

ESCAPE

Meerut, India - 11th May, 1857

I lay still as death itself. Hugging the ground, cowering in the dry bed of a shallow nullah¹, hardly daring to breathe in case I gave myself away.

My leg throbbed; I must have fractured it when I'd jumped from the cantonment wall the night before after my commanding officer had ordered me to sneak out of the garrison and break through the sepoy troops to raise the alarm and bring back reinforcements.

God knows if the garrison was still resisting or not; I couldn't hear any shooting in the distance so either they had been overrun or the siege had entered a stalemate. All I did know as I kept my head down was that my leg was a constant throbbing pain and the enemy was searching for me. Around me I could hear the muffled footsteps of sepoys scouring the ground and the occasional shouted command or comment near and far in a language that I didn't understand.

At times, I would shudder in the cool of the night and almost choke, stifling a groan of agony as the stabbing pain jarred my body. Then I would resolve to stay still again until an involuntary twitch shot the next vicious bolt of pain up my leg.

It took extreme willpower to stay quiet but I knew that if I were to be discovered they would kill me - perhaps a bullet or a bayonet thrust or the slash of a khanda, the traditional double-edged sword that the rebels would be carrying, or maybe worse.

I even had some distant empathy with them. They had reason to vent their anger on a British soldier in return for the treatment that they and their comrades had received at the hands of the British East India Company over the years. The blood lust would still be upon them as they besieged the camp or, for all I knew, after they had overrun it and slaughtered my comrades.

My mind raced as I reviewed my situation. I cursed the desk jockeys that had led us to this state of affairs. It had been a long time coming and clear to see for those with eyes and ears to see and hear. It had been a regular topic of discussion in the officers' mess.

A number of changes had been stirring up resentment. The presence of missionaries and the Company's tolerance if not encouragement had convinced some that we were planning mass conversions of Hindus and Muslims to Christianity. Not true, but repeat a lie often enough and it takes on the veneer of truth.

Too, with the Company's jurisdiction expanding following victories in wars or annexation, Indian soldiers had been required to not only serve in foreign lands like Burma but also serve

without the foreign service pay that they had once received. And although only new recruits to the Bengal Army were required to abide by this requirement, serving high-caste sepoys spread the rumour that this would eventually be extended to them.

There were also grievances about promotions based on seniority which was even more of a problem with the increasing number of British officers. The new rifle had been the last straw.

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I had covered my army uniform before leaving the cantonment, disguising myself in a native garb which afforded me some comfort - God knows what would have happened if they had caught sight of a red tunic. But the almost imperceptible lightening of the sky foretold the coming of dawn and I knew I couldn't remain undiscovered for long, nor would I want to remain in the open once the fury of the sun began to beat down on the bone-dry land below.

I cautiously swung my free arm from side to side until I found a rock that filled my hand and held it tight. It might be a useful weapon - certainly preferable to firing my pistol which would alarm the sepoys searching for me. I also found a pebble which I put in my mouth to try to relieve a growing thirst - a trick I had picked up from a long-serving officer when I had arrived in India.

It was then that I heard the sound of footsteps.

I hugged the ground and kept totally still.

Steps coming closer.

I could smell someone nearby and, although I was lying face down, I sensed him bend towards me. Perhaps he was just checking if I was alive or dead. As he leaned in closer, I could hear and almost feel his breath and my senses picked up the scent of spiced food mingled with sweat.

I turned as quickly as I could to see his eyes widen and his mouth opening to shout a warning - a warning silenced as I smashed the rock against his temple with all the force I could muster. He slumped to the ground, his rifle clattering against the rock-strewn earth. I tensed, waiting for this to alert others.

But nothing.

And my victim lay still as death, blood oozing from where I had struck him. He was still breathing, spittle slipping into his beard, but he was completely unconscious.

Leaving him where he lay, I took his rifle and carefully crawled up to the ridge of the nullah and looked around. Here and there I could see several sepoy's searching, but none were near me, and about 100 yards away, partly obscured by bushes and hillocks, I could see someone on a horse surveying the scene. Probably their commander.

I exhaled my pent up breath slowly and momentarily closed my eyes as I muttered a short prayer. I had not been observed. This could not continue much longer and I wracked my brain to decide on a course of action before the sepoy recovered and gave me away.

An idea came to me. Desperate, but what other choice was there? I had the sepoy's rifle. I could use this as a crutch. So I raised myself gingerly, almost fainting with the pain at one point.

Leaning heavily on the rifle, I began to make my way towards the horseman, pretending to be a sepoy searching the ground as I inched ever closer.

I managed to get within a yard or two of the horseman, using bushes for cover and coming up from behind, then, checking around to make sure that no one was watching, I stepped stealthily away from the bush and up to the horse then, gripping the muzzle of the rifle in both hands, I swung it with all my might at the horseman's head.

Pain shot up my leg as I applied leverage but there was a satisfying thud as I connected with my target. He fell from his mount like a sack of potatoes and the horse began to rear, neighing in alarm. His rider was out cold, unconscious, if not dead. Frantically, I grabbed the reins and soothed the animal with soft words and by stroking his neck, "There, there my beauty. Nothing to worry about. There, there".

Then I gritted my teeth, held onto the pommel, placed my good foot into the stirrup and heaved myself up. I felt nauseous, the sweat poured down my face and stung my eyes as I assessed the situation.

It was then that I heard the shouts of the infantrymen who had now realized what was happening - but to my surprise nobody fired their weapon and instead they just ran towards me, waving blades and crying out in anger. I urged my horse forwards and, with a regularly jarring pain, galloped off towards the garrison town of Delhi. Still, nobody fired any shots and there was nobody ahead so all I had to do was to keep riding.

Which is exactly what I did.

I later realised that the reason no shots had been fired at me was because a rumour had spread among the sepoy that the grease used on the cartridges issued to them by the British was a mixture of pigs' and cows' lard, so oral contact when they bit the cartridge to load the Enfield was an insult to both Muslim and Hindu alike. Their disobedience of orders in this regard was one of the reasons that the rebellion² had broken out in the first place, but it also probably saved my life.

I remember riding as the sun rose and the dry air began to rasp at my throat. I don't know how long I was in the saddle, clinging on desperately. And then I remember nothing until I awoke in a hospital bed with someone bathing my forehead.

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"Where am I?" I croaked.

"You're safe, Major Gask" he replied, "Just rest, sir. You've had a bad injury to your leg and you're running a fever, but we got to you in time and it's all under control now". Then he added as an afterthought, "You're lucky. You were picked up by a patrol out of Delhi and they sent you on to here. Delhi's also been overrun".

"Where's here?" I whispered.

"Lucknow", he replied, then he put his hand up and said, "Enough talking for now, Major. You need to recover, then you can make plans".

* * *

About 10 days later I was on my way again. In addition to my injury, I was now experiencing a fever, headaches, chills and abdominal pain. However, it was too dangerous to stay put; there were no reinforcements nearby and the rebels were expected to lay siege to Lucknow at any time, long before a relief column could arrive. So, I and other invalids were loaded onto wagons with most of the women and we set out before dawn, heading south, away from the increasingly serious rebellion that seemed to be gathering force by the day.

It was a miserable journey and when I arrived at Bombay I was in a poor way. The doctors diagnosed enteric fever³ - a curse that had fallen on many new arrivals - and for the next several weeks I was quite delirious and it was touch and go, but thanks to the attentive care I received I pulled through, although I was extremely weak and I had to use crutches to cope with my injured leg.

As I recovered over the next couple of months, I cursed my luck. I grieved for my comrades; at Meerut and Delhi, men and women had been butchered, including men I had known and liked, with whom I had laughed and worked, shared a joke and a beer. Good men. Defenceless women. And if Lucknow had needed to be fortified (and it did, that was obvious), as an engineer I should have been helping out, overseeing new fortifications, doing my job for God's sake.

This was my first assignment to India but now my health was irretrievably compromised. I cut an emaciated shadow of my prior self and I had a pronounced limp. All this when things had been going so well with promotion to Major a few months earlier.

I remained in a sour mood as events unfolded. Unfolded without me because my condition was considered sufficiently compromised that the medical board determined no time should be lost dispatching me back to England for a period of convalescence.

At least the lengthy journey gave me time to heal and to come to terms with my injury. It could have been worse, I knew that, and now I had to turn my thoughts to the future. What was I going to do with myself?

The journey back, day after day after day on an endless sea gave me plenty of time to think and when we finally disembarked at Portsmouth I had formed a plan of action.

1 Nullah: A gully or ravine

2 When soldiers of the Bengal army mutinied in Meerut on May 10, 1857, tension had been growing for some time. The immediate cause was the deployment of a new breech-loading Enfield rifle, the cartridge of which was rumoured to have been greased with pork and beef fat. When Muslim and Hindu troops learned that the tip of the Enfield cartridge had to be bitten off to prepare it for firing, a number of troops refused to accept the ammunition for religious reasons. These troops were placed in irons, but it didn't take long for their comrades to free them and rise against the British.

3 Enteric fever, or typhoid