



Their Names Liveth For Evermore

http://www.sikhspectrum.com/112003/sikh_france.htm

By Bhupinder Singh Holland

The Lahore and Meerut Divisions followed by Secunderabad Cavalry were engaged in the Western Front (France-Belgium) during World War I. Many of these soldiers were Sikhs. In the first battle of Ieper (22 October 1914) a platoon of Dogra Sikhs died fighting to the last man, and Jemadar Kapur Singh kept on fighting until everyone else was out of action except for one wounded sepoy. As he did not want to surrender, he committed suicide with his last bullet.

After the bloody battle of Neuve Chapelle, France (10 till 13 March 1915) the Sikh Regiments had lost eighty percent of their men and three regiments stood at only sixteen percent of its original composition. A Sikh soldier wrote to his uncle in Jalandhar (Punjab),

"Thousands and hundreds of thousands of soldiers have lost their lives. If you go on the fields of battle you will see corpses piled upon corpses so that there is no place to place or put hand or foot. Men have died from the stench. No one has any hope of survival, for back to Punjab will go only those who have lost a leg or an arm or an eye. The whole world has been brought to destruction."

On October 7, 1927 the Secretary of State for India Earl of Birkenhead, unveiled the noble Memorial which has been erected by the Imperial War Graves Commission at Neuve Chapelle in France to the memory of all Indian soldiers who fell on the Western Front in the Great War of 1914-1918. This monument was designed by Sir Herbert Baker who is well known to India as one of the creators of modern Delhi. By doing so, in a special sense, too, it marks the gratitude of the great French nation which was defended from German invasion by the supreme sacrifices of the British Indian Army in France. It marks the French gratitude of the French people who built it on their soil. For the ceremony, special units including Sikhs who engaged in the actual war were brought from India with Maharaja of Kapurthala as a special guest.

Speaking on the occasion in French, Marshal Foch of the French Army who signed the Armistice document at 05:05 hours on 11 November 1918 with Matthias Erzberger, the leader of the German delegation and one of the new German leaders, stated frankly,

"The Indian Troops were thus among the first to show the way to a victorious offensive. It is only right that a Memorial should perpetuate the glorious memory of officers, non-commissioned officers and men of the British Indian Army at the very spot where later on a general attack by the Allied troops was to bring the decisive victory in sight."

Turning to the British Indian Contingent, he bade them:

"Return to your home in the distant, sun bathed East and proclaim how your countrymen drenched with their blood the cold northern land of France and Flanders, how they delivered it by their ardent spirit from the firm grip of a determined enemy; tell all India that we shall watch their graves with the devotion due to all our dead. We will cherish above all the memory of their example. They showed us the way, they made the first steps towards the final victory."

These historical words of the French marshal are even true today as this Memorial is best maintained in all respect and is accorded the highest historical status and is kept clean and well decorated. A Sikh delegation from Holland, U.S.A and Dubai including Sardar Dr. Gurdit Singh and Sardar Dr. Jaideep Singh from University of California, Sardar Hardial Singh (Dubai) and the author visited this Memorial on 6 April 1998 during our official delegation visit of Ieper.

Online Memorial: [Their Names Liveth For Evermore](#)

On the pillar are written the words, GOD IS ONE HIS IS THE VICTORY, and from the Qu'ran and the Bhagwad Gita and IK ONKAR SIRI WAHEGURU JI KE FATEH from Siri Guru Granth Sahib is written in Gurmukhi. The names of 4,746 soldiers who died are written on the round wall of this memorial. Most of them are Sikh soldiers. There is a list available from the Database of The Commonwealth War Graves Commission.

Mr. Jeremy Gee, OBE of CWGC, was right when he wrote me back about the "important role Sikhs played in the First World War" in one of his letters dated 2 December 1997. Eight soldiers from World War II (1939-45) who were cremated are also commemorated on the walls of this memorial.

There are 151 different cemeteries-burial places in whole of France where these soldiers have been cremated and buried with full religious respect and honor. Engraved on the graves of Sikh soldiers is Ik Oankar Siri Waheguru ji Ke Fateh Sanskare Gaye in Gurmukhi. Sepoy number, full name, name of the regiment, and date of death are all printed in block letters in English. These samadhs of the Sikhs can be found across Europe. They are well maintained, cleaned, and decorated by Commonwealth War Grave Commission throughout Europe.

Similarly, most Hindu soldiers are Gorkhas, and engraved on their graves in Hindi are the words, Oom Bhagwattee Nammo. Rest of the particulars are the same. In the same way, our Muslims brothers have the holy words from Qur'an written on their graves.

It should be noted here that during the Celebration of Peace, to commemorate 300 years of Khalsa at Ieper (Flanders), jointly organised by the Mayor of Ieper and the European Sikh Community, a monument was unveiled by panj piara and this monument has the same script on it except two Khalsa khandas were added. Besides many distinguished guests from many countries and the Belgium Government, Sardar Inder Singh Jamu, then Mayor of Barking & Dagenham, Sardar Tarsem Singh Bhogal, the Mayor of Woolwich, Janab Abdul Karim Sheikh, then Mayor of New Ham were also present.

In these 151 burial places, there are 3,359 graves of identified soldiers and 390 graves of unidentified soldiers. Mazargues War Cemetery in Marseilles has 1,002 graves. Some of the other cemeteries are La Chapelle British and Indian - Peronne, Somme (320), Meerut Military, St. Martun - Boulogne (313), St. Sever Extension - Rouven (271), Lillers Communal - Pas de Calais (153), Rue du Bacquerot No 1 Military - Laventie (144) and Hargicourt British Cemetery - Aisne. There are cemeteries that have a lone Sikh soldier or a small number of soldiers buried or cremated.

Memorials

There are 4 memorials where British Indian soldiers have been commemorated. Neuve-Chapelle Memorial has 4,746 names. The village of Neuve Chapelle is some 5 kilometres north of La Bassee and 20 kilometres south-west of Lille. The memorial is 800 metres south-west of the village on the east side of the road from La Bassee to Estaires.

The Memorial is a circular enclosure in the foreground of which is a column nearly 15 metres high, recalling the pillars of Asoka, surmounted by a Lotus capital, the Star of India and the Imperial Crown. On either side of the column two carved tigers guard this temple of the dead. The column and the tigers are supported by a podium, on the near side of which is carved "INDIA 1914-1918", while on the far-side are the Battle Honours of Indian units on the Western Front.

From the ends of the podium a pierced stone railing extends half-way round the circle, and the ends of the semicircle are marked by two small domed chattris, roughly East and West. The far semicircle is enclosed by a solid wall on which are carved the names of over 4,700 soldiers of the Indian Army. Also engraved on the Memorial is the following inscription:

TO THE HONOUR OF THE ARMY OF INDIA WHICH FOUGHT IN FRANCE AND BELGIUM, 1914-1918, AND IN PERPETUAL REMEMBRANCE OF THOSE OF THEIR DEAD WHOSE NAMES ARE HERE RECORDED AND WHO HAVE NO KNOWN GRAVE.

In 1964 a special bronze panel was added to this memorial in honor of 210 unidentified servicemen of undivided India who died during the 1914-1918 war, whose graves are at the Zehrendorf Indian Cemetery in East Germany. The following inscription is also engraved on the panel of the Neuve-Chapelle (Zehrendorf Cem) memorial:

IN HONOURED MEMORY OF THESE MEN WHO DIED IN CAPTIVITY AND WERE BURIED AT ZEHRENSDORF NEAR BERLIN.

Also to be found at this site is the Neuve-Chapelle 1939-1945 Cremation Memorial. In 1964 the remains of eight Indian soldiers (including two unidentified) were exhumed from Sarrebourg French Military Cemetery Extension and cremated. The names of the six identified soldiers are engraved on panels at the Neuve Chapelle Memorial, together with the following inscription:

1939-1945 IN HONOUR OF THESE SOLDIERS WHO DIED IN CAPTIVITY IN NORTH-WEST EUROPE AND WHOSE MORTAL REMAINS WERE COMMITTED TO FIRE.

The other three noteworthy memorials are:

Neuve-Chapelle (Zehrendorf Indian Cemetery) Memorial: 206
Arras Flying Services Memorial: 6
Le Touret Memorial: 1

Now , From the Database of The Commonwealth War Graves Commission it can easily be concluded that the total casualties in World War I of British Indian Forces commemorated in France are,

Total of Commemorations on Memorial: 4959
Total from the Cemeteries (Identified): 3359
Total from the Cemeteries (unidentified): 390
Final total: 8708-390 (Unidentified) = 8318
(The unidentified have been commemorated on the memorial)

According to CWGC record in Belgium:

Burials and Cremations in Cemeteries = 76
Total Commemorations on Memorials = 417
Unidentified = Nil
Total in Belgium = 493
France = 8318 + Belgium = 493 Thus Total = 8811

But the story of exact figure of casualties of British Indian forces on the Western Front does not end up here. There are many loopholes and thoroughly historical research is needed to fix the exact number of casualties. Most of the casualties are from Punjab and the Government of Punjab (India) and Government of Punjab (Pakistan) can play an important role in this research work. Mr. Dominiek Dendooven from the Documentary Center of In Flanders Fields Museum, Ieper (Belgium) wrote his account to me, in view of some historical facts that the Documentary Center has preserved.

"In 14 months the Indian Corps had lost 34,252 men (dead, wounded, ill, or prisoners of war) on the Western Front. I also found the figure of 7,700 sepoy who died, but that is even far below your estimation, based on the figures of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission.

And I am 100 % sure that you underestimate the number of casualties: you make the total from the commemorations on Memorial + identified in cemeteries + unidentified in cemeteries, but I am sure there are many more Indian casualties whose names were never recorded and who are by consequence not commemorated. I think this is due to the battle circumstances and perhaps poor administration. I give you some examples:

The losses of the 57th Wilde's Rifles and the 129th Baluchis were great during the last two days of October 1914 (during the 1st battle of Ieper). The Wilde's Rifles lost 300 out of 750, the Baluchis had 240 men killed, wounded or taken as POWs.

The Menin Gate in Ieper has the name of 15 casualties from the 47 Sikh Regiment while alone on 27 April 1915 (during the 2nd Battle of Ieper) out of 444 men 348 did not come back. They are nowhere else commemorated. Between 24th April and 1st May 1915, the Lahore Division had lost 3,889 men, or 30 % of the troops it had employed."

The total war dead (493) of Indian forces commemorated in Belgium by CWGC Memorial database is far less than the actual casualties figure. Dr. Sukhdev Singh, Head of Bio-Chemistry at Guru Nanak University in Amritsar found this information most valuable and commended the work. Universities of Punjab can undertake this project and motivate a student for a Ph.D on this subject to reasearch it further. I am sure, on being requested, the Documentary Center at the In Flanders Fields Museum in Ieper can provide these students with maximum guidance and cooperation. The Commonwealth War Graves Commission is also very helpful.

I shall close my article with this historical remarks of Lt. General Sir James Wilcox, Commander of the British Indian Corps,

"It was the dark days of 1914 when our men had to face mortars, hand grenades, high explosive shells for which they themselves were not provided. They could reply only with their valour, their rifles and two machine guns per batallion. And yet they did it."



Sikh soldiers near Neuve Chapelle in summer of 1915.

NOTE

A large number of Sikh soldiers are buried in the following cemeteries.

Gorre British and Indian Cemetery - Pas de Calais

Hargicourt British Cemetery - Aisne

La Chapelette British and Indian Cemetery, Peronne - Somme

Lillers Communal Cemetery - Pas de Calais

Mazargues War Cemetery, Marseilles - Bouches du Rhone

Meerut Military Cemetery, St. Martin- Les Boulogne - Pas de Calais

Merville Communal Cemetery - Nord

Rue du Bacquerot No. 1 Military Cemetery, Laventie - Pas de Calais

Copyright© 2002 Bhupinder Singh ([About the author](#))