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THE EUROPEAN MILITARY ADVENTURERS IN INDIA:
BENOIT DE BOIGNE.
By

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Of all the Soldiers of Fortune, for whom India in the Eighteenth Century was a Golden Age, none was of such a romantic figure, or more successful than this Savoyard. It was he who raised and trained for Madhoji Scindia, the greatest and best regular army ever owner! by a native Prince in India, and one which gave Wellesley and Lake very stern fights at Aligarh, Assaye and Laswari after its creator had left India.

Benedict de Boigne, son of a hide merchant of Chambery, was born in 1751, and early decided for a military life. As a commission in a regular French Regiment demanded at least eight quarterings, or three centuries of noble descent, it was, for him, impossible. However, this rule did not extend to the Swedish, Swiss, German, or Irish regiments in French service, and as these were open to Frenchmen of humble birth, he managed to secure an ensigney in the Irish Regiment of Olare. We may here remark that these regiments were not, as generally supposed, recruited exclusively from Irishmen, but had always a proportion of Frenchmen or other foreigners in their ranks, and their officers were interchangeable with those of other foreign regiments in the French service.

De Boigne served in Flanders and at Mauritius for about three years, when, finding his prospects not very promising, he resigned. after securing a captaincy in a Greek Regiment in the Russian service. A curious mixture, one might remark. The Russians were then at war with the Turks. and in a descent on the Island of Tenedos de Boigne was taken prisoner and interned at Scios, where he remained until the close of the war. His Russian commission having lapsed, he proceeded to Smyrna where he fell in with some Englishmen whose accounts of India so fascinated him that he decided to try his luck in that El Dorado.

Accordingly, he joined a Caravan setting out for Baghdad, thus proceeding overland as so many adventurers had done before him. Arrived there, he found that the war between the Russians and Turks precluded any further progress, and had to

return to Aleppo. Not to be baulked, he passed over to Cairo, being wrecked at the mouth of the Nile, and taken prisoner by the Arabs on the way. They, however, not only released him, but helped him on the way to Cairo, a tribute to his personality.

At Cairo he so interested the British Consul-General, that he not only gave him a free passage to India, but letters of recommendation which, on his arrival in India, procured him an ensigncy in the 6th Madras Sepoys in the year 1778. Being away on convoy when the regiment was cut up, and the remainder taken prisoner by Tippoo Sultan at Polliorein in 1780, he escaped their fate. In 1781 he resigned because he considered the prospects inadequate, though other reasons have been assigned, one being that he had taken liberties with the wife of another officer, and another that he was passed over for an appointment. Both are incorrect, as he was acquitted of the one and declined the other when it was offered him.

Having secured a recommendation to Warren Hastings, he proceeded to Calcutta, where he was again fortunate enough to find an English officer who put him up and financed him, till he obtained an interview with Hastings. To him he confided his intention of journeying overland to Russia, and asked for letters of introduction to the rulers of the various countries and Indian States through which he would pass. Hastings, greatly impressed, furnished all he desired, amongst which was a letter to the Nawab of Oudh at Lucknow.

He was again very fortunate, for the Nawab not only gave him a Khillut, he subsequently sold for Rs. 4,000, but also letters of credit on Kabul and Kandahar for Rs. 12,000. At Lucknow he made the acquaintance of Claude Martine, afterwards his lifelong friend and business partner for many years. From Lucknow he went on to the camp of Madhoji Scindia, ostensibly on a visit, but really we think to see how the land lay. Being very suspicious of this wandering stranger, Scindia had his baggage plundered, and though it was afterwards restored to him, his progress was stopped, as his money and letters of credit were retained.

Being now penniless, he applied for military employment to the Rana of Gohad, whose fort of Gwalior, Scindia was besieging. The Rana refused him, as he had already employed the battalions of Rene Medoc, now under a Scotch ex-watchmaker, named Sangster. He then applied to Pertab Singh of Jaipur who declared himself quite willing to engage him provided the

necessary permission was given *by* Warren Hastings. This was refused; whereupon de Boigne went to Calcutta, and by a personal interview, secured permission, only to find on his return that Pertab Singh had changed his mind. As a solatium, however, he gave de Boigne Rs. 10,000.

Meanwhile Scindia, having met with some military reverses from Sangster's battalions, decided that similar units were worth having, so early in 1784 engaged de Boigne to raise two battalions of 800 men each, with four guns per battalion, and to be officered, or commanded, by Europeans. These were speedily organised, for de Boigne was a man of indefatigable energy, and found men to whom he could impart it. The first battalion was commanded by a Dutchman named Hessian, the second by Fremont, a Frenchman, with whom were associated some minor Europeans or Eurasians, and the guns were worked by Europeans, mostly deserts, runaway sailors or half caste Portuguese, who were the N.C.Os., or gunners, the matrosses or gun crew being Indians.

In November 1784 the new formations were employed at the storming of Kalinjar, near Allahabad, and acquitted themselves so well as to gain the approbation of the Mahratta general, which they understood as license to plunder the town. In January 1785 they were present at the taking of Delhi, which fell to Scindia, who held the senile old Mogul Emperor in pawn. Till February 1787 they saw nothing but a few minor actions, when *in* that month they drove off the Rajput cavalry, numbering some 10,000, who for the first time in history were routed by hitherto despised footmen, their repeated charges against the indomitable squares always proving of no avail.

Here the artillery also distinguished themselves, for though the cavalry got in amongst them and cut many down, they did not capture a single gun, or gunner. But the bravery of de Boigne's men was discounted by the inertia of the Mahratta horse, and he was compelled to retire within the walls of Ulwar, losing nothing in his retreat.

The next action was at Chaksana, in April 1788, and at Agra in June of the same year, both hard fought battles, where he gained more honour and glory. Having thus justified himself, de Boigne asked sanction to increase his force to ten battalions, which, on being refused, he quitted Scindia's service, and

proceeded to Lucknow where he set up in business in cloth and indigo with Claude Martine.

Repenting shortly afterwards, Scindia implored de Boigne to return on his own terms, which he did in January 1790. The new army constituted ten battalions of 800 each, 500 cavalry, and 60 guns of various calibre, the whole officered by over 100 Europeans, the senior officers all being Frenchmen or Continentals at the beginning, though later a few Englishmen and Anglo-Indians were given command. In supreme command of this force, de Boigne met the combined forces of the Moghul rebel Ismail Beg, and the Rajas of Jaipur and Jodhpur at Patan Tanwar in the Shekawati district on the 29th June, 1790. The two opposing forces were considerable, de Boigne having some 12,000 Mahrattas beside his own men, and the enemy mustering 12,000 Rahtore cavalry, 25,000 foot and 130 guns.

After the opening skirmishes the Mahrattas took no part in the battle, which resolved itself into a continual succession of cavalry charges on de Boigne's squares and artillery, all of which were repelled with great loss to the enemy. These proving unsuccessful, a general advance was ordered and the enemy completely routed, de Boigne taking 107 guns, 6,000 stand of arms, 15 elephants, 200 camels, 513 horses, and over 3,000 oxen, as well as 12,000 prisoners. His Own losses were 700 of whom 130 were killed, whilst the enemy dead not only covered the field, but the pursuit of some ten miles. In the afternoon he took the town of Patun, which afforded more booty, including 2,000 horses.

The defeat of the hitherto invincible Rajput horse so infuriated the Raja of Jodhpore, that he assembled every Rajput between 16 and 60, and adding to these 100,000 foot and twenty-five guns, awaited battle at Merta, a walled city about 30 miles east of Ajmer. At dawn on the 12th September 1790, de Boigne, who had 30,000 horse, his own ten battalions and 80 guns, taking advantage of the fact that night attacks were very unusual in India, fell on the camp and nearly destroyed the foot soldiers before the Rajputs awoke to the danger.

Nobly they redeemed their sloth, for they charged down on two of de Boigne's battalions, who had imprudently advanced too far and cut them up. Seeing this, de Boigne formed his others into squares linked up by the guns, against which the

waves of horsemen beat in vain until but 4,000 were left. These, donning yellow turbans in token of devotion to death or victory, renewed their charges until only 15 were left, who, dismounting, advanced on foot against the squares, where they too met the death they desired.

De Boigne records that at times the squares were absolutely surrounded and invisible amidst the swarms of horsemen, from whom the gunners saved themselves by taking refuge within the squares until the attacks were driven off, when they emerged and opened fire. His own loss was about 900 including many gunners, most of whom were slain by the sabres of the Rahtore horse. The battle was over by ten, and at three the columns assaulted and took Merta, "of which the pillage lasted three days, and to mention all its particulars would make your mouth water. The ladies at first were displeased at our abrupt entry, but at length grew more kind, acknowledging that none but the brave deserved the fair."

This account by one of de Boigne's officers was published in the *Calcutta Gazette*, and rather upsets the popular idea of the Rajput ladies; but may be the "fair ones" were not Rajputs. So pleased was Scindia at this victory, that he sanctioned the formation of two more brigades and cavalry, artillery, etc., bringing the disciplined forces up to 30,000, officered by 130 Europeans of all nationalities, including some Eurasians, such as Butterfield, Evans, Hearsey, Skinner and Vickers. Besides these there were about 350 drill sergeants, military artisans, and gunners, recruited from the peripatetic military rascality of India, and of the same classes as the officers.

Of these latter, Compton remarks that "though in ordinary times they reflected little credit on the European, they were extraordinarily brave and stubborn in action." His next battle was that of Lakhairi in September 1793, where he defeated the army of Tukoji Holkar, with which were three disciplined battalions under the Chevalier Dudrenec who were annihilated, losing every European officer and gunner present with them. The last battle in which his troops were engaged was that of Kardla, where they defeated the army of the Nizam of Hyderabad, which mustered 110,000 men, amongst whom were 17,000 disciplined infantry under command of Colonel Raymond, and another 6000 belonging to the two Free Companies under an Englishman named Finglas, and an American named Boyd.

As, owing to ill health, de Boigne was not present, the battle was fought by his second in command, and ultimate successor, Perron, an ex-sergeant of French Marines. Continued ill health induced de Boigne to resign and, in December 1795, he left for Calcutta escorted *by* 600 Pathan Horse. whose mounts, arms, and equipment were his own personal property. His other effects were carried on four elephants, 150 Camels, and 150 bullock carts, with which he arrived at Calcutta in June, having stopped at Lucknow for some time to dose his business there.

At Calcutta he *was* honourably received by the Governor-General, who purchased the cavalry horses, and equipments, and enrolled the men in his own forces. In September 1795 he left India, taking with him a son and daughter by a Persian lady, the latter of whom left descendants who carry on the name and title of Benedict, Count de Boigne. He died at Chambery in June, 1831, closing an honourable career by an equally honourable and respected old age. His character *is* thus summarized by Ferdinand Smith, one of his officers:

"I have seen him daily and monthly rise with the sun, survey his arsenal, view his troops, enlist recruits, direct the vast movements of his brigades, raise resources and encourage the manufacture of arms, ordnance and stores; harangue in his durbar, administer the affairs of a jaidad of thirty lakhs of rupees, carry on an intricate system of intrigue in various courts, superintend a private trade of many lakhs, keep his own accounts, public and private correspondence, and direct a most complicated political machine.