

Lance Naik Kulbir Thapa (1889-1956)

First Gurkha to win the VC



Figure 1. Rifleman Kulbir Thapa VC (USI-CAFHR).

Early Life

Kulbir Thapa was born on 15 December 1886 in a village called Palpa in Nepal. Following the tradition of the Nepalese people, he enlisted in the 3rd Queen Alexandra's Own Gurkha Rifles.

When War Broke Out

On 25 September 1915, Lance Naik Kulbir Thapa found himself in Manquissart, France. His battalion was about to enter into a diversionary attack, which was to be the opening move of the Battle of Loos.

Winning the VC

He was to make history by becoming the first Gurkha to win a Victoria Cross. This is even more remarkable considering he had never been under fire before the incident.

After preliminary use of gas, artillery bombardment and a mine under the German position, the Allied infantry assault began. Kulbir Thapa was in one of the leading companies, many of whom were killed trying to breach the German wire under cover of thick smoke.

He made it through but was wounded and stranded on the German side of the line. Though alone, he began to dig a firing position intending to hold his

ground till the next wave moved forward.

Nearby, he noticed a badly wounded soldier of the 2nd Battalion, Leicester Regiment so went to him and although urged by the British soldier to save himself, stayed with him all day and night, comforting him with what little English he knew and killing any Germans who approached.

On the morning of the 26th, there was a thick fog. Seizing his chance he picked up the wounded Englishman and carried him over the German trench and through the virtually uncut wire.

Placing the man in a shell crater for cover, he went back over the German trench to look for more Germans. Instead, he came across two badly wounded men of his own regiment. One at a time, Thapa carried these two men back to the lines of the 39th Garhwalis who were holding the British front line at this point.

Finally in broad daylight, under heavy fire and badly wounded, he returned once more to 'no man's land' and rescued the wounded Leicester.

This act of faith and courage had by now attracted a good deal of attention, and when he emerged from his trench for the third time with one more wounded comrade over his shoulder, the German soldiers actually clapped their hands to encourage the Gurkha on. Only this time, the Gurkha walked right across the 'no man's land' back to his own side.



Figure 2. 'No Man's Land - once a forest in "Flander's Fields"' (Library of Congress - Public Domain)

Recognition

It is believed that the German High Command, in recognition of that exemplary courage and self-sacrifice, wrote a citation offering to honour the anonymous Gurkha.

The British Army would have nothing to do with German sentiments, but when the story reached London by word of mouth, King George V expressed a desire to see the Gurkha soldier himself in person.

So, Kulbir Thapa was ushered into the Buckingham Palace, where, in a rare expression of royal prerogative, the King Emperor personally decorated him with British Empire's highest military honour, the Victoria Cross, for his heroic deeds.

Post-War Years

He survived the war and retired having eventually earned the title of Havildar (Seargent).