

The Corps of Sikh Pioneers

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Abstract

From early days the necessity of having efficient Pioneer units in the British Indian Army was considered essential, and as time went on more and more Pioneer regiments were raised or existing Indian infantry regiments made into Pioneers, until the army in India had twelve Pioneer battalions. The British Army, strange to say, possessed no Pioneers beyond the few men in each battalion who were called Pioneers. Although the Sikh Pioneers did not have the length of service of many other regiments in the Indian Army, they saw more fighting than has fallen to the lot of many older units. Nearly every campaign fought by the Indian Army from 1857 till the Third Afghan War in 1919 has seen one or more of these three gallant regiments (23rd, 32nd and 34th Sikh Pioneers) taking part in it. This article encapsulates the history of the Sikh Pioneers from 1857 till they were disbanded in 1932.

Introduction

To place in proper perspective the history of a class of men, who from an insignificant socio-cultural background rose in martial spirit and proved their value, it is necessary to go back in time. Though soldiering is a way of life for the people of Punjab, the profession of arms was earlier open only to those from the warrior caste. The rise of Sikhism gave an opportunity for the development of a caste-less society and for everyone to have the right to bear arms.

In June 1857, with the general uprising in India against the East India Company, the British were hard pressed to find troops to fight under their colours. In this time of strife, Punjab had not been affected by the rising tide against foreign rule. To meet the

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urgent need for troops, an irregular force was formed out of the Mazhbi Sikhs working on the Bari Doab Canal at Madhopur and they had their baptism under fire at the siege of Delhi. In March 1858, this force was designated as the 24th Regiment (Pioneer) of Punjab Infantry, later re-designated as the 32nd Sikh Pioneers. Meanwhile, there was a demand for raising a regular regiment of Mazhbi Sikhs who had displayed great staunchness under fire. The 15th Regiment of the Punjab Infantry, later re-designated as the 23rd Sikh Pioneers, was raised at Lahore, on 20 October 1857.

Both the regiments gave such an excellent account of themselves, establishing such outstanding standards, that another regiment, the 34th Sikh Pioneers, was raised on 28 March 1887. This trio of Sikh Pioneers won undying name and fame through their deeds of glory amply proving that accidents of birth have no importance in the military tradition, where actions of merit and courage are recognised and justly rewarded. Their epic history, for a period of 75 years, is a story for the ages. Their motto was – *Aut Viam Inveniam Aut Faciam* – a Latin phrase translated as ‘Either find a way or make one’. To the old soldiers, the unofficial motto was ‘What Mazhbi, Mazhbi’ or ‘*Jo hoega, so hoega*’.

The Sikh Pioneers belied the idea that the Indian Army was raised, trained and equipped for service in India alone, or upon its frontiers. It earned great credit and glory in diverse theatres of combat. It was a force always ready, of admirable efficiency, and assured valour. The conditions under which they bore arms and fought in countries where the climate, language, people, and customs were entirely different; yet their cheerfulness, dedication, discipline and intrepidity ensured solid and striking display of soldiering. They were expected to act as infantry on special and critical occasions, and they always responded with conspicuous success. Unswerving and unstinting in their loyalty, it is a spirit that evokes admiration and is worthy of esteem.

China 1860

In 1860, the 23rd Sikh Pioneers (then 15th Regiment of Punjab Native Infantry) embarked for China. The Second Opium War had just begun. Reaching in end-July, they took part in action at the Taku Forts (in Northeast China) and in the capture of Peking. There were four forts, two on each bank of the Peiho River (now

called Hai), which were low-profiled and flat-topped. The plan to capture the forts involved moving up the estuary and landing from ship eight miles away. Fire support was provided by the ship's guns. The smaller northern fort was captured on 22 August 1860 after constructing a road for two miles through the marshes and the breaching of the fort by artillery fire. After crossing the mud ditches, hand to hand fighting ensued before enemy resistance was overcome. As the assault on the southern fort was underway, its garrison surrendered. A month later, the Regiment marched to Peking which was occupied on 06 October 1860.

Abyssinia 1868

Lieutenant General Sir Robert Napier commanded the expeditionary force to Abyssinia in 1867-68 for the release of the British envoy, and 60 other hostages, held at Magdala Fort on the orders of Emperor Tewodros II. The 23rd Sikh Pioneers, as part of this force, moved from Peshawar to Calcutta, from where they embarked to land at Zula near Djibouti in January 1867. They were initially ordered to dig wells, erect telegraph lines and construct a railway line. They were then part of the leading column for the advance to Magdala, over 400 miles from the Red Sea. The long and arduous journey took over two months with each soldier carrying upwards of 55 pounds of equipment. They had to march across plains, scrubland and farmlands before reaching the hills and mountain plains to get to the fortress of Magdala. On 24 March, the force entered Dildi but the mountainous ridges meant a tortuous circumventing route of some 60 miles over most inhospitable terrain. The track passed over a height of 12,000 feet with temperatures touching 100 degrees by day and 10 degrees Fahrenheit (frost) by night. On 09 April 1868, a large body of Abyssinians attacked the advance guard at a ravine near Arogi. The Regiment met the attack in a most spirited manner and, after charging with the bayonet, drove the enemy into the surrounding ravines. The occupation of Magdala then became a mere formality.

Peiwar Kotal 1878

Pioneers were integral to any force that operated in the Northwest Frontier. In 1878, the 23rd Sikh Pioneers participated in the Second Afghan War. They marched from Thal to Kurram and then on to the Afghan position at Peiwar Kotal, a very dominating feature. The Afghans were dug in and had artillery support. Any direct attack up the track to the *kotal* (pass) was exposed to flanking fire

from Afghan positions on the spurs to the north and south, as well as frontal fire from positions along the main ridge. The *kotal* itself was dominated by defences which were some 500 feet above the pass. In effect, a frontal attack implied pushing into a cul-de-sac dominated on all three sides. The Afghans had repulsed an earlier assault. The 23rd Sikh Pioneers participated in the successful attack, on 02 December 1878, fighting under the personal command of General Sir Frederick Roberts, who led the turning movement.

Charasia 1879

In 1879, the 23rd Sikh Pioneers were again ordered to Kabul, following the killing of the British Resident along with his escort. The force advanced through the Shutargardan Pass and reached Charasia, the last major geographical obstacle before Kabul, on 05 October. At this point, no armed resistance was expected. General Roberts decided to camp on the flat ground around the village of Charasia with a view to seizing the eastern pass early the next morning.

At dawn on 06 October 1879, cavalry patrols were sent out along with a party of 23rd Sikh Pioneers and 92nd Highlanders to prepare the valley road for use by the carts, wagons and guns. They reported observing Afghans along the ridges of the hilltops with some artillery pieces. It suggested that a determined force was going to prevent the British column from reaching Kabul. The Afghan strength was difficult to establish, but was assessed as probably 13 regular regiments of infantry, 20 field guns and several thousands of tribesmen in excellent defensive positions. The advancing force was on the flat ground beneath the imposing hills and the situation did not look good.

Roberts decided to split his forces and attack the Afghans on the west of the range and roll them up along the hilltop ridges. Meanwhile, a smaller force would be sent to hold the Afghans at the east of the range and prevent them from sweeping down from the hills in a rush to aid their forces in the west. The 23rd Sikh Pioneers were part of the main force and were attacking an enemy that greatly outnumbered them. The fighting was intense and hung in the balance until a company of the 23rd Sikh Pioneers arrived on the flank of the Afghans, which completely unnerved them and they retreated northwards, with the Pioneers hot in pursuit. Apart from capturing six guns, the force had taken possession of the entire position.

Kabul to Kandahar 1880

In July 1880, a British column was destroyed at the hands of Ayub Khan, a son of the late Amir Sher Ali, who then laid siege to Kandahar. The 23rd Sikh Pioneers received orders to be part of the column to march to Kandahar under General Sir Frederick Roberts. The march of 310 miles in three weeks, in hostile territory, was an epic achievement. As speed was of the essence, the troops had to march light. No wheeled transport or heavy guns were in the column and they were out of communication for most of the time, with no base of operations behind it and with an uncertain strength of enemy in front.

During the whole of this forced march, through mountainous terrain, the Regiment formed part of the advance guard. Conditions were hard. Most of the force was woken up at 1 or 2 in the morning to start off by 4. The freezing cold and darkness made it difficult to load up the pack animals. By the time they stopped at 1 or 2 in the afternoon (though the rear guard did not get in till 5 or 6 hours later), the heat was intense, with no shade and scarcity of water. Meanwhile, the 32nd Sikh Pioneers were part of another force reaching Kandahar from Quetta. On 01 September 1880, the day after its arrival at Kandahar, they took part in the battle to lift the siege of the town. Besides the battle honours, all troops who had marched from Kabul to Kandahar were awarded a special bronze star.

Chitral 1895

In 1894, the 23rd Sikh Pioneers moved to Gilgit to build roads, lay telegraph lines and construct a fort at Chilas. The 32nd Sikh Pioneers relieved them. The problem with the ruler of Chitral started soon thereafter when, the Mehtar, Nizam-ul-Mulk, was murdered by his brother in January 1895 and the throne was contested. The British agent, along with the garrison at the Chitral Fort, was besieged and a relief column had to be quickly organised. The task fell to the 32nd Sikh Pioneers.

The small column of the 32nd Sikh Pioneers that marched from Gilgit to Chitral, achieved great renown for its endurance and courage. The route was a difficult one, through deep snows, passing over the 12,400 feet high Shandur Pass. They started on 22 March 1895 in heavy rain, in two detachments, with a mountain battery accompanying. After a week of marching, they reached the snow line which made movement tougher. The coolies with

the column, who were carrying the food supplies on ponies, decided to vanish. While climbing up to the Shandur Pass, it began to snow. At some stages, the men were in chest-deep snow and could only flounder up the slopes. Carrying the guns up was an arduous task as the troops suffered from thirst, snow blindness, frostbite, lack of supplies and the sheer physical exhaustion of moving in the deep snows at the heights without adequate shelter, but they persevered.

The epic crossing of the Shandur Pass on 04-05 April brought them into Chitrali Territory. After a bold action at Chokalwat, the column reached Mastuj, the most important fort between Gilgit and Chitral. Fighting their way through, they were the first troops to reach Chitral and relieve the besieged garrison. The final physically unnerving task was the fording of the Chitral River, which had breast high water and a swift current.

Tibet 1903-04

The 23rd and 32nd Sikh Pioneers participated in the Younghusband Mission to Tibet in 1903-04, (the designation of the Regiment had, by then, been changed to Sikh Pioneers). The mission set off on 19 July 1903 from Darjeeling. The 23rd Sikh Pioneers moved via Kalimpong, over Jelep La, as part of the escort to the mission. The move over the passes till Chumbi was uneventful, save for difficult pioneering work in improving the tracks and hard marching. On reaching Khamba Jong, just inside Tibet, they settled down to await the Tibetan and Chinese delegates. As no official came for talks, the march was sanctioned to Gyantse, with the capital Lhasa, 100 miles farther on through the mountains.

The mission was then expanded into a full-scale military expedition with about 1,200 British and Indian soldiers, four artillery pieces, two Maxim guns, 16,000 pack animals and 10,000 coolies. The force left Siliguri on 20 November 1903. The 32nd Sikh Pioneers joined the force, part of which was formed into mounted infantry to keep the advance at a good speed. The force reached Tuna, at 15,000 feet, where they stayed for the winter, enduring terrible hardships. On occasions, minus 25 degrees was registered (the thermometer could register no lower!). Conditions were frightful. Rifle-bolts froze into the breeches, and the soldiers kept them warm in their own beds. The troops' clothing offered no real protection and was too bulky to allow free movement for firing.

It was not until they reached the tiny village of Guru on 31 March 1904, that they came into direct conflict at the Tibetan fortifications. Two thousand Tibetan troops were waiting there, blocking the caravan trail which the British had to follow if they were to get to Gyantse. Younghusband ordered the Sikh Pioneers to disarm the Tibetans. As the two forces wrestled with each other, the situation began to turn ugly. Then the Tibetan General fired a shot as a Sikh soldier was trying to take away the rifle of his orderly. Fighting broke out instantly and nearly 900 Tibetans lay dead and wounded on the field. The mission then continued to Gyantse after seeing action at Hot Springs and Karo La.

The action of the 32nd Sikh Pioneers at Karo La, on 06 May 1904, was at heights in excess of 18,500 feet, establishing a record for high-altitude warfare that stood for 80 years till it was broken in the Siachen Glacier. The expedition then marched on towards Lhasa. Here Younghusband learned that the Dalai Lama had fled to Outer Mongolia. After crossing the Tsangpo River, the mission entered Lhasa on 02 August. An agreement was signed on 07 September and the mission was ordered back to India.

Egypt and Palestine 1914-18

At the beginning of the First World War, the three regiments of the Sikh Pioneers were at their cantonments of Lahore, Sialkot and Ambala respectively. During the war, the 23rd, 32nd and 34th Sikh Pioneers, originally one battalion regiments, expanded to three battalions each. Soon they were tramping over the battlefields of Egypt, Europe, Palestine and Mesopotamia, leaving indelible imprints wherever they went. Numerous battle honours emblazoned their glorious record. The Corps of Sikh Pioneers had nine battalions, plus a training battalion, when the armistice was declared on 11 November 1918.

The 23rd Sikh Pioneers were tasked to defend the line of sea communication through the Suez Canal and the Red Sea. They sailed from Karachi in November 1914, landing at Fort Turba, north of Aden, in the face of enemy opposition, and destroyed the fort and its armament. They were then employed in Somaliland, before moving to Egypt, in March 1915, to be divisional troops as part of 10 Indian Division at Suez. They were tasked to defend the railway line on the east bank of the Suez Canal before they moved to Gaza on the Sinai Peninsula.

The 1/23rd saw action in the first battle of Gaza against the Turks in March 1917 and the 2/23rd was the first unit to enter Palestine. Three weeks later was the second battle of Gaza. Both battalions worked on the narrow-gauge railway line to Jerusalem in preparation of the offensive. The advance to Beersheba commenced on 01 November 1917. The 2/32nd came to Palestine in February 1918 and was also employed on constructing a standard railway line and repair of the existing metre-gauge railway line. Their efforts, under frequent air attacks and ground raids, made it possible for the Allied offensive to be carried forward. They saw action in the offensive towards Jerusalem, under General Allenby, and were then deployed at Haifa. To them goes the credit of constructing the railway line from Gaza to Jerusalem, through Sharon, Megiddo and Nablus.

After the war, the 1/23rd were to return to India, while the 2/32nd and 3/32nd were employed for the construction of the Damascus-Beirut railway line and the coastal road in Palestine. The 1/23rd, while at Suez, were diverted to Constantinople. After a short stay, they were sent through the Black Sea to Tiflis, in Georgia, and then returned to Turkey to take charge of refugees from Russia. (It was later learnt that the orders, at Alexandria, were for a 23rd battalion of a British regiment). The 1/23rd returned to Ambala in August 1920.

France 1914-1915

The 1/34th Sikh Pioneers earned the coveted title of "Royal" during the war. They were the only pioneer unit in the army to receive this honour. Moving from Ambala, as part of divisional troops of the 3rd (Lahore) Division, they landed at Marseilles, in France, on 26 September 1914. Much was expected of them and they responded in full measure. There were problems, not only related to the cold, clammy climate. The rifles were obsolete and new rifles and ammunition was issued at Marseilles but there was no opportunity for training. The clothing was suited to Indian conditions and warm clothing was only issued by mid-winter. There was no mechanical transport, artillery or signal equipment with the Indian Corps. Above all, was the problem of language, especially when most Hindustani-speaking British officers were killed or wounded and their replacements were not familiar with Indian culture. Yet, the Sikh Pioneers lived up to their warrior reputation.

They were sent straight to the trenches for holding defences from seven miles north of Neuve Chapelle to Givenchy. They relieved the French cavalry at night, in unknown territory, cut up by wire entanglements and deep ditches full of water and mud, facing the German onslaught at Givenchy, in December 1914, suffering a large number of casualties. They fought on wet and cold nights with insufficient food, and little or no sleep. Rations could only be collected from a central point 400 yards behind the line, at night, when there was a lull in the intense shelling and sniping. No lull meant no rations.

In the 14 months they spent in France, they saw action at the First Battle of Ypres on 23 October, at Neuve Chapelle on 27-28 October and in Festubert on 23-24 November. They played a glorious part in the deadly battle to capture Neuve Chapelle from 10-12 March 1915, where victory was achieved at a great cost in lives. Then followed the Second Battle of Ypres on 22 April, where they were subjected to mustard gas attacks. Then came the Second Battle of Festubert from 15-25 May. Finally, they saw action at the Battle of Loos in September.

Influenza and trench fever added to the casualties of war. They experienced heavy shellfire, air and gas attacks, and trench fighting against an enemy who had mortars, rifle grenades, searchlights and other advanced weaponry, while they had to locally manufacture explosives with empty jam tins. Weary, depleted and battle-scarred, they were finally relieved in November. They left France in December 1915, after leaving their mark on the battlefields of Europe at a time when British and French troops were not available to fight.

Mesopotamia 1916

The 34th Sikh Pioneers did not return to India from France but were sent to Mesopotamia. They disembarked at Basra on 14 January 1916. The 6 Indian Division under General Townshend was besieged at Kut-ul-Amara and troops were sorely needed to relieve the garrison. The Regiment marched along the Tigris River to join the relief force at Ali Gharbi. The British offensive had floundered strategically and tactically. The surrender of General Townshend with his garrison on 27 April necessitated further fighting against the Turks. They saw action as part of the force that advanced on to Baghdad in January 1917, and participated

in the fighting for the capture of the city. At Sherquat, as part of 17 Indian Division, towards the end of October 1917, they participated in the action that led to the final defeat of the Turkish forces in the theatre.

Black Picquet 1919

Immediately after the Third Afghan War, Wazir and Mahsud tribes launched attacks on British convoys and posts, angered by false rumours that Waziristan was to be handed over to Afghanistan in post-war talks. On 18 December 1919, the leading brigade of the Derajat column, under General Andrew Skeen, pitched camp at the Palsonia plain in Waziristan. After two days of demoralising reverses during attempts to establish picquets on the far side of the Takki Zam River, it was decided to build a *sangar* on 'Black Hill', about a mile northeast of the camp, on the near side of the river. Two companies of the 3/34th Sikh Pioneers, under four officers, were given the task.

The Mahsuds planned to attack the camp with about 10,000 tribesmen. By mid-day on 21 December 1919, the encirclement of the camp was complete. The two battalions tasked to provide fire support to the construction on Black Hill retreated as the first wave of attacking Mahsuds appeared, leaving the two companies of the 3/34th Sikh Pioneers alone, completely uncovered and exposed, on the hill-top with no more than a knee-high wall and a few strands of barbed wire in front. Casting aside their tools, the Sikhs took up rifles to defend their post. They gallantly faced and repelled waves of attacks, which were so fierce that on three occasions there was grim hand-to-hand fighting in the picquet itself, but each time the Mahsuds were driven back.

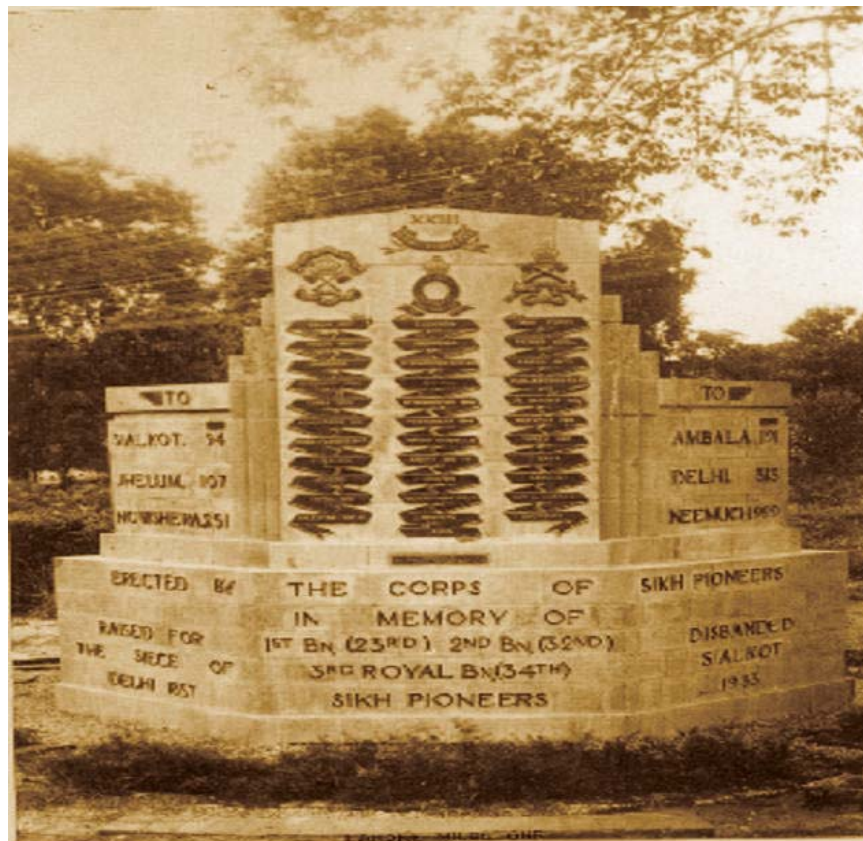
The battalion suffered 186 men killed and wounded in this action where individual acts of gallantry were many. It was the final stamp of Sikh Pioneer actions on the Northwest Frontier. In honour of the gallant action of the 3/34th Sikh Pioneers, the 'Black Hill' picquet was named as 'Pioneer Picquet'.

Disbandment

In 1929, the Sikh Pioneers were reduced to a Corps HQ with one battalion each as it was felt that, under modern conditions, they could not be both fully-trained infantry and engineers. They were useful for roadmaking in expeditions on the Northwest Frontier;

but such ventures became infrequent and the regular garrisons had permanent roads built by civil contract. It was also felt that the engineer troops of any division should be homogeneous. This, coupled with serious financial stringency, caused the Government of India to decide in 1932 that the Pioneers should be abolished from the Indian Army and that a part of the financial saving so effected should be applied towards an increase in the strength of the three Corps of Sappers and Miners.

10 February 1933 was a sad day for the Regiment as the Sikh Pioneers were disbanded after 75 years of glorious service. It was a traumatic experience for a community that had soldiered so sedulously. A farewell parade was held at Sialkot on 08 December 1932 to bring the curtain down on a fine fighting force. Yet, its heritage was destined to continue.



Commemorative Milestone constructed by the Sikh Pioneers in Lahore Cantonment.

Raising of the Sikh Light Infantry

Within eight years of disbandment, the Sikh Pioneers were re-raised, like the phoenix rising from the ashes, as the Sikh Light Infantry, to meet the urgent and mounting demands of World War II. The 1st Battalion was raised at Jullundur on 01 October 1941, the 2nd at Peshawar on 01 July 1942 and the 3rd at Sialkot on 15 August 1942, by converting the 13 Pioneer Battalion.

Reference

1. Lt Gen Sir George MacMunn, *The History of the Sikh Pioneers* (London: Sampson, Low, Marston, 1936)