THE SUTLEJ CAMPAIGN MEDAL TO SERGEANT-MAJOR JOHN CANTWELL, 50TH REGIMENT, KILLED IN ACTION AT SOBRAON AT THE MOMENT OF VICTORY HAVING CAPTURED A SIKH STANDARD.

SUTLEJ 1845-46, 3 CLASPS, FEROZESHUHUR, ALIWAL, SOBRAON ‘COLOR SERJT. JOHN CANTWELL 50TH REGT.’

H.M’s 50th Regiment of Foot took two Sikh standards at Ferozeshuhur on 21-22 December 1845. Sergeant-Major Cantwell, it is said, took a third at Sobraon on 10 February 1846, but at the cost of his life. The regimental history of 1895 records:

‘A third was afterwards captured, and probably by Sergeant-Major Cantwell, at Sobraon. The Orderly Room Records say: “Sergeant-Major Cantwell much distinguished himself but was killed at the moment of victory when the regiment was entering the trenches,” and a paper at the War Office adds, “and just as he captured a standard from the enemy.”

Sergeant Godwin, one of the few survivors of this glorious campaign, does not remember/did not see a standard being taken. He adds, “Sergeant-Major Cantwell was found killed and stripped at the river side.” This is not incompatible, however, with the narrative of his capturing the standard, as he would have confided it to an escort: or with that of his being killed at the moment of victory, for he would have been one of the first men into the trenches, and would have followed up the retreating enemy. These three standards for many years decorated the regimental mess room; but in course of time very little of the colours remained,
and the author of this work, when in command of the Regiment, had them mounted in an airtight case with a glass front, the frame of which is made from their own flag-staffs and ornamented with the Crown and Sphinx, and the Kentish horse in silver, with an inscription at the base. This now hangs in All Saint’s Church, Maidstone, where the old Crimean colours have also found an honourable resting place.’

Musters show Cantwell joining the 50th on 26th January 1831, Promoted Corporal in June 1834 and embarking for New South Wales, in May, arriving in Van Diemans Land in October. He was promoted Sergeant 12th September 1835, Norfolk Island Nov 1836. To Colour Sergeant 1st January 1837. The Regiment left for India in 1841 and Cantwell was Reduced to Sergeant on 7th October 1841 at Fort William. He left for Depot in the UK in March 1842 and was promoted to Colour Sergeant again in May 1842. In 1843 the regiment took part in the Gwalior Campaign, receiving the Punnar Star, Cantwell, however missed this campaign, having returned to UK to join the Regimental depot in March 1842 and therefore did not receive the medal. He did not arrive back with HQ in India until 28th April 1844. Cantwell served through the all the battles of the Sikh War of 1845-6, being promoted Regimental Sergeant Major on 2nd January 1846, on Promotion to Ensign of Sergeant Major Richard Heaton. Cantwell was Killed in action shortly after at the battle of Sobraon on 10th February.

In early December, 1848, Lord Gough presented ‘a splendid cup’ to the 50th Regiment, the gift of Prince Waldemar of Prussia, who was attached to the regiment through the greater part of the Sutlej campaign. The cup was presented at a mess dinner at Dover Castle, and was thus described by the Dover Telegraph at the time:

‘The cup is of elegant form, about 24 inches in height, and weighs about 150 ounces. The foot, of silver gilt, is formed of the trunk of the palm tree, and upon a cluster of palm leaves, surrounding its upper part, is embedded the vase; this is of frosted silver, and upon its surface, exquisitely chased in basso relievo, are two scenes - the one of the battle of Sobraon, at the instant the 50th Regiment had charged the works, and succeeded in placing the regimental colours on their summit, and at the same instant that Sergeant-Major Cantwell, who bravely bore them was shot, and fell in the arms of victory. The works also display the
Sikh banner, which was afterwards captured, and adorned the room. The second incident or scene is taken at the instant when, at the battle of Ferozeshah, the Sikh forces were yielding, and Doctor Hoffmeister, the medical attendant of Prince Waldemar, fell. The cover is of burnished silver, and reposing upon the lid are the sleeping lions of the Punjab, the whole being surmounted by a complete set of chieftans’ chain armour, modelled from that belonging to a captured Sirdar. The shield, the lance, the surcoat, and helmet, are all executed with the most exquisite correctness and delicacy. Round the margin of the vase is engraved: ‘This goblet is presented by His Royal Highness Prince Waldemar of Prussia, as a token of remembrance of the happy days spent amongst the officers of the 50th Regiment at Loodiana, and the following glorious campaign of the Sutlej.’

All References above from: The History of the 50th or (The Queen’s Own) Regiment (Fyler).

There does seem to be some confusion above regarding all the statements above saying he captured a Sikh Standard and the last saying he had the Regimental Colours when killed. Given his rank it is highly unlikely he would have been with the Regimental Colours, these being with the Colour party. It is even less likely he planted the Regimental Colours, then captured a Sikh Standard. Further to this, Richard Holmes book ‘Sahib’ gives:

‘Sergeant Major Cantwell has just run a Sikh Ensign through with his sword and seized the Colour when he himself is cut down by a vicious blow from a tulwar (the Hindustant for sword); his body stripped and gashed will be found in a ditch at the end of the fighting’

The vast majority of evidence would indicate it was the Sikh Standard only he captured/bore before his death and that description of the cup had the Regimental and Sikh Colour confused.

A note regarding the rank being Colour sergeant and not Sgt Major or the medal, is due to an error on the original roll. Cantwell was promoted Sgt Major on 2nd Jan 1846 in place of Sgt Major Heaton; promoted Ensign. However neither Cantwell or Heaton’s correct ranks are on the roll. Heaton was gazetted Ensign in 1846, backdated to 25th Dec 1845 due to him being in India (with other Officers). Heaton’s medal, Rank Sgt Major, was actually sold at DNW Sept 2009 for £3100 and should of course have the rank Ensign on it. Further confirmation comes from the 50th memorial in Canterbury Cathedral, Giving Cantwell’s rank of Sgt Major, Regimental musters (copies included on CD) , Regimental history etc etc.

Condition VF, just slight edge bruising, a superb medal. From the collection of Miss Clarke, Glendining, October 1912 and Ex Brian Richie collection DNW Sept 2005
50th REGT SILVER CUP GIVEN PRINCE WALDEMAR OF PRUSSIA