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The Battle of Miawand - 27th July 1880

Early in 1880, the 66th Regiment was ordered to Afghanistan, which the British had invaded in the previous year after the massacre of their envoy and his escort at Kabul.

Early in July information was received in Kandahar that the Ayub Khan was marching on the place with a force described officially as an advance guard of irregulars, and a brigade was at once sent out to intercept him. It was commanded by Brigadier-General Burroughs and consisted of two Indian cavalry regiments, two Indian infantry regiments, a battery of Royal Horse Artillery, another of smoothbore guns, and six companies of the 66th Regiment, under Colonel Galbraith. The smoothbore guns had recently been recaptured from some mutineers and were manned by a hastily trained party of an officer and forty-two men of the 66th.

On the morning of July 27th the cavalry advance guard reached Mahmudabad, about forty-five miles from Kandahar. The village stood on the edge of a deep, dry watercourse and on the plain beyond it they saw the Afghans - not the small force they had led to expect but a great Army, streaming eastwards towards Kandahar. It was later established that the force consisted of four thousand cavalry, eight thousand infantry, thirty guns and some twenty thousand irregulars, many of them the religious fanatics known as Ghazis.

The Afghan Army turned south and began to envelope the British force which was drawn up with the 66th on the right and the Indian Infantry on the left. The first attack was launched against the 66th but although it was pressed with great courage it was soon beaten off, hundreds of men falling under the concentrated fire of the Martini-Henry rifles. After a lull the Afghans concentrated against the left of the line; this time they were successful.

At first a tremendous fire was poured into them but the Ghazis came on with great determination and the Indians would not face them at close quarters. They broke and ran and the whole mass crashed into the rear of the 66th, breaking its line into fragments.

The watercourse offered the obvious rallying point and most of the troops made of it instinctively. The 66th, who were for the most part in small rallying squares, kept up a steady fire during the retreat, but the Indians, many of whom had thrown away their arms, were slaughtered like sheep by the wild irregulars.

Colonel Galbraith, who was carrying the Queen's Colour at this stage, rallied most of the survivors of his battalion there and made a determined stand. Unfortunately the position was very exposed. The Colonel decided to retire to Khig, where use might be made of houses and garden walls. The withdrawal was ordered and the men went back steadily. Colonel Galbraith fell at once and was left still grasping the Colour amongst the sixty or seventy of his men who had also been killed there.



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About a hundred of the Regiment made their second stand in a walled garden. By then they were surrounded by hordes of irregulars and, although they killed hundreds of them, the end was no longer in doubt. The Afghans still would not close, but shot down the British at a horrifying rate. The end was soon on them. With only two officers and nine men remaining they formed up and charged out of the

garden in a last desperate assault on their tormentors. They advanced for some three hundred yards until wounds and exhaustion brought them to a halt, when they formed a tiny square and continued to fire steadily. Only when the last man was shot down did the Ghazis swarm upon them.

The 66th received no official recognition for its services at Maiwand. It was a defeat, so no battle honour could be given for it. Nor, apparently, did it warrant a bar to the Afghan Medal. The battery which had behaved remarkably well, received a number of Victoria Crosses but nothing of that sort went to the 66th, for the good reason that there was no one left qualified to make recommendations. Yet the Regiment was content, for although General Burroughs came in for some criticism, no one had anything but praise for the 66th. Even the Afghans, who valued courage above all other virtues, had been impressed, and one of their Colonels who had been present spoke in glowing terms of their admiration for the Regiment's conduct. General Primrose, in his official despatch to the Commander-in-Chief, India, wrote:

... history does not afford any grander or finer instance of gallantry and devotion to Queen and Country than that displayed by the 66th Regiment on the 27th July 1880."