

Subadar Khudadad  
Khan VC



# HERO *of the* MONTH

By Lord Ashcroft

**K**hudadad Khan had the distinction of two notable 'firsts' in the world of gallantry honours: he was the recipient of the first VC awarded to a Muslim and also the receiver of the first such decoration made to an Indian. He was born on October 26, 1888 in Jhelum, Punjab, India (now Pakistan). He was from a family of Pathans who came originally from the North West Frontier, bordering Afghanistan.

Khan had enlisted as a sepoy (the equivalent to a private) in the 129th Duke of Connaught's Own Baluchis, Indian Army, in October 1906 at a time when the regiment was recruiting on the North West Frontier.

In August 1914, Sepoy Khan was initially sent to the Suez Canal Zone but he was then diverted to France because of the urgent need for more Allied soldiers. He was among 20,000 Indian troops sent to the front line to help the exhausted BEF try to stop the Germans from capturing the strategic ports of Boulogne in France and Nieuwpoort in Belgium.

### Into The Trenches

On October 18, 1914, he moved with the Ferozepore Brigade from Orléans, France, to be attached to the British Cavalry Corps that was attempting to hold the line between Zandvoorde and Ploegsteert Wood, Belgium. On October 22, his regiment joined the 3rd Cavalry Brigade,

moving to join the line the following day.

By this point, fighting was raging all along the front line as both sides tried to gain the advantage. The Germans were aiming to make a breakthrough in the Gheluvelt sector of the Ypres Salient, while the British 2nd Cavalry Division advanced from Hollebeke Chateau, between Ypres and Comines in a south-easterly direction.

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On October 30, during the First Battle of Ypres, the enemy repulsed the advancing 2nd Cavalry Division and captured the Belgian town of Hollebeke. Conditions for the 129th Baluchis were appalling: they faced the well-equipped advancing Germans from a position of water-logged trenches,

BELOW: INDIAN SOLDIERS PRACTICING WITH BAYONETS ON THE WESTERN FRONT. (COURTESY OF THE IMPERIAL WAR MUSEUM)

with insufficient hand grenades and with gaps in the line due to a shortage of soldiers.

The Germans were determined to push further forwards and in fighting the next day, October 31, they outnumbered the Allies by an estimated five to one.

However, Colonel William M Southey, the commanding officer of the 129th Baluchis, later reported favourably on a small part of the fighting that day: “We formed up at about 3am and advanced on the left of the farm. We killed about three and wounded three and those who had not bolted, surrendered; 14 in number.”

Early on October 31, during further fighting, one of the Baluchi regiment's two Maxim machine guns was destroyed by enemy fire in an attack that had wounded a British officer. Also injured by the relentless fire from the Germans was Sepoy Khan, then 26, one of six men from his detachment who had been tasked with manning the second Maxim machine gun.

### Fighting On

As the battle intensified, Khan ignored his serious injuries to the upper part of his body and continued to work his gun as shells rained down on the six men. One by one, Havildar (equivalent to a sergeant) Ghulam Mahomed, Sepoys Lal Sher, Said Ahmed, ▶



RIGHT: A WOUNDED INDIAN SOLDIER RECEIVING TREATMENT AT A HOSPITAL IN BRIGHTON, 1915. (IWM)

BELOW: KHUDADAD KHAN'S KUKRI, WHICH IS ON SHOW AT THE IMPERIAL WAR MUSEUM NORTH IN MANCHESTER. (IWM)

OPPOSITE: KHUDADAD KHAN'S MEDAL GROUP (VIA LORD ASHCROFT)



Kassib and Afsar Khan were killed by enemy fire.

When his position was eventually overrun by the Germans, Khan initially feigned death, but not before putting the machine gun out of action so that the much-prized weapon did not fall into enemy hands. Eventually, once the Kaiser's men had left the scene, he crawled back to rejoin his company and to receive medical aid.

During the battle, 164 Baluchis were killed or wounded and 64 others were missing in action. A further three British officers fell, with three more wounded, while three Indian officers perished and two were wounded. Khan was treated in hospital and then transferred for further treatment to the UK, where he was initially taken to Brighton but later spent several weeks at the Indian Convalescent Home, New Milton, Hampshire.

Khan's VC was announced in the *London Gazette* on December 7, 1914 when his brief citation, in truth, failed to do full justice to his astounding bravery. It simply stated: "On October 31, 1914, at Hollebeke, Belgium, the British Officer in charge of the detachment having been wounded, and the other gun put out of action by a shell, Sepoy Khudadad, though himself wounded, remained working his gun until all the other five men of the gun detachment had been killed."

Khan received his VC as an Indian under the terms of the Royal Warrant of 1911, which extended the reward to native troops. Previously Indians who showed exceptional gallantry had received the Indian Order of Merit (1st class). The other five men manning the second machine gun on October 31 received posthumous gallantry awards.

### Investiture

Initially, Khan was too weak to attend his planned investiture but he eventually received his VC from George V at Buckingham Palace on January 26, 1915. On the same day the *Daily Mirror* newspaper highlighted Khan's bravery under the headline "The first Indian to win the Victoria Cross."

They carried a photograph of Khan and wrote: "This is Sepoy Khudadad Khan, of the 129th Duke of Connaught's Baluchis. He was the first Indian soldier to win the coveted honour of the VC through gallantry on the field of battle. He worked a gun single handed although wounded. All his comrades were killed."

In the aftermath of the Great War, he served on the North West Frontier, India (now Pakistan), and in the Third Afghan War. After retiring in 1921, in the rank of subadar (equivalent to captain), he worked as a farmer and, in 1956 – by then 68 – he took part in the VC centenary celebrations in London.

Khan, who was married twice and had two sons and a daughter with his second wife, died at the Military Hospital, Rawalpindi, Pakistan, on March 8, 1971, aged 82. He was buried in an unmarked grave at Rukhan Tehsil cemetery, Punjab, Pakistan. His name is engraved on the Memorial Gates, Hyde Park Corner, London, and there is a statue in his honour at the Army Museum, Rawalpindi, Pakistan.

For a time, Khan's medal group was on display at the Army Museum in Rawalpindi but it remained in the ownership of one of his descendants. When the relative decided to offer the medal group for sale, I was able to secure it in a private deal in 2016.

### Lest We Forget

We should never forget that Muslims made an immense contribution to the Allied effort during the Great War and beyond. Of the 1.3 million Indians who constituted the volunteer force during the 1914-1918 global conflict, approximately 400,000 were Muslims. It has been estimated that some 50,000 Indians were injured and 8,500



killed on the Western Front alone. Around a third to a half of these war-dead were Muslims, who fought – and sometimes died – alongside their fellow Hindu and Sikh countrymen. Many of those who were listed missing in action, and are named on the Menin Gate war memorial in Belgium, were Muslim.

In a world in which a tiny minority of Muslims – notably those fighting for the so-called Islamic State (IS) and those extremists responsible for terrorists acts around the world – tarnish their religion, the purchase of Khan’s VC provided a wonderful opportunity for people to recognise the many, loyal and brave Muslims who have risked, and sometimes given, their lives for Britain, its allies and for wider freedoms.

In fact, in 2014, two former heads of the army had called for greater recognition of the bravery of Khan as the first Muslim soldier to be awarded the VC. This, they said, was intended as a “riposte” to the “sickening extremism” of IS militants. General Lord Dannatt and General Lord Richards led a group of peers, MPs, historians and religious leaders who argued that children should be told about the role played by Muslim troops in the Great War.

In a letter to *The Daily Telegraph*, penned in October 2014, the group said the actions of Khan “exemplified the courage” of the many Muslims who served in the Great War. They added that the knowledge of his role, together with that of the other 400,000 Muslims who fought alongside British troops, is vital to “fully understand the multi-ethnic Britain that we are today”.

British Future, the think tank behind the letter, believed that the commemoration of Khan and the other Muslim soldiers would act as a rebuttal to IS extremists. Dilwar Hussain, a Muslim academic and

## Victoria Cross Heroes Volume II



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Ashcroft’s VC and GC collection is on public display at the Imperial War Museum London. For more information, visit: [www.iwm.org.uk/heroes](http://www.iwm.org.uk/heroes) Details of his VC collection may be found at: [www.lordashcroftmedals.com](http://www.lordashcroftmedals.com) For more information on Lord Ashcroft’s work, visit: [www.lordashcroft.com](http://www.lordashcroft.com) Follow him on Twitter: @LordAshcroft

one of the signatories of the letter, said: “The quiet dignity of our commemoration of Khudadad Khan’s bravery and service is perhaps the most powerful riposte we could possibly send to the sickening extremism of IS.” Other signatories include the late Lord Ashdown, the former Liberal Democrats leader; Sir Hew Strachan, military historian; Baroness Warsi, former Coalition minister; and Sughra Ahmed, the president of the Islamic Society of Britain. “We wish

today to highlight one man whose service exemplified the courage of many who served in the First World War,” they wrote.

Sunder Katwala, the director of British Future and one of the signatories of the letter, said at the time: “The service of the 400,000 Muslims who fought for Britain in the First World War is little known, and increasing public knowledge of it would remind people that we share more history than we sometimes realise.”

In November 2014, Lord Ahmad, then the communities minister, unveiled a commemorative stone at the National Memorial Arboretum in Subadar Khan’s memory. He said: “In honouring the courage of Khudadad Khan we not only remember our shared history, we are also cherishing the long tradition of Muslims fighting bravely alongside British soldiers, for a just cause in the service of this country.”

I echo every word of those sentiments and I feel immensely privileged to be the custodian of this courageous Muslim’s gallantry and service medals. ●

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