

A VERY RARE TIBET 1903 AWARDED TO AN NCO OF THE ROYAL FUSILIERS WHO WAS WOUNDED IN ACTION DURING THE STORMING OF GYANTSE JONG 6 JULY 1904. ONE OF JUST THREE BRITISH SOLDIERS WOUNDED IN ACTION DURING THE CAMPAIGN.



TIBET 1903, CLASP, GYANTSE '7931 LCPL H. PRENTICE 1ST BN RYL FUSLRS'

Henry Prentice, an 18 year old Greengrocers assistant from Lambeth, London, enlisted into the Royal Fusiliers on 12 March 1900. Noting 3 years service with the 3rd Royal West Surrey Regiment (militia), he served in South Africa with the 4th battalions Mounted Infantry Company (20th M.I.) from 16 March 1901 until 21 October 1902 (medal and 5 clasps). Promoted Lance Corporal on 19 February 1903, he further served with the 1st Battalion Royal Fusiliers during the Tibet expedition 1904, during which he was wounded in action during the assault on the fortress at Gyantse Yong 6 July 1904

Reverting to Private on 10 August 1905, he was awarded a gratuity of £1.12 for service with the Tibet Mission escort and transferred to the Army Reserve on 11 March 1908. Prentice's service papers note him having passed the Mounted Infantry course on 16 March 1901 and Mounted Infantry (maxim gun) course on 1 January 1907. Confirms service during the Boer War 1901-02 and on the Sikkim-Tibet Expedition 1904, present at the action of Niani (28 June 1904), operations at and around Gyantse and the march to Lhasa

Also confirms he was wounded in the scalp at Gyantse Yong 6 July 1904

423 Tibet medals and clasp issued to British Officers and men, all but a handful being to 1st Royal Fusiliers who were the only British Regiment to take part in the expedition.

During the Tibet Expedition, the bulk of the casualties(202) were to Native units. Several British Officers were killed and wounded but no British NCO's or men were killed. However 3 were wounded; all 3, including Prentice, at the Gyantse Yong 6 July 1904. A further 8 were injured in the explosion at Gyantse on 7 July 1904.

THE EXPEDITION TO TIBET 1904

“Tibet, under Manchu control, had excluded foreigners since the early 19th century and its aloofness was regarded as an affront to British Imperial power. Besides, there was a suspicion that Russia was interested. The Tibet Frontier Commission was the brainchild of the Indian Viceroy, Lord Curzon, and the team of diplomats was headed by Colonel Francis Younghusband. The object of the expedition was to provoke the Tibetans into a confrontation and secure the safety of the neighbouring states of Sikkim and Burma. Brigadier-General James Macdonald was the commander of the expedition and his troops were made up of Gurkhas and Indian troops of Pathan and Kashmiri origin who would be better suited to the altitude and climate in Tibet. Although there were British soldiers and civilian journalists etc in the expedition there was no British unit involved until the Royal Fusiliers arrived later on.

The first battle started unexpectedly during a meeting between the British and Tibetans at Chumik Shenko which turned nasty when a Sikh soldier was shot in the face. The ensuing fight was more of a massacre because the Maxim-gun detachment was ordered to open fire against men armed with primitive matchlock muskets. Leaving 700 dead and 168 wounded, the expedition pressed on and had a less easy fight at Red Idol Gorge. The Tibetans again came off worst losing around 200 dead. When the expedition reached Gyantse, the third largest town in Tibet, they entered the place unopposed and enjoyed a restful interlude with the Mission HQ set up at Chang Lo Manor. Macdonald took the main force back to secure the lines of communication. But while he was a way, Younghusband and the mission escort of the 8th Gurkhas and 32nd Sikh Pioneers, commanded by Lt-Col Brander, heard that the Tibetans had assembled troops at Karo La and set out to meet them in battle. This action was successful but the Mission HQ was attacked while the escort was away, and Younghusband's small band of men repulsed them but with the loss of 3 dead. The Tibetans also occupied the fortress of the Gyantse Jong.



THE FORTRESS OF THE GYANTSE JONG

The 1st Btn Royal Fusiliers were stationed at Lebong in India when they were called on to be the only British battalion to join the reinforcements sent to Gyantse. They contributed 4 companies, the 40th Pathans sent 6 companies and there were several artillery pieces. They met up with Macdonald's force in early June at New Chumbi. Meanwhile there had been more skirmishes at Gyantse in May including an attack on Palla Manor in which 400 Tibetans were killed or wounded.

The enlarged force under Macdonald's command proceeded towards Gyantse and fought actions, on 26th June at Niani, a fortified monastery, and 28th June at the ancient Tsechen monastery which was looted by officers and soldiers and later burned down. When they reached the formidable Gyantse Jong stronghold the artillery had a hard job creating a breach in the wall but it was accomplished on 6th July, and the 8th Gurkhas stormed in led by Lieutenant John Grant who won a VC. The Royal Fusiliers followed them in and the defenders retreated. More looting followed including religious sites which were supposed to be respected.

The advance to Lhasa was made by the members of the commission led by Colonel Younghusband, together with a reduced force of soldiers which was to include the Royal Fusiliers. The remainder of the force was required to protect the lines of communication. This, however, was a source of discontent among the officers and men of the Indian regiments who had been part of the original expedition and regarded the final push to the fabled city of Lhasa as an honour that should have been conferred on a unit more deserving than the Fusiliers. Notwithstanding the unpopularity of the regiment the Royal Fusiliers undertook the journey, crossing the River Tsangpo which took 4 days, and arriving at Lhasa on 3rd Aug 1904. It was the first time since 1811 that foreigners had beheld the Potala Palace. Corporal Croath of the Fusiliers wrote in his diary:

'...the huge upstanding mass of the Potala Palace to my left. For sheer bulk and magnificent audacity, lamaism could do no more in architecture. It is a simple marvel in stone, nine hundred feet in length and seventy feet higher than the gold cross of St Paul's Cathedral. It suggests the massive grandeur of Egyptian work.' But when he entered the town with Younghusband's escort he found: 'great pools of black-scummed water. Under some squalid willows the main drain of the town runs foetidly between black banks. On these stinking eminences herds of black pigs were grouting about among rubbish heaps.'

Younghusband forced the Tibetans to sign a worthless treaty despite the fact that the Dalai Lama had fled to Mongolia. It was part of a ceremony that took place on 7th Sep 1904. The Fusiliers escorted Younghusband into the Potala smartly dressed and wearing nailed boots that could not cope with the polished ramps. They slid about wildly, causing the monks much amusement. One of the trophies brought back to England was a Tibetan wild ass which was paraded through the streets of the City of London where the Fusiliers exercised their privilege of marching with fixed bayonets."

A superb Royal Fusiliers Tibet roll on the Regimental Museum website, with details of the campaign can be found here:

<https://www.fusiliermuseumlondon.org/download?id=12393>



Condition; a little contact wear, GVF. Sold with copied service papers, plus LG Tibet despatch. A superb and very rare Royal Fusiliers casualty medal