

Subedar Khudadad Khan VC (1888-1971)

First Indian to be awarded the Victoria Cross



Figure 1. Khudadad Khan proudly wears his Victoria Cross (on the far left of his row of medals) © USI-CAFHR

The Victoria Cross was instituted in 1856 and is awarded for most conspicuous bravery, pre-eminent act of valour, self-sacrifice or extreme devotion to duty in the presence of the enemy.

Indians were not eligible for the Victoria Cross until December 1911, when King George V decided it could

be conferred upon men of the Indian Army.

During the Great War, the Victoria Cross was conferred on 11 men of the Indian Army.¹ The very first of these Indian-born soldiers to win the VC was Khudadad Khan.

Early years

Khudadad Khan was born in October 1888 in present-day Pakistan. His father was a Pathan. Pathans are Muslim tribesmen who mainly inhabit Afghanistan, especially the border region with India.

Recruitment

Possibly for the sake of regular pay and a chance of honour and glory, Khudadad Khan enlisted in the Indian Army as a Sepoy (private) in the 129th Duke of Connaught's Own Baluchis.

On the Western Front

The 129th Baluchis was one of the first units of the Indian Army Corps to see

¹ This number comprises two Indian officers, four non-commissioned officers and five men.

action on the Western Front during the Great War. In October 1914, almost immediately after arriving in France, their regiment was amongst 20,000 Indian soldiers sent to the front line to help the troops of the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) who were exhausted and had lost many men.

They were needed to prevent the advancing Germans from capturing vital ports where the BEF'S supplies of food and ammunition arrived from England across the Channel.



Figure 2. Men of the 129th Baluchis in a front line trench on the outskirts of Wytschaete, October 1914 © IWM Q 60743

Heroism

On 30 October, Khudadad Khan was serving as a machine gunner when the

well-equipped Germans attacked the village of Hollebeke, near Ypres in Belgium.

The Baluchis faced appalling conditions: shallow waterlogged trenches that offered little protective cover, a lack of hand grenades² and barbed wire, and a dire shortage of soldiers to man the defensive line. They were also outnumbered five to one.

The Germans pounded the Allied forces with endless artillery fire resulting in the death of many killed and wounded Baluchis.

Khudadad Khan's machine-gun team, along with one other, fought on, preventing the Germans from making the final breakthrough.

However, matters took a turn for the worse when Captain F.F. Dill, who was in charge of the detachment, fell wounded in the head.

Soon after, the other gun was disabled by a shell. Khudadad Khan and his team led by Havildar Ghulam Muhammad continued to operate the

² The Baluchis had none, so improvised with explosives in jam tins.

remaining gun, holding back the Germans for as long as they could.

Eventually Khudadad Khan's own team was over-run. All the gunners were killed by bullets or bayonets except the badly wounded Khudadad Khan.

He pretended to be dead until the attackers had gone on – then, despite his wounds, managed to make his way back to what remained of his regiment at night.³

The actions of the Baluchis had held up the Germans long enough for other Indian and British troops to get to the area and halt the attack. The ports remained in Allied hands.

This action came to be known as the Battle of Ypres.

³ The 129th Baluchis suffered a staggering 3,585 casualties out of the 4,447 men who served with it in the First World War.