

In 1839, the British East India Company commenced the

disastrous campaign in Afghanistan which came to be known as the First Anglo-Afghan War. The war lasted three years and finally came to an end in October 1842. Far removed from this turbulent backdrop, in the dusty plains of northern India a young boy was born on 12 August 1840. Christened Charles Metcalfe MacGregor, he would eventually go on to establish the United Service Institution (USI) of India.



Major General Sir Charles Metcalfe MacGregor, KCB, CSI, CIE

This year being the 150th anniversary of the founding of the USI, it is befitting to recall the Institution's founder. A man of exceptional ability and energy, he achieved a great deal during his relatively short lifespan. And yet, the two overly ambitious goals he desired the most remained elusive till the end: to win the Victoria Cross (VC) and become the Amir of Afghanistan.¹ Given the outstanding gallantry he displayed in the field on several

occasions, many of his contemporaries felt he was deserving at least of the VC. Paucity of space does not permit a detailed retelling of all his deeds. However, this article endeavours to highlight certain key aspects and achievements of his life.² By virtue of the nature of such an article, some amount of repetition of previous biographical accounts is unavoidable. However, it is hoped that the information culled from disparate sources provides a fresh account of the man and his times.

Charles MacGregor was of Scottish descent and was born into a family of considerable note. Several of his forebears had distinguished themselves in numerous battlefields. His lineage can be directly traced back to the famous Scotsman, Robert 'Rob Roy' MacGregor. Rob Roy fought, along with his father, in the Jacobite rising of 1689 in support of the Stuart King James II. A man of strength and conviction, Rob Roy's conduct reflected the ancient Gaelic proverb which described the notable character of the Highlanders, 'That he would not turn his back on an enemy or a friend'.³ He was sharp, courageous and determined, and clearly bestowed these traits on his progenies.



Charles MacGregor's great-grandfather, James MacGregor, was a captain in the 60th Regiment of Foot. He served, with credit, with his regiment during the American Revolution (1775-83) and lived up to the regiment's motto 'Celer et Audax' (Swift and Bold), being repeatedly mentioned in General James Murray's despatches. Charles's grandfather was in the Bengal Cavalry and retired as Major General. He was present at the taking over of Seringapatam (now Srirangapatnam) (1799) and in various other

battles and sieges; and was mentioned in despatches and general orders on several occasions for his gallant conduct. Charles's father, Robert Guthrie MacGregor, was a Major in the Bengal Artillery. He served in the First Anglo-Burmese War (1824-26) and was present at the capture of Rangoon and the storming of Donabiew, where he was severely wounded. He subsequently served in the capture of Bharatpur in 1827, where he was once again severely wounded and lost function in one leg. On 06 January 1838, Robert married Alexandrina, who was the daughter of Major General Archibald Watson of the Bengal establishment.⁴ The long family tradition of military service and gallant battlefield exploits was bound to influence young Charles and sure enough, he followed in the footsteps of his forebears and joined the army at the very young age of sixteen.

MacGregor's early childhood was spent in Scotland. At the age of 13 he became a boarder at Marlborough College in Wiltshire. As a young boy, he was reserved in his association with others and had a strong temper but he was an outstanding pupil; a prize winner. Pierce Connelly, his one close friend at school, recalled that, "His whole mind was towards the army; he, at least, never talked about 'choosing a profession' – his profession was chosen".⁵ After leaving Marlborough College, MacGregor joined his brother, Edward, in 1856 and they were both commissioned into the Indian Army. Following his commission, MacGregor was once again back in India, arriving at the port of Calcutta on 01 December. Unbeknownst to him, trouble among the ranks of the Bengal Army had been brewing for some time and would come to a boil six months later in May 1857. The start of his career would be forged by fire and sword as he fought and gained widespread recognition during the Great Uprising of 1857.

After a short stint at Dinapur, MacGregor was appointed second ensign⁶ in the 57th Regiment of Bengal Native Infantry (BNI), in February 1857, stationed at Ferozepur. In May, shortly after the outbreak of unrest, his regiment was disarmed and disbanded. He personally felt that his men had not been of a mutinous bent of mind and what had happened to them was unjust. During the course of the uprising, MacGregor saw extensive active service while attached to a number of different

units and all throughout distinguished himself. In September, he found himself at the siege of Delhi, arriving two days after the first assault. He had been attached to the 1st Bengal Fusiliers and served with Colonel Gerard during the capture of Rewari and Kanaonda; and at Narnaul in November. This was MacGregor's first action since being commissioned. He went onto to serve in the siege and capture of Lucknow. This period saw MacGregor assuming command of several mounted regiments. He charged at the head of his men on many occasions. In August 1858, he was appointed to the command of a squadron of Hodson's Horse. Between 1857 and 1859, he was twice wounded in action and was mentioned in despatches four times.

In early 1860, MacGregor joined Fane's Horse⁷ which was being raised for service in China for the second Opium War and served with the regiment throughout the campaign. He was wounded five times, twice severely, and was specially recommended for gallantry by Sir Hope Grant, commander of the force in China. Upon his return to India, he was appointed second-in-command of the 10th Bengal Cavalry (Hodson's Horse), a post he held between 1861 to 1864. Subsequently, MacGregor was appointed Brigade Major of the Bhutan Field Force (1864-66) during which period he once again showed conspicuous gallantry on several occasions. His final service in the field was in the Abyssinian Campaign in 1867. Following this, MacGregor was appointed Assistant Quartermaster General of the Sirhind Division.

In 1867, before embarking on service to Abyssinia, Charles MacGregor had conceived of an idea to establish an institution for the Indian Army similar to that of the Royal United Service Institute at Whitehall Yard in London. MacGregor continuously laboured to bring this idea to fruition and it was only in 1870 that he was finally able to establish the United Service Institution (USI) of India, at Shimla. During its first year, he served as its secretary and the first annual report in 1871 proved it to be a worthy match to its older sister institute in England.⁸

The mid-19th century was a period marked by Russian expansion into Central Asia, bringing them closer with each passing year to British India's ill-guarded frontiers. The vast

expanse of perilous and inhospitable tracts of land, inhabited by hostile peoples, that lay between the advancing Russians and India needed to be mapped. Both, the Russians and the British, hoped to gather as much intelligence as they could and the 'shadowy struggle' that ensued came to be known as the Great Game.⁹ While there was considerable danger in manoeuvring through these lands, there was no shortage of intrepid young officers who preferred risking their lives than languishing in the plains of India. It is no surprise then that MacGregor – given his fearless and adventurous spirit – would become involved in this endeavour. He was nominated to compile a gazetteer of the countries that lay between Russia and India. This project took him on a journey of 5000 miles, on horseback, in order to gather as much information as he could. The compilation was by no means an easy task and, after five long years, resulted in the successful publication of the *Gazetteer of Central Asia* comprising of seven voluminous parts.

In late 1880, MacGregor became Quarter Master General of India and was promoted to the rank of Major General. He was only 40 years old at the time and had 24 years of military service. A few months later, he was made Knight Commander of the Order of the Bath. MacGregor wrote a number of books covering his travels. His most significant work, *The Defence of India: A Strategical Study* reflected the thinking of those who backed the 'Forward Policy' in India. This policy regarded the control of territories bordering the North-West Frontier as a crucial necessity to prevent Russian expansionism.¹⁰

MacGregor, undoubtedly, achieved a lot during his lifetime. However, the man was not without flaws and received a fair amount of criticism – mostly after his death in 1887. Much of this criticism came when his personal diary, written during the Second Afghan War, came into the public domain. It shed light on Macgregor's egotism and self-serving attitude as well as his harsh criticisms of his Chief, Lord Roberts. By its very nature, it is unlikely that the diary was ever meant to be for anyone else's eyes other than its author's. An edited version of it, however, was eventually published in 1985.¹¹ The criticisms based solely on the man's most intimate thoughts, and after he was no longer around

to defend himself, can perhaps be deemed somewhat unjust. Nonetheless, the diary proved to be an invaluable resource for future scholars and was used by Major Robert Hammond for his book on the history of the MacGregor Memorial Medal.¹² The Medal itself was instituted in 1888 by the USI in memory of its founder. It is the only Raj era medal that is still awarded till this day and is, along with the unique Institution that he founded, a befitting tribute to a truly remarkable man.

Endnotes

¹ Robert Hamond, *History of the MacGregor Memorial Medals 1889-1989* (New Delhi: Lancer, 1994), pp. 7-8.

² For a more comprehensive account see *The Life and Opinions of Major-General Charles MacGregor, KCB, CSI, CIE, Quartermaster-General in India, Vol I*, ed. by Lady MacGregor (Edinburgh and London: William Blackwood and Sons, 1888).

³ J. Bernard Burke, *A Genealogical and Heraldic Dictionary of the Landed Gentry of Great Britain & Ireland for 1852, Supplement* (London: Colburn and Co, 1852), p. 215.

⁴ Ibid, pp. 216-17.

⁵ *Life and Opinions*, p. 10.

⁶ The rank 'ensign' was formerly the lowest commissioned rank for an infantry officer.

⁷ Fane's Horse was raised at Kanpur in 1860 with volunteers from Hodson's Horse. It became the 19th Regiment of Bengal Cavalry in 1861. In 1903 it was styled 19th Lancers (Fane's Horse) and after independence the regiment was allotted to Pakistan.

⁸ *Life and Opinions*, p. 329.

⁹ For more details see: Peter Hopkirk, *The Great Game: The Struggle for Empire in Central Asia* (New York: Kodansha International, 1992).

¹⁰ Hamond, p. 8.

¹¹ *War in Afghanistan, 1879-80 : The Personal Diary of Major General Sir Charles Metcalfe MacGregor*, ed. by William Trousdale (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1985).

¹² Robert Hamond, *History of the MacGregor Memorial Medals 1889-1989* (New Delhi: Lancer, 1994).