

Dawn
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The origins of Sam Browne's belt Lahore

THERE was a time when the name Sam Browne was the buzz word in Lahore. Everyone knew of him, or about him. The Sikh empire had just been crushed in 1849 by the British at Chillianwala in Gujrat, in a ferocious battle that almost cost them their Empire. The first cantonment had been established inside the Lahore Fort, which was the last city to fall to the British as they consolidated their hold.

The badly battered British force was finding housing in the Old Anarkali cantonment difficult when Lt. Sam Browne rode into Lahore with his sowars. By the time he retired he was known as Gen Sir Samuel James Browne, VC, GCB, KCSI. There are three plaques in his memory today. One is the market at his cremated ashes in the Rhye Cemetery on the Island of Wight, the second honouring him is at St. Paul's Cathedral in London and the third is at the Lahore Cathedral on The Mall. For the British he carved a name in history as a "fearless leader of men on horses". For Lahore, he was the fearless person who used local knowledge and expertise to be known as the man who gave the world the famous Sam Browne belt.

Sam Browne was born in

Barrackpore in India on October 3, 1824, the son of a surgeon in the Bengal Medical Service of the East India Company. He joined the 46th Bengal Native Infantry as a subaltern, participating in action at Ramnager and Sadulapur. It was only when he was thrust into action at Chillianwala, and a few months later at nearby Gujrat, that he experienced the force of the Punjabi soldier. For the rest of his life, he lived in awe of them, and it was to Lahore that he was sent to raise "horsemen of the highest order". It was Sam Browne's opinion that he had never heard or seen such bravery as he had experienced against the 'Fauji-Khas' at Chillianwala, and it was his opinion that these very men had to be won over. His assessment served the British well for another 100 years.

In 1849, he was made a lieutenant and asked to raise a cavalry force, to be designated the 2nd Punjab Irregular Cavalry and later incorporated into the regular force. For this, he came to Lahore, living in the Old Anarkali area. He started locating all the old cavalry men of the 'Fauji-e-Khas' from inside the walled city. He would command this unit for the next five years. Half a century later in 1904, the

unit would be redesignated as the 22nd Sam Browne's Cavalry in his honour.

Browne led the 2nd Punjab in several engagements, and was decorated for action during the Bozdar Expedition, in 1857, being promoted to captain. Browne won the Victoria Cross on August 31, 1858, for action near Seerporah during the war of independence, known also as the Indian Mutiny. Browne, now a major, charged and captured a rebel gun, accompanied by only a single sowar. He lost his left arm but earned a Victoria Cross. One of the defenders severed his left arm with a sword.

Some time after this incident, he began to wear the accoutrement which bears his name, as compensation for the difficulty his disability caused by wearing his officer's sword. One account states that his Sikh orderly presented him with a belt that was worn by the 'Fauji-Khas' of Maharajah Ranjit Singh, for this elite force, led as it was by French general from Napoleon's defeated army, had come up with a belt and a supporting belt, to hold a sword, a dagger (which all Sikhs 'wear'), a pistol and two leather cases of ammunition. This makes up for considerable weight, which a

belt could not hold up.

The 'Fauji-Khas' design incorporated the sword belt, that hung from the shoulder, as was worn by the French forces of Napoleon, while the tradition 'Kamarband' of the sub-continent managed to hold a dagger and a pistol. To understand the 'kamarband' and its function, it is best to see drawings of soldiers in the Moghal armies and the Sikh 'misls' that followed them. The genius of Browne was that he incorporated both these belts to form one broad belt around the waist, supported by a thinner leather belt across the shoulder.

There is some dispute about the reasons for this 'invention'. One school of thought puts it down to Browne's disability, while the other puts it down to the fact that the virtual 'arsenal' that a cavalryman had to carry on himself made this essential. It was the addition of a pistol and ammunition to the sword and the dagger that made this 'invention' inevitable. Sam Browne, having lost his left arm, had difficulty in carrying his sword comfortably, whether mounted or dismounted, leaving his one hand free. Its design was also intended to carry a leather pistol holster where the weapon could be safely carried without the risk of accidental discharge, as

the pistols of the day were inclined to do.

It seems that both these reasons played a part in this simple 'invention'. Later, the wearing of the Sam Brown belt would be adopted by other officers who knew Browne in India, but it was not to come into common use in the British Army until after his retirement. Browne's original belt is now on public display in the India Room of the Royal Military Academy, Sandhurst.

In those days, Lahore was known for its excellent leather products. Inside the walled city, just next to Kucha Chabbaksowarann inside Mochi Gate, is a bazaar that sold belting and other equipment for horses. The particular finish, a glazed reddish brown finish, is typical to Lahore. The leather is definitely buffalo, which is not available in other parts of the world. It stands to good reason that the Sam Browne belt, now standard equipment to officers all over the world, was born out of the intense military city that Lahore had become. Today, there are companies in the West that specialise in the Sam Browne belts, mostly using cow leather. The original at the Royal Military Academy, Sandhurst, is made from buffalo leather. —

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