

Sepoy Mohan Singh

Sikh bomber immortalised in silver



Figure 1. 'The Sikh Bomber', silver statuette of Mohan Singh, 14th King George's Own Ferozepore Sikhs, preparing to throw a grenade, 1915 © National Army Museum

This dramatic silver statuette shows Sepoy Mohan Singh in the act of hurling a grenade during the Gallipoli campaign of 1915.

Recruitment

Over time, the 14th King George's Own Ferozepore Sikhs regiment recruited Sikhs who were primarily from Punjab's agriculturalist community. Regarded by army recruiters as the most important of the Punjab 'races',¹ the Sikh agriculturalist was considered 'par excellence, the husbandman, the peasant, and the revenue payer of the province.'²

The military establishment took a particular interest in the Jat Sikh's physical appearance and attributes. In the words of one British recruitment officer who had studied them in some detail, they had:

always been famous for their fine physique and are surpassed by no race in India for high-bred looks, smartness, and soldierly bearing.

¹ This was a mistaken view propounded by the Martial Races Theory. The Sikhs are not actually a race, but people from different backgrounds tied together by their belief in the teachings of their Gurus.

² A. E. Barstow, *The Sikhs: An Ethnology* (1928; reprint Delhi: Low Price Publications, 1994), p. 151.

It is likely that Mohan Singh came from this background. His entry point into an infantry the regiment was as a Sepoy (Private).

There were several motivators for Sikh soldiers to encourage their sons and grandsons to join the ranks and to continue their long military tradition. The most significant were their loyalty to the British Raj and the very real prospects of economic and social advancement.

Keeping Up Appearances

Mohan Singh's large, distinctive turban and peculiarly rolled beard embodies the popular image of the stalwart Sikh soldier.

The Sikh soldier is easily distinguished by the voluminous turban he winds about his head. He does not trim his beard, which he twists up in a roll and ties over his ears, and which, when uncurled and left to hang as nature intended it to do, falls over his breast. When he takes off his turban it is discovered that his hair has never been cut, and his long locks are coiled in a knot on top of his head, held in place by a small comb which his religion bids him wear. He is usually a tall, broad-

*shouldered man and takes gigantic strides when he walks.*³

When War Broke Out: Gallipoli Campaign

The 14th King George's Own Ferozepore Sikhs played a conspicuous role in the campaign, which lasted from April 1915 to January 1916 and ended in an allied defeat and evacuation.



Figure 2 Men of the 14th Sikhs in the trenches at Gallipoli, 1915 © National Army Museum

At the Third Battle of Krithia on 4 June 1915 the 14th Sikhs was virtually wiped out, losing 379 men out of 514 and 80% of their officers as they fought their way through enemy defences at Gully Ravine.

³ Saint Nihal Singh, *India's Fighters: Their Mettle, History & Services to Britain* (London, 1914), p. 77.

Despite having lost three-quarters of their troops in a single day, they took three lines of trenches and managed to hold them all day.

Writing to the commander-in-chief in India a few weeks after the event, General Sir Ian Hamilton paid noble tribute to the heroism of all ranks of the 14th Sikhs:

In the highest sense of the word extreme gallantry has been shown by this fine Battalion... In spite of the tremendous losses there was not a sign of wavering all day. Not an inch of ground was given up and not a single straggler came back... The ends of the enemy's trenches leading into the ravine were found to be blocked with the bodies of Sikhs and of the enemy who died fighting at close quarters, and the glacis slope is thickly dotted with the bodies of these fine soldiers all lying on their faces as they fell in their steady advance on the enemy. The history of the Sikhs affords many instances of their value as soldiers, but it may be safely asserted that nothing finer than the grim valour and steady discipline displayed by them on the 4th June has ever been done by soldiers of the Khalsa. Their devotion to duty and their splendid loyalty

to their orders and to their leaders make a record their nation should look back upon with pride for many generations.

After the war

Since Mohan Singh does not appear in the CWGC database of soldiers killed in action, it is likely he survived the war and returned to his home in Punjab to be reunited with his family.