

The Story of Force K6

The first thing they heard was the screaming.

Not men. Not bullets. Aircraft.

In May 1940, as German Stuka dive bombers tore through the skies above Dunkirk, Major Akbar Khan led 300 exhausted soldiers along the beaches of northern France. They were soaked, hungry and carrying the wounded, including their disabled imam. Around them, Europe was collapsing. Yet these men kept moving. They were soldiers of Force K6, Muslim troops of the Royal Indian Army Service Corps, many from villages that lie in modern-day Pakistan and they were among the last Allied soldiers to escape Dunkirk.

History remembers Dunkirk through white cliffs and British heroism. But the story of Force K6 reveals something larger. Britain did not stand alone. Empire stood with it.

The men of Force K6 had arrived in France months earlier with mules and supply wagons, transporting ammunition and equipment across terrain vehicles could not cross. In chaos and retreat, they continued working under fire while much of the British Expeditionary Force withdrew. One company was captured by German troops. Others escaped through Dunkirk and nearby ports, eventually reaching Britain. Their courage earned medals for gallantry, but their names faded from public memory.

Then came Scotland.

The soldiers were sent north to the Highlands, where cold air rolled through the Cairngorms and heather stretched beneath vast grey skies. In villages like Kingussie and Newtonmore, Force K6 trained in mountain warfare while building unexpected friendships with local people. Highland children followed them through the streets. Farmers welcomed them onto their land. In wartime Scotland, ceilidhs were shared alongside chapatis, songs and stories from Punjab and Kashmir, a quiet meeting of cultures in the shadow of war.

But not all the soldiers survived.

Fourteen members of Force K6 died while stationed in Scotland. Nine were buried in Kingussie New Cemetery beneath the Highlands. Far from home and family, their graves might easily have been forgotten.

Except one woman refused to let that happen.

Isobel Harling, later awarded the BEM, first saw the graves after the war. Her own brother, John MacPherson, had been killed in Belgium, and strangers cared for his grave there. She chose to do the same for these young Muslim soldiers in Scotland. With gardening tools and quiet determination, she returned again and again — for more than seventy years. She called them “my boys.”

This is not simply a war story. It is a story of remembrance, and of ordinary people choosing kindness across borders, faiths and generations.

Today, memorials stand in Kingussie honouring Force K6 and Isobel Harling’s devotion. But the real memorial lives in the story itself: Muslim soldiers escaping Dunkirk under fire; Highland communities welcoming strangers; one Scottish woman ensuring forgotten graves were never left untended.

In Kingussie, the Highland wind still moves across those graves. Rain drifts over the Cairngorms. The hills keep watch in silence and because one Scottish woman refused to forget them, neither will we.

A true Scottish and South Asian story. A shared story of humanity.

TRUE STORY – National Theatre of Scotland true story entry by Dr Saqib Razzaq, Colourful Heritage