

The Saga of Saragarhi

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* From *The Sikh Review*: September 1992.

the 12th of September every year marks the anniversary of Saragarhi, one of the most moving episodes in the annals of our military history. Not many of the present generation of Indians will have heard of Saragarhi; so I take the liberty of writing about it. In this little outpost 21 Indian jawans fought back a *lashkar* of 10,000 tribemen. And died to a man without surrendering their outpost.

Saragrahi was, as the name signifies, a tiny fortress in no-man's land in the Hindkush and Sulaiman ranges. The region was inhabited by fierce, lawless tribes whom both the Afghan and the British governments paid a sort of blackmail tax to keep them peaceful. The Afghan government exploited Pakhtoon nationalist sentiment and religious fanaticism of the tribesmen against the English who had introduced "idolatreous Hindus and the hated Sikhs" into the homelands of the Pathans.

This was known as the "prickly hedge policy" of turning the tribesmen against the British so that they did not give the Afghans any trouble. It paid handsome dividends as the tribesmen kept harassing British-Indian troops, while leaving the Afghans alone.

British policy wavered between aggressive inroads into tribal territory and buying peace by regular payments to villagers to guard caravan routes. In 1879 the British led an expedition into Orakzai territory. The Orakzai tribe retaliated by ambushing isolated British units wherever and whenever they could. This undeclared war went on for 11 years.

In January 1891, Brigadier General Sir William Lockhart took a punitive expedition through Orakzai territory and destroyed many villagers in the Khanki valley. The Orakzais capitulated and agreed to let the British build three outfield posts on Samana Ridge and link them to the neighbouring Morangai Valley by road. Two months later they changed their minds and decided to have another go at British-Indian forces. On 24th March they suddenly attacked an escort party of the 29th Punjabis and the 3rd Sikh Frontier Force, killed 14 men and wounded seven.

The next day they rushed picquets at Sangar and Gulistan. All the victims of the surprise attack on Gulistan were Sikh soldiers. The tribesmen drove a herd of cows to the post. The Sikh abstained from firing on cows and fell victim to the ruse practiced on them.

A full-scale war began with tribal *lashkars* attacking British-Indian outposts all over the NWF Province. Samana Ridge, Kohat and the Khurram Valley were defended by the 36th Sikhs, a unit raised from Ferozepur in 1887. Three fortresses which came under heavy attack from Orakzais and the Afridis were Fort Lockhart, Gulistan and Saragarhi.

Of these, Saragarhi was only a picquet with a signal tower which maintained the heliographic communication with the other two. All around the three was thorny scrub littered with large boulders which provided cover for the besieging tribesmen. The garrison in Saragarhi consisted of 21 men under the command of the Havaldar Ishar Singh. The tower was manned by a solitary signaller Gurmukh Singh.

The tribesmen came on with full force and killed most of the 21 defenders. The defenders ran out of ammunition. The six who remained decided to make their last stand in the mess. Tribesmen threw burning faggots of bushwood into the mess and set it on fire. The six men fixed bayonets on their rifles, rushed out and were killed to a man. Only Signaller, Gurmukh Singh, remained in the tower.

The last message from Saragarhi which flashed across with the sunbeams was: "People say one's brothers are like one's own arms. If you were our brothers, you would have seen our plight and helped us with ammunition. But it was beyond your power: the enemy has blocked all the roads. Brothers, we have served our Guru and our Emperor and now we take leave of you for ever."

Gurmukh Singh asked for permission to close the signal post. The permission was flashed back from Fort Lockhart. Gurmukh Singh dismounted his heliograph equipment, packed it in a leather case and fixed his bayonet on his rifle.

The tribesmen did not want to lose more men in hand to hand fighting and set fire to the tower. Gurmukh Singh perished in the flames shouting at top of his voice, "*Boley so nihal, Sat Sri Akal.*"

