

MEDALS AND MEMORIES

Twentieth Century Babel

Character Education

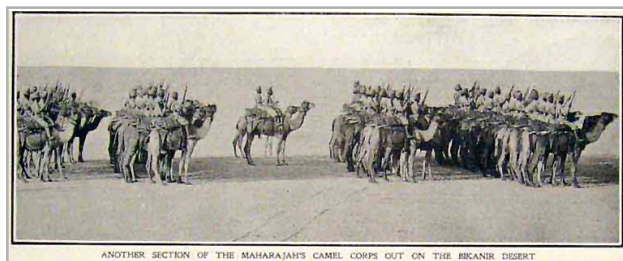
- Explore the multicultural contributions in World War I
- Investigate what role positive recognition makes in character development
- Develop pride in heritage

Facts

- Approximately 100 countries participated in World War I, a war that lasted 1,567 days
- Canada sent 800,000 men overseas and sustained 60,383 military deaths
- The Indian Army and semi-independent princely states sustained 43,000 deaths
- African nations contributing soldiers to the Allied cause sustained 82,000 military deaths

Before the Reading

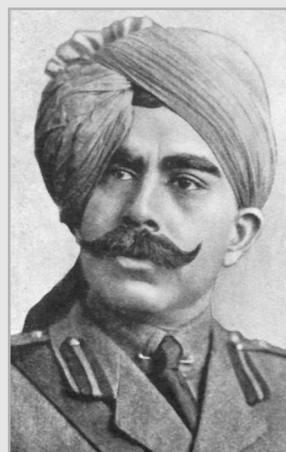
- List everything you know about the contributions of India and Africa to the Allied cause in WWI and WWII. Why would the then called 'colonials' have enlisted?
- Areas of the world where the world wars took place are called 'theatres' of war. Name as many theatres of war as you know. Which theatres of war are most familiar to you and why?



ANOTHER SECTION OF THE MAHARAJAH'S CAMEL CORPS OUT ON THE BIKANIR DESERT

The Maharajah's Camel Corps at Bikaner, 1905
Photo University of Columbia

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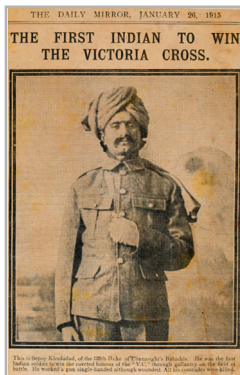
Maharaja Ganga Singh
FirstWorldWar.com

The Bikaner Camel Corps

Camel Corps were important to the Allied cause in Africa in both World Wars. The Bikaner Camel Corps, founded by the Maharaja Ganga Singh of the state of Bikaner, was a force of 500 when the Maharaj

himself led the troops in Egypt during WWI. The troops routed the opposing Turkish forces in a camel cavalry charge at the Suez Canal in 1915. In WWII Companies Meharistes/ camel corps formed part of the Compagnies Sahariennes with motorized French and French Foreign Legion units; they saw service against Axis forces in Fezzan and southern Tunisia. Each company of Meharistes, originally recruited from the Chaamba nomadic tribe, was comprised of six officers, 36 non-commissioned French officers and troopers and 300 Chaamba troopers.

Reading



Sepoy Khudadad Khan

At the beginning of WWI India contributed 70,000 native troops—Sikhs and Gurkhas from the Himalayas, Bengal Lancers from the Ganges and Maharaja Infantry from the central plains. Among these many brave men, **Khudadad Khan**, of the Punjab and a member of the famous Mair-Minhas, Rajput tribe, was the first to earn the Victoria Cross. On Oct. 31, 1914, at Hollebeke

Belgium the officer in charge of the 129th Duke of Connaught's Own Baluchis had been wounded and one gun in the detachment stilled by shell action. Sepoy Khan remained firing the lone remaining gun even as the five men of his gun detachment fell around him. Wounded and left for dead, Khan later crawled back to his unit. He rose to the rank of Subedar—the English equivalent to Lieutenant.



Cpl. Darwan Singh Negi

Naik (Corporal) Darwan Singh Negi, (1881-1950) of the 1st Battalion of the 39th Garhwal Rifles, received his V.C. for his actions the night of Nov. 23 to 24, 1914, in Festubert, France. Negi was one of a bayonet/bomb party clearing the enemy out of British trenches. At each traverse, he was the first to go round in the face of close up enemy fire from rifles and the threat of bombs.

Although wounded in the head and arm, he helped drive the enemy back until they were forced to surrender. Naik Negi later achieved the rank of Subedar.

Rifleman Kulbir Thapa was the first Victoria Cross recipient from Nepal. On Sept. 25 in Fauquissart, France at the battle of Loos, Thapa of the 3rd Gurkha Rifles, British Indian Army, found a wounded British soldier behind the line of German trenches. Although wounded himself, Thapa stayed with the badly injured Leicestershire Regiment man for a day and night before carrying him through German barbed wire to a place of relative safety. He then returned to carry two wounded Gurkhas to safety—one after the other. In a final act of bravery in broad daylight and under constant enemy fire, Thapa carried the Leicester man to a place he could get the help he needed. Rifleman Thapa achieved the rank of Havildar (Sergeant).

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The Mighty Eleven

The names of Khan, Negi and Thapa appeared in the Reading for WWI. Another eight Indian names are among the roll call for Victoria Crosses, the highest British Commonwealth award, during WWI. **Sepoy**

Chatta Singh of the 9th Bhopal Infantry was awarded the V.C. for his devotion in protecting his commanding officer. Sepoy Singh bound up his C.O.'s wound, dug cover for him with his entrenching tool and remained with him for five hours until nightfall, shielding him with his own body, until eventually under the cover of darkness he was able to take the officer to safety.

Lance Naik Lala dragged a British Officer of another regiment lying close to the enemy to a temporary shelter which he had made and in which he had already bandaged four wounded men. When Lala heard calls from the Adjutant of his regiment who was lying severely wounded in the open, he wanted to go to him even though the enemy was no more than 914 metres distant. Denied permission to rescue the Adjutant, Lala stripped off his own clothing to keep the wounded officer warm and then stayed with him until dark. Under cover of darkness, Lala carried the wounded officer to safety in the main trenches and then returning with a stretcher, brought his Adjutant to safety.

Lance Dafadar Gobind Singh volunteered three times to carry messages a distance of 2.4 km over open ground under heavy enemy fire. Each time his horse was shot and Singh had to finish his journey on foot. Singh received his Victoria Cross from King George VI at Buckingham Palace.

Rifleman Gobar Singh Negi (1894–1915) of the 2nd Battalion of the Garhwal Rifles won his V.C. on March 10, 1915, at Neuve Chapelle. Ten V.C.'s were won in this battle, the first of which went to this Rifleman.

Naik Shah Ahmad Khan in charge of a machine gun section, **Jemadar Mir Dost** at Ypres, **Rifleman Karan Bahadur Rana** of the 14th Gurkha Rifles and **Risaldar Badlu Singh** of the 29th Lancers—all Victoria Cross recipients—deserve their own recognition. Research their acts of valour. As you explore your own character development, the self-sacrifice, tenacity, loyalty, daring and courage of these men serve as good discussion starters.



Billetts for Senegalese soldier
Photo: www.greatwar.nl/
Jean-Baptiste Tournassoud

Tirailleurs, a word originally meaning sharpshooters, was the term used by the French for the armed forces recruited from their colonial territories. The Tirailleurs units, usually battalion to regiment in size, took the names from the areas where they were recruited: tirailleurs Algériens, tirailleurs Sénégalais, tirailleurs Tunisiens, tirailleurs Cambodgiens.

With the start of World War I, many Tirailleurs were brought to the front in France and served with distinction in battles such as Vimy Ridge, Marne, Somme, Verdun and Chemin de Dames. On Oct. 24, 1916, the RICM or 9th Light Armoured Marine Brigade, along with the 43rd Senegalese and three companies of Somali soldiers took on the strong, modern and heavily fortified Fort Douaumont on a hill 395 meters above sea level near Verdun. The German capture of the French fort had been a blow. In what was described as a pivotal WWI victory Fort Douaumont was retaken by the valiant African attackers in less than four hours. The RICM received its third Croix de Guerre for its actions that day. The great Mosque of Paris was constructed after WWI to honour Muslim Tirailleurs who had fought for France

Captain Abdel Kader Mademba, the highest ranking officer from Africa and the son of a king of Sinsana (today in Mali) fought with distinction near Flaucourt during the Battle of the Somme. When he was disabled by poison gas at Ypres, he continued to work as a recruiter in west Africa. He received the Croix de Guerre and was made an officer of the Legion of Honour. Mademba was the stimulus to building the pink Soudanese Mosque de Missiri in Frejus on the Mediterranean coast which was modelled on the Djenne mosque in the Niger River valley. Intended as a tribute to the fighters of Africa, it was also meant as a promotion of African culture as the majority of Tirailleurs had not been Muslim. Bouna N'Diaye, son of a Wolof resistance figure, was also made an Officer of the Legion of Honour.

During the WWI victory parade in France, 21 army corps marched down the Champs-Élysées for an hour—trotting chasseurs in berets, cavalrymen in breastplates, Moroccan goumiers in turbans, immense Senegalese with wound stripes on their sleeves and medals pinned to their short jackets, Algerian and Indo-Chinese tirailleurs.



Camel Ambulances
Photo: www.greatwar.nl/

An article originally published in 1918 stated, “The conflagration of war literally belted the earth. It consumed the most civilized of capitals. It raged in the swamps and forests of Africa A 20th century Babel came to the fields of France for freedom’s sake, and there was born an internationalism making for the future understanding and peace of the world.”ⁱⁱ

What this writer from 1918 did not foresee was that the Great War, the war to end all wars, the war that had brought peoples from all parts of the globe together in the name of freedom, had to be renamed World War I after only 21 years.

After the Reading

- Thubedar, Naik, Sepoy, Havildar are ranks in the Indian army. What are their equivalent ranks?
- Locate where in India/Nepal the WWI Victoria Cross recipients originated? Do any of your schoolmates share the heritage of these heroes?
- Find all the references to African locations in this reading. Who among your schoolmates share an African heritage? How do they feel about reading about these World War I soldiers who fought for freedom?

Extensions

- Try to locate the 2006 film *Days of Glory/Indigènes* which was nominated for an Academy Award for best foreign film and won the Prix d’interprétation masculine at the 2006 Cannes Film Festival. The film, dealing with the discriminatory treatment of French colonial soldiers led to a change in the French government’s policy towards them
- Look up the BBC History of India and the Western Front at www.bbc.co.uk/history/worldwars/wwone/india_wwone_01.shtml to report on Indian participation in World War I
- Discuss: Does your knowledge of the significant contribution of Indian and African troops to the WWI Allied efforts change your perceptions of what remembrance means in Canada today?

ⁱ Private Richard Mercer was a machine gunner with the Borden Motor Machine Gun Battery. He was twice wounded at Passchendaele

ⁱⁱ “A War For International Freedom”, www.oldandsold.com/articles26/world-war-one-1.shtml

Sources

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Images

- <http://www.greatwar.nl/> The First Real Color Pictures of World War I | Jean-Baptiste Tournassoud
- University of Columbia