

A Mid-Nineteenth Century view of Assam : The Little Known Diary of Sergeant Major George Carter

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George Carter was without doubt an usual soldier. He spent twenty one years in India, and in the non-commissioned ranks of the East India Company's army, the last three being in Dibrugarh in Upper Assam. Throughout those years he maintained a diary¹ making in characteristic nineteenth century calligraphy almost daily entries that today provides new insights into issues and events in Assam. The numerous water colour sketches done by himself illustrate among other things life and condition in the ranks of the native army. Equally interesting are the photographs the diary contains. Those on Assam are perhaps the earliest of their kinds and the few portraits, including one of himself, the only ones known to exist. Virtually nothing is known of his antecedents that could explain even if partially his rather unusual interests and habits, at any rate for an English sergeant major on the Company's service, the rank Carter held on Superannuation in 1860.

Towards the close of the year 1856 George Carter then a sergeant in the 2nd Bengal Fusiliers in Ambala was transferred to Assam to do duty with the 1st Assam Light Infantry (ALI). He accepted the appointment and after a tedious journey of nearly three month including twenty six days by steamer from Calcutta he reached Dibrugarh on 22 February 1857. It was a Sunday. The following morning he reported to Commanding Officer Lieutenant Colonel Simon Fraser Hannay. Had he requested to be appointed to the 1st ALI the Colonel asked : "No Sir" was the brief reply. Carter probably had not heard of his new regiment nor could he have looked forward to the billet in the remote and obscure North East Frontier.²

I

The local corps and Upper Assam turned out to be a wholly experience. What struck Carter at once was that the 1st ALI had permanent head quarter and unlike his "ever marching Fusiliers"

did not move from station to station. It was therefore "a relief to come to a half and last and to know that my new corps does not reach unless on service". His duties as quarter master sergeant too were relatively lighter. An early entry describes daily routine :

Awoke as usual at the 1st bugle 4½ (AM) bathed and dressed for morning parade ; turning out at 5½ AM: on parade Superintending the drill of the men till 8,0 clock. Then through the lines to see that all is right and clean there, and so on home to my bungalow. Breakfast is brought by my cook a little before 9 (Kitcheree, grilled fowl, coffee and bread). At 10 over to the Magazine (Of which I hold the keys and am responsible for its order & reguarity) At 11 I move over to my quarter & can now find time to write letters or amuse myself with a tune etc. At 2 PM my servant walks in with hot water for shaving and as soon as that operation is performed I wash and as soon as that operation is performed I wash dress for dinner, which is served at a quarter before 3. Parade for the Commananding (Officer)'s inspection having been in orders for 4 PM.

Dibrugarh was an expensive station and provisions were scarce. Mutton was unavailable, Carter says, because there was no sheep rearing in Assam. And "there and so few Europeans" he adds, "that it is seldom that beef could be got : for when a man kills a cow or a bullock there is a risk of half of it having left on his hands". His salary of Rs. 44/13/2 a month was low. In most Bengal Infantry regiments where European non-commissioned officers (NCO) held appointments it was customary to give them some "writing" which fetched a substantial remuneration. His friend Thomas Leak in the 56th Bengal Infantry with whom he maintained a regular correspondence, for instance, earned as much as ninety rupees a month for desk, work in his regiment. Even the European sergeant of the local Artillery in Dibrugarh made thirty rupees a month doing similar work in his Company. "There is no such work for me in this regiment" lamented Carter, for colonel Hannay had assigned the work to two "natives" under his own superintendence. It was by "living low", Carter said that he was able to manage on his meagre earnings.

Regimental life in the local corps as described by Carter contrasts sharply with that in the Company's regular regiments. He sketches the lay-out of the Dibrugarh cantonment, the sepoy lines, their white washed thatched huts and the Bungalows of the European NCO's the latter "are square thatch'd brick buildings, with an

open arch'd verandah along the front face 40 feet long. The whole bungalow is floored with lime plaster beaten hard". Conditions for European NCO's whether Company's or Crown, in cantonments and stations in India in the nineteenth century were harsh. They were unpri viledged, segregated and much the "single men in barracks" which kipling describes in the 1880s. Carter is thus amused to find himself "alone in a big bungalow". But it was, the confessed, "a very lonesome life".

It is odd to eat my meals alone, to have no one to help, to have no one to quiz, and to have no one looking after me as in the Fusiliers.

His accounts of the lives of the other Europeans of his rank and station provides further insight into social life in Dibrugarh. The Sergeant Major of the Battalion was Henry Jackson, a short (5' 5") gouty Englishman of thirty one years service, the greater part spent in easy staff appointments. He was married to a Assamese and had four daughters, one of whom was grown up, of "tolerably good appearance, but not a particle removed from the mother's colour". In addition to the girls there were two youngmen both employed as clerks in the Political Agent's office who were "darker". Jackson, Carter wrote, was :

under petticoat government except when the bottle is triumphant and then he has his bungalow to himself as the old hen and chickens fly to the Gun-Serg (eans't) s FOR REFUGE. The knee (afflicted by rheumatism) is then worse and hinders him from persuing them.

James Coates, the sergeant of the Artillery, described as somewhat of a different stamp" was" in similar married bondage". He drank to excess occasionally and "then his fat $\frac{1}{2}$. caste wife has to fly out of the bungalow for safety, sometimes taking refuge in one of the Sepoy's cow-sheds". Such connections with local women was not frowned upon. Colonel Hannay and Carter were for example witness to a marriage sometime later between an Assamese Christian named Katrina Wood and a sailor of the Naval Bridge.

The Europeans had a good deal of freedom. Coates for example who was a carpenter before enlisting, made tea boxes in his leisure hours. "He openly avowed his intention", Carter says, "of making all the money he can" though "his orinking bouts swamp the savings". The men too, despite the continuous daily parades, had their amusements. The paltan or regimental bazar

provided the liquor and the women. Illicit distilling appears rampant. Many of the Europeans indulged in local spirits : when Carter made his first call on Jackson he was served with a local brew. But what amazed Carter most was Hannay's indulgence in allowing the sepoys to keep cows, ducks, hens, and goats in the lines. He thus observes :

This regiment being a local one, the sepoys have become regular colonists. They have gardens well stock'd with Peach, Apricot, Linie, Guava, Rose, Apple, Orange & Jack trees.

Colonel Hanny had opened tea gardens and most of his time was spent in his estates. When Carter reported to him on his arrival the Commanding Officer had just returned from his gardens, a thing he was to do regularly during the next three years of Carter's life in the Dibrugarh. It was small wonder that senior military officers during the Bhutan War (1864-65) spoke damagingly of the system of local regiments as commanding officers where most likely under it to degenerate into tea planters.³

But despite all this Carter had no regrets in leaving his old regiment and northern India :

It do not repine, nor I repent having left the 2nd Fusiliers when I balance one thing against the other, and at any rate, here I have ease and am nearly my own master.

II

On 3 June 1857 Carter learnt though the *Calcutta Phoenix Extraordinary* that five regiments of Bengal native infantry had mutinied in Delhi and had taken possession of the fort. Only ten of the 150 Europeans had escaped death according to the paper. The following day the Colonel brought in more news of the mutiny : on 10 May 3rd Native Light Cavalry and 20th Native Infantry mutinied in Meerut. They forced the 11th Native Infantry to join them and together released 1100 prisoners from jail and then murdered "every European or Christian man, women and child with circumstance of brutality". Carter's entry for 7th June shows the perception of the common soldier about the nature of the outbreak :-

The rebellion as far as I can glean from natives has been foreseen for some years by them in an indistinct manner : there is a prophecy among them which has been talked of till they believed it would be a true one : namely, that after the completion of one

hundred years from the time the British took Bengal (viz 100 years after the battle of Plassey 23 June 1757) The British Rule in India will expire ("Coompnee Ke Raj Murjage"). The chief movers in the mutiny are the Mahomedans with the ex-King of Delhi for their head & with the secret assistance of the Court of Oude. The Brahmins who are engaged in the mutiny have been used by the Moslems to influence the rest of the Hindoos in the cause of rebellion.

Interestingly, this observation comes nearly two months before the young Alfred Ryall wrote to his father from northern India: 'The whole insurrection is a great Mahomedan Conspiracy and the Sepoys are merely the tools of the Mussalmans'.⁴ This widespread belief in Muslim conspiracy was largely fostered by the Anglo-Indian Press. But more damaging than this was the passions that it inflamed by the colour they gave to the brutalities by the mutineers. Thus after reading the killing of Europeans in Delhi Carter entered the following in his diary: "The blood of our slaughtered countrymen, of our violated & murdered countrywomen and their helpless babies cry-out for vengeance, & it will come". Vengeance taken was duly reported soon after but Hannay who handed the newspaper to Carter told him: "though there had been vengeance taken on the mutineers at Benaras it may not be so good to speak about it amongst the sepoy or the natives". Carter's entry twenty days later, for 20 July, after news was received shows the extent and persistence of the inflammatory reporting

The atrocities that the rebellious sepoy have committed are frightful to read of: Such things as putting a family of children to death one at a time, before the madened parents & then forcing pieces of their own babies flesh down their throats, thereafter executing the husband barbarously the wife reserved for more horrors & then hacked to pieces by the incarnate demons. Several instances of children torn asunder limb from limb before their parents have been brought to light by the news papers.

Not all news, however, came from the newspapers. Until late May Carter continued to receive letters quite regularly from Thomas Leak. Others like the Reverend E H Higgs of St. Paul's Church, Dibrugarh, occasionally received private letters from Calcutta. But news from Northern India took a rather circuitous route: 'All our intelligence comes up through the Punjab which is held

quiet by Sir John Lawrence ; from the Punjab the news is sent down the Indus to Bombay & so it reaches us by sea to Calcutta & thence up the Burrampooter to Assam”.

Until June there was little cause for worry in Dibrugarh. On the 17th the Battalion had volunteered for General Service and Carter was instructed to be ready to move out with a detachment of 200 men under Captain Lowther : Entries from the following month onwards, however, show a growing anxiety. On 4th July Hannay for the first time talked of measures in case of a rising. He took Carter around the cantonment selecting gun sites for enfilading sepoy lines if this became necessary. Three days later Carter writes of “some plotting here” and

Our eyes and ears are alert to notice any change in the tone and demeanour of the natives and sepoys.

By the middle of August 1857 there were enough reasons for Hannay to contemplate “open precautionary measures”. Reports had been received of persons going round the Colonel’s bungalow enquiring after the numbers of night sentries. There was also a report of one of the junior native officers talking of Gorkhas, the reference was to Nepal’s Jang Bahadur, deserting the Company. Fire in the sepoy lines as well as in the nearby *Faltoo Gow*, village predominantly of ex-servicement was seen as significant. That something was afoot was confirmed on 17 August when Hannay told Carter that agents from Northern India were in Gauhati, and “having been secreted a while in the Chief (sic) Commissioners house were trying to arrange a rising amongst our Sepoys in connection with the Assam Raja”. News of this development was in all probability brought in by Captain Charles Holroyd, Principal Assistant Commissioner in Sibsagar, whom Carter saw in church only the day before. Two days later Carter made the following entry :

the wave of the rebellion has reached us and is showing itself in Golaghat, one of our out posts, 104 miles off, as well as in Debrugarh.

Fortunately for Carter and the European community there were one and a half companies of Gorkhas in Dibrugarh. This was further augmented by the arrival of Lowther from Sadira with another half company, so that the total number of Gorkhas, or *Parbaties* as they were locally called, was two hundred,

Still Carter considered Dibrugarh "in a most critical state. Panic has been and is now prevalent". The Artillery Company, composed almost exclusively of Hindustanis, and "not trustworthy" was a matter of concern. Its Commanding officer moved recordingly moved the contents of the Magazine to the care of the Gorkhas in the ALI but the guns with 500 rounds of grape remained with the men. As a "counter poise" its Commanding officer, the Sergeant and three other Europeans had posted themselves in the Sergeant's bungalow, described as "few paces" of the gun shed so as "to be able to sezesi and if necessary spike them with the aid of 10 of our Purbutteahs".

Colonel Hannay, meanwhile, drew up plans for the defence of the station. His instructions in respect of the Artillery were :

In the event of any disturbance in the lines of the Artillery and Light Infantry the three sergeants on the lines will as soon as possible, spike the 6-pr guns in the Gun-shed, and for their assistance 10 hill men (Gorkhas) are posted in the billiard room who have orders to give immediate assistance in carrying out the measure.

Arrangements relating to the ALI were as follows :

In the year of the lines are 2 Havilaars, 2 Naiks, and 40 men 10 of which are a guard on the 12-prs., 10 men will proceed to the Quartermaster Sergeants, who will then will hold the Magazine ; the remainder, with no, 10 Company will hold the Bells of Arms. The whole of the party in the rear of the lines amounting to bout 80 rank & file have their arms and 60 round of balled ammunition per man. These with No. 10 are, I trust, faithful, as well as some 100 men of the Jerooahs and Munneepoorees, thus making 300 of the 400 at this station.

Nothing untoward happened in August : "it seems", Carter says, that the presence of our Purbutteahs have overawed the bad spirits in the corps and about the station. He talks of Lowther going down to Jorhat where with Captain Holroyd Kanderpeswar Singha was apprehended. A mass of correspondence relative to the intended rising in Upper Assam," was discovered and it was towards morning of a rainy stormy night that the capture was made & more than one sleeping guard was passed & secured are the young Rajah was got at". This was followed by arrestes in the battalion :

Carter mentions the names of Jemador Noor Mahammed, native doctor Hadaiat Ali and sepoy Shaikh Lale Muhmmad. There was however, no let up in security arrangements. Constant night patrolling, done by all Europeans officers and NCO's continued. It was only on 4 October that Carter could write : "At length relief has reached us in the form of a detachment of 100 sailors with 2 12 pr Howitzers under command of Lieutenant Davis, Indian Navy".

One of the Carter's last references to the mutiny related to rise in prices. By the end of September things appeared to have improved for the British in Delhi. Provision were "plentiful" in the British Camp : gram was available at 60 seers to a rupee, Attah at 26 seers and ghee 2 $\frac{1}{2}$ seers. This was "cheering news". But in Dibrugarh prices continued to be double of what it was in the early part of the year. Ghee was $\frac{3}{4}$ speer per rupee' attah 8 seers' sugar 2 seers, mustered oil seer and "table" rice at 10 seers". I wish" writes Carter,

my pay would rise with the rise and in the price of provisions. Now the sepoys are secured against high prices for when rice gets above a certain price government pay batter or compensation to the sepoy : but the serg (ean)t Major or Q (uarte) r Master Serg (ean)t of a native corps must just do as he can on his own resources. This is felt very hard after being used for so many years to receive Rations at the fixed rate from the Commissariat.

III

The "mutiny" was followed by problems on the northern Assam frontier. The Abors has decended upon the plains of the northern bank of the Brahmaputra and cut up a Bihea Village just six miles off Dibrugarh. George Carter found himself in a puritive expedition that the Government of India sanctioned against the tribe. At the rank of Sergeant Carter had nothing to do with policy and planning : but if his diary is devoid of such issued it is replete with details illustrating the extraordinary difficulties of mountain and jungle warfare in the north eastern frontier.

The purnitive column that moved out of Dibrugarh on 10 March consisted of Captain Lowther in Command, Captain Davies and 15 Sailors from the Naval Brigade, sSergeant -Major Carter three native officers, five havilders, four naiks, two buglers and 90 men from the 1st ALI and 15 Golandauz from the Local Artillery with two howitzers. In addition a havildar and a nrik together with twelve light infantry with Capatain Bivar proceeded on 12

February. It took seven days for the troops to reach Dihangmukh by upward navigation in two regimental boats. Here the column changed out of the large boats into small open canoes. Bivar has organised 27 such canoes and 16 elephants. In the next two days fourteen miles were covered, the troops moving in canoes while the elephants with guns and baggage moved along its banks, until pasighat was reached. Advance beyond this point was exceedingly slow.

Keybang Village, the object of the expedition, was according to estimates, only four days march from here. The column therefore marched light with only four days provisions. Transport allowed was one cooly to 5 soldiers. Until 24 March the village was nowhere in sight and Carter records :

everyone is both surprised and disappointed at not having met the enemy. Neither have we got to his village. Captain Bivar's information led him to say that the enemy were but a short distance yet we have come seven miles and to night our food is out. It was all very well at Pangey to say let each man take 4 days provision in his haversack : its light enough work to climb up these hills with a rifle and ammunition through a tolerably level country, four days ration might be carried, but here the climbing tries the wind and stamina too much without a load of provisions.

It now became clear that the Abors had withdrawn deep into the interior and pursuit without provisions was useless. Ammunition too was running low. From the 25th the column was constantly harassed by Abor archers and Carter thus writes :

This noiseless peppering was very annoying : we could not tell where to aim at an Abor but when any of our men fired a dozen bows sent arrows towards the flash.

The column failed to make contact with the tribesmen. Lowther decided to withdraw on 28th and the Abors constantly harried the party on their return. The failure of the expedition has been largely attributed by recent writers to the misunderstanding between the military officer in command, Captain Lowther, and the political officer, Captain Bivar.⁵ Carter makes no reference to this. But from a perusal of the diary it is clear that the expedition was mounted on very poor intelligence and it is this that was at the root of all the difficulties. It was the pluck of the men that saved the expedition from certain disaster.

The failure of this expedition led to another better organised and far larger one under Colonel Hannay. Carter once again accompanied that column detailing every action. The expedition which had left Dibrugarh on 14 February 1859 was back on 7th of the following month.

IV

Meanwhile, Carter was promoted to Sergeant-Major, Henry Jackson having been transferred to the Commissariat Department and posted to Dacca. In October 1859 Carter proceeded on five months leave to Calcutta. "This is the first leave I have had during my service" he writes. The following June he completed twenty one years service and on verge of retirement. Colonel Hannay wanted Carter to stay on in his tea estates offering him a salary of a hundred rupees for the first year together with a bungalow and a pony, one hundred and fifty in the second year and two hundred in the third.⁶ It was a tempting offer but Carter declined declaring.

I have considered the Colonels offer of remaining with him and come to the conclusion that, as my health has never been thoroughly re-established since I was in Pegu (2nd Anglo-Burmese War, 1852) and I have lately been under treatment by Doctor White, it is much to better for me to go home to my native land and have poverty and health rather than remain to accumulate wealth & perhaps die over it.

On 1st October 1860 his orders for retirement arrived and on 15th he left Assam carrying with him his memoirs for posterity.

Notes & References

1. Leather bound and in excellent state of preservation the diary is in the custody of the India Office Library and Records, London, and listed as IOR MSS EUR E 262. Extracts of photocopies relating to Assam have since been deposited in the Central Library, North Eastern Hill University, Shillong.
2. The 1st Assam Light Infantry, raised in 1817 as the Cuttack Legion and became Rangpur Light Infantry in 1823, was localised in Assam in 1829 as the Assam Light Infantry. It became the 1st ALI in 1844, when the irregular Assam Sebundy Corps raised to 1835 became the 2nd ALI. The 1st ALI is now the

Gorkha Rifles, transferred to Britain after independence. As a local regiment its duties were confined to Assam. In 1861 after the reorganisation of the Army following the mutiny it became a regular regiment, and gradually developed into a Gorkha battalion. It moved out of the province in the early part of the century.

3. Foreign Political A Proceedings (National Archives of India, New Delhi) July 1865 : Nos 80-82 · vide Keep-with, Brigadier General Sir Henry Tombs to Adjutant General, 14 April.
4. Quoted in Eric Stokes, *The Peasant Armed* (Oxford 1868) Ed. C. A. Bayley, p. 7
5. Cf. L. W. Shakespeare, *History of the Assam Rifles* (London 1929, Rept. 1977) p. 42.
6. Cf. Salares of Assam Company tea planters, H A Antrobus, *A History of the Assam Company*, (Edinburgh, 1959) pp. 419-425