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The Evolution of the Sikh Soldier

by Hugh Pearse

So much admiration has been excited by the distinguished conduct of the Sikh regiments of the Indian Army in the recent Frontier campaign, that some account of the origin of these fine fighting men may be found interesting. To those unacquainted with Indian history it may be difficult to realise that the Sikh soldier of to-day, so brave in the charge or in the assault, so steady in retreat, so devoted, in spite of race and creed, to his English officer, should be the representative of the fanatical and savage foemen who, but fifty years ago, shook the power of Britain in half a dozen bloody battles, and earned almost as much infamy by the cruelty with which they treated our wounded as honour by the tenacity of their resistance.

The evolution of the Sikh soldier dates, however, from a much earlier period, and its history is very strange.

The Sikhs, it must be remembered, were in the beginning no nation, but merely a weak and persecuted religious community, formed by a succession of priestly rulers, known as the ten Gurus, from the Hindus who desired to free themselves from the pretensions of the Brahmans, and to find in a reformed communion a purer morality and that religious equality which had been taken from them by the development of the system of caste. This being an account of the Sikh soldier, it must suffice to say that their national religion dates from the period in the life of Nanak, its founder, when (as his disciples believe) he was carried by angels into the Divine Presence, and re-

ceived a mandate to preach the doctrine of the true God on earth. Nanak was born in the year 1469 near the city of Lahore, and had attained manhood before this miraculous occurrence, which took place therefore towards the end of the fifteenth century. Passing briefly over the gradual increase in numbers and strength of the Sikhs, we arrive, some two centuries later, at Govind Singh, the tenth and last of the Gurus, who took upon himself the task of uniting the scattered disciples of his creed into a military nation. With this object Govind Singh resuscitated the disused baptismal rite of the Sikhs, the administrator and the recipient of the baptism both shouting to the assembled disciples the battle-cry, as it really was rather than a profession of faith, "*Wah! Guruji ka Khalsa* (victory to the Khalsa of the Guru)," which may perhaps be best interpreted as "Victory to the belongings (or followers) of God."

Govind Singh was assassinated in the year 1708, by which time the Sikhs had become a powerful and warlike people, strongly united by the consciousness that by unity and vigour alone could they hope to hold their own against the surrounding power of Islam; but they had yet to await the coming of the man who was to weld their confederacies into a nation of warriors, to form for them a policy, and by long years of war and conquest, to acquire for them a kingdom whose limits should be respected by the Afghans on the north and by the all-devouring English on the south.

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At length, in the year 1780, was born at Goojerat, Runjit Singh, destined to become a great ruler of men, and to be deemed worthy by many of the designation of the Napoleon of the East.

Runjit Singh was the son of Mahan Singh, chief of one of the least powerful of the twelve confederacies in which the Sikhs were at that time embodied, and, succeeding his father at the age of eleven years, devoted a persistent and unswerving ambition to the task of gradually bringing confederacy after confederacy under his rule, until he became the absolute monarch of the Sikhs and of the kingdom of the Punjab.

By the year 1809 Runjit Singh, though still far from the fulfilment of his ambition, had become the most powerful of the Sikh chieftains, and it was in that year that he learned from a trifling incident the value of the European system of military discipline. The weak Indian escort of a British mission was attacked without the slightest warning by a fanatical band of Sikhs, who had been irritated by the religious observances of the Sepoys. The ease with which the latter, though taken at so great a disadvantage, repulsed their assailants, greatly impressed the Maharaja, and decided him on introducing into his army the discipline which had defeated his most formidable soldiers. It was the execution of this design which enabled Runjit Singh to consolidate his power, and to add to his dominions those outlying provinces which he conquered from their former owners.

The old Sikh army, from which the new one was to be formed, consisted principally of cavalry, the only arm held in consideration by the Sikhs, raised and paid under a feudal system, each chieftain furnishing his

followers with arms and horses. The Sikh weapon was the sword, which, when mounted, they used with great skill. Bows and arrows were carried by the infantry, and a few matchlocks, but in the early days of Runjit Singh's career the Sikhs disliked fire-arms and artillery of all descriptions, and possessed little or no skill in their use.

The rank and file of the unreformed Khalsa army have been vividly described by Sir Henry Lawrence in that admirable work *THE ADVENTURES OF AN OFFICER IN THE PUNJAB*; but it should be remembered that the description is put into the mouth of a Mahomedan soldier, and is consequently highly unflattering. "Go to the Bazar," says Chand Khan; "take any dirty naked scoundrel, twist up his hair, give him a lofty turban and a clean vest, comb out and lengthen his beard, and gird his loins with a yellow *cummerbund*; put a clumsy sword by his side and a long spear in his hand; set him on a strong, bony, two-year-old horse, and you have a passable Sikh."

As is often the case in irregular armies, and particularly in the irregular armies of the East, the squalor of the bulk of the Sikh levies was strongly contrasted with the picturesque appearance of some of Maharaja Singh's cavaliers. "Many of the irregular levies," writes Sir Lepel Griffin, "were well-to-do country gentlemen, the sons, relations, or clansmen of the chiefs, who placed them in the field and maintained them there, and whose personal credit was concerned in their splendid appearance. There was no uniformity in their dress. Some wore a shirt of mail, with a helmet inlaid with gold and a *kalgi*, or heron's plume; others were gay with the many-coloured splendour of velvet and silk, with pink or yellow muslin turbans, and gold-embroidered belts carrying

their sword and powder-horn. All wore, at the back, the small round shield of tough buffalo hide." If the attire and armament of the men-at-arms were so gorgeous and picturesque it will readily be believed that the officers and chiefs carried Eastern magnificence to an extreme pitch.

It has been stated that the Sikhs held the cavalry arm alone in favour, disliking the artillery service and holding the infantry in contempt. One section, however, of the ancient Khalsa army, whose desperate courage commanded the highest respect, was accustomed to fight principally on foot. There were the *Nihangs*, or *Akalis*, a fanatical body of devotees who were dressed in dark blue, in accordance with the laws of Govind Singh, the last Guru; their other distinctive signs, says Sir Lepel Griffin, were a knife stuck in the turban, a sword slung round their neck, and a wooden club.

The Akalis, or Immortals, though little better than drunken savages, possessed a semi-sacred character, and though frequently a source of personal danger to the Maharaja from their unbridled lawlessness, often by their headlong valour turned the fortune of a doubtful day. It was the attack of the Akalis on Mr. Metcalfe's escort, already described, that first made clear to the Maharaja the power of discipline, but in addition to this unintentional service they performed many others. A brief record of two of them may serve to show how the Khalsa army fought in the early days.

The ancient city and district of Mooltan formed, at the beginning of the present century, a semi-independent Afghan province. From the year 1806 until 1818 Runjit Singh made repeated attempts to capture the city and to annex the province. In 1816 an irregular attack on Mooltan, led by the Akali leader, Phula Singh, met

with such unexpected success that the city would have fallen could the attack have been pressed home; and on June 2nd, 1818, Mooltan was at last captured. The Sikh Army had previously been repulsed with heavy loss, eighteen hundred men having fallen on one occasion alone. Sadhu Singh, an Akali, determined to eclipse the feat of Phula Singh, rushed with a few desperate followers into an outwork of the fort, and held it. The Sikh army, seeing this success, advanced to the assault and captured the fortress, the gallant Afghan Nawab, with five of his sons and one Amazonian daughter, falling, sword in hand, in the breach.

Even more signal were the services of the Akalis at the great battle of Theri, or Nowshera, fought in the year 1823, which finally decided the superiority of the Sikhs over the Afghans. At this time Yar Mahomed Khan, the Afghan governor of the Peshawar province, had come to terms of subordinate alliance with Runjit Singh. Mahomed Azim Khan, brother of Yar Mahomed Khan, and prime-minister of Cabul, disapproved of this alliance, and declared war against the Maharaja, raising the wild border tribes against the Sikhs by proclaiming a *jehad*. The Sikh army had, at this time, been for about a year in the hands of Generals Ventura and Allard, officers of Napoleon's army, who had been employed by Runjit Singh to introduce the European system of discipline. Ventura had trained a considerable force of infantry, and Allard a brigade of cavalry.

The battle was fought on both banks of the Cabul river, the Maharaja commanding in person on the left bank, where he was confronted by the fanatical Yusafzais. Here it was that the battle raged most fiercely and most doubtfully. and gold-embroidered belts carrying

Victory at first seemed to declare against the Sikhs, for, in spite of all the desperate exertions of Runjit Singh, a panic spread among the troops of the Khalsa. Several unsuccessful attempts to drive the enemy from their position had exhausted their strength and broken their spirits, and a defeat seemed inevitable. In vain Runjit Singh threatened and implored his soldiers; in vain he adjured them by God and their Guru to advance; in vain, dismounting from his horse, he rushed forward, sword in hand, calling on his troops to follow him. At this critical moment the black banner of Phula Singh and his Akalis moved up the slope of the disputed hill; the fanatic chief and his desperate followers, five hundred in number, advanced to the attack. Phula Singh had, earlier in the day, been struck from his horse by a musket-ball, which had shattered his knee, and had been carried to the rear, apparently disabled. Now, seated on an elephant, he again led the way, shouting an invitation to the whole army to follow him and his men. The army did not respond to the call, but Phula Singh and the Akalis rushed to the assault. The wild Afghans waited not for their attack, but streamed down the hill to become the assailants. At this moment, it is said, Phula Singh ordered his men to dismount and let their horses go. This was done, and, strange to say, the horses rushed into the ranks of the Yusafzais, throwing them into confusion. The Akalis seized the opportunity and charged home, sword in hand, piercing to the heart of the Afghan position. Encouraged by this exploit the Sikh army again advanced, and, in consequence, drove up the hill a body of some twelve to fifteen hundred Afghans who were now actually below the Akalis. Finding themselves thus assailed in front by the main body, and cut off by the Akalis

from their line of retreat, these Afghans endeavoured to escape round the flanks of the Akalis; but the redoubtable Phula Singh had no intention of allowing them to escape so easily. So vigorously did he bar their retreat that at least half of them were slain, the Akalis also being reduced to little more than one hundred and fifty men. This exploit so fired the Sikh army that they now advanced and assaulted the main Afghan position, still led by Phula Singh, who was eventually killed after performing prodigies of endurance and valour. The Sikhs gained a complete though dearly bought victory, no less than five thousand of the Khalsa army having been killed or wounded. The Afghan loss was believed to be nearly ten thousand men.¹

To form from these brave but undisciplined levies an army, trained and disciplined on the European model, was the task to which the great Maharaja now set himself. To diminish the importance of the cavalry, to form an efficient artillery, and to induce the Sikhs to enter the despised infantry service, was a feat which taxed all Runjit Singh's influence over the minds of his subjects. In this matter, as in all others, he approached his object with great subtlety and caution. Colonel Gardner, one of his officers, from whose manuscript memoirs the account of the battle of Theri has been compiled, thus describes the conversion of the army. "When the Maharaja explained his intentions, the old troops took umbrage, resenting the proposed form of instruction and the introduction of money payments; they had formerly been rewarded by grant of land and by plunder, and cash payments had been considered ignoble. Runjit Singh was not the man to b

¹ From the notes of Colonel Gardner, of Maharaja Runjit Singh's service. See also *THE REIGNING FAMILY OF LAHORE*, a work based on information supplied by Gardner.

turned from his purpose. He used to favour the new men in every way; used to send for them in the morning, distribute food from his own table among them after their parades, with which he would affect to be highly pleased, and would administer *bakshish* to each with his own hand. The sight of the money was too much for the remainder of the army, who soon held no more aloof from the new discipline coupled with regular payment." An attempt of the Maharaja to force his troops to adopt the round cap of the Bengal Sepoy did not succeed, his own Sikhs fraternising with the Gurkha battalion, which they had been ordered to compel at the bayonet's point to adopt the cap. In all other respects the Sikh infantry were dressed and equipped like those of the Company's army.

Aided by his four foreign generals, Ventura, Allard, Court, and Avitabile, and by some fifty other European officers of lower rank who entered his service from time to time, Runjit Singh succeeded in converting his unwieldy and undisciplined host into a well-equipped and well-trained regular army of thirty thousand men with nearly two hundred guns; in addition to which were the irregular levies of the chiefs, whose number is estimated by Sir Lepel Griffin at another thirty thousand. The regular infantry, first trained by Generals Ventura, Court, and Avitabile, imbibed an iron discipline, which rendered them a most formidable force; while the artillery, trained for the most part by General Court and Colonel Gardner, developed an extraordinary devotion to their guns and a high skill in their use, both facts being amply proved at Sobraon and Chillianwalla, and indeed in all the battles of the two wars in which our army met and defeated the Sikh legions.

The gallant and amiable Allard,

who had rendered conspicuous service at Theri, brought the Sikh cavalry to a high pitch of perfection; but after his death, which occurred in 1839, shortly before that of the Maharaja that arm rapidly deteriorated. After Runjit Singh's death the army grew much stronger in numbers and as much weaker in discipline, ere long taking the reins of power into its own hands and violently removing one ruler after another. Finally it brought about its own destruction, and the annexation of the Punjab, by crossing the Sutlej with the avowed intention of capturing Delhi or even Calcutta. On the outbreak of war the Sikh army numbered eighty-eight thousand men, with three hundred and eighty field guns; but many of the latter were of inferior quality.

Of the military quality of the soldiers of the Khalsa it is difficult to speak too highly. The veterans of Runjit Singh's army might in many respects be compared with those of Napoleon. Inured to hardship by long years of service and led by officers who had risen from their ranks by force of soldierly merit, it need cause no surprise that they triumphed over all their Asiatic enemies. Like the Napoleonic soldiers also they were haughty and oppressive to their civilian countrymen, brutal and rapacious as invaders, relentless slaughterers of the defenceless wounded in the day of battle. These were dark blots on the fame of a warlike race, but, as history shows, by no means peculiar to the Sikhs.

One last parallel may be mentioned between the Grand Armies of the Khalsa and of France; both were fated to meet defeat and destruction at the hands of England.

In the two wars which followed the invasion of British India by the Sikhs both sides suffered heavy losses, but those of the vanquished were terrible.

It is probable that no estimate can be considered accurate, but careful writers state that the Sikhs lost between twelve and fifteen thousand men at the battle of Sobraon alone, on which occasion the merciless carnage inflicted on the flying Sikhs by our horse-artillery may be considered as condign punishment for the slaughter of our wounded in the previous battles. In the second war the doubtful and bloody battle of Chillianwalla was fought, in which it is undeniable that the more skilful generalship was shown by the Sikhs, though our national tenacity was rewarded by the possession of the field of battle. Finally, on February the 22nd, 1849, the battle of Gujerat, fought on our part coolly and scientifically, broke for ever the power of the Khalsa, but brought no disgrace on the training of Runjit Singh and his European generals.

The rapidity with which these valiant and haughty enemies accepted British rule is justly considered one of the chief triumphs of our Indian administration ; a triumph peacefully effected by the efforts of that noble brotherhood of military and civil servants of the Crown into whose charge the Land of the Five Rivers so fortunately fell. It was well for England that, at one time and in one province she had working for her such men as Henry and John Lawrence, Robert Montgomery, Herbert Edwardes, John Nicholson, Neville and Crawford Chamberlain, James Abbott, Lake, Becher, James, Reynell Taylor, and many others of like nature. It was well for England that for eight years after the annexation of the Punjab these great men and their fellows had laboured without ceasing to give to that war-worn land peace, prosperity, and content, and that they had succeeded. The merits of English rule in India can need no further

testimony than the fact that eight short years had sufficed to convert the Punjab from our most dangerous foe to our most staunch supporter.

Thus it was that the year 1857 saw the new birth of the troops of the Khalsa, called again into being by the trust of Lawrence, and led to the re-capture of Delhi by their own most dreaded enemy in days gone by, John Nicholson.

The story of the Sikh and Pathan levies of the Punjab, and of the deeds they wrought for England, has often been told and can here receive but brief notice. Suffice it to say that it was by the work of John Lawrence, by his courageous and persistent influence, and by the constant stream of reinforcements sent by him from the Punjab, that Delhi fell when it did fall ; and that, until that day, the fate of England in India trembled in the balance. How loyally and bravely the soldiers of the Khalsa, and above all the Sikh artillerymen, who showed themselves as efficient and as staunch as our own glorious gunners, fought for us in the memorable siege, should never be forgotten. Those who realise that John Lawrence saved our Indian Empire, must remember also that he did that deed in great part by the hands of his Sikh soldiers ; and those who admire the deed and praise the doer must thank also the living weapon which he used. Acute indeed was the crisis when Lawrence decided to trust the Sikhs, and, when all that hung on his decision is remembered, let no one wonder that for a while he hesitated, until the bold yet wise counsels of his younger advisers prevailed. When next a great emergency falls on the ruler of a British province may he have counsellors such as John Nicholson, Herbert Edwardes, and Neville Chamberlain.

A most interesting circumstance is

connected with John Lawrence's action when his decision was taken. There had been, as is well known, certain differences between himself and his brother, Sir Henry, as to the manner of treating the Sikh chiefs. To these dispossessed potentates Henry Lawrence was ever inclined to be very tender in pity for their fallen estate; while John Lawrence, aware of their many faults while in power, was disposed to bear hardly upon them. Now, however, ruling the Punjab in the room of Sir Henry, John Lawrence acted in the very spirit of his brother. Having, as a first step, initiated those wise measures by which the disloyal Bengal troops in the Punjab were disarmed, and the rebellious overwhelmed, Lawrence sent letters to the various chiefs who had fallen into disgrace in the war of 1848. He urged them to retrieve their characters, and come in at once with their retainers, naming the number of men to be brought by each. The measure met with complete success, and, as the chiefs joined him, Lawrence organised their levies and sent them off to Delhi under carefully selected English officers.

From these Sikh feudal levies, from the old soldiers of the Khalsa, from the wild frontier tribesmen of all regions from Peshawar to Moqltan, and even from our old enemies the Afghans, Lawrence and his lieutenants raised that new army of the Punjab which first helped to destroy the rebellious Bengal army, and then took its place.

The rising at Meerut occurred on Sunday, May 10th, 1857, and the southward march of Lawrence's reinforcements began with, what seems to us, almost miraculous promptitude, though, to the fiery impatience of John Nicholson, there had appeared to be an intolerable delay. On June 9th the Guides arrived before Delhi, having marched five hundred and

eighty miles in twenty-two days, in the very hottest season of the Indian summer, a feat which has never been equalled in any army. By July 1st three thousand two hundred troops had been sent from the Punjab, to be followed by regiment after regiment, in rapid succession, so long as reinforcements were required.

All who read these pages know the story of the capture of Delhi. There is no brighter page in our history; and many will echo the words of a brave man who fought there at the head of one of these very levies furnished by the loyal Punjab,—Hodson of Hodson's Horse: "History will do justice to the constancy and fortitude of the handful of Englishmen who have for so many months of desperate weather, amid the greatest toil and hardship, resisted and finally defeated the most strenuous exertions of an entire army, trained by ourselves, and supplied with all but exhaustless munitions of war, laid up by ourselves for the maintenance of our Empire. I venture to aver that no other nation in the world would have remained here (before Delhi) or have avoided defeat had they done so. A nation which could conquer a country like the Punjab so recently with an Hindustani army, and then turn the energies of the conquered Sikhs to subdue the very army by which they were tamed; which could fight out a position like Peshawar for years in the very teeth of the hostile tribes; and then, when suddenly deprived of the regiments which effected this, could unhesitatingly employ those very tribes to disarm and quell those regiments when in mutiny,—a nation which could do this is destined indeed to rule the world."

The famous Hodson's Horse, a specimen of the Punjab levies, was actually raised, equipped, and trained while serving before Delhi: an ex-

perience which few cavalry regiments can have undergone. In its ranks, Afghans, Sikhs, and Punjabi Mahomedans vied with one another in devoted service to Hodson. The uniform of these hastily raised troops consisted mostly of the now familiar *bharki*; but Hodson's Horse wore, as a difference, a scarlet sash over the shoulder, and a turban of the same colour, gaining thereby the nickname of the Flamingos.

Though less conspicuous than those of the besiegers of Delhi, the services of the Sikh force raised and commanded by General Van Cortlandt also deserve notice, if only on account of the history of its commander. Van Cortlandt had for many years served Runjit Singh, and was the only one of his European officers who was permitted to enter the British service on the annexation of the Punjab. He had loyally supported Herbert Edwardes in his famous march against Mooltan, and showed such conspicuous gallantry and power of character during the second Sikh war as to be entrusted with an independent command in the Mutiny. General Van Cortlandt's levy was known as the Haryana Field Force, and did excellent service in suppressing the rebellion in a wide district to the north-west of Delhi. Van Cortlandt had received his military training under the eye of the great Maharaja himself, and the backbone of the Haryana Field Force was furnished by the men of the two regular regiments of the Khalsa whom he had formerly commanded.

It is in truth impossible to read the story of the great Mutiny without feeling both gratitude and admiration for the brave northern soldiery who served England so well; nor need these feelings lead us to do any injustice to others whose deserts are equally great. Still greater praise

should undoubtedly be given to those faithful Abdiels of the Hindu and Mahomedan regiments who remained true to their salt. Few they were, indeed, but the marvel is that any could resist the tide of disloyalty which carried all but the most steadfast off their feet. And the long-service soldier of England, who marched and fought till he died in his tracks,—he has gone now, his place knows him no more, and there are many who have scarce a good word to say for him. They were ignorant and helpless, those old soldiers, those "poor wild birds whose country had cast them off," but they could march through India at the worst season of the year, they could fight day after day against great odds, and finally they could, and did, die without a murmur for their country, and without even a suspicion that they were doing more than their bare duty. Now they are gone, may we do as well without them!

To conclude the narrative: from the days of 1857 the same story of brave and loyal service has to be told. Sikh cavalry and infantry regiments have shown their national quality of staunch and steady courage on many a distant battle-field. China, Abyssinia, Egypt, and Central Africa have seen the Sikh soldier following his white officers as he followed them to Delhi, and distant lands, unknown even by name to their fathers, have borne witness that the sons of the Khalsa have not degenerated. It is, however, in Afghanistan and the mountain border of India that the Sikh soldier of recent years has found his most congenial field of service. Many a battle-field west of the Indus, their ancient bulwark, has heard the Sikh war-cry, and far in the north-east stands the fort of Chitral to remind all men of one of the stoutest defences recorded in history, the heat

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and the burden of which was born by Sikh soldiers and English officers.

The Tirah Campaign is so much an affair of today that even the newspaper readers of England, ever, like the Athenians, in search of some new thing, can hardly have forgotten how often the Sikh soldier has shown his fine quality. Being, as he is, among the most determined of fighters, the Sikh is never more terrible than when playing a losing game with his life for the forfeit. The whole Empire rang with the proud story of the defense and fall of Fort Saragheri, when every man of the garrison fell rifle in hand, and the last survivor is said to have killed eighteen or twenty enemies before he was overcome.

Here then we leave the Sikh soldier of today, the honourable representative of the warlike disciples of Guru Govind, feeling a just confidence that from the Punjab England may yet draw many a staunch man-at-arms, as warlike and as faithful as those who have served her in the past.

And if ever the time should come,
Sahib - as come full well it may -
When all is not as smooth and fair as
all things seem to-day;
When foes are rising round you fast
and friends are few and cold;
And a yard or two of trusty steel is
worth a prince's gold;
Remember Hodson trusted us, and trust
the old blood too;
And as we followed him to death, our
sons will follow you.

- Hugh Pearse

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