

## An Afternoon Patrol

Major Harrison was mad. Completely loony. Most of the battalion swore it was the twenty years of African sun he'd been exposed to, although Private Masterson wasn't convinced. "'It's all tha' bloody whiskey 'e drinks" he suggested.

"Nah, I'm tellin' you, it's the sun what's done it" replied Private Ford, "sometimes I feel like I'm going mad in this heat".

"Well, whatever it is it's certainly done for his senses".

The two infantrymen were watching the Major berating Captain Lewisham, apparently on the subject of some recent remarks the Captain had made on the native command structure.

"Damned Liberals, that's who they follow Lewisham, not this warlord chap. Gladstone's got them in his pocket!"

"But sir I think..."

"Damn your thoughts man!"

Harrison turned his horse from the captain and trotted over to where Masterson and Ford were standing at ease with the rest of the patrol. "Lieutenant!" he called, glaring down suspiciously at the men, as if daring them to speak up and question his views on the politics of the region.

"Sir!"

"Spread the bastards out and advance into the village. Search every house."

The lieutenant saluted and turned to face the redcoats, who were readying themselves to move.

"Sergeant!"

"Sah!"

"The platoon will move in open order towards those buildings. Prepare to advance."

"And no damned heroics" growled the major, mentally noting down which of the advancing figures might be concealing socialist sympathies...

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"I told 'im we're only 'ere to search f' weapons sir, but 'e don't believe me. Seems to fink we're 'ere t' nick 'is 'ole livelihood."

Captain Lewisham sighed and drew his revolver. "Repeat the message Matthews, but this time tell him I'll blow his bloody brains out if he doesn't agree."

As the private translated a slightly more diplomatic version of the message to the village elder, Lewisham cast his eye over the miserable cluster of buildings. He hated Africa. All things that occurred on this continent seemed to conspire to irritate and anger him. No wonder Harrison had gone mad. Lewisham often wondered whether the Major's apparent insanity was merely a cover to escape from the constant hassle of the world in general.

The man had at last seemed to admit defeat, and merely stood with his arms crossed glaring up at the captain.

"Alright, let's get this over with."

A dog began to bark as the first redcoats began to move into the buildings. Lewisham suddenly found himself daring to hope that he would be back at the officer's club by six o'clock...

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"Form line you bastards! Form line!"

And it had all been going so well. The last house had been searched, the weapons found – one ancient flintlock pistol and half of an unidentifiable rifle – had been destroyed, and the patrol had been formed up and prepared to move when a horn had sounded and the land behind the village had sprouted men. So it was that Captain Lewisham found himself behind a half-formed line of redcoats, screaming at them to fire into the throng of enemy warriors pouring over a low wall towards him.

"Buggers must've sent for them while we were interviewing the old man" he said to himself, before firing his revolver into the screaming mass of bodies. Some of his men were already being forced to use their bayonets to defend themselves; such was the speed with which the warriors were upon them.

"Retire in sections!" cried the Lieutenant. Without waiting for Lewisham's response the soldiers began to shuffle backwards, firing as they went. Private Matthews cried out and slumped forward as a spear pierced his chest, his blood forming tiny rivulets in the dust.

Bugger this, thought Lewisham, and with a cry of "fall back!" turned his horse and galloped out of the village back towards the dubious safety of Major Harrison, who oddly enough was charging to meet him.

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Private Masterson shot a man in the chest, then stepped over him and bayoneted a second in the throat. This was certainly not the afternoon patrol he had anticipated. A cry of "fall back!" sounded out behind him, and he fired once more into the mass of warriors before turning and beginning to run. Beside him, Private Ford was swearing violently as he ran, cursing the enemy, the officers and the universe in general. Behind them the jubilant tribesmen gave chase.

Suddenly Major Harrison appeared galloping towards them, waving his sword and shouting. He charged through the retreating redcoats and careened to a halt ten yards from the native pursuers, who seemed to slow in their surprise at seeing this mounted officer. The infantry, however, continued to run.

"Come back, damn your eyes!" He screamed at the fleeing figures, "Come back here and show these bloody liberals how British soldiers fight!"

A couple of redcoats turned and fired, but most kept on running, the fight obviously lost.

Harrison turned in the saddle to glare at the swarm of tribesmen advancing towards him. "Never liked the wretches anyway" he said to no one in particular. Gripping his sword, the Major prepared to go down fighting.