

World War I through Sikh Soldiers' Letters

To mark the occasion of 200 years of Anglo-Sikh relations, World Sikh News brings this well-researched chronicle of letters which should amaze the young generation into applause for the sheer determination of the Sikh soldiers in Europe during World War I.

The letters of Sikh soldiers project their courage, loyalty, will to win the war or die like Sikh heroes, following the Sikh tradition of martyrdom to fight against oppression. The letters narrate the conditions in which the Sikh soldiers and their compatriots had to fight. Sikh soldiers laid down their lives in thousands and they lie buried all over Europe. Significantly, most of the letters were detained and never reached their destinations. The transcripts of the original letters are kept in the India Office Library at the British Library, London.

Bhupinder Singh Holland

In Europe, the Sikhs fought in Belgium-Flanders at Ypres twice from 22 October 1914 till 31 October 1914 and from 22 April 1915 till 1st of May 1915 and in France at La Basse, Neuve Chapelle from 10 to 13 March 1915, Aubert's Ridge, Festubert, Loos on 25 September 1915, Givenchy and Somme from July 1916 to November 1916.

Guru Gobind Singh (1666-1708) the 10th master of the Sikhs revealed Khalsa in 1699. Khalsa was to be a "politically and spiritually sovereign" entity, in direct line of Waheguru, the Supreme Sovereign. Khalsa is the direct subject of Akal Purakh (God). Hence the sovereignty of Khalsa is both temporal and transcendental. Guru Gobind Singh prescribed Khanday di Pahul (Khalsa initiation ceremony) for those who wished to join Khalsa (the sovereign subjects of God) brotherhood. Thousands of Sikhs gave their lives under this spirit of the Khalsa during the times of the Guru Gobind Singh and later on it was this spirit that Khalsa fought the great Moguls in 17th and 18th century and established Khalsa Rule (Raj) under the leadership of Maharaja Ranjit Singh of Punjab.

The British had fought 8 wars against the Sikhs and they knew very well the martial spirit, war tactics and supremacy of the Khalsa army in all the battlefields. Though the Khalsa Army was banned after the close of the Second Anglo - Sikh War and the subsequent annexation of the Punjab in 1849 by unfair means (read History of the Sikhs by Dr. Harjinder Singh Dilgeer) but Sikh Army was reorganised again in 1858 and took part in all the major wars of the British including 1st and 2nd World Wars.



Sikh soldiers using gas masks while defending leper in April, 1915. Photo Courtesy Inlanders Field Museum, leper..

THEY FIGHT IN THE SKY...

What you say in your letter about not being disloyal to the Emperor and it being the religion of Sikhs to die facing the foe - all that you say is true. But if only you yourself could be here and see for yourself!

There is no fighting face to face. Guns massacre regiments sitting ten miles off. Put swords or pikes or staves in our hands and the enemy over us with like arms then indeed we should show you how to fight face to face! But if no one faces us what can we do? No one stands up to fight us. Everyone sits in a burrow underground. They fight in the sky, on the see in battleships, under the earth in mines. My friend, a man who fights upon the ground can hardly escape. You tell me to fight face to the foe. Die we must - but alas, not facing the foe! My friend,

the cannons are such that they throw a shell weighing twelve maunds (12x40 kgs) which destroys the earth five hundred paces round about where it falls.

We are in France. It is very cold country..... It is a fair country and the people are like angels. All they lack is wings..... The fighting is along a line of 300 miles. England, France, Italy, Belgium, Russia - these five are on one side; Germany, Turkey, Austria, Hungary, Bulgaria - these five on the other. The battle sways evenly balanced. None can kill the other. When it ends there will be peace. No one knows when this will be."

A Sikh wrote in letter number 163 in Gurmukhi from FPO, 13, France to Mahant Partab Das (Patiala State, Punjab) on 18th October 1915.



Sikh soldiers attacking the German trenches at leper in April 1915. From a German postcard.



Wounded Sikh soldiers in leper . October 1914. Photo Courtesy Begian Army Museum Brussels.

THE SPIRIT OF THE KHALSA

The Sikh roars like a lion on the field of battle. And yields up his life as a sacrifice. Whoever is fortunate enough to be born a Rajput. Never fears the foe in battle. He gives up all thought of worldly pleasure.

And dreams only of the battle field. He who dies on the field of battle, H is name never dies, but lives in history. He who fronts the foe boldly in battle.

Has God for his protection. Once a Sikh takes the sword in Hand, He has only one aim - Victory. This poem marked number 295 was written in Gurmukhi by Dafadar Nathan Singh (Sikh) to Sowar Paran Singh of State Cavalry, Jind State, Punjab on 18th April 1916 from 2nd Lancers, France.

GERMANS ARE STRONG

The German is very strong. His planes sail the clouds and drop shells from the sky; his mines dig up the earth and his hidden craft strike below the sea. Bombs and blinding acid are thrown from his trenches which are only 100 to 50 yards from ours. He has countless machine guns which kill the whole firing line when in attack. When he attacks we kill

A GOOD OPPORTUNITY OF SACRIFICING MY LIFE...

"The country is exceedingly pleasant. In it, India is forgotten. I do not wish the war to end soon. I should like to die in this country and I have no intention of returning to India. If you want anything, write to me. May the Holy Guru save me from India? I hope you will answer this quickly, telling me you are well. I am in great comfort as I am always away from the squadron. Tell Basant Kaur from me to look carefully after the children and have them well schooled, fed and clothed. There is no need to think of the cost. She can spend as much as she likes on them. But I have no hope of seeing them again - nor do I wish to see them for I have found a good opportunity of sacrificing my life and I hope to pay my debt with loyalty.

Letter no. 209 from Sowar Natha Singh (SIKH) to Sapuran Singh, Lyallpur District, Punjab written in Urdu from FPO 19, France on 4th January 1916

...a man who keeps a dog has to pay five rupees a month to the King

The battle is being carried on very bitterly. In the Lahore Division only 300 men are left. Some are dead, some wounded. The division is finished. Think of it - in taking 50 yards of German trench, 50,000 men are killed. When we attack they direct a terrific fire on us - thousands of men die daily. It looks as if not a

single man can remain alive on either side - then (when none is left) there will be peace. When the Germans attack they are killed in the same way. For us men it is a bad state of affairs here. Only those return from the battlefield that is slightly wounded. No one else is carried off. Even Sahib (English officers) is not lifted away. The battleground resounds with cries..... Here they are in a very bad way. In France the news is that dog churn milk in machines and look after the cattle. A man who keeps a dog has to pay five rupees a month to the King.

Do not be anxious about me. We are very well looked after. White soldiers are always besides our bed - day and night. We get very good food four times a day. We also get milk. Our hospital is in the place where the king used to have his throne (Brighton Pavilion). Every man is washed once in hot water. The King has given strict order that no trouble be given to any black man in hospital.

Men in hospital are tended like flowers and the King and Queen sometimes comes to visit them." In letter number 63, Isher Singh (Sikh, 59th Rifles) to a friend (50th Punjab), Punjab written in Gurmukhi on 1st May 1915 from Indian General Hospital, Brighton describing the war of New Chappell.

CHARDIKALA OF SIKH SOLDIERS

"You say that you have heard that the entire Indian Army has left France. This is not so. The infantry have left but the cavalry is still upholding the honour of the Government here. By the Grace of God the cavalry are flourishing like fields of Sarson (rape seed) in the spring. At the present time much rain and snow are falling and consequently the cold is very severe. The snow accumulates all day...."

Sirdar Buta Singh of Rawalpindi has sent a copy of the Granth Sahib. He has conferred a great favour on us, since we can have worship celebrated during our sojourn in a foreign land."

-Letter of Mohan Singh (Sikh) to Sirdarni Bishan Devi, Lyallpur District, Punjab. The letter number 254 is written in Urdu on 25th February 1916 from 6th Cavalry, France.



THEY DON'T GROW WEARY WHILE CARING

They take great care of us here as no one else would take except a man's mother, not even his wife. If a man falls sick at home and remain ill for a month the whole household grows weary of his illness, but these people do not grow weary. The arrangements for our food are very good because men have been selected from the regiments to look after it and every man is served by his caste-fellows.

First we suffered that the trenches were ill made but now they are very strong and there are no losses in the trenches and no hardship. Much rain falls and if you dig down a little way in the ground you come upon water. It is very

cold but we have plenty of clothing and get good rations. Our regiment has got the better of all the other regiments. They agreed to eat biscuits and European bread but our regiment refused. So now we get atta and the other regiments get biscuits - and bad (ones) at that. People told us that there was no atta in this country and we should have to eat biscuits; but, where there are inhabitants, there atta must be obtainable. Besides, there are plenty of mills.

Bir Singh (Sikh, 55th Rifles) to Ganga Singh (55 Rifles, Kohat, NWFP) wrote in letter number 98 from a Hospital in England in Gurmukhi on 17th July 1915.

MARTYR CHUR SINGH

"Chur Singh has suffered martyrdom in the war. The 47th Sikhs were charging. The Sahib (English officer) said, 'Chur Singh, you are not a Sikh of Guru Gobind Singh, (you) who sit in fear inside the trench. Chur Singh was very angry. Chur Singh gave (the) order to his company to charge. He drew his sword and went forward. A bullet came from the enemy and hit him in the mouth. So did our brother Chur Singh become a martyr. No other man was like Jamadar Chur Singh.

A sepoy of the 47th Sikhs (Sikh) wrote in Letter number 199 to a friend in Punjab from Brighton Hospital in Punjabi language on 14th December 1915.

FRANCE -THE LAND OF COLD, MILK AND A GOLDEN FUTURE

"Here (France) is very cold at present. It snows much. The little discomfort that we experience is due to cold and rain. Otherwise the country is like heaven. It rains frequently. You are, no doubt, astonished at what I say and wonder how this country can be heaven. Listen to one little thing. Here no one drinks water. When they desire to drink, either at meals or any other time, they drink the juice of apples. So many apples are produced that the people press the juice and store it in barrels, (from) which they drink throughout the year. They let us have a bottle full for two pica (paisa). All the men drink it. There is no prohibition - you may bring as much as you like inside the house. Barrels upon barrels are full of it. Moreover there are barns full of apples.

If I return alive I will tell you all about this country. You shall be staggered at all I shall tell you. It is real heaven. There is plenty of milk, but only cow's milk. The people, however, drink very little milk. They milk the cows and then they

extract the butter at the rate of a mound (40 kilo) of milk in ten minutes. The skimmed milk they give to cows, calves and pigs. The people are very honest. There is no sign of theft. Goods to the value of lakhs (hundred thousands) of rupees lie in glass houses. No one pays any regard to them. Grain, potatoes and such like things lie in the fields unguarded.

In short, the cat plays with pigeons and chicken and the dog plays with the cat and tends the sheep, churns the butter and draws a cart and guards it too. When a cow calves, they immediately take away the calf and do not let the cow see it. They rear it on skimmed milk. They milk the cow daily - two or three times daily - without the calf being present. The cows in fact do not know whether they gave birth to a calf or not. It is the golden age."

Letter number 255 from Bakshis Singh (Sikh) of Sialkot Cavalry Brigade in Gurmukhi from France on 27th February 1916 to Sher Singh, Ferozpur District, Punjab.



Maharaja Bhupinder Singh of Patiala with Belgian Generals in April 1915. Photo Courtesy Belgian Army Museum, Brussels.

WHAT IS THE NEWS BACK HOME?

Here it is said that men are being forced to enlist by order in India and they also say that plague is very rife. Write me some news of our country..... so long as the war goes on, no sound man can return to India - only those who have lost a limb can

return. In my heart I feel that I shall have to go back to the war."

Sepoy Gurdit Singh (Sikh) to his father in Amritsar District, Punjab wrote in Gurmukhi from Brighton Hospital on 6th April 1915 in letter number 48.

REGARDS FOR MAHARAJA

"And my friend, this is the photo of our King's granddaughter - he who was King of the Sikhs, Ranjit Singh. She has distributed her photo amongst Sikh brethren at the depot (Milford) on the evening of the 23rd February at five o' clock."

Written on the back of a photo of a lady friend, signed Sophia A. Duleep Singh 1916 by Kartar Singh (Sikh, 15th Sikhs) to Gurdit Singh, Raswind, Punjab from Milford - on -Sea on 24th February 1916 via letter number 253 in Gurmukhi.

Born in Amritsar, Dutch citizen Bhupinder Singh is a persevering researcher and public leader in the Netherlands engaging with the Sikh community and Dutch society. A former Accounting Analyst with IBM Netherlands, he now spends time in further exploration of Sikh linkage with Europe in the last century. He may be reached at bsingh@upcmail.nl



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