Kuldip Vagha reflects quietly during the annual Sikh Remembrance Day ceremony at the Kitchener Mount Hope Cemetery on Sunday.

Canadians remember Sikh hero from First World War

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BY MELISSA TAIT, RECORD STAFF

KITCHENER — In 1919, Pte. Buckam Singh lay dying in a Kitchener hospital from tuberculosis contracted during the First World War.

On Sunday, members of the Sikh community from all over southern Ontario attended a Remembrance Day ceremony centred around his military grave at the Kitchener Mount Hope Cemetery.

The annual ceremony was inspired when Sandeep Singh Brar of Brampton discovered Pte. Singh’s grave in 2008 — nearly 90 years after his death.

During the ceremony, some speakers wondered if Singh could have imagined more than 100 people circling his gravestone to commemorate him as a war hero in 2010.
Brar believes Singh’s grave is the only known military grave for a Sikh-Canadian soldier from the two world wars.

He said Sikhs have a long military history as part of the British army during both wars, “but we never knew that we also had a part of Canada’s military heritage.”

“This grave, and the story that it reveals of the nine Sikh soldiers that were allowed to serve in World War One is really a remarkable story.”

Brar said the ceremony at Singh’s grave honoured all Sikh soldiers, as well as Canadian soldiers of all faiths.

The ceremony brought dignitaries and Canadian Forces members from Toronto, Brampton and Hamilton.

Navdeep Bains, the member of Parliament for Mississauga Brampton South, attended with his daughter and father.

“My daughter, who is three years old, can dream because of the sacrifices of Pte. Buckam Singh and so many Canadian soldiers,” Bains said.

“We are extremely fortunate and we must not take our history for granted.”

Corp. Jasroop Bains said he didn’t expect such a large turnout. He said he was motivated as a Sikh member of the Canadian Forces.

“I hope when people see the Canadian flag, they see all the people of Canada,” Bains said.

While Peter Braid, member of Parliament for Kitchener-Waterloo, said the Canadian Forces represent our multicultural society, Sgt. Gurpreet Dipak pointed out shortcomings that the Canadian Forces have only recently overcome.

Speaking at the ceremony, Dipak reached beneath his uniform and pulled out his military identification that was hanging around his neck.

“As Sikhs we are still fighting for recognition,” he said.

Until recently, the identification tags stated Dipak’s religion as “OD” or other denomination. Today his tags read “Sikh.”

“I hope the youth in the audience will think of serving our country in the future, and know that they will be recognized by Canada,” he said.

Brar said the annual ceremony has been growing steadily, and he is happy to see Singh’s story reach so many people.

“(Sikhs) have a share of Canadian history, we have a share of that poppy that we wear, and we need to feel proud of that,” Brar said. “We’re Canadian and our story is Canada’s story.”

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