

## Battle of Haifa: The Last Great Cavalry Campaign in History

**\*Ajeet Singh Choudhary**

### **Abstract**

Every year on September 23, the Indian Army celebrates 'Haifa Day' to commemorate the war dead during the Battle of Haifa, considered as one of the bravely contested battles of First World War. The Teen Murti memorial was constructed in 1922 in the memory of the Indian soldiers from three princely states namely Jodhpur, Hyderabad and Mysore who served present day Gaza strip, Israel and Palestine during the First World War under British Indian Army. Even as the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the battle was celebrated this year, not many outside of the army are aware of the Rajasthan connection to it. The heroism, tenacity and cavalry skills of the Jodhpur and Mysore Lancers that took control of the city from the Turks on September 23, 1918, proved to be a decisive factor in the victory over the Ottoman Empire. The historical battle of Haifa paved the way to the victory of the British Army and 30 years latter to the creation of the State of Israel.

The Jodhpur Lancers were the cavalry unit of the erstwhile Princely State of Jodhpur, from 1885 to 1952. In the early 20th century, the Jodhpur Lancers served under the British Army in China, South Africa, the Middle East and France, among other places, earning honors for their courage and dedication. In their final drive, the Jodhpur Lancers part of the 15th Imperial Service Cavalry Brigade (along with the Hyderabad & Mysore Lancers) were in the saddle for 500 miles over 38 days; but it was at the Mediterranean town of Haifa on September 23, 1918, that they covered themselves with glory. The victory was even more special as the Indian soldiers were armed only with lances (a kind of spear) and swords while the Turks had had in their possession advance artillery and machine guns. The Indian troops displayed exemplary cavalry skills and valor during what was considered to be the last major cavalry campaign in military history. Their action on the battlefield on horses with swords and lance against machine guns was described in the Official History of the War, 1919: "No more remarkable cavalry action of its scale was fought in the whole course of the campaign"; and is rated variously by military historians as "one of the greatest ever cavalry charges on a regimental scale", and, as "the last great cavalry charge".

Their finest hour was on 23 September 1918, when the Jodhpur Lancers, in a daring cavalry charge, armed only with swords and lances, liberated the town of Haifa, Israel, which was guarded by the

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machine guns and artillery of the Turkish troops of the Ottoman Empire. In this gallant action, the Indian troops also secured the safety of the residents of the town and the spiritual leader Abdul Baha, the heir of Baha'u'llah, the leader of the Bahai faith. They delivered Abdul Baha from the threat of crucifixion made by Kemal Paşa, the Ottoman military chief. The Bahai community in India, therefore, commemorates the Battle of Haifa as a day of deliverance of their spiritual leader. The gallant action of the Indian troops is remembered by the Israeli government too and the Mayor of Haifa has had a chapter on the Indian role in liberating the port city, included in the history text books of students in Haifa. In the huge loss of blood and lives incurred, these Indian soldiers had successfully built a robust political relationship between two nations, born out of British dominance, and being celebrated for the last hundred years. This article provides a comprehensive historical account of the Jodhpur Lancers and Battle of Haifa – their origin, their deeds and dash and their role in the armies of British India and their princely state. This article also reminds us, lest we forget of the sacrifice of so many Indians who fight in the Great War and who died in foreign lands, as brave sons of India.

**Key Words:** Haifa Day, Cavalry, Israel, Ottoman Empire, Lances

### **Introduction**

23<sup>rd</sup> September is annually observed as 'Haifa Day' in commemoration of the capture of that city following a dashing cavalry action by the 15<sup>th</sup> Imperial Service Cavalry Brigade during the First World War. The 15<sup>th</sup> IS Cavalry Brigade consisted of three famous Indian State Forces Cavalry Regiments: The Jodhpur IS Lancers, Mysore IS Lancers and the Hyderabad IS Lancers, formed a part of the 5<sup>th</sup> Cavalry division of the Desert Mounted Corps. In the autumn of 1918, the Brigade was a part of the Allied Forces sweeping northwards through Palestine under Allenby, rolling up the remnants of the Turkish Seventh and Eighth Armies and their German allies in the last great cavalry campaign in history.

The battle of Haifa was pre-empted by the threat of life by the Ottoman Governor in Palestine to the life of 'Abdul Baha', the son of the prophet of the Baha'i Faith – a pacifist religion that seeks universality of humanity and reconciliation amongst various faiths. 'Abdul-Baha' was released from prison just before the outbreak of the Great War where he was held for nearly 50 years with his father by the Ottomans. He spent the war years tending to the needs of the people in Haifa and Akka organizing extensive agricultural operations, thereby actually averting a famine when the war broke out. Since he gained a significant following and preached a religion which went against the tenets of the Ottoman State religion he was again persecuted and held captive by Jamal Pasha, the local governor.

It was an input of Major Tudor Pole, who was a British Intelligence officer, about the impending crucifixion of Abdul Baha that required General Allenby to alter his plans for the war in the Palestinian theatre. Since he had no British troops freely available, he ordered the 15<sup>th</sup> Imperial Cavalry Brigade comprising of Jodhpur, Mysore and Hyderabad Lancers to carry out the assault on Mount Carmel and Haifa. The daredevil cavalry charge led solely by Indian officers against well entrenched troops in broad daylight led to the combined opposing Troops abandoning their positions. The Mysore Lancers proceeded to rescue Abdul Baha.

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On 23<sup>rd</sup> September 1918 the Brigade less the Hyderabad Lancers, was ordered to advance and capture Haifa in present day Israel. The sun-baked city of Haifa lies due north of Jerusalem on the southern shore of the Bay of Acre on the Mediterranean coast. The road and the railway leading into the town is dominated by the steep wooded slopes of Mount Carmel to the south and bounded by the swift and swampy Nahr el Muqatta or River Kishon to the north. The approach into the town therefore had to be made through the narrow defile between mountain and river, and this was well covered by fire by the Turkish gun emplacements and artillery. The Turkish were strongly posted just outside Haifa to hold the defile thus formed. It was here that the enemy had established themselves, covering every part of the ground with their guns.

The Jodhpur Lancers was commanded by Major Dalpat Singh. Lt Col Hyla Holden was the special service British officer with the regiment. He chose his senior most and experienced 'B' Squadron Commander Captain Aman Singh to lead the attack and capture the defile. After the capture of the defile the 'D' Squadron under Captain Anop Singh was to attack the Mount on east of the road after passing through the defile to capture machine gun located on it. Thus the capture of the defile was the most critical operation to the whole battle. To avoid this dangerous defile, it was decide to cross the Kishon and attack the town from the north-east. A Squadron of the Mysore Lancers was sent east of Haifa and another squadron was sent up from the north to silence the enemy guns on Mount Carmel. After giving this movement time to develop, The Jodhpur Lancers were ready to make a mounted attack on the Turks holding the defile from the east. In the meantime frequent patrols were sent to reconnoitre the ground and locate the enemy. No news reached about the action of the squadrons sent out earlier to silence the enemy guns.

At 2PM Brigadier Harbord the Brigade Commander ordered the Jodhpur Lancers for the attack. The Jodhpur Lancers from a position of readiness 500 yards north-east of Beled Esh Sheikh moved forward at a trot with 'B' Sqn leading, cantered out in to open towards the stream, coming under intense fire as they crossed the Acre railway line. A previous reconnaissance of the proposed crossing point had been prevented by heavy enemy fire. Now, approaching the river it was found that the bank leading down to the water was very steep, even worse, as the two scouts in front forced their horses down the steep embankment to the water's edge they were swallowed up in quicksand. It was obvious that no crossing was possible. By now the regiment was out in the open with no cover, and was being raked by fire of 77mm guns from the front and flank, and horses were falling fast. Lt Col Holden now ordered Maj Dalpat Singh to quickly swing the regiment to the left and charge the machine guns on the lower slopes of Mount Carmel. As the squadrons reversed direction, Maj Dalpat Singh was hit in the spine by a machine gun bullet and was felled (he died later that night on the operation table).

This was the most critical moment of the whole operation. But the leading 'b' Squadron Commander Captain Bahadur Aman Singh immediately assumed the command of the regiment, swiftly rallied and turned and galloped straight at the enemy. Getting among the machine gun, the speared the detachments capturing two machine guns, two camel guns and killing 30 of the enemy. The mouth of the narrow defile through which ran the road to Haifa was now open.

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The 'B' squadron over the two branches of the Wadi el Wawy, dashed into the Wadi Selman and the mountain (through the Turkish bridge) for the passage of the rest of the regiment. The 'D' squadron under captain Anoop Singh passed through the defile and galloped up the road, wheeled half right and charged two machine guns on a Mount east of the road, capturing both. Passions inflamed at the loss of their gallant CO Maj Dalpat Singh, the remaining two squadrons now dipped their lances to the 'charge' and thundered down the road straight into the town. So unexpected and rapid was the whole attack that the enemy did not have enough time to react to it, several Turks being ridden down in the streets. Meanwhile after clearing the defile the 'B' squadron made its way along the lower slopes of Mount Carmel, and charged into the German colony west of Haifa, capturing several machine guns and killing large numbers of Turks and Germans. As soon as the charge got home the two squadrons of Mysore Lancers who had supported the attack with their fire mounted and followed at a gallop into the town. Shots were fired by Turks here and there from behind the walls of houses but the fight had practically finished as soon as the defile was crossed by the leading 'B' squadron. A large number of the enemy were still hiding in the town disguised as Arabs, those were gradually rounded up. This action is regarded as the finest cavalry charges ever made, the regiment captured a total of 1350 prisoners (include 2 German and 35 Ottoman officers) as well as 17 guns (2 six inch naval guns, 4 four point inch guns, 6 77mm guns, 4 10-lib guns) and 11 machine guns and a large amount of ammunition were collected at Haifa after the action. Captain Aman Singh Bahadur and Dafadar Jor Singh were awarded the Indian Order of Merit (IOM) and Captain Anop Singh and 2nd Lt Sagat Singh were awarded the Military Cross (MC) as recognition for their bravery in this battle while Major Dalpat Singh was awarded a military cross for his bravery.

The cable sent by Allenby after the capture of Haifa was "notify the world that Abdul Baha is safe". After being liberated by Indians; 'Abdul-Baha' spoke of the courage and bravery of the Indian troops. He said "*Seven sovereign powers of the world endeavored for two hundred years to release it (Haifa) from the hand of the Turk but failed while you through the Power and Help of God have taken the land so speedily and so easily*". He also said to the Indian soldiers, "*The people of India have a wonderful capacity to become spiritual. They are naturally inclined toward God and religion. They are pure and God-fearing... Most of the people of the world have lost their faith, but the people of India retain it and are firm in their belief. They are both people of faith and intelligence.*"

Every year on September 23, the Indian Army celebrates 'Haifa Day' to commemorate the war dead during the Battle of Haifa, considered as one of the bravely contested battle of First World War. The Teen Murti memorial was constructed in 1922 in the memory of the Indian soldiers from three princely states namely Jodhpur, Hyderabad and Mysore who served present day Gaza strip, Israel and Palestine the First world war under British Indian Army.

#### **Centenary celebrations of the Battle of Haifa:**

A series of commemorative events to celebrate the gallantry and victory of the last recorded cavalry charge against well entrenched Austrian, German and Ottoman Armies in Haifa that took place on September 23, 1918, has been held worldwide. On January 14, 2018 Prime Minister Narendra

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Modi broke protocol by receiving his visiting Israeli counterpart Benjamin Netanyahu at the airport, from where both proceeded to the Teen Murti traffic roundabout to unveil the plaque renaming it as "Teen Murti-Haifa Chowk", in remembrance of the Indian soldiers who laid their lives to liberate the Israeli city of Haifa during the World War I. In July 2017, when Prime Minister Modi visited Israel, both he and Prime Minister Netanyahu laid wreaths at the "Indian War Cemetery" in Haifa and unveiled a plaque commemorating Maj. Dalpat Singh, known as the "Hero of Haifa". Mr. Modi wrote in the visitor's book: "I am deeply honored to stand here today to salute the valiant Indian soldiers, who led down their lives for the liberation of Haifa during the WWI. The exceptional bravery and supreme sacrifice of Major Dalpat Singh MC, the 'Hero of Haifa' and his men, will be remembered forever and continue to inspire generations to come. Next year, the centenary of the Battle of Haifa will present another opportunity to mark this enduring bond between India and Israel."

Messages to mark the function were received from the President of India, Ram Nath Kovind, PM Modi, the Prince of Wales and the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, Theresa May. The message from the President of India said: "We remember with pride those Indian troops who, one hundred years ago in Haifa, displayed valor, courage and heroism in the face of seemingly impossible odds". Theresa May's message hoped the function at the House of Lords would help raise awareness on the vital contribution of the Indian army not only in this campaign but throughout the entire war. The message from Prince Charles remarked that the event offered a chance to honor, in particular, the courage and sacrifice of Indian service personnel at the Battle of Haifa and throughout the conflict - which made such an indelible mark on the shared history of Britain and India. The gathering in London was attended by over 200 distinguished guests including the current Maharajah of Mysore, Y K Sinha, the Indian High Commissioner, members of the British Royal household, descendants of the veterans of the battle from India and UK including the grandsons of Field Marshal Allenby, Brig Holden and Capt Tudor Pole. The event held at Jaipur and Delhi was marked by tattoo parades and ceremonies presided by the Army Chief and attended by high ranking officials from Israel, UK and India.

The northern Israeli coastal city of Haifa on Thursday 23<sup>rd</sup> September 2018 celebrated the centenary year of its liberation from Ottoman rule during World War I, honoring the brave Indian soldiers who laid down their lives in what is considered "the last great cavalry campaign in history". The Indian Army commemorates September 23 every year as Haifa Day to pay its respects to the three Indian Cavalry Regiments - Mysore, Hyderabad and Jodhpur Lancers, that helped liberate Haifa following a dashing cavalry action by the 15th Imperial Service Cavalry Brigade of the then British Indian Army at the Battle of Haifa in 1918. "Major Singh and the bold Indian soldiers are very dear to us and this centenary celebration is special to us," Mayor of Haifa, YonaYahav, told the gathering assembled to pay tributes to the fallen Indian soldiers. "Dalpat Singh not only changed the history of my city but the history of the Middle East," Yahav asserted. About 900 Indian soldiers are interred in cemeteries across Israel in Jerusalem, Ramle and Haifa. The event is meant to salute the brave Indian soldiers for their valiant deeds and to show that their courage and sacrifice is not forgotten. Indian cavalry regiments armed with spears and swords displayed the highest tradition of

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valor and cleared the enemy from the rocky slopes of Mt Carmel. It is also a sign that even in this part of Israel, far from India, the eternal flame of the Indian Army - duty and service before self - continues to shine.

Yahav also told the gathering that once he became aware of the sacrifices of the Indian soldiers in liberating the city, he subsequently made efforts to get the information in the school textbooks so that the youngsters of Haifa would know an "important episode in the history of their city". "We have changed the whole textbooks to insert the story of the Indian troops because this is an important part of our history and legacy. It is important that the students know who liberated their city," Yahav stressed. The Haifa mayor said that he was "touched" by the gesture of the Indian government to rename the famous Teen Murti Chowk in New Delhi adding his city's name to it. In a symbolic gesture of friendship with Israel, India renamed the iconic Teen Murti Chowk, a war memorial, to Teen Murti Haifa Chowk, during the visit of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to New Delhi in January 2017. Prime Minister Narendra Modi had visited the Haifa cemetery during his visit to Israel in July 2017 and unveiled a plaque commemorating Major Dalpat Singh, known as the 'Hero of Haifa' for his critical role in the liberation of the city. "I am deeply honored to stand here today to salute the valiant Indian soldiers, who led down their lives for the liberation of Haifa during the WWI," Modi had written in the guest book. "The exceptional bravery and supreme sacrifice of Major Dalpat Singh MC, the 'Hero of Haifa' and his men, will be remembered forever and continue to inspire generations to come. Next year, the centenary of the battle of Haifa will present another opportunity to mark this enduring bond between India and Israel," he wrote. The Indian Army's 61st Cavalry, the name given to the unit created after the merger of the three cavalry units after independence, also sent a contingent to participate in the centenary celebrations. The Indian contingent serving in UN Disengagement Observer Force (UNDOF) and a small contingent from the Israel Defense Forces also participated in the ceremony. The former maharaja of Jodhpur, Gaj Singh, and Brigadier M S Jodha, grandson of Aman Singh Bahadur, were also present for the ceremony.

On the morning of September 23, 2018, the Army Chief and Colonel of the 61st Cavalry, Gen. Bipin Rawat attended the centenary celebrations of the Battle of Haifa at 61st Cavalry Jaipur. In the series of events the chief reviewed the ceremonial mounting parade, laid a wreath at Ashwa Shakti Haifa Parisar, released a first-day cover and attended the Barakhana (meal with all ranks). On the same day in the afternoon there was a wreath laying ceremony at Delhi's Teen Murti-Haifa Chowk. The war memorial and the entire traffic circle was festooned with flowers and national flags of India and Israel and lined all around by soldiers of 61st Cavalry in their ceremonial uniforms. Present for the occasion were Israel's charge d'affairs Maya Kadosh, Indian Army Chief Gen. Rawat, director-general mechanized forces Lt. Gen. M.J.S. Kahlon, President, Cavalry Officers' Association Lt. Gen. Amit Sharma (Retd), Defense Attaches of the UK and Israel, former commandants of 61st Cavalry and serving and retired officers of the Indian Army.

#### **Significance of Battle of Haifa:**

Owing to its rail and harbor, Israeli port city of Haifa was a strategic supply base. In addition to Haifa,

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the Allied Forces also engineered a plan to annex Nazareth and Damascus in present-day Israel and Syria. On September 23, 1918, the 15<sup>th</sup> (Imperial Service) Cavalry Brigade comprising lancers from the regiments of princely states of Jodhpur and Mysore inflicted heavy assault on positions held by Ottoman Turks in and around the city of Haifa. Eventually, in Indian cavalry brigades fighting under the leadership of British General Edmund Allenby helped liberate Haifa from the clutches of the Turkish-German forces. The victory was even more special as the Indian soldiers were armed only with lances (a kind of spear) and swords while the Turks had in their possession advance artillery and machine guns. The Indian troops displayed exemplary cavalry skills and valor during what was considered to be the last major cavalry campaign in military history. 'No more remarkable cavalry action of its scale was fought in the whole course of the campaign', the official history of the war observed while aptly describing the resilience of the Indian troops. Machine gun bullets over and over again failed to stop the galloping horses even though many of them succumbed afterwards to their injuries.

The victory is all the more remarkable because the opposing army commanders were Kemal Attaturk and Jamal Pasha who had earlier forced the Allies to retreat in ignominy from Gallipoli. It brought about an early end to the war by opening up another seaport in Haifa for the British Forces. The subsequent upshot of this astonishing victory was the end of the Ottoman Empire that led to the creation of Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Iraq, Syria, Lebanon and Israel. The most significant offshoot of the battle led solely by Indian officers was the debunking of the myth that Indian soldiers performed well only when led by British Officers.

It is striking to note that the battle also paved the way in molding the present-day Indian Army. Right since the time of the British, there have been three types of armies: British troops; British Indian Army, in which the officers were British and the troops were Indian; and, armies of the princely states. The armies of the princely states each had one or two British officers as advisors. During the 1899 Boxer Rebellion, the Indian troops (as part of the British Indian Army) were rubbing shoulders with the armies of Russia, France, Germany and America. Their performance in the battle was noticed. Two regiments from the princely states that took part were Jodhpur Lancers and Bikaner Ganga Risala. The result of the participation of the Indian troops was the setting up of an institute called the Imperial Cadet Core, in 1903. The main objective of the institute was to train Indian troops so that they could become officers. In a matter of 10 years, the British killed the institution as they realized how good the Indian officers could be. It was soon after the Battle of Haifa that Lt-Gen Maharaja Sir Pratap Singh led efforts to establish the Prince of Wales Royal Military College in 1922, in the same premises of the Imperial Cadet Core which had been shut down by the British in 1914. The institution is today called the Rashtriya Indian Military College, a necessary stepping stone for commission in the Indian Army. The college has seen several distinguished alumnus, one among them being KS Thimayya, who served as the Chief of Army Staff between 1957 and 1961. Subsequently the Indian Military Academy was also set up in 1933.

On the eve of India's independence, the Indian Army was one million strong. Field Marshal Lord Wavell, the then Viceroy of India, wrote to Clement Atlee, the then British Prime Minister, that the

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Indians in the British Indian Army had strongly identified with the fight for India's independence. Thus the time was ripe for the British to leave India. "Britishers realized they can't rule India without the army and the army was clearly not with them," says Major General Dhruv Katoch, editor of the *Salute* magazine and secretary general of the Indian War Veterans Association. One finds similar sentiments in the book, '*Thimayya of India*', by Humphrey Evans. In the 1920s, soon after being commissioned as an officer from the Prince of Wales Royal Military College, Gen K S Thimayya, along with a few other officers, met Mahatma Gandhi expressing their interest to join the freedom movement. But Gandhi advised them to continue serving the Army as their services would be most required there. It's sad that such a battle which has contributed in so many significant ways remains a lesser known fragment of history.

### **Conclusion**

The battle of Haifa and its significance a hundred years later emphasizes that why great battles should be commemorated and celebrated for the right reasons. The greater message and impact of this gallant cavalry charge fought a hundred years ago should be remembered for the impact on human history and progress. Other than the ones listed earlier, two million Baha'is call India home and remain indebted for saving Abdul Baha from certain death. They too have thrived in India just as Paresis another miniscule community while they continue to be persecuted in Iran and other Islamic countries.

The end of the war saw an active campaign led by Sir Pratap of Jodhpur which established the Prince Of Wales Royal Indian Military Indian College that trained future officers and also led to Indianization of the Officer corps. At the time of independence three decades later thus India had a large pool of battle-hardened officers which has led to a creation of professional military force.

The battle of Haifa and its significance a hundred years later emphasizes that why great battles should be commemorated and celebrated for the right reasons. The greater message and impact of this gallant cavalry charge fought a hundred years ago should be remembered for the impact on human history and progress. Other than the ones listed earlier, two million Baha'is call India home and remain indebted for saving Abdul Baha from certain death. They too have thrived in India just as Parsis another miniscule community while they continue to be persecuted in Iran and other Islamic countries.

Stories of valor and courage of Indian soldiers have throughout history been lauded based on actual performance and accounts even during the colonial days. Even post-independence, in many a conflict they have snatched victory from the jaws of defeat against all odds be it in the liberation of Kashmir in 1948, the stand against Chinese in the Western Sector in 1962, in upholding the rights and political freedoms of ordinary East Pakistanis facing a genocide, to the extreme restraint and discipline shown in face of barbarism and provocation in recent conflicts. Wars should be judged twice – first for the reasons that led to the fighting and second for the outcome of the war and the impact it had on human history. Indian Armed forces have repeatedly upheld the responsibility to protect and

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preserve humanity and freedom of mankind. There is more to India's military victories that should be felicitated than short term gains.

For one, the Indian soldiers, most of whom came from the hinterlands of India, found Europe and Middle East to be a different universe. There were no divisions of caste or religion. Unlike the British who kept their women away from the Indian soldiers at home, in Europe especially in France, the brave hearts were coveted by the Mademoiselles. During First World War, Indian Soldiers first became familiar with the principles of the French Revolution – Freedom, Equality and Fraternity. Indian soldiers would write home several letters praising these independent, educated French women who were running their towns in the absence of their men. “Everyone here is educated, even the women. Send our daughter to school”.

To wear a red poppy in your lapel is a ubiquitous form of homage in the U.K to soldiers who died in the First World War. Yet in the ceremonies that mark Remembrance Day, there has till now been only a token recall of the contribution of a significant section of the British armed forces- soldiers from the subjugated colonies of British Empire who stood in the frontlines of the Great War. One and half million soldiers from undivided India fought in freezing trenches dressed only in khaki cotton gear on the western frontier; in Africa and West Asia; in Palestine, Mesopotamia, Gallipoli and Egypt. Of them 72000 died. Indian soldiers were cannon fodder for the British army. Britain needed mass and Indian soldiers provided it. These soldiers of Indian royalty is believed to have fought out of choice, and not because they were forced by the British. Indian cooperation with Israel during First World War is an example of high moral obligation. They fought in a strange country against conquest and oppression and even paid a heavy price, at a time when a similar struggle for independence was taking place. In the huge loss of blood and lives incurred, these Indian soldiers had successfully built a robust relationship between two nations, born out of British dominance, and being celebrated for the last hundred years.

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