

# Chitral Revisited

by Robert Huttenback  
with Peter Fay

Early in 1895 Umra Khan, an ambitious Pathan ruler fishing in the troubled waters of succession controversy on India's northwest frontier, besieged 500 British troops under the command of George Robertson, MD, at Chitral, a princely state astride the route by which many British statesmen anticipated the Russian hordes would debouch out of central Asia. Robertson's men, who were mainly Sikhs and Kashmiris under British officers, held off the enemy for 46 days until the relief column arrived. The siege attracted almost as much attention in Britain as had Gordon's defense of Khartoum

ten years before, and the story of Chitral entered the folk literature of the day as one of those edifying tales which once again proved that British phlegm and the strength of heart that God had reserved for the Anglo-Saxon race always triumphed in the end. In *The Relief of Chitral*, the Younghusband brothers wrote:

... The British forces came on triumphant; and once again in our fair island's story it was shown that British officers, even though they had not a single British soldier by them, and had only to trust to their own stout hearts and strong arms, and to the influence they could exercise over the men of subject races, and to the feeling of loyalty they could evoke from them, had been able to uphold the honour of the race; and the story of the defence and relief of Chitral will be handed down to posterity as one of the most brilliant chapters in the annals of Indian military history.



Some 70 years after these words were written, I was spending the summer searching the archives of India and Pakistan for materials dealing with Kashmir, the subject of a historical study I was writing. As Chitral had played an important role in the history of that state, I decided to visit it with my Caltech colleague Peter Fay. If Chitral contained no relevant records, at least I would gain that feeling for the area which is so vital for the writing of readable history.

The Younghusbands would no longer recognize the India of today. Gone is the British raj, so firmly

*A history professor's research sometimes takes him  
farther afield than he ever intended to go.*

in the seat of power in 1895 that no one seriously contemplated its demise. Gone too are most of the princely states, though in the part of the subcontinent that is now Pakistan a few are still preserved in some degree of autonomy. Chitral is one of these. But the siege is almost totally forgotten. No longer is Chitral considered a vital defensive position astride the route likely to bear invading Russian legions southward. Nevertheless we wanted to see the place.

We left our families in Fay's bungalow in Kanpur, where he was on detached service from Caltech teaching at the Indian Institute of Technology. We obtained the necessary visas in New Delhi and, early in July, flew by way of Lahore and Rawalpindi to Peshawar.

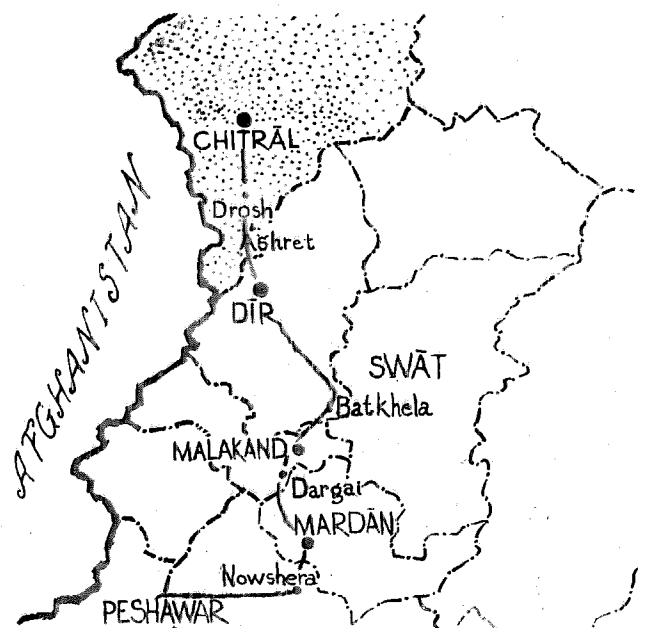
In Peshawar, at the very limit of the great north Indian plain and from that circumstance the historic gateway to Afghanistan and the northwest frontier, we put up at Dean's Hotel and sought out the government tourist officer whose permission had to be obtained for any journeys to the northern regions. It was evening, but he obligingly reopened his office and issued the necessary permits.

Our problem was, however, how to get to Dir, capital of the princely state of that name, situated at the southern end of the Lowari Pass, and we solved it by reserving at the Khyber Express agency two seats on next morning's run to Swat, still another princely state which lies well to the southeast of Chitral but is approached by the same road from

Peshawar. Edward Lear immortalized its ruler with:

Who, or why, or which, or *what*,  
Is the Ahkond of Swat?  
Is he tall or short, or dark or fair?  
Does he sit on a stool or sofa or chair,  
or Squat,  
The Ahkond of Swat?

At eight on the morning of July 4 we took our seats in what proved to be an ordinary, somewhat battered American sedan. Our fellow passengers were a surly Pathan, a woman in a burkah (face covering), and the woman's husband. We had suitcases and bedrolls. They had at least the equivalent.



It wouldn't all fit in the trunk, and there was a good deal of arguing and shouting. In the end a second car was produced and we were off.

We did not, of course, head northwest into the low hills that almost touch Peshawar on that side and in which the Khyber Pass lies. Instead we turned east and drove for several dozen miles across the flat, irrigated Peshawar plain, past occasional sugar mills, through Nowshera and Mardan. On the far side of Mardan we left the plain at last and began to climb toward the Malakand Pass. The road, narrow but paved, wound back and forth up rocky and bitterly arid slopes. Occasionally we met a bus, and halfway up we came across one lying empty and deserted on its back just below the curve it hadn't negotiated.

At the top we passed between Beau Geste-style forts connected by crenellated walls. There were two lines of them along the heights, one facing north and the other south, for they had been built as much to bar the way to the plains behind us as to protect the gateway to Pathan tribal territory ahead. The Pathans are an independent and warlike people, and once over the Malakand Pass, at the Dargai Barrier where cars are halted and papers checked, the influence of the Pakistani government is greatly reduced, and tribal law prevails.

In Batkhela, a collection of shop stalls strung along both sides of the paved highway, we left the Khyber Express. It went on to Swat, but we had to turn left for Dir and Chitral. Westerners who tarry in this unlovely spot are still sufficiently rare to cause some stir. Several young boys adopted us at once. They seemed to have charge of a stall

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selling motor parts and quickly found us a couple of chairs and a small table, produced tea and *tanduri roti* (unleavened bread), and took an enthusiastic and distracting interest in our efforts to find a way of reaching Dir, still 70 miles away. As our Pushtu (the local language) wasn't much and our Hindustani little better, this took some time. In the end we found a bus—or rather, a truck with a bus body entirely filled with cross benches. On these benches sat a number of bearded men in the rough grey cotton pajamas which are the standard dress of the area. They were talking, laughing, and spitting out the window. Their tin trunks, boxes,

bedrolls, livestock, and whatnot lay in a heap on the roof. We saw our bedrolls and incongruous airline suitcases to the same place, bought tickets for Dir at the deluxe rate of four rupees, eight annas (95 cents) each, and took our seats on the front bench beside the wheel. By then the bus was entirely full and obviously ready to start. But nothing happened, and nobody but us seemed impatient. Our fellow passengers joked and sang. It was our first lesson in the vast good humor of these frontier people and in their total lack of a sense of time.

We had left Peshawar at 8 a.m. It was now 2 p.m., and we had covered only 50 miles. To make matters worse, we suddenly discovered that we were on the wrong bus. But, actually, it was of no matter. We were shifted to another similar conveyance equally reluctant to get under way. Finally our driver approached—a natty chap with sparkling eyes and rakish mustache, dressed in the usual salwa and camise and wearing the furred-edge wool hat of the frontier. He carefully hung his pistol over the steering wheel and prepared to depart. A push got us under way, but after no more than ten feet we broke down—a pattern that was to continue for the eight hours it took us to go the 70 miles to Dir.

The Pathan country through which we drove at first was essentially foothill terrain—small, flat, stony valleys among ridges too low to support trees. The dirt and gravel road crossed washes, some of them wet. In one of them the bus stuck and had to be pushed. We passed little forts and were stopped at check posts manned by irregulars carrying rifles and cartridge belts. In fact, nearly every man we passed carried a rifle. At one of the clusters of stalls where the bus from time to time stopped for tea, we saw one fellow with a submachine gun. Women we rarely saw. The few we encountered turned their backs as we drove by.

Gradually the country rose, the ridges became hills and even mountains, the appearance of rifles became less. We were leaving Pathan country. But the bus wasn't emptying. On the contrary, it got fuller and fuller, until the roof carried almost as many passengers as the benches. Still they were continuingly amiable. One in particular adopted us; plied us with cucumbers and tea, shouting throughout, “Thik hai? Thik hai?” (Okay, is it?). As he seemed to be related to everyone we encountered, we dubbed him “Uncle Thik Hai.”

We reached Dir a little after 10 p.m. It was pitch black. Our luggage was unceremoniously dumped in the road. Fortunately the bus driver took us in hand and led us several hundred yards down dark alleys to a large, two-story building which turned out to be a sort of caravanserai filled with tribesmen



*Where snowdrifts block the road, passengers and porters carry the luggage over the 10,500-foot Lowari Pass.*

and students in transit. We ate a greasy supper next to a table of West Germans—technicians of some sort on holiday from their jobs in West Pakistan—and went to bed by the light of a kerosene lamp in a little room that smelled of urine.

Bed meant spreading a bedroll over the mattress on the bedstead; but the bugs were not to be stopped by mere canvas, and by morning I was trying to sleep sitting bolt upright on the only chair. At first light we left and took a look at Dir. Despite a rushing river, it was a mean and ugly little town without a single building of consequence.

To reach the Chitral Valley from Dir, we had to cross the 10,500-foot Lowari Pass whose approaches began just beyond the town. There is a good gravelled road over the pass which is usually open by July. So it was with confidence that we rented space for ourselves and our luggage in a jeep already carrying about ten other persons. After an hour of climbing, the jeep stopped at a little village which turned out to be the end of the jeep line; for, though most of the snows had melted, hardpacked drifts as much as ten feet deep still covered parts of the road above us. It would be another week or two before the work of shoveling cuts through them would be completed and Chitral opened to the outside world.

We were determined to proceed on foot. So, by the usual process of inquiry and advice—you ask in

English, you ask in broken Hindustani, ten bystanders give you ten different answers in Pushtu—we hired two porters, and off we went.

The porters were soon out of sight—ahead of us, that is. It was a lovely walk, moderate grade, only occasional snow, a small stream below us to our left, and high up on the mountainside beyond it some interesting food for thought: the pieces of the last Pakistan International Airlines DC-3 which had tried to fly into Chitral.

About eleven we reached the top of the pass, an event we celebrated with the usual cup of tea from one of the “hôtels” that welcome the weary traveler. The tea came in brand-new cups recently imported from China. A number of porters passed us carrying tea boxes containing miscellaneous goods going into the valley. Small mules carrying triple a human load went by on the same errand. They had a dozen miles to go before what they carried could be transferred back to jeeps or trucks. And so did we.

The downhill walk on the Chitral side was even pleasanter than the ascent from Dir had been. There were many more pines and in the distance, looking north, an alpine landscape very different from what we had seen in the lower, harsher, Pathan country.

We were overtaken by Uncle Thik Hai, with his nephew who was returning to his Chitral home for the summer after a year of teaching school at Pesh-



*The "Dir Express" makes one of its numerous tea stops on the road through Pathan country from Dir to Ashret.*

awar. Most of the people going north that day were going home on vacation after a winter's work somewhere in West Pakistan.

Down we went with Uncle and Nephew. Most Indian roads must have been much like this one in the early 19th century. The only modern touch, if you except our suitcases now far out of sight, was someone's transistor radio screeching popular music, and, at intervals, bad news from Vietnam in a perfect imitation of the BBC accent.

We reached Ashret and the once-more-negotiable road early in the afternoon, paid our porters the agreed price of 15 rupees (\$3), and recovered our baggage. Only 40 miles lay between us and Chitral proper. Uncle negotiated a ride for us all and four or five other men on top of a loaded truck. About four, the driver, who looked rather like Gregory Peck, finished his tea, waved us all to our posts on the top of the tea boxes which entirely filled the little pre-war Chevy, and away we went.

The road wound first along the side of the valley of a tributary to the Chitral River, then of Chitral Valley itself. Below us, for the road kept well up the hillsides, were cultivated fields of barley and millet or rice, in places to which water could be brought

from the river. From time to time we passed a tribal chieftain's fort. "Gregory" drove with enthusiasm and without brakes. We rode on the very top of the cargo, higher than the roof of his cab, hanging on to the tops of the tea boxes, each other, or air. But nobody lost his good humor. I was on the left side and had a splendid view of the river swaying far below. Fay crouched on the right, with an equally exciting prospect of onrushing, overhanging rock.

From time to time something went wrong with the truck. Or so Gregory evidently decided, for he would stop, get out, and go under the hood. Someone always shoved a large rock under one of the rear wheels just in case.

About dusk we reached Drosh, the second town of the state of Chitral. Like most towns in this part of the world, it consists almost entirely of stalls with sod roofs. It is also, however, the headquarters of a first-rate military unit, the Chitral Scouts. Once raised as local levies by the British, the Scouts now form a part of the regular army of Pakistan. Chitralis are not as martial as Pathans. But their Scouts looked much more military, at least in a spit-and-polish way, than the irregulars we had seen the previous day. We observed officers and men playing

soccer near their immaculate encampment and wandering among the stalls in starched khaki shorts of British cut. No baggy pajamas for them.

After the usual delay for tea and the checking of papers, on we went again—Gregory driving faster than ever with the smell of home in his nostrils. We thought sure to be in Chitral by nightfall. Unfortunately there were delays at any tributary of the river that required a bridge. The bridge was invariably of the suspension type and so rickety, hung from cables so mean, that everything in the truck had to be taken out on one side and put back in on the other. Coolies stationed at each bridge did the carrying. Passengers took advantage of the interruption to pray, sleep, or relieve themselves.

Dusk caught us still 25 miles from the promised land. To our utter astonishment and apparently no one else's, as the sun went down we pulled up at a cluster of huts in fields near the river's edge and everyone climbed down. We saw no profit in arguing. By silently pulling the rank of our foreignness, we obtained, through Gregory, two charpoys (wooden cots with rope webbing). These we heaved up on the flat, sod roof of one of the houses.

The night was cool and pleasant. As we rested and drank from a bottle of Scotch secreted in one of the bedrolls, the moon rose over the mountains revealing a lovely muted picture of river, mountains, and cultivated fields. Supper consisted of two great plates of rice cooked in what surely must have been axle grease with an egg on top of each. Soon the exertions of the day caught up with us, and we slept on our rooftop surrounded by comrades who had more or less dropped where they had a moment before stood.

At five the next morning we were again on our way. The night halt had not improved the disposition of our conveyance, and repair stops were more frequent than ever. But there was a compensation. We began to see, at first occasionally and then almost continuously, a mountain. Not an ordinary mountain, but over 25,000 feet of one, conspicuous in its perpetual ice and snow, massive, towering high above everything around it. At every turn in the valley, which grew somewhat wider and gentler as we went north, we expected to confront it base-to-summit. At every turn it was as far away. It lay in fact almost 40 miles beyond Chitral. Lambent in the early morning sun, Tirich Mir fully answered its description as the most imposing mountain in the world.

At 11 a.m. we crossed the final bridge and at last entered the town of Chitral. We found it, despite the beauty of its setting, a rather poor place. The valley, twisting another 200 miles northwards to the

Afghan border, is narrow, and there is little arable land. The town consists largely of sod roofed stalls, although the Scouts' camp is more substantial. Near the Mastuj River there are some lovely green fields dotted with huge chinar trees. The old fort still stands on the banks of the river, much as Robertson left it in 1895. No one today knows of its history. Everywhere in the town there is rushing water in streams, channels, and irrigation ditches.

We moved into the Government Rest House. As usual it was clean and comfortable, with a lovely garden. After a few moments the lieutenant of the

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local police arrived to register our papers. He insisted that we take his picture, and before departing stuck out his tongue to show how ill he was and that he needed medication. It is an oft repeated myth that the people of these northern mountains enjoy boundless good health and live to a very ripe old age. Almost the opposite is true. They suffer from a multitude of diseases and from chronic malnutrition.

We paid a courtesy call on the Assistant Political Agent, who was the Pakistan government officer in charge of the state. Mohamad Tariq was a sophisticated young man with a law degree from Lincoln's Inn and experience in the USA. He had just received orders to go to Oxford for further study and could not have been more delighted. He did not know whether he could have stood another winter in Chitral. At the first snow the road closes and the telegraph line ceases to operate. Only the radio provides sporadic contact with the outside world. And, he said, there was no one to talk to in Chitral.

Our stay in Chitral itself lasted scarcely more than a day. I found no records, no papers, but was left with an indelible impression of a land of which Robertson has left us this memorable description:

The dominant note of Chitral is bigness combined with desolation; vast silent mountains cloaked in eternal snow, wild, glacier-born torrents, cruel precipices, and pastureless hillsides where the ibex and the markhor find a precarious subsistence. It takes time for the mind to recover from the depression which the stillness and melancholy of the giant landscape at first compel. All colour is purged away by the sun-glare; and no birds sing. Life is represented by great eagles and vultures, circling slowly or poised aloft, and by the straight flight of the hawk . . . .