



Riding the Frontier

Photographs & Article by Henry Dallal

The Campaign

The little town of Chitral on the border between Pakistan and Afghanistan, only 47 miles from the great watershed of the Hindu Kush, which divides the waters flowing down to India from those which flow to Central Asia. In the 19th Century it was at the very edge of what was then the North-West Frontier of British India, where British and Russian influence interlocked and 'the Great Game' was played out. Early in 1895 the ruler of a nearby small state, backed by dissident Chitralis, attacked Chitral's British backed ruler, the Mehtar, and besieged him and a tiny Indian Army garrison in Chitral Fort. British prestige was at stake, and failure would encourage Russian ambitions. The Indian government ordered the 1st Division, away to the south at Peshawar, to relieve Chitral.

But the division was large -with 28,000 pack animals -and moved slowly. In contrast, Lieutenant Colonel James Kelly, commanding at Gilgit, 300 miles to the east, set off on 23 March with a tiny force of the Sikh 32nd Pioneers, two guns of 1st Kashmir Mountain Battery, a handful of the Kashmir Sappers and Miners and local levies. Kelly's men marched across some of the most difficult country in the world, fording rivers, hauling their guns through snow drifts, and crossing the 15,000 foot Shunlur pass. They won two battles en route, and relieved Chitral on 20 April.

It was one of the classics of the high noon of Empire, and its echoes resounded into the 20th century. The garrison commander at Chitral, Captain Charles Townsend, made his reputation in the siege. In 1916 he was a Lieutenant-General, under siege again, this time by the Turks at Kut Al Amara on the Tigris. And this time he could not hold out, but surrendered with over 10,000 British and Indian soldiers.

The Expedition

In the autumn of 2000 a small group of us including military historian Richard Holmes followed in Kelly's footsteps guided by Maqsood Ul-Mulk, whose great-grandfather Aman was Mehtar of Chitral at the time of the siege. The party included Major General Sir Evelyn Webb-Carter, who commands the Household Division, Richard's daughter Jessica, an art student who painted the local landscape, and photographer and mountaineer Henry Dallal. We travelled on horseback, following Kelly's route, campsite by campsite, though hoping for milder weather than Kelly's men had to face. We travelled through spectacular scenery and experienced warm and colorful hospitality by the local mountain folk.

Major General Sir Evelyn Webb-Carter and military historian and author Professor Richard Holmes have a bad but contagious habit of picking an episode in British History where a campaign or battle has taken place, involving horse, chivalry, bravery and honour somewhere in the world. South Africa or Custer country in North Dakota, to ride through and spend a few weeks reliving as close as possible to experience minus the terror. This time it was to the Hindu Kush Mountains in North West Pakistan.

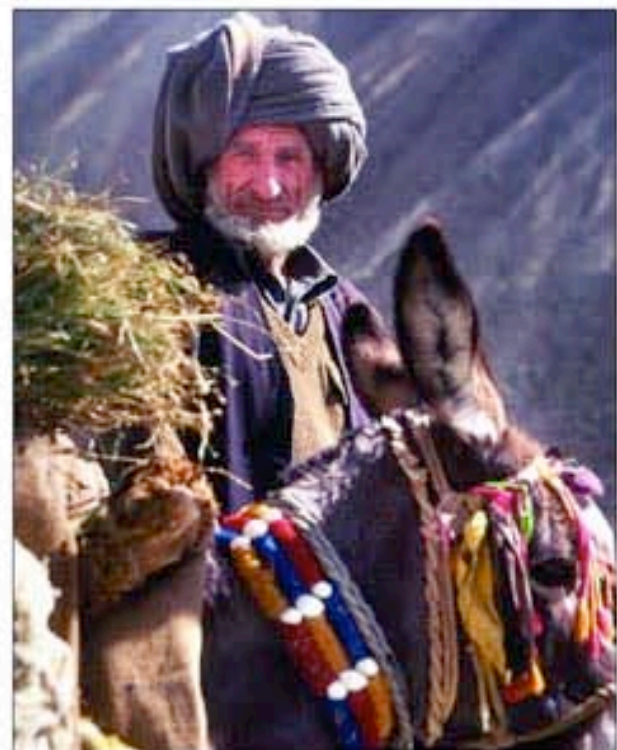
I did not hesitate an instant when the General Sir Evelyn Webb-Carter at the time Commander of the Household Division invited me to join him and British historian and author Professor Richard Holmes to travel through the Hindu Kush Mountains by horse in the North West Frontier Province of Northern

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Pakistan. What better way to experience the unspoilt nature and beauty of the mountains, the local culture travelling in good company on a loyal and dependable steed, woven within it an excuse of a historic episode?

The purpose of our eight-person expedition was to retrace the trail of a famous campaign that took place where the Great Game was played out testing British and Russian influence of yesterday. In March of 1895 Colonel Kelly marched across some of the most difficult country in the world from Gilgit to Chitral across the notorious 13,000-foot Shandur Pass. Post holing and hauling guns through snowdrifts, snows successfully relieving the fort in Chitral.



kilometres

backed Mehtar at the time of the campaign organized our expedition.

Once mounted and leaving Gilgit, being in the company of four senior British officers described as late eighteenth century English gentlemen travellers who would have been happier to have been involved in the campaign itself and living in a bygone romantic era where the horse, chivalry and honour was the law of the land. Our procession of 8 riders, 13 horses plus pack horses and donkeys proceeded along the banks of the blue green colours of the Ghiza River valley cutting through to most impressive mountain scenery over the Shandur Pass and down to Chitral, travelling a total of 450

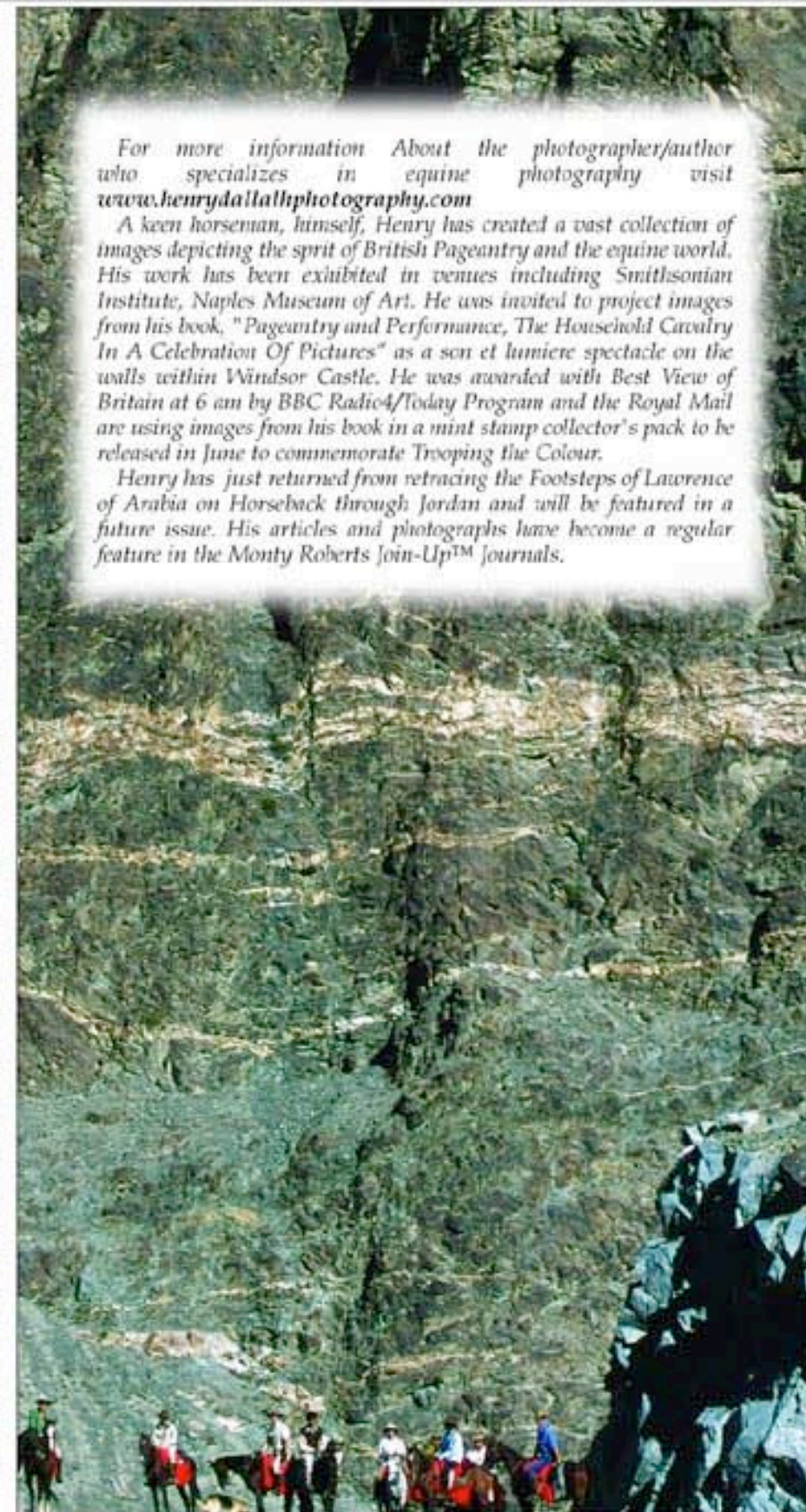
Maqsood Ul-Mulk whose grandfather was the British We rode on superb Marwari and Badakhshi horses



that are normally used as polo ponies by the locals in the surrounding villages. Polo grounds became a common site in the villages that we rode through as every village had its own team that would train and play in preparation of the annual polo festival held every summer on the highest polo grounds in the world a top the remote Shandur Pass. Polo is big in this remote part of the world a remnant of the glory days of the great Persian Empire.

Each night sitting around a roaring fire Sir Evelyn would read to us the diary kept by Lieutenant Benyon who was Colonel Kelly's chief of staff as we travelled and camped the very trail and spots used by the earlier expedition. The only difference being, there were no battles or enemy to be wary of. Instead we experienced a glowing and welcome hospitality of the few people we saw who lived in the surrounding village or collection of homes where we camped as we progressed through the mountains along the Ghiza River.

Majestic mountains, the real country and real mountain folk, little has changed since Colonel Kelly's campaign took place. This is the way to travel: by horseback in the deep country at a pace that permits you to see and feel the local culture, and magnificent scenery. Moving with the pace of life in contrast to a pace of a mechanized vehicle. Very little has changed since 1895 in these regions. The mountainfolk desperately clinging to survival in the long and harsh winters and short summers used for growing all the food necessary for the following winter. A delicate and balanced harmony of nature and survival for these, the nicest of peoples.



For more information About the photographer/author who specializes in equine photography visit www.henrydailalphotography.com

A keen horseman, himself, Henry has created a vast collection of images depicting the spirit of British Pageantry and the equine world. His work has been exhibited in venues including Smithsonian Institute, Naples Museum of Art. He was invited to project images from his book, "Pageantry and Performance, The Household Cavalry In A Celebration Of Pictures" as a son et lumiere spectacle on the walls within Windsor Castle. He was awarded with Best View of Britain at 6 am by BBC Radio4/Today Program and the Royal Mail are using images from his book in a mint stamp collector's pack to be released in June to commemorate Trooping the Colour.

Henry has just returned from retracing the Footsteps of Lawrence of Arabia on Horseback through Jordan and will be featured in a future issue. His articles and photographs have become a regular feature in the Monty Roberts Join-Up™ Journals.