

PAST HISTORY
145 (MAIWAND) COMMANDO BATTERY
ROYAL ARTILLERY

The Battery originated in 1826, being known then as No. 3 Troop 1st Brigade, Bengal Horse Artillery. It first saw action in Afghanistan in 1842, and later took part in the Sikh (Satlej) Campaign in 1845. Fighting at Sobraon in 1846 they first made their name by "reflecting everlasting credit" on the Artillery by successfully accomplishing the tremendous march against the Kote Kangra in the same year.

In 1877 the Battery's name was changed to 'E' Battery, 'B' Brigade, Royal Horse Artillery. It was as 'E' Battery that they embarked at Bombay for Karachi to take part in the Afghan war. In this war, on the 27th July 1880, the Battle of Maiwand was fought.

In July 1880, a small force, 2,500 strong, including the 66th Foot (later Royal Berkshire Regiment) and 'E' Battery with their six 9 pounder guns, were involved in the successful pursuit of a certain Shere Ali's troops who had defected to the Afghans. Six smooth bore guns were captured in this action, and were formed into a Battery manned by men of the 66th Foot under Officers and NCOs of 'E' Battery.

Shortly after this, on the 27th July, the column was marching along a water-course when it was attacked by a force of 36,000 Ghazis and well-trained Afghan regular troops. The Afghan forces held a great advantage in that, besides outnumbering the Anglo-Indian force by 14 to 1, they had cover to within 100 yards of the position. They also had modern breech-loading Armstrong guns, at least the equal of the Battery's muzzle loading rifled 9-pounders.

In the first wave of the attack, two officers, including the Battery Commander Major Blackwood, were wounded; shortly afterwards the smooth bore guns had to retire to replenish ammunition. The enemy pressed home their attack with great bravery and complete disregard for their own safety, in spite of sustained, accurate fire from the Battery. Soon the firing line crumpled, and the disastrous retreat began.

Captain Slade (now Commanding the Battery) gave the order to limber up. The Ghazis were almost on top of the guns, and Lieutenant MacLaine, commanding the left section nearest to the enemy, failed to hear the order. Consequently he found himself defending his guns with "handspikes and sponge-rods." The detachments of these two guns were over-run and the guns captured. By a super-human effort the remaining four guns were brought out of action.

The 66th were forced to retire with the rest of the force. A party of about 200 were cut off, and met their fate in a garden. They fought most gallantly to the last man against a force more than ten times their number. It is thought that Major Blackwood was a member of this unfortunate party. This epic action was immortalised in the famous painting. "The Last Eleven at MAIWAND."

The remnants had no choice but to withdraw to Kandahar, 49 miles distant, in the face of a victorious and remorseless foe. The horrors of this retreat can scarcely be realised. "The Artillery alone appeared to have maintained their military formation and morale during the retreat" states the official account.