British Retreat from Waziristan

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When an Afghan army threatened India's Northwest Frontier in May 1919, British forces and local militia were handicapped by desertion and mutiny.

For more than 200 years, from the 18th to the 20th centuries, the British ruled India's millions with indigenous levies - Indian soldiers led by British officers and supported by British units. In 1857, a large portion of that army revolted, and smaller mutinies occurred throughout the years more often than the British liked to acknowledge.

One such mutiny broke out when Afghanistan invaded India's Northwest Frontier in May 1919. As one consequence of that uprising, a small column of loyal tribal militia led by a handful of British officers became stranded deep within the hostile deserts of Waziristan; the roughest part of the frontier. The column's ordeal was described in the official history of the militia, written by its own officers, as "one of the finest exploits recorded in the history of the Indian frontier."

On February 20, 1919, the pro-British Amir Habibullah of Afghanistan was slain in his tent at his camp near Jalalabad by unknown persons. After a brief but nasty power struggle, the Afghan succession passed to his third son, Amir Amanullah. That upheaval coincided with serious trouble within India. Mohandas Gandhi had proclaimed a campaign of nonviolent civil disobedience against newly enacted anti-terrorism laws. During April, serious riots wrecked the big cities of India; particularly those in the Punjab. Mobs attacked English men and women, native policemen, government buildings and railroads. Although the disturbances were quickly and ruthlessly suppressed, they convinced Amanullah that British rule in India was about to collapse. Seeing an apparently unique opportunity, he mobilized his army and prepared to march over the border to regain the Punjab, which had been part of Afghanistan only 75 years earlier.

On May 3, an Afghan army appeared in the Khyber Pass and occupied the spring that supplied water to the frontier post at Bagh, near Landi Kotal. Only two companies of the Khyber Rifles; the famed Scouts (militia recruited from the Afridi tribe), were on hand to defend Bagh. Fighting began the next day, and the British evacuated the Khyber Rifles. Not until May 6 did the British mobilize and formally declare war. Unfortunately for them, the initial success of the Afghans at Bagh convinced the major Pathan tribes in the Khyber, the Afridis and the Orakzais, that it would be safe to attack the British. The revolt by their kin proved too much for the Khyber Rifles, who deserted or went over to the Afghans.

Figure 1: An Indian army column moves to counter Afghans invading the Northwest Frontier in May 1919

Maj Gen Charles Howard Foulkes, Foulkes Papers, in: Liddell Hart Centre for Military Archives, King’s College London, 1915-1918
Other Afghan columns pushed down the other passes linking India and Afghanistan. One column moved into the Kurram River valley, laying siege to the town of Thal. Farther south, 14 battalions of Afghan regulars under General (and future king) Nadir Shah advanced down the Kaitu Pass into Waziristan on May 24. Because of the threat to Thal, the thinly stretched Indian army could not respond.

The authorities in Waziristan realized that the army could not rescue the numerous remote militia posts in tribal territory. The lightly armed and locally recruited Frontier Constabulary and militias (Scouts) were collectively known as the Civil Armed Forces because they reported not to the Indian army headquarters in Delhi but to the chief commissioner of the Northwest Frontier Province at Peshawar. An added complication was that the local tribes, the truculent Wazirs and Mahsuds, were more dangerous than the Afridis. The British had quelled serious uprisings in Waziristan as recently as 1915 and 1917. However, when World War I ended in 1918, the region had enjoyed a brief spell of uneasy peace.

Most British recruits in Waziristan came from other Northwest Frontier tribes, including the Afridis. Although Scout units composed of Afridis had mutinied in the north, it was not clear how the South Waziristan or the North Waziristan Scouts would react if their distant kin in either unit, or the local Wazirs and Mahsuds, were to rebel. Since 1857 the British had tried to forestall disaffection by recruiting units from a variety of tribes and seldom from the immediate locality. Of the 1,800 South Waziristan Scouts, there were only 66 Wazirs: compared with 820 Afridis or Orakzais and some 914 other tribesmen. Among the latter were 230 Khattaks, tribesmen recruited from within British administered territory across the Indus River. They would remain loyal because their families and homes were squarely under the British thumb. Trans-border Scouts recruited from beyond British-administered territory were another story.

When it became apparent on May 24 that an Afghan army with artillery was marching down the Tochi River valley into Waziristan, the British weighed their options and decided to cut their losses.
Figure 3: When Afghans threatened the passes of the Northwest Frontier, British forces withdrew from their more vulnerable posts - at the risk of encouraging rebellion.
Figure 4: Wazir warriors, photographed during their 1917 uprising. In 1919, the Afghan threat in the Northwest Frontier encouraged them to rise against British and Indian forces in their territory once more.

Figure 5: A typical Wazir fortified village. On May 25, 1919, General F.G. Lucas ordered the North Waziristan Militia to abandon its most vulnerable frontier posts.

Rather than have the militias routed by the Afghans and then butchered by the locals, on May 25 the commander of the 7th (Bannu) Brigade, General EG. Lucas, ordered the North Waziristan Militia to evacuate its most exposed posts and to consolidate its garrisons at major army stations. Lucas knew that the Scouts were too weakly armed to resist the Afghans, who had artillery. The British frontier forts would have crumbled if shelled.

Ordinarily, Lucas would have moved Indian army regulars up to the front to stabilize the situation, but because he did not know the exact direction of the Afghan attack, he held back. The lack of lateral roads in Waziristan meant that his regulars, once deployed on a particular line of advance, could not redeploy to block another enemy thrust. He would have to wait. But could the Scouts?

In South Waziristan, General Lucas decision meant abandoning half dozen exposed positions. Many were miles from graded roads and were little more than adobe police stations garrisoned by fewer than 100 Scouts. For its 1,800 men, the entire militia corps in the Northwest Frontier had only eight British
Figure 6: Mahsud tribesmen survey the terrain along India’s Northwest Frontier in 1919. Many of the Mahsuds joined the Wazirs in mutiny against the British.

and 37 tribal officers. But orders were orders. These posts were to be abandoned, their armories burned, and the animals killed if they could not be gotten away. The order to abandon included the corps headquarters at Wana, which was located well inside un-administered tribal territory.

In 1919 the commandant of the South Waziristan Scouts was Major Guy Russell. Thirty-seven years old, Russell had graduated from the Royal Military College at Sandhurst and joined the Indian army in 1902. He had later transferred to the Scouts, where promotion opportunities were better and the cost of living cheaper. He was a bachelor, a virtual requirement for the Scouts, since women were not allowed to live in the frontier outposts. Russell rose steadily through the ranks, becoming a captain in 1911 and a major in 1917.

Russell spoke Pashto, but only two of his eight other British officers could also converse with the Scouts. As a result, they depended on the 17 native sub-officers, themselves tribesmen, to communicate with their men. If those tribal officers betrayed them, the British would be doomed.

On May 21, Russell learned that Nadir Khan’s forces were marching on Wana, barely 25 miles away. His superiors waited four days before ordering posts on the Upper Tochi to be evacuated. They hoped that their decision would not either demoralize the Scouts or tempt the local Wazirs to rebel. Russell thought that news of British victories in the Khyber Pass had improved matters, but knew the tribes well enough to guess that when word of the evacuations got out, the Wazirs would revolt. Therefore, Russell decided to get out while he still could, hoping that his Scouts would remain loyal and that the tribes would not take advantage of his peril.

Russell decided to withdraw the garrisons of his four western most posts and at Wana to Moghal Kot,
34 miles south, just over the border in Balochistan. From there, they would retire farther to the army post at Fort Sandeman and safety. The risk of that plan lay in its need for utter secrecy and prompt execution. To execute carefully staged withdrawals simultaneously, Russell had to divide his forces, sending one small column, under Captain H.R. Traill, to Kharab Kot. After evacuating Kharab Kot, the column would split again, and a still smaller detachment under Lieutenant A.R. Barker would move to Khajuri Kach and also evacuate its garrison to the south. Traill’s column, composed of 60 infantry men and 10 mounted infantrymen, left Wana at 6 p.m. as if on a routine patrol. While they were away from the post, Russell would evacuate Wana.

During the evacuation of Wana, Russell would also have to destroy the outpost’s substantial stores and ensure that its silver rupees, rifles and 600,000 rounds of ammunition did not fall into the hands of tribesmen or potentially untrustworthy militiamen. His greatest difficulty was to destroy those immensely valuable stocks in an orderly fashion so that no one would guess that the British were on the ropes in Waziristan. To accomplish that, Russell assembled the native officers at 7:30 p.m. on May 26, and briefed them that they were to abandon Wana that evening at 11 p.m. and begin a march of 34 miles south to the Zhob River.

"After the first shock of surprise the native officers seemed in good spirits," Russell recounted, "and to be for taking the scheme in the right way." He dismissed them at 8:15, directing the officers to tell their men what was happening and to move as quickly and quietly as possible. Russell saw to it that most of the ammunition was destroyed and that the treasury was distributed to the Scouts, each man getting 15 silver rupees.

Everything seemed to be going according to plan for the next 45 minutes, until it became apparent that a group of mutinous Scouts was looting the armory. As Russell set off toward it, shots rang out, and as he drew near the armory he saw that its door was shut. A few more shots indicated to Russell that the structure was still held by the rebellious natives.

A Khattak Scout told Russell that Afridi and Wazir Scouts had seized the armory. Thinking quickly, Russell sent for Subedar (Sergeant) Major Mukam Khan and went to the east of the fort to try to round up some reliable men. By then, Scouts were streaming out of the fort through the parade gate. It was every man for him self. With difficulty Russell restored order and got the parade gate shut. The men then hunted for hand grenades to help them retake the armory, but these weapons had already been destroyed. Since they could not storm the armory without these explosives, Russell decided to evacuate Wana as soon as possible.

Unfortunately, the armory contained not only the ammunition and the treasury of the garrison but also the carts to carry them. Most of the animals had already been removed or had stampeded, so all Russell had were eight riding camels. By 9:45 p.m., the remaining Scouts and Russell’s four British officers had fallen in, along with 150 native non-combatants or followers - water carriers, cooks, personal servants, sweepers, clerks, blacksmiths, and coolies.

Russell tried to determine just who had mutinied and who had not. Counting the Scouts marching with him, he realized that Scouts from the Yusafzai, Khattak and Bangash tribes had remained loyal, as had some Bhittanis. The Afiridis and Wazirs, who made up one-tenth of the South Waziristan Militia, had mutinied, and their officers - men with whom Russcll had worked and lived for years - had led them. Some Orakzai Scouts; near kin of the Afridis, accompanied Russell’s column as it marched out of Wana, but during the night they melted away. How faithful the others would prove was anyone’s guess.
Russell’s column marched all night and covered 20 miles. They had to move quickly, since the surrounding tribes would soon hear what had happened at Wana and would join in, if only to pillage. No straggling troops could survive if the entire country rose up. The column reached Toi Khula post at 7 a.m. Captain Traill was supposed to have evacuated the position, but something looked amiss. Russell shouted but got no answer. As he moved closer, shots rang out from the post.

Apparently, Traill had evacuated Toi Khula, but it had fallen into the hands of mutineers or hostile tribesmen. Thus, instead of a much-needed rest during the heat of the day, Russell’s column would have to detour around the post and keep marching. His men forded the Tol River, refilling their canteens. The next three miles were easy enough, but thereafter the gradient got steeper and the column made less progress. Hostile tribesmen continued to snipe at them, inflicting a few casualties. Russell’s loyal Indian officers sent out picket parties to take the high ground ahead of the column’s advance, so snipers were kept at a respectful distance.

The day was very hot, and there was no water as the column climbed onto the Tesh Plain. Having
marched 30 miles since the previous evening, no one was making very good time, but at last they met
Captain Traill’s party and learned what had happened.

Traill had reached Kharab Kot at 9 p.m., just as Russell was trying to get away from Wana. He told
its surprised garrison that the government had decided to close down Wana and its nearby posts in an
economy drive, and that they must evacuate immediately, taking nothing more than a blanket and two
days’ cooked rations. They should destroy everything of value, he said. Traill doubted that many of the
Scouts believed that lame tale. To be on the safe side, he loaded up the three available camels there and
made certain that they were well to the front of his column and guarded by Scouts other than Wazirs.

As his column trudged over the hills to the next post at Tanai, Wazir Scouts began to straggle and wander
off. Reaching Tanai at 1 AM, Traill and Lieutenant Barker did not wait for the rest of the Wazirs to
desert but had them disarmed. Their Afridi Zimadar (Lieutenant) Taza Gul was a remarkably steady
influence on the Scouts, and no one else deserted or even appeared reluctant to stay with the British.
Taza Gul had served in the Scouts for 21 years with no great distinction, though he was considered
steady and dependable. During this ordeal, he was to prove a veritable rock of Gibraltar to his British
allies. Reassured by Taza Gul’s efforts, Traill, Barker and their men loaded up the ammunition and
departed Tanai at 2:30 a.m.

As the soldiers approached the fort at Toi Khula, bands of Wazirs sniped at them from near the walls
but without much effect. Although sentries at the fort fired back, the tribesmen harried Traill’s party
until it got right up to the fort’s gate at 9 a.m. The sentry informed Traill that the key to the gate
had been lost, so he could not enter the fort. Zimadar Taza Gul once more stepped into the breach.
Somehow, he coaxed the Toi Khula Scouts into letting him into the post, and after 25 minutes the gate
was opened.

Taza Gul and Traill then disarmed and arrested some 18 Wazir Scouts. At that point, Traill learned
that Major Russell’s party was approaching, but he had no way to get a message to Russell because
Wazir tribesmen had surrounded the fort and were climbing the hills to the south, from which they could
block a retreat. Traill decided that Russell was probably making directly for the next stop of Moghal
Kot and decided to wait no longer. His men smashed a number of spare rifles but had to abandon piles of ammunition since they lacked the time to burn it. At 11:30 AM, Traill’s party marched out. Although sniped at constantly, they made their way through the hills without any casualties and soon joined Russell’s column.

From then on, things got very tight indeed. The men from both columns were dog-tired from having marched all night and most of the following day with scarcely a break. The daytime temperature in Waziristan at that time of the year approached 110 degrees. The merciless sun was setting when they reached Moghal Kot and met Lieutenant Barker and what remained of his column - seven mounted infantrymen.

Barker had his own tale to tell. He had separated from Traill at Tanai, and marched on to Khajuri Kach. He was to evacuate the post, saving as much ammunition, guns and treasure as possible, and make for Moghal Kot. For that task, he had 10 mounted infantrymen. But after reaching Tanai at about 12:30 am on May 27 Barker found that one Indian officer, an Afridi and five of his mounted men had deserted in the darkness. With just five men, he rode on to Khajuri, arriving there 2 1/2 hours later. When Barker informed the native officers about the situation, they showed no surprise and helped him load 50 camels and five donkeys with 2,000 rupees, spare rations and 53 boxes of rifle ammunition - small fortune in the currency of the Northwest Frontier. After setting fire to the post, the column set off for Moghal Kot. The column had barely left when Scouts began to wander away. Barker tried to restore order, but the Scouts refused. As it happened, some Mahsud tribesmen who were shadowing the column took advantage of the chaos to open fire. Immediately, the whole party of Scouts, followers and camels stampeded. Two of the Indian officers ran with them; only one, Taza Gul remained with Barker.

As dawn broke, small parties of Mahsuds appeared on the heights overlooking the convoy’s route - a bad sign. Barker learned that militia deserters were attacking from the rear. The camels had wandered ahead, so Barker followed them. Taza Gul succeeded in persuading 10 men to come with him and recapture the camels, and they soon ran into the camel drivers, who said that a handful of Mahsuds had captured most of the animals. With some 35 Mahsuds and another dozen deserters pursuing them, Barker and his men broke and streamed across the countryside "in hopeless disorder", as Barker recalled. Neither his nor Taza Gul’s orders had any effect. All but Taza Gul and seven Scouts simply disappeared. Luckily, the Mahsuds were more interested in looting the camels, each of which contained a treasure in ammunition, than in massacring the survivors of Barker’s column.

By 4:45 PM on May 27, this little band minus its infantry, camels, ammunition and rifles, reached Moghal Kot. Half an hour later, Russell’s main column joined them at the tiny fort.

The fort at Moghal Kot offered scant protection. Its garrison included some 27 mounted and 18 infantry Scouts, but its rations could feed the new arrivals for only a day and a half. Russell now commanded about 300 Scouts, of whom 100 were recruits of little fighting value. Half were trans-border men from tribal country not directly administered by the British, including a few Orakzais, Afridis, Yusufzais and Bhittanis. The Khattaks were about the best that he had. Thus, he had about 100 reliable Scouts, against which had to be set the possibility that as many as 100 trained trans-border Scouts and perhaps 50 recruits might well decamp at any moment and go over to the rebellion.

Fortunately, the telegraph line was intact to Fort Sandeman, 50 miles to the south, and Russell was able to arrange for pickets from the nearest post to the south, Mir Ali Khel, to proceed north two days later, early on the morning of May 30. In the meantime, he and his men would have to stand firm in their pitifully exposed fort.
While that parleying went on, Russell’s forces suffered further attrition. Thirty of the Scouts who had earlier deserted and then returned deserted a second time on May 28. During the night of May 28-29, seven horses belonging to the Moghal Kot garrison and 16 camels disappeared. By now, the fort itself was effectively under siege. Sniping continued throughout May 29, becoming heavy at times, and more horses and camels were killed. The only two water bullocks were killed early on, making it necessary to bring water from the tanks by manpower - a hazardous undertaking since the tanks were located 200 yards outside the fort. Men had to dash out with containers, fill them and run back, and eight men were wounded in the process.

The tribesmen were unable to cut the telegraph lines, however. Russell was therefore able to telegraph a Captain Reilly of the Zhob Militia at Mir Ali Khel to send his relief column out at 3 a.m. on the 30th. Russell had meticulously planned his next withdrawal, gathering the 12 surviving camels. Eight of the beasts would carry the wounded, one would bear the treasure and ammunition, and three were spares. Two pickets were already posted beyond the fort to cover the water supply, so it was hoped that sending out a third picket would not arouse immediate suspicions. Those three men would also function as the rear guard. At 8:30 a.m. on May 30, Russell’s column moved out, followed by the convoy of camels and followers.

The tribesmen were not fooled. They opened fire with everything they had. Russell hoped that his pickets could keep them at bay, but his hopes were dashed when the first picket got too far ahead on the road south and beyond recall by voice or signal. Consequently, the Scout, in the main body thought that the pickets had abandoned them. In minutes, Russell reported, "a panic seemed to seize nearly everyone, and the countryside was covered with men and followers all fleeing in the direction of Mir Ali Khel, and many throwing down their arms." British and native officers tried to stem the tide, but "in no case did anyone succeed in holding up more than four or five men, and in such cases, as soon as the officers turned away to get more men, the original men disappeared."

As before, however, the opportunity to loot Moghul Kot interested the tribesmen more than butchery, and the rabble of Scouts running for their lives got four or five miles down the road. At that point, the mounted infantry of the Zhob Militia from Mir Ali Khel appeared, led by Captain Reilly. As the superior officer, Russell told Reilly to try to hold the positions that his infantry pickets had taken, while he and his officers re-formed their men. Unfortunately for Russell, most of his officers had been killed in the rout, including Captain Traill and Lieutenant Leese. Taza Gul, who led the rear guard, was wounded but managed to reach safety. Few of the Scouts still had their rifles, but Reilly’s Zhob Militia held their own, and only a handful of tribesmen managed to get among the routed Scouts. During the fighting, Captain Reilly’s horse was killed, and he was pinned beneath and died. Russell was shot through both legs. Forty Scouts were killed or wounded.

When the force reached Mir Ali Khel at 1 p.m. on May 30, Russell was shown a wire ordering its immediate evacuation, so he and his men refilled their water bottles, grabbed what rations they could and headed south by a circuitous route to Fort Sandeman. They arrived there on the 31st. Only 165 troops had made the entire journey from Wana to Fort Sandeman. At that point, Russell received a final blow. He learned that the wire ordering the evacuation of Mir Ali Khel was a forgery.

By now, the Third Afghan War had formally ended. Up north, the British had concentrated quickly. On May 11, they attacked and defeated the Afghans at Bagh. On May 17, a single Royal Air Force Handley Page bomber bombed Kabul, and a British column routed the Afghans besieged in Thal. Chastened, the Afghans sued for peace on May 31, and fighting soon died out after an armistice went into effect on
June 3. A formal peace treaty was signed in August.

Major Russell recovered from his severe wounds and received the Distinguished Service Order. Taza Gul received the Indian Distinguished Service Medal, Mukam Khan the Indian Order of Merit, and Lieutenant Barker the Military Cross. Russell returned to the Scouts in 1921 and served in the Waziristan fighting, which lasted until 1924. Promoted to lieutenant colonel that year, he became commandant of all the militias, a position that he held until he retired in 1934. Having saved his money, Russell was able to marry in 1925. He lived until 1958, survivor and hero of one of the great retreats in the history of British India.

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