



## Loyalty in the line of fire: Lance Naik Lala Victoria Cross and Indian soldiers in Mesopotamian campaign

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### ABSTRACT

A strong army is most required institution to secure the borders and protect sovereignty of the nation. Army drew the strength from loyal, conscientious, and responsible soldiers. British had a prejudice that Indians are inferior and incompetent. This myth of Britons was broken by the people when fought with them worldwide. This article explores the story of such a brave heart Lance Naik Lala of India who exemplified the Indian soldierly spirit and loyalty. He demonstrated exceptional bravery in the First Battle of Hanna in January, 1916. Amid overwhelming enemy fire he repeatedly risked his life and evacuated six injured soldiers which earned him the global recognition and reflected the deep-rooted martial tradition of his people. Fighting the key battles particularly in Mesopotamia highlights the enduring spirit and unwavering conscientiousness of Indian soldiers even while serving British imperial objectives. Tracing the legacy and journey of an innocent countryman to the legendary brave heart is aimed to instill the patriotic zeal and conscientiousness among the youth.

**Keywords:** *Loyalty, Lala, Victoria Cross, Legacy, Indian Soldiers, Mesopotamia.*

The folks of Himachal Pradesh are well-known for their warrior-like grit and strong sense of responsibility; thus they have contributed immensely to the military. Exceedingly tough terrain impregnates demos with inherent adventurous spirit which makes them proficient for the army thence known as *Vir-Bhumi*. Lala the son of this soil earned global recognition for him and his people as well. There is a confusion regarding his birth date according to the family he was nineteen years old at the time of enrollment; nevertheless, some records place his birth date as 20<sup>th</sup> February, 1882 (Personal Interview Grandson Sh. Bhupinder Singh 2024). However, according to a study conducted by the Government of the United Kingdom and published recently on 20<sup>th</sup> June, 2016, his birth date is stated as 20<sup>th</sup> April, 1876 according to the military records (Govt. of UK: Foreign and Commonwealth Office 2016). He was born in Parol village district Kangra (now Tehsil Bhoranj, District Hamirpur, Himachal Pradesh). His father Dhinga had served as Jemadar in the army. Therefore, Lala had gotten inspired to join army solely from home. He was not formally educated but learned to read and write Hindi. He had an elder brother Ramditta

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who stayed at home to help parents. Lala's first wife died young, leaving him childless, so, he married Gurdevi, who outlived him. However, he did not have any child from Gurdevi as well (Personal Interview Grandson Sh. Bhupinder Singh 2024). Lala joined a newly formed '41<sup>st</sup> (Dogra) Regiment of Bengal Infantry' on 20<sup>th</sup> February, 1901, which was raised on 12<sup>th</sup> October, 1900 at Jalandhar. Soldiers for its initial enlistment were furnished by other Dogra regiments some by Punjab regiments and some recruited directly from Kangra (Officers of the 41<sup>st</sup> Regiment 1924). Lala was among the soldiers who recruited directly from then district Kangra of Punjab province. He was an enthusiastic soldier, excelled in football which was among the fabulous sports of the army that time after the introduction of *Durand Cup* in 1888 in Indian Army to promote physical fitness of the soldiers (All India Football federation). The battalion's designation was altered to '41<sup>st</sup> Dogras' in 1903 (Heathcote 1995, pp. 170-178). After undergoing initial recruitment and training, battalion organized into a full-fledged infantry battalion of eight companies with Eleven British Officers, Sixteen Indian Officers and Eight Hundred Other Ranks. In March 1905 they received orders to relieve 30<sup>th</sup> Punjabis in North China. The Indian Army was deployed there during the Boxer rebellion (1899-1900). It was the very first instance when Indian Army deployed on foreign soil (Preston 2000, p. 238). Just after the earthquake of 4<sup>th</sup> April, 1905 in Kangra the battalion set off and stayed there till May, 1908, deployed against German, French, Italian, Russian, and Japanese troops. While stationed at Kanpur from 1908 to 1912 they attended the Delhi *Durbar* on 12<sup>th</sup> December, 1911 as part of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Composite Infantry Brigade alongside the 36<sup>th</sup> Sikhs and the 74<sup>th</sup> Punjabis. Thereafter they relocated to 21<sup>st</sup> Bareilly Brigade of 7<sup>th</sup> Meerut division on 6<sup>th</sup> November, 1912. With the outbreak of the First World War a new chapter of Indian army began.

Earlier British considered whom Indian soldiers, inferior due to their bigotry now under pressure of fighting on multiple fronts they were helpless to change their perception and deploy those, to kill the so called superior white European at the western front and save the France from German clutches. First Indian Expeditionary Force-A (IEFA) consisted of 'Indian Corps' and 'Indian Cavalry Corps' deployed in France (Roy 2018, pp. 71-72). Lance Naik Lala with the battalion 41<sup>st</sup> Dogras part of the Indian Corps fought the famous battles of Neuve Chapelle and battle of Festubert (Officers of the 41<sup>st</sup> Regiment 1924, p. 12).<sup>1</sup> Battalion suffered huge loss twice first in the 'Hell Corner' or 'Glory Hole' incident where the total casualties reported, were twenty deaths and ninety personnel wounded during the hostile artillery bombardment (Officers of the 41<sup>st</sup> Regiment 1924, p. 17). And second at the high grounds of 'Aubers-Ridge' where the assault was deferred staunchly by the German, almost half of the battalion was killed in action (Merewether and Smith 1919, p. 362).<sup>2</sup> Lala injured and received medication in the 'Brighton Pavilion', a field hospital for Indian soldiers known as the *Indian Village* in South England. *India Gate* at the southern entrance of the Pavillion designed by Thomas Tyrwhitt in typical Gujrati style erected to commemorate the sacrifice of Indian soldiers in First

World War, inaugurated by Maharaja Bhupinder Singh of Patiala on 26<sup>th</sup> October, 1921 (Kevin Brighton & Hove Museum). In 1927 a war memorial at Neuve Chapelle, designed by Herbert Baker was unveiled by F. E. Smith, Secretary of state for India inscribed 4742 Indian soldiers' name killed in action. The memorial is visited by Prime Minister of India Sh. Narendra Modi in April, 2015 and Chief of Army Staff General Manoj Pande in November, 2022 to pay the homage to the martyrs (PIB 2015 and 2022). This memorial is now a UNESCO World Heritage Site (UNESCO, Funerary and Memory Sites WW 1). The battalion after this massive haemorrhage, to level its war strength transferred to Egypt under Indian Expeditionary Force-E (IEFE) at the 'Suez Defense' (WO 95/4428, Suez Defences). They were deployed from *Mariam* to *Balla* (WO 95/4428, Operation Orders 41<sup>st</sup> Dogras). They received new recruits from the depot at Bareilly but still the strength was quite low due to which four company battalion model was adopted. Soldiers were still recovering from the sores of France in the temperate climate of Suez; they received new orders to join the Relief Force (Tigris Corps) in the lower Mesopotamia. In the lower Mesopotamia the new war front was opened by the Viceroy Hardinge to save the British Oil Fields at Abadan and the Basra port which was strategically crucial place to protect the movement of troops from the gulf and fuelling up the ships passing through (Cohen 1976, pp. 119-132). Additionally, besides he wanted to capture the suspected substantial oil reserves at Mosul, Britain wanted to keep Kuwait and Arabia a bay from Ottoman Empire (Douglass 1976, pp. 919-945). Ergo Indian Expeditionary Force-D (IEFD) sent to save British interests in Mesopotamia. The 6<sup>th</sup> Poona Division landed at Basra port on 5<sup>th</sup> November, 1914 while 12<sup>th</sup> Division joined in April, 1915 (Ford 2009, pp. 20-26). This force expelled the Turks from Basra, Qurnah, and Nasiriya and ensured the fulfillment of British objectives. Now Lieutenant General Nixon the Mesopotamian Theatre Commander entrusted the Sixth Division under Charles Townshend with the task of capturing Baghdad Vilayet as per the wish of Viceroy, ignoring all the warnings of Beauchamp Duff Commander-in-Chief of Indian Army pertaining to ensure the logistics support and reinforcement prior to proceeding beyond Kut-al-Amara (Rothwell 1970, pp. 273-294). Poona Division pursued the retreating Forces upstream and fought an unnecessary battle at *Ctesiphon* (Miller cited in Gardner 2013, 182-200). The game went wrong here because Indian Army of about ten thousand men was outnumbered by the Turkish Sixth Army of thirty thousand men under Nur-ud-din Pasha and cavalry under Khalil Pasha supported by German General Von der Goltz and forced to retreat back to the Kut-al-Amara (Gardner 2015, pp. 269-289). Exhausted Townshend decided to defend at Kut-al-Amara and refused to travel downstream (Crowley 2019, pp. 67-77).<sup>3</sup>

To help this besieged force Nixon assembled the 'Tigris Corps' of Nineteen thousand men consisted of 7<sup>th</sup> Meerut and 3<sup>rd</sup> Lahore Divisions under Lieutenant General Fenton Aylmer. 41<sup>st</sup> Dogras was the part of the 21<sup>st</sup> Bareilly Brigade of 7<sup>th</sup> Meerut division arrived at Basra from Suez on 22<sup>nd</sup> December, 1915. The Echelon arrived at Qurnah on 24<sup>th</sup> in drib and drabs due to the deficiency in water

transport facilities. The enemy redoubt at Sheikh Sa'ad approached on 7<sup>th</sup> January, 1916. Rashly assault was launched to surprise the enemy but the downpour made it tough row to hoe and the Turkish tribal Arab cavalry outflanked the attackers whirled a devastating loss (Candler. *The Long Road to Baghdad*, 2019, p. 53). Tigris Corps suffered 4,262 losses killed in action. Turks retired upstream and set up a stronghold on the stream Ab-i-Shangwa (Wadi). The battle fought on 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> January, 1916; the Tigris Corps emerged victorious again because Turks vacated their position for unknown reasons on the night of 14<sup>th</sup> despite had a whip hand. E. D. Wintle the Commander of Tigris Cavalry wrote, Turks retired intentionally to save their army and cause a great deal of damage to the attackers through their Tribal cavalry (Field Cavalry) (Wintle cited in Roy 2018, p. 278). Lala's battalion suffered a considerable loss due to the effective enemy fire including Commanding Officer Colonel C.W. Tribe killed in action.

New position held by the Turks at Umm-Al-Hanna between the Tigris and the Suwaikiyeh Marsh. Torrential rain since fifteenth flooded the River Wadi, made it difficult to cross with the heavy equipment and artillery guns, also deteriorated the health of the troops and caused sickness (Officers of the Regiment 1924, p. 68). To assault through the greasy muddy plain crisscrossed by the irrigation channels under the direct observation of enemy was tough nuts to crack (Moberly 1923, pp. 4-6). Due to the substantial loss the strength was significantly lower than war time level (Officers of the Regiment 1924, p. 72). All these difficulties reduced Indian soldiers' will to war while; the morale of Turks was high after emerging victorious at Gallipoli.<sup>4</sup> But, owing to the pressure to relieve the besieged soldiers at Kut reporting running out of ration and ammunition, advance was inevitable. On the morning of 21<sup>st</sup> January, 41<sup>st</sup> Dogras backed by 37<sup>th</sup> Dogras enduring the effective fire of Turks reached at three-hundred yards from the enemy; hitherto they have observed the well lope holed enemy trenches, fenced with the barbed wire. The attack was started at 7:45 A.M. but was shattered, afresh attack was launched at 1:00 P.M. but the effective enemy firing resulted into death knell to the attackers. Only one hundred forty seven soldiers including twenty five Dogras of 41<sup>st</sup> Dogras reached the Turkish front line, the go-getters were either killed or taken prisoners in the Turkish counterattack. The casualties to the 41<sup>st</sup> Dogras were thirty eight killed in action, thirty nine missing, and three hundred seven wounded. The British cemeteries in modern Iraq at Qurnah, Kut, Basra and Shaiba are the evidence of the devastation (Crowley 2019, pp. 67-77).

Where there seemed no chance of endurance, Lance Naik Lala showed extraordinary bravery. His anecdote was well recounted in a letter of General Aylmer to General Sir George Younghusband. He incorporated this letter in original in his book 'A Soldier's Memories in peace and War' in 1917 (Younghusband 1917, p. 334). Aylmer wrote, Lala remained entirely exposed to the firing but surprisingly no bullet touched him. He dragged the fellow soldiers

to tiny hideout just few inches scraped by him otherwise there was no shelter at all. He heard Captain F L Nicholson of 37<sup>th</sup> Dogras, laid wounded in the open groaning in pain, pulled him to the trench (Officers of the Regiment 1924, p. 67). In awful conditions he also brought four more soldiers to this meager trench and bandaged them (The Advertiser 1917). Then, he heard a murmuring voice of Captain Lindop, Adjutant of his battalion pierced by gunshots laid debilitated exposed to the enemy firing, appealing for assistance. He was just fifty yards ahead and not more than hundred yards from Turkish. Lala identified the voice and decided to save him. The area was under the Turkish effective gunfire. Nicholson ordered him in strong words to not to go there because of intense firing. He was so committed, ignored all commands, sighed heavily, observed the fire, jumped in and crawled to the Captain. Before him there were two others had tried to save him but both got killed, Lindop narrated to his fellow officers in the hospital. Whenever he tried to move a little the bullet hit him all of sudden he added. Lala was the only person who reached safely. Then he dragged him to the nearby pressed ground and bandaged him. Heavy and continuous downpour with chilling winds was rubbing salt in the wounds. He put his coat on the shivering officer to keep him warm. Half naked Lala spend more than four hours with Lindop until the dusk. As long as he stayed there, laid lengthwise making a shield of his body to protect the Adjutant. After ensuring his safety, promised him to return soon with a stretcher Lala came back to seek help. He never imagined that Lala will keep his words. But in the dark Lala appeared and told him to try to crawl a few yards but he was not able to do so. Then he mounted him on his back crawled till the stretcher bearer and brought him to the Regimental Aid Post. He carried rest all five men to the Regimental Aid Post and saved all from the mouth of sure death (Younghusband 1917, p. 334-336). Lindop died tragically of his injuries on 30<sup>th</sup> January, 1916 in the operation theatre but he narrated the saga of Lala's heroism to his fellow officers in the presence of Nicholson. One more reason of his death was the serious deficiencies in medical in the operation theatre (Galbraith 1984, pp. 358-385). Candler stated that, the extraordinary disregard to the risk earned Lala the Victoria Cross dozen times (Candler *The Sepoy*, 1919, pp. 100-102). General Aylmer met him on 15<sup>th</sup> February, 1916 congratulated him and expressed his happiness in recommending his name for the Victoria Cross (Officers of the Regiment 1924, p. 68). Due to the low strength 41<sup>st</sup> Dogras was amalgamated with the 37<sup>th</sup> Dogras, 'The Composite Dogra Battalion' was formed as a result (WO 95/5176, 1916). This composite battalion fought the battle of Duijaila Redoubt in March (WO 154, 1916). Next attack was launched at Hannah again but to no avails (WO 95/5175/4, 1916). Lala was an active soldier of this composite battalion and took part actively in every action. When there was no hope left, Townshend surrendered on 29<sup>th</sup> April, 1916 after the stalemate of one hundred forty-seven days siege (Galbraith 1984, pp. 358-385).

The 41<sup>st</sup> Dogras battalion came to know the news of granting Victoria Cross to Lance Naik Lala on the 20<sup>th</sup> May, 1916 (LG 1916, 29576, p. 4809). In June, 1916 the 'Composite Dogra Battalion' was disbanded and 41<sup>st</sup> Dogras partially

withdrawn from the battle fields owing to the recruitment problems, only a few men left attached with 37<sup>th</sup> Dogras. Among the returning troops of the two British officers (Lieutenant Colonel R.G. Macpherson Commanding Officer and Lieutenant J.P. Fullerton Adjutant), six Indian officers, one hundred thirty two other ranks, there were only four soldiers including Lala who went to France initially. In India the battalion was garrisoned at Jhelum Cantonment. Within a year battalion recruited more soldiers at the rate of hundred per month and brought up to the war level strength Officers of the Regiment 1924, p. 83). In 1917 another battalion of 41<sup>st</sup> Dogras formed in Jabalpur i.e. 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion of 41<sup>st</sup> Dogras and the Lala's Battalion henceforth called 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion of 41<sup>st</sup> Dogras. He was awarded the Victoria Cross on 30 January, 1917 at the Vice-Regal Lodge in Delhi by the Viceroy Lord Chelmsford with two others. He was also honoured with the highest Russian gallantry award First Class of the 'Cross of St. George,' made up of ninety nine percent of gold which was being awarded to Indian soldiers for the first time (Officers of the Regiment 1924, p. 84 and Prasad 2008, p. 26). He was promoted to the rank of *Havaldar* (Non Commissioned Officer). In May, 1919, Afghanistan declared war, proclaimed *Jihad* invaded Indian Territory. Now Lala as Havaldar took part in the Third Anglo-Afghan War. His battalion 41<sup>st</sup> Dogras disarmed the mutinied Waziristan Militia at Miranshah Fort. Lala with regiment also saw the operations in Aden, Jerusalem and Palestine from 1920 to 1923. Lala's Battalion 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion of 41<sup>st</sup> Dogras designated as the 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion of 17 Dogra Regiment in 1923. During this transformation Lala was *Jemadar*, served in 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion of 17 Dogra Regiment for next three years. Unfortunately he lost his Victoria Cross and received official replacement on 1<sup>st</sup> April, 1924 (Crook 1975, p. 236). His customary medals pertaining to the First World War were '1914-15 Star', 'British War Medal (1914-20)', 'Victory Medal (1914-19)' (Hayward et al 2006, pp. 502-508). Medal related to general service awarded to him was India General Service Medal with the clasp 'Afghanistan North West Frontier 1919' (Joslin 1988, p. 220). A medal awarded as Non-Commissioned Officer was 'Indian Meritorious Service Medal' (Steward 1915, p.336). He retired in 1926 after 25 years' splendid service. Lala died on 23<sup>rd</sup> March, 1927, from medical complications caused by polio at his native village (Govt. of UK: Foreign and Commonwealth Office 2016). His final words "We fought true" encapsulate a life lived with honour and purpose. His medals are privately owned by people, except Russian Cross of St. George (Sharma 2023). He also received a plot of land in Mintgumri now in Pakistan. Following the partition of India his wife Gurdevi was given an eighteen-Killa land in Mukerian Punjab as recompense by the government of India (Personal Interview Grandson Sh. Bhupinder Singh 2024). His Victoria Cross was handed over to his battalion 3<sup>rd</sup> Dogra Regiment in June, 1965 by his wife Gurdevi (Original Receipt of Three Dogra Regiment 1965). The Dogra Regiment preserved his legacy well and to inspire the newly recruited Dogra soldiers, Regimental Centre have named its parade ground after his name 'Lala Parade Ground' at Ayodhya Cant, Uttar Pradesh. School of Parol

village was also named after him by former Chief Minister Dr Yashwant Singh Parmar (Personal Interview Grandson Sh. Bhupinder Singh 2024). There is a park in Hamirpur Municipal Council, Hiranagar ward named after his name Lal Batika (Bhartiya 2014). A hand made bronze memorial plaque presented to the government of India by the government of United Kingdom on the centenary of the First World War (Dsouza 2014).

## Conclusions

The remarkable story of Lance Naik Lala Victoria Cross is a testament to the indomitable spirit and unwavering loyalty of Indian soldiers. He stood tall in the face of adversity and contributed immensely to the history of the Indian Army. Lala's heroic saga will encourage future generations to uphold the virtues of bravery and diligence, and ensures the preparedness of our Army to defend the emerging threats. To keep the adversary at bay, it highlights the importance of well-trained, disciplined, and responsible soldiers to make the Army powerful. These soldiers fought with great courage and bravery in this precocity while struggling for food, medicines, weapons, and equipment of their basic needs. Impressed by the heroic demonstration of 41<sup>st</sup> Dogras, Lord Chelmsford first raised a new battalion of them and then declared more classes as martially eligible and liable for compulsory service in Indian Army to expand it, also the recruitment and training boards were convened (Latter 1994, pp. 232-246). All these changes led to the expansion of the Indian Army and this expansion gave green signal to its Indianisation. This process begins with reforms of Indian Expeditionary Force-D (Latter 1994, pp. 232-246). Indians who were waiting for the opportunity, proudly took chance to demonstrate the bravery and proved that they are not inferior to *Celtic Britons* as blamed by Townshend who called them dejected, spiritless and pessimistic (Townshend 1920, p. 221). The reformed Indian Army, beaten the Ottomans badly in the battle of Mosul despite fewer numerically (Latter 1994, pp. 232-246). It helped Indian to gain the respect of the British (Singh 2014, pp. 232-234). Since Indians were equally involved with the British the components of racial supremacy were eliminated and they were imbued with a sense of nationalism.

## Notes

- 1 Indian Expeditionary Force-A (IEFA): To fight for France to save her from German invasion formed on the 8th August, 1914 reached at war front on 31st October, same year; Indian Expeditionary Force-D (IEFD): Deployed in Lower Mesopotamia in November, 1914; Indian Expeditionary Force-E (IEFE): deployed for the defense at Suez in October, 1914.
- 2 Total 12 British Officers, 12 Indian Officers and 633 Other Rank went into action but 7 British Officers, 5 Indian Officers and 244 Other Rank mustered after the battle...
- 3 Kut-al-Amara: The village was surrounded by the river Tigris from three sides; therefore, Townshend considered it a suitable place to defend.
- 4 Gallipoli Campaign; Fought at Gallipoli peninsula from 25th April, 1915 to 9th January, 1916, to control the Dardanelles Straits, first major defeat of Allied troops and victory of Ottoman under Mustafa Kemal Atatürk.

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