Major exhibition remembers Sikh soldiers in First



Lady pins a flower on Sikh soldier in 1916

As the world turns its attention to the centenary of the First World War, this summer sees a landmark exhibition by the UK Punjab Heritage Association (UKPHA) to commemorate the remarkable but largely forgotten contribution and experiences of Sikh soldiers, as well as the families they left behind.

‘Empire, Faith & War: The Sikhs and World War One’ will run until 28 September at the Brunei Gallery, School of Oriental & African Studies’ (SOAS), Russell Square, and is the launch event of a three year project to reveal the untold story of how one of the world's smallest communities played a disproportionately large role in the ‘war to end all wars’.

From the blood-soaked trenches of the Somme and Gallipoli, to the deserts and heat of Africa and the Middle East, Sikhs fought and died alongside their British, Indian and Commonwealth counterparts to serve the greater good, gaining commendations and a reputation as fearsome and fearless soldiers.

Although accounting for less than 1% of the population of British India at the time, Sikhs made up nearly 20% of the British Indian Army at the outbreak of hostilities. They and their comrades in arms proved to be critical in the early months of the fighting on the Western Front, helping save the allies from an early and catastrophic defeat.

The First World War's forgotten army

And yet their far from inconsequential role remains largely forgotten. Undivided India provided Britain with a massive volunteer army in its hour of need. Close to 1.5million Indians served, fighting in all the major theatres of war from Flanders fields to the Mesopotamian oil fields of what is now Iraq.

Surprisingly, every sixth British soldier serving during the war would have been from the Indian subcontinent, making the British Indian Army as large as all the forces from the rest of the Empire combined – including the forces of Australia, Canada, New Zealand and South Africa.

The exhibition will see this untold, or at least forgotten, story put centre stage for the first time.

We will remember them

Between 2014 and 2016 UKPHA's 'Empire, Faith & War' project will commemorate the Sikh contribution and will include the creation of a documentary film, a commemorative publication, education packs for schools, and a mini touring exhibition.

A core aspect of the project will be the database of soldiers' and families' stories which will be created with the help of the community in the role of 'Citizen Historians'. The public will be encouraged to either discover more about their own ancestors who fought, or to 'Adopt a Hero', with help from online guides and other resources.

Crucially this will also include uncovering the lives of those left behind – the wives, mothers and others who waited anxiously for loved ones to return.

In this way, with the public's help, UKPHA will collect and share the stories of Sikh combatants and their families, creating new history to enable the world to remember the story of the Sikhs and the First World War.

Exhibition highlights

The exhibition itself is the centrepiece of SOAS's own centenary commemorations and will also serve as a 'recruiting sergeant' for UKPHA's community-driven effort to create new history, as the public will be encouraged to sign up as Citizen Historians.

The story of Sikhs in the First World War will be told through original artefacts including unpublished photographs and drawings, newspapers and comics, postcards, stunning works of art, uniforms, gallantry medals, and folk songs sung by the wives left at home. It will also feature a unique album of x-rays of wounded Indian soldiers' injuries by kind permission of The Royal Collection, Windsor.

It offers a unique opportunity to learn about this largely unknown aspect of the war and features:

- a cinema zone featuring rare archive film footage including of the first Sikh fighter pilot
- sound recordings of Sikh POWs captured on the Western Front
- The Trench kids' activity zone and a Wall of Remembrance
- a pre-story section including original artefacts from the days of the Sikh Empire
- a series of associated Sunday Symposiums featuring expert speakers