

Heroism at the battle of Gallipoli

SJS Pall

When the first World War broke out in 1914, there were six battalions of the Sikh Regiment forming part of the British Army. They were named as 14th Ferozepur Sikhs, 15th Ludhiana Sikhs, 35th Sikhs, 36th Sikhs, 45th Sikhs and 47th Sikhs. Since the Sikh soldiers were known for their bravery and steadfastness, the British employed all their battalions, except the 35th Sikhs, for fighting in such faraway places like Egypt, Palestine, Mesopotamia, Gallipoli and France.

In all the battles in which they fought, they had to suffer heavy casualties. However, there was no wavering among them and they always stood like rocks among the fighting men. While recounting their brave deeds, the immediate attention of all who have a sense of history goes to the first battalion of the Sikh Regiment called the 14th Ferozepur Sikhs, which was moved after a short stay in the Suez Canal area to Gallipoli.

The battle of Gallipoli was fought to capture Constantinople [Istanbul] so as to reach the Turkish land, who had entered the war scene on the side of Germany. The 2nd Royal Fusiliers were finding it difficult to fight the Turks and as such the Coy. of Sikhs was sent for their help. Although the allies did not succeed, the bravery shown by the Sikhs during this operation became a glorious chapter in the history of warfare.

The task given to the Sikhs was highly arduous. They were to capture two Turkish Trench lines named as J-11 and J-13. The brave soldiers of 14th Sikhs were equally divided for the task on these two lines. A fierce battle took place on 3rd and 4th June, 1915, wherein the brave soldiers of 14 Sikhs lost 371 officers and men killed or wounded.

Gen Sir Ian Hamilton was the concerned General at that time. When Lord Kitchner, Secretary of State for War, received an appeal on January 2, 1915, from the Russians, that with a view to diverting the Turks, a diversionary front be opened, the War Council decided on a joint attack under Gen Hamilton. When Hamilton landed on April 25 at the Southern Tip of the Gallipoli Peninsula, he found that their strength, as compared to that of the Turks, was starkly inferior. He also realised that the terrain greatly favoured the Turks, who were well dug-in. With a view to meeting the situation effectively, he had made the 14th Sikhs of the Indian Brigade a part of his expeditionary force. Sir Hamilton wrote to the Commander-in-Chief in India.

"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 were found to be blocked with the bodies of Sikhs and of the enemy who died fighting at close quarters, and the glacial slope was 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 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."

The brave Sikhs, who earned a very high degree of appreciation included Sardar Udai Singh, who saved the life of 2nd Lt R.A. Savory. The handsome Sikh of Manikwal village (near Gill railway station) was over 6 ft tall and had a fair beard and light green eyes. He was a wrestler from his childhood and when, in 1907, he went to Ferozepur to take part in a wrestling match, he was selected by the British to join the 14th Sikhs. He

was with the unit when Hamilton's forces landed at the Galli Poli Peninsula. It is interesting to note that when, after the war, he was offered a gallantry award, he pleaded that he should be allowed to go back to his village so that he could pursue his vocation which was dear to his heart.

Another prominent Sikh soldier associated with this battle was L/Nk Bhola Singh. When Lt. Gen. Sir Reginald Savory came to India in 1968 to attend the presentation of colours ceremony at Meerut, L/Nk Bhola Singh was also present on that occasion. Recapitulating the past, the General spoke about the close relationship between officers and his men as was achieved during that period. In his own words:

"Only this morning (8th February, 1968) Lance Naik Bhola Singh of the 14th Sikhs, who had been wounded in Galli Poli in 1915, took the trouble to come all the way from his home to call upon me, and after 52 years we saw each other again. I was deeply touched, not only at having the pleasure of seeing him again, but also at the thought of all the trouble he had taken to come and see me. When he was wounded, he and I were both young men. Now he is '*chitti dariwala*' and I am old and bald, but although we have both grown much older, yet our affection for each other and our mutual pride in our old Regiment stays as young as ever. Long may this continue. *Wahe Guruji Ka Khalsa, Wahe Guruji Ki Fateh.*"

The discussion on the battle of Galli Poli will not be complete if no mention is made of the appreciation earned by the Sikhs from the Fusiliers. It was in 1921 when the Fusiliers had been put on a firm footing and they, along with the Sikhs, were on duty in the Khyber Pass area in the North-West frontier of India. The Fusiliers presented the Sikhs with a Silver Grenade inscribed "**in the memory of Galli Poli 1915 and the Khyber Pass 1921**", which continues to be a prized possession with them.

[Courtesy: *The Tribune*]