

# **The Outbreak of the Indian mutiny**

By

Edwin Wilson

(Late band Sergeant, 1st Batt., 60th King's Royal Rifles).

Sunday, the 10th May, 1857, was intensely hot, not a cloud to be seen, the sand-hills across the plain in front of the cantonments in Meerut - an important military station some forty miles from Delhi - were hidden by the glare of the scorching sun. Towards evening the temperature had fallen a few degrees. Peace and quiet seemed to reign after the excitement and turmoil of the day before, when eighty-five sepoy had been sentenced to imprisonment for one of the greatest crimes of which a soldier can be guilty, "refusing to obey orders."

About five o'clock Riflemen were strolling up and down the parade ground waiting for the "fall in" to sound for church parade. Many of them, like myself, had recently joined, and were thinking of the quiet Sunday evenings in their boyhood's home in old England. The church bells had commenced to give notice of the approach of the hour of prayer, when suddenly a mounted officer of the Rifles galloped through the lines, shouting, "Stand to your arms, men! The sepoy have mutinied." The bugles rang out the "Alarm and general assembly," and in a few minutes 1,000 Riflemen stood on parade in column of companies ready and eager for the order to proceed to action, and put down, there and then, what afterwards proved to be the greatest mutiny of armed and drilled soldiers that has ever been seen.

Thus commenced fifty years ago the great Mutiny in India. The English troops in Meerut on that Sunday evening consisted of the 1st Battalion 60th King's Royal Rifles (1,000 strong), the 6th Dragoon Guards (Carabineers, 600 strong), a battery of Artillery, and a few other details, making a total of over 2,000 men, surely quite sufficient to give a good account of the mutineers 3,000 or so in number. But, no! The army was there, and the hour, but not the man. A Company, to which I belonged, was ordered to make all haste down to the Treasury and secure that-it was on the way to the old gaol, which was guarded by sepoy under a native officer. When we arrived at the building the native guard turned out; we disarmed them and took over charge. Our orders on starting were on no account to fire on the mutineers. Why, it is not for me to say.

During the night fires and firing were going on continuously, and we were attacked in front by a large armed mob. My section was detailed

to defend the left of a compound in front of the Treasury ; the enemy came with a rush; one of them turned round the corner of the compound; I knocked him into the ditch with the butt of my rifle, and secured him. I believe that was the first prisoner taken in the Mutiny. He was hanged from a tree in the corner of the graveyard, near the Sadana Road.

I was on sentry with an old soldier named Brownlow some 200 yards in front, and about 400 yards from a range of buildings which were then on fire. On a flat roof we could see a number of people being pursued by the rebels. Brownlow turned to me and said, "I can't stand this, youngster; I shall have a shot at them in spite of the order not to fire." He took careful aim at the most prominent of them, and brought him down. Brownlow was immediately made prisoner, but was shortly afterwards released.

In the early hours of the morning the alarm was given that a large body of horse, believed to be the 3rd Light Cavalry (who had joined the mutineers), was coming down the main road. We prepared as best we could to receive them, but they turned out to be the 6th Carabineers. They drew up in front of the Treasury, and while the officer in command was speaking to our officer (Lieutenant Austin) the native guard took the opportunity to rush out of the guard-room among and under the horses, and all escaped except the native officer and about ten men, who remained loyal. A short time after the Carabineers had gone there was a great commotion at a large bungalow about 500 yards towards the old gaol (native), which early in the evening the sepoy had broken open and released all the prisoners, including the eighty-five sentenced on Saturday. The sergeant in charge of No. 1 Section was ordered to proceed in the direction of the bungalow and find out what was taking-place, but on no account to fire on anyone. They had been gone about ten minutes when shots were heard, and No. 2 Section was ordered out. In a few minutes volley after volley rang out; our officer was getting excited, but the men were smiling.

When the two sections returned an explanation was demanded. The sergeant of No. 1 said that when he arrived at the building the enemy were smashing up the furniture and setting fire to the place, and they fired on his men; he was therefore compelled in self-defence to fire on them. The sergeant of No. 2 Section said that when he got to the entrance of the compound his section was charged by ten times his

number of men, and he acted in self-defence only; there the matter dropped. All the money in the Treasury was removed to the laboratory up in the cantonments, and as far as my company was concerned that ended the first night of the Mutiny.

The following morning disclosed the horrors of men, women and children mutilated beyond description, and the sight caused everyone to feel that retribution must be dealt out to the perpetrators of such atrocities. Perhaps, as a young soldier, I was not at that time able to judge the situation correctly, but in after years I have held the opinion that if any one of the grand heroes of the Mutiny had been in command in Meerut at the outbreak, the mutineers would have been smashed up, Delhi, with all its subsequent horrors, would have been saved, and the head of the revolt broken, for as one writer says, "Delhi was the nerve-centre and head of the whole Mutiny."

Records of the Mutiny and subsequent operations, extending over three years, brought to the surface such heroic deeds performed by soldiers, civilians and women, that as Sir Owen Tudor Burne, in his book, *Clyde and Strathnairn*, says: "England may truly be grateful when she calls to mind records so brilliant and deeds so honourable, and remembers the glorious part borne by her children in handing down to posterity, notwithstanding shortcomings, failures and errors, one of the most memorable chapters in her memorable history."

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