

15th Ludhiana Sikhs during the First World War

Introduction

This article can be read in the context of the Senussi Uprising, and as background information for the units that participated in the suppression of the Senussi Uprising in 1915-16.

During the First World War, the regiment was deployed on the Western Front, in Egypt and on the North-West border. The regiment's combat element was its 1st Battalion; a 2nd Battalion existed from 1918 to 1921, but as far as is known did not see combat.



Regimental Badge

*2nd Bn., 11th Sikh Regiment
(Ludhiana Sikhs), 1922.*

From Source 1.

- 1914-15: France
- 1915-16: Egypt
- 1916-18: India

15th Ludhiana Sikhs

15th Ludhiana Sikhs - Historical Summary

1846: The Regiment of Ludhiana 1861:

16th Regiment of Bengal Native Infantry 1861: 15th

Regiment of Bengal Native Infantry 1864: 15th (Ludhiana)

Regiment of Bengal Native Infantry 1885: 15th Regiment of Bengal

Infantry (Ludhiana Sikhs) 1901: 15th (Ludhiana) Sikh Infantry

1903: 15th Ludhiana Sikhs 1922: 2nd

Battalion, 11th Sikh Regiment

(Ludhiana Sikhs)



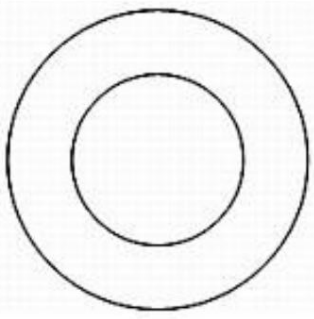
*15th Ludhiana Sikhs, The Color Party. Drawn by AC Lowett, 1910.
From a postcard published by the National Army Museum, London.*

The soldiers are *Jat Sikhs*. 1)

For the field uniform in 1914, the badges were worn at the front of the turban, in the style of the two standard bearers on the plate.

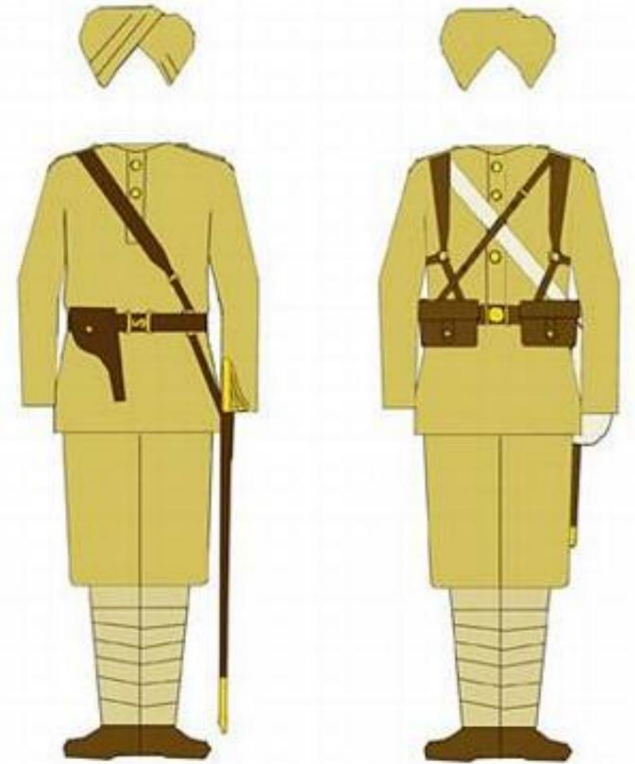


*Principle Sketch 2) - 15th Ludhiana Sikhs -
Regimental Badge, Native Officers.*



*Principle Sketch - 15th Ludhiana Sikhs
- Regimental Badge, Personnel.*

Uniforms



*15th Bengal Infantry.
From The Sudan 1883-85 (Perry Miniatures).*



*Officer, 15th (Ludhiana)
Sikh Infantry, on arrival at
Southampton for the Coronation of King
Edward VII, 1902.
From Sikh Memories.*

The uniforms worn during World War I were not unlike the field uniforms worn during the Sudan campaign.

However, the men's leather clothing was replaced by a new model in 1903, where the waist belt's cartridge pouches had been replaced by two smaller ones on either side of the buckle. The cartridge pouches were supplemented with a bandolier with 5 cartridge pouches.

France, 1914-15



15th Ludhiana Sikhs, photographed in France, September 1914.

From a simultaneous postcard.

The 15th (Ludhiana) Sikhs was one of the oldest Sikh battalions in the Indian Army and was the first Indian combat unit of the Indian Expeditionary Corps to land at Marseilles on 26 September 1914.

The battalion was transferred in 1915 to another of the Lahore Division's [3](#) (later [3rd](#) (Lahore) Division) brigades.

15th Ludhiana Sikhs, September 1914

15th Ludhiana Sikhs, March 1915

Jullundur Brigade (*Major General PM Carnegie*)

Sirhind Brigade (*Brigadier-General WG Walker, VC*)

- 1st Battalion, Manchester Regiment 15th
 - Ludhiana Sikhs 47th
 - Sikhs 59th
 - Scinde Rifles (Frontier Force)
- 1st Battalion, Highland Light Infantry 4th (Extra Reserve) [4](#) Battalion, [King's](#) (Liverpool Regiment)
 - 1st Battalion, 1st King George's Own Gurkha Rifles 1st
 - Battalion, 4th Gurkha Rifles

On the Western Front, the battalion took part in, among other things in battles at Givenchy, Neuve Chapelle, Ypres and Festubert.

The battalion commander, Lieutenant Colonel JLR Gordon, was badly wounded during the fighting at La Bassée canal on 25 October 1914, and he did not return to his battalion until a year later.

A Victoria Cross

During the Battle of Festubert [5](#) (15 to 27 May 1915), one of several failed attempts to break through the German lines in 1915, Lieutenant John George Smyth, 15th Ludhiana Sikhs, won a Victoria Cross.



Lieutenant Smyth's VC action.

From John George Smyth (Wikipedia) [6](#). [__](#)

Lieutenant Smyth was the battalion's "hand grenade officer" and on 18 May 1915 was tasked with bringing forward supplies of hand grenades to an exposed post in a trench that had been partially captured from the enemy.

He selected the 10 strongest soldiers from the 4th Company and went forward.

The terrain was difficult to access and the advance took place partly through trenches filled with dead and wounded, friends as well as enemies, and through a small stream where you had to wade in water up to your chest. The patrol brought two boxes, each containing 48 hand grenades.

The enemy fire was fierce and it took a toll on the patrol. Only Lieutenant Smyth and Sepoy Lal Singh reached the objective safely, carrying a box of hand grenades. Immediately afterwards Lal Singh was hit and died instantly.

Lieutenant Smyth was awarded the Victoria Cross for his deed, while the Indian soldiers were awarded other high honours.

The battalion suffered heavy losses several times, and after the (second) Battle of Ypres, the battalion was reduced to 4 British officers, 11 Indian officers and 369 Indian non-commissioned officers and privates.

Egypt, 1915-16

On 17 August 1915, the 15th Sikhs leave France, perhaps with a strength figure similar to the above. The battalion is initially deployed in the defense of the Suez Canal, at Ismalia.

Two double companies of Sikhs from the Patiala Imperial Service Regiment [7](#) (I estimate about 350 men) are added to the battalion to replace the losses in France, as are a number of English [8](#) and Indian officers also added. (Source 5)

Per 20 November 1915 the battalion becomes part of the Western Frontier Force and by this time Lieutenant Colonel JLR Gordon has returned as commander of the battalion.

The battalion is the only unit of the Western Frontier Force that has combat experience and therefore forms the backbone of this force. General Maxwell emphasizes the battalion's importance to the operations in his official report (Source 5), which is repeated in the official history's mention of the battalion (Source 4).

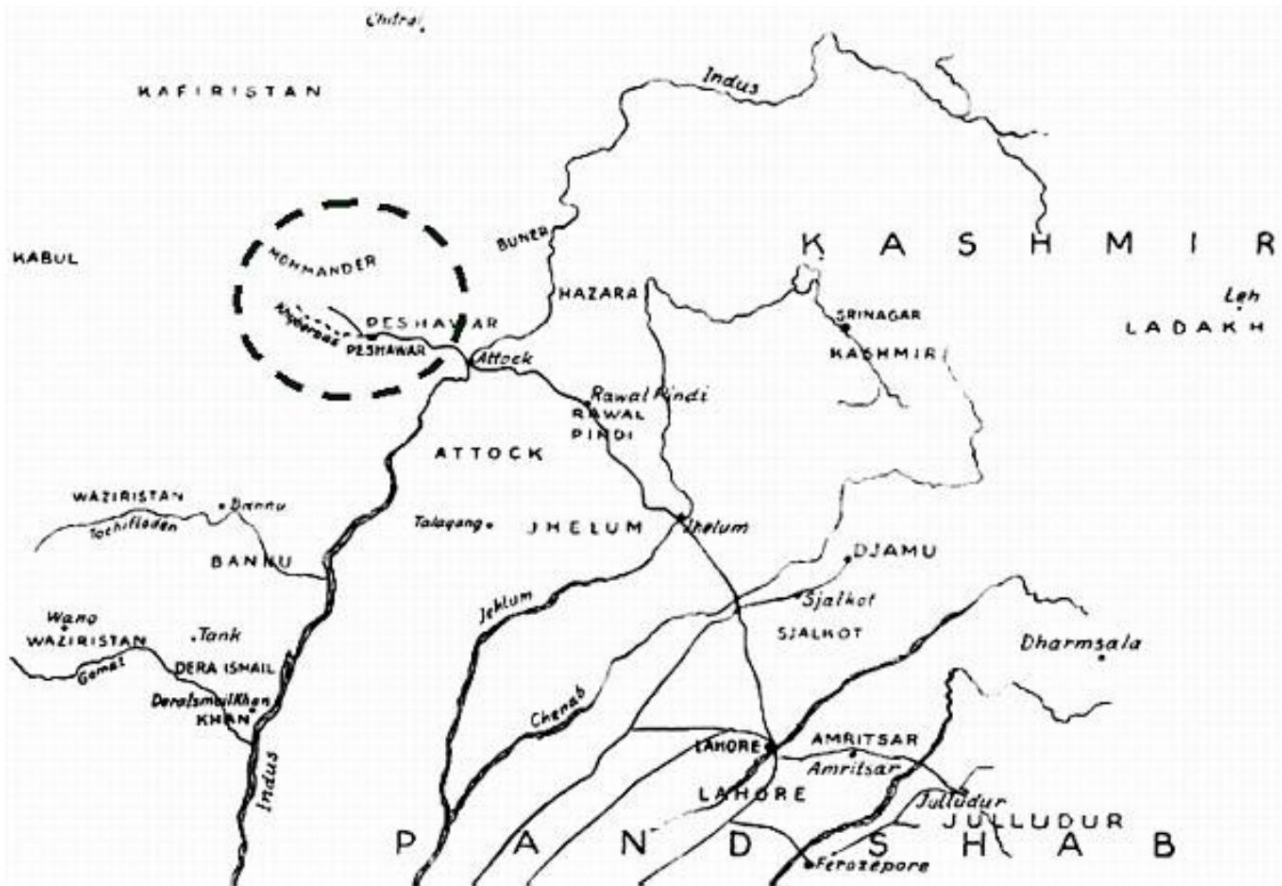
As part of the Western Frontier Force, the battalion takes part in the skirmishes at:

- Wadi Senab, 11 and 13 December 1915
- Wadi Majid, 25 December 1915
- Halazin, 23 January 1916.

The Northwest Frontier, 1916-18

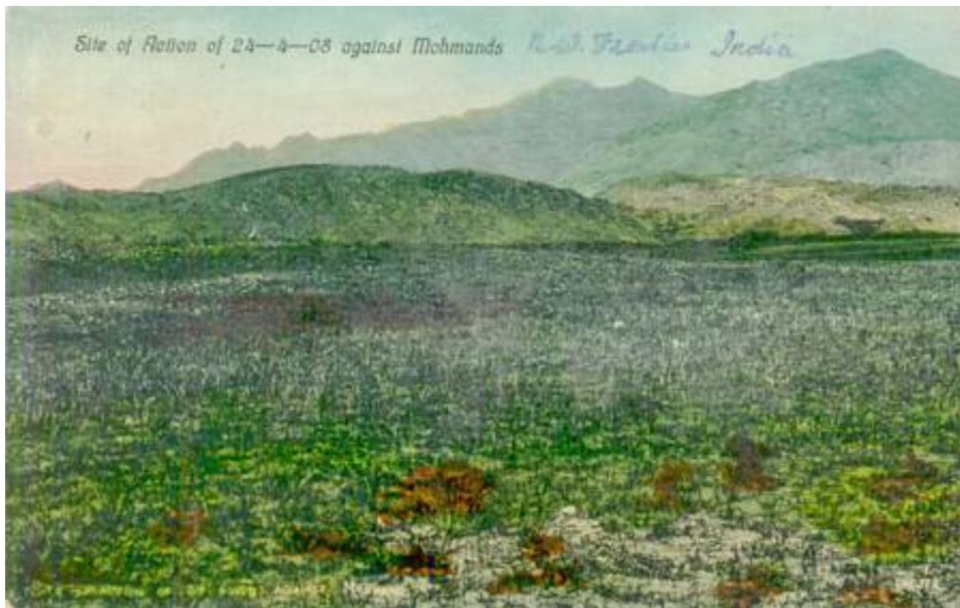
The battalion is then ordered to India, and on 28 January 1916 the first parts of the battalion leave Mersa Matruh. The battalion remained in India for the rest of the war, and was, among other things, deployed on the North West Frontier to keep the Mohmander tribes in check.

The Mohmands, who are Pashtuns, inhabit an area covering parts of Afghanistan and parts of the then North-West Frontier Province. The Mohmands had caused problems for the Indian government on previous occasions, most recently in 1908 when several expeditions were sent into the tribal areas located northwest of Peshawar (now in Pakistan), which was also one of the targets of the Mohmand attacks in 1915.



Map 1: Northwest India, ca. 1916.

From Source



Site of Action of 24 April 1908 against the Mohmands, North-West Frontier, India.

From a simultaneous postcard.

The areas are today referred to as the Mohmand Agency, which is administered by the central government of Pakistan.

See a detailed description of the areas and the population on the website Mohmand Agency (Federally Administered Tribal Area, Pakistan)

Various religious fanatics now again roused the Mohmands to battle, offering them great opportunities of plunder, and at the same time promising access to Paradise, should they fall in battle ...

The unrest in the area lasted from April 1915 to the end of 1917. The Defense of India (Source 6) gives a good impression of the conditions. 9) —

During 1916, a number of barrier lines with barbed wire fences and fortified positions were constructed in an attempt to contain the Mohmand incursions from the tribal areas.

21st Lancers attack at Hafiz Kor

The subsequently best-known skirmish during the campaign against the Mohmands took place a few months before the 15th Sikhs returned to India, and took place on 5 September 1915, where, among other things, the English cavalry regiment 21st (Empress of India's) Lancers made an attack at the town of Hafiz Kor (in north-west Pakistan).

FA McKenzie describes the attack as follows in Source 6:

"On the morning of September 5th the tribesmen, who had come down from the hills by the Kuhn Pass, advanced right in the open nearly down to the Shabkadar village. As they approached, the British howitzers and field-guns opened on them, but the tribesmen kept on, threatening our left. Thereupon two squadrons of the 21st Lancers, one squadron of the 14th Lancers, and one section of a mounted battery of the Royal Horse Artillery moved out to meet them.

Our troops moved out around Shabkadar village and occupied some foothills to the north. The Mohmands, ignoring the Indian Cavalry, concentrated their fire upon the British Lancers. The gallant 21st were eager to distinguish themselves, for it was then within two days of the anniversary of their great charge at Omdurman in 1898. The Mohmands were entrenched in their sangars and in the nullahs (deep, dry ditches) along the foot of the hills. The 21st Lancers charged full against a large force, went through them, and turned straight again into a dense mass of Mohmands."



21st Lancers - Private C. Hull saving the life of Captain GED Learoyd, 5 September 1915.
From a plate seen for sale at MILPRINTS.

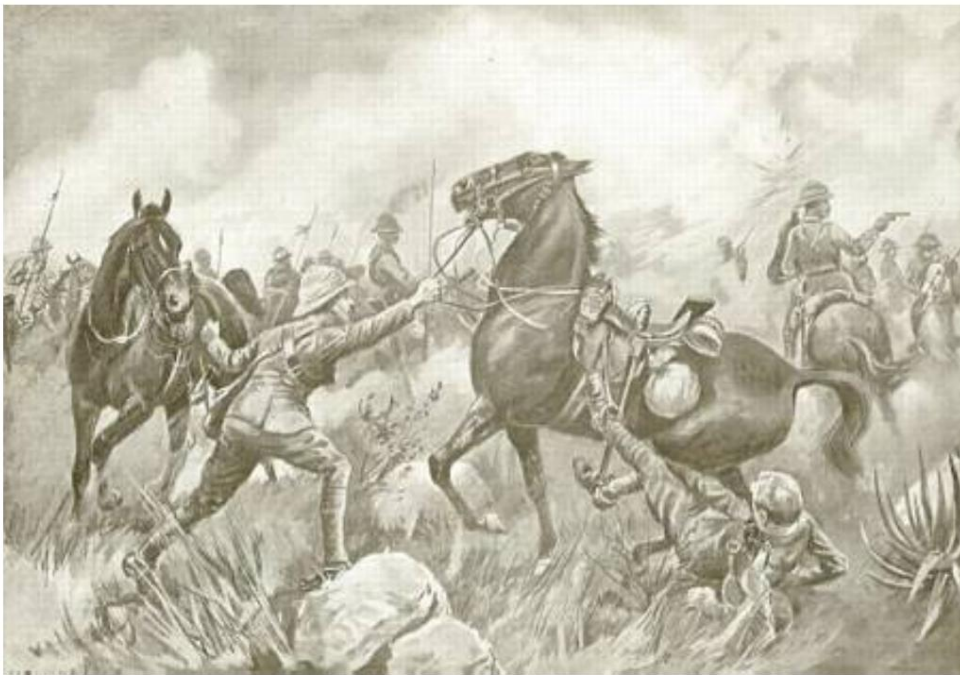
The text of the plate reads:

"When under close fire of the enemy, who were within a few yards, Shoeing-Smith Private Charles Hull, of the 21st Lancers, rescued Captain GED Learoyd, whose horse had been shot, by taking him up behind him and galloping into safety.

Hull acted entirely on his own initiative, and saved his officer's life at the imminent risk of his own. He was awarded the VC"

"At one point they were charging over what they thought to be level ground when a blind nullah intervened. To quote the description of one soldier of the Royal Sussex Regiment: "The 21st Lancers charged what they thought to be a small belt, but came suddenly on a big ditch, and a lot of horses and men fell in. Then two I out of the grass on the other side about 3,000 Mohmands came. The only thing they could do was to charge. They went right through them, turned round, and charged back again. One chap, about nineteen years old, just out of England, killed five with his lance, leaving it sticking in the fifth one, and two more with his sword."

The British cavalry came out splendidly. Emerging from the bed of the Minchi-Abazai Canal they came under very heavy fire at close range. They charged the enemy a third time, and in this charge, which really decided the battle, they suffered heavily."



*21st Lancers - Regimental Sergeant Major Ryder
rescuing a comrade, 5 September 1915.
From a plate seen for sale at MILPRINTS.*

The text of the plate reads:

"Seeing a comrade in danger of serious injury owing to his having fallen from his horse with his foot caught in a stirrup, Regimental Sergeant Major, 21st Lancers, picked him up and placed him on his own horse. He then charged through the enemy who had surrounded him.

For his conspicuous gallantry Sergeant Major Ryder was awarded the DCM"

"Many stories of the fighting were afterwards told by the survivors. Lieut.-Colonel Scriven led his squadron in the charge, and did great execution with his sword until his horse was shot and fell upon him. Two of his lance-corporals assisted him to his feet. Shortly afterwards he was shot through the heart and fell, shouting, "Go on, lads. I'm done." Two men guarded his body until they were rescued. Captain Anderson who had been severely wounded, fought desperately with his revolver until he was shot dead. Lieut Thompson was so severely wounded that he died in the evening.

Of five officers who rode in the charge three were killed and one wounded, the adjutant alone coming out unharmed. He, however, had his horse shot from under him, and was only fifty yards from the enemy when he was rescued by a shoeing-smith. One sergeant was unhorsed, and after killing two natives, grappled with

a third huge native on the ground. Each man had his hand at the other's throat, when another sergeant came up and shot the native. At the same moment he himself was shot and severely wounded."

Postscript

The operations against the Mohmands were the first in India to involve the active use of armored vehicles. This subject is discussed in more detail in my article *On Armored Car Units in India during the First World War*.

The Maharaja of Patiala was, from 15 June 1918 until his death in 1938, Honorary Colonel of the 15th Ludhiana Sikhs.

Sources

1. 15th Ludhiana Sikhs (British Empire).
2. *The Indian Corps in France* by Lieutenant-Colonel Merewether and Sir Frederick Smith; original published December 1917, and reprinted by Naval & Military Press, London in 2001, ISBN 1-84342-38-4.
3. *VCs of the First World War - The Western Front 1915* by Peter F. Batchelor & Christopher Matson, Sutton Publishing Ltd., Stroud/Gloucestershire 1997, ISBN 0-7509-1106-9.
4. *History of the Great War, Military Operations Egypt & Palestine, Volume I, From the outbreak of war with Germany to June 1917* by Lieutenant General Sir George Macmunn and Captain Cyril Falls, HSMO, London 1927.
5. Sir John Maxwell's Egypt Despatch (The Long, Long Trail).
6. The Defense of India by FA McKenzie, from "The Great War, Vvolume 7, Chapter 128", HW Wilson (ed.) (The Great War in a Different Light).
7. Sir Beauchamp Duff's India Despatches (The Long, Long Trail).
8. *Stilk's Memoirs* by LC Dunsterville, Gyldendalske Boghandel - Nordisk Forlag, Copenhagen 1930. (The original title is *Stalky's Reminiscences*, and originally published in 1928 by Jonathan Cape, London.)

Per Finsted

Notes:

- 1) *Jat* (population group *Sikhs* (religion) belonged to the so-called martial (warlike, fighting spirit, murderous) parts of the Indian population, from which soldiers were mainly recruited for the Indian army.
See *Martial Race* (Wikipedia), which has several interesting references. A completely true-to-the-time description can be found i.a. in *Description of the Indian Army* (Appendix 1 to *The Indian Corps in France during the First World War*, published in 1918 (Project South Asia).
- 2) Own design after inspiration in *Military Badges of the British Empire 1914-1918* by Reginald Cox, The Standard Art Book Co., Chicago, Illinois 1983, ISBN 1-84342-384-7.
- 3) See 3rd (Lahore) Division (The Long, Long Trail).
- 4) On the British Army's reserve units, see *The various British Army Reserves 1914-1918* (The Long, Long Trail).
- 5) See *Battle of Festubert* (Wikipedia).
- 6) See also John Smyth, VC (The History of the Victoria Cross) for a more detailed account of the action, incl. names of the Indian soldiers in the command.

7) See my article On Patiala Imperial Service Infantry, 1914-1916.

8) These officers may include Major G. Pennefather Evans, 19th Punjabis, who during the later operations against the Senussi at times commanded the battalion, while Lt. Col. JLR Gordon actually acted as brigade commander. (Source 5)

9) See also Mohmand Tribe (Wikipedia) and Mohmand Blockade Photos 1916-1917 (King Emperor).