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A drawing by Paul Sarrut, a French artist, 1915

Sikhs & Their Turbans

“We shall cherish above all the memory of their example. They showed us the way, they made the first steps towards the final victory.”

— Marshal Foch, French Army

RESPECT

“The scene is one that should be retained on the Empires retina. The hosts of Indian soldiers marched through the streets of Marseilles with the population, especially the female proportion, hanging onto the arms of bewildered Sikhs and Pathans.”

The Martial races of India, Lt Gen Sir George MacMunn, 1923

FRIENDSHIP

“The English and the women of this place [France] are very pleased to see us, like opening flowers. They shake hands with our men when they disembark, and attempt to feed them from their own pocket...”

From a letter, dated 15th December 1915, written by a Sikh cavalry soldier at a Marseilles Depot.
Further Extracts from Reports made by the Censor, Indian Mails in France, British Library.

CONTRIBUTION

Major battles in France during World War I in which Sikh troops fought:

Ypres • La Bassée • Neuve Chapelle • Festubert • Loos • Givenchy • Somme

SACRIFICE

74. La Guerre Européenne 1914 — Troupes indiennes allant au front - Indian troops going at the front
J. M. T.

“In the last two world wars 83,005 turban wearing Sikh soldiers were killed and 109,045 were wounded for the freedom of Britain and the world during shell fire, with no other protection but the turban, the symbol of their faith.”

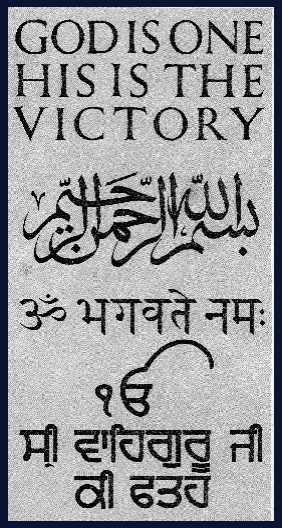
— General Sir Frank Messervy KCSI, KBE, CB,DSO

Neuve Chapelle - India's Memorial in France

On October 7, 1927 the noble Memorial at Neuve Chapelle was unveiled in France in memory of all Indian soldiers who fell on the Western Front in the Great War of 1914-1918.

It marked 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.



A tablet bears 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.

Neuve Chappelle – India’s Memorial in France 1914-1918, London, Hodder & Stoughton, 1927.

Neuve Chapelle – A Sikh soldier's legacy

In March 1915 the Allies attacked Neuve Chapelle and broke through the German front line. On the first day of the battle, British and Indian troops captured the town. Then the Germans counter-attacked with 16,000 reinforcements.

In three days' fighting, the British and Indian troops suffered 13,000 casualties. The Allies' ammunition ran out, and the troops had to retreat. 5,021 Indian soldiers - about 20 per cent of the Indian contingent - were killed in heavy fighting, and Manta Singh was injured in action after helping to save the life of an injured officer, Captain Henderson. (In the Second World War, the sons of both of these men served side by side and became lifelong friends.)

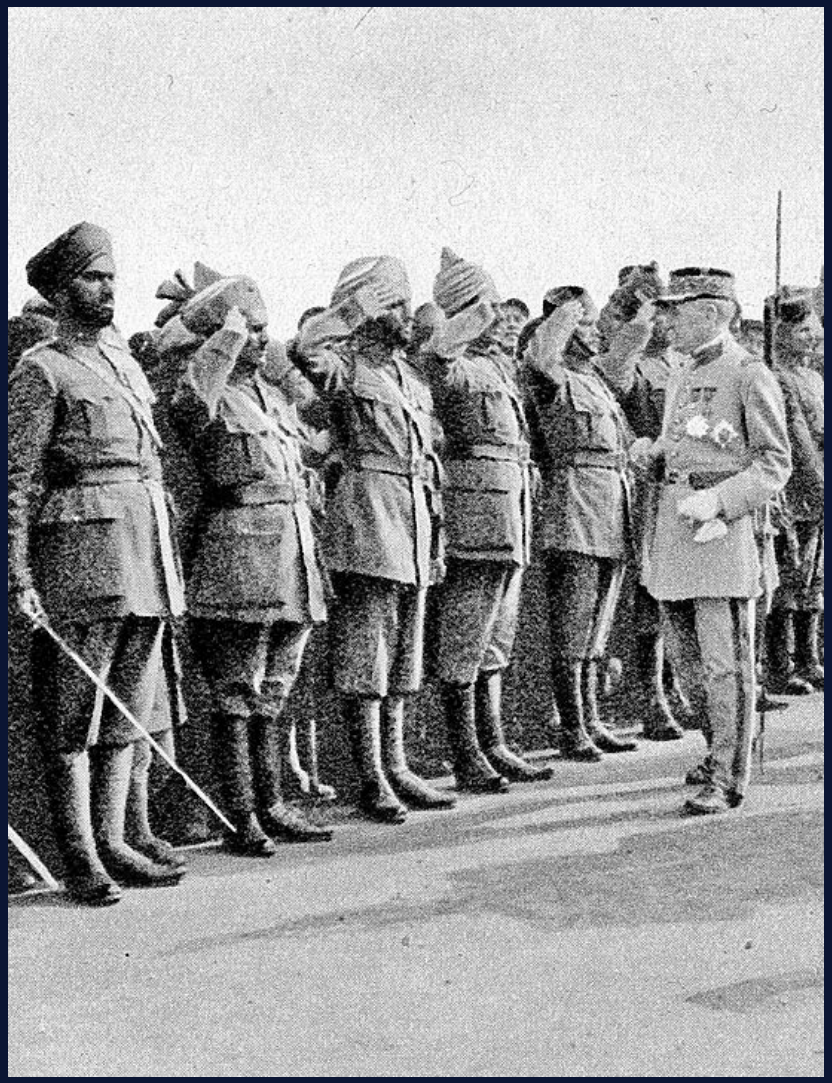
In 1993 Manta Singh's son, Lt Col Assa Singh Johal, was part of a delegation of the Undivided Indian Ex-Servicemen's Association that visited the Indian war memorial at Neuve Chapelle. Assa Singh said, "It was a moving visit of great sentimental value to us. We were able to remember and pay homage to the fallen in foreign lands."

http://www.mgtrust.org/ind1.htm

VERS LA VICTOIRE
552
HONNEUR aux ALLIÉS
HONNEUR aux SOLDATS d'AFRIQUE et des INDES

HONOUR

Neuve Chapelle – Marshall Foch’s testimony



Speaking in French, Marshal Foch told of India's effort in the Allied cause, how she had raised more than a million soldiers, how she had lost upwards of one hundred thousand men. After telling the story of the battles from the 10th to 13th March, 1915, the Marshal described how the Indian Corps opened the attack.

“The Indian Troops,” he said, “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 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 Indian Contingent, he bade them:

"Return to your homes 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 over their graves with the devotion due to all our dead. We shall cherish above all the memory of their example. They showed us the way, they made the first steps towards the final victory."

Neuve Chappelle – India’s Memorial in France 1914-1918, London, Hodder & Stoughton, 1927

Acknowledgements

The British Library

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Imperial War Museum

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MG Trust

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Cliff Parrett

This presentation was prepared by Parmjit Singh, independent researcher and co-author of Warrior Saints: Three Centuries of the Sikh Military Tradition (IB Tauris, 1999). He has recently co-edited Sicques, Tigers or Thieves: Eyewitness Accounts of the Sikhs (1606-1809) (Palgrave Macmillan, April 2004) and is working on his next book with Amandeep Singh Madra which will showcase the rich photographic history of the Sikhs and the Punjab. Any information relating to early Sikh picture sources would be welcomed. Please contact via email: psingh001@hotmail.com.