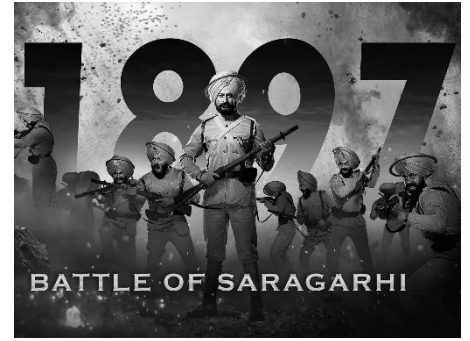


# ਸਾਰਾਗੜ੍ਹੀ

## The Battle of Saragarhi (1897)



“21 vs 10,000. To the last man, with the last round.”

“It is no exaggeration to record that the armies which possess the valiant Sikhs cannot face defeat in war.” — Queen Victoria, 1897

### What and Where

The Battle of Saragarhi took place on September 12, 1897 on the Samana Ridge in the North-West Frontier Province (today in Pakistan). Saragarhi was a tiny communication post between two nearby forts: Fort Lockhart and Fort Gulistan. Because hills blocked the view between the forts, Saragarhi used a heliograph (a mirror that flashes sunlight in Morse code to send messages).

The soldiers at Saragarhi were 21 Sikh soldiers from the 36th Sikhs (today the 4th Battalion, Sikh Regiment). Their leader was Havildar (Sergeant) Ishar Singh. They were experienced frontier troops who understood the land and the people who lived there.

### Why the Fight Happened

In 1897, there was a major uprising by Orakzai and Afridi Pashtun tribes. The British had built or maintained a chain of forts along the frontier (many first built by Maharaja Ranjit Singh). Fighting was common. In early September, the tribes attacked Fort Gulistan twice (on September 3 and September 9), but the fort held. The next move was to strike the smaller post at Saragarhi.

### The Odds

On the morning of September 12, Havildar Ishar Singh and his men saw columns of tribesmen approaching, about 10,000 to 14,000 fighters. From Fort Lockhart, officers counted at least 14 tribal standards, often taken to mean thousands of men. That meant each Sikh might face hundreds of attackers, an incredible 1:500 ratio.

### The First Attacks (9:00 a.m. – Noon)

Sepoy Gurmukh Singh, the signaler, climbed the tower and flashed to Fort Lockhart: “ENEMY APPROACHING THE MAIN GATE...NEED REINFORCEMENT.”

The reply came:

“UNABLE TO BREAK THROUGH...HOLD POSITION.”

The Sikhs waited until the enemy closed to about 250 meters, then fired in two ranks (one kneeling, one standing). Their .303 rifles were deadly at that range, and the first wave fell. But more attacks followed.

### **Smoke, Fire, and a Breach (Afternoon)**

The attackers tried a two-pronged assault, toward the main gate and toward a weak spot in the wall. The Sikhs shouted their battle cry:

“Jo Bole So Nihal! Sat Sri Akaal!”

They pushed the enemy back again and again, but ammunition and numbers were going down. Around 2:00 p.m., Gurmukh Singh flashed:

“LOW ON AMMO...NEED AMMO...URGENTLY.”

The tribesmen then set fire to bushes around the post. Smoke hid their movement. From Fort Lockhart, the warning flashed:

“ENEMY APPROACHING...THE BREACH.”

Severely wounded, Havildar Ishar Singh ordered the remaining men inward, then led a bayonet charge at the breach with two soldiers to buy time. It was an act of pure leadership.

### **The Last Stand (About 3:30 p.m.)**

Only five Sikhs were left, four inside the inner building and Gurmukh Singh at the tower. He flashed:

“MAIN GATE BREACHED...DOWN TO ONE...REQUEST PERMISSION TO DISMOUNT AND JOIN THE FIGHT.”

Answer: “PERMISSION GRANTED.”

He packed his heliograph (he didn't just drop it), fixed bayonet, and joined the battle.

Witnesses later credited him with killing 20 enemies before he fell. He was 19 years old, the last defender to die, shouting,

“Jo Bole So Nihal! Sat Sri Akaal!”

By evening, Saragarhi had been overrun, and the post was set on fire. The next morning, a relief party found the burned-out post and the signs of a fierce fight. Accounts from the time reported hundreds of enemy dead, often cited between 600 and 1,400, with many more wounded.



The ruins of Saragarhi after battle

### **What Their Sacrifice Achieved**

The defense of Saragarhi bought time. The attackers moved on to Fort Gulistan, but the pause allowed reinforcements to strengthen the fort on September 13–14, and the fort held. Later, British forces used heavy artillery to regain control around Saragarhi.

### **Honours and Rewards**

News of the battle spread worldwide. In London, both Houses of Parliament gave a standing ovation, and the story was presented to Queen Victoria. The London Gazette (February 11, 1898) praised the “heroic devotion” of the 36th Sikhs at Saragarhi and Gulistan.

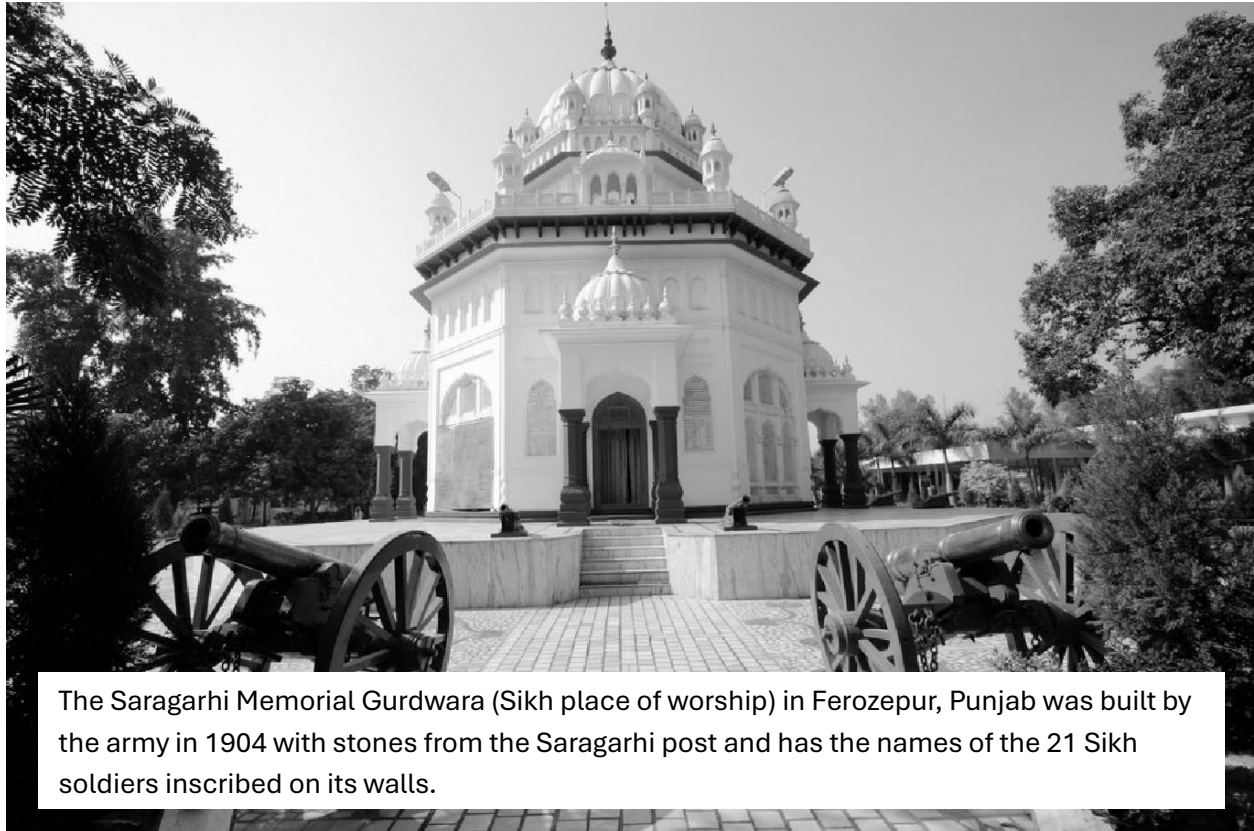
All 21 soldiers were awarded the Indian Order of Merit (IOM), the highest gallantry award for Indian soldiers (often compared at the time with the Victoria Cross; today people sometimes compare it with the Vir Chakra). Their families received land (two squares  $\approx$  50 acres) and Rs. 500 each.

## Memorials and Remembrance

To honor them, three gurdwaras were built:

- Saragarhi (at/near the site),
- Amritsar (Gurdwara Saragarhi, unveiled February 14, 1902),
- Firozpur/Ferozepur (Saragarhi Memorial Gurdwara, opened 1904).

Inside, a tablet records their bravery and their loyalty “to the Queen Empress of India,” and praises the unflinching courage of the Sikhs.



The Saragarhi Memorial Gurdwara (Sikh place of worship) in Ferozepur, Punjab was built by the army in 1904 with stones from the Saragarhi post and has the names of the 21 Sikh soldiers inscribed on its walls.

Every year, September 12 is marked as Saragarhi Day, the Regimental Battle Honours Day of the Sikh Regiment. The story is widely shared; for years, people have said it appears among UNESCO’s collective stories of bravery and is taught in schools in France (it is certainly taught in Punjab schools).

## Legacy and Inspiration

The battle is often compared to Thermopylae (480 BCE), where a small Greek force held off a much larger Persian army. The ratios, about 1:476 at Saragarhi and often described as 1:285 at Thermopylae using some estimates, show how extreme the odds were. In 1999 (Kargil), soldiers of the Sikh Regiment remembered Saragarhi as they fought on high peaks like Tiger Hill and Chorbat La, promising to uphold their martial heritage.

## Full Roll of Honour — The 21 of Saragarhi

Please take a moment to read every name. These are the men who fought to the last:

1. Havildar Ishar Singh
2. Naik Lal Singh
3. Sepoy Narayan Singh
4. Lance Naik Chanda Singh
5. Sepoy Gurmukh Singh
6. Sepoy Sundar Singh
7. Sepoy Jivan Singh
8. Sepoy Ram Singh
9. Sepoy Gurmukh Singh (another soldier with the same name)
10. Sepoy Uttar Singh
11. Sepoy Ram Singh (a second soldier with this name)
12. Sepoy Sahib Singh
13. Sepoy Bhagwan Singh
14. Sepoy Hira Singh
15. Sepoy Bhagwan Singh (a second soldier with this name)
16. Sepoy Daya Singh
17. Sepoy Buta Singh
18. Sepoy Jivan Singh (a second soldier with this name)
19. Sepoy Jivan Singh (a third soldier with this name)
20. Sepoy Bhola Singh
21. Sepoy Nand Singh

*(You can see that several brave soldiers shared the same names; the regiment's roll lists them separately.)*

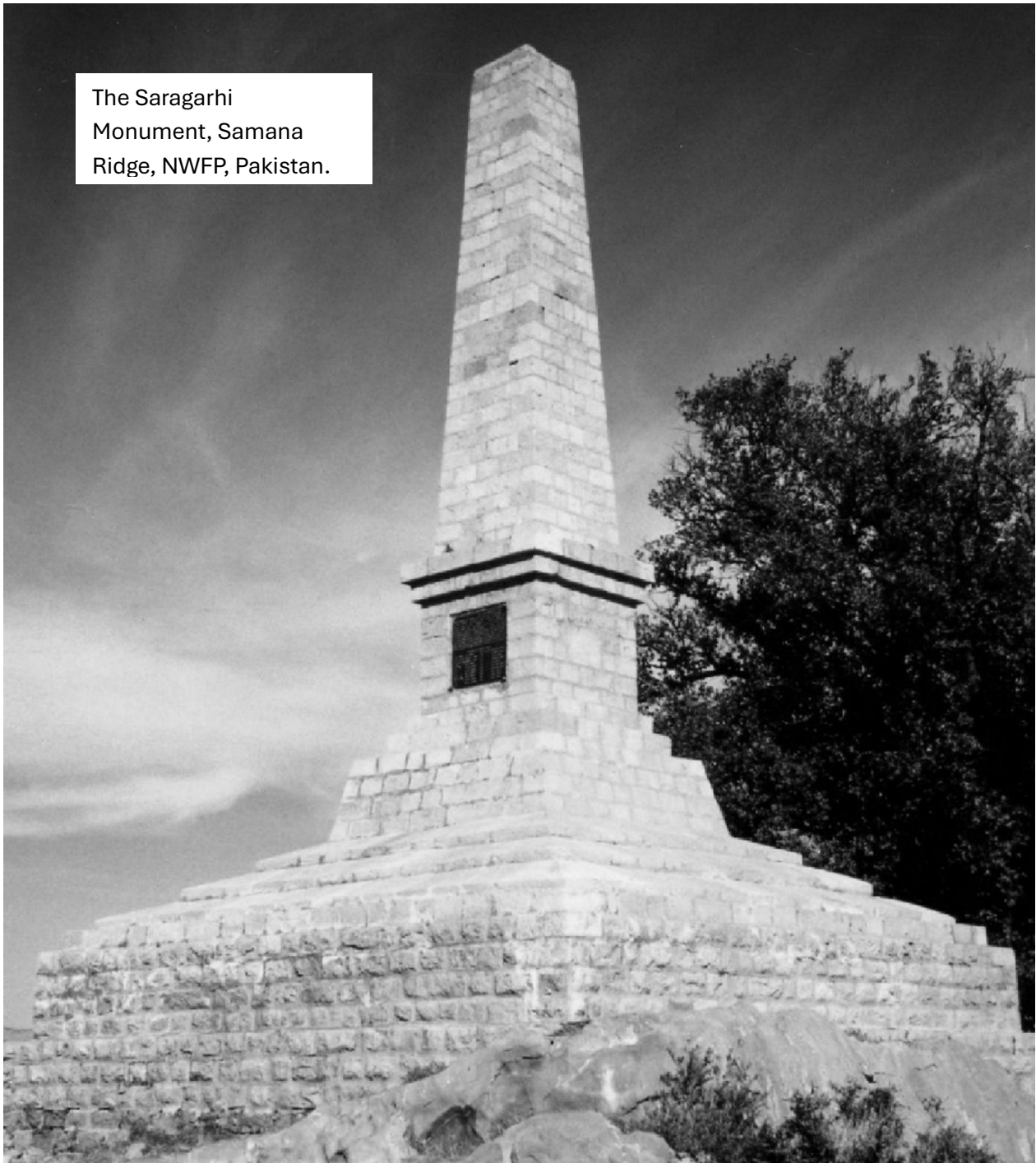
## Short Timeline

- 1887: 36th Sikhs raised; forts strengthened along the frontier.
- Sept 3 & 9, 1897: Attacks on Fort Gulistan repelled.
- Sept 12, 1897: Battle of Saragarhi—21 Sikhs hold against 10,000–14,000 attackers; all 21 fall.
- Sept 13–14, 1897: Reinforced Fort Gulistan holds.
- Feb 11, 1898: London Gazette praises the defense.
- 1902–1904: Memorial gurdwaras opened in Amritsar and Firozpur.
- Every Sept 12: Saragarhi Day observed by the Sikh Regiment and Sikhs worldwide.

## Conclusion

Saragarhi is remembered because courage, duty, and teamwork stood firm against overwhelming odds. The 21 Sikhs chose to hold their post so others could survive and win. Their story teaches us about leadership, sacrifice, and honor, lessons that still inspire students and soldiers today.

The Saragarhi  
Monument, Samana  
Ridge, NWFP, Pakistan.



**Please answer the following questions in complete sentences**

1. Where was the Battle of Saragarhi fought, and what was the purpose of the Saragarhi post between the two forts? **The battle was fought on September 12, 1897, on the Samana Ridge in the North-West Frontier Province (now in Pakistan). Saragarhi served as a communication post between Fort Lockhart and Fort Gulistan, using a heliograph to send messages because the hills blocked direct visibility between the forts.**
2. How many Sikh soldiers defended Saragarhi, and who was their leader? **Twenty-one Sikh soldiers of the 36th Sikhs defended the post. Their leader was Havildar Ishar Singh.**
3. What strategy did the attackers use in the afternoon to hide their movement, and how did it affect the defenders? **The attackers set fire to bushes around the post, creating thick smoke. This smoke hid their movement, allowing them to advance toward a weak spot in the wall and eventually breach the defenses.**
4. What message did Sepoy Gurmukh Singh send before leaving the tower to join the final fight? **He flashed:**  
**“MAIN GATE BREACHED...DOWN TO ONE...REQUEST PERMISSION TO DISMOUNT AND JOIN THE FIGHT.”**  
**After receiving permission, he packed his heliograph, fixed his bayonet, and joined the battle.**
5. Why is September 12 observed as Saragarhi Day, and how is the bravery of the 21 soldiers remembered today? **September 12 is observed as Saragarhi Day because it marks the anniversary of the battle and honors the courage and sacrifice of the 21 Sikh soldiers. Their bravery is remembered through memorial gurdwaras in places like Saragarhi, Amritsar, and Ferozpur, and by annual ceremonies in the Sikh Regiment and communities worldwide.**