

ALJUSAD

By *Sanners Gow*

‘Shite!’ I tried to mak masel as small a target as I could by cooryin intae the rocks here at the bottom of the pass. The Afghan tribesmen hid sprung a perfect ambush on us, firing as they were fae the sides of the Khyber Pass straicht doon ontae our position. Oor sergeant big Rab wiz livid an he cursed the Afghans till the very cats widnae lick their bleed supposin it wiz in a saucer. But of course it wisnae gan tae be Afghan bleed the cats would be getting a lick o. It wiz gan tae be gweed Scotch bleed and if we didnae get oot o this place there wiz gan tae be plenty o it.

Rab shouted for us tae fire back at the buggers and tellt us tae shoot at the smoke clouds fae their discharges. The tribesmen were firin muskets- nae sae accurate as oor Enfields but that didnae maitter a damn because they were pingin us fae well abeen and could have thrown rocks doon ontae us wi nae problem. Musket baas were slapping on the grun and skytin aff the rocks aside us an that wiz fit wye I wiz trying tae become een with the boulders and mould masel tae the under edge. But wi Rab’s order me and my comrades now hid tae come oot fae oor hiding places and shoot back.

There were a lot o fite faces I can tell ye an mine wiz likely the same because I wiz shittin masel wi the fear. My poophole wiz fair winkin and the hairs on the back of my neck birstled. I tried tae keep calm as I fummilt wi ma rifle bolt. Some aal sojer eence tellt me that eence ye gang intae action training taks ower and ye load and fire automatically.

Weel it didnae seem tae be happening tae me because try as I micht I jist couldnae get the damned thing tae fire. Rab must’ve seen my predicament and cam chargin across fae the ither side of the narra pass follaet by a swarm of musket baas afore throwin himsel ahin my wee bit o cover. The only thing he said tae me wiz “Corrich!” [idiot] and grabbit the rifle fae my fammels [hands] and draggit the bolt back, lookit inside, blew oot a load of sand and slammed the rifle back at me.

“Now shoot the buggers!”

He made awa again, his passage marked by a swarm o angry wasps weerin lead jaickets. Miraculously he wisnae touched and reached his ain bit of cover and startit firin up at the tribesmen fa were getting bolder at the sight o oor inaction.

Stories in the Doric from the Monastery of Fable

They were staanin termintin us instead of being ahin cover so fin we fired, oor shots hid some effect and I personally saw twa Afghans faa back as if they were hit. I jist kept reloading and firin up at the buggers an ivvery time I saa a puff o reek I shot at it. I heard a whacking sound then a gasp and the man nearest me convulsed for a meenit or twa then lay still.

I sidled ower tae him keeping under cover as much as I could an pulled him ontae his back but he wiz steen stiff staring deed. A musket shot had burst his broo wide open exposing the inside o his napper. A fyowe shots cam my wye so I crawled back tae my wee bit which wiz safer by far. Mair shots hit the already deed man wi seeckenin thwumps so I wiz better oot o thon place.

There wiz thirty of us pinned doon an we could neither move back nor forrit and they, like masel, lay ahin ony wee bit cover they could find and were shootin back as best they could. The main column should've been up wi us lang syne but as yet there wiz nae signs so we'd jist hiv tae keep firin until they did mak an appearance and gie us a wee bit caa-tee against the Afghans.

Aifter aboot an oor o time passin and still nae signs of the column Rab broke cover and cam chargin ower tae me. His huge body wiz instantly the target for every tribesman on baith sides of the pass and musket baas cam at him like hailsteens. Wi a mighty lunge aa sax fit fower o him slammed doon at my side in a clood of dust sprinkled with lead bullets an the butt o his rifle caught me on the side knockin aa the wind oot o me. As I lay gasping for breath Rab shook me.

"Are ye aaricht Donny?"

Obviously he didnae realise that he'd winded me an thocht I'd been hit.

"Na I'm aaricht Rab jist winded I'll be fine!"

I managed tae gasp the words oot atween deep braiths and I'm sure my ersehole wiz sookin air in as well. I dinnae ken if it tried tae spik but it widnae have surprised me if it did. Rab put his heed close tae mine and said, "We're feeckit Donny if the column disnae come soon. The tribesmen will ken fine we cannae get oot o here so they're gan tae come doon fae the heichts in a great boorach and murder us and there's fuck all we can dae about it!"

I'd been thinking the same masel for they must've been ten tae one against us at the very least because the pass abeen us wiz a veritable smog bank o dischargin musketry.

My poophole, aaready winkin wi the fear doublin it's twitchin. There's nae wye I relished the thocht o the Afghanies gettin their hands on me, some o the stories I'd heard tale of wiz eneuch tae mak the very hairs on the back of my neck birstle. I noddit tae Rab and asked "Whit are we gan tae dee Rab?"

Stories in the Doric from the Monastery of Fable

Rab ducked low as another splattering o musketry hit the boulders we sheltered ahin and blinkin throwe steen chips and dust he laached oot loud. I thought for a wee bit that he'd went moich but it wisnae madness but humour that brocht on the laachter. Rab wiz een o the best sergeants in the Gordons and een o the teuchest but it wiz said he'd a wicked sense of humour especially faan things got bad. I wiz seein it in action for the first time at this meenit . Things could hardly be worse and here's Rab laachin his heed aff. He eventually managed tae stop laachin and said, "Whit are we gan tae dee?" afore bursting oot laachin eence mair.

It wisnae a hysterical laughter jist a deep belly shakkin laach as if he wiz sitting at a bar haein a dram wi some o his freens. Some of the men nearest tae us looked ower and powkit eenanither and tae my amazement their styoo covered faces broke intae huge grins.

It wiz said Rab wiz the very man to hae aside ye in a ticht spot, that he could aye find a wye oot and gan by the reaction o the men maybe the story wiz richt. But a quick look ower the boulders wiz eneuch tae mak me winder if somehow this wiz the eyn of the line for us.

The tribesmen emboldened by oor puny return fire were makkn their wye doon baith sides of the pass some dauchlin here an there a meenit tae fire. Ithers nae even botherin but jist clammerin fae steen tae steen.

I shook Rab "Look Rab the tribesmen are comin doon in droves, we're gyan tae get oor ballicks chappit aff if they get their fammlis (hands) on us!"

Rab, laachter forgotten roared, "Right lads mark yer targets and let the fuckers hae it!"

The men put up a withering fire ontae the approaching tribesmen that dropped mony and made the ithers retire ahin the cover they'd jist lately left. I could see some o the tribesmen crawlin back up the side of the pass like flees on a camel's hingin ersehole clartit o shite. Some o them hid on flowin robes wi turbans on their heeds an ithers had baggy troosers and dark jaickets affa like a tunic. They werenae so easy tae get a shot at but the yins with the flowin robes were richt easy tae spot.

"Cease fire!"

Rab came back tae me and crouched doon. He grinned "That showed the fuckers!"

I managed a ticht grimace that might've passed for a grin for I still didnae feel easy but Rab seemed trickit. As trickit in fact that he pulled oot a wee cutty and in a moment or twa's deft handling of the flint and flierish reek wiz yoamin fae it, and sat himsel doon and sooked contentedly.

Stories in the Doric from the Monastery of Fable

Rab wiz weel ower sax fit wi a pair of shooders on him like an ox that made him look one hardy bastard. Dark skin covered his gweed lookin face, a big moustache and a thick iron grey heed o hair gave him dusky gweed looks that weemin couldnae bide awa fae. Rab wiz my mither's uncle and had jined the army as a drummer boy fin he wiz about twelve. He'd been in the army ever since and hid seen action aa ower the Empire.

He'd been hame tae New Deer twice in my lifetime, eence fin I wiz a wee bairn and the last time wiz seven years ago. His stories were jist the thing for young lugs tae hear and it wiz then I decided I wanted tae be a sojer jist like Rab. Now here I wiz in Afghanistan being shot at, my mooth that dry wi thirst and the sun cookin the very life oot of my body. Nae far fae the place I lay hunners o angry tribesmen awyted their chance tae cut the ballicks fae ma and dae some ither nasty things tae ma person. Aye I'd deen weel for masel richt eneuch, here's me thinking I'd be a hero but instead I'm lyin wi my ersehole winking watching Rab sookin his pipe.

The tribesmen hid gotten a bit of a begeck at the hett reception we'd given them and were now well oot o wir effective range although some were keeping up a desultory but useless fire on oor position. Rab turned and lookit ower our meagre rock cover and said, "That showed the buggers fit tae expect, they winnae be so keen next time!"

He sat back doon and spoke tae me quately.

"Look laddie we're feekit if they come again so ye'll hiv tae rin back tae the column and tell Captain Moore tae gie us mair men so we can clear the tribesmen fae the pass!"

I wisnae ower keen on gyan back tae the column and tellt Rab so, but he wiz determined. He said that I'd be faar safer gan towards safety than bidin here tae be killed like a rat in a barrel. Even though Rab wiz my sergeant I wiz failmily first and foremaist so I could get awa wi a bit mair than the rest o the men although in front of them he wiz usually affa canny that nae favouritism wiz shown towards me an mony's the extra rifle drill I wiz given for the least mistak I made. So bad wiz it sometimes that the aaler sojers wid grummle amangst themsels as tae how bad Rab treated me. Accordin tae them it wisna like him tae be that wye ava.

Fin that happened I wid jist curse sergeants in general and let it be at that. But noo I could see Rab wiz troubled, I weel understood his motives for getting me tae fuck oot of this place but I wisnae keen on leaving him and ma comrades tae their fate. I speired at Rab fit wye we didnae aa mak a dash back tae the column because they must've been alerted by noo wi aa the

shooting gan on? They were at maist a couple o miles back the pass and surely they'd hiv sent oot a rescue pairty.

Rab shook his heed.

"Na Donny it widnae work. Afore we got as far as the first bend they'd be ontae us in droves and we'd be slaughtered like sheep in a killin hoose!"

Poochin his pipe he cairried on "Oor best bet o survival is here ahin some kind o cover." noddin towards the tribesmen's positions. "They'll nae be so keen on attacking us for a fyle and afore they do you should be back wi a relief pairty!"

I wiz forced tae agree that it made sense. I wiz fit and could rin like the wind and wid be back tae the column in nae time ava. Of coorse that's if the Afghans didnae get ma! Rab laached at my misgivings aboot the tribesmen catching me and tellt me that I should be aaricht as lang as I weaved plenty as I ran and used the shaddas to pit them aff their aim.

"Onywyne" says Rab "It's maistly aaler men that work the flanks while the younger yins are the spearheed and are at the front o oor positions."

That wiz supposed tae reassure me, I think, but I couldnae help refleekin that the aaler men wid be the better shots because they'd the maist experience. I took a quick look ower my rock at the tribesmen fa were keepin their distance but there seemed tae be an affa lot mair o them noo.

Ivvery noo an then a puff of smoke could be seen fae the side of the pass. At that distance the baa would hardly hurt ye if it hit but some of them still made a fair thwack as they landit so I kept my heed doon for fear.

"Right!" says Rab, "Tak a good slug of yer watter. Ye'll be needin aa the fluids ye can get afore ye reach the column!"

I did as Rab bid me and weetitt ma thrapple wi the warm brakkish watter fae my bottle. It tasted foul but watter's watter so doon it gid. I took aff my tunic because there wiz nae wye I wiz gyan tae run in this heat wi a thick reed tunic and hae ivvery Afghan shoot at the gype staanin oot like a reed beacon on a dark nicht. Rab noddit approvingly and laached as I threw the panny white hat ontae the grun wi ma tunic.

"Aye min, yer learnin weel aboot this sojer cairry on!"

Rab clappit me on the back and said, "Go Donny rin like the wind!"

Grabbin up ma rifle I slottit the lang bayonet ontae the eyn and wi an "I'm on it!" for Rab, I started tae run. I wiz gye near at the first bend by the time ony of the tribesmen jaloused but soon the crack and zing of bullets were coming aboot me like hornets. Abeen me I could mak oot the Afghans leaving their cover and makkin their precarious wye doon towards me.

Stories in the Doric from the Monastery of Fable

Fin I cam at the bend I started tae weave and sure eneuch a volley of shots follaet me. Ae bullet tuggit at my sleeve an I wiz richt- the aaler men were the better shots so I hunched my back a wee bittie and really startit tae jink oot an in while at the same time diving in and oot of the shaddas tae pit the buggers aff their aim.

My chest wiz haivin or this time, the mixer o heat, styoo and fear wiz makkin me sook in air like an aal bauchled steam engine, the swyte wiz fleeing fae me and my claithes were stickin tae me.

I cursed the tartan trews and wished the bastards hid left us wi oor kilts that were faar better suited tae the heat. My curses were pointless at that moment because there wiz a big bastard Afghan wi flowing robes, turban the lot in front o me. He jist grinned and threw doon his musket. Drawing oot fae his plaid like cover a lang kurrah sword, he hefted it intae his left haan an gave me a mocking challenge.

I nivver stoppit rinnin but keepit on richt at the bugger and stuck him under the ribs an ae brief moment afore the licht gid fae his een I saw terror in them. I booted his body fae me and gagged at the stench fae his puddins. Affa near boakin I cairriet on my wye.

Funnily I lost my fear then an it wiz replaced gye near straicht awa by a burning anger whether at mysel for killing a man or at the man for makkin me kill I nivver found oot but fitivver, anger replaced fear an I saa things crystal clear aifter that.

At this point the fleer of the pass rose steeply and gets so narra that twa mules can barely pass especially if they are loadit. I'd hoped tae meet in with an advanced party fae the column but instead three tribesmen wytit there. Thankfully they werena lookin my wye but beyond the narrows back the wye that the column would come. I didnae wint to stop but hid tae so I slipped intae some rocky cover and got my braith back.

I wiz in a snorrel noo, nae doubt there'd be tribesmen follaein me. Hopefully Rab wiz richt about it bein aal men guardin the flanks, they'd tak faar langer tae catch up wi me. My only hope lay in my killin the three men tae my front, they were about a hunnder yards fae ma and well within the killin range o my Enfield. And if they were tae conveniently staan still I'd pick them aff as if targets at the Blackdog rifle range back in Aberdeen.

Somewye or anither though I didnae think they'd be that obleegin. The only thing I could think on deein wiz tae hit them hard tae keep them wrang fittit. I wid use that tactics here, hard and fast. I crawled a wee bit closer tae mak sure o my aim and slid a round up the spoot. Wiping the swyte fae ma

broo I took aim on the tribesman nearest tae me. I put the sicht ontae the middle o his back and squeezed the trigger.

He fell like a rag doll, aa this wiz just at the edge of my thoughts as I bolted anither round hame changed target tae the next man faa wiz starin in shock at his fallen comrade and fired. He skirled in agony and fell writhing on the grun while the third tribesman fully alerted now dived for cover. I bolted anither round and fired at him tae keep his heed doon then shifted faist tae his hidin place wi the rifle held oot in front of me like a pikeman of old.

I covered the grun in jist a fyowe seconds but he wiz faister and raised himsel fae cover so I wiz looking doon the barrel of an aal British Springfield rifle. Aathing went in slow time for me as he pulled the trigger. I felt the bullet pass the side of my face by inches and saw the panic refleckit in his een as he realised that he'd fucked it. I startit tae roar as I closed wi him as he tried tae scramble awa fae the pynt o my bayonet. He squealed like a bairn and in that instant I realised he wiz jist a young laddie. I stoppit in my tracks and couldnae shove the bayonet intae his cowering back so instead I hit him wi my rifle butt and grabbed his dropped Springfield and smashed it against a rock. O the ither twa tribesmen one wiz obviously deed the ither wiz groanin but nae danger. I smashed their weapons as weel.

A quick check ower my shooder satisfied me that naebody wiz comin up the pass fae ahin so I ran on throwe the gap and made my wye doon the narra path jumpin ower the boulders scaittered on the flier of the pass.

The heat wiz oppressive in the enclosed channel even though it wiz in deep shaddas as I ran wi the echoes o my beets ringin ower an ower again. Ma hairt wiz bangin in ma chest and ma mooth wiz as dry as a bone wi my braith tearin its wye tae my lungs like the hett blast o an oven.. Swyte ran into my een stingin them an that jist added tae my misery makkin me styter aboot like a drunkard ower the roch steeny grun.

I wiz rinnin oot o strinth an I kent that if I didnae find the column afore lang that I'd be goosed in this affa heat. At aboot this pynt the pass opened up and ye could see for a couple o miles afore the sides closed in again and turned tae the left up towards the ruins of an aal fort. I did a quick three hunnder and sixty scan and crouched doon tae catch ma braith. I teen a moothfae of watter fae my bottle and sweeled it aboot afore swallae'n it. Nae drink hid ivver tasted so gweed as the warm brackish liquid made its wye doon ma pairched gullet.

Nae ony signs of the column did I see apiart fae the marks made by army boots on the dry grun. The place I wiz at wiz very near faar we'd left the column that mornin. A quick raik aboot and I found faar they'd turned back.

They must've left as soon as they heard the firing on the skirmish party, the coordy bastards! Because hear them they must've for in the distance I could at that minute mak oot the sharp crack of the Enfields comin doon the pass in a mulch of echoes.

The Enfield's high powered round made a shusssh shusssh sound as it passed through the hett dusty air at high velocity. The Afghan weapons made a dull baff sound on discharge. At this meenit there seemed tae be a helluva lot mair Afghan rounds than oors. Rab and the skirmish party were surely getting it heavy again. At that I got tae my feet and forced my wearied legs tae move. For a start they hid a mind of their ain but eence I got rinnin proper the stiffness eased aff and my legs did as I bid them.

As I got intae my stot I felt better. The rest and the drink had deen some gweed. It wiz still searingly hett and especially now that the pass opened up a bit. But the going wiz that much easier and the air wiz a wee bit clearer so I fair knyped on breathing much better noo that I wiz awa fae the enclosed pass.

In about an oor I caught up with the tail eyn o the column and glaid I wiz tae see them. Some banter wiz exchanged atween mysel and the native levies as I stoppit tae drink fae a proffered skin of water. They were rale amused at my condition an some witty remarks were made at my expense. Thanking them I made my wye past the rest of the column tae even rocher comments fae the troops.

I reached the heed o the column lookin for the officers but they were weel in front on horseback. The corporal tellt me tae bide in the ranks but I said I'd an urgent message for Captain Moore. By gweed luck I could see them dismounting up ahead so I hurried up tae them and stood tae attention and peched oot Rab's message. Captain Moore jist lookit at me as if I wiz something ye'd find aneth yer fit aifter a dog hid passed.

Ignoring me he turned and said something tae Sergeant McLeod.. He came forrit and asked me fit wye I wiz oot o uniform. I didnae ken fit tae say tae this. I hid explained my reason for bein here but the officer jist didnae seem tae be listening. I startit tae tell him again but I nivver got ony farrer than the first fyowe words fin he roared like an enraged bull and ordered me put under arrest. Sergeant McLeod the erse licker that he wiz jumpit tae attention and dived at me as if I wiz about tae strike the officer but I jist stood like an eejit mair shocked than onything at the captain's disregard for fit I hid tellt him.

A couple o the subalterns snichered at my discomfiture and it wiz about then that the penny drappit. This bastard wiz rinnin awa and leavin the skirmishin party tae their fate. Me turnin up must've buggered up the hale

plan for him: fuckin coordie bastard. Like a gype I said as much and endit up gettin a cut across the face wi his swagger stick for ma troubles.

He really got workit up aifter this and roared at Sergeant McLeod again tae pit me under arrest for gross impertinence tae an officer o the Crown. Wi a servile look on his face McLeod orderd twa o his squad tae arrest an tie me tae the wheel o een o the wagons. He lookit up for the pat on his heed fae his beloved Captain Moore but instead Moore jist glowered at me and rode awa.

“Right ya bastard!” roared McLeod.

I wiz helpless wi baith wrists faistened tae a spoke wi my back against the wheel as if half crucified. I wiz in a sittin position wi my feet tae the front an kent fine I wiz in for a good kickin. I didna hae lang tae wyte as McLeod ran at me and aimed a kick at my exposed chest. I tried tae roll wi the kick tae lessen its effect but tied as I wiz there wisna ony chance o that. His boot near liftit me aff the grun and I felt the searing pain bash through me as my rib cage gye near exploded. Ivvery bit o braith wiz caa’d fae me but I did manage tae pech “Ye dirty bastard!” afore he gid clean gyte and startit kickin at ivvery bit o me he could get at.

I’ve nae idea foo lang he kept it up because I wiz in faar ower muckle pain tae ken. I jist mind tryin tae protect my bawbag fae his kicks fin he landit a massive hoof tae ma heed an I must’ve passed oot like a shot sharny bull.

Fin I cam tee my heed wiz hingin near on my chest. I didna move because I could hear Captain Moore spikkin tae somebody near by. He wiz sayin something about Big Rab.

“Thet’s great news sergeant! Are you sure they are all dead?”

I hated the sound o his voice an foo he affected fit he thocht wiz a posh uppercrust accent but he wiz actually an Aiberdonian Shoemaker’s son that paitter hid bocht a commission for.

I painfully put up my heed and saw it wiz McLeod that he spoke till. I wiz in agony and could hardly breathe because maist o my ribs were on fire but I managed enough braith tae shout “Bastards!”

That got their attention. Moore came ower tae me and started tae lash me wi his swagger stick and the dirty bastard tried tae pit ma een oot wi it. But he forgot my feet were free and I swept his feet fae ablow him and he landit hard ontae his face.

He nivver got a chance tae pit a haan oot tae save himsel meetin the grun wi seekinin whack. He got tae his fowers wi the bleed and snotters fleein fae him. Een o his haans wiz within my reach so I brocht the heel o my fit crashin doon ontae his fingers and he skirled like a wee lassie. That’s the last thing I mind as Sergeant McLeod swung his rifle butt ontae ma heed.

Stories in the Doric from the Monastery of Fable

“Donny!”

Thrope the agony o my battered body I’d heard my name. “Donny! Come on min get tae yer feet!”

I groaned wi the pain but I managed tae look up and saa Big Rab staanin abeen ma. He wiz smilin doon at ma and Jesus I saw he wiz in full mairchin order and even wore his kilt.

The rest o my squad stood aroon smilin doon at ma as weel. They were dressed the same as Rab wi their reed coats and their Gordon tartan kilts abeen their knees. Rab bent doon tae pull ma up but I shouted tae him, “Hing fire Rab ivvery rib in my chest is broken!”

He laached and pulled ma tae ma feet. There wisna ony pain ava. I stood aside him an started tae relate fit hid happened but he jist put a haan on my shooder an shook his heed. Turnin tae the men he ordered them in twa ranks.

“Right Donny get intae line!”

I wiz surprised tae realise that I wiz in full mairchin order ana so I shoudert my Enfield and got intae ma place. I lookit back at the broken and bloodied ragdoll tied tae the wagon wheel and lookit intae my ain face wi the starin lifeless een.. Rab at the heed o the men shouted his favourite mairchin order...

“Left right keep in good order, lift yer kilt and shite in the corner!”