

Our spies and informants, no doubt including Govind Rao, told our command that British land forces were marshalling to attack after the first monsoon showers. This puzzled me; surely it was to their advantage to attack *before* the rains set in. After all, the shelter of the fort and its ramparts favoured us, while they would be open to the elements.

Aware that waiting is difficult for an army whose thoughts are turned towards a coming battle, General Gerald de Lally toured the fort, encouraging the men.

I was fortunate enough to be singled out by the general, and became part of his entourage. I was impressed by his logic, the sincerity of his words and the patience he showed toward those who needed the reassurance only a great man can give.

When the tour was over, he held out his hand to me. "Victory is ours, it will always be ours." I believed him.

Meanwhile, we waited.

On parapet duty, I looked up at the clouds scudding across the moon and shivered, turning away from the impression of ghosts moving slowly through the chill in the morning air.

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Not all battles begin with an explosion of noise. Some are cloaked in stealth.

Like warrior ants, the enemy tenaciously advanced up the ramparts, disregarding the crushed and mangled bodies of the first swarm of attackers who fell to our fire.

Terror-stricken birds screeched across the sky as men below drenched the earth with fresh blood. A monkey that had been the adjutant's pet made a frenzied leap but was caught in mid-air by a disintegrating shell. Half of us manning the parapets were sent down to help the defenders resist the inexorable advance of the enemy.

As I was hurled into this dreadful maelstrom, there was no time to

think of anything but killing. My bayonet turned a half-circle in the belly of a rabbit-jawed Englishman. As I withdrew the blade, it made a sound that would haunt my nights for months to come.

A push sent me reeling backwards and a tall Englishman grabbed my shoulders from behind and tried to break my back. I screamed as another grabbed my arm and seized my gun.

“Kill the fucking frog bastard!” someone shouted.

“No!” yelled an enemy officer. “We need prisoners!”

I couldn’t move. Pain racked my body, and I stifled another scream.

A shot whistled by as I struggled to free myself. I did not want to be taken prisoner, to be tortured. The sharp edge of a boot grazed my ankle. There was another shot, and the Englishman’s grip on my shoulders slackened. He gave a muffled cry, and slumped to the ground.

I lunged at the man who had seized my gun. My weapon fell from his hand into a pool of mud. As I bent to retrieve it, he grabbed my ankles and I fell headlong into the mud. Before I could rise, his fingers were around my windpipe. I reached up and gouged at his eyes. He swore obscenities at me as my breath hissed through my nostrils, then I gasped as I choked.

With one frantic thrust, I brought my knee up, broke his murderous grip, and jerked away from him. He reached for his pistol, cocked it and levelled it. It flew out of his hand as I kicked his wrist. We grappled for the fallen weapon. I got a firm grip on its barrel and smashed the butt into his skull. He shuddered and fell. Chips of bone and brain oozed from the side of his head. I picked up my own gun and ran back to the far wall of the fort.

The sergeant-major and the lieutenant were forcing two English prisoners into one of the sentry boxes. I did not wonder what they were going to do with them. I did not care.

A shot grazed my forearm as a sudden flare lit the scene of the battle, illuminating the twitching limbs of the dying and the ruptured entrails of the dead. It was a scene from Dante’s *Inferno*.

A scream rose above the din. “I’ve just killed one of our own men by mistake!” Bernard screamed.

No one answered his plea. He dropped on his knees, asking God

for guidance. In the confusion of battle, I forgot about his plight.

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When dawn finally cast its faint glow over the fort, I noticed Bernard still praying. I grabbed his shoulder and shook him.

“Get up off your knees, you blasted idiot!”

He turned towards me and let out a great, shuddering sigh.

“Get some sense into yourself, Bernard. We’re in the middle of a sodding war!”

“I know, Claude, I know,” he said, tears welling in his eyes.

I hauled him away to a room which had been converted into an aid post. Carlos was there, bandaging the wounded.

“The sawbones commandeered me services and turned me into a nurse. Bet it won’t be for long, though,” he chuckled. “I’m as clumsy as an elephant with me left hand – keep dropping things.”

I kicked pieces of broken glass into a corner. “Carlos, you’d better obey orders and stay here. All hell’s broken loose outside, down the road a bit.”

“A man needs the multiple arms of a Hindu god to ward off those bloody British,” said a harassed doctor. “What’s the matter with you two?”

Bernard mumbled something and made the sign of the cross. The doctor frowned. Then Rouge was carried in, protesting. “Bloody well put me down! You’ve got hold of the wrong man. My hide doesn’t have a scratch on it, it’s not *my* blood I’m covered in!”

“Up to a point, I agree with you,” the doctor said, after a cursory examination of Rouge. “No wounds, but you do have a nasty bump on the head. Lie down.”

“But doctor, I have to get back into the fight!”

The doctor forced a powder down Rouge’s throat. “Strange, concussion usually shuts idiots up and makes them easier to manage.”

Rouge jumped up. “I refuse to lie here like a wet-britch coward while my comrades are getting themselves killed!”

“Rouge, you’d better shut up,” I cautioned.

Carlos grinned. “If you argue with the sawbones, you’re liable to be turned into a chamber-pot nurse like I’ve been.”

I held a man's head up as he vomited on the floor.

"Good work, soldier," said the doctor. "You probably saved him from drowning in his own vomit. Keep making yourself useful."

Fiesal, a gigantic French African, staggered in with a man flung over each shoulder. "Please, sir, my friends are wounded!"

The doctor touched the neck of one of the Africans and then held a mirror over the other man's mouth. They were dead. "I'm afraid your friends have gone to a peaceful land."

Fiesal gently lowered the bodies of his compatriots to the floor, then gave a plaintive howl.

The sound of a bullet whistling overhead and the boom of guns echoed through my sleep-deprived mind. How long could we go on like this?

The doctor handed me a roll of bandages. "Here, use these."

I was bandaging a wounded arm when Bernard began twirling his rosary beads around in time with the twitching in his cheek. When he started to sing a hymn, the doctor snapped. "Will you get the blazes out of here – I have neither the time nor inclination to treat religious maniacs!"

Bernard dropped his beads. "Let me stay here, sir. I can be your assistant."

The doctor gave a raucous chortle. "Bernard is very clever. He knows a lot. But he don't hold with no killing," Carlos said.

The doctor placed a tourniquet on a man's arm as Bernard continued. "My God has spoken to me and forbidden me to kill."

The doctor looked up. "It's a pity that your God didn't speak loud enough for everyone to hear. Then I might get some rest."

"Please, doctor," persisted Bernard, "Let me help you."

"Seeing that you're no bloody good for anything else, you may as well stay."

"God bless you, sir. You will be rewarded in heaven."

"Stop that rubbish and go over to the medicine cabinet. I suppose you can read labels?"

"I can read in a number of languages, doctor."

Georges put his head through the door. "Is anyone attending Rouge? He got a bump on the skull that would have downed a bull

elephant.”

The doctor looked up. “I take it you mean your friend with concussion?”

“Yes, that’s him,” said Georges.

“He’s fallen asleep – a fact for which I’m thankful.”

Georges sat down on a stool, but the doctor gestured at him with a surgical instrument. “*You*, however, are out of bounds. Kindly remove your horrible hirsute face from my first-aid post – such as it is – or I fear I’ll be sick, and then you will *all* be in trouble.”

I gave sips of water to patients who were begging for it, but some were too weak to swallow. I watched Bernard obeying the doctor’s orders, and then I heard Father Diaz speaking in rapid Spanish.

“Oh, God, not another one of them!” exclaimed the doctor.

“He wants to help the dying, sir,” said Carlos. “He’s a real good priest.”

The doctor studied Father Diaz. “I don’t care if he’s a saint – if he stays here, he helps the living!” The doctor took the bandages from me and gave them to Father Diaz. “Now you, Martin, you can go out and send a few customers to my English counterpart.”

“Can I go with him, doctor?” asked Carlos.

“You’re always wanting to scuttle off somewhere, aren’t you? They should have called you ‘weasel’.”

“That means I can’t bloody well go?”

“It bloody well does.”

I moved to the tent flap and Carlos smiled. “Good luck, Claude. Look after yourself.”

“Go with God,” said Father Diaz.

And so I rejoined the fight that history books in later years were to dismiss in a line or two as ‘the insignificant last stand of the French in India’.

Before the final battle began, an officer in full regalia covered in campaign medals, his sabre gleaming in the sun, led a charge, banners flying defiantly and the kettle drums playing in quick tempo.

This was going to be the victory in which we would rout the enemy, shouting triumphant cries which would resonate across our empire,

across the world.

Too soon, the banners lay covered in mud beside the stricken officer as he gasped the words *La Belle France*, his hand stiffening in a final salute. One by one, the drums ceased playing.

Soon our only thoughts were of our own survival.

To us who had taken part in four months of dreadful struggle against insurmountable odds, it was an appalling anti-climax, one that shook the foundations of our world.

“Is there enough water in the world to wash away the blood from our hands?” asked Father Diaz, sitting on the ground next to me, munching a piece of mouldy bread.

“You were very brave, Father,” I said. “You went outside to the villages to beg food for us. Even after the English caught and beat you, you had no thought of stopping.”

“I had to return when the English threatened to kill that girl Brigitte, her child and her family. That family gave us all the food they could spare. I could not risk their lives any longer.”

“That young man – the one you all call Baldy – who accompanied me on more than one food scrounging expedition, was captured by the English. And alas, he is still in their clutches.” We had all reassessed Baldy’s character and his unexpected bravery in volunteering for such dangerous forays. “I will pray for his well-being,” promised the priest.

Rama and Krishnamurti managed to collect some bird and reptile eggs, and these were made into an omelette with a few scrounged onions. I wondered what my friend Paul and Constance were eating at Maxim’s in Paris.

Then the English caught Krishnamurti foraging potatoes. They broke both his legs and left him to die. Rama found him, and managed to drag him back to camp.

“I wish I had both my hands,” grumbled Carlos. “I’d go out and get food aplenty.”

“You’d only get caught like that poor sod Baldy,” sighed the baker, who had run out of all the ingredients for carrying on his trade.

“Anyway, Carlos, there is probably nothing left out there to steal,” I said.

The doctor, his smock splattered with blood, stopped by.

“Now, I can perhaps get some sleep. The fighting seems to have eased considerably.”

“Tis only stopped because we’re losing,” remarked the corporal as he shook his empty tobacco pouch. “Not much ammunition left, nor much else,” he grumbled.

With the harbour in enemy hands, we had little hope of replenishing our stores. The British had sealed off the fort. My musket lay useless at my feet, impotent without its powder. My pistol had only enough powder left for one kill – for one Englishman.

Whatever hope we had been holding onto had evaporated. We stopped asking our superiors questions, for we knew that the answers would only confirm our deepest fears.

Finally, the merciless enemy of starvation defeated us, as it has defeated so many armies throughout history.

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The night before we surrendered, Father Diaz said mass. When he closed his Bible, he addressed us in his halting French.

“Man’s spirit can live eternally, drawing from the energy which God and the years have stored there, but his body needs a minimum replenishment of fuel to keep it going.”

Count de Lally stood up, crinkled up his Irish eyes that had lost none of their steadfastness, threw back his proud head and addressed us.

“I want to thank every man present. You have all played your part, through your sacrifices, in maintaining stable French rule in Pondicherry. We have imparted a way of life, a philosophy, and a faith to the people of this land. Regretfully, we can no longer sustain our presence here, but one day we may return. Defeat is not a sentence measured by eternity. Unfortunately, circumstances leading up to our capitulation were beyond human endurance.”

Count de Lally bowed toward the makeshift altar and crossed himself. “May God bless all of you and honour your endeavours.”

The next day, as the guns boomed at noon, he signed the surrender documents, unbuckled his sword from his one remaining

immaculate uniform, and formally handed over the French possession of Pondicherry to the British. Only a slight quiver of his proud Celtic mouth betrayed the innermost thoughts of Comte de Baron de Tollendal, Thomas Arthur de Lally, the general who had once vowed he would never yield to an enemy.

With slow dignity, our flag was lowered for the last time. A faint breeze lifted it defiantly. The golden *Fleur-de-Lys* raised their heads, even in defeat.

Accompanied by a roll of drums, the harsh red, white and blue pattern of the Union flag was raised.

An era had ended.