

A SCARCE AFGHANISTAN 1878 TO A PRIVATE OF THE 7TH FUSILIERS WHO DIED OF WOUNDS RECEIVED DURING THE DISASTROUS SORTIE TO DEH-KHOJA ON 16TH AUGUST 1880. JUST 367 FUSILIERS TOOK PART IN THE SORTIE, WITH NO LESS THAN ONE V.C. AND 8 D.C.M.'s BEING AWARDED TO THEM



AFGHANISTAN 1878, NO CLASP '896 PTE. F. SWAN. 2/7TH FOOT'

Francis D. Swan enlisted with the 49th Brigade on 6 November 1875 before joining the 1/7th Foot in November 1877 and from there to the 2/7th Foot in December. Posted to India in April 1879, he was still with the Battalion when they joined British troops in Quetta for service in the Second Anglo-Afghan War. The battalion arrived at Kandahar, 26 April 1880. On the 28th July, on the news of the disaster sustained at Maiwand reaching Kandahar, 70 rifles of the 2/7th formed part of the force under Brigadier-General Brooke which set out to relieve the survivors of Brigadier-General Burrows ill-fated brigade. On 11th August, they and 4,500 other British and Native troops were besieged by 10,000 enemy tribesmen. On 16th August, five companies of the 2/7th (367 men), along with companies from the 19th and 28th Native Infantry, formed part of a force of 900 infantry and 300 cavalry, sent on a sortie to attack the nearby fortified village of Deh Khoja. The plan which had originally been intended to involve a much larger force was foolishly stripped down in size by Brigadier-General Brooke and he would lead the attack. After suffering heavy casualties, the force finally reached the village, which was made up of a warren of streets and houses, perfect for defence. In the fierce hand to hand fighting that followed and with enemy reinforcements streaming into the fight, retreat became the only option. Brooke himself was killed, as were many of his senior officers and;

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of war, and armed only with rude matchlocks, short swords, and axes of native manufacture, had by a sort of natural instinct discovered at once our weak points, and, by feints upon our centre, and furious

assaults upon our flanks during the whole of our retreat across the plain, not only inflicted a tremendous loss upon us, but at one period seriously endangered our position.'

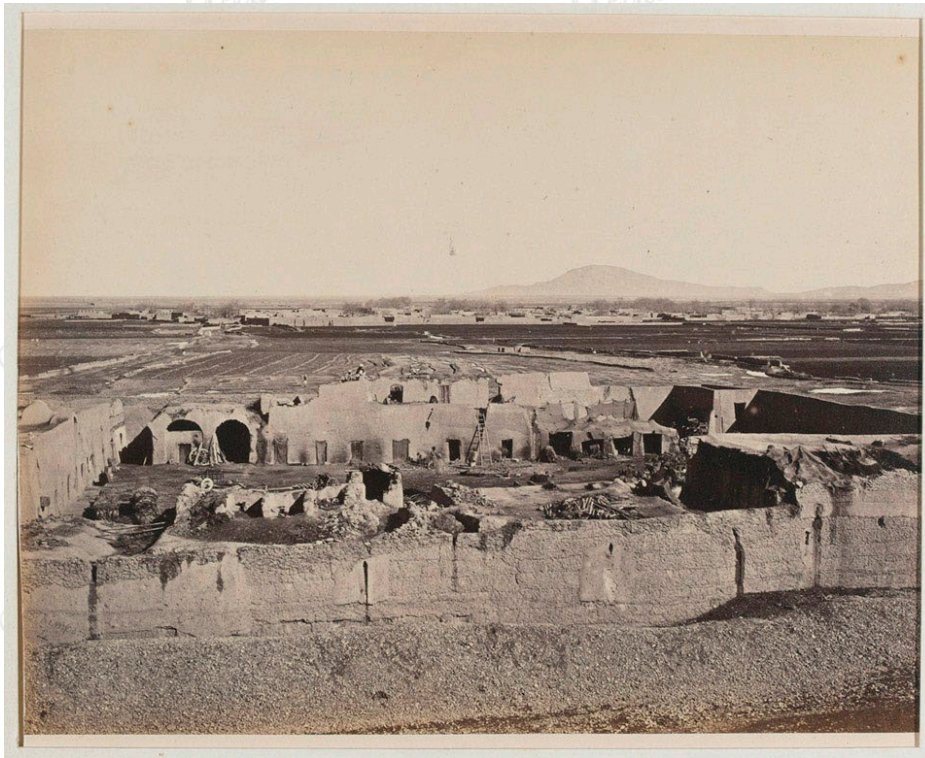
Both sides suffered heavy casualties, with the British losing 226 officers and men killed and wounded, including 4 Officers and 50 men of the Fusiliers. It was another major disaster for the British and just 3 weeks after Maiwand. Private Swan was severely wounded during the sortie but made it back to Kandahar, only to die of his wounds the next day.

Seven D.C.M.s and one VC were awarded to the 7th Fusiliers for the Second Afghan War 1878-80, all of which were for Deh-Khoja. Most of these recommendations appear to be for bringing wounded men in under fire or holding off the enemy during the retreat. Given the severe nature of his wounds, Private Swan more than likely was brought in with the help of others.

THE SORTIE FROM KANDAHAR VILLAGE OF DEH KWAJA.

"An Officer's narrative; Kandahar ; Aug. 20.

In war, as in other matters mundane, misfortunes seldom come alone; and now I have to chronicle a disaster almost equal in intensity to the sad story of which I told you in my last. At the instance of Brigadier-General Brooke Brigadier-General Brooke, who strongly advised General Primrose to the attempt, an ill- judged, ill-devised, and foolish sortie, was attempted by us four days ago.



DEH-KHOJA 1880

We have been much annoyed by an irritating rifle fire upon our ramparts from a village called Deh Kwaja, which lies within range of and towards the east face of our citadel. We knew that the main position of the Afghan Prince faced east. Our spies have brought us intelligence that Ayub had with him thirteen regiments of regular infantry, thirty-eight guns many of them rifled, a very numerous array of cavalry, and a large body of fanatical Ghazis. General Brooke himself demanded permission to lead the sortie, stipulating however or, I should say, suggesting that our very weak artillery should bombard the village. Poor Vandeleur was with me on the night of the 15th ; and although he had specially requested to serve as a volunteer, he pointed out that his knowledge of the locality, gained from frequent quail shooting in the neighbourhood, made him certain that the village we deemed so easy of assault would be found an extremely difficult, hard nut to crack. Several of our men and camp

followers have from time to time been murdered by these villagers, who are known to be most bitterly hostile to the wealthier traders of Kandahar and the Kizilbashi merchants, who are friendly to us. With Vandeleur in my tent were two other officers, who had been in the habit of quail and duck shooting on the plains near the village, and they also were strongly of opinion that a simple bombardment, instead of a rush at the village, would be more prudent. However, as we had not the ordering of the affair, nor the control of events, matters were allowed to take their own course.

Before I give you full particulars of the sortie, I may tell you that Brigadier-General Brooke most gallantly led the assault, and was cut to pieces while endeavouring to carry off his wounded comrade and my old friend, Major Cruickshank, our field engineer. Amongst the killed were Colonel Newport, 28th Bombay N.I.; Le Poer Trench, 28th Bombay N.I.; and young Charley Stayner, of the same corps; Poor Teddy Marsh, 7th Fusiliers; young Phil Wood, of the same; and our popular and zealous chaplain, the Rev. J. Gordon for many years connected with the Church Missionary Society.

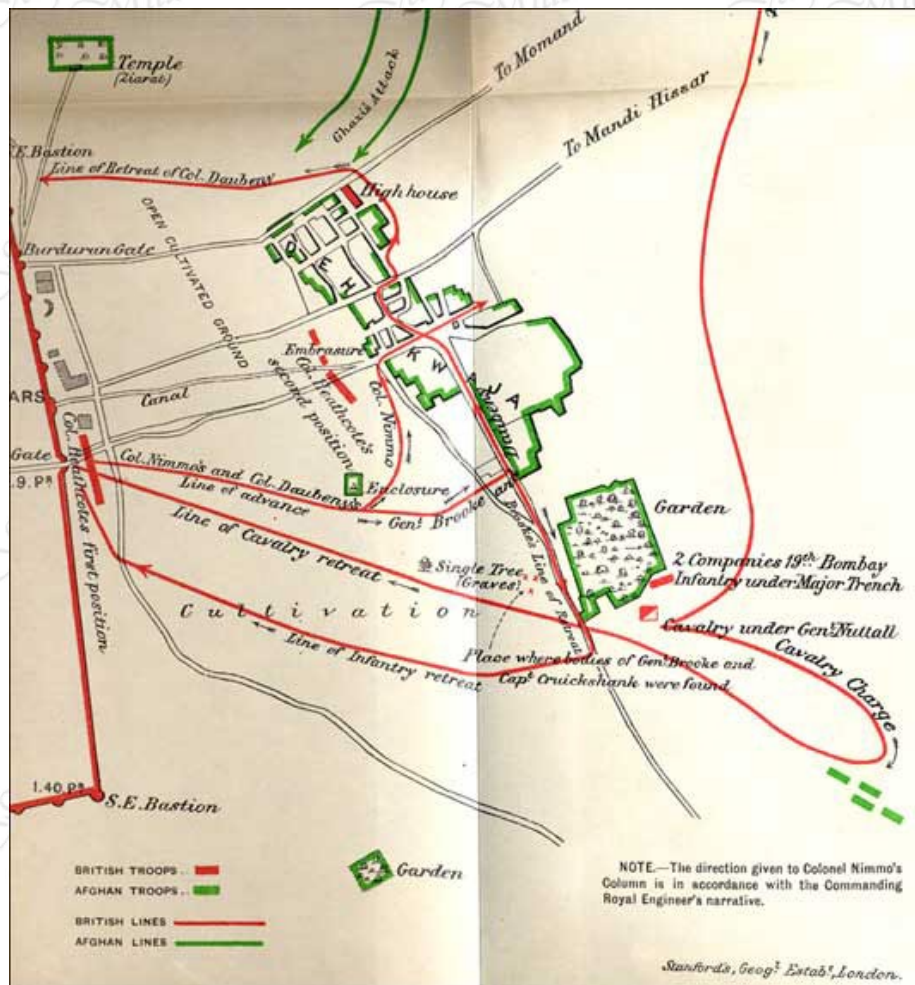
About two hours before daylight our force, in two columns, was drawn out in front of the Cabul gate. The night was somewhat misty, but the moon now and then came through the clouds and lit up the bronzed faces of our Sepoys, many of whom, to say the truth, seemed not particularly elated at the prospect of our venture. The innumerable watercourses that interlace, as it were, the plain that intervenes between our citadel and the village seriously interfered with the order of our march and the movements of our field guns. Prior to the sortie, I have omitted to inform you Ayub had occupied the cantonments, which we had, I think, imprudently abandoned. This occupation, however, afforded considerable amusement, combined with some very excellent artillery practice to our gunners, who, at 900 yards from the Cabul gate, were not long in shelling out the forces posted there by the Afghan general. The latter on the 7th of the month detached a couple of brigades to a strong position on the Herat road, almost between the Mir Bazaar and the Argandab river; while his cavalry and right flank were placed on a steep prominence not far from the ruins of the old Kandahar city. It would be difficult to describe how unusually strong and strategically chosen was this front, enfiling the village, whose approach was watered by many deep canals and irrigation channels, which could be crossed only at few points.

On the morning of the 9th General Primrose ordered some field guns to take up a position on the Picket Hill overlooking our cantonment, and these guns during several days made excellent practice upon the loopholed walls of Deh Kwaja. Ayub, it was known, had posted a strong body of irregulars in the smaller villages to the right and left of Deh Kwaja; and we were given to understand that, should an opportunity occur, a night attack would be made upon our Cabul and Durani gates. As I have said, the walls of the village are honeycombed with loopholes, and approachable only through a mass of orchards and considerably broken ground. Our cavalry were carefully selected, and consisted of 300 of picked sabres, in equal proportions of lancers and l'arme blanche. To these were added 900 bayonets, furnished respectively by the 7th Fusiliers, and 19th and 28th Native Infantry.

At the first approach of dawn our guns opened fire upon the village, which we could see was very strongly occupied and reinforced from the neighbouring hamlets. Deploying one half of his infantry into line, with 100 of our cavalry on either flank extended in skirmishing order, General Brooke moved steadily across the plain, taking advantage of whatever cover we could obtain in the gardens and orchards through which we passed. Some 200 yards from the Cabul gate there is a rather deep nullah, behind which there is a mass of rock, the whole forming a most perfect ditch and parapet. Here we came to our first obstacle, namely, some 500 well posted rifles, who inflicted considerable loss upon our men. Here Colonel Malcolmson, of the Scinde Horse, had his charger shot under him, being himself badly hit through the sword arm. Major Cruickshank, with fifty men, was then ordered to move round to the left, with the intention of outflanking the enemy; while Colonel Shewell made a very gallant charge on the other flank. The nullah did not suffice to stop our gallant Scinde horsemen, who charged it in brilliant style with but few casualties.

Here, however, one of our guns became entangled, and for a short time had to be abandoned. Lieut. Wood of the Transport, and Lieut-Colonel Nimmo, 28th Native Infantry, and two other officers, made the most desperate efforts to prevent the Ghazis from carrying off the gun. Here one of the best hand-to-hand combats that has ever been witnessed between our Sepoys and the Afghans took place; and,

after several repulses, one final rush of a company of the 7th drove the enemy from his vantage ground. Our loss, however, I am sorry to say, was not slight ; and considerable delay was experienced from the necessity of carrying back to the shelter of our ramparts our wounded comrades, who would otherwise have been massacred and mutilated by the villagers, whom we could see collecting in the distance...



The enemy, who had, as I before stated, taken advantage of the natural defences of the deep nullah, with its rocky breastwork behind, and who were in considerable strength in the hamlets and villages beyond, without any doubt had gained reliable intelligence of our intended attack. Our troops, on the morning of the 16th, were scarcely in position outside the Cabul and Kandahar gates, when a strong force of their cavalry, admirably led by the chief who was so conspicuous in his brilliant charges at Maiwand, rushed down the steep slopes of the mountain above, and with loud shouts attacked our advanced skirmishers and our unsupported guns. Nothing but the steadiness of one company of the 7th Fusiliers, who had been posted in a hollow, would have checked the onslaught, and all their efforts to dislodge this picket failed against the determined handful of men which the General had sent forward.

The peculiar manner in which an Afghan village is constructed, and the skill which their simple engineering and knowledge of field fortification display, ought perhaps to have suggested a night instead of a day attack, a mode of fighting which former frontier experiences tell us is always objectionable to these hardy combatants. In that case the smallness of our force would have been unknown, and a desperate attack hardly pressed would, in all probability, have effected our object without the loss and bloodshed which daylight enabled superior numbers to inflict. While the fierce struggle was taking place at the nullah I have described, and whilst the echoes were ringing with the shouts of the combatants and the booming of our covering artillery, General Brooke was sitting on horseback with his field-glasses in hand behind a small breastwork of which we had taken possession

on the left flank of the village. From this we saw a strong force, composed of swordsmen and matchlock men, advancing boldly to the attack, charging across the plateau in our front in the most determined manner, and following their standard-bearer with a red and gold lunghi steadily.

It was now seven o'clock, and we were still some hundred yards from the village. The fire from these men was uncommonly steady, and our efforts, both with musketry and occasional charges of horsemen, for a time were unsuccessful. Their swordsmen at intervals endeavoured to rush upon our flanks, but here we were advantageously posted, and our mountain guns moving to a neighbouring hillock, with an effective fire at short range, threw their masses into disorder. A general advance was now ordered, but our losses were now heavy, our infantry suffering most, as the nature of the ground gave cover to our foe while we were in the open. General Brooke, Colonel Newport, Major Trench, and Lieutenants Stayner, Marsh, and Wood, were all badly hit, but still seemed in the thickest of the fight. At this juncture messengers arrived from the city with instructions, if possible, to retire, but I fear that a point of honour deterred our chief from accepting this alternative. Our leading companies, moreover, were now at the walls of the village, and we could see that practically they were in a position to be cut off if not supported. Under these circumstances our General sent back word that he could not with safety retire, and galloping in front of a squadron of Scinde Horse the main street of the village was carried. Here Major Cruickshank, with his Sappers, had effected a lodgement in a ruined building surrounded by a large compound, and held at bay the increasing forces of the enemy, who were now swarming in from the neighbouring hamlets ; but a ball from one of the matchlock men struck him in the groin, and as he fell from his horse half-a-dozen swordsmen rushed to despatch him. General Brooke saw his plight, and generously endeavoured to save him by assisting him with his stirrup. In the melee which ensued both were carried away by the rush. Colonel Newport, who was riding with Colonel Malcolmson, of the Scinde Horse, now gave the order to retire, and the street was held by the 7th Fusiliers and a detachment of the Sappers while the movement was effected.



If any satisfaction can be experienced at this disastrous and unsuccessful day, it lies in the fact that our ill-advised attempt upon the position of Deh Kwaja resulted in a far greater loss to the enemy than to our people, while the morale of the affair has had beyond all doubt a vast effect upon the besieged and the besiegers. The conduct of our native troops in this sanguinary tussle has, we all think, greatly redeemed, if not atoned for the demoralisation of our Sepoys and Sowars at Kushk-i-Nakhud, and the fate of the brave young officers who led their men to the assault at the village, and who were struck down sword and revolver in hand, has taught both the Afghan Ghazi and the Indian Sepoy that the race of Clive, Wellesley, Havelock, and Outram is not extinct. One native officer I particularly noticed who tried to save his colonel (Newport), and who gave up his life in the attempt.

He not only stood over his commanding officer when struck down, but remained to defend him, while the conspicuous gallantry of a havildar was noticeable, as, rushing ten paces in front of his company, he cut down a standard-bearer and captured his standard.

Our retreat, I need scarcely say, was not unmolested, and had it not been for Malcolmson's Horse, and the brilliant manner in which they wheeled about to charge across our flanks, the day would have been even more disastrous than it was. They not only drove off the pursuing enemy who now swarmed along the rocky knolls, which gave so many coigns of vantage to our foe, but chased them precipitously along the ridges, and forced them back in confusion into the valley. While this was being effected, our Sappers and half a company of the 7th Fusiliers had thrown up a low breastwork across the rear of our column, and this being flanked by a couple of mountain guns, and held with unflinching tenacity, enabled our disordered infantry to retire in something not approaching to actual flight.

The combat during the retreat was perhaps even more desperate than during our assault. These desperate Ghazis and bold mountaineers, ignorant of discipline or any regular art of war, and armed only with rude matchlocks, short swords, and axes of native manufacture, had by a sort of natural instinct discovered at once our weak points, and, by feints upon our centre, and furious assaults upon our flanks during the whole of our retreat across the plain, not only inflicted a tremendous loss upon us, but at one period seriously endangered our position. Our losses are out of all comparison with the number of forces engaged, and may be set down at the very least at 200, including General Brooke, who was last seen endeavouring to save his old friend Cruickshank. Colonel Newport was three times wounded, and was last seen with Colonel Shewell trying to save an injured man. Our chaplain, Mr. Gordon, with the greatest devotion, returned from the Cabul gate to a spot outside the walls, where five men were lying, and in trying to assist the dhoolie bearers to save them was, with several of our men, shot down by a volley of musketry. Poor Vandeleur, who was badly hit early in the day, has since died, and our hospital is now full to overflowing. Meanwhile we know that Roberts is not more than two or three marches from Khelat-i-Ghilzai, and should be with us in a week. Our wounded are doing well. Our provisions and ammunition, if not abundant, are sufficient, and our greatest anxiety now is that we may measure swords with Ayub, and wipe out the inglorious 27th of July."



Condition GVF. A scarce Deh Khoja casualty medal. Sold together with a copied medal roll and handwritten research.