

## **Sikh Spiritual Leader's Trip to United States includes Historic Visit to the U.S. Military Academy at West Point**

September 11, 2017: Giani Gurbachan Singh, the current Jathedar of the Akal Takhat and the spiritual leader of the Sikh religion, visited the United States Military Academy at West Point on September 11th, the first visit ever of a Sikh spiritual leader to any U.S. military installation.

West Point was established in 1775 by then-General George Washington, who considered it the most important strategic position in America. The Academy traces its roots to 1801, when President Thomas Jefferson directed the creation of a school for the training of future U.S. Army officers, shortly after his inauguration. It is the oldest continuously operated military post in the United States and its campus has been designated a national historical landmark.

The Jathedar met with Brigadier General Steve Gilliland, the Commandant of West Point, and the ranking officer in the charge of student body, known as the Corps of Cadets. Jathedar Singh also met First Captain [Simone Askew](#), the highest ranked cadet at the academy, and also the first African-American female to hold that position.

The Jathedar's visit was particularly significant in light of the recent policy changes adopted by the U.S. Army to permit permanent religious accommodations to the Army's uniform and grooming standards, enabling soldiers and cadets to wear turbans and maintain beards, consistent with their faith. Jathedar Singh expressed his gratitude to General Gilliland and the U.S. Army for working with the first two Sikh cadets who joined the Corps of Cadets with accommodations granted under the new policy.

The historic visit to West Point was facilitated by Lieutenant Colonel Kamal Singh Kalsi, the first Sikh to receive a religious accommodation in the Army in over a generation. The Army's 2017 policy changes came after a nearly decade-long effort by Kalsi and the Sikh community. Today, there are over forty practicing Sikhs soldiers proudly serving in the U.S. Army, donning their religiously-mandated turbans and beards while maintaining good order and discipline.

Sikhs have faced hate crimes, bullying and job discrimination in the wake of 9/11. As the founder of Sikh American Veteran's Alliance (SAVA), LTC Kalsi states, "This visit helps to push back against discrimination by promoting Sikh military service in one of our nation's oldest and most revered institutions."