

THE BATTLE OF KELAT

Lieutenant T.W.E. Holdsworth

Kotree, 8 December 1839

...About three miles and a half from Kelat the fortress appeared before us, frowning defiance. The sun had just burst out, and was lighting the half-cultivated valley beneath us, interspersed with fields, gardens, ruinous mosques; while Kelat was still in the shade and seemed to maintain a dark and gloomy reserve; nor was the effect diminished when a thin cloud of smoke was seen spouting forth and curling over its battlements, followed, in a short interval, by the report of a large gun, which came booming over the hills towards us. "Hurrah! They have fired the first shot," was the exclamation of some of us, "and Kelat is prize-money!"

We could only see the citadel, which was more commanding and difficult of access than that of Ghuzni. Nearer the fort we could observe the body of cavalry drawn up, under cover of the redoubts of the hills. General Willshire now ordered one of the guns to open on the horsemen, to cover the movements of the advance companies, who were driving the enemy's matchlock-men before them. The third shot went slap in among them.... The whole affair was the most exciting thing I ever experienced. We moved steadily on, the guns from the redoubts blazing at us as fast as they could load them, but only two shots struck near us. When our artillery unshipped one of their guns, they exploded their powder, and retired in the greatest disorder....

Captain Outram here rode up to us, and cried out: "On men, and take the gate before they can all get in." This acted like magic on the men. All order was lost, and we rushed madly down the hill on the flying enemy, more like hounds with the chase in view than disciplined soldiers. The consequence was, we were exposed to a most galling fire from the ramparts.... The fugitives were too quick for us, and suddenly the cry was raised by our leading men, "The gate is shut." Unluckily a rush was made by the greatest part of the regiment, who were so closely jammed that they could not move, exposed to the fire which the matchlock-men kept pouring in with utmost impunity. Had the artillery been less expedient in knocking down the gate, the greatest part of them would have been annihilated.... Our men gave the general hurrah; and General Willshire came up to us at his best pace, waving his hat, "Forward, Queen's," he sung out, "or the 17th will be in before you." On we rushed again for the gate as hard as we could....

However, on entering, we found matters not so easy as we expected. The streets were very narrow and so intricate that they formed a perfect labyrinth. The men, therefore, soon got scattered about and some, I am afraid, thought of loot more than of endeavouring to find a way to the citadel.... In a short time we found ourselves in a large courtyard with Beloochees right under the windows of the citadel. These men cried out for mercy; but the soldiers, recollecting the treachery that had been practised at Ghuzni, were going to shoot the whole kit of them, when I suddenly received a shock, which made me think at the moment I was smashed to bits, by a ball from a ginjall, or native wallpiece. I was knocked senseless to the ground.... When I came to myself I found myself coughing up globules of clotted blood at a great pace. I made a desperate effort, got on my legs, and soon found some of our men, who supported me until a dooly could be brought and I was soon on my way to the doctor....

In the meantime, there had been sharp fighting in the citadel. One party reached the place where Mehrab Khan, at the head of his chiefs who had joined his standard, was sitting with his sword drawn. The others seemed inclined to surrender, and raised the cry of "Aman!" but the Khan, springing on his feet, cried, "Aman, nag!" equivalent to "Mercy be d—d" and blew his match; but all in vain, as he immediately received about three shots.... so fell Mehrab Khan, and died game, with his sword in his hand, in his own citadel....

At length a few survivors, being driven to their last stronghold at the very top of the citadel, surrendered; then one loud and general 'hurrah!' proclaimed around that Kelat was ours.... The loss was 140, about one in seven. My wounds continued doing very well; I caught a low fever and I have continued to grow better ever since.

Larkhann, 24 December 1839

I have delayed sending this till our arrival here. Now the campaign is near its close, I feel very glad that I have been on it, as it is a thing that a man does not see every day of his life in these times; and I consider it to be more lucky than otherwise that I have four holes in my body as a remembrance of it; but I cannot say that I relish a longer sojourn in India, unless we have the luck to be sent to China which I should like very much, (fancy sacking Peking, and kicking the Celestial Emperor from his throne)....