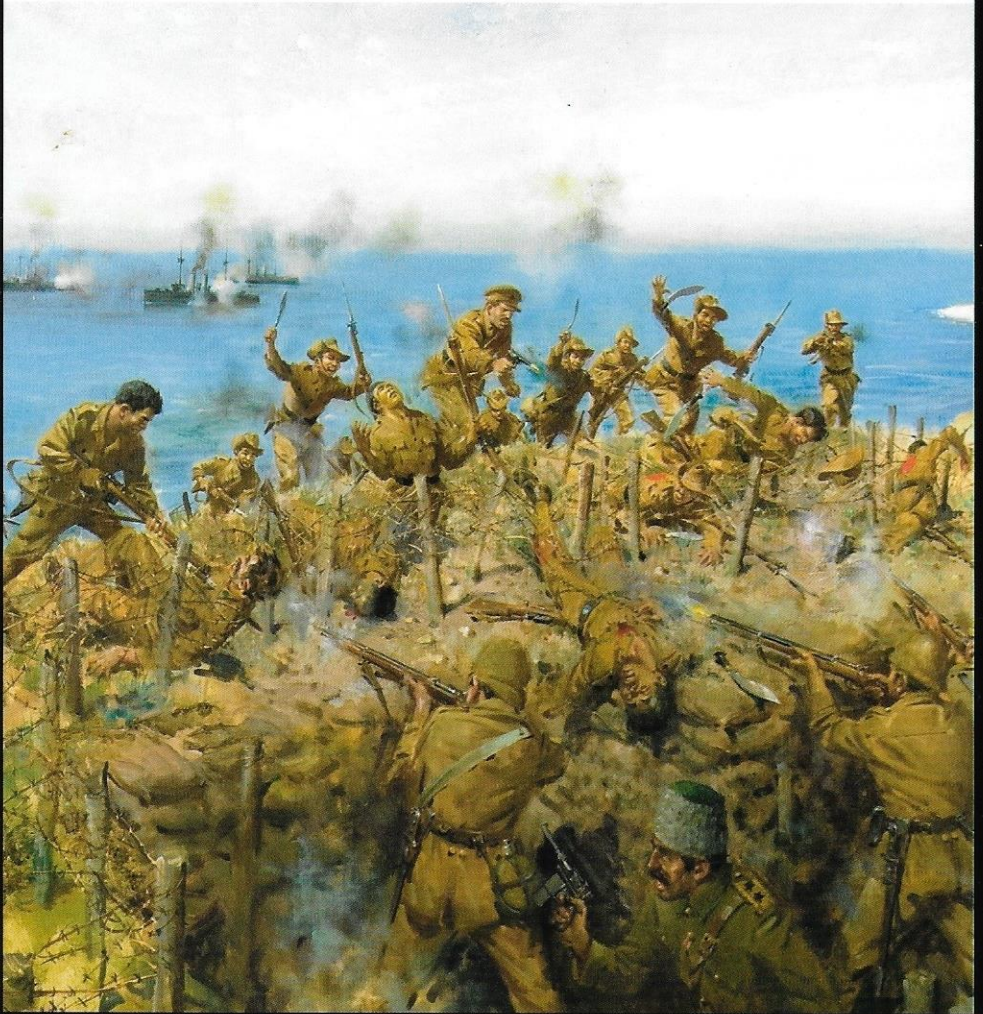
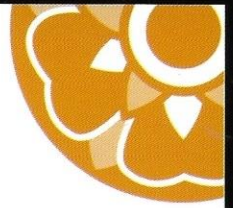


# fIBIS

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# GURKHAS IN THE FIRST WORLD WAR

CRAIG LAWRENCE

The First World War was a defining event for the Gurkhas, not just because it was the first time that these proud warriors had fought on European soil, but because it was their first exposure to 'modern' warfare. Despite being poorly prepared and ill equipped for the horrors of the trenches, they were to make a lasting impression, winning three Victoria Crosses and numerous other gallantry awards. But the reputation they earned and the many accolades they received came at a cost: of the 90,780 Gurkhas who fought for the Crown during the Great War, 20,000 became casualties. Of these 6,168 died. This article highlights some of the actions in which the Gurkhas played a key role: on the Western Front and further afield on the Gallipoli Peninsula and in Mesopotamia.

There were ten Gurkha regiments at the outbreak of the war, each comprised of two battalions. Their primary role until then had been maintaining the security of British India. They were therefore equipped and trained for frontier operations against small groups of determined tribesmen, not for massed attacks against highly disciplined, well-equipped European troops. Two divisions deployed from India to support British operations in Europe, both containing Gurkha units. The Meerut Division had four Gurkha infantry units (1/9th, 2/2nd, 2/3rd and 2/8th Gurkhas), whilst the Lahore Division contained only two (1/1st and 1/4th Gurkhas). Both divisions formed part of the Indian Corps, which was deployed to reinforce the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) to the south of Ypres.

On 29 October 1914, 2/8th became the first Gurkhas to be sent into the line. It proved to be a sobering experience; within twenty-four hours, the Germans had attacked, inflicting heavy casualties. By the evening of 30 October 1914, 4 British officers, 4 Gurkha officers and 146 Gurkha other ranks from the battalion had been killed; a further 3 British officers and 61 Gurkha other ranks had been wounded. Sadly, it was a story that was to repeat itself over the months that followed as the battalions settled into the attritional routine of trench warfare.





1/1st in France in 1915. Despite the horror of life in the trenches, the smiles in this photograph illustrate the bond that existed, then as now, between British and Gurkha officers.

The stalemate could not endure and on 10 March 1915 the Allies launched a major offensive. The plan was to try and seize the village of Neuve-Chappelle and then exploit beyond it to secure the Aubers Ridge which, heavily defended by the Germans, dominated the Allied positions. 2/3rd Gurkhas, as part of the Garhwal Brigade, were in the vanguard of the attack. As soon as the Allied artillery barrage lifted, they raced over the open ground separating them from the German trenches and, kukris drawn, secured the position, capturing Neuve-Chapelle. It was the first time on the Western Front that the German line had been broken and was, as the military historian Christopher Bullock notes, a 'brilliant success'. The follow-on force, which comprised the Dehra Dun Brigade and included 2/2nd and 1/9th Gurkhas, eventually pushed forward towards the Aubers Ridge but, as darkness fell, they were forced to occupy a hasty defensive position short of the ridgeline. The Germans then launched a massive counter-attack to try and retake Neuve-Chapelle. Comprised of some 16,000 men, it was a formidable force but the Dehra Dun Brigade held firm, inflicting some 3,000 casualties on the enemy. There were numerous acts of heroism. Rifleman Gane Gurung, for example, single-handedly

captured eight German soldiers whilst clearing one of the houses in the village. He was awarded the Indian Order of Merit for his bravery.

Six months later, on 25 September 1915, the Allied forces advanced in what would become known as the Battle of Loos. It was the 'big push' expected to break the German line. As ever, the Gurkhas were in the thick of it with both 2/8th and 2/3rd forming part of the assaulting Garhwal Brigade. Both battalions sustained dreadful casualties. 2/8th advanced and managed to clear a number of German trenches but their victory was short-lived. Isolated from the units on their flanks, they had little



Rifleman Kulbir Thapa

option but to fall back. In the single day's fighting, 2/8th's casualties amounted to 9 British officers, 8 Gurkha officers and 453 men; a further 166 men, many of whom later died, were taken prisoner. 2/3rd were mown down by German machine-guns as they tried to cross wire obstacles which the British artillery barrage had failed to breach. An officer and 38 men were sent out to cut a way through the wire but were all killed, with the exception of Rifleman Kulbir Thapa. Badly wounded, he started to crawl back towards the British positions but came across a soldier from the 2nd Leicestershire Regiment, also severely wounded. The British soldier urged Kulbir to save himself but Kulbir remained with him throughout the night and early the next morning started to carry him towards the Allied lines. Kulbir then stumbled across two wounded Gurkhas, both unable to walk. He dragged the British soldier into cover and then went back for the Gurkhas. One at a time, he carried them to the safety of the Allied lines before returning to collect the British soldier. All three survived and Kulbir became the first Gurkha to be awarded the Victoria Cross for his conspicuous bravery.

The Indian Corps was eventually withdrawn from operations in Europe in late Autumn 1915. By then, additional British and Canadian troops had begun to arrive on the Western Front and it was decided that the infantry of the Indian Corps would be better employed in Egypt, East Africa and Mesopotamia where the 'climate and general conditions would be more familiar to them, and contacts with India much easier'. The Corps' arrival on the Western Front in late October 1914 had prevented the Germans from breaking through the British defences and reaching the Channel ports. Its actions at Neuve-Chapelle had also clearly demonstrated that the



seemingly invincible Germans could be driven from their trenches. By the time it left the Western Front, the Indian Corps had sustained 25,000 casualties and eight of its members had been awarded the Victoria Cross. Although many regiments within the Corps distinguished themselves, the Gurkhas in particular established a reputation as the most fearsome and loyal of soldiers—indeed, General Sir James Wilcox, then commander of the Indian Corps, was unequivocal that the Gurkhas were his best soldiers.

In April 1915 a force of some 75,000 soldiers from Britain, France, New Zealand and Australia landed on the Gallipoli Peninsula in the South of Turkey. The intention was to seize the ground dominating the Dardanelles, the strip of water that connects the Mediterranean to the Black Sea, in order to open a sea route to Russia and to bring Constantinople (now Istanbul) within range of British warships. A previous attempt to take the straits with a purely naval force had failed after three British ships had hit mines and sunk. General Sir Ian Hamilton, the Commander of the Mediterranean Expeditionary Force, had asked for 100,000 men for the land operation but been given far fewer. An accomplished soldier, he was a veteran of the North West Frontier and recognised the value that Gurkhas would add in the hilly terrain of the Peninsula. He wrote to Lord Kitchener, then Secretary of State for War, in March 1915 requesting that he be given a brigade of Gurkhas. He got his wish and 29 Indian Infantry Brigade, which included three battalions of Gurkhas (1/5th, 1/6th and 2/10th), joined his force, albeit several days after the initial landings had taken place. 1/6th Gurkhas were the first battalion to arrive and had immediate impact, seizing a position which two British units had been unable to take. So impressed was Hamilton by the battalion's performance that he renamed the feature Gurkha Bluff.



6th Gurkhas in the trenches at Gallipoli, 1915

Hamilton then switched his focus to a feature known as Achi Baba which, lying to the north of Gurkha Bluff, dominated the beaches on which the Allied forces had landed. All three of 29 Indian Infantry Brigade's Gurkha battalions were committed to trying to take the feature but the Turks,

who also appreciated its tactical importance, held firm, inflicting tremendous casualties on the attacking forces. 1/5th lost 129 men and seven British officers within the first few hours of the attack with 1/6th sustaining 95 casualties.

In a separate operation 2/10th achieved a notable victory at Gully Ravine, scaling a sheer cliff to surprise the defending Turks. Notwithstanding the occasional success, the constant fighting took its toll. Within thirty-five days of arriving at Gallipoli, for example, 2/10th had lost three-quarters of its British officers and 40 per cent of its other ranks. The brigade was therefore pulled out of the line and given a month to recuperate on the Isle of Imbros, an Allied staging post for operations on the Gallipoli Peninsula.

By August 1915, 29 Indian Infantry Brigade was back in action, this time as part of a new offensive further to the north in the ANZAC (Australian and New Zealand Army Corps) area of operations. The plan was to seize the central Sari Bair massif in order to gain control of the Peninsula and isolate the Turkish forces that were causing so many problems down in the south. As Hamilton notes, 'the first step in the real push—the step which above all others was meant to count—was the night attack on the summits of the Sari Bair ridge'. But the night attack did not go as planned and, as dawn broke on 9 August 1915, Allied troops had still not reached the crest of the ridgeline. 1/6th Gurkhas, under the command of Major Cecil Allanson, were eventually launched at the Sari Bair feature, the highest of the ridgeline's peaks. The fighting was intense, with Gurkhas drawing their kukris and using their weapons as clubs as the ammunition ran out. Eventually, supported by two companies of the South Lancashires, 1/6th reached the top of the peak, driving the Turks down the far side. The Gurkhas pursued them until, mistaken for fleeing Turks, they were engaged by the guns of HMS *Colne*.

Once part of the ridgeline had been secured, the plan was that four battalions, under the command of General A. H. Baldwin, would then use the lodgement to exploit along the ridge, clearing



Major Cecil Allanson, under whose inspirational leadership the 6th Gurkhas succeeded in capturing the critical point of the Sari Bair Massif on 9 August 1915. A remarkable officer and superb athlete, Major Allanson held the Army record for the two miles for a number of years.



the enemy's positions. But Baldwin's battalions had lost their way during the night approach and never arrived. The Turks quickly counter-attacked, pushing the Gurkhas and reinforcements from the South Lancashires and the Wiltshires off the ridgeline and pinning them down on the mountainside. By this stage of the battle, all of 1/6th's British officers, except the medical officer (Captain Edward Phipson), were either dead or wounded and it was left to Subedar Major Gambirsing Pun to command the battalion as it withdrew. The next day the Turks counter-attacked in force, consolidating their defensive positions on top of the ridgeline and driving the Allies back down towards the beaches. Though wounded, Major Allanson survived the attack on Sari Bair. He was recommended for the Victoria Cross but eventually received the Distinguished Service Order (DSO) for his actions.

The Allied forces sustained 12,000 casualties in the failed operation but the number of casualties was to increase. By October 1915, it was apparent that additional forces would be necessary to defeat the Turkish defenders. As these could not be spared, Kitchener made the decision to withdraw from the Peninsula. In mid-January 1916 the last of the Mediterranean Expeditionary Force left Gallipoli. Over the course of the campaign, the Allied force had sustained some 205,000 casualties.

Gurkhas also found themselves fighting the Turks in Mesopotamia (modern-day Iraq) as part of a large British force deployed to secure access to Persia's oilfields. Advancing up from the Persian Gulf, the British initially made surprisingly good progress, defeating large Turkish forces at Shaiba, Nasiriya and Kut-al-Amara, a major Turkish stronghold about 200 miles east of Baghdad. Events took a turn for the worse when a British force commanded by Major-General Charlie Townshend encountered some 18,000 to 21,000 Turks and Arabs occupying a well-prepared defensive position amongst the ruins of the ancient city of Ctesiphon, 22 miles south of Baghdad. Townshend's force launched their attack on 22 November 1915 but, although they broke through the first line of trenches, they were unable to breach the second.

Outnumbered, outgunned and having sustained losses of some 4,600 men, Townshend ordered his force to withdraw back to Kut-al-Amara. The Turks followed in hot pursuit. Surrounded on three sides by the Tigris, Kut was in many ways an ideal place for Townshend's force to await the arrival of a relief column. However, despite repeated efforts, which involved 1/1st and 1/9th Gurkhas, the British were unable to break through the Turkish cordon. Attempts were made to resupply Townshend's beleaguered division by aircraft, the first time this was ever done, but it was a token effort given the size of Townshend's force. In April 1916, and using T. E.



Soldiers from 9th Gurkhas prepare for crossing the Tigris in February 1917 in order to defeat the Turkish defences at Kut. The operation was made particularly difficult because not only was the river in spate following heavy rains but the opposing banks were covered by enemy machine-guns.

Lawrence (Lawrence of Arabia) as an intermediary, the British even offered the Turkish commander £2 million to let Townshend's force go free but the offer was 'disdainfully refused'. On 29 April 1916 Townshend surrendered unconditionally to the Turkish General Khalil Pasha.

In August 1916 General Frederick Maude was appointed as the commander of the army in Mesopotamia. On 13 December 1916 he went on the offensive, resuming the advance to Baghdad at the head of an army of some 165,000 men. About 110,000 of his force were Indian and Gurkha, and included 1/2nd, 4/4th, 1/7th, 2/9th and 1/10th Gurkhas. Following Townshend's surrender, the Turks had occupied Kut, preparing defensive positions either side of the Tigris. Maude realised that he would need to clear Kut before he could continue the advance to Baghdad. His plan was to advance up both sides of the river and then, having pushed the Turks back on the west bank, move additional forces across the river in order to attack the rear of the Turks' main defensive position. It was an audacious plan, particularly as the river had swollen following heavy rains. On the morning of 23 February 1917, D Company of 2/9th Gurkhas, commanded by Major George Campbell Wheeler, and a detachment from 1/2nd, commanded by Lieutenant C. G. Toogood, succeeded in establishing tentative footholds on the opposing bank despite heavy enemy resistance. The Norfolk Regiment also managed to secure a foothold in a slightly less exposed position, allowing the remainder of 2/9th and 1/2nd to cross the river and expand the bridgehead. By early afternoon a boat bridge had been established, allowing



Maude's forces to attack the rear of the Turkish defences. Realising that their position had become untenable and recognising that they were in danger of being cut off, the Turks withdrew towards Baghdad. It had been a brilliant victory but had come at a cost with 1/2nd and 2/9th losing 98 killed and 132 wounded. For conspicuous bravery Major Wheeler, who led with such determination despite sustaining a bayonet wound to the head, was awarded the VC.

Further north in Palestine, General Sir Edmund Allenby, who had taken over command of the British forces in Egypt in June 1917, also made good use of his Gurkha troops, which included 1/1st, 2/3rd, 3/3rd, 2/7th, 1/8th and 4/11th. The battalions distinguished themselves in numerous battles under Allenby's command with Rifleman Karnabadaur Rana, then only 19 and serving in 2/3rd Gurkhas, being awarded a Victoria Cross for his actions at El Kefr on 10 April 1918. Interestingly, a detachment of 30 soldiers from 2/3rd Gurkhas also served as volunteers with T. E. Lawrence and his irregular army of Arabs. Along with a detachment of Indian troops, they provided mortar and machine-gun teams to support his tribal forces in their fight to defeat the Turks.

On 30 October 1918 the Turkish Army eventually surrendered. Though the British achieved success in Mesopotamia, it came at a high cost: 30,000 of the 250,000 Allied troops who took part died.

The First World War formally ended with the signing of the Treaty of Versailles on 11 November 1918. For many regiments in the British Army, the subsequent decades would be relatively quiet until the outbreak of the Second World War. This was not the case for the Gurkhas; it was 'business as usual' for those policing the Empire and the Gurkhas were kept fully employed.



Soldiers from 2/9th Gurkhas mounting guard in Mesopotamia after the surrender of the Turkish Army on 30 October 1918.

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Front cover: Terence Cuneo, *Sari Bair* —1st Battalion 6th Gurkha Rifles led by Major C. J. L. Allanson attacking the Turks on the crest of Sari Bair ridge, Gallipoli, 9th August 1916 (detail), Gurkha Museum, Winchester.

Back cover: *Hugh Gough, 1st Viscount Gough*, after Sir Francis Grant. National Portrait Gallery. Creative Commons.

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