

The Battle of Saragarhi

DHRUV C KATOCH

*Beneath Saragarhi's ruined walls,
They found a fitting grave;
For Saragarhi bears the fame,
They gave their lives to save.*

Early Roman history records the great courage of Horatius Cocles, the legendary Roman hero, who defended the bridge across the Tiber when the city was attacked by the Etruscans in the year 510 CE. Many centuries later, Thomas Babbington Macaulay wrote an inspiring poem of this act of exceptional valour. Titled 'The lays of Ancient Rome', the 27th verse of this epic poem is now quoted across the world:

*Then out spake brave Horatius, the Captain of the Gate:
'To every man upon this earth death cometh soon or late.
And how can man die better than facing fearful odds,
For the ashes of his fathers, and the temples of his gods'.*

There have been similar acts of valour in India, but perhaps we lacked a Macaulay to immortalise their indomitable courage in verse. The Battle of Saragarhi is one such which should be etched in the heart of every Indian. The battle took place during the Tirah Campaign of 1897.

In the latter half of the 19th Century, the boundaries of the British Indian Empire extended up to Afghanistan. To reach the border required passing through rugged terrain inhabited by hostile Pathan and Afridi tribes. The events leading up to the

campaign had their origin in British interests to protect the caravan trade routes to and from Kabul which passed through the Kurram Valley. 'Safed Koh' or 'White Mountain' in the North separated this British frontier territory from Afghanistan proper. The local tribes often attacked and looted the caravans moving between British India and Kabul. In 1896, Pathans in NWFP (North West Frontier Province now called Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, a province in Pakistan) rose in revolt against the British policy of deploying troops in this territory. Consequently, 36 SIKH of the East Bengal Rifles (now 4 SIKH) was mobilised and moved to Kohat by end December 1896. The Battalion was thereafter deployed on the Samana Range, a dominating feature overlooking the Tirah Valley to the West and the Hangu Valley in the East.

In January 1897, the battalion under Lieutenant Colonel J Haughton completed its deployment. The battalion headquarters with a part of the battalion occupied Fort Lockhart (altitude 6,743 feet above msl) and Fort Cavagnari (Fort Gulistan). As these forts were some 5 miles apart and lacked inter-visibility, a post was set up at Saragarhi, between the two, at a height of 6000 feet to act as a heliographic communication post. The rest of the battalion under Captain WD Gordon occupied Parachinar about 80 kilometers further West with detachments at Thai and Sada. The nearest permanent garrison from where reinforcements could come was at Kohat, about 60 kilometers East of Fort Lockhart. In August and September 1897, the Pashtuns made sporadic attempts to capture the British forts but were thwarted in their attempts. On 3rd and 9th September, Afridi tribes, owing allegiance to Afghans attacked Fort Gulistan, but the attacks were repulsed. A relief column sent to Fort Gulistan from Fort Lockhart, on its return trip reinforced the signaling detachment positioned at Saragarhi, increasing its strength to one Non-Commissioned Officer (NCO) and twenty Other Ranks (ORs). This proved fortuitous as the attack on Saragarhi, commanded by Havildar Ishar Singh came three days later on 12 September.

With their failure to capture Fort Gulistan, a large force of the Orakzai tribe along with the Afridi Lashkar turned their attention to the more vulnerable Saragarhi Post. Surrounding Saragarhi from all sides, the tribesman successfully cut off the post from all access to reinforcements, ammunition, ration and stores. That left the post with only heliographic communication with its battalion headquarters at Fort Lockhart. It is through the messages sent by the post to its battalion headquarters that a picture emerges of what happened on that fateful day of 12 September 1897.

The attack on Saragarhi commenced on the morning of 12th September. The tribesman launched a fierce and determined attack but the approaches were

well covered and the defenders held on to their post. After heavy and bitter fighting the attackers were forced to withdraw leaving many dead behind. The hopelessness of the situation however could not have been lost on the defenders for though one attack had been repulsed, they were completely outnumbered and the enemy was forming up to attack once again. But that only fuelled their resoluteness to fight till the bitter end and defend their post at all cost. The die was cast. History in golden letters was soon to be written by a group of men, fighting a battle far from their homeland on a lonely hill feature which their heroism would transform into a word which would be used synonymously with courage.

From Fort Lockhart, at least 14 Standards of the tribesman could be counted and that gave an idea of the strength of the tribal lashkar in the area. Some estimates put the figure in the region of 10,000 to 12,000 personnel. The narrowness of the feature and the restricted approaches obviously could not have involved more than a couple of hundred attacking at any point of time, but the sheer numbers available to the attacking force meant that the attackers could make up their losses while the defenders had no means to do so. And that is how the battle unfolded.

The tribals regrouped and attacked again, but the defenders remained resolute and held on to their positions. Attempts to send reinforcements from Fort Lockhart were thwarted by the tribals and Saragarhi remained isolated. But the resolve of the defence did not weaken. The tribal leaders then started making tempting offers to the Sikhs, to induce them to surrender but to no avail. Charge after charge was repulsed but in the process, the ranks of the defenders started dwindling. The tribesmen now set fire to the surrounding bushes and under the cover of smoke two of the tribesmen closed in with the post's boundary wall in an area blind to the defender's observation and rifle fire. They succeeded in making a breach in the wall, a development that was observed from Fort Lockhart and flashed to the post. From the men left guarding the gate, Havildar Ishar Singh immediately dispatched a few to deal with the breach. With the defenders being forced to split their meagre forces, the defence of the gate was weakened. The enemy seized the moment to pile up the pressure and it was not long before the enemy rushed both the gate and the breach.

Thereafter, one of the fiercest hand to hand fights followed, the unique saga being witnessed by the commanding officer and others from Fort Lockhart. The wounded fought with the rest, till the last drop of blood oozed out from their body and they lay still, their weapon still firmly held in their hand. And when they fell, their dead bodies were carried back and laid to rest in the inner layer

of the post. Sepoy Gurmukh Singh who had been in continuous heliographic communication with the battalion headquarters now sent his last signal. The enemy was at the gate, ammunition was running low and the handful of defenders remaining required every man for the defence. Gurmukh asked for permission to shut down the heliograph and take up his rifle. Permission was immediately flashed back and Sepoy Gurmukh Singh dismounted his heliograph equipment, packed it in a leather bag, fixed bayonet on his rifle and joined the fight. But the toll on the defence had been too heavy and as the defenders fell one by one, the enemy finally swarmed inside the post. By 3.30 pm, the only survivor was a badly wounded soldier lying on a bed in the guard room. He continued the fight killing many of the enemy before achieving martyrdom. The 21 brave men of 36 SIKH had been silenced but in the defence of their post, they had lived up to the highest traditions of the infantry. They held on to the post for more than nine hours till the last man amongst them had died. Only then could the enemy take Saragarhi.

On 14 September, the post was retaken with intensive artillery fire support. The Afghans later stated that they had lost about 180 killed and many more wounded in the capture of Saragarhi. Some 600 bodies were strewn around the post after it was retaken but a large number of these would have been those killed in the counter attack, mostly from artillery fire. The figure of 180 lashkar killed by Havildar Ishar Singh and his men as stated by the Afghans can thus be taken as being fairly accurate. This by itself was a tremendous feat, worthy of emulation, but the greater heroism lay in fighting continuously for over nine hours, without rest or pause, without hope of reinforcement, till the very last defender had laid down his life. Such a feat is rarely seen in the annals of military history. On learning of this glorious, gallant and unparalleled action, the British Parliament rose in unison to pay homage to the great Indian soldiers. Each one of the 21 soldiers was awarded an IOM (Indian Order of Merit), the highest British gallantry award then given to Indian troops. Never before or since have such a large number of posthumous gallantry awards been given at one time to a single unit.

The Battle at Saragarhi is one of eight stories of collective bravery published by UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization) and has been rated as one of the world's most courageous actions in the annals of military history. This article is a tribute to the 21 who made the supreme sacrifice and in doing so, embellished the history of their unit, their regiment and their country in letters of gold.



The ruins of Saragarhi after the post was retaken on 14 September 1897.



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12 September 1897

ROLL OF HONOUR

S. No.	Name	Regimental Number
1	Havildar Ishar Singh	165
2	Naik Lal Singh	332
3	Lance Naik Chanda Singh	546
4	Sepoy Sundar Singh	1321
5	Sepoy Ram Singh	287
6	Sepoy Uttar Singh	492
7	Sepoy Sahib Singh	182
8	Sepoy Hira Singh	359
9	Sepoy Daya Singh	687
10	Sepoy Jivan Singh	760
11	Sepoy Bhola Singh	791
12	Sepoy Narayan Singh	834
13	Sepoy Gurmukh Singh	814
14	Sepoy Jivan Singh	871
15	Sepoy Gurmukh Singh	1733
16	Sepoy Ram Singh	163
17	Sepoy Bhagwan Singh	1257
18	Sepoy Bhagwan Singh	1265
19	Sepoy Buta Singh	1556
20	Sepoy Jivan Singh	1651
21	Sepoy Nand Singh	1221

**In Remembrance of the Valiant 21
Whose actions remind us
What Honour, Courage and Sacrifice
Should mean to a soldier.**

Maj Gen **Dhruv C Katoch**, SM, VSM (Retd) is the Additional Director at CLAWS, with inputs the Sikh Regimental Centre