

The Thin Red Line

The Thin Red Line was a famous military action by the British Army's 93rd (Highland) Regiment at the Battle of Balaclava on October 25, 1854, during the Crimean War. In this incident the 93rd aided by a small scratch force of Royal Marines and some Turkish infantrymen, led by Sir Colin Campbell, routed a Russian cavalry charge. Previously Campbell's Highland Brigade had taken part in actions at Alma and Sevastopol.



The Russian cavalry force of 2,500 rode down the road to Balaklava. It was early morning and the sole force that lay between the oncoming cavalry and the disorganized and vulnerable British camp was the 93rd regiment.

Campbell is said to have told his men, "There is no retreat from here, men. You must die where you stand." Sir Colin's aide John Scott is said to have replied, "Aye, Sir Colin. If needs be, we'll do that." Campbell formed the 93rd into a line two deep — the "thin red line". Convention dictated that the line should be four deep, but the line had to be stretched. Campbell had the regiment wait until very close quarters before the first line fired. The Russians continued to advance, and Campbell had his men wait until no more than 50 yards lay between the Highlanders and the charging Russians to fire the second volley. This broke the Russian charge. At that, some of the Highlanders started forward for a counter-charge, but Sir Colin stopped them with a cry of "93rd, damn all that eagerness!"

It was *The Times* correspondent, William H. Russell, who wrote that he could see nothing between the charging Russians and the British base of operations at Balaklava but the "thin red streak tipped with a line of steel" of the 93rd. popularly condensed into "the thin red line", the phrase became a symbol for British sangfroid in battle.

The battle is fictionally characterized in Robert Gibb's 1881 painting of the same name (above), which is housed at the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders regimental museum at Stirling Castle, in Stirling, Scotland.