**[From Gilgit scouts to NLI regiment](https://nation.com.pk/10-Jan-2020/from-gilgit-scouts-to-nli-regiment%22%20%5Ct%20%22_new)**

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In 1878 Britishers raised an irregular corps from local tribesmen, mainly Afridis, to protect traffic from Khyber Pass and Jamrud Fort to Afghan frontiers. They were known as Khyber Jezailchis since they were armed with Jezail; later renamed as Khyber Rifles. By 1880s the Russians had advanced in Central Asia and were pressing river Oxus and Pamir region. The location of Gilgit was important for the defence of the British Empire. Therefore, Gilgit was made an agency in 1877 under Major John Biddluaph and in 1889 the British re-established Gilgit as an agency for the second time. Colonel Durand was appointed political agent. It was Durand who raised irregular levies force armed with matchlocks and some of the force with swords and shields. The aim was to keep a watch on the developments across the frontiers, as Russia had annexed some central Asian cities in the vicinity of Pamir.

The main role of the force was to act as police and chowkidars. During Anglo-Brusho war of 1891, a contingent of Punial levies under Raja Akber Khan of Punial was part of Durand force. Punial levies also accompanied Major Robertson’s expedition to Chilas in 1893 and with Colonel Kelly on his expedition to Chitral from Gilgit. According to Mir Nazim Khan of Hunza, in 1912, the political agent Major Macpherson told him that he was planning to disband levies and raising a corps of scouts and the same was also discussed with Mir of Nager Raja Sikandar Khan.

In 1913 the Punial Levies were disbanded and Gilgit Scouts formed with the nucleus coming from Levies. Major J. C Bridges of 5th Gurkha Rifles (FF) who was military advisor to the Kashmir state troops in Gilgit raised the corps of Gilgit Scouts. First recruitment was done from Hunza, and according to Mir Nazim Khan, some 3000 youngsters gathered for recruitment. Mir Nazim Khan himself chose five hundred for final selection. Among this lot was his son Ghazan Khan as Subedar Major of Scouts. Viceroy Commissioned Officers were mainly from royal family and blood relatives of Mirs and Rajas.

Initially, the corps of Gilgit Scouts consisted of eight companies. Hunza and Nager had two companies each and one company each from Punial, Yasin, Gilgit and Koh Ghizer. The scouts were under political agent who controlled their promotions and commission to the ranks, while commandant was responsible for training, discipline and payments. The ibex head badge of Gilgit Scouts was worn on the traditional Gilgit cap. Colours were used to depict different platoons like green for the Hunza platoon, red for Nager and yellow for Punial. During the great war, scouts were deployed on Hunza-China border and at a post at Beyik two, German officers were arrested on their way from China to Afghanistan.

In 1919 the scouts were deployed in guarding the passes into Chitral during the third Afghan war. In 1935 when Kashmir Darbar leased Gilgit to British. Kashmir state troops withdrew to Bunji and scouts became responsible for the defence of the agency. In 1943 Captain William Brown joined Gilgit Scouts as adjutant and also acted as assistant political agent Chilas and later as commandant in July 1947. The major role of the Gilgit Scouts was to act as the first line of defence against possible attacks from the Russian, Chinese and Afghans. They were also responsible to ensure law and order in the Gilgit agency in the absence of police. According to Charles Trench in his book, The Frontier Scouts “the speed of their forced marches moved even faster than Waziristan Corps. Chilas 60 miles from Gilgit could be reinforced in a single day”. In April 1940 political agent G. C. L Crichton visited Hunza to select a site to guard border post with Afghanistan and China.

Kalamdarchi was selected at the height of 11500 feet; highest post of the British Empire at the junction of the routes from Chinese Turkistan over Kilik and Mintaka passes. The deployment of scouts at that time was in the headquarter and four platoons in Gilgit, four platoons in Chilas, one platoon in Gupis and one platoon in Kalamdarchi. In the gazetteer of 1927, while referring to Gilgit Scouts, it is written, “They are naturally good shots, fine mountaineers and can travel great distances”. According to 3 June 1947 plan, the whole of the Gilgit Agency was handed to Maharaja without consulting the locals. The troops of Gilgit Scouts being hundred percent Muslims were in favour of accession to Pakistan. On 1 August 1947 Brigadier Ghansara Singh assumed the responsibility of Governor of Gilgit, although all the Rajas and the people of Gilgit agency had already decided in favour of Pakistan.

People’s resentment against the decision found its expression on 31 October 1947. On that day the Gilgit Scouts under Subedar Major (later Captain) Babar Khan surrounded the residence of governor Brigadier Ghansara Singh. Exchange of fire continued for several hours and sepoy Ameer Hayat of Hunza became first martyr of Gilgit liberation. On the morning of 1 November 1947 governor brigadier Ghansara Singh surrendered to Gilgit Scouts. After the liberation of Gilgit, Gilgit Scouts organised themselves into forces, i.e., Ibex, Eskimo and Tiger force and fought the war of liberation. Baltistan was liberated on 14 August 1948; these irregular forces captured even areas of Dras and Kargil. In recognition of his services in 1993 Major William Brown was posthumously awarded Sitara-i-Pakistan by the then president Farooq Leghari.

In 1949 the Gilgit Scouts were split into two forces, Gilgit Scouts for internal security duties and other wing named Northern Scouts for external defence. Gilgit Scouts is proud to have major Tufail Muhammad Shaheed, Nishan-i-Haider, as commandant from first November 1949 to 30 September 1951. In 1964 Northern Scouts were deployed in Astor and Skardu areas with its headquarters at Gilgit. Later, it was decided to create a separate force each for the defence of Skardu and Astor. 16 platoons of Northern Scouts were converted to form Karakorum Scouts with headquarters at Skardu. The Gilgit, Northern and Karakorum Scouts played a significant role in defending Gilgit Baltistan frontiers against Indian attacks in 1965 and 1971. In 1975 three of the units, the Gilgit Scouts, the Karakorum Scouts and the Northern Scouts were merged into a new paramilitary force called Northern Light Infantry, (NLI). My first posting from my parent unit was to an NLI Regiment deployed in Baltaro sector guarding Conway Saddle between Gasherbrum group on the north and Sia group to the south, named after Martin Conway who discovered this 1890. NLI units were the first to be deployed at Siachen.1 NLI battalion has a unique honour of being the first unit to defend Gyong and Gyari sectors in 1984.

During the Kargil war in 1999, again most of the NLI units outclassed a superior army and successfully captured strategic heights threatening Srinagar-Leh highway. The performance of NLI troops during the Kargil war was exemplary, fought from the front to thwart many Indian attacks. 12 NLI is the only unit of Pakistan Army that received two Nishan-i-Haiders, by Captain Colonel Sher Khan and Havaldar Lalik Jan. After the Kargil war in recognition of their outstanding performance, the entire regiment was designated as an infantry regiment of the Pakistan army with the status of a regular army regiment.

But NLI had yet to sacrifice many of its soldiers in the line of duty. In April 2012, 133 soldiers belonging to 6 NLI were buried under an avalanche that struck their battalion headquarters (13000 feet) at Gayari sector of Siachen. The NLI Regiment is one of the most decorated regiment of Pakistan Army with numerous gallantry awards. The NLI regiment and the nation can rightly be proud of their gallant sons who laid down their lives for the defence of the motherland.