

# Subedar Manta Singh (1870-1915)

## *Sikh soldier wounded in France and cremated in Brighton*



**A Sikh Havildar (Seargent). This gives some idea of what Manta Singh would have looked like. © IWM Q 24754**

### **Early career**

Manta Singh was born in 1870 in the Punjab. As soon as he left school, Manta Singh joined the 15th Ludhiana Sikhs in 1906. British officers prized Sikh soldiers, along with Nepalese Gurkhas, as coming

from the so-called 'martial races'. For Manta Singh and his comrades, the army was a good career option and one they took up willingly. Being educated, he rose up to the rank of Subedar (Captain), above the ranks of most and just below that of the European officers in the army.

### **Over to France**

At the start of the First World War, Manta Singh's regiment was sent to reinforce the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) fighting in France.

In the official war diaries of Manta Singh's regiment, the 15th Sikhs, it is evident that when they first arrive in France, the tone is pretty cheery:

'This is September 26th. The march through Marseilles was one of great enthusiasm. Most enthusiastic reception extended to regiment throughout the journey. Baskets of fruits etc. pressed on the men on every possible occasion.'

## **The Harsh Reality**

Like all new troops on the Western Front, Manta Singh and his regiment were unprepared for the dank trenches and unrelenting terror of industrialised warfare. Once they reached the front, their letters home revealed their anxieties:

‘For God’s sake, don’t come, don’t come, don’t come to this war in Europe...’

‘Tell my brother not to enlist. If you have any relatives, my advice is don’t let them enlist...’

‘Cannons, machine guns, rifles and bombs are going day and night, just like the rains of the month of July and August...’

‘Those who’ve escaped so far are like the few grains uncooked in a pot.’

By late autumn of 1914, one in every three soldiers under British command in France was from India. One of these soldiers was Manta Singh.

### **Battle of Neuve Chapelle**

After long months of trench warfare, in March 1915 Manta Singh's regiment prepared to engage in the first major British offensive on the Western Front, the Battle of Neuve Chapelle.

General John French, commander-in-chief of the BEF in France at this time, planned to take the village of Neuve Chapelle, which formed a German salient (bulge) in the British line, and if possible to take Aubers Ridge, a modest but nevertheless important observation post overlooking the plain. The French also thought it might well be possible to get behind the German front and threaten the defences of nearby Lille.

On 10 March four divisions, comprising 40,000 men (half of whom were Indian Army soldiers), gathered on a sector of the front, which was only three kilometres wide. The infantry attack was preceded by heavy but concentrated shelling from 342 guns, guided by reconnaissance planes of the Royal Flying Corps.

In thirty-five minutes, the bombardment consumed more shells than the British Army used in the whole of the Boer War fifteen years earlier, a clear example of the growing industrialization of the Great War.

After an initial success, in a matter of hours, the British became paralysed by poor communications and a lack of munitions, and their advance ground to a halt.

Bringing in 16,000 reinforcements from Lille, Crown Prince Rupert of Bavaria launched a counter-attack on 12 March. British soldiers attempting to take Aubers Ridge came up against undamaged barbed wire entanglements and their losses were enormous; in three days of fierce fighting the allied forces suffered 13,000 casualties, including over 4,000 Indian soldiers.

## **Heroism**

It was in this chaotic field of battle that the 15th Ludhiana Sikhs fought. Manta Singh witnessed an English comrade and friend, Lieutenant (later Captain) George Henderson, suffering serious injury and near death.

Manta Singh pushed him to safety in a wheelbarrow he found in no-man's land but he himself was severely injured while carrying out this selfless rescue under gunfire.

## **Dr Blighty**

Manta Singh and his wounded comrades were sent to Brighton for hospitalisation and treatment.

It was in December 1914 that the first Indian patients began to arrive at Brighton. The town's most famous hospital was the Royal Pavilion, which in

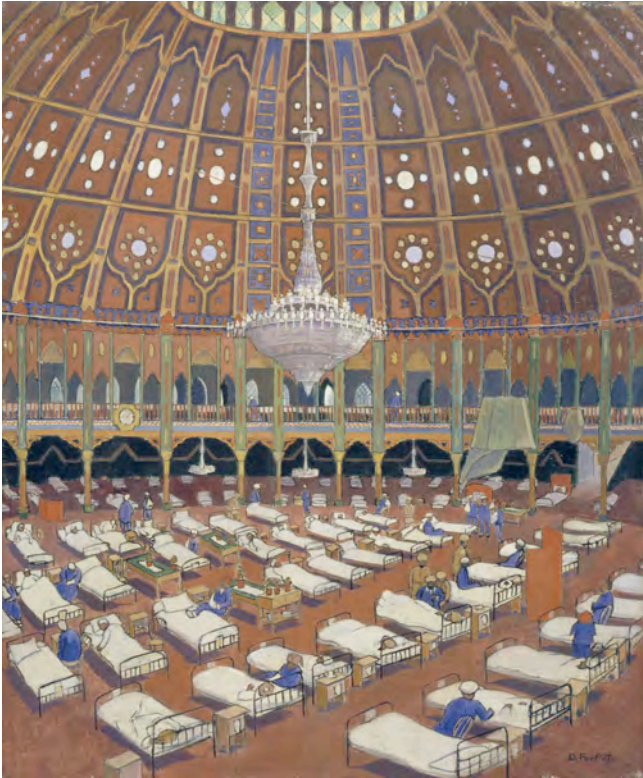
1914 was a museum. It was rapidly adapted as a hospital for Indian sick and wounded from France and Flanders.

Around 12,000 Indians convalesced in Brighton and seventy-four died in the town. This number may at first glance seem unfeasibly small, but most deaths from wounds occurred at Field Ambulances and Casualty Clearing Stations within the proximity of the front line. The men at Brighton had survived these facilities and also voyages and treatment on hospital ships and ambulances before completing their treatment and convalescing here.<sup>1</sup>

Of course, in some cases later complications with their wounds caused death; others died of sickness, but all in all the small number of dead speaks well for the care provided in the three Brighton hospitals.

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<sup>1</sup> They would typically begin their journey on one of the six ambulance trains plying back and forth from Boulogne and Le Havre (200 miles away), where the Hospital Ships were waiting, to Rouen and Bailleul picking up 400 patients at a time from the clearing hospitals close to the Western Front.



**An interior view of the Brighton Pavillion. The floor is filled with rows of metal framed hospital beds covered with white sheets. Many of the beds are occupied with soldiers resting; other soldiers sit by their beds dressed in blue uniform. By Douglas Fox-Pitt, 1919 © IWM ART 323**

### **Manta Singh's last days**

A certificate signed by the Chief Resident Officer at the Kitchener Indian Hospital in Brighton lists Manta Singh's wounds as 'one, gunshot wound, left leg, two, gangrene of leg and toxæmia.'

Manta Singh had one and possibly both of his legs amputated, but unfortunately succumbed to his injuries and died a few weeks later on 15 March 1915.

His body was taken to the South Downs and cremated in the open air and his ashes were scattered in the sea.

### **Memorial to the dead**

The Chattri ('umbrella' in Hindi, Punjabi and Urdu) on the South Downs outside Brighton is a unique memorial that stands in memory of all Indian soldiers who died during the First World War. It is particularly associated with the fifty-three Hindu and Sikh soldiers who died in hospitals in Brighton during 1914-15 and whose remains were cremated at this spot.

### **Tradition, Friendship & Remembrance**

Manta Singh and the injured man he rescued, Captain Henderson, had become brothers-in-arms.

Henderson survived the war and ensured that Manta Singh's son, Assa Singh (1909-2003), was taken care of and he encouraged him to join the Sikh Regiment like his father before him. Assa Singh developed a friendship with Captain Henderson's son, Robert Henderson, and both actually served together in the Second World War. To this day the two families have remained close friends.

Quotations taken from War Diary - 15th Sikhs, which is kept by The National Archives