



Dring Family of the Wiltshire Regiment

It was 21st December 1845, in a jungle near Ferozeshah in north-western India. With the regimental flag wrapped around his body, his knees blown away by the enemy, Sergeant William Dring of the Wiltshire Regiment lay on the ground unable to move, listening to the sounds of the wounded and dying around him, and the roar of tigers coming in search of an easy meal. What was going through his head? "How did I get here?" or "Will I survive?" or maybe "What will happen next?" Fortunately, we now know the answers to all these questions.

His father, Simon Dring, had been born in Wilton, Somerset in 1803 and Simon and his wife Ann had their first child, William, a few months after their marriage in 1825. The following year, Simon joined HM 62nd Regiment of Foot, the Wiltshire Regiment. He was 23 years old and was described as 5'7" tall, with a fair and fresh complexion, dark brown hair and hazel eyes. Shortly afterwards, the regiment was shipped to Ireland, and four years later, Simon and his little family embarked with the regiment for Bangalore in southern India. Simon and Ann would never see their homeland again. William was five years old.

All was relatively peaceful until 1832, when Indian troops in Bangalore began planning a mutiny. The mutineers and townsfolk were to be let into the garrison through the Mysore Gate by a soldier named Shaik Ismael. The night before, his brother met the Indian officer in charge of the sentries and gave him some silk handkerchiefs as a gift. The officer accepted the gift, then the mutineer asked a favour. He said that his child's ear was sick and that the doctors had recommended swallow's blood to cure it. He asked if the officer would put the mutineers' brother, Shaik Ismael, on the Mysore Gate so that he might collect some swallow's blood for the purpose of curing the child. The officer agreed and posted Shaik Ismael at the Mysore Gate, unaware that he was planning to admit the mutineers. However, an Anglo-Indian drummer learned of the plot and alerted the British. The ringleaders were rounded up and the plot was foiled. Punishment was swift and brutal: four of the conspirators were blown from cannon, two were shot and the rest were transported for life.

Early in 1833, the Wiltshire Regiment received orders to march 700km from Bangalore to Masulipatam. It was the start of the most disastrous period in the regiment's history. On the first day of the march, wives and children began to die from cholera. On the third day, the regimental surgeon's own child died, and soldiers began to die in their dozens. The cattle drawing the baggage carts withered and died from lack of food in the drought-stricken countryside. Six weeks after they set out, the Wiltshire Regiment arrived in Masulipatam, with one quarter of the soldiers buried along the way, along with uncountable numbers of wives and children. Only 100 of the original 600 soldiers were fit for duty. A few weeks later the hot weather set in, and 50 men a day were admitted to hospital with apoplexy and sunstroke, and many more died. There were only 44 men fit for duty. Then the regiment was hit by a particularly malignant strain of dysentery that killed within 12 hours. In true bureaucratic style, a committee was formed to work out what to do. By that time, only two men in

the entire regiment, both very junior officers, were fit for duty. The committee decided that the best thing was a cruise, and 200 men of the Wiltshire Regiment embarked on a six-week cruise around the Bay of Bengal. It did not occur to the committee that a large number of men convalescing from cholera and dysentery, and crowded on board a small ship with rudimentary sanitation, were not likely to regain their health by sailing through tropical seas. Eleven men died at sea, and most of the remainder were readmitted to hospital on their return with dropsy and scurvy, from which many more died.

The Commanding Officer died of fever, then the rains of June 1834 brought "violent attacks of fever, ague and dysentery", with deaths averaging seven per day. The regiment abandoned Masulipatam to head to Burma. The regimental history says, "In sixteen months at Masulipatam the total number of deaths came to 3 Officers, 187 Rank and File, and 115 women and children. During the ten-day voyage across the Bay of Bengal, a further 24 men, women and children died, and there were none strong enough to act as Pall Bearers ... Since leaving Bangalore the Regiment had lost about three-quarters of its men and many of their families, and all to no purpose."

Miraculously, the Dring family survived this onslaught of disease, although Simon was chronically ill with hepatitis throughout his time with the regiment, as well as suffering from "inflammation of the mucous membranes". The regiment remained in Burma for four years, but Simon and his family were sent to Madras, where Ann died in 1836. Simon re-married the following year, to an Anglo-Indian teenager named Margaret Killman. By this time young William was 11 years old and his new stepmother just sixteen.

In 1840 the entire Wiltshire Regiment, including Sergeant Simon Dring and his family, moved north to Calcutta. A group of 100 recruits from England were already waiting for them there and the regimental history states that by the time the rest of the regiment had arrived "...the temptations which Calcutta presented had tended much to injure the morale and regularity of the Corps." In other words, they were drunk and disorderly, and spent their recruiting bonuses in the brothels of Calcutta. The regiment then sailed up the River Ganges to Dinapore, before starting a thirteen-day trek south to Hazaribagh. Early in 1841, fifty recruits brought cholera with them from Calcutta. The Regiment's Assistant Surgeon committed suicide, and the Chaplain died of the disease. The June rains set in and there were 150 men in hospital, 38 of whom had died by September. Simon's young wife Margaret gave birth to a son, and the next day marched with the regiment back to Calcutta. By this time, Simon Dring was so debilitated by his chronic hepatitis that he was unable to perform any duties that exposed him to the weather. He became a Hospital Sergeant - and there was plenty of work for him to do.

The regimental history records that the garrison in Calcutta was once again ravaged by cholera and there were many deaths. "This was attributed in the main to the climate, but was no doubt augmented by the great extent of intemperance which prevailed in the Regiment to an amount unparalleled in its records." Simon was apparently not amongst the drunks, as his medical records show that the cause of his illness was "the effect of long service in India and not the result of vice, intemperance or misconduct, nor aggravated by it".

The following year, 1842, young William Dring joined his father in the Wiltshire Regiment, when aged 16 years and 5 months. He was appointed an orderly room clerk, although the regimental history says that he had trouble reading the Colonel's handwriting, which caused anguish for both of them. Shortly after William signed up, the regiment was ordered to leave Calcutta, and they set off in boats up the Ganges again, headed for Dinapore. All went well until a violent storm arose at 2 o'clock one morning. All the boats were moored to the bank but many of them were blown from the shore and swamped. Two officers, 43 soldiers and 18 women and children were drowned. The rest drifted downstream in the night until they all collected at Rajmahal. A steamer was sent to rescue the

hapless drifters, who not only had lost many lives that night, but the treasured Regimental Colours, the regimental records and all of the Officers' Mess silver. They began the tortuous journey up the Ganges again, and finally reached Dinapore two months after their river journey began. There they remained peacefully for two years, before being ordered to march to the Punjab, a journey that took three months on foot.

Cholera struck the Regiment again and by the end of the year, 126 men had died from cholera and apoplexy. This particular strain of cholera turned the victims black and they suffered cramps in the limbs, but if they survived the first 48 hours, they stood an excellent chance of full recovery. But now the regiment was at war. Sikhs first attacked British India in December 1845, but the British were well-prepared. For some time, the soldiers of the Wiltshire Regiment had been sleeping fully-dressed with laced boots, and had their muskets by their cots. Surprisingly, the Wiltshire Regiment, with all its invalids, attempted to attack a vastly superior Sikh force at Ferozeshah and the battle raged for two days.

The Regimental Colours (the regiment having acquired a new set after their loss in the River Ganges) were the symbol of a regiment, and men were prepared to die to protect them. To lose the Colours was tantamount to losing the regiment's honour. The group who protected the Colours was known as the Colour Party and they had a grave responsibility to protect the Colours at all costs. The Colour Party was commanded by an officer, who carried the Colours, and for whom it was a great honour. In theory, only officers could carry the Colours, but one by one, in the Battle of Ferozeshah, the officers were killed or wounded. William Dring, by then 20 years old and already a sergeant, was the centre-sergeant of the Colour Party. With all the available officers dead or wounded, William took the unprecedented step of removing the Colours from their pole, and wrapping them around his body to protect them. He was shot through both knees with grape shot, which was anti-personnel ammunition, consisting of hundreds of pellets of iron, connected together with chains, and shot out of a cannon. The object was to shred the enemy, and William suffered terribly when he was hit. Being unable to move, he lay still, listening to the screaming of his fellow soldiers and the growling of the tigers as night set in. Perhaps he wondered where his father was, and whether he would live to see the dawn.

William survived that dreadful night and the Colours were saved. The Sikhs were forced back to their part of the Punjab, but the Wiltshire Regiment paid a heavy price: 281 casualties out of 580 soldiers and 18 casualties out of 23 officers.

In recognition of this extraordinary feat of saving the Colours, a regimental tradition began. Every year, on the anniversary of the Battle of Ferozeshah, the officers of the Wiltshire Regiment went to the Sergeant's mess to serve the sergeants their meal, in remembrance of the heroic role that the regiment's sergeants played in protecting the Colours.

The remainder of the family story in the Wiltshire Regiment is more peaceful. In 1846, the year after the Battle of Ferozeshah, the Wiltshire Regiment was ordered back to England. Simon, then aged 44 years and debilitated with his service, elected to remain in India with his wife and children. He was discharged to pension and continued to live in Madras, fathering many children, until he died of "Old Age" in 1873.

Meanwhile, William Dring went to England with the regiment and in 1854 he was commissioned as a junior officer in the Wiltshire Regiment. He was promoted to Lieutenant the following year, and made Paymaster. He served with the regiment in Malta in 1854 and the Crimea from 1854 to 1856, where he was again wounded on the battlefield. William married an English girl and the regiment was sent to Halifax, Nova Scotia in Canada, where they remained for six years. All but one of William's children were born in Canada. In 1865 he left the Wiltshire Regiment to join the 49th Regiment of

Foot, and was posted back to India. He eventually made his way up to the rank of Colonel, and was made Chief Paymaster of the Army.

Since this is a story about the Wiltshire Regiment, I will leave William here. Suffice it to say that his children thrived in India, his daughters married generals and his son was knighted. His grandson, Sir Arthur John Dring, was the Prime Minister of the independent state of Bahawalpur from 1947 until it was absorbed into Pakistan in 1952. And it was this grandson who had the Dring Stadium in Bahawalpur named after him, the site of the first ever India-Pakistan cricket test match. I'm guessing that when William Dring was lying in the jungle listening to the tigers, he would never have imagined that future for himself or his family.