

## **BATTLE OF SARAGARHI**

(An unparalleled act of Bravery)

September 12, 1897 is the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Battle of Saragarhi- one of the "ten most famous battles " of the world. On this day, exactly 100 years ago, a handful of Sikh soldiers- 21 to be exact - of the 4<sup>th</sup> Battalion of the Sikh Regiment (then XXXVI Sikh) formed part of the British Indian Army and fought thousands of Pathans in the North Western Frontier Province (now Pakistan). All 21 Sikh soldiers died in the battle as they fought to the last man and last bullet; but they did not yield even an inch of ground that they were defending.

This epic battle is worth recounting as a singular example of unmatched courage, absolute devotion to duty, unflinching loyalty and giving supreme sacrifice of life for a cause.

In the later half of 19<sup>th</sup> century, boundaries of the British Indian Empire extended right up to the borders of Afghanistan, through the rugged and hostile terrain of Baluchistan and the North West Frontier Province inhabited by fierce Pathan and Afridi tribal warriors who refused to acknowledge the British supremacy and often attacked and raided anything British.

In order to protect these long lines of communications passing through the Kurram valley, the Samana range had been occupied by the British troops for almost five years. When the Afridis and Orakzai clans rose against the Government of India in 1897, the 4<sup>th</sup> Battalion of the Sikh regiment (XXXVI SIKH) was holding the forts and the fortified piquets on the Samana ridge which has the Khanki Valley on the North and the Miranzai Valley on the South.

The main position occupied by the 4 SIKH on the crest of the Samana Ridge were the two fortified posts known as Fort Lockart (Mastan) at Saragarhi (approximately 3 km from each of the main posts), Dhar, Sartap, Crag and Sangar. These had been built to accommodate a garrison of 25 to 50 men in each.

The nearest garrison from where reinforcements could come in case of outbreak of hostilities was at Kohat, a good 60 km away. Saragarhi was considered the most important of these minor forts, because through it signaling communications was maintained between Forts Lockhart and Gulistan along the Samana ridge.

Between 27 August and 8 September 1897, a large force of Orakzai tribe attacked Fort Gulistan held by 4 SIKH. Fort Gulistan was strongly held and offered a stubborn resistance and by 10 September, the Orakzais were driven back into the Khanki Valley. But, soon after, the Afridi Lashkar, 10,000 strong, along with Orakzais attacked the posts on Samana ridge. Four attacks were repulsed by the defenders with heavy casualties inflicted on the hostile tribesmen.

Utterly humiliated and frustrated by the reverses against Forts Gulistan and Lockhart, the tribesmen decided to change their objective of attack. The combined might of Orakzais and Afridis was thus hurled against Saragarhi in early hours of 12 September 1897. Almost 20,000 tribesmen surrounded the post and cut it from other localities. No reinforcements

and replenishment of ammunition could reach the detachment, which was under siege by the ever-swelling hordes of tribesmen.

The first onslaught of tribesmen yelling and firing came early on the morning of 12 September only to be repulsed by the small band of brave Sikhs. This was followed by a pitched battle of six long hours. At last, there was a lull in the gruesome battle. But it lasted only a short while. It gave the defenders time to reorganise and replenish ammunition from their depleted reserves. The attackers managed to create a smoke screen on one flank of the post by burning dry bushes. Covered from observation and fire of the defenders, two of the enemy managed to get close to the perimeter wall of the post and start hammering a breach through the stonewall.

Through the breach in stonewall, the tribesmen, swarmed into the fort. Saragarhi defenders fought with fixed bayonets and rapid fire against the multitudes that poured through the breach and Signaler Gurmukh Singh continued to give a graphic picture of the battle to the Commanding Officer using his holiograph. But the ferocity of close quarter battle took its toll.

At about 3 o'clock in the afternoon, there were only two survivors - a wounded soldier in the guardroom and the Signaler. The Signaler put away his apparatus and took up his rifle. His last message to the Commanding Officer at Lockurt was " I will be engaging the enemy now onwards with my rifle and will not be relaying any more messages". He killed a dozen tribesmen before he fell himself. The wounded soldier in the guardroom who was solely in command of the post now secured the guardroom from inside and used his rifle till he was burnt to death. His foes later admitted that he accounted for 21 of them before his end came.

The captors, after succeeded in overpowering the post, were so shaken by the sight of the brave soldiers' now lifeless bodies on the ramparts of the Saragarhi Fort that in order to obliterate the scene of their moral defeat, they set the place on fire.

On learning of this glorious, gallant and unparalleled action, members of both houses of the British Parliament rose in unison to pay homage to the great Indian soldiers. Each one of the 21 soldiers was posthumously awarded the Indian Order of Merit, the highest British gallantry award then given to Indian (equivalent to the Victoria Cross awarded to the British).

The story of this epic battle is taught to schoolchildren in France and is one of the eight stories of collective bravery published by UNESCO. No military history book, when portraying, the bravery and sense of sacrifice of the Indian soldier is complete without special reference to the defenders and the martyrs of Saragarhi.