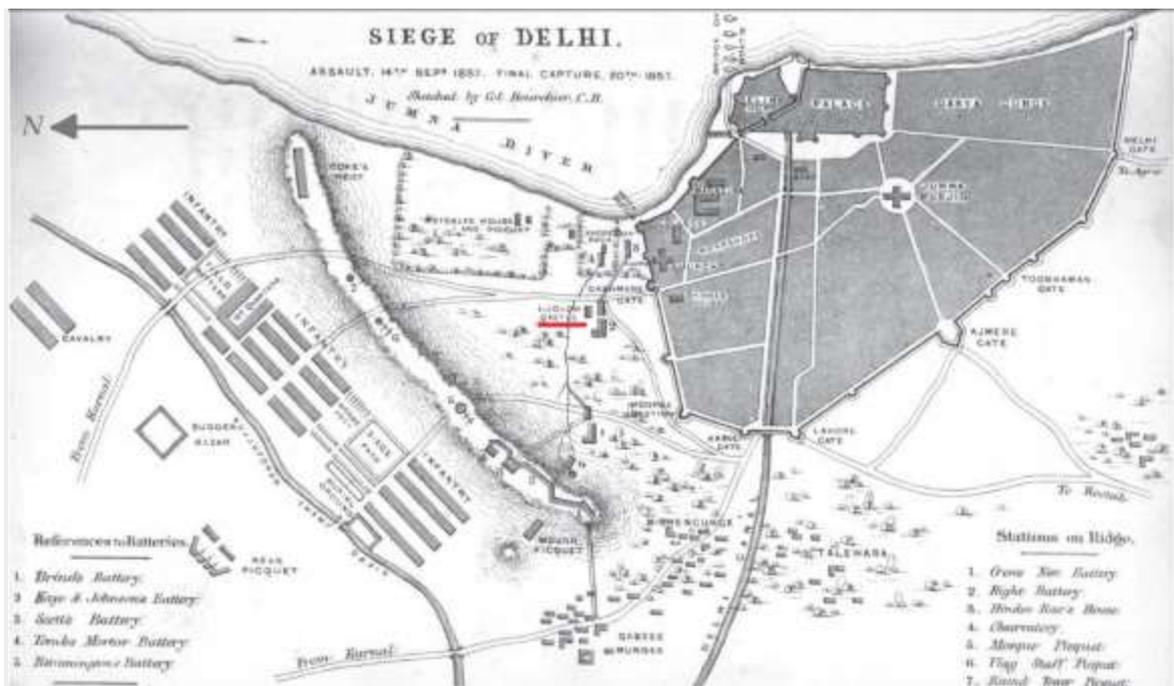
Meanwhile bundles of the inoffensive rounds were issued by mistake to the Gurkhas. In a fine example of British ignorance working the opposite way this offended the Nepalese, who were quick to remind the British that they had had no problem with them to start with. With typical

humour the Gurkhas returned the cartridges to the quartermaster, wryly commenting that there must have been a mistake, these cartridges were surely “intended for the kala log”. Further proof that the Nepalese infantry did not think of themselves as traditional purbiya Sepoys comes from one of the newly formed 66th’s European officers. Technically after being given a number in the line the 66th had become Native Infantry, however:

“By the by” wrote young ensign Gepp “speaking of the Goorkah’s, [sic] do you know that regimentally you have been for the last three or four months most desperately insulting my dignity by two very simple letters, viz, NI, affixed to the regimental designation, and even if I have mentioned this before you must forgive the repetition and indulge my (I may say our) conceit whilst I inflict upon you a panegyric on the excellencies of “The Goorkha’s” in general, and their undoubted superiority to the rest of the Indian Army... In religion they are Hindu’s, but far less bigoted than the ordinary Hindu, as they will eat and drink anything; they get on capitally with Europeans, and associate with but do not condescend to mix with NI’s... I fear you will be quite tired of hearing their praises sung, but you will forgive my regimental esprit de corps”

The feeling was therefore clear. The Gurkhas were not “Native Infantry”, they neither looked, nor thought nor acted like the Purbiya battalions, and why should they? After all the hill people of the Himalayan belt were the enemies of the plain, who found little to admire in the sepoys who they saw as grumbling, unprofessional and bigoted. Their pride in their traditions and regiments had been fostered for over 40 years, 35 of which had been spent as separate troops from the regular company battalions. They believed it was the British that conquered their impregnable country not the Indians. Most would remember tales told by their fathers of how the Native troops would run when ambushed, but the British would usually stand and die. This was of course a highly prejudiced view of men who had hitherto been nothing but fine soldiers, utterly ignoring the fact that Ochterlorny’s column had not had a single European battalion in it, but the Gurkha was a breed apart.

Despite the Gurkhas offering such evidences of their loyalty, after British officers were hacked to death at Meerut by soldiers they had sworn were loyal, eyebrows began to arch towards the Gurkhas. Especially when the new Nasiri battalion, (which had been formed in 1851 to fill the gap left when the original one became the 66th), seemed to embark on the path of mutiny. However they had a much more familiar military grievance than the others, they had not been paid. So they refused to escort an artillery detachment to Ambala. A detachment then helped themselves to 7,000 rupees from the treasury at Kasuki, prompting the local European population escaping the summer heat of the southern provinces, to flee in terror and 100 men of HM’s 75th Foot were sent up to protect them. In the end the Gurkha’s merely handed back the money, and the entire battalion, bar the thieves, were pardoned. Lord Roberts reported with satisfaction that before the year was out they had done good service. Despite this it was time for the Gurkha’s to prove themselves.



A rather helpful map. Showing the British front line stretching from “Mound Picquet” to the Jumna River, the ridge and the camp behind it. From this it is easy to see how exposed Hindu Rao’s House is, marked at 3 on the ridge. Flickr.

### Here Come the Gurkhas.

General Ochterlorny and Young had a special type of “intelligent” officer in mind to lead their “peculiar” corps. Major Charles Reid, officer commanding the Sirmoor battalion at the depot at Dehra Dun, was one of them.

On the 14th of May 1857 a camel sowar rode in and handed him orders to march to Meerut where the European’s were in trouble. A march of 100 miles lay ahead, which would be accomplished in stages of up to 30 miles a day due to the minimal baggage Reid carried. He had 490 men in the battalion’s 6 companies. Each man was inspected to see that he had 60 rounds in his cartridge box, and that his personal kit was in order, and in four hours they were ready to march, with two elephants to carry the extra ammunition. He set off immediately without packing tents, the long dark green line of Sirmoors snaked their way to Roorkee on the Ganges canal, the red and black dicing on their distinctive cocked Kilmarnock’s the only flash of colour on their somber uniform. Here they rested, but while they broke out their rations they were interrupted by some dodgy individuals who turned out to be mutineer sappers. They pointed to the flour ration and goadingly told the Gurkhas that they had been given ground bullock bones to make their chapatis. The Nepalese traded looks and burst into laughter. Things would soon turn grim however.

They transferred to boats and sailed down the canal, but near a village called Bhola, 5 days into the march, they came under fire. Reacting quickly the Sirmoors caught the rebels before they had time to press their advantage and captured eighteen men. They were found to be mutineers, and were tried summarily, the result of these findings being 13 were executed by firing party. Another village gave up three men in possession of government property, and this was enough to seal their fate. Reid ordered them hanged. When two of the ropes snapped, he had the men shot. These were some of the first executions of the uprising. The significance of the fact that 8 of the executed men were Brahmans was not lost on anyone. In terms of Hindu caste, a Brahman was inviolate. However even the Gurkha Brahmans had not lifted a finger to save them. By obeying

the order to carry out the executions, the Gurkhas of the Sirmoor battalion had just made it perfectly clear where their loyalties lay and there was no turning back.

### **Delhi.**

On the 30th of May Reid was directed to Ghaziabad and the Sirmoors marched through the night to arrive before dawn the next morning. They were greeted with a frosty reception from the Delhi Field Force, all non British troops were suspect. Another of the native battalions had mutinied and tensions were high. At that moment this was General Wilson's little army, the command of which would soon pass from man to man as cholera ravaged the army's senior officers. Wilson advanced against Delhi, a mutinous hot spot and the scene of desperate fighting already. Arriving before the city the British moved forwards in two columns to take the high ground. After a sharp two hour fight they secured the long rocky ridge that rose 60 feet out of the broken ground at the banks of the Jumna, and ran for about two miles before ending at Delhi's Grand Trunk Road. With 4,000 men & virtually no siege guns the British could not invest the place properly or indeed cut it off from help. Therefore this not really a relief force, or indeed a seiging army it was a holding force, or corps of observation that was to sit tight until reinforcements arrived, troops were therefore deployed along the ridge which they would attempt to hold at all costs until relieved.



Sirmoor Battalion (later 2nd Gurkha Rifles) Hindu Rao House. Online collection NAM. 1978-04-11-1

The Sirmoor battalion and 2 companies of the 60th Rifle's were ordered up to the right of the Badle-ki-Serai ridge early on the 8th. Reid noticed ominously that tents had been pitched for them, under their own guns, it was his opinion that this had been done so they could be dealt with if they "misbehaved". When asked if his men would stay loyal he replied with dry sarcasm "Time will show ... But shooting the Brahman's was a pretty good test". And a test it would be, for they were the only non British unit in the army. The General was keen to see how they would perform and if they could be trusted, so he had flung them into the frontline. Reid was very aware that his battalion was being constantly referred to as a "Native" unit, and like all Gurkha soldiers, was offended at being lumped in that category. There was not a single man in the battalion that thought of himself as a native of India, or believed the "kala log" equal to himself.

The key to this commanding position was on the centre of the right flank, where the main Picquet was disposed at a "white Palladin mansion" with walls and gates, named after its last owner, Hindu Rao. It was a dignified abode some 3,630 feet from Delhi's Mori Bastion, a dominant feature on the landscape, and quickly fortified for defence and heavily supported by artillery. Two batteries stood to the right, still more to its left. A half moon battery was in front of it and several others including a mortar battery were positioned to its left front, which could offer support if necessary.

The position was strong, but it was also one of those posts that Hollywood would have used to build "last stand" movies around. The ridge faced South and was subject to the summer glare of the sun from dawn to dusk. The kiln like atmosphere was made worse by the lack of a clean source of water and the danger was heightened because the heavy guns of the enemy were only half a mile away. The suburb of Subzi Mandi, a vegetable market in more peaceful times, and viewed from the British position as a collection of houses and gardens, extended beyond the right rear of the Right Battery. The majority of the ground between the ridge and the walls was dotted with old buildings and topes, that could give cover to an attacking force wishing to turn the British right flank.

The alarm was sounded early at Hindu Rao signalling the first attack. It was still the early hours of the morning of the 9th and the Gurkhas and 60th took up their positions in the rising heat. The unimaginative and uncoordinated attack came in large numbers and was determined but unscientifically delivered. Reid's men repulsed them and he led the Sirmoors in a charge that threw the enemy back into the city but it had been a gruelling sixteen hour fight. At 5pm Reid's "little fellows" returned to their posts and were cheered by every European regiment present. His force was strengthened by the attachment of 2 guns and 2 reserve companies of the 60th and a detachment of the Corps of Guides, which brought his force to a strength a little in excess of 1,000 men.

The attacks that followed varied in strength and determination, and once early in the game, after the Mutineers had discovered that it was a "Native" regiment holding Hindu Rao, they tried cunning.

On the 10th 500 Mutineers sortied out from the suburbs. Reid deployed and advanced against them, with the Guides out in skirmish order, the 60th to his left and the Gurkhas in line on their right. The rebels called out to the Sirmoors "Come on, Goorkhas we won't fire upon you, we expect you to join us".

To their surprise the call came back, sinister to those who understood the Gurkha warcry Ayo Gorkhali (The Gurkhas are here) "Oh yes, we are coming" they said. The Mutineers held their fire as the Sirmoors closed distance, doubling forward to their front in a disciplined line, stopped

and to the horror of the muntineers presented arms. The Sepoys scattered like leaves when the Gurkha line delivered a devastating volley into them at 20 yards distance leaving forty of their number splayed on the ground behind them. With a yell the Sirmoor battalion rushed after them with bayonet at kukri, chasing their foes all the way to the Ajmere Gate, where they were targeted by the sepoy artillery and forced to retire.



Ruins of Sabzi Mandi, 1858. British Library.

### **“Morning Noon and Night”**

The Sepoys came again on the 11th and were once more repelled. Undeterred as usual they returned on the 13th of June. The British were constantly amazed at the courage of the enemy, who seemed impervious to fatigue and hurt. However the attacks would have stopped much sooner had not rivers of reinforcements kept pouring into Delhi. Reid had been warned that the enemy would attack at 4am. Action usually started early to avoid the heat of the day, but the fighting was hot nonetheless. Lead by their officers, yelling at them to keep their intervals straight, 5,000 mutineers made a disciplined advance over the open ground. Reid let them get close before opening up with grape and musketry. The Sepoy's fought splendidly but Sirmoor's didn't give an inch and Reid then lead three companies in a charge that drove the enemy back. His adjutant Lall Sing killed a man he identified as a “Sirdar Bahadur” from whom Reid silently removed the Ribbon of India from his uniform. A poignant scene to those who witnessed it. Reid reported 3 killed, 11 wounded and 3 right arms amputated, by the end of June 138 men had fallen, and a similar number of the 60th with them, reinforcements were requested from the Depot at Dehra Dun.

Reid was certain that a static defence would be disastrous. His artillery support could not prevail against the heavy guns of the batteries, indeed big 12 and 18 pounder shot fired from Delhi were actively collected and passed back to the artillery of the Right Battery who returned it to Delhi with a suitable charge of powder. Morale in the battalion would flag if the Gurkhas were not able to bring the fight to the enemy, therefore whenever the alarm sounded Reid would either lead his men out to skirmish with the enemy until they got close and counterattack or, hold his ground, fire at close range and charge. This aggressive posture helped the enemy to think his force was much larger than it actually was.

The Gurkhas and their British riflemen comrades suffered unbelievable hardships during this time from the constant enemy attacks and disease. Holding their positions under fire from the mutineers' heavy guns "Morning noon and night". The total force available was now the Sirmoor Battalion, 4 companies of the 60th, 300 men of the Guides and Coke's Rifles, supported by Cpt. Tomb's battery & two guns from Scott's battery. These extra hands helped to prevent new enemy batteries being created and took some of the pressure off.

Time and time again fresh batches of mutinous troops arrived in Delhi to ensure the struggle went on. The attackers would march out of the Lahore Gate and file through the suburb of Sabzi Mandi and move out into the open and up the slope to attack.

At its height, in July one imagines the stench in the air around Hindu Rao to be unbearable. The nearer to the house one got the worse it became, the buzzing of thousands of flies attracted by the rotting bodies pervaded, drowned only by the continual grumble of artillery from Delhi. Up here in the forward positions a man was instantly beset by the insects who flew into his clothes and even down his throat when he tried to speak. Every soldier was ill with Cholera or dysentery from the bad water and the noisome atmosphere created by the unburied dead. The infirmaries were a sight to make the strongest stomach turn. Out of the scorching sun and inside the once grand rooms of the house the air was thick and hot, suffocating, the place had been turned into ruin and was riddled with shot holes and piled with crumbling masonry.

Despite the rigours of life in the main Picquet, the Gurkhas displayed a marked disinterest in their suffering and throughout all toil remained cheerful and good humoured. To them war was a grim business, but therefore all the more reason to conduct themselves with light hearted sangfroid, as if it was shikar, a hunt.

Their knack for irregular warfare was apparent in June when an officer of the 60th called James Hare observed how they dealt with a sepoy sniper on the 23rd of June during an 11 – hour attack. It was the 100th anniversary of the Battle of Plassey. The marksman had holed up in one of the huts between the ridge and the walls. He was shooting out and making a nuisance of himself. Two Gurkhas resolved to bag him and worked their way forwards, creeping up to positions either side of the door. The next time the sepoy poked his head out of the doorway, one caught hold of his head by his hair, and the other promptly lopped it off with his Kukri.

Artillery fire was a constant threat, one roundshot crashed through the veranda and killed the sentry on guard by the battalion colours, which were propped up against the wall. While three nearby European officers looked on in horror at the ghastly sight, the corporal of the guard walked out and quietly posted another sentry. Not long afterwards another shot came through the wall, this one killed ensign Wheatly and cut the regimental colour in two.

There was no doubt therefore that the Sirmoors were happiest when taking the fight to the enemy. Reid knew how to harness this exceptional fighting spirit as is demonstrated in an incident during a particularly heavy attack. "Sahib, here we are getting knocked over in cold blood;" one of his soldiers told him "Do let us jump over this breastwork and go at the enemy, they think we are afraid of them"

Reid nodded "Have patience and get under cover " he replied calmly "I'll let you go presently". The soldier gave a broad grin and did as he was told. It wasn't just the European officers who lead the way. During the most testing moments individual soldiers showed examples of great leadership, Havildar Badalsing for example, a hero of Aliwal, was decorated and promoted to Jemadar on the field for his example to the men.

So far Reid's force had sustained 20 separate attacks, and he was down to half strength when the 21st sallied out from Delhi. This Attack was the most fanatic as the Sepoy's were "Pandies" or high on bhang. Despite their fearlessness, the deadly accurate aim of the Gurkhas and the 60th saw this off too, and the rifles and the Sirmoor's vied with each other to defeat them. Reid reported 206 casualties in mid July.

The dangerous duty forged strong bonds, the men of the two companies of the 60th Rifles got on with the Sirmoors splendidly and the Gurkhas were happy to mess with them and freely shared their grog. To the 60th they were "them Gurkhee's [sic] of ours" and to the Nepalese the 60th were "our rifles", each called the other brother. At the time the 60th were fully equipped with the new Enfield rifle, whereas the Sirmoor battalion were using the old 1840 Brunswick rifled musket. By now covers had been put on their Kilmarnock's, and the British officers wearing Havelock caps did likewise. To all intents and purposes the Gurkhas were dressed and equipped as riflemen, with green uniforms and black equipment, all they lacked at this point was the name. Tales of Nepalese ingenuity and cunning were now the talk of the army, and the crumbling walls of Hindu Rao increasingly the defining landmark of the siege. The next test came during the Muslim festival of 'Id. For a night and a day the 910 men of Reid's force beat back successive waves of rebel troops, estimated to be in numbers as high as 10,000 and more. At the end of the fight Reid encountered a "Line Boy" a lad of 13 who had been born in the regimental lines, rather than being from the mountains of Nepal. There were many line boys in the different regiments, and they were usually forbidden to join the action. This one however had gone out to join his father, and had loaded his musket for him until he had been shot down. With his father dead, the boy offered his services to a rifleman of the 60th, who was then wounded and sent him back to fetch a doolie to evacuate him. When this job was done he joined the action himself and was wounded in the leg. Reid examined the wound, which the boy proudly presented to him and he was enlisted on the spot. He later commented that 12 line boys received the order of merit for Delhi (of the 7 who got the award for Aliwal 5 were line boys).



Defence of Hindu Rao by Jason Askew.

### **Riflemen All.**

The last and 26th attack came on the 30th of July. The old King of Delhi mounted the ramparts to watch the fall of Hindu Rao and nearby Sammy's House. His army, 40,000 strong launched ferocious attacks against the entire British line, however they failed to break through, Reid wrote laconically that in his sector "The rascals found me at home and took a sound thrashing" Afterwards the men of the Sirmoor battalion were grimly delighted when they heard that the head of a Gurkha was now worth 10 rupees to the King of Delhi. This was the price paid for British heads and nothing could have pleased them more than to be finally free of the "with us or against us" routine. There was not a soldier in the army that would say a word against them now. For not only had the Sirmoor's proved their worth, but so too had the new Nasiri battalion and the 66th in other sectors. In August, reinforcements arrived for the Delhi Field Force, and 60 heavy guns pounded away at the walls, guided by spotters on Hindu Rao. When September came, plans were drawn up for the assault of Delhi, and Reid was given command of a column numbering 2,500 men (Sirmoor Battalion, Guides, Coke's Rifles, Tomb's Guns, detachments of the 60th Rifles, and the 61st and 75th Foot), he was wounded in the head just as they stepped off, thus he missed the chance for a VC, and his column therefore was delayed in the attack.

The grim business of storming the city took from the 14th of September to the 16th. The dark deeds carried out during the fighting in the high population zone, where fear and hate was as thick in the air as the bullets, have stained the reputation of the British in India as deep as the blood that stained the streets. The victors showed no less savagery than the defeated had shown when the shoe had been on the other foot.

The Sirmoor battalion had begun the campaign in May 490 men strong. Now in September after an unrelenting defence of 3 months and eight days, their roll call revealed that they had lost between 327 – 370 men and 8 British officers. The remaining diseased, hungry but ultimately victorious soldiers of the Sirmoor battalion and the 60th were given the honour of garrisoning the Red Fort.

As a consequence of their heroic stand on Delhi Ridge, the Gurkha battalions were officially made “Riflemen” and as such the Sirmoors were redesignated as the 2nd Gurkha Rifles. Their uniform was altered to adhere as closely as possible to that of the 60th, barring the distinctive diced band on their caps. Their colours would be altered to include the honour Delhi, in 3 languages and to top it off a third standard was issued to them. Rifle regiments didn’t carry colours, therefore an ornamental “truncheon” was created for them, resembling a band leader’s baton, a singular honour which has been carried by the Gurkhas on parades to the present day.

Josh.

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