

**Major Bob STAMBERG MVO [1929 - 35] writes:**

In 1931 the Battalion which had been in Dehra Dun was ordered up to the North West Frontier. There had been considerable unrest amongst the Pathan tribes about this time and there had been several instances of raiding parties breaking out of the hills and attacking the northern outskirts of Peshawar. To counter this the military headquarters of Northern Command had established various fortified posts on the Kajuri Plain in order to stop these raids and to catch the marauders as they retreated into the hills with their loot. The chief instigator of this unrest was a character called the Fakir of Ippi who went up and down the frontier preaching sedition.

It is a wild part of the world and the very nature of the landscape breeds extremely tough and hardy people. Living as they do on the barest necessities in a country which consists chiefly of shattered rock and dust, it is almost impossible to grow any crops in sufficient quantity to feed a population which is organised on a tribal basis. Fierce inter-tribal hatreds often occur and in many cases these lead to a far reaching system of blood feuds. The climate is also very harsh ranging from 130 degrees Fahrenheit shade temperature in the hot weather to bitter freezing gale force winds in the winter which howl down from the 13,000 foot Hindoo Kush passes.

The Kyber pass which runs from Jamrud to the frontier of Afghanistan at Tor Kam is thirty miles long and winds its way through desolate hills and is guarded all the way by a series of pickets or concrete block houses which are manned by troops based at Jamrud at the entrance of the pass and Landi Kotal at the top end on the frontier. Half way up the pass there is a big fort at Shagai guarding the pumping station at Ali Masjid which is the only source of water supply for the whole area.

On leaving Dehra Dun the Battalion travelled to Peshawar in a big troop train which was shunted into a siding on arrival. We were directed to take over one of the new fortified posts on the Kajuri Plain. Fort Salop, as this fortification was called, was some twenty miles from the rail head which involved an eight hour march leaving Peshawar at first light next morning. This fort which was roughly rectangular in shape was surrounded by a line of trenches protected by a system of barbed wire fences.

These were definitely Active Service conditions, and at first it seemed strange to go to bed at night with a loaded revolver under the pillow. In order to guard against a possible sniper's bullet, the ground inside the tents was excavated so that when lying in bed the occupant was about four feet below ground level. The Mess tent was also similarly countersunk so that the table was equally protected. At the two diagonal corners of the fort there were two large mud and stone blockhouses equipped with searchlights and machine guns sited down the length of the barbed wire fences.

At Fort Salop outside the defensive perimeter about a quarter of a mile away was an extraordinary outcrop of rock some hundred and fifty feet high which sprouted up on an otherwise wide, bare, undulating plain. This was a most useful point as it provided an observation post covering a huge area. This observation post was connected with the fort by a telephone line so that any suspicious movement could be reported immediately.

The tribesmen soon discovered that government telephone wire was an excellent material for stringing the local *charpoys* (wooden frame beds) and also for constructing enclosures for flocks of goats. The tribesmen would creep out at night, climb up the metal pylons and cut the telephone wires. This kind of thing obviously had to be discouraged so that next time it occurred a line party was sent out and with great display replaced the missing link with a length of bright shiny new copper wire. The end of the wire however was connected to the main generating motor inside the fort. After dark one man with earphones was listening and as soon as there was noise of interference on the line he threw over the switch. Next morning at daylight the corpse of the would-be thief was found at the base of the pylon supporting the cable. There was no further trouble of this kind.

Life on the frontier at that time was mostly uneasily quiet and one lived in a state of continual anticipation knowing that there were always many unseen eyes watching - watching for the unforeseen opportunity. Dispositions were continually being changed and you never used the same road twice on any particular occasion. Security was always of paramount importance and even at night the men slept with their rifles chained to them

as a British rifle was the most sought after prize that any tribesman could desire. The loss of a rifle was also the ultimate disgrace any unit could suffer.

On some occasions when a working party was required to repair track or a culvert the men always worked with their rifles slung over their shoulders and another party with rifles and Lewis gun were on guard to discourage any form of interference.

The maintenance of main roads and bridges was normally the responsibility of the Public Works Department (PWD) working with the civil authorities and usually this worked quite well. However there were exceptions. On one occasion a section of road passing between two villages needed repair and the work was put out to tender. The headmen of the two villages were instructed to submit a price for the work involved and after due deliberation a contract was awarded to village A. This caused great rejoicing and the men of village A hurled jibes and taunts at their neighbours across the road.

The men of village B were highly incensed and when the working party from A came out to start work they manned the walls of their village and proceeded to shoot them up. A fusillade of shots exchanged and traffic came to a standstill. All matters involving tribal disputes came under the jurisdiction of the Political Agent who now summoned the elders of both villages and after hearing their versions he dealt with them summarily. Both villages were heavily fined. They lost the contract, and the work was finally done by P.W.D. and we provided a machine gun security guard for the workers. It was with great relief that after nearly a year on the Kajuri Plain the Battalion was transferred to Jamrud where the huge medieval fort guards the entrance to the Pass. This fort which was originally built several centuries ago by one of the Mogul emperors is constructed entirely of baked mud with walls some thirty feet thick.

While we were there we were responsible for manning the various block houses overlooking the road. The companies took it in turn to carry out this duty which was a miserable job. Each block house contained about a dozen men and they, with water and rations, were locked up there for a week. There were no windows, only loopholes, and the only access was by means of a steep ladder up to a bullet proof steel door which could only be unbolted from the inside. Communications were maintained from the flat roof by heliograph or semaphore. Those were the days before wireless and the distance between block houses was too great for field telephones.

From Jamrud the Battalion was moved up to take over Shagai Fort which is a big fortification half way up the pass. It was now the hot weather and the day shade temperature hovered between 120 and 130 degrees Fahrenheit so Shagai Fort which was built entirely of red brick and situated at the mouth of the gorge was like the proverbial oven. In order to cope with these conditions all outside work had to start at 'first light' - about 0400.

In the centre of the gorge was a small Moslem shrine known as Ali Masjid and some 200 feet above it was the picket block house guarding the pumping station. After being roasted here for several months the Battalion was finally ordered to move up to Landi

Kotal on the Afghan border. Here the country was much more open and the climatic conditions were greatly improved. This however was counter balanced by a virulent outbreak of sandfly fever which put a large percentage of the Battalion including myself in the sick bay. It was a most unpleasant disease which although of comparative short duration was violent and left one feeling terribly depressed.

Luckily all things come to an end and ultimately I recovered and was sent off with my company to take charge of a small fort which overlooked a native village called Bagh. This was situated practically on the *Durand Line* which was the agreed boundary between Afghanistan and British India. Looking down from the walls of Bagh Fort there was an excellent view of the Afghan Customs post at Tor Kam through which all traffic had to pass. This gave us an excellent observation post where we could assess the volume and type of traffic passing through each day.

One day the sergeant of the guard at the gate of the fort reported that there was a young native asking to speak to me. The Gurkhas always referred to the Pathans rather contemptuously as 'natives' - (*desi log*). Knowing that all Pathans used to go fully armed I told the sergeant to disarm him and to send him up to my room under guard.

A few minutes later a young lad appeared escorted by two Gurkhas with drawn kukris. Although my knowledge of Pushtu (the Pathan language) was very rudimentary as I had only just begun learning the language, I had learned a few words and phrases parrot fashion which enabled me to understand the message he wanted to convey.

Apparently he was the grandson of the Malik or headman of Bagh village, and as his grand father had heard that a new sahib had taken over the command of the fort he would be honoured if the sahib would eat his salt and break bread with him. This took me completely by surprise but judging that to have a friendly neighbour might be a great asset I decided to chance my arm, so I accepted the invitation in suitable terms and suggested a convenient date the following week. The young lad then returned to his village bearing my greetings to the Malik.

That evening I gathered the Gurkha officers together and told them what I proposed doing and issued orders for the garrison to 'stand to' during my absence.

On the appointed day the young boy presented himself at the gate again, and having packed a .45 Colt automatic in my pocket I went off to break bread with my host who was waiting to receive me at the entrance to the village.

Once the greeting had been exchanged the Malik, whose name was Sher Ali Khan, ordered his grandson to return to the fort and to wait there until my safe return. I managed to persuade him that this was quite unnecessary as I knew I was among friends.

I was surprised to find that this was quite a gathering and the Malik had summoned several people to meet me amongst whom were a couple of men who had worked in the Political Department and spoke Hindustani and a few words of English. This was an enormous help.

My host and I sat on cushions on a charpoy and a meal was produced. It was served on a huge circular brass tray piled high with rice and topped with a whole curried sheep. With all the old grey beards sitting round, each with his rifle to hand, we rolled up our sleeves and proceeded to dig in with our fingers from the tray.

As the meal progressed my host began fumbling in the centre of the dish and with a broad smile presented me with the sheep's eye. Bowing politely and with a smile I forced myself to swallow it - it would have been a mortal offence to have done otherwise.

From a basket alongside piled high with hard boiled eggs my host proceeded to peel some for me saying; 'Allow me to make your egg white'. As handkerchiefs were unknown and they frequently blew their noses with their fingers, the eggs were hardly white by the time they were handed to me!

Because of the language barrier and the difficulty of carrying on a conversation I felt the assembled company were regarding me with a certain amount of suspicion and the atmosphere became rather tense. I felt I should do something to raise a laugh and to make them relax, so surreptitiously I took a couple of eggs from the basket and slipped them under me. Then I began to cluck like a hen and flap my elbows. Their mouths dropped open and they gazed at me incredulously as I slowly raised myself and produced a couple of eggs. The Pathan's sense of humour is childishly bawdy and they all collapsed with laughter which had the desired effect.

Then, to my utter amazement, my host produced a plate of sponge cakes. It transpired that he had heard that the British liked these so he had despatched the young lad to Peshawar - thirty six miles away - a two day journey hitch hiking on any passing lorry - to buy these and bring them back to the Afghan border. What hospitality!

The meal ended with green caravan tea, very strong and very sweet and making my farewells I returned to the fort feeling that I had made friends who would be able to provide useful intelligence.

During my time at the fort I paid several visits to Bagh village and when I finally left, Sher Ali Khan said 'Ah my son Allah is merciful and who knows we may meet again.' Little did I think that thirty years later his words would come true.

After three years on the frontier the Battalion returned to Dehra Dun but alas I had become ill and was sent to the hospital at Murray. It took some time for the doctors to decide what was wrong with me but eventually they treated me for amoebic dysentery. This seemed to do the trick but unfortunately the trouble kept on recurring and finally after a medical board it was decided that the climate was doing me no good and I was advised to return to England. This was a great blow but finally I had to resign my commission and start life again. The India Office was extremely good to me and granted me a gratuity and a year's leave on full pay.

In 1961 when I was in India once again I took the opportunity of visiting Bagh village and renewed my acquaintance with a very ancient Sher Ali Khan.