

A SCARCE AFGHANISTAN 1878 TO A 72ND HIGHLANDERS PRIVATE WHO WAS WOUNDED IN ACTION AT THE BATTLE OF CHARASIAH 6 OCTOBER 1879



AFGHANISTAN 1878-80, 1 CLASP, CHARASIA '58B/922, PTE. J. ANDERSON, 72ND HIGHRS.'

James Anderson, born in Derrylin, Irvinestown, Ireland, in 1857, enlisted into the 58 Brigade on 1 May 1877. He was posted to the 72nd (Seaforth) Highlanders on 7 December 1878 and served with the 72nd in the Second Afghan War. Anderson was severely wounded at the battle of Charasiah on the 6 October 1879 and was invalided home on 22 December 1879. He was discharged from the army due to wounds on 20 July 1880

Anderson's service papers state:

"He received a severe bullet wound in the right forearm and left breast at the engagement of Charasiah on the 6th October 1879"

THE BATTLE OF CHARASIA

'At dawn on the 6th of October 1879, cavalry patrols were sent out. As was a work party of the 23rd Pioneers and 92nd Highlanders who were supposed to prepare the valley road for use by the carts, wagons and guns. These forces quickly came scurrying back to report that they could see Afghans along the ridges of the hilltops. They also reported seeing artillery pieces. This meant that they were a determined force who were going to try to prevent the British force from reaching its destination. The final figure of Afghan forces present is

difficult to fully establish, but it seems as if there were probably 13 regular regiments of infantry, 20 field guns and several thousands of tribesmen. And they were sitting in excellent defensive positions. Roberts, meanwhile, was sitting with only two-thirds of his force on the flat ground beneath the imposing hills. He had to act fast and he also had to assume that Macpherson's force would not be able to arrive in time to help him. The situation did not look at all good.

Roberts decided to split his forces into an attack group, a holding group and a reserve. The plan was to attack the Afghans on the West of the range and roll them up along the hilltop ridges. Meanwhile a smaller force would be sent to hold the Afghans at the East of the range and prevent them from sweeping down from the hills in a rush to aid their forces in the West. A small reserve would be kept under Roberts control in Charasia itself. The main attack force would be commanded by Baker. He had at his disposal the 72nd Highlanders, the 5th Gurkhas, half of the 5th Punjab Infantry, half of the 23rd Pioneers, two mountain guns, three field guns and two gatling guns. The holding force was commanded by Major George White. He had four companies of the 92nd, half of the 23rd Pioneers, 3 field guns and some cavalry. These two forces were attacking a force that greatly outnumbered them.



At 1130 Baker launched his 72nd Highlanders onto the centre and right sections of the Western Afghan forces. Fierce resistance from the Afghans held up the Highlanders. The Gurkhas and two companies of the 5th Punjabis were sent in to reinforce the uphill attack. This helped to swing the balance towards the British attack and by 1400 hours they had managed to clear the first ridge. The timing was crucial as the Afghans had begun to send reinforcements. Had they arrived in time, the outcome of the battle may have been very different. Meanwhile on the eastern flank White had advanced his force forward to try and dislodge the Afghans sitting south of the gorge. Artillery was used in an attempt to dislodge the Afghans, but it became clear that the cover was just too good. The only way to dislodge

the Afghans was by launching an infantry attack at them. White personally led two companies of the 92nd up the steep, rocky hillside. Fortunately, the rocks provided cover for both sides. The Scots were able to use this cover to get up amongst the Afghan positions. Unnerved by the presence of the British troops, the Afghans soon abandoned this position and retreated to the north of the ravine. Despite still being massively outnumbered on this flank, White could see that the western flank could do with some help. He therefore split his 92nd Infantry and sent two companies to aid Baker in his attack on the west.

Back on the western flank, Baker had quickly sent his troops on to assault the Afghan positions some 600 metres in front of them on a second ridgeline. They advanced in a series of short rushes reinforced by a company of the 23rd Pioneers. The fighting was intense and hung in the balance until that is, the two companies of the 92nd sent by White arrived on the flank of the Afghans. This completely unnerved the Afghans and they retreated north and eastwards, with Baker's men hot in pursuit. By 1545 Baker had taken the entire western flank and central positions of the Afghans. He was ready to launch a flank attack on the remaining Afghans. Just as White was also pressing home an attack back at the gorge. He had sent forward his cavalry to take possession of the mouth of the gorge. Apart from capturing six Afghan guns, the combined threats of White and Baker saw the Afghans disperse and disappear back into the mountains. By 1700 hours the British had taken possession of the entire position.'

81 Officers and men were killed at the battle, 36 of these casualties being to the 72nd!

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