



The Indian Army before independence in 1947 was drawn from many of the nations that comprise South Asia – particularly modern Pakistan and India. During the Great War 1914-18 800,000 South Asians volunteered to join the army and 400,000 volunteered for non-combatant roles. 74,187 were killed. They fought on many fronts.

Expeditionary Force A served on the Western Front in Europe, from October 2014 to the end of 2015. Of over 130,000 men, almost 9,000 were killed. There's a monument to them at Neuve Chapelle in France.

Expeditionary Forces B and C served in East Africa

Expeditionary Force D, was the largest, with some 700,000 who served in Mesopotamia (modern Iraq)

Expeditionary Forces E and F were in Egypt and Palestine (covering much of modern Near East)

Expeditionary Force G served at Gallipoli, although it has been overshadowed by the ANZACs – the Australia and New Zealand Army Corps

In the Second World War the Indian Army, which expanded from peacetime 200,000 to 2.5 million, was the largest ever volunteer army.

This article concentrates on three Great war Pakistan-born recipients of the highest award for gallantry – Pakistan heroes.

The first Indian Army VC – Khudadad Khan

Khudadad Khan was born on 20 October 1888 in the Punjab, in what is now Pakistan, to a family of Pathans who came originally from the North West Frontier, bordering Afghanistan.

He served in the First World War with the 129th Baluchis, and was the first soldier of South Asia origin to be awarded the Victoria Cross.

In October 1914, Khan, a machine gunner with the Lahore Division, arrived in France and was among 20,000 Indian troops sent to the front line to help the exhausted British Expeditionary Force (BEF) stop the Germans from capturing the strategic ports of Boulogne in France and Nieuwpoort in Belgium.

During what became later known as the First Battle of Ypres, the 129th Baluchis faced the advancing Germans in the village of Hollebeke in Belgium under terrible condition; waterlogged trenches, insufficient hand grenades and barbed wire, and gaps in the line due to a shortage of soldiers. In fact, the 129th Baluchis were outnumbered five to one. The Germans attacked on 30 October, and many Indian soldiers were killed or wounded.

Khudadad Khan's machine gun crew, along with one other, carried on fighting until they were overrun by Germans and everyone was bayoneted or shot. Khan was the only survivor. He pretended to be dead and then managed to crawl back to his regiment under the cover of darkness.

His citation reads: On 31st October, 1914, at Hollebeke, Belgium, the British Officer in charge of the detachment having been wounded, and the other gun put out of action by a shell, Sepoy Khudadad, though himself wounded, remained working his gun until all the other five men of the gun detachment had been killed. The bravery of Khan and his fellow Baluchis gave the Allies enough time for British and Indian reinforcements to arrive and stop the German army from reaching the vital ports.

He was treated for his wounds at a hospital in Brighton and was later decorated with the Victoria Cross by King George V at Buckingham Palace. Khudadad Khan continued to serve in the Indian Army, and he died in Pakistan in 1971.

There's a statue of him outside the Pakistan Army Museum in Rawalpindi

Some of his descendants now live in Leeds

Mir Dast

Mir Dast was born on 3 December 1874 in Maidan Valley, Tirah, in the North West Frontier area of Pakistan.

Aged 20, he joined the British Indian Army in 1894 and served in the North-West Frontier and Waziristan before the First World War. He arrived in France in March 1915 as part of a large contingent of Indian soldiers to fill the gaps left by the many soldiers who had already been injured or killed. He was a Jemadar (equivalent to a Lieutenant) attached to the 57th Wilde's Rifles, 7th Brigade of the Lahore Division, when he was awarded the Victoria Cross for his bravery on 26 April, in the Second Battle of Ypres.

His Lahore Division were ordered to launch a counter-attack with the French against the Germans on 26 April, and despite severe Allied losses, Mir Dast and some others managed to get close to the German trenches. The Germans then released chlorine gas, and many soldiers

retreated in confusion. Mir Dast was among a small number of British and Indian troops who stayed and held their position until nightfall when they were ordered to withdraw.

His citation explains further: For most conspicuous bravery and great ability at Ypres on 26th April 1915, when he led his platoon with great gallantry during, the attack, and afterwards collected various parties of the regiment (when no British Officers were left) and kept them under his command until the retirement was ordered. Jemadar Mir Dast subsequently on this day displayed remarkable courage in helping to carry eight British and Indian Officers into safety, whilst exposed to very heavy fire.

Mir Dast himself was wounded and sent for treatment to the Brighton Pavilion, which had become a hospital. George V presented him with his Victoria Cross in the grounds of the pavilion.

He died in 1945 in Peshawar.

Shahamad Khan

Shahamad Khan was a Punjabi Muslim who was born on 1 July 1879, in Rawalpindi (now part of Pakistan). He served as a Naik, (the equivalent to a corporal) in the 89th Punjabis (now 1st Battalion the Baloch Regiment, Pakistan Army).

Khan was awarded the Victoria Cross for most conspicuous bravery in Mesopotamia (now present-day Iraq) on 12 to 13 April 1916.

His citation explained: He was in charge of a machine gun section in an exposed position, in front of and covering a gap in our new line, within 150 yards of the enemy's entrenched position. He beat off three counter attacks and worked his gun single-handed after all his men, except two belt-fillers, had become casualties. For three hours he held the gap under very heavy fire while it was being made secure. When his gun was knocked out by hostile fire he and his two belt-fillers held their ground with rifles till ordered to withdraw. With three men sent to assist him he then brought back his gun,

ammunition, and one severely wounded man unable to walk. Finally, he himself returned and removed all remaining arms and equipment except two shovels. But for his great gallantry and determination our line must have been penetrated by the enemy.

He later achieved the rank of Subedar (equivalent of a Captain). Shahamad Khan died in 1947 in his ancestral village of Takhti, Pakistan.

It is to poets we often turn to crystallise our remembrance after death, including more 160,000 from South Asia in 2 world wars.

Sir Muhammed Iqbal from Pakistan, whose poetry in the Urdu language is considered among the greatest of the twentieth century, wrote in one of his most famous poems

Man's spirit does not know annihilation;
It may disappear from sight, but is not obliterated.
The apparel of existence is turned to ashes by the flames of grief;

This fire is put out by the water of that pleasant feeling.
Ah! The suppression of lamentation is not the silence of indifference.

It is awareness that brings consolation, not forgetfulness.

So many paid from South Asia paid the ultimate price of war alongside soldiers from around the world. They have a unique place in the UK commemoration of sacrifice.

The Kohima Epitaph or Exhortation is said at Remembrance events before the Last Post is played and the Silence begins.

It is an extract from a poem written by Robert Laurence Binyon called "For the Fallen", composed in September 1914, just a few weeks after the outbreak of the First World War.

**"They shall grow not old, as we that are left grow old,
Age shall not weary them, nor the years condemn.
At the going down of the sun, and in the morning,
We will remember them."**

Response: "We will remember them."

This article is the research undertaken for Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow on South Asia Global TV with Robin Ashby.