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Sowars and Sepoys in the Great War 1914-1918, bridges an important gap in the historiography of what was then known as the British Indian Empire during the First World War. Focusing on the cavalry and the infantry regiments of the British Indian army, it records their war services, battle honours and ethnic composition. A detailed record of the regimental iconography (insignia) worn by every cavalry, infantry and Gurkha regiments during that period are illustrated life size in excellent colour images.

An early chapter in the book explains the complex class structure, martial race theory, identity and the primary elements that created an effective combat regiment and more importantly how the military authorities structured Indian regiments to exploit and to reinforce a South Asian soldier’s most deeply rooted values and his sense of self. This book therefore is a significant contribution on South Asia and the First World War.

To the
SOLDIERS OF
‘UNDIVIDED’ INDIA
WHO FELL IN
THE GREAT WAR 1914-1918

I saw them—I can see them now—shivering in those early and primitive trenches, standing up to their knees in foul water. Their features composed in that mask of fatalism which gave an impression of pathos altogether terrible. Their bodies were often broken by the elements, but their souls were never conquered.

Lord Birkenhead, at the unveiling of the Neuve Chapelle Indian Army Memorial, 1927.

34th Royal Sikh Pioneers


Raised in 1887, it became 3rd Royal Battalion, 3rd Sikh Pioneers in 1923, and was disbanded in 1932. Re-raised in 1941, present designation, 3rd Battalion, The Sikh Light Infantry.

The 34th Sikh Pioneers accompanied the 3rd (Lahore) Division to France in 1914, as their divisional pioneer battalion. Expecting to be working on the construction of defences, they instead found themselves on the front line, under continuous shelling and sniping, losing nearly 200 men killed and wounded. At Festubert, they faced a direct German attack on their positions, and their trenches were lost. The following night the 34th took part in the desperate attempts to recover the lost ground. Their commanding officer was killed but the trenches were re-taken at a heavy cost of 161 killed and 105 wounded.

The Sikh Pioneers were present in several other battles of the Western front as is evident from their battle honours. Finally, in October 1915 the decision was taken to withdraw the infantry divisions of the Indian Corps and relocate them to Egypt and Mesopotamia and the 34th Sikh Pioneers went to Basra where they helped in the reconstruction of the docks. Thereafter, they were part of the force involved in the unsuccessful relief of Kut. The summer of 1917 found the 34th at Samarra engaged in the building of defences. Later they moved to Kut where they were tasked with the construction of a connecting railway.

The decision was made in 1917 to move the Meurut and Lahore Divisions to Palestine to reinforce General Allenby’s forces. The 34th then served at Suez, Surafend, Ludd, and Jerusalem where preparations were being made for the final advance. The war ended in November 1918, and 34th Sikh Pioneers were relocated to Beirut and served also in Palestine and Syria. In 1919, they were sent back to India to take part in the Third Afghan War.

A 2nd and 3rd Battalion, of the 34th Sikh Pioneers were raised during the War. The 2nd/34th served at Jammal, then Landi Kotal in 1919, employed principally in road building. The 3rd/34th Sikh Pioneers were also at Landi Kotal, and then at Waziristan. During road construction duties near Black Hill, 274 men of the regiment fought 1000 armed Mensal tribesmen. By the end of the fighting, the Mensal casualties were over 550 with the Sikhs losing some 169 men. The post at Black Hill was renamed Pioneer Piquet in honour of the men of the 3rd/34th Sikh Pioneers and the Pioneer Piquet centerpiece, made from a stone brought down from Black Hill, remains a prized piece of regimental silver in the Officers Mess of the Sikh Light Infantry at Patialagarh.
The book is authored by Swedish-Indian historian Ashok Nath, a former cavalry officer and honorary member of the 5th Royal Gurkha Rifles (Frontier Force) Association. Connected to the Department of History at Stockholm University, he is a former senior research fellow of the United Service Institution of India and currently visiting senior research fellow with the Bangladesh Institute of Peace and Security Studies. His main focus of research is South Asian conflict history and military cultures. Internationally known for his expertise on the Indian Army during the Company and Raj period (1600-1947) he is also an authority on South Asian regimental iconography.

The writing of this book is part of a series of historical studies on the history of South Asian Armies from circa 1740 to current times. His earlier book *Izzat- Historical Records and Iconography of Indian Cavalry Regiments 1750-2007*, (ISBN 978-81-002097-7-9), United Services Institution of India, New Delhi, 2008, is acclaimed as the definitive work on the subject.

For all queries or for orders relating to the book please e-mail nathfoundations@gmail.com