

**INDIA GENERAL SERVICE 1895 TO A PRIVATE, 1ST DORSET REGIMENT WHO WAS WOUNDED DURING THE DISASTROUS RECONNAISSANCE TO AND ACTION AT SARAN SAR, 9 NOVEMBER 1897.**



**INDIA GENERAL SERVICE 1895-1902, 2 CLASPS, PUNJAB FRONTIER 1897-98, TIRAH 1897-98 '4620 PTE. J. STRICKLAND 1ST. BN. DORSET REGT.'**

James Strickland attested for the Dorsetshire Regiment, and served with the 1st Battalion as part of the Tirah Expeditionary Force on the North West Frontier of India. He was severely wounded by gunshot to the foot at Saran Sar on 9 November 1897, and was invalided on 7 March 1898. He died in Gillingham, Dorset, on 29 February 1960.

#### **SARAN SAR**

*"On 9th November 1897, a reconnaissance was mounted to Saran Sar, to survey the area prior to an advance into the Bara valley. The reconnaissance force, commanded by General Westmacott, comprised 1st Dorsets, 1st Northamptons, 15th Sikh Infantry, 36th Sikh Infantry, Nos 5 and 8 Mountain Gun Batteries and No 4 Co Madras Sappers and Miners. This force marched out of Maidan Camp at 7am on 9th November 1897 heading east for the Saran Sar Mountain.*

*Within two miles of camp the British force encountered opposition from the tribesmen and dispositions were made for the assault on Saran Sar. The Dorsets were directed to advance on the left flank, up a*



spur to the north of Saran Sar Mountain, while the Northamptons and Sappers advanced up Saran Sar, supported by the 36th Sikhs on the right. The gun batteries marched to the top of the conical hill at the bottom of the mountain, escorted by the 15th Sikhs. Tribesmen, occupying well-built sangars at the end of the nullah, opened rifle-fire on the Northamptons as they debouched from the nullah and began to climb the mountain.

General Westmacott became concerned with the lack of progress of the Dorsets, whose role was to cover the left flank of the Northamptons as they climbed and occupied Saran Sar.

The general despatched several members of his staff to find the Dorsets and urge them up the mountainside. It emerged later that the Dorsets had become lost in the difficult country.

Fire from the mountain batteries on the conical hill forced the tribesmen to abandon the sangars and withdraw up the mountainside, enabling the Northamptons to continue the climb.

A thousand feet further up, the Northamptons reached a knoll on which a single tree stood. They here came under rifle-fire again. The Northamptons pushed on up the steep mountainside and reached the base of the final ridge, where five of their companies circled around to the left and onto the peak, while the other three companies followed the track around the base of the final ridge to the right, emerging onto the far side of the mountain, where the Bara valley opened in front of them. Throughout this advance the mountain battery guns on the conical hill fired in support of the Northamptons.

The top of Saran Sar was covered with the remains of an extensive campsite where the tribesmen were living. It was clear that the tribesmen had abandoned the camp on the approach of the British reconnaissance force. Westmacott was considerably concerned at the failure of the Dorsets to appear on the Northampton's left flank, leaving unoccupied an area of thick woods near the top of the mountain, from which the tribesmen could be heard calling to each other. It was notorious that the tribes on the North-West Frontier awaited the point at which punitive forces began their withdrawal to camp, particularly down a difficult mountainside, to launch their most aggressive and persistent attacks, harrying the troops downhill, sniping and following them up closely so that parties that became isolated could be overwhelmed before the main force was aware of their difficulty. The attacks became additionally dangerous if the British force was unable to complete its retreat in daylight.

Soldiers wounded in these attacks had to be rescued, to save them from mutilation and death, often involving a halt and a counter-attack. Each wounded man took several soldiers to carry him, creating a vulnerable bunching, removing the rescuers from the firing line and slowing the retirement. Each wounded man could take up to five soldiers out of the firing line, depending on the nature of the wound suffered.



*These were the occasions when inexperienced troops were particularly vulnerable and several of the English county regiments fell into this category: officers had little idea of how to fight in this unforgiving country and the soldiers easily became disorientated and demoralised.*

*There seems to have been no formal arrangements for training British regiments due for service on the North-West Frontier, such training taking place through the initiative of the senior ranks of the battalions concerned, if at all. The Indian Army regiments, being permanently based in the country and with many of them regularly taking part in such operations, did not have the same handicap.*

*By 12.15pm, General Westmacott considered that sufficient surveying work had been conducted and it was time for his force to withdraw from Saran Sar to the camp in the Maidan. It was an essential precaution for a reconnaissance of this sort on the North-West Frontier to leave ample time to return to camp before darkness fell. The 36th Sikhs began the withdrawal at 12.30pm, reaching the first cover point, the knoll with the solitary tree.*

*Information then reached Westmacott that General Lockhart was coming up to the top of Saran Sar to conduct a personal reconnaissance, causing the withdrawal to be halted, it being necessary to provide cover for the general's mounted party. Lockhart spent time on the summit before riding back down the mountain with his staff, enabling the withdrawal to resume at around 2pm. The three companies of Northamptons on the track withdrew down the mountain at the double, joining the 36th Sikhs at the solitary tree. Once these three companies were clear, the five companies of Northamptons on the summit were directed to withdraw. Of these five companies, G Company was nearest to the wooded slope that should have been occupied by the absent Dorsets. The tribesmen opened a sudden fire on G*



*Company, inflicting casualties and thereby placing them in the situation where withdrawal became so difficult, even for experienced frontier troops, which the Northamptons most definitely were not.*

*A Company attempted to provide covering fire but could not see the tribesmen in the woods.*

*It was clear that the Northampton companies on the peak were in considerable difficulties, unable to retreat with their casualties. Westmacott sent the 36th Sikhs back up the hill and the experienced Sikh Regiment brought the Northampton companies to the bottom of the mountain, albeit under a continuing and damaging rifle-fire from the tribesmen.*

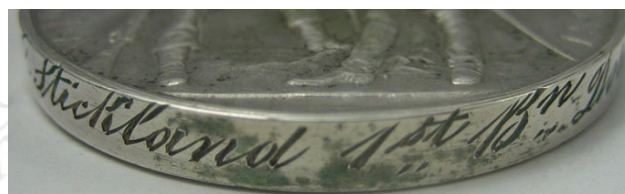
*At this stage, the Northamptons were encumbered with around a dozen casualties, each requiring the assistance of several other soldiers, who were thereby taken out of the firing line. Groups of soldiers assisting a wounded man moved slowly and were particularly prominent targets for the tribesmen.*

*It was almost dusk when the troops reached the bottom of the mountain. The guns were withdrawn and the tribesmen crept forward in increasing numbers. Encumbered by so many wounded, the Northamptons withdrew along the main Nullah with two companies of the 15th Sikhs holding one side and the Dorsets holding the other. The 36th Sikhs moved away to the left having the obligation to cover that flank. The Northamptons became strung out along the Nullah, the rear part of the regiment lagging well behind the cover provided by the Dorsets and the 15th Sikhs.*

*It was only once Westmacott's force reached camp at 7.30pm and the rolls were called it was discovered that a party of the Northamptons, comprising Second Lieutenant McIntyre, Colour Sergeant Luck and eleven privates was missing. The official Indian Government history describes how, in the gathering darkness, the companies of Northamptons lost contact with each other and the battalion became strung out over two miles on its journey back along the main nullah, the rearmost companies being slowed down through having to carry their wounded. There was a failure to take the precaution of posting men on the rims of the nullah to keep the tribesmen away. The tribesmen gathered along the nullah edge and fired down on the Northamptons making their way along the bottom of the nullah. In the ensuing melee the battalion failed to keep in touch with all its units and McIntyre's group at the rear of the column became isolated and was overwhelmed. Westmacott's brigade marched out again the next morning and the bodies of McIntyre and his men were discovered in the Nullah where they had been cut off and killed by the tribesmen, their rifles and ammunition taken.*

*Total casualties for the day were 2 British officers, 17 British soldiers and 1 Indian soldier killed and 3 British officers and 1 Indian, 35 British and 7 Indian soldiers wounded.*

*The infantry component of Westmacott's reconnaissance force was 50:50 British and Indian infantry battalions (two of each) and yet the casualties were British 55 and Indian 9. This perhaps reflects the inexperience and lack of training of the two British battalions for North-West Frontier operations. If the Northamptons had not been extracted from the summit of Saran Sar by Colonel Haughton's experienced 36th Sikhs their casualties would have been significantly greater."*



Condition NEF. A fine Saran Sar casualty medal