

Major Thakur Dalpat Singh MC

by Bill Bowden and Michael Partridge



Dalpat Singh, taken from a photograph of the Blackwater team, winners of the Junior Cricket Cup in 1908

One of the less documented of our war dead from the First World War is Dalpat Singh. We know that he came from a Rajput noble family, was born in November 1892, and attended Wargrave then Blackwater between 1907 and 1911. He won 1st XI cricket colours (an opening bat, he scored four centuries for the College and ended the 1911 season with an average of 61). He also played rugby for the First XV, winning 2nd XV colours, and was awarded his First Running Strings, winning both the mile race and the steeplechase. Joining the Indian army, he served with the Jodhpur Lancers in France and then in Palestine, where he was awarded the Military Cross and where he lost his life. Yet we could not find his name recorded by the Commonwealth War Graves Commission and information about his military career is sparse.

Until now, that is. Bill Bowden (W61-65), our indefatigable genealogist, has unearthed many of the facts surrounding his military service and his death. And only in December, by a strange coincidence, we received an enquiry and still more information from Jon Lee on behalf of author Jodha Singh in



Dalpat Singh in 1918 wearing his Military Cross

India, who is writing a regimental history of the Jodhpur Lancers. This has stimulated a more thorough search for information about him. The results are below.

Dalpat Singh (Thakur is not a name but a title of a Rajput Chief or feudal lord) was the son of Thakur Hari Singh of Deoli, Jodhpur, Rajputana, who was aide to Sir Pertab Singh*, who sent Dalpat to Eastbourne College together with his own son, Narpat Singh. An outstanding polo player, Dalpat was commissioned on 13 October 1913 and appointed to the Jodhpur Lancers on 25 October 1914. Initially he served as scout officer and adjutant with the regiment in France before being appointed squadron commander. Sir Pertab met Dalpat in France and reputedly was angry at his English manners and at the degree to which he had forgotten his Rajput greetings etc. The Lancers were stationed in a reserve trench near Festubert and took part in a dismounted attack on 21 December. Most of 1915 was spent training, wiring and laying light railways. By July 1916 the Lancers were in

reserve behind Gommecourt during the Battle of the Somme and on 1 December 1917 they fought a dismounted action near Cambrai, attacking a farm on Villers Ridge. In 1918 Dalpat attained the rank of major and was acting commanding officer of the Jodhpores. One source, American historian the late DeWitt C Ellinwood, claims that he married a French girl, to Sir Pratap's annoyance.

By July 1918 the Jodhpur Lancers were in the Jordan Valley guarding a bridgehead over the Jordan. Already they were celebrated as the 'Jo Hokums', which literally means 'As you command', for their reckless courage and discipline in following orders, however dangerous. The Jodhpur Lancers arrived in Egypt in early 1918, a part of the 15th Imperial Service Cavalry Brigade, 5th Cavalry Division, Desert Mounted Corps. After three months of training near Cairo they moved into the Jordan Valley guarding a bridgehead over the Jordan. There, in more familiar terrain at last, they would cover themselves with glory. Indeed, bored with the trenches of France and itching for some real cavalry fighting, they showed their mettle in their very first action, at Abu Tulul in the Jordan Valley on 14 July. Two squadrons of the Lancers led by Major Thakur Dalpat Singh attacked a large body of Turks on a ridge, spearing many and capturing many more. The Eastbourne-educated Dalpat outpaced his troop and, accompanied only by his trumpeter, attacked a machine-gun emplacement, killing and scattering the crew and capturing the commander of the 11th Turkish Regiment. For this he was awarded the Military Cross, recorded in the *London Gazette* of 29 November 1918 with the following citation:

For conspicuous gallantry and devotion to duty. This officer, accompanied only by his trumpeter, charged an entrenched machine gun killing and scattering the crew and capturing the gun. At the same time he captured the commandant of a regiment and another officer.

He was not the only one decorated that day. In all the Lancers received six Indian Orders of Merit and seven Distinguished Service Medals for their success at Abu Tulul.

Yet, it was only the beginning. The Commander-in-Chief, Egypt Expeditionary Force, Sir Edmund Allenby's historic offensive into Palestine and Syria began on 19 September 1918. Four days later the Jodhpur Lancers with the Mysore and Hyderabad Lancers, moved into position to capture strategic Haifa. This charming coastal town, now in Israel, was strongly defended and easily defensible, commanded as it is by Mount Carmel in the south-west and protected by the River Kishon in the north-east. At 1400hrs on 23 September the battle began. Under

A bronze figurine of Dalpat



heavy Turkish machine-gun fire, negotiating quicksand on the banks of the Kishon which they had to cross on the one hand and the not-so-gentle slopes of Carmel on the other, the Jodhpur Lancers charged into Haifa. This charge at Haifa is described by many as the most remarkable cavalry action ever in the history of the war and, as historian Charles Chevenix Trench remarks in his book, *The Indian Army and the King's Enemies*: 'Only the Jo Hukums could have done it.' That day the Jo Hukums had to be restrained as they galloped through the streets of Haifa, even after all the machine-gun posts had fallen, towards the placid and unknowing Mediterranean, spearing and butchering the unfortunate Turks who crossed their path, civilians even, for they had seen too many of their brothers fall. And among the dead was their beloved commander, Major Thakur Dalpat Singh. The Jodhpur Lancers lost three killed and 34 wounded. They captured 689 Turks [1352 according to another source], 17 field guns and 11 machine guns. 'It was perhaps the most extraordinary feat of cavalry, on that scale, in that or any other war. Probably no other regiment but the 'Jo Hukums' would have been crazy enough to try it.'

The action was mentioned in General Allenby's despatch of 31 October 1918: 'The Jodhpur Lancers charged through the defile and, riding over the enemy's machine guns,

galloped into the town [Haifa] where a number of Turks were speared in the streets. Colonel [actually Major] Dalpat Singh MC fell, gallantly leading the charge'. He was critically injured with machine gun bullets in his spine and died that night on an operating table. He was cremated the next day with full honours in an olive grove facing the sea. His death is recorded on the Commonwealth War Dead Memorial at Heliopolis (Port Tewfik).

In his *History of the British Cavalry*, the Marquess of Anglesey concludes his description of the action thus: 'By 3 pm the battle was over and victory complete. A vital new supply base had fallen into British hands. Four days later the landing of supplies started. Without a doubt this was the most successful mounted action of its scale in the course of the campaign. It was won by a weak brigade of only two regiments and a single 12-pounder battery pitted against about 1,000 well-armed troops who had so far seen no action. These, skilfully deployed, occupied a naturally formidable defensive position with an impassable river on one side of a narrow defile and a steep hill on the other. That they had already received news of the general rout is certain and this may well have affected their behaviour, but there is little evidence to show that they put up less than a respectable resistance. The

speed and daring, dash and boldness of the two Indian Imperial Service regiments were what made the action such a success. The speed and good order demonstrated by the leading squadron of the Jodhpores when it was forced to change direction under heavy fire were other vital ingredients in what was almost certainly the only occasion in history when a fortified town was captured by cavalry at the gallop.'

India and her army have not forgotten their heroes of the Great War. In 1922 the British government erected in New Delhi a cenotaph, the Teen Murti, to the three cavalry regiments from Hyderabad, Mysore and Jodhpur which took Haifa. This is a three-sided memorial. Dalpat is reputed to be one of the three full-size soldiers depicted.

The two regiments have been combined to form the republic's 61st Cavalry Regiment and annually India commemorates 23 September 1918 as Haifa Day on the grounds at Jaipur.

*Sir Pertab Singh (1845–1922) was the Maharaja of Idar between 1902 and 1911. A fine soldier, he served on the staff of Sir William Lockhart during the Tirah expedition of 1897–98, during which OE Henry Singleton Pennell won his Victoria Cross. His son, Narpal Singh (W&B 1906–11) was in Blackwater with Dalpat.



The Teen Murti memorial in New Delhi is a three-sided stone obelisk with three bronze sculptures which commemorates Indian Army casualties in First World War battles, including the Battle of Haifa in which Singh was killed. 23 September is still observed as 'Haifa Day' each year



Indian lancers marching through Haifa after the city was captured in 1918

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