

## RIFLEMAN GOBAR SING NEGI V.C.

### 2<sup>nd</sup>/39<sup>th</sup> GARHWAL RIFLES

Gobar Sing Negi was born on the 19<sup>th</sup> October 1894<sup>1</sup> the son of Badri Sing of Manjaur village, near Chamba in the district of Tehri, Uttarakhand which was formally part of the Kingdom of Garhwal, in the Himalayas. There is virtually no information about his early life. On the 19<sup>th</sup> October 1912<sup>2</sup> he enlisted as a Rifleman into the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion, 39<sup>th</sup> Garhwal Rifles. The regiment was originally raised in 1887 but was disbanded a year later. In 1891 the 39<sup>th</sup> (The Garhwalis) Regiment of Bengal Infantry was constituted from the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion, 3<sup>rd</sup> Gurkhas Rifles. A year later they assumed the title 'Rifles' and in 1901 a second battalion was raised.



Victoria Cross

After the outbreak of the First World War, the 2<sup>nd</sup>/39<sup>th</sup> Garhwal Rifles were mobilised and left their barracks at Lansdowne on the 21<sup>st</sup> August 1914 under the command of Lieutenant-Colonel D.H. Drake-Brockman with 7 British Officers, 17 Garhwal Officers, 14 Buglers, 734 rank and file, all their equipment and animals for war service. Lansdowne, a town and hill station located in the Pauri district of Uttarakhand, 25 miles from Kotdwar was founded by Lord Lansdowne, Viceroy of India (1888-1894). It was developed by the British for recruiting young men of the local populace into the Garhwal Rifles. The 2<sup>nd</sup>/39<sup>th</sup> Battalion, Garhwal Rifles, were then part of the 20<sup>th</sup> Infantry Brigade VII War Division, Indian Expeditionary Force. In 1914 the Indian Expeditionary Force was sent to France after the outbreak of war to reinforce the British Expeditionary Force. The Indian infantry divisions of the Meerut Division, commanded by Lieutenant General C.A. Andrews and the Lahore Division, commanded by Major-General D'U. Keary formed the Indian Corps, commanded by Lieutenant General Sir J. Willcocks. The Meerut Division was comprised of the Dehra Dun Brigade, Garhwal Brigade, Bareilly Brigade plus Engineers, Pioneers and Mounted Troops. The Garhwal Brigade was composed of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion, Leicestershire Regiment, 1<sup>st</sup>/39<sup>th</sup> Garhwal Rifles, 2<sup>nd</sup>/39<sup>th</sup> Garhwal Rifles, 2<sup>nd</sup>/3<sup>rd</sup> Gurkha Rifles and the 3<sup>rd</sup> (City of London) Battalion, London Regiment (Royal Fusiliers).

From Lansdowne the battalion marched via Dogadda, Kotdwar where they entrained for Lahore, then onward to Karachi where they arrived on the 2<sup>nd</sup> September, 1914 and marched to a rest

camp. On the 16<sup>th</sup> September they boarded a train for Kiamari Docks and embarked on the S.S. Coconada. The latter sailed on the 21<sup>st</sup> September as part of transport convoy of 12 ships escorted by light cruiser HMS Dartmouth. They arrived at Suez on the 3<sup>rd</sup> October and Port Said the following day. On the 6<sup>th</sup> October they sailed from Port Said with 18 other ships for Marseilles escorted by the French battleship Jaure Guiberry. Anchoring in Marseilles harbour on the 12<sup>th</sup> the battalion began disembarking the following day. They also received orders to change their rifles for the latest pattern, ammunition, and machine guns. From the docks the battalion marched through Marseilles on the 13<sup>th</sup> October to Camp La Valentine where they remained until the 18<sup>th</sup>.

During the evening of the 18<sup>th</sup> October the battalion left Camp La Valentine and marched to the railway station and entrained, the officers accommodated in first class carriages and the rank and file in cattle wagons fitted with seats. The train left Marseilles at 0600 hours on the 19<sup>th</sup> travelling via Gette, Beziere, Cahors, Limoges, Vierzon and arriving at Les Aubrais station Orleans on the 21<sup>st</sup>. Detraining the battalion marched to Camp Les Grouves, Orleans. On the 26<sup>th</sup> they marched out of the camp to a railway station at Murlins and via Nantes, Rouen, Abbeville, Calais, St Omer, arrived at Hazebrouck where they detrained and marched to billets at Calonne on the 28<sup>th</sup>.

The 2<sup>nd</sup>/39<sup>th</sup> Battalion, Garhwal Rifles left their billets at Calonne and marched with the other regiments of the Garhwal Brigade via Les Glatignes to Lacon where they learnt that they were to relieve the 14<sup>th</sup> Brigade, 5<sup>th</sup> Division and enter the trenches near Rue de L'EpINETTE. During the relief on the 29<sup>th</sup> the battalion was subjected to enemy artillery fire which wounded 9 Indian soldiers. They remained in the trenches for twenty days and sustained 24 killed, 136 wounded and 12 missing. Relieved on the 17<sup>th</sup> November they moved to billets at La Touret and on the 19<sup>th</sup> to billets at Rue de Bois. Leaving there on the 23<sup>rd</sup> they marched to billets at La Couture.

On the 25<sup>th</sup> they entered the trenches at Festubert, the War Diary recorded: 'The trenches were very bad ones, being very wide and certainly untenable under shrapnel fire'. Three days later they returned to billets at La Couture, their total casualties, numbering 31 killed, 156 wounded and 12 missing. Leaving La Couture on the 2<sup>nd</sup> December, they entered water logged trenches at Richebourg St Vaast. The previous day 100 men from the battalion and other Indian troops paraded at Lacon where they were inspected by King George V. They remained in the trenches until the 27<sup>th</sup> and moved back to billets at La Couture. On Christmas Day both sides fraternised with each other for approximately one hour and took the opportunity to search for the dead and

missing. The total casualties incurred by the 2<sup>nd</sup>/39<sup>th</sup> Battalion, Garhwal Rifles at the end of 1914 amounted to 44 killed, 244 wounded and 11 missing.

Leaving their billets at La Couture on the 28<sup>th</sup> December, 1914 they marched via Paradis, Robcq, Hurionville where they remained until the 22<sup>nd</sup> January 1915 and marched to billets at Calonne, Vielle Chapelle and Richebourg St Vaast over the following days. On the 26<sup>th</sup> they entered the trenches at Rud de Bois where the trenches and ground was water logged. Relieved on the 29<sup>th</sup> January they moved to billets at Vielle Chapelle. Their casualties to this date totalled 50 killed, 242 Wounded and 11 missing. Leaving Vielle Chapelle on the 3<sup>rd</sup> February they returned to Richebourg St Vaast until the 8<sup>th</sup> and returned to the trenches at Rue de Bois. Relieved four days later they moved back to their old billets at Vielle Chapelle. Leaving there on the 21<sup>st</sup> they returned to the trenches at Rue De L'Épinette. After spending seven days in the trenches, they moved into billets firstly at Zelobes and then at Richebourg St Vaast on the 8<sup>th</sup> March, 1915. The battalion's total casualties up to the 28<sup>th</sup> February numbered 55 killed, 354 wounded and 11 missing.

In February 1915, the commander of the First Army General Sir Douglas Haig planned an operation to re-capture from the Germans the village of Neuve Chapelle, which they had occupied in October 1914. Haig proposed to capture the village which was approximately in the centre of the First Army's front. He intended to widen the front by attacking at the same time to the left and right of the German front line



#### Battle of Neuve Chapelle – 1<sup>st</sup> Day 10<sup>th</sup> March 1915

and then advance onwards to Aubers Ridge. The plan was approved by Field Marshal Sir John French, Commander-in-Chief of the BEF and Haig was to make all the necessary arrangements for the attack to proceed by the 9<sup>th</sup> March, depending on the weather and ground conditions. It was presumed that the French would assist by attacking the Germans on the right of the First Army around La Bassée – the French however only gave minimal support. The opportunity for a successful outcome of the proposal was viewed by the British with optimism as the Germans

had transferred from the Western Front significant numbers of their forces for operations against Russia.

IV Corps and the Indian Corps were to assemble their forces in considerable depth facing Neuve Chapelle. The extent of IV Corps front was approximately 5,000 yards and that of the Indian Corps 3,000 yards. Three Infantry Brigades, two of IV Corps and one from the Indian Corps were ordered to undertake the first assault on a frontage of 2,000 yards. Detailed instructions were promulgated, and the troops were able to rehearse their initial part of the operation in areas behind the front line and out of sight of the enemy. Troops were to form up before the attack behind specially constructed 'forming-up trenches' close to the front line. False breastworks were built along part of the First Army's front with the intention to deceive and confuse the Germans as to which part of their front was to be attacked.

Supplies to support the attack were established at breastworks on the front sector of the attack including magazines for ammunition and bombs. In anticipation of a successful outcome

working parties were detailed for repairing roads into Neuve Chapelle. The Indian Corps and IV Corps artillery was grouped opposite the German positions. Maps were prepared on which for the first time 'Red' and 'Blue' lines were drawn.



Neuve Chapelle Memorial

Information gathered by

RFC reconnaissance was included in outline on the maps. As far as could be anticipated all preparations for the attack on the village had been completed and it was considered that the Germans remained unsure from which direction the assault was to be launched.

On the 10<sup>th</sup> March, the Garhwal Brigade commanded by Brigadier-General C.G. Blackader, were deployed along 600 yards of the frontline between Port Arthur and Port Logy, with the 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion, London Regiment in brigade reserve. The War Diary of the 2<sup>nd</sup>/39<sup>th</sup> Battalion, Garhwal Rifles recorded:-

War Diary 10-3-1915 – 'Neuve Chapelle & Vicinity. Left Richebourg St Vaast at 1.30 a.m. and marched to and took up positions in 6<sup>th</sup> Jat trenches. Just before dawn Nos. 1 and 2 Coys., left the trenches and filed out in front of main trench and lay in readiness in a small trench special dug at C.O.'s request, just the other side of the road ready for the assault on the Germans trench covering Neuve Chapelle. Have the 1<sup>st</sup> line lay down out of sight of the German trenches camouflaged by the shape of the ground.

'The whole Brigade was to assault in line, the regiments being in the following order from the left 2/39 G. 2/3 G.R. Leicesters 1/39 G. The front to be assaulted was divided up and assigned to the various regiments of the Brigade as above, the 3/London Regiment being in reserve. The object of the attack was to capture the advanced German trenches and if possible push on capture Neuve Chapelle and eventually occupy the original British line E. of the village, known as the Smith-Dorrien line, as being the line taken up by that General's Corps in the fighting around this area in the early days of the war. The 8<sup>th</sup> (British) Division of the 4 Corps was also to assault on our left, and Brigades of the 1<sup>st</sup> Corps on our right were also to attack the German trenches in their front.

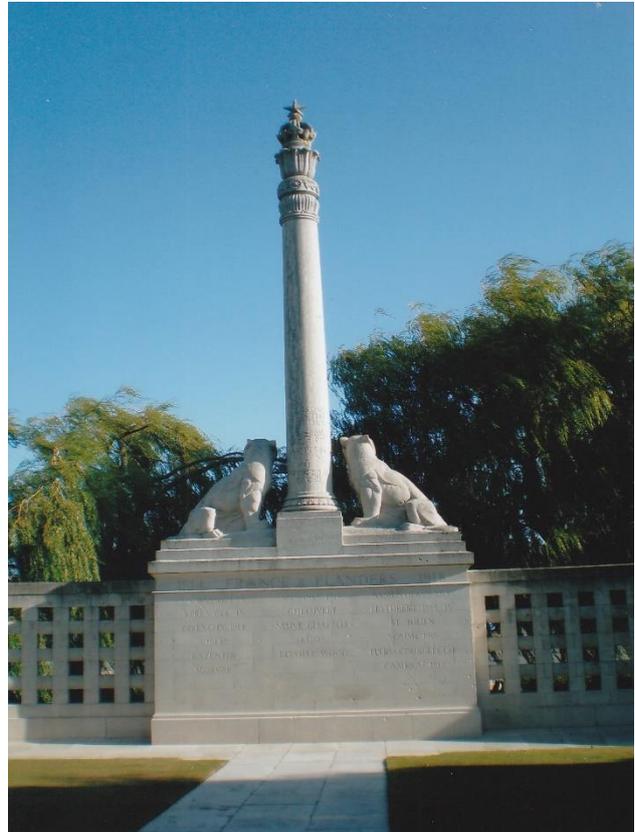
'The plan of attack was as follows: From 7.35 a.m. to 8.5 a.m. the guns were to concentrate their fire on the front to be assaulted by the Garhwal Brigade; 10 minutes fire being by Field Guns on wire entanglement etc. At 8.5 the attack was to be launched simultaneously along the whole line, though the attack by the 8<sup>th</sup> Division was timed for half an hour later. At 7.30 a.m. the guns began a terrific bombardment, every kind of gun being used, field siege and howitzer. The noise was deafening and the fire very accurate. One or two premature bursts caused casualties in the trenches, but these were remarkably few considering the number of guns in action. The Germans also fired a good deal in reply.

'Precisely at 8.5 a.m. Nos 1 and 2 Companies rose to the assault, advancing in a very good line across the 100-200 yards or so between the trenches, followed by their 2<sup>nd</sup> Platoon at 50 yards distance and soon reached the German lines. The barbed wire had been cut a great deal by the fire of the guns and but little resistance was a first met with. Bombing and bayonet parties worked down the main fire trench and up communication ones and so rounded up prisoners who all surrendered and touch was thus gained with the Berkshire regiment who also were working up the trenches towards us. Several casualties occurred here, but the line pressed on and reached their objective the line G – H. During this advance 187 prisoners and 3 machine guns were captured. Meantime No 3 Company had been sent up to support Nos 1 and 2 and eventually the whole line advanced and passed through Neuve Chapelle and reached the Smith-Dorrien line beyond. Touch was gained with the Rifle Brigade on the left, the right battalion of the 8<sup>th</sup> Division. A strong line was established here, the battalion taking up a position in support of the front line behind the 2/3 G.R. and facing the Bois de Biez. Sandbags, hurdles and entrenching tools were found in a house in Neuve Chapelle, evidently a German sapper depot and good use was made of all this material to build up a breastwork. A few more shells were fired during the day and occasionally a maxim opened on the troops

working but on the whole there was little firing. Jemadar Ghantu Sing Bisht was killed by maxim fire while here.'

'During the advance Subadar Shib Sing Negi had been killed and Subadar Ratan Sing Negi, Jemadar Balbhadur Sing Gusain and Jemadar Amar Sing Negi had been wounded, 26 rank and file had been killed and 75 wounded, 31 being reported missing of whom 11 were believed killed. Subadar Sing Negi was missing, not traceable at all, so it is presumed he must have been killed by a shell. The advance had been carried out with great dash and vigour and the start was well timed; and this undoubtedly prevented heavier casualties. The men behaved splendidly and were always ready and anxious to advance further.

'About 5 p.m. G.O.C. Brigade sent for the C.O. and he received orders to go and consult with Colonel Swiney, 1/39 G., who had been slightly wounded about consolidating the R. Flank of the line at Port Arthur and to take over both battalions. Orders were received to be ready to move at a moment's notice and at 12 midnight the Battalion was ordered to proceed to Port Arthur. On the way the commanding officer was met on his way back from Port Arthur and he ordered the Battalion back to the trenches they had just evacuated. Meanwhile the G.O.C. Brigade had directed Major MacTier take



Neuve Chapelle Memorial

over command of the 1/39G., vice Colonel Swiney who had been wounded and Captain Harbord was also transferred to the 1/39 G., as they had suffered heavily today in the attack losing 6 British officers killed. The Battalion returned to the breastwork behind the 2/3 G.R. and got what rest they could. Total casualties for the day:- 122. The Battalion's total casualties up to that date were 87 killed, 327 wounded and 33 missing.'

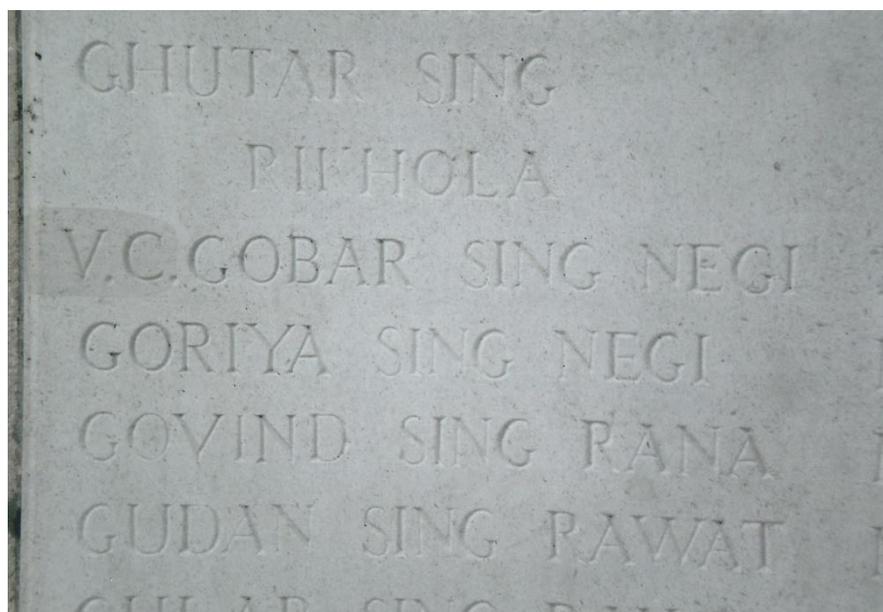
During the advance of the bomb and bayonet party working their way down the main German fire trench, Rifleman Gobar Sing Negi was awarded the Victoria Cross, posthumously, for his conspicuous gallantry in leading his party around the trench traverse's.

### War Diary 11-3-1915 – Trenches

‘At 5 a.m. orders were received placing the Battalion at the disposal of the G.O.C. Dehra Dun Brigade in connection with operations to be undertaken on the morning of the 11<sup>th</sup>. The battalion, which was to attack the Bois de Biez that morning. Accordingly, the Battalion marched off at once and reached the appointed position on the R. Flank of the Dehra Dun Brigade at about 8.30 a.m. The morning was foggy and cold. The Battalion took up a position in the open ground in front of the trenches captured the previous day and now occupied by the 2/Leicester Regiment and the Seaforths. Touch was gained with the 2<sup>nd</sup> Gurkhas on our left and all was in readiness to support when they advanced.’

The prospect was not a pleasing one as the ground was absolutely, open for 800 yards and it was across this that the Battalion would have to advance. As it was the Battalion lying out there in the open suffered a good many casualties from rifle fire and snipers and eventually the C.O. ordered their withdrawal into and behind the trenches, where

some dead ground in an orchard afforded a certain amount of cover. Here the Companies entrenched themselves. A report was sent in to the G.O.C. Dehra Dun brigade explaining the situation and pointing out the extreme difficulty of the task allotted to the Battalion i.e, to advance under fire from



three sides across the open ground. Meantime our guns shelled the Bois de Biez heavily the enemy replying occasionally with rifle and machine gun fire. Considerable movement was seen in the German trenches opposite the Battalion, and it was evident that a good number were collecting there. The bombardment of the Bois de Biez continued practically all day, till about 4 p.m. Rations were brought up for the men by a party of the 2/6<sup>th</sup> Gurkhas, the first food the men had since leaving Richebourg St Vaast, except what they had in their haversacks with them. The Germans opened a fairly heavy shell fire all along the line from 4 to 5.30 p.m. but no(t) much damage was done. At 12 midnight orders were received from G.O.C. Dehra Dun Brigade to march to billets at La Couture which was reached at 3 a.m. Casualties during this day 31. Total casualties up to the 11<sup>th</sup> March were 91 killed, 355 wounded and 33 missing.’

#### Rifleman Gobar Sing Negi V.C. – Neuve Chapelle Memorial

Whilst the Battalion was in the trenches at Neuve Chapell on the 29<sup>th</sup> April 1915 they received news of awards granted by the C-in-C The British Army In The Field and:-

War Diary 29-4-1915

'News was received that the King had awarded the VICTORIA CROSS to No. 1685 Rifn. Gobar Sing Patwal (Negi) for conspicuous gallantry at Neuve Chapelle; and the Military Cross to Lieut. A.H. Mankelow (1/39 G.) and Jemadar Panchan Sing Mahar (2/39 G.)'

War Office, 28<sup>th</sup> April 1915. No.1685 Rifleman Gobar Sing Negi 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion, 39<sup>th</sup> Garhwal Rifles: "For most conspicuous bravery on 10<sup>th</sup> March 1915 at Neuve Chapelle. During our attack on the German position, he was one of a bayonet party with bombs who entered their main trench and was the first man to go round each traverse, driving the enemy until they were eventually forced to surrender. He was killed during this engagement." Gobar Sing Negi was 21 years of age.

The Germans had counter-attacked on the 11<sup>th</sup> and by the following day established a position east of Neuve Chapelle.



On the 13<sup>th</sup> Sir John

Memorial Gates Hyde Park, London.

French halted any further advance as the troops were exhausted and ammunition supplies were low. He also ordered that the First Army was to 'consolidate and strengthened their new line'. British casualties during the battle of Neuve Chapelle were 583 officers and 12,309 other ranks. German casualties were similar with 30 officers and 1,657 other ranks taken prisoner.

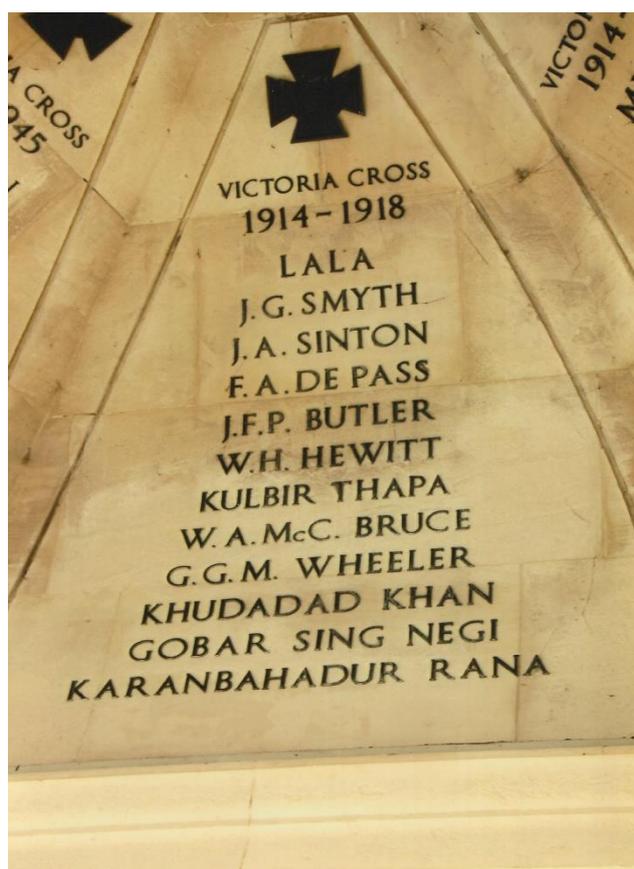
Gobar Sing Negi's Victoria Cross was sent by the War Office to the India Office for presentation to his wife Satoori Devi. He also posthumously received the 1914 Star, British War Medal 1914-1920, Allied Victory Medal 1914-1919, and Bronze Memorial Plaque and Scroll. Subsequently the regiment purchased the Victoria Cross and forwarded a replica to Satoori Devi, who evidently treasured all her husband's medals for the rest of her life. She died in 1981.

Rifleman Gobar Sing Negi V.C., is commemorated on the Indian Memorial at Neuve Chapelle. The memorial commemorates over 4,700 Indian Soldiers and labourers who lost their lives on the Western Front during the First World War and have no known grave. The location of the memorial was specially chosen as it was at Neuve Chapelle in March 1915 that the Indian Corps fought its first major action as a single unit. The memorial takes the form of a sanctuary enclosed within a circular wall after the manner of the enclosing railings on early Indian shrines. The column in the enclosure stands fifteen feet high and was inspired by the famous inscribed columns by the Emperor Ashoka throughout India in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC. The column is surmounted with a Lotus capital, the Imperial British Crown and the Star of India. Two tigers are carved on either side of the column guarding the temple of the dead. On the lower part of the column are the words 'God in One, He is the Victory' inscribed in English, with similar texts in Arabic, Hindi and Gurmuki.

The memorial was designed by the British architect Sir Herbert Baker (1862-1927) and unveiled by the Earl of Birkenhead on the 7<sup>th</sup> October 1927. Lord Birkenhead (1872-1930) the Secretary of State for India had served as a staff officer with the Indian Corps during the war. The ceremony was attended by the Maharaja of Karputhala, Marshal Ferdinand Foch, Rudyard Kipling and large contingent of Indians.

Every year on the 20<sup>th</sup> or 21<sup>st</sup> April – depending on the Hindu calendar – in respect and remembrance of Gobar Sing Negi V.C., the town of Chamba holds The Gobar Sing

Negi Fair. In 1971 the Garhwal Regiment erected a memorial statue to him in Chamba and is decorated with flowers, especially during the annual fair. The regiment provides entertainment, military band music and encourages young men of the locality to join the Garhwal Regiment. Rifleman Gobar Sing Negi V.C., with other Indian Army recipients of the Victoria Cross have their names inscribed on the dome of the Memorial Gates, Hyde Park, London.



Dome Of The Memorial Gates Hyde Park

<sup>1</sup> Dates for his birth vary, depending on the source.

<sup>2</sup> Similarly the dates for his enlistment vary, depending on the source.

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### Source

War Diary 2<sup>nd</sup>/39<sup>th</sup> Garhwal Rifles ~ The National Archives Ref: WO 95/3945/3

The Victoria Cross & The George Cross – The Complete History Volume II The First World War 1914-1918. Edited by Christopher J. Wright OBE & Glenda M. Anderson. Published in 2013 by Methuen & Co and The VC & GC Association. ISBN 978 413772 17 6

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Wikipedia Web-Site ~ [www.wikipedia.org](http://www.wikipedia.org) – 39<sup>th</sup> Garhwal Rifles; Gobar Sing Negi; Lansdowne;

Government Web-Site ~ [www.gov.uk](http://www.gov.uk) – WW1 Indian VC Recipient Gobar Sing Negi

Commonwealth War Graves Commission Web-Site ~ [www.cwgc.org](http://www.cwgc.org) – Neuve Chapelle Memorial

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