

## **First World War: Sikh Contribution to the Freedom of Europe**

[Extract from unpublished book, “Anglo-Sikh Relations and the Role of the Sikhs in the World Wars” by S Gurmukh Singh, Principal (Policy), UK Civil Service ret’d]

### **PART III THE FIRST WORLD WAR**

#### **1. Sikh regiments before the First World War**

##### **1.1 Presidency armies of Bengal, Bombay and Madras.**

The Indian army units were raised by the East India Company in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> Centuries. In the early 19<sup>th</sup> Century, for military and administrative purposes, India was divided into three Presidencies of Madras, Bombay and Bengal. After the Indian Mutiny, by which time the East India Company had ceased to exist, the units became part of her Majesty’s Forces. In May 1857, each Presidency, Madras, Bombay and Bengal, had its own separate army. There were two types of troops: Royal troops of the British regular army, and Honourable East India Company (HEIC) troops which included both British and Indian units. The Bengal Presidency stretched right across Northern India from Calcutta, the headquarters of the British Government, to Peshawar in the North-West Frontier. This is the reason that the first Sikh regiments raised the 14<sup>th</sup> (Ferozepore) Sikhs and the 15<sup>th</sup> (Ludhiana) Sikhs were part of the “Bengal Infantry”<sup>1</sup>.

The three Presidency armies remained as separate entities but included Indian troops only. These were abolished in 1895. From then, all mention of the designations of old Presidency armies was omitted.

##### **1.2 Recruitment from martial races: “One class” or “All class” Army units Was this part of British “divide and rule” policy in India?**

Did the British invent the “divide and rule” policy in India or did they just inherit it from the Indian social and political system which existed before their arrival? It is said the British introduced the idea of the “martial race”. Some say that this was part of the British policy of “divide and rule” in India. “Divide and rule” means that divided and disunited people remain weak, and, therefore, are easier to rule. Sometimes they would even fight each other. This makes it easier for the colonial rulers to extend and prolong their hold over a country. One method is to first side with the weak to defeat the strong through own combined strength, and then to subdue own weak ally without any difficulty! All colonial adventurers in India used this method but the British came out on the top. It was not too difficult to make the maharajahs, the nawabs and small princedoms fight against each other because they had been doing this for centuries anyway! Each was more concerned about taking over the neighbours’ territory, or seeking revenge for some insult caused, than about the *farangi’s* designs.

It is important to discuss this topic to see if it was the British who introduced this idea of a martial race as part of their divide and rule policy.

---

<sup>1</sup> This must be the reason that the first Sikh migrants to South-East Asian countries like Malaya (now Malaysia), who followed the Sikh army and police units were called “Bengalese”. These Sikh (“Bengalese” to local population) were both, respected and feared.

In his classic book, *A Matter of Honour*, Philip Mason of the Indian Civil Service (ICS) says that the division of the people of India into “martial” and “non-martial” classes was not an invention of the British. In fact, it was the recognition of such divisions which were already there in the Indian social system. He says, “It was common sense to see the reality of it, and not waste effort in trying to turn money-lenders [the Indian Bannias not renowned for bravery] into soldiers.”<sup>2</sup>

In the Indian social thinking, each caste has its own function and duty. According to Manu, the author of the Indian caste system, it is better to do own duty badly than another’s well. The warrior caste is a separate *Kshatrya* caste under that system. In fact it was the Sikh Guru who first introduced the concept of a casteless Khalsa, capable of defending own rights and fighting for a just cause. Nevertheless, what Philip Mason wrote is true about the Indian social system. It was not the British who introduced the idea of martial races or “one class” army units. They simply made the best use of the system, which they took over.

The British had much experience of international and colonial wars and of “one class” units, in which soldiers from the same area were recruited. Indian martial races (e.g. Sikhs, Panjabi Muslims, Rajputs, Dogras, Gurkhas, Marathas etc) are proud of their tradition and the areas and towns they come from. The British fighting units with proud traditions were also based on regions in the United Kingdom and men were recruited from the same area e.g. regiments were named after cities in England and regions like Scotland. Tradition and background does matter in frontline battles. People hide fear in danger due to pride and honour, and what colleagues would tell others on returning home. This point is illustrated by a true story of Captain Balbir Singh Sandhu during an Indo-Pakistan war.

“Balbir along with other troops, was thrown back from Chhamb by the Pakistani offensive. When Balbir lay critically wounded in a military hospital, his father, a senior police officer, went to see him. The only thing Balbir could say was, “Look father, all the bullet injuries are in my stomach and chest and none in my back.” Then he passed out. What had weighed heavily with Balbir was that his people may think that he was wounded while withdrawing (running away!) from the battle.”<sup>3</sup>

Until the arrival of the Khalsa of Guru Gobind Singh in 1699, India had an unbroken record of military defeats stretching back to over a thousand years. It was not the British who weakened India through any policy of “divide and rule”. If at all by using the skills of the martial communities like the Sikhs they created a world class Indian army, which could face the best in battle. And so proved the Sikh battalions who spearheaded the Indian army on many battlefronts in the two World Wars. They won by far the most number of military awards for bravery as compared with any other Indian martial community.

Other than the combat units, the British did employ non-martial races in support services e.g. engineers, signals, and even artillery. A large number of mixed or all class army units were also formed especially during the war. Many support units were mixed. Sikhs were taken in large numbers into these units also. The tall, upright and well built Sikh *jawans*, proud of their distinct identity were to be found in all the different branches of the British Indian Army at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century.

---

<sup>2</sup> Quoted in the *The Sikh Review*, December 1998 p. 35.

<sup>3</sup> Lieut-Gen. Harwant Singh, *Sikh Review*, December, 1998 p. 36

## 2 Nature of Sikh allegiance to the British Raj

By the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the commitment of the Sikh nation to the Anglo-Sikh alliance, and through that friendship, to the King and the British Empire was not in doubt. Events like the Indian Mutiny, the North-West Frontier campaigns, the Burmese wars and Sikh deeds of great heroism in battles like Saragrhi, had clearly tested the Sikh loyalty and commitment to the alliance.

The British valued the Sikh alliance and were careful to base it on full respect for Sikh tradition. However, it is also important to understand the nature of Sikh support for British rule in India. As later events showed, Sikh support for any *raj* (administration of any type) has never been unconditional. Here it is important to understand the Sikh concept of *miri-piri*.

*Miri* is about worldly affairs and includes all social, economic and political issues. *Piri* is about spiritual or religious matters only. Sikhism combines both into a way of thinking and a way of life. The Sikhs always regard themselves as independent regarding both aspects of life. When it comes to the affairs of the Sikh nation, the Khalsa Panth, they are never prepared to give up their freedom in both, worldly and spiritual matters. So, Sikh loyalty and Sikh acceptance of any rule is always conditional upon their *miri-piri* principle<sup>4</sup>.

## 3 Recruitment drive for the War

Many Sikh battalions had been raised by the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century.

When the recruitment drive in preparation for the first World War started, the Sikhs responded in large numbers. From 35,000 Sikh *jawans* at the beginning of the war in 1914, the number of Sikhs rose to well over 100,000 by the close of the war in 1918. With a Sikh population of less than 2%, they made up about 15 - 20% of the Indian army.

The Sikh states south of River Sutlej (cis-Sutlej states), which had retained their semi-independent status under the British Raj, made up some 60% of the Sikh battalions. These Sikh rajahs supported the war effort generously expecting good returns in future. The Sikh leaders were equally enthusiastic.

A new Sikh regiment, the 47<sup>th</sup> Sikh Regiment of the Bengal Infantry was raised in January 1901 at Sialkot (now in Pakistan). This regiment, later re-organised as the 5<sup>th</sup> Battalion (Duke of Connaughts Own – DCO) in 1922, has a most remarkable history of action in many countries.

Many Sikh battalions were attached to non-Sikh regiments and brigades. Often military records, war photographs, video newsreels and even history books lost the Sikh identity in the

---

<sup>4</sup> “The Sikh doctrine of Double Sovereignty [of *miri-piri*] .....has a curiously modern ring....a growing school of writers in Europe have tended to think on the lines in which it is grounded. The main substance of this doctrine is that any sovereign state which includes Sikh populations and groups as citizens must never make the paranoic pretensions of almighty absolutism, entailing the concept of total power, entitled to rule over the bodies and minds of men.....Any state which lays such claims, qua the Sikhs, shall automatically forfeit its moral right to demand allegiance of the Sikhs...” Kapur Singh, *The Golden Temple: Its Theo-political Status*, *The Sikh Review*, August 1974 p. 6.

general description of “Indian sepoy” etc.; when, in fact, they were writing about or showing Sikh *jawans* in action. For other background political reasons, Sikh identity and great contribution to the war effort was gradually lost in such generalised descriptions<sup>5</sup>.

#### **4 Ranks in the Indian Army: Commissioned and non-commissioned officers**

Until the last year of the First World War, all the commissioned officers of the Indian army were British. Although the Indians numbered twice the British forces, they could not receive the King’s Commission. Commission indicates grant of certain power or authority to do a certain duty. A commissioned officer in the forces holds the King’s (or these days, the Queens) commission and ranks second lieutenant, or its equivalent or above. Subedar and Jamadar were the first commissioned officer ranks for Indian officers. Havildar, equivalent to a sergeant, was the senior non-commissioned rank.

Only ten places per year were provided for Indian candidates at Sandhurst from 1918. This number doubled by about 1930. Further opportunities for Indian officer training opened up later at Woolwich (for Gunner and Sapper officers), at Cramwell for airmen, and in India at the Military College at Dehra Dun.

In the private armies of the Maharajahs there were, of course, senior ranking officers.

#### **5 British Indian Army officers**

The pre-war Indian Army officers came from the best in the UK and there was great competition for service with the Indian Army. For example in 1907, Bernard Montgomery (later Field Marshall Viscount Montgomery) missed selection. Those selected were keen to join the prestigious Sikh Regiment in the Indian Army. Brigadier Sir John Smyth, VC, got his first choice, the Sikh Regiment, only because one of the officers in the 15<sup>th</sup> Sikhs died in 1913<sup>6</sup>!

#### **6 Royal visits before the War**

The Prince and the Princes of Wales (the future King George V and Queen Mary) visited Amritsar during their Indian tour of 1905-6. They were received by the Sikhs of Panjab with great enthusiasm.

There was a grand *darbar* at Delhi when King George V (Emperor of India) in December, 1911. The climax was when the Jullundur Brigade with its three battalions, 47<sup>th</sup> Sikhs, 59<sup>th</sup> Scinde Rifles and 1<sup>st</sup> Manchester’s marched past in salute.

#### **7. Pre-War growth of Sikh religious and educational institutions under the British**

---

<sup>5</sup> In researching war records for the Sikh role, this trend is most noticeable. It is much easier to trace Sikh military contribution to the First World War than the Second World War. This was not entirely due to the increase in the number of mixed army units in the Indian army. In the struggle to free India from British rule, the Sikhs were beginning to take a lead role at some cost to their independent national and religious identity. They paid a heavy price during the partition of India and have continued to do so in India after independence.

<sup>6</sup> Schlaefli Robin. *Emergency Sahib: Of Queen’s, Sikhs and The Dagger Division*.

## 7.1 Sikh literature and education

The annexation of Panjab and the collapse of the Khalsa Raj had an immediate impact on the Sikhs as a community. During the Khalsa Raj, thousands had converted to Sikhism and swelled the ranks of the Khalsa army. Some famous Sikh generals of Khalsa Raj like Sardar Hari Singh Nalwa were amongst these converts. However, many who had converted to Sikhism for a good life in the Khalsa Raj, soon slipped back into their old Hindu sects.

Later in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, Sikh recruitment to the British army, and the special recognition and privileges which Sikhs started enjoying in British Raj, reversed the trend to some extent. Western scholars wrote books about the great Sikh religious and historical heritage. Some of these books, which praised the Sikhs and, at times, criticised the British policy in India, were not liked by the British rulers of India. However, after the Indian Mutiny, the British attitude changed. Sikh scholars increasingly came into contact with western scholars and started reforms to ensure survival of Sikhism as a distinct religion. Directly or indirectly, the British influence did help the Sikh cause. A well organised Sikh reform movement, the Sri Guru Singh Sabha, held its first meeting on 1<sup>st</sup> October, 1873 in front of the *Sikh miri-piri* (political and religious) centre of Akal Takht, at Amritsar. That date may be regarded as the turning point for the Sikhs and the beginning of modern Sikh history.

Panjabi language in Gurmukhi script (in which Panjabi and Sikh holy Book, Guru Granth Sahib is written) was officially recognised and taught by the Panjab university<sup>7</sup>. The government supported the opening of a Sikh college. The foundation stone of this first great Sikh literary institution, the Khalsa College Amritsar, was laid by Sir James Lyall, Lt-Governor of the Punjab on 5<sup>th</sup> March, 1892. The Sikh Maharajahs of Patiala, Nabha and Kapurthala contributed generously. The college is famous for its magnificent buildings and rich cultural heritage.

Stress on Sikh religious discipline in the British Indian Army further revived interest in Sikh religion. Most Sikh *javans* were recruited from the villages of Panjab. These *javans* returned home on leave looking distinct and smart in their army uniforms and full Sikh identity. They became the role models for the Sikh youth in Panjab.

As many times before in its eventful history, the Khalsa nation so close to extinction after the annexation of Panjab, was revived to make history in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century and beyond. However, neither the Indian historians nor Indian politicians forgave the British for their role in promoting the distinct Sikh religious and cultural identity. They have preferred to attribute the Sikh revival to the British “divide and rule” policy in India!

## 7.2 Promotion of Sikh religious tradition in the Sikh regiments

The British promoted the Sikh religious traditions in the army. An order issued by the Governor-General of India read, “...all Sikhs entering the British Army should receive Pahul [Sikh initiation] and observe strictly the code of Sikh conduct.” From the army view-point, there was a good reason for this. Lt Gen. Sir George MacMunn wrote, “A Sikh is baptised into his sect and not born into it, so that no man is a Sikh till he has taken the pahul....as the

---

<sup>7</sup> “Dr Leitner was convinced [when Sardar Attar Singh of Bhadaur presented him with a list of 380 books in Panjab] and he not only introduced Punjabi as a subject in the Oriental College but also got it introduced in the Panjab University...” *The Encyclopaedia of Sikhism.*, Punjabi University Patiala.

value of the Sikh as the simple faithful soldier, has lain in his adherence to the simple tenets and hardy life of his forebears, no non-baptised Sikh is admitted into a regiment of the Indian Army.” However, this policy worked to the advantage of the Sikhs also. The numbers of practising Sikhs had fallen sharply after the fall of the Sikh empire in northern India by 1849. Due to the privileges given to the Sikhs in the army and other services, this number started rising rapidly by the turn of the Century.

## **8. The First World War**

Germany invaded Belgium on 4<sup>th</sup> August 1914. This was the start of the First World War. The huge Indian Army, spearheaded by Sikh units of proven quality and loyalty during the Indian Mutiny, the Burmese and North-West Frontier campaigns, provided the British Empire with a force which was “always ready, and of admirable efficiency and of assured valour”.

The British Indian Army had three functions: the preservation of internal peace in the sub-continent of India, the defence of Indian borders, and to serve anywhere in the British Empire outside the Indian sub-continent. For understanding the Sikh military contribution to the war effort in the First World Wars, it would be useful to trace the history of a typical Sikh army unit raised in 1901.

### **8.1 The 47<sup>th</sup> (Sikh) Regiment or the XLVII (D.C.O.) Sikhs**

The 47<sup>th</sup> (Sikh) Regiment<sup>8</sup> of the Bengal Infantry was raised at Sialkot in Panjab (now the part of Panjab in Pakistan) on 21 January, 1901.

One hundred trained jawans were supplied by 35<sup>th</sup> Sikhs and 36<sup>th</sup> Sikhs regiments.

Four Jemadar commissions were sanctioned by the Government of India for “Native Gentlemen of good family”. (Jemadar rank is equivalent to sergeant in the British army.)

The first Commanding Officer was Lieutenant Colonel P G Walker from the 20<sup>th</sup> Punjab Infantry. The first Subedar Major (sergeant major, the highest rank allowed for Sikhs and Indians) of the Battalion was Waryam Singh from (The Queens Own) Corps of Guides. It is interesting to note the direct appointment of Jemadar Thakur Singh, whose grandfather had served in the Khalsa army of Maharaja Ranjit Singh. He rose to the rank of Major when he retired in 1924.

The Regimental crest represented a plain Sikh Quoit (symbolising the steel “chakkar”<sup>9</sup>) in which was the Sikh Lion, under which were the words “XLVII Sikhs”. There was an Imperial Crown on the top of the quoit.

---

<sup>8</sup> Although, the modern regiments are made up of two or more battalions, some earlier regiments e.g. the 14<sup>th</sup> (Sikhs) Regiment of the Bengal Infantry, known as the Ferozepore Sikhs, were single-battalion regiments consisting of about 700 men. A battalion normally has five companies (each company has about 140 men under the command of a Captain).

<sup>9</sup> The author has seen in childhood the deadly accuracy with which the Nihangs (Akalis) could throw the chakkar to slice off the top of melons placed on the top of posts.

In the earlier days, the Sikh soldiers wore a massive turban 10 yards long for protection. This length was reduced to 5 yards in October 1903.

47<sup>th</sup> Sikhs were presented with their first Colours (the identifying flag or banner of a military unit) by Lieutenant General Sir Bindoon Blood, KCB, General Officer Commanding Punjab Force. The traditional “Bengal Infantry” part of the description was dropped after 2<sup>nd</sup> October 1903.

On 13 June 1904, the 47<sup>th</sup> Sikhs was ordered to do service in North China as part of an allied force to restore order following the Boxer rebellion<sup>10</sup>. The rebellion was crushed and the Indian Army were stationed there to maintain peace. The Regiment stayed in China at Tientsen and Lutai, for three years from early May 1905 to April, 1908. It fought hard to maintain law and order in the area. So impressed was the Brigadier General W H Walters, Commander of North China Force that he was moved to say at the farewell “.....you cannot be surpassed by any unit of His Majesty’s Army.” The German Field Marshall von Waldersee reviewed the Sikhs at Shanghai and greatly admired their physique and military bearing. Little was he to know at the time that six years later the same 47<sup>th</sup> Sikhs would beat the best of the German soldiers opposite them in France.

The 47<sup>th</sup> Sikhs and one of the original regiments, 15<sup>th</sup> Sikhs (the Ludhiana Sikhs) were attached to the 8<sup>th</sup> Jullundur Brigade (stationed at Jullundur in Panjab) when the First World War started on 4<sup>th</sup> August 1914. The Regiment joined the Indian Expeditionary Force for service abroad and boarded a ship from Karachi on 28 August, 1914. The British forces (called the British Expeditionary Force) had suffered heavy losses in France. On 27<sup>th</sup> September, the Indian forces named the “Indian Corps”, including Sikh regiments, landed at Marseilles in France. On arrival huge crowds were waiting. “First came a detachment of Sikhs, for the greater part head and shoulders above the spectators [general impression of tall Sikh *jawans* of the Indian Army wearing their neat Sikh-style turbans]. They received the plaudits of the crowd with the imperturbable smiling composure of their race.”

From 21<sup>st</sup> October, 47<sup>th</sup> Sikhs took part in battles named after villages Ypres and Neuve Chapelle. On 28<sup>th</sup> October the Regiment fought a memorable battle at Neuve Chapelle. They proved their superior battle skills in hand to hand fighting with the Germans who had greater numbers and more machine guns. The official historian wrote, “The History of the Indian Army contains few nobler pages than that of the 28<sup>th</sup> October, 1914”. The newspapers in England showed pictures of Sikh troops and wrote about their great bravery. Journalists wrote, perhaps with some exaggeration, that they were proving irresistible and slaughtering Germans like sheep!”<sup>11</sup>.

Sir James Wilcocks sent the following message to the Commanding Officer:

“I am glad to hear how splendidly the 47<sup>th</sup> fought at Neuve Chapelle. I feel quite sure it will keep high the name of the Sikh in this War, and will answer every call of duty.”

The British military historian wrote about those two critical months of October and November, 1914, “While it was perhaps hyperbole to say that the Indian troops (particularly

---

<sup>10</sup> The aim of this peasant rebellion was to drive out all foreigners from China. Boxer was the name given to a Chinese secret society and Boxer bands went about attacking all foreigners killing Europeans, Christian missionaries and Chinese converts. So a combined allied force was put together to restore order.

<sup>11</sup> Khana P. K. Maj. Gen. & Pushpinder S Chopra. *Portrait of Courage*

the Jullundur Brigade) had saved the Empire, it was certainly true that they had saved the British Expeditionary force.”<sup>12</sup>

The 47<sup>th</sup> Sikhs remained at the frontline for 13 months taking part in further battles. The Sikh regiments fought many battles in France at Ypres and Neuve Chapelle; at Flanders (now divided between Belgium and France) and Ieper (Belgium) which they held against far greater odds. At Neuve Chappel they fought against crack German and Bavarian Regiments in one of which was Corporal Adolf Hitler!

One example of the daring of the Sikhs is given as follows:

“On the night of 27/28<sup>th</sup> [November, 1914] Havildar Lachman Singh and Sepoy Rur Singh crawled out to obtain information as to the suspected sap [covered enemy trench tunnel nearby] of the enemy. The two men approached the sap very closely, but were discovered and heavily fired upon, Sepoy Rur Singh being hit. Lachman Singh carried him back to the trenches. He then found that Rur Singh’s rifle had been left behind and before he could be stopped went back and brought it in despite the heavy fire assisted by Verey lights, that the Germans were maintaining.” Loss of a rifle was regarded as loss of honour by the Sikh jawans. Havildar Lachman Singh was awarded the Order of Merit. During most of these operations the 15<sup>th</sup> Sikhs was close by.

The 47<sup>th</sup> left France on 17<sup>th</sup> December, 1915. The Sikhs had suffered heavy casualties but were in good spirits having worsted the best in the field.

Military history records show that they stopped the first assault by the Germans in First World War which allowed the Western forces time to re-group. Thousands of Sikh *jawans* from famous Sikh regiments gave their lives in many crucial battles on the Western Front at the start of the War:

“Samadh [memorial stone etc. to remember the dead] of Sardar Kishan Singh at Bedford House Cemetery, Ieper, where “IK OM KAR, SRI WAHEGURU JI KI FATEH, SAKARE GAYE<sup>13</sup>” etc is engraved. Such text is engraved on every Sikh soldier’s Samadh throughout Europe who has given his life for the freedom of mankind.....Here Kishan Singh with many unknown Sikh soldiers was cremated on 27<sup>th</sup> April 1915 in the second battle of Ieper” Chain Singh, writing from Holland (he also sent pictures with captions) to Sikh Review, March 2001, p.52.

The next wartime destination for the 47<sup>th</sup> Sikhs was Mesopotamia (part of Iraq). They reached there on 8<sup>th</sup> January 1916 and joined other Sikh units like the 14<sup>th</sup> Sikhs in the 8<sup>th</sup> Brigade (the Jullundur Brigade). There was much heavy fighting against heavily defended Turkish position on river Tigris. Casualties were heavy but the Sikh battalions gave an excellent account of themselves. The 47<sup>th</sup> Sikhs were praised for their gallantry. General Keary, G.O.C. 3<sup>rd</sup> Division wrote to the Commanding Officer of 47<sup>th</sup> Sikhs:

“I wish to put on record my very high appreciation of the conduct of your Battalion in common with the other Battalions of the 8<sup>th</sup> Brigade at the action of 8<sup>th</sup> March, 1916.

---

<sup>12</sup> Khana and Chopra, *Portrait of Courage* p.8

<sup>13</sup> The words mean: “There is One Creator to Whom belongs the victory”. The Sikh name for God is “Waheguru” meaning “The Wonderful Giver of Knowledge”.

The attack on Dujailah was most gallantly carried out and its capture was a notable achievement.”

The units were involved in many battles in Mesopotamia until the Turks were in full retreat by November 1917. The Battle of Tekrit on the river Euphrates front was memorable where the Turkish force surrendered on 29<sup>th</sup> September, 1917. There were many other Sikh units at this front e.g. the 14<sup>th</sup>, 15<sup>th</sup>, 51<sup>st</sup> and 53<sup>rd</sup> Sikhs, and 34<sup>th</sup> Sikh Pioneers.

47<sup>th</sup> Sikhs left for Palestine on 3<sup>rd</sup> May 1918 having suffered heavy casualties in Mesopotamia. There were times when the troops were ordered to attack heavily defended positions. On occasions when positions were captured there was a lack of backup support.

## 8.2 14<sup>th</sup> Sikhs

There are many accounts of remarkable bravery shown by the Sikhs. At the Third Battle of Krithia, at Gallipoli (Turkey) on 4<sup>th</sup> June, 1915 the 14<sup>th</sup> Sikhs fought gallantly. The British troops suffered 4,500 casualties out of 16,000 who took part in the battle.

“The fate of the 14<sup>th</sup> Sikhs on the right must be described in greater detail... The two British officers were killed, within a few minutes; the double-company nevertheless succeeded in forcing its way across an intact wire obstacle and in capturing a trench in the ravine. Wonderful resolution was displayed. At one spot where heavy losses were being suffered whilst the men were trying to cut their way through wire, Havildar Maghar Singh suddenly leapt the obstacle as if it were a hurdle and was followed immediately by his section.” Although, the Sikhs suffered heavy casualties, Havildar Maghar Singh survived to be awarded the Order of British India.<sup>14</sup>”

One account of a battle towards the end of the War on 26<sup>th</sup> October, 1918, is as follows:

Just before the end of the War, the 14<sup>th</sup> Sikhs were ordered to attack a heavily defended Turkish position on the banks of the river Tigris in Mesopotamia. With their traditional courage, the Sikh *jawans* charged into heavy artillery and machine-gun fire. Sixty-five of them were killed and 247 wounded in that action. These casualties represented 38% of those involved in the attack and all were incurred in one hour between 6.30 and 7.30 in the morning<sup>15</sup>.

The same Battalion (renamed 1/11 Sikhs) was later involved in Indian North-West Frontier operations.

## 8.3 Rest leave between battles

Between the battles, the Sikh *jawans* rested and performed religious duties. Camps were sometimes pitched in the desert. Religious discipline was strict. They read from the Sikh holy Book, Guru Granth sahib and also sang religious hymns. Much attention was paid to physical cleanliness, health and training. They took part in games with other units. The Sikh *jawans* excelled in war games including bayonet attack, assault and team racing. The game of

<sup>14</sup> Talbot Colonel F. E. G., *The 14<sup>th</sup> King Georges Own Sikhs*, p.126.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid* p.78.

hockey had been introduced in the Indian army before the War and Sikhs became highly proficient at this game. They also held athletic sports, tug-o-war and quoit throwing.

The Sikh maharajajs supported the war effort very fully. The Sikh regiments of the Sikh princedoms were serving with the Indian Army. The leading figure amongst these was the Sikh Maharajah of Patiala who visited the front at Palestine on 20<sup>th</sup> August 1918 and met *jawans* of the Sikh units.

#### **8.4 Deployment of Sikh and other Indian battalions during the Wars**

The following notes by [ ??????? ] show the unsatisfactory manner in which parts of Indian battalions and regiments were deployed to serve with other Divisions and Brigades during the First World War:

“On 29<sup>th</sup> October 1914, General Willcocks wrote in his diary:

*“Where is my Lahore Division? Sirhind Brigade: left in Egypt, Ferozopore Brigade: somewhere in the north, divided in three or four pieces, Jullundur Brigade: the Manchesters in the south with the 5<sup>th</sup> division, the 47<sup>th</sup> Sikhs half with the one or the other British division, for the other half somewhere else. The 59<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> Sikhs: in the trenches...”*

It is clear that this was not really favourable for the morale of the Indian rank and file.

Thousands of miles away from home, in completely different surroundings, and inadequately adapted to the dreadful weather conditions, the Indian troops fought for a cause they hardly understood. I have already emphasised the particular relationship between the British officers and their Indian rank and file. When a lot of these officers died in the first fights, many Indian soldiers felt dazed and left alone without those officers who understood them and knew their culture, their habits etc. Indian companies, of which the commanding officer was lost, were brought under command of British units where no one understood them.”

#### **8.5 The end of the War**

At about this time Turkish deserters started arriving and the end of the War was in sight. Following the battle of Megiddo in Palestine towards end September the Turks were in full retreat to Damascus and 47<sup>th</sup> Sikh with the other units continued their advance in pursuit. Turkey surrendered on 30 October, 1918 and Armistice between the Allies and Germany was concluded on 11<sup>th</sup> November, 1918..

The Farewell Order of 5<sup>th</sup> December, 1919, to the Jullundur Brigade by Brigadier General S. M. Edwardes, read “You left India at the very beginning of the War, in August 1914 as the “Jullundur Brigade”, and you three battalions have fought side by side in France, Mesopotamia and Palestine, to the end of the War. It is an unique record of which you must be justly proud.” The three battalions which had fought together throughout the Great War were the 1<sup>st</sup> Manchester (English), 59<sup>th</sup> Rifles (Pathan) and 47<sup>th</sup> Sikhs. The three battalions exchanged trophies to remember their friendship. The three trophies are now proudly displayed by the three battalions now part of the British, Pakistan and Indian Armies respectively.

While the above account of the First World War is mostly of one Sikh Battalion, other famous Sikh regiments served with distinction in Europe, Egypt, Mesopotamia and Gallipoli

(Turkey) and other fronts. Nearly 60,000 Indian soldiers died fighting in the War<sup>16</sup>. As the Sikhs were in the forefront in most campaigns, a very large proportion of those who died were Sikh *jawans*. Tactical errors by commanders may have been made e.g. in Mesopotamia in 1915, where heavy casualties were incurred without proper backup support. But charges by some Indian writers that, “Indian troops were used as cannon fodder.” are unjust. British troops were fighting side by side with Indian troops and suffered as many, if not more casualties.

The British policy towards the Sikhs, the privileges given to the Sikhs and full trust in their loyalty to the King and the Empire paid off during the First World War. Of the 22 Military Crosses awarded for conspicuous gallantry to the whole British Indian Army, the Sikhs won 14. One estimate is that the Sikhs contributed ten times in men and material to the war effort than any other community of India<sup>17</sup>. The Sikhs were by that time regarded as the backbone of the Indian Army and the British Empire.

After the World War five Indian officers were especially selected to be given the King’s Commission. Two of these officers, Thakur Singh M.C. and Mit Singh M.C. were from the 47<sup>th</sup> Sikhs i.e. the XLVII (Duke of Connaught) Sikhs.

The Sikhs were also taken in large number into the police and other services in India and in many South-east Asian and East African countries. These Sikh servicemen took their families and their religious practices to these countries. For example, many of the first Sikh Gurdwaras in Malaya (now Malaysia) were built by those in the army or the police.

-----  
Acknowledgement: Above long extract is from unpublished draft book “Anglo-Sikh Relations and the Role of the Sikhs in the World Wars” by S Gurmukh Singh, Principal (Policy), UK Civil Service ret’d] “

© Gurmukh Singh  
E-mail: sewauk2005@yahoo.co.uk  
Parts may be quoted with acknowledgement.

-----  
Put on the Sikh Missionary Society UK website with S Gurmukh Singh’s permission.

---

<sup>16</sup> Bose, Sugata & Jalal, Ayesha, *Modern South Asia – History, Culture, Political Economy*

<sup>17</sup> Sir John Maynard.