

PLAYING THE GAME

Garwhalis at the Truce

Soldiers recruited into the Garhwal Rifles are from the Garhwal Hills, one of the most beautiful areas of the Himalayas in India. These men are known for their hardiness, and come from an area with a long military tradition (Garhwal translates as the land of many Garhs meaning forts). The Regimental Headquarters is located in a town called Lansdowne and is named after Lord Lansdowne who founded the regiment in 1887.

When the Great War broke out, the Garhwal Rifles were immediately mobilised, and set sail to France through Karachi. On arrival, they were plunged into fierce fighting, and the 1st and 2nd Battalions lost so many men they were forced to merge. The Garhwal Rifles were involved in what is thought to be the first trench raid of the campaign at Festubert in November 1914. During the raid, Naik Darwan Singh Negi became the first Indian soldier to win a Victoria Cross. His citation read:

"For great gallantry on the night of the 23rd-24th November, near Festubert, France, when the regiment was engaged in retaking and clearing the enemy out of our trenches, and, although wounded in two places in the head, and also in the arm, being one of the first to push round each successive traverse, in the face of severe fire from bombs and rifles at the closest range."

Naik Darwan Singh Negi was not alone in his bravery. On 12th December 1914, Lance Naik Biaz Gul left his trench and crossed no-man's land under heavy fire to save a wounded comrade. He won the Indian Order of Merit for his conspicuous gallantry.

By Christmas Eve, the 1/39 and 2/39 Royal Garhwal Rifles

were in shallow trenches south east of Neuve Chapelle. The conditions which the men endured were horrific. Along the whole line the trenches were flooded and the men waded, often knee-deep and sometimes waist-deep, in freezing water and slime.

Fifty or sixty yards away across no-man's land was the 16th Regiment (3rd Westphalian Freiherr von Sparr) an elite Prussian unit whose commander was a 19-year old boy named Walther Hennes. He described in his diary what occurred that Christmas Eve:

"The activities on both sides died down and after nightfall ceased completely. We had received our mail, parcels and some Christmas trees from home. The choir of my company tuned up for some Christmas songs."

Beyond the two lines of wire, the Indians watched and listened. Their attention was caught by the lighted Christmas trees, which, as elsewhere, the Germans put in rows upon their parapets. Far from seeming exotic and strange, these flickering lights had a very familiar look. The Diwali festival is one of the most important of the Hindu year. The word Diwali, in fact, means 'a row of lights.' So when the Germans celebrated and the Indians looked on, they were reminded of home.

Conditions after Christmas were miserable in the extreme with bitter sleet and frost. The Indian troops of the Garhwal Rifles were ill equipped for the weather and suffered severely, so it was decided to relieve them on the 27th December 1914. The experience which that Christmas had shown them was that no matter what race, creed or religion, all of them shared a longing for home and peace.



Patriotic Anglo-Indian postcard, 1914. City of Westminster Archives



The Garhwal Rifles marching down La Bassée Road, August 1915. National Army Museum



Recruitment poster showing Sikh soldiers in action. National Army Museum



Naik Darwan Singh Negi VC of the First Battalion 39th Garhwal Rifles, leading round the Traverse at Festubert, France.



Naik Darwan Singh Negi (1881-1950)



Lance Naik Biaz Gul bringing in a wounded man under heavy fire, 12th December 1914



Illustrations by Michael Foreman