

India 1857, Lucknow

Inside the magazine of Machhi Bhawan Fort, twenty-year old lieutenant John Ritson of The East India Company was wounded and about to die. Yet despite his injuries he was determined to take as many of the mutineers with him as he could. 'Aw Christ,' he groaned through gritted teeth as the pain shot through his leg. Reaching the stacked barrels he eased himself one knee and almost fainted as bones in his shattered leg grated together. Taking a deep breath he ground his teeth against the pain and cut short the fuse on the barrel in the centre of the front row.

It was only two days ago that Sir Henry Lawrence had led a seven hundred strong force of us out via the Fraizabad Road, to meet the Sepoy threat from the northeast. We marched eight miles and came to a halt by some trees. Ahead lay two villages the one on the left slightly in front of the second, which was called Chinhat. The scouts reported that enemy held a strong position at the back of Chinhat and we waited while the senior officers decided what action to take. I sat and stared hungrily at the elephants carrying the commissariat stores and wondered if we were to be fed. A cup of char and a bit of breakfast would not have gone amiss. Instead we were ordered to advance with empty stomachs under the burning sun and took up positions in the first village.

The skirmishers were sent out, we moved into their former positions, the heavy gun commenced firing and we waited for the order to advance. That order never came. The artillery firing over our heads was so successful that it shattered the enemy centre. There was however so many of them that the wings swept out and around. As we came under attack on both flanks and men began to fall it became obvious that if we did not withdraw soon, we would be surrounded and annihilated. Thankfully the order came, and we had to fight our way clear of the screaming mob. It was bloody murder with men falling around us and we lost nearly half our small force. But at last we broke free and raced back to the town.

Back in Lucknow, Sir Henry strips the fort and orders everyone into the residency, which will be easier to defend. My squad is detailed to blow the magazine and the long fuse that will give us ample time to get clear is in place. I order the men to head off to the residency and wait with slow match in hand for them to get clear, before heading back in to fire the fuse. The men only get as far as the gates when a fusillade of shots ring out and they are forced back into the fort. Within minutes the mutineers pour through the gates. I draw my pistol and empty it into the crowd; by now the renegades have overwhelmed the men.

The only thing I can do now is to blow the magazine, before the rabble can get their hands on the powder. I am about to turn when I am punched from my feet by a musket ball. There isn't much pain at first, but when I try to rise my leg buckles under me and the pain comes. Unable to stand, I grab the slow match from the ground – it is still burning – and crawled into the magazine. The magazine contains two hundred and fifty barrels of gunpowder and fifty thousand rounds of ball and gun ammunition, more than enough to send the rabble to their heathen makers.

I sit back with the slow match in my hand and try to make peace with my maker while I wait. It will not be long, only as long as it will take the screaming mob to hack the bodies of my Sikhs into pieces and parade their heads high in the air.

The first renegade appears, I wait and he is joined by another, a Bengali from the looks of him, who pulls a wicked looking knife from his belt. Still I wait, by now the place is full of them and the Bengali is grinning as he draws near. I raise my trembling hand, set the slow match to the fuse and smile as the fear flickers across his pockmarked face. My brain registers the bright flash and then there is only darkness.

Fred Watson