

CHAPTER XVIII

THE THIRD AFGHAN WAR

THE head-quarters of the Derajat independent¹ brigade, to which I had been appointed, were at Dera Ismail Khan on the west side of the River Indus. The station is not popular and usually known as "Dera Dismal." The troops were split up a good deal, being located, some at Dera Ismail Khan itself, some in a hutted camp forty miles off at Tank, and the remainder on the outposts beyond. By arrangement with the Punjab Government the Multan brigade was taken away from the Lahore division and included in the Derajat command just as I arrived, which considerably increased the work and responsibility.

To reach Dera Ismail you alight at a station called Daryakhan on the North-Western Railway, with a sixteen miles motor drive to the River Indus; crossing it and its branches by pontoon bridges from September to April, and at other times by means of a little steamer. Dera Ismail is most pleasant in the winter, but hot from May onwards, until in July it is really bad. A peculiarity of the bungalows is the quaint appearance of little shelters on each roof, where one sleeps in the summer.

Soon after arrival I felt I must visit Wana, an isolated outpost garrisoned by the South Waziristan Militia and nine marches north-west of Dera Ismail up the celebrated Gomal Valley. Finding the Resident, Sir John Donald, was also going there, we joined forces, and had a very pleasant trip together in June, although it was uncommonly warm. Leaving Sir John at Wana, I returned via Sarwekai and Tank to my head-quarters. This militia corps was

¹ Called "independent" because not allotted to any division.

not under me except when we were mobilised, but I had to inspect and report on it.

At Tank I had a hutted camp of all three arms with a flight of planes. It was an appalling spot, with its eternal dust-storms, inadequate shelter, bare surroundings and scanty water supply. One of the units was a battalion of the 2nd Gurkhas, whose men were feeling the heat pretty badly, having a very large number in hospital. However, the good old "2nd" were not going to grouse, and just making the best of it, were quite cheery.

But what alarmed me was the isolation of Wana, and the serious problem of its garrison in time of trouble. Moreover, after my inspection of the militia, I did not at all like the situation as regards the British officers, feeling that, without any stiffening of other troops, they would fare very badly should their men fail to remain staunch. This seemed to me extremely probable, for the position was very different to that of the North Waziristan Militia at Miran-shah, in the Tochi Valley beyond Bannu, where a whole brigade of regular troops was camped alongside them at Dardoni.

Here it is necessary to say a few words about our North-West Frontier policy. For years there have been two schools of thought: (a) the "back to the Indus" party, and (b) the advocates of occupation practically up to the boundaries of Afghanistan.

Theoretically the latter proposition is of course ideal, but in practice it presents enormous difficulties. This was one of the first problems to face Lord Curzon on his arrival as Viceroy in 1899. He is understood to have been inclined towards the "forward" policy, but not seeing how it was feasible, he decided on a novel experiment. Withdrawing large numbers of regular troops from the advanced posts he replaced them by militia units composed of the tribesmen themselves under British officers. In fact he made the tribesman responsible for his own country. Then there was the important question of material and moral support. Lord Curzon was much too clever to forget that, and provided it by means of regular troops placed within our own administrative area.

This system worked very well for twenty years. It broke down in 1919, partly owing to excessive and cunning propaganda; partly to the fact that Afghanistan was the

invader; partly to a weak policy (or lack of any at all), and partly to neglect to provide that very *support* Lord Curzon had been so insistent on.

It must be understood that the moral side of this support is even greater than the material. In times of unrest on the frontier great pressure is brought to bear on the militiaman, possibly by his own people, to be untrue to his salt. Many of the militia are lads who do not want to desert, but, when isolated, find it hard to withstand the supplications of their greybeards and mullas.¹ With regulars stationed near, or sent up to stiffen them, they can point to these, and resist the arguments of their seducers.

Mr. Montagu stated the other day (1921) that Waziristan is "a mountainous district roughly half the size of Switzerland." Rather an apt simile, for that is just what it is, a little compact mountain country on the North-West Frontier contained by the rivers Tochi and Gomal. The inhabitants used to be called Wazirs, or Waziris, and are split up into many tribes and sections, of which by far the most important, of the main branches, are the Darwesh-Khels and the Mahsuds. As a matter of fact the latter are always called by their own name (Mahsuds), and the people near Wana, Wazirs.

The country, consisting mainly of steep, precipitous hills and deep, broken valleys, is a most difficult one to operate in; while numerous "tangis"² continually cropping up are very tricky and dangerous to negotiate, with any kind of an enemy in opposition. The remainder of the country, with the exception of a few valleys, is little better than a desert, owing to scanty rainfall and lack of irrigation.

The inhabitants, especially the Mahsuds, are extremely democratic, and even to their tribal leaders only give a half-hearted allegiance, which can never be depended on. They are a brave, hardy, independent people who live mainly by raiding, simply because the country is too poor to support them otherwise.

The numerous expeditions and blockades of the last

¹ A religious teacher.

² A mountain defile, sometimes of considerable length, and often consisting simply of a cleft in the mountains, at the base of which runs a track frequently only a few feet wide.

fifty or sixty years have met with varying success. The 1917 campaign under Major-General Beynon produced more complete submission, and a greater number of rifles surrendered, than any before, yet these people could not resist joining in against us when the Afghan trouble arose in 1919. The thought of loot, the influence of the Amir's troops, and the strong feeling that our day was over, was too much for them. It certainly was a bad day for us, as they are still on the war-path.

The Waziristan trouble being mainly economic, as has been stated time after time, the best plan would appear to be to devise some means by which the country could be made more fertile. Dams, from which water could be conducted to large areas, have been proposed. Here there is the question of *silt*, but, if this is not insuperable, some measure of extensive irrigation, combined with a system of tribal levies, may prove to be the best solution.

This matter of Wana seeming to be urgent, I decided to report it at once to Simla personally, although a perusal of the old files showed that the question was no new one. It had been vigorously represented by some of my predecessors, notably General Sir C. Anderson.

It happened that I had not yet handed over my inspectorship, the arrangement being that I should go up to Simla to do so, two months after taking over the Derajat independent *brigade*. Rather a misnomer by the same token, as the command, with Multan and its brigadier to say nothing of Tank with its commander and various outposts, had much more the strength and status of a division than a brigade. Doubtless overlooked, however, as I was only paid as an ordinary brigadier.

Anticipating the date somewhat, I set off for Simla the very night of my return to Dera Ismail from Wana. There strong representations were made and some kind of settled policy requested. At the same time I fully stated my apprehensions as to what might happen should trouble occur, but all without any success. Indeed it was said, what was there to fuss about? Wana was certainly very disadvantageously situated—everyone knew that—but it was a strategic point and must be held, and even if troops could be spared—which they could not—it was considered inadvis-

able to transfer any to Wana, though it might be, as I stated, a salubrious spot compared with Tank.

It was also said political reports upheld the belief, that the militia were quite all right where they were. Moreover, had we not just finished the successful 1917 campaign against the Mahsuds and Wazirs? Had they not submitted completely and handed in more serviceable rifles, stolen, captured or surrendered, than had ever been known in frontier history before? Finally, there was no likelihood of any trouble in that quarter for a long time, the relations with the tribes never having been in a more satisfactory condition. That was June, 1918.

There was no more to be said, and yet in less than twelve months' time, when the Afghan trouble came and orders were sent for the evacuation of Wana, out of the nine British officers of the South Waziristan Militia, five were killed by their men and two severely wounded, while only two reached Fort Sandemann unscathed. In addition, the mutineers seized the "keep" with all transport, arms, stores, half a million rounds of ball ammunition, sixty thousand rupees worth of treasure, and various other property.

It is a well-known principle of frontier warfare to deny, at all costs, any initial success to the enemy, simply because such a catastrophe spreads like wildfire. Also because, having been once top dog, even for ever so short a time, the primitive but egotistical tribesman sees no reason why he should not be so again. Therefore the failure to abandon Wana altogether in time of peace—and *not* while hostilities were going on—or else to stiffen its garrison with regulars, would appear to be responsible in a very large degree for all the trouble and enormous expenditure that has occurred since, and is still occurring as I write.

Some thirty miles from Dera Ismail, off the Bannu road, where the low hills on the west bank of the Indus come down to the plain, is the quaint little deserted station of Sheikh Budin, once a favourite summer resort of the Bannu garrison, for the place is full of breezes, and the nights are delightfully cool. Approached by a tortuous thirteen miles of zigzag track from Pezu, it contains about a dozen houses in a shocking state of dilapidation, a church, a racquet court and a large clubhouse with quarters—all situated

in a little basin of two hundred yards diameter on top of a hill over three thousand feet high.

These houses were built some fifty years ago all round the edge of the basin, and being little used of late are now almost entirely unfit for habitation without very extensive repair. There is no water on the hill at all, with the exception of four large masonry tanks in the middle of the basin containing very suspicious-looking rain-water. A dry well is alongside which tradition says once held a large amount of good water. A zealous sapper officer, however, trying to increase the yield, investigated with dynamite and effectively stopped the supply altogether, for it has been dry ever since!

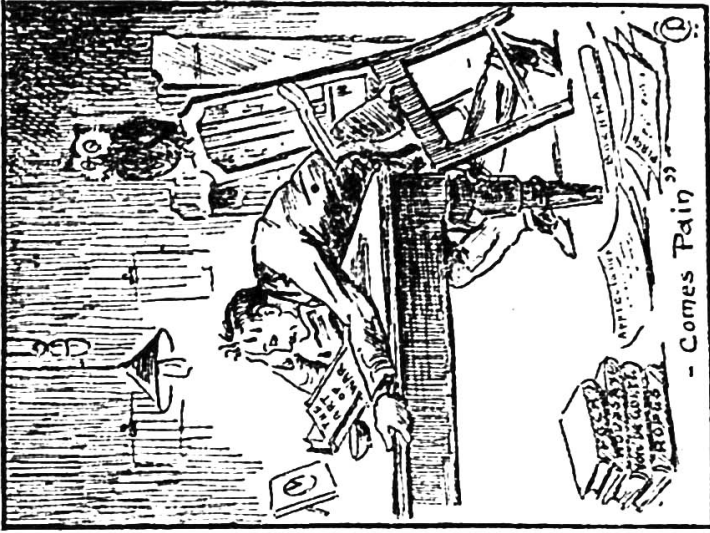
Such was the hot weather head-quarters of the Derajat brigade, and we had to *borrow* it from the Bannu garrison. They indeed said we might have it for ever so far as they were concerned! The clubhouse was sufficiently repaired to make it fairly safe to live in, the owners of one or two houses were induced to plaster a little mud on the walls, a hundred mules for daily carriage of water were sent to Pezu, and before I got back from Simla the office had gone up to Sheikh Budin for the remainder of the hot weather.

Early in 1919 the authorities got out their orders for the demobilisation of INDIAN units with somewhat feverish haste, and without due regard to all the factors that required consideration. Doubtless there was a good excuse, pressed as they were by the Home Government to reduce military expenditure in every way. But the question needed looking at from every point of view, and was a matter for very mature reflection, and not for the hasty issue of dogmatic instructions described, I am told, by one irreverent staff officer, as "undigested froth."

Especially was this the case as regards the North-West Frontier where, the climate having greatly reduced effectives, the majority of infantry battalions could not put in the field more than some four hundred trained men apiece. Yet, under the hard and fast rules circulated, many hundreds were got rid of who did not in the least want to go, and whose retention with the colours was very desirable. Strong representations were made by me, vigorously supported by fellow, as well as higher, commanders, that, on account of our present reduced units, a minimum strength of one



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QUETTA STAFF COLLEGE XMAS CARD, 1919, AT END OF FIRST TERM HELD AFTER THE GREAT WAR.

thousand two hundred and fifty per battalion should be the standard fixed, instead of the figures laid down. This seemed to us absolutely necessary for the time being, so as to deal effectively with any eventualities on the North-West Frontier. My recommendation, however, was not accepted, with the result that when trouble came, a few weeks later, units were woefully below strength.

On the 2nd May the Afghans crossed our frontier near Landi Kotal, in the Khyber, and on the 6th I was appointed G.O.C. Waziristan Force, which included the Derajat and Bannu Brigades, together with the north and south Waziristan Militia at Miranshah (Tochi Valley) and Wana respectively.

This is no place, nor would space suffice, to describe in detail the third Afghan campaign, which can be read elsewhere. It will be sufficient to say that the "plan" contemplated active operations on the Dakka side (beyond the Khyber Pass) only, to meet which all other fronts were denuded of mechanical transport, aeroplanes, etc. On my side even one flight of the latter would have made all the difference. I feel indeed that even *one plane* would have had an enormous influence on the decision of the various tribes near the Gomal, Tochi and Kurram Valleys to be on our side, or against us. But from the Gomal to the Kurram we had not even a single plane for weeks after hostilities commenced.

At this time was also formed the Baluchistan Force with head-quarters at Quetta. It consisted of troops of the 4th Division, as well as the Eastern Persian Cordon, with line of communications from Nushki to Meshed. As the permanent commander of the 4th Division moved up to command this force, it was necessary to find a new one for the division. General Sir Harry Brooking, just back from Mesopotamia, was appointed. Being unable to join owing to ill-health, I was promoted to the vacancy in his place, and joined at Chaman¹ at the end of May. Over this there was some extraordinary mishap to a telegram which, instead of reach-

¹ An outlying cantonment on Afghan frontier, about 78 miles by road and 88½ by railway, north-west of Quetta, over the Khojak Pass. Consists of two small forts, some bungalows and native infantry lines. Is the terminus of the Quetta-Peshin-Chaman branch of the North-Western Railway, which runs through the Khojak Tunnel.

ing me about the 16th May, did not arrive until the 24th. This prevented me joining in time to conduct the operations against Fort Baldak (an Afghan stronghold some five miles from this border cantonment of Chaman), attacked and captured by the 4th Division about the 26th May, without much difficulty, in spite of its formidable strength.

This journey to Quetta was about the hottest we ever undertook. At one period my wife suddenly asked me what the first symptoms of heat-stroke were like, as she felt red-hot needles darting through her head. Putting a hand up, she withdrew it quickly, for her hairpins were so hot it had been painful touching them. When all the hairpins were taken out there was no more trouble.

One fortunate thing was that we managed to keep motor truck, horse box, luggage van, etc., with us. An excellent A.D.C. (Lieut. Salmon, 2nd Gurkhas, one of the best I ever had) looked well after ice for the horses, and they got through the journey very well.

Chaman, being the advanced base for any forward movement on what is termed the southern line (i.e. towards Kandahar, distant only seven marches), has innumerable troop sidings, comprehensive water scheme, some stores, and a supply of rails, etc., for any railway extension necessary. I found it in a partially protected state, but with a great deal more work to be done. Arrangements were made at once for an all-round perimeter defence by means of barbed wire and trenches, as suitable for the troops available. In the middle of this, orders were received to commence an elaborate scheme of outlying "strong posts," supported by lunettes, connected by deep zigzag communicating trenches, and protected from one flank to the other—a distance of about twelve miles—by an apron of barbed wire.

Studying this scheme closely it seemed to me unsuited to frontier fighting, and to be carrying trench warfare a bit too far. I infinitely preferred a reliable perimeter defence with full freedom of movement for aggressive action wherever required. I telegraphed this to headquarters, begging to be allowed to scrap the new scheme. Imagine then my amusement when the answer came that my request could not be acceded to, ending: "It is desired therefore that you carry out as expeditiously as possible

the scheme of defence *evolved by you* with so much care and forethought!" The italics are mine. I had no more to do with its evolution than the Archbishop of Canterbury.

It is a matter of sincere thankfulness to me that there was never any occasion to hold this line against a serious attack. At the same time the work was most beneficial to the troops in every way, keeping them abnormally fit and strong. The occupation of so many small posts was excellent training too for platoon and other sub-unit leaders, in the exercise of their command, and the conduct of those essentials so indispensable for the health, protection and welfare of their men.

Reports from other fronts in 1919 indicated heavy mortality from sickness, evidently connected with water and unclean surroundings. Sanitation and hygiene being amongst my hobbies, I determined that Chaman should be beyond reproach in these matters. Here it is a pleasure to record I was backed up so wholeheartedly by all my staff and commanders (and especially by the Royal Artillery, who became a model) in the many improvements and changes introduced, that when the travelling Health Committee visited my camp I was told they couldn't find a single fly, and stated in their report that the sanitary conditions were far ahead of any other area they had visited.

Although the 4th Division was composed of very fine troops we were quite immobile, having nothing but our first and second line transport and a few camels. A wire came one day asking how long I considered it would take me to get to Kandahar, if not seriously opposed. I forget the number of days given in reply, but with the transport at my disposal it was well over twenty. The journey indeed is only seven stages, but lack of transport would have necessitated long halts to send back for, and get forward, supplies.

Opposed to us at Chaman was a fluctuating force of Afghans bivouacked within a few miles, here one day, there the other, but not out to do us any damage. They were occupied much more in efforts to induce the surrounding tribesmen to rise, than in plans for the discomfiture of the division. Nor were we allowed, after the capture of Fort Baldak, to take any aggressive action whatever,

pending the result of negotiations which were in progress, and which ended shortly in an armistice followed by peace terms in August.

Commanding these Afghan troops was an interesting celebrity in the person of Sardar Abd-ul-Quds. He was appointed Prime Minister of Afghanistan in 1919, when the present Amir Amanulla came to the throne. In April of the same year he was sent to command the Kandahar front. He was recalled to Kabul in October, 1919, and returned to Kandahar as Governor in March, 1920. A whilom wanderer in exile with Abdur Rahman,¹ in the seventies he returned with him when the latter was made Amir of Afghanistan in 1879.

Flying low over his camp one morning, my airman on duty that day came and reported how he had seen a very fascinating young female, in pink, issue from the Sardar's tent, and wave her hand to him. So struck was he that he begged permission to return there in the evening and drop her a box of chocolates; a request I was reluctantly compelled to refuse!

Although well over seventy (born about 1845), the Sardar had all his wits about him, and being inordinately fond of writing used to send in an envoy bearing a flag of truce and carrying letters for G.O.C. Baluchistan Force, the Political Officer, or myself, two or three times a week. They began with sentence after sentence of effusive compliment, and then in a most roundabout way came to the subject-matter. Abd-ul-Quds was really tired of the war, and would gladly have taken his men away, but felt he could not do so until Fort Baldak was restored² to the Afghans.

He was always referring to this. Used to call it the "purdah of his modesty," which he wanted my help to lift, by restoration of the fort. He said his men would refuse to withdraw until this had been accomplished, and talked of the impossibility otherwise of them meeting

¹ The great Abdur Rahman, Amir of Afghanistan for over twenty years, who died 3rd October, 1901. He was succeeded by his son Habibullah, who will always be remembered for his loyalty and staunchness to us during the Great War. Habibullah was murdered on 20th February, 1919, and followed by his third son, Amanullah, the present ruler.

² Eventually restored about September, 1919.

their women folk. He described most graphically how the latter would ask, "In whose care is Fort Baldak?"

On one occasion I had to call his attention to a breach of the terms of the negotiations referred to by his men.

Back came his reply, sheets of it, from which I extract the following. The translation is literal.

"You have written that a few tribal Ghazis¹ entered the British territory which will not be so. The places where the Ghazis live are limited and belong to the Afghan Government. Of course it is possible that they might have entered your border to collect firewood with a view of lull owing to armistice. As your men had fired on them, it is just possible that they might have answered, as our tribal Ghazis never expected such unkindness. After that it can be considered against friendship that you bombed. If you and all your officers of your Government possess one-tenth of the good feeling that I possess, there will be no such occurrences. How it can be possible for me to work without senses who have been doing work with wisdom for the long past period and which is an admitted fact by all the wise men. And now owing to the lack of discipline of your subordinates if such act is done by you, it is considered to be my mistake. I would kill myself if such a wrong act had been committed by me during these forty years. In that condition if God please my death will take place in such a way so as to live eternal life as regards religious point of view and that my name be known throughout the world as regards worldly affairs.

"Walu Mohid Khan my messenger says that Major St. John (Political Officer) stated that who will stand a surety if British vacate the Baldak Fort and hand over the traders' property and see there is no taking up of wrong way against British in future? I write to you that the way adopted by me during the last forty years will stand as your surety. So far I have not asked anything from your soil. As a corner of our modesty (Baldak Fort) has fallen in your hands, I am desirous that you should vacate so that I may be able to speak to my nation as to enable me to open the entrance of conversation with you."

Altogether it was a very pleasant time at Chaman.

¹Fanatics.

There were the delightful morning and evening gallops round the camps, looking at protection and sanitation. Then on to the defences with the cheery working parties and vigilant "look out" groups. All this with the good going and the communicating trenches as "leps" will long live in my memory, and I hope in the memory of those who went with me.