

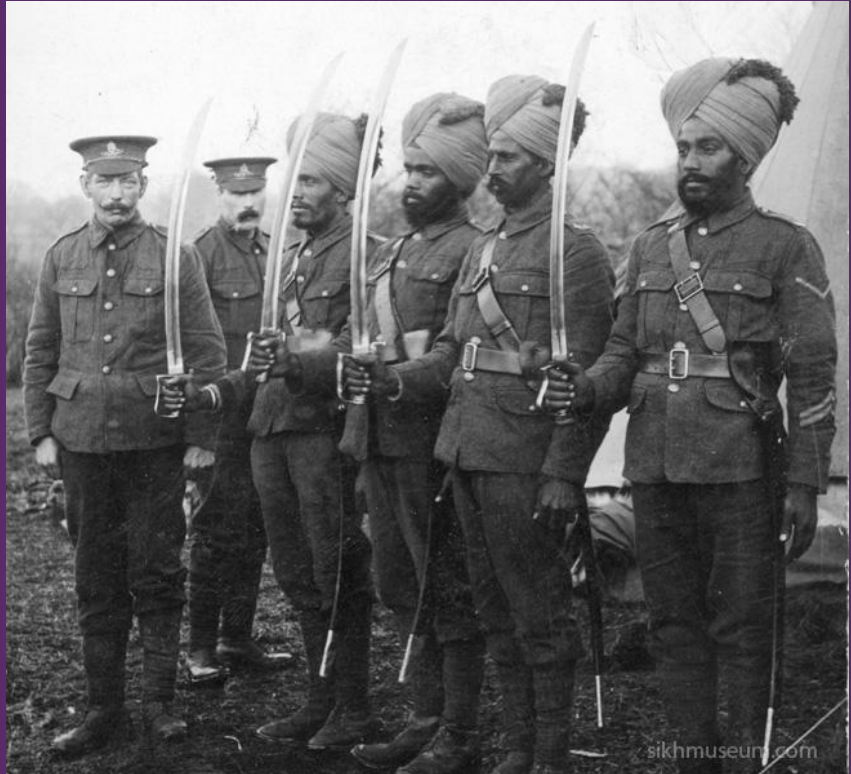
INDO-CANADIAN SOLDIERS IN WORLD WAR I

Sikh-Canadian Military Service

The Sikhs have a long tradition of military service, rooted in the 15th century foundations of the Sikh religion, when Sikhs battled the oppressive Mughal empire. In 1851, the Sikhs, recognized for their bravery and skill in battle, were absorbed into the British Indian Army, and were instrumental in backing the British East India Company during the Indian Rebellion of 1857.

In the 19th Century, Sikh regiments fought for the British empire across Africa, the Middle East and Asia. Their service continued into both world wars. While Sikhs made up only 2% of the total Indian population, 22% of the 161 000 troops serving in the British India Army during World War I were Sikh. During World War II, more than 300 000 Sikhs from India served for the Allies – a figure disproportionately large for their small population.

In fact, the first Indians to ever visit Canada were Sikh soldiers for the British empire. The first group passed through Canada in 1897 on the way to Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee, and a second group visited in 1902 with a military contingent traveling to Edward VII's coronation. Of the Sikh immigrants who began to arrive in British Columbia from 1904 onward, most were former soldiers.



Sikh Allied soldiers

1915: "The Great War"

Archives show that 10 Indo-Canadian men enlisted in the Canadian Army during WWI, also known as "The Great War". One of these men was Muslim, another was likely a Hindu, and the remaining eight all carried the Sikh surname Singh (though they were not related to each other).

To date, very few details, and no photos, of the Sikh WWI soldiers have been discovered. But an in-the-works documentary film, *Canadian Soldier Sikhs: A Little Story in a Big War*, has uncovered several interesting details about this little-known chapter of Indo-Canadian history.

One of the soldiers, John Baboo Singh, was based in Winnipeg, and had an Irish-American wife and young daughter. He was wounded at Vimy Ridge in 1917 and discharged, later resettling in B.C. Two others were killed in action and buried in Europe. Sunta Gougersingh, who was part of the Quebec Regiment, was killed in Belgium in 1915, and rests in La Laiterie Military Cemetery. Lashman Singh was part of the 75th Battalion. He was killed in 1918 in France and buried in the Arras Road British Cemetery. A third man, Buckam Singh, was wounded in action in Belgium and later died from tuberculosis at a Canadian military hospital. Of all that is known about the WWI Indo-Canadian soldiers, the most substantial details have come to light about Buckam Singh.



Buckam Singh

Buckam Singh was born in the Punjab region of India in 1893. At age 10, he was married to Pritam Kaur, a practice that was then common in Sikh families. Marriages were sometimes arranged when the couple were still children, but they would not be allowed to see or live with each other until adulthood. Buckam Singh never had the chance to live with his wife as a married couple - he left India for British Columbia in 1907, when he was only 14 years old. There he worked in the mining industry. In 1912 he relocated to Ontario and found work as a farmhand. This was unusual, as very few Indians lived outside of Western Canada at this time. Buckam is in fact one of the earliest recorded Sikhs to have lived in Ontario.

On August 4, 1914, Great Britain declared war on Germany. One day later, Canada joined the war. As subjects of the Empire, it was the first time in history that Canadian forces fought as their own distinct unit. At first, nonwhites were excluded from the Canadian military - a group of 50 black men from Nova Scotia who tried to enlist in 1914 were told "this is a white man's war," and turned away. By 1915, the government was in need of more recruits and relaxed the rules to allow some minorities, including blacks, Natives and Japanese Canadians, to enlist. But they were kept in racially segregated units that camped separately from the mainstream Canadian battalions.



DESCRIPTION OF <u>Buk Am Singh</u>	
Apparent Age	<u>22</u> years <u>4</u> months. <small>(To be determined according to the instructions given in the Regulations for Army Medical Services.)</small>
Height	<u>5 ft. 7</u> ins.
Chest measure in front	Girth when fully expanded <u>34</u> ins.
	Range of expansion <u> </u> ins.
Complexion	<u>Swarthy</u>
Eyes	<u>Brown</u>
Hair	<u>Black</u>
Religious Denominations	Church of England <u>XX</u>
	Presbyterian <u> </u>
	Methodist <u> </u>
	Baptist or Congregationalist <u> </u>
	Other Protestants <u> </u> <small>(Denomination to be stated.)</small>
Roman Catholic <u> </u>	
Jewish <u> </u>	

Singh's Attestation papers

In 1915, at age 22, Buckam Singh enlisted with the Canadian Expeditionary Force. Though the reason is unknown, he and the other enlisted Sikhs were put into mainstream units with white soldiers. His attestation papers show that his complexion was listed as "swarthy," and though he was Sikh, he was recorded as belonging to the Church of England. This is because at the time, no religions outside of Christianity and Judaism were officially recognized by the Canadian military. Thus, anyone from another religious tradition was by default assigned to the Church of England.

On August 27, 1915, Buckam shipped out from Montreal with the 59th Infantry Battalion, arriving in England on September 5. From there, he was transferred to the 39th Reserve Battalion. Buckam arrived in Belgium in January, 1916, and was again transferred to the 20th Battalion, where he would stay for the remainder of his service.

The 20th Battalion was assigned to the 4th Brigade, 2nd Division of the Canadian Corps on the Ypres Salient, near Flanders. The section was subjected to almost continuous shelling. Bitterly cold days in the dead of winter were made worse by rampant disease and infections such as trench foot. There were many injuries and casualties. In June, 1916, Buckam suffered a gunshot wound to the head, which was treated at a Convalescent Depot in Boulogne.

About a month later, he was released from the clinic and rejoined his field duties with the 20th Battalion. In July, Buckam was again injured when a bullet entered his knee bone and shattered his leg. He was sent to the No. 3 Canadian General Hospital at Boulogne, which was run by the poet and physician Lt. Colonel John McCrae, famously known for his eloquent war memorial poem, "In Flanders Fields." Buckam's injury was recorded in a newspaper article by the Toronto Daily Star:

PTE. BUKUM SINGH, the first Sikh to enlist with an Ontario battalion, has been twice wounded since he went to the front. He was engaged as a farm hand for W. H. Moore, of Rosebank, Ont., when the call came for active service. He was reported injured for the first time two months ago. His name appears among the wounded in to-day's list. Bukum Singh came to Canada from Punjab in 1907. After mining in British Columbia, he came to Toronto about two years ago. He went overseas with a Kingston battalion.

The Toronto Daily Star, August 9, 1916

While recovering from his wounds, Buckam began suffering from serious lung problems. These were later revealed to be caused by tuberculosis, a disease which killed an estimated 100 million people in the 20th Century. TB was easily spread in confined spaces such as army barracks, and was a common cause of death for soldiers. In May, 1917, Buckam returned to Canada aboard the hospital ship HMHS Letitia, which docked in Nova Scotia. By this time, he was gravely ill. He traveled by train to Ontario, where he was discharged from active service and sent to the Freeport Sanatorium Hospital in Kitchener, Ontario. There, Buckam suffered from debilitating illness for one year before passing away in August 1919, at age 25.

Buckam Singh was buried in Mount Hope Cemetery in Kitchener. His is the only known gravesite of an Indo-Canadian soldier who served in WW I. Since his story has become known, annual memorial services are now held at his grave. Buckam's Victory medal has also been discovered. Though Victory medals were issued to anyone who served in World War I, it is the only surviving medal issued to a Sikh-Canadian soldier, thus making it a rare and prized artifact of Canadian history.



Gravesite of Buckam Singh



Victory medal of Private Buckam Singh

