

MAGAZINE

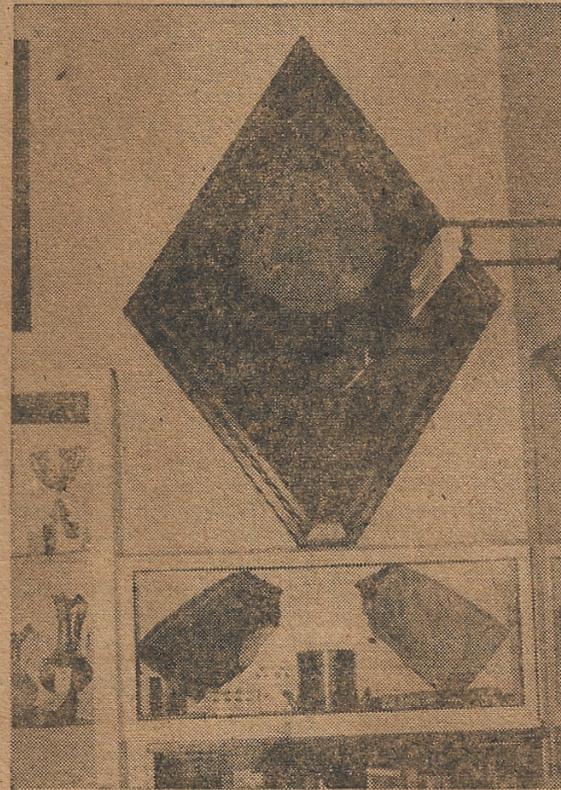
The anniversary of the Ferozeshah battle falls on Dec. 21

The Anglo-Sikh wars were the last campaigns fought by the British in India. These battles were also the hardest, of their long career of conquest in the sub-continent, and the most difficult foes, they had encountered anywhere in the world. On the night of the battle of Ferozeshah (21.12.1845) Lord Hardinge had exclaimed, that the fate of the empire hung by a thread. After the battle of Subraon (10.12.1846), General Sir Harry Smith described it "as the hardest fight in his life except Badaioz, Waterloo and New Orleans". The British Commander-in-Chief, Lord Gough, spoke thus of his erstwhile enemy: "Policy prevented me publicly recording my sentiments of the splendid gallantry of the fallen foe — I could have wept to have witnessed the fearful slaughter of so devoted a body."

The sanguinary Anglo-Sikh conflict has some unique features. Till the British came to the banks of the Sutlej, their wars had been won with an ease, which almost showed an Army on peace-time manoeuvres. At Plassey there was hardly a casualty, and the battle was more a diplomatic one. Even the relatively difficult fights against Tipu Sultan, had been won with the British hardly ever in serious danger. Rarely, if ever, the British had occasion to lose officers, leave alone generals, in a battle in India. When the army therefore marched from Ambala for Ferozepur it was full of braggadocio. Young officers vied with each other, in the glories that they would win, in the short campaign against the Sikhs. The enemy was considered a paper tiger. The turmoil in the Sikh State after Maharaja Ranjit Singh, had further convinced the British, that their army would not stand and fight.

Therefore when in the fading evening light of December 13, 1845, the army of Lord Gough marched into the village of Mudkee, they were full of pride and self-confidence. A sudden skirmish lasting barely two hours, with the advance guard of the Sikh army, left them surprised, confused and baffled. The sharp engagement ended with 872 casualties among the British. General Sir Robert Sale, the hero of Jellalabad, Brigadiers Bolton & Wheeler, and a host of other senior officers lay dead or wounded. The Sikhs had fought and withdrawn to their main camp in good order. The British developed a new found respect for their opponents.

There is no doubt today among historians, British or Indian, that had a patriot guided the destinies of the Sikh Army, Fe-



Sikh battle flags displayed in a case in the museum of the Royal West Kents at Maidstone in England.

rozeshah (21.12.1845) would have gone down in the history of British Army, as their Waterloo. Alas! It was not to be. Shah Mohammed could only lament the absence of the 'Sarkar'. Betrayed and leaderless, the Sikh Army, still took a heavy toll of the British. A total of 2,415 were killed or wounded in Lord Gough's army. Out of 6,000 and odd English soldiers 1,600 became casualties, perhaps the highest ratio ever recorded. H.M. 62 Foot lost 299 men including 16 officers. That evening the regiment was commanded by Sergeants. The 9th lost 270 while the 29th 250. Thirty per cent of the men and the officers of the Third Dargoons became casualties. Everyone of the officers on Lord Hardinge's personal staff became casualties, being either killed or wounded. Major Broadfoot the Political Officer who had done so much to bring about the conflict, was killed in the very first salvo.

At Subraon once again, though winning the battle, the British suffered heavy casualties, including the loss of General officers, such as General

Dick and Brig. Taylor. Chillianwala in the 2nd Sikh War was the last disaster for the British in their Indian Wars. In that brief action they suffered a total of 2,331 casualties. The 24th Foot alone had 518 casualties—perhaps the highest ever suffered by a regiment in a single action—and was completely written off, as a fighting unit after that battle. Two points emerge from these figures. Firstly, the very heavy casualties suffered by the British Army. These are even more impressive when compared as a ratio of the total force involved — about 20,000 men. Never before had the British suffered such losses in any war anywhere. Secondly, the large number of casualties were among officers, including Generals. Before the Anglo-Sikh Wars, I am not aware of any British General having fallen in battle in India. In the Sikh Wars dozen fell.

The British have fought wars in every part of the world. A brave and disciplined people, they have never been known to abandon the field of battle. To this day therefore their histori-

ans have to accept and rue three cases of retreat in the face of the Sikh Army. At Ferozeshah when the attack was launched on the afternoon of December 21, H.M. 24th Regiment forming part of Sir Harry Smith's Division, moved to the attack. Flayed by a murderous fire from Sikh guns, within seconds, it lost more than 200 men. It hesitated, turned and retreated.

Sir Harry Smith in his report after the battle described them as having been seized by "a sudden panic". A tremendous argument arose in England, for never before had a British Regiment been accused of cowardice in the face of the enemy. The Duke of Wellington had himself to defend their reputation in the House of Lords. On December 22 when the 13rd British Army had taken the Sikh Camp, and was about to have a well-earned rest, a second Sikh Army under Tej Singh, which had been camping outside Ferozepur, appeared on the scene. Even the bravest British hearts sank. In that moment of panic, Capt. Lumley ordered the British cavalry and artillery to retreat to Ferozepur, which they actually did. Tej Singh of course never stayed, to complete an easy victory over a desperate and tired army. He deliberately retreated across the Sutlej, against the protest of his men and officers. That is why Shah Mohammed lamented, that a battle which had been won, had been ultimately thrown away.

To the British the withdrawal ordered by Lumley remains a shameful episode, which their historians are trying even today to dissect and explain. One more incident is worthy of note. In the 2nd Sikh War at the battle of Chillianwala (13.1.1849) the British Cavalry under Brig. Pope was attacked by Sikh Cavalry under Jahawar Singh Nalwa, son of the famous Hari Singh. As recorded by British Historians—officers who fought in the battle in fact—the brigade turned, and galloped back through their own guns, which were captured by the Sikhs.

The story goes, that the Army chaplain pulled out his pistol, and tried to stop some of the retreating British Cavalrymen. After the battle, Lord Gough complimented him and said, that but for the fact that he was a man of God, he would have made him a brevet major on the spot! Brig. Pope died of Talwar wounds received in the battle. In a recent book on the battle written by a Pakistani Army Officer, it is recorded, that Lord Gough was so angry at the cowardice of Pope and

by M. S. GILL

his men, that he went and actually kicked Pope's grave. To this day, boys of the village of Chillianwala, keep this tradition alive; they go and throw shoes at the grave. In the long annals of the British, these are perhaps the only instances where their soldiers have turned their backs on the enemy.

Generally the British have been successful in their wars around the world. Rarely have they lost a battle, and even more rarely have they lost colours and guns. In the Invalides in Paris, I found Flags of Scottish regiments of the British Army, which had been captured by Napoleon in Spain. The Sikhs too had the honour of capturing guns and flags from the British at Chillianwala. Sher Singh Attarwala had the distinction of capturing 6 flags including Queen's Colours, and four guns from Lord Gough's army. Unfortunately, since the Sikhs ultimately lost the war, they could not retain these trophies. But this fact remains as an enduring proof of the valour of the Sikh soldiery. The achievement is all the more worthy of praise, when one remembers that, as H. C. B. Cook, in the latest book on the Sikh wars writes: "The tragedy for the ordinary fighting soldier of the Khalsa was to have to go into battle with a Government, which more than half hoped for his defeat, and with ineffective leaders who did not believe in



The British Pillar at Ferozeshah in a dilapidated condition.

the cause they were fighting for".

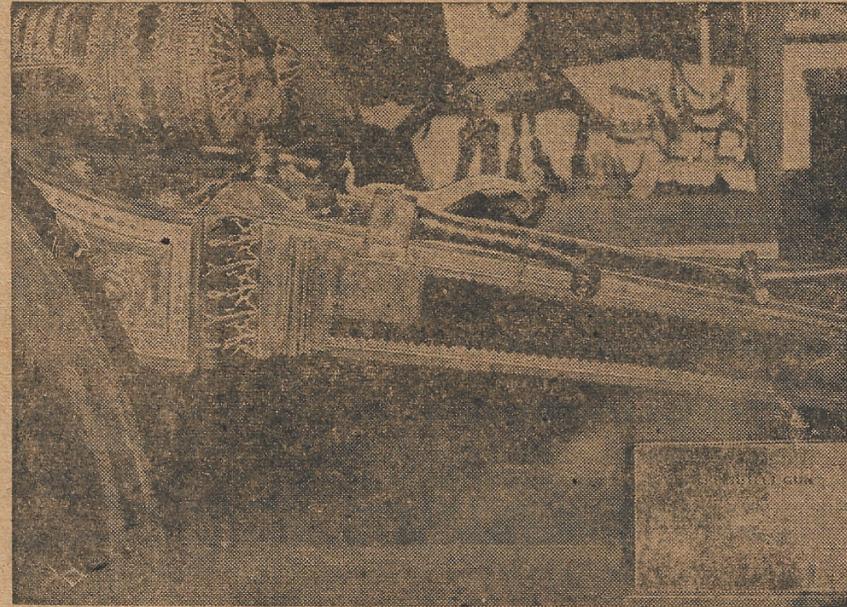
One might make another interesting speculation about the Sikh Wars. They were fought in 1846. The British Army had a large component of Indian regiments recruited from the provinces of Northern India. British historians record, how before the war started, Sikh emissaries secretly visited camps at Ferozepur, Ludhiana and Ambala, to try and persuade the Indian soldiers, not to fight against them. They mention with pride, that everywhere the Sikh overture was rejected, by their Indian mercenaries. Ten years later, in 1856, these same soldiers revolted and failed. Had they been truly motivated by feelings of nationalism they would not have opposed the Sikhs in 1845. That was the time when they should have joined the Sikh army in expelling the British from India. In that year, they would perhaps have succeeded, for the British, with mutiny in their own ranks, could hardly have faced the disciplined Sikh Brigades.

The Sikh Wars being the most recent, and the most bloody of the British campaigns in India, continue to excite the interest of their historians. New studies and eva-

luations of the battles appear with monotonous regularity. Because of the nearness of the period, it is still possible to search for interesting historical relics and documents of these wars. In my own amateurish way I have followed this hobby. I was particularly interested to trace the battle Flags and Guns, which must have been taken from the Sikh Army, by the victorious British. During a year's stay in Cambridge over 1974-75, I contacted numerous authorities on Anglo-Sikh history, visited museums and historical family houses, but without success.

Then with more luck than effort, as often happens, I discovered what I wanted. On a glorious summer morning I motored 50 miles out of London, to the small town of Maidstone in the county of Kent, which houses the museum of the Queen's own Royal West Kent Regiment. The 50th Foot had fought through the Sikh Wars, and as I came into the museum, I saw with excitement, a beautifully polished and gleaming Gun from the arsenal of Maharaja Ranjit Singh, on display.

It was in perfect condition, and bespoke the quality of the Sikh artillery, which had caus-



One of the two Sutlej guns as they are called in a museum in England.

ed so much havoc among the British at Ferozeshah. Six of these guns had been brought as trophies after the War to England. Two were given to Lord Hardinge, who presented them to this museum. The second of this pair now finds an honoured place, in the entrance foyer of the National Army Museum, in Chelsea in West London. The other four guns were given as mementoes to Directors of the East India Company, and have disappeared.

Looking at the beautiful piece of brass craftsmanship probably cast by Lehna Singh Majithia in the Lahore Fort, my mind went back to the fateful afternoon of December 21, 1845 at Ferozeshah, when as Cook records "the Sikh gunners literally fought to the death". Lord Hardinge's son, who took part in the battle, also wrote to his mother afterwards, that the morning had found British and Sikh dead, Such was the devotion of the Sikh artillerymen, that they had preferred to die with their

Continued on page 7

GUNS & BATTLE FLAGS

Remembering Anglo-Sikh wars

Remembering Anglo-Sikh Wars

Continued from page 5 col. 8

guns, rather than abandon them.

In a case on the wall of the museum, hung three battle Flags taken from the Sikhs by the 50th Foot. In another corner, hung the torn and bloody Jacket of a British Officer, along with the Talwar which had killed him. In the National Army Museum in London, hangs the famous white coat which Lord Gough wore during the Sikh Wars. He liked to wear this, so that both friend and enemy could spot him without difficulty. Working through the Research Section of the National Army Museum, I traced out another two Sikh Flags, which were taken at the battle of Gujrat (21.2.49) by the 2nd Bengal European Regiment. A fifth Sikh Army Flag, hangs in Lichfield Cathedral in the Midlands. Of this Cook has written thus "against the 80th the Sikhs were led by a man with a large Black Flag, around which the fiercest fighting occurred. Two of the Company Commanders were killed at this time, but the Black Flag was captured by Colour Sergeant Kirkland. The Black Flag now hangs above the 80th Sikh War Memorial in Lichfield Cathedral".

Interestingly, all these Flags are secular in design, and do not bear the Sikh religious emblem nor are they in the traditional Sikh colours of blue and yellow. As far as I can judge they were designed by the European officers of Maharaja Ranjit Singh, for the new regiments raised in the Sikh Army. Each General produced his own esthetic design. I had often speculated as to whether Sikh battle flags were also religious ones. The evidence now confirms the secular, non religious character of the regime of Maharaja Ranjit Singh. These historical relics, located for the first time, are of intense interest to all patriots in this country, for they commemorate men, who fought bitterly to retain their freedom. The Punjab Government has done much, to bring back such historical relics. I hope they will try, and bring back at least one of the guns, and some of the flags.

On return to India, I had an intense desire to visit the battlefields of the 1st Sikh War, those of the Second now being in Pakistan. Last winter I went down to Ferozepore, and saw the impressive memorial, which was to be inaugurated a week later by Mr. Sanjay Gandhi. The Memorial is situated some distance away from the village, on the canal bank. I walked back to the village to see the victory pillar put up by the British. It stood forlorn and dilapidated in swampy fields of paddy. Unless repaired, it will soon disappear.

At Mudkee, 10 miles away, stood another pillar in some what better condition among sand dunes. Opposite it, I found a Shaheed Gun, or memorial to the Sikh dead, being constructed by the people of the area. In a fit of enthusiasm a Chief Minister had promised all help. The promise and the man, have both faded from the scene. But the villagers still continue to

struggle on to complete this "Yaadgar".

I asked them what they remember of the battle. They only called it 'Qatal Garh'. I knew that General Sale, Brig. Bolton and Brig. Wheeler were likely to be buried, somewhere around the battlefield. I asked, but the villagers denied knowledge of any such graves. On a little more probing, someone remembered three old graves in the village itself. We walked down through narrow lane to a 'Havell'. Refugee farmers from Pakistan now lived there. In side, in a small walled enclosure, I found two graves, obviously of high dignitaries in a state of total neglect. Around them were piled dry cotton sticks and fodder. I asked about the third one. Through a door we went into another 'Havell'. I looked around, but found no grave.

"Where is the grave?" I queried. "There, in front of you, Sir," someone replied. I looked hard, but found only two buffaloes, feeding out of a raised, feeding trough. "Yes that is one. You are looking, not at the feeding trough but the grave", some one said with a loud laugh. Still mystified, I asked them to explain. The owner of the house came forward, grinned, and explained somewhat sheepishly that this in fact was the grave, around whose raised platform, he had put a brick or two, in order to convert it into a feeding trough. We all laughed, and I thought of poor General Sale, who now helps feed Punjab's buffaloes. My thoughts went to Omar Khayyam.

"They say the Lion and the Lizard keep The Courts where Jamshyd gloried and drank deep And Bahram, that great Hunter- the Wild Ass Stamps o'er his Head, and he lies fast asleep".

From Mudkee we motored down to the Ferozepur bank of the Sutlej, to the village of Chhota Sutlej, the scene of the last, and the most bloody battle of the 1st Sikh War. The Memorial Pillar and its surroundings, are occupied by landless tenants. Unless repaired, this one too will soon disappear. Standing near the Pillar I looked across towards the river, and the village of Chhota Subraon, and the battle of the fateful February 10, 1846 seemed to be re-enacted before my eyes.

I thought of the noble Sham Singh of whom Sir Lepel H. Griffin comments in his book THE PUNJAB CHIEFS! "It is said that the night before Sabraon, Sardar Tej Singh counselled Sham Singh to fly with him on the first attack of the British. Sham Singh refused with scorn. On which Tej Singh angrily said: "If you are so brave you had better take your oath about it, for I believe you will come with me after all." Sardar Sham Singh called for a Granth (the Sikh scriptures), and solemnly swore that, should the Sikhs be defeated, he would never leave the trenches alive. On the morning of the battle, the 10th of February, he dressed himself in white and having mounted his white mare, addressed his men, begging them, as true sons of the Khalsa, to die ra-

ther than turn their backs on the enemy. During the first part of the battle he was everywhere present, urging the Sikhs to fight bravely; and it was not till he saw that all was lost that he spurred forward against the 60th Regiment, waving his sword and calling on his men to follow him. Some fifty of them obeyed the call, but were driven back into the river, and Sham Singh fell dead from his horse, pierced with seven balls. After the battle his servants swam over the river and begged permission to search for his body. The permission was granted; and the body of the old Sardar, conspicuous by his white dress and long white beard was discovered where the dead lay thickest. His servants placed the body on a raft and swam with it across the river, but it was not till the third day, that it reached Atari. Many other true Sikhs like Sham Singh lost their lives in this battle.

As at Mudkee, in the village of Chhota Sabraon, once again I found a modest Memorial, in memory of this great son of Punjab. A Gurdwara is being constructed. When it will be completed, I do not know. But ever since the death of Sham Singh the people have always come spontaneously to this village, for a festival on February 10.

Under the 'Nishan Sahib' I found large numbers of wooden pegs driven into the ground. I asked the old priest, why? He explained: "At night, at times we still hear the sound of battle, the boom of cannons and the shrieking of dying horses. The Sikh soldiers come galloping up out-of the moon night. These pegs are put here by the faithful to help them to tie their horses. Those who are pure of heart, can even see the noble Sardar Sham Singh come riding by, on his horse. Sleeping in this little Gurdwara room, I have myself seen him, standing under yon trees. You may or may not believe it, but even at the victory Pillar set up by the British they had to have two Chowkidars. One alone would not sleep there, because the din of battle at night frightened him."

"On February 10 farmers from far and near bring offerings and milk from their newly purchased buffaloes and cows, for the shrines of Sardar Sham Singh. The Chowkidars have gone, and the British Pillar is falling down, but the memory of Sham Singh lives on, in the hearts of the people.

It is true that a memorial has been built at Ferozeshah, but there is need even more, to build them at Mudkee and Subraon. Sardar Sham Singh deserves to be remembered better by his countrymen. It is also necessary to repair and preserve the columns set up by the British, at these battlefields. Some one objected to me, that they are memories of the British. But the point is slightly different. They authenticate the battlefields, which we wish to preserve. History cannot be changed by letting a Pillar fall down. At Waterloo, the mementoes of both Napoleon and Wellington, are preserved for posterity. We too need to preserve Punjab history, both for its own people, and for the visiting tourist.