



Indian Army in the Ypres Salient

World War - I (1914-1918)

According to the Commonwealth War Graves Commission, 138,000 soldiers from India were sent to Europe during the First World War. Most of these soldiers were deployed in the Ypres Salient and at nearby Neuve Chapelle in France during the period 1914-15. A very large number lost their lives in the campaign to halt the German advance.

2. The Indian Army's involvement on the Western front started on 6 August 1914. That day, the War Council in London requested two infantry divisions and a cavalry brigade from the Viceroy's government to be sent to Egypt. On 27th August, these troops were ordered to Europe.

3. The supreme sacrifice of Indian soldiers in Europe is recorded in the major World War One memorial in continental Europe, Menin Gate, in Ypres, Belgium, and at the memorial for Indian soldiers in near-by Neuve Chappelle in France. In 2002, at the request of the Government of India, an Indian Memorial was erected on the lawn south of the Menin Gate.

4. After the war, India participated in the peace conference held in Versailles and was represented by Edwin Montague, the Secretary of State for India, Lord Satyendra Nath Sinha and His Highness Maharaja Ganga Singh of Bikaner. The Peace Treaty of Versailles was signed by Mr. Montague and His Highness Maharaja Ganga Singh and India became an original member of the League of Nations. In 1945, when the conference to establish the United Nations Organisation was held in San Francisco, India participated and signed the Charter becoming a founding member of the United Nations.

5. The story of the Indian Army in the Ypres Salient 1914-1918 has been researched by Dominiek Dendooven, who is a curator in the "In Flanders Fields Museum" in Ypres, Belgium and presented in the article below in vivid detail.

Manjeev Singh Puri
Ambassador of India, Brussels

Indian Army in the Ypres Salient 1914-1918:



Indian forces on their way to the Front in Flanders

The Indian army's involvement on the Western front started on 6 August 1914. That day, the War Council in London requested two infantry divisions and a cavalry brigade from the Viceroy's government to be sent to Egypt. The two selected infantry divisions were the Lahore Division (3rd India War Division) and the Meerut Division (7th Indian War Division). Together they formed the Indian Corps. The Secunderabad Cavalry Brigade was added later. On 27 August 1914 the British government decided that the Indian divisions had to be sent immediately to France, as reinforcement of the British Expeditionary Force, which had already suffered heavy losses in the Battle of Mons.



Indian forces on their way to the Front in Flanders

Part of the Lahore Division had since already left. Its new destination was Marseille. It arrived in late September 1914. Along the way, the Lahore Division had left one of its brigades, the Sirhind Brigade, behind in the region of the

Suez Canal. Because some of the units of the Jullundur Brigade did not leave India until the end of September, only the Ferozepore Brigade was at full strength.

To the Indians, Europe was a completely new and very strange experience. They did not understand the language and the culture was completely different too. The Indians and the French or Belgians were puzzled by each other. Still, the Indians were given a friendly welcome by the French population, especially at the start of the war. From Marseille they travelled north via Orleans.



Indian soldiers with British soldiers

The First Battle of Ypres:

In the meantime, the First Battle of Ypres had started. That battle - which according to the official nomenclature would rage until 22 November - was the ultimate attempt by the Germans to end the war to their advantage in 1914.



Indian soldiers trying to keep warm in their trenches, winter 1914

On 22 October 1914 the Ferozepore Brigade entered the freshly dug trenches with the 1st Battalion Connaught Rangers - the British battalion that belonged to the brigade – first undergoing its baptism of fire. The first Indian battalion to be deployed into battle was the 57th Wilde's Rifles.

On the very same day, the first Indian casualty of war on the western front fell. He was "Naik Laturia, 57th Wilde's Rifles (F.F.) - 55th Coke's Rifles (F.F.), son of Phehu, of Tikar, Hamirpur, Kangra, Punjab" and is now commemorated on the Menin Gate Memorial to the Missing in Ypres. The Indian troops continued to be brought in. Achiel Van Walleghe, priest in Dikkebus, writes in his diary that, for the whole night from 22 to 23 October, the Indian troops were brought in with English double-decker buses.



Indian soldiers arriving on double-decker buses

The next day, on 23 October, the 129th Baluchis made their way to the trenches and the last battalion of the Ferozepore Brigade, the 9th Bhopal Infantry, arrived. The Connaughts and the Wilde's Rifles were placed under the command of the 1st British Cavalry Division, the Baluchis under the 2nd Cavalry Division. The remainder of the Lahore Division, now without two of the three brigades, was deployed on the other side of the French border.



Indian soldiers in Flanders Fields

On 26 October 1914, a grey and foggy day, the troops of the Indian army attacked the German trenches. It had been raining all night and the trenches were full of mud and water. Moreover, they were really not much more than shallow ditches and there were large gaps in the defence line allowing infiltration by the enemy. The result of the attack on 26 October 1914 was a few hundred metres of land, but as the start position was better from all perspectives than the new line, the men had to retreat to their original positions - to the great incomprehension and even disappointment of the Indian troops.



Men of the 57th Wilde's Rifles in Wijtschate, October 1914

After heavy fire on 30 October 1914 the Germans attacked the Indian troops. Indians and British were the minority, they had little ammunition and little artillery support. Two companies of the 57th Wilde's Rifles retreated to the town of Messines, where they spread in the streets. Other units of the Wilde's Rifles also had to retreat.

A Sikh unit had to take up new positions in the proximity of a battery near the windmill east of the Wijtschate-Messines road. One unit did not receive the order to retreat because all means of communication were cut off. When the message finally got through it was already too late and they were surrounded by German troops. The Baluchis in the region of the chateau of Hollebeke, on the other side of the canal and the Ypres-Comines rail track had a particularly hard time to stay standing.

That night and in the morning of 31 October 1914 an action took place near Hollebeke for which Khudadad Khan of the 129th Baluchis would be awarded the Victoria Cross a few months later, as the first Indian ever. In the night from 30 to 31 October the Baluchis had lost their position in a farm because they could not distinguish German soldiers from the French. They therefore noticed too late that they were being approached by Germans - and not by the French who were fighting to their left. Khudadad Khan belonged to the unit that operated the two machine guns of the battalion. He was badly wounded later that day, while still operating the only remaining machine gun for as long as possible. Earlier the other machine gunner had been lost when a shell struck, the British officer had been wounded and the other five men of the unit were killed. As if by magic Khudadad Khan managed to join his company after disabling his own machine gun.



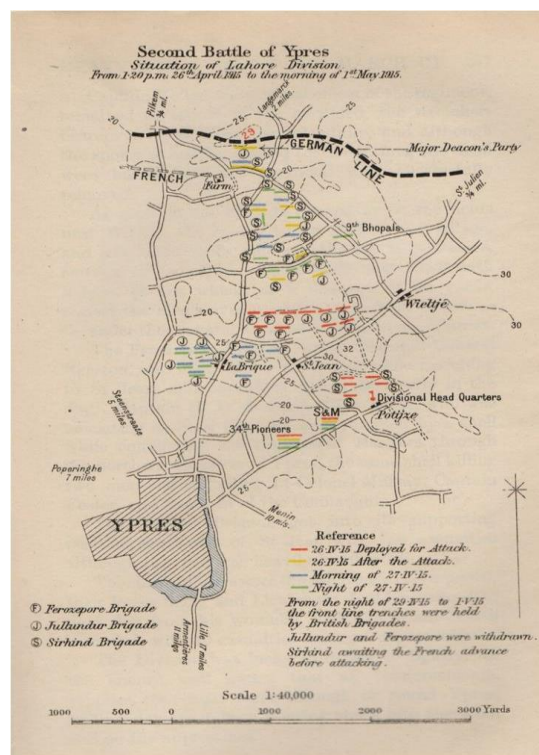
Khudadad Khan, Victoria Cross

The battle continued the whole day of 31 October 1914. After incessant fire overnight, Messines was attacked by nine German battalions. They overran the trenches of the 57th Wilde's Rifles. Various units of the battalion were killed to the last man: Jemadar Ram Singh was the only survivor of his group. Another Sikh, Jemadar Kapur Singh continued fighting until everyone was out of action, with the exception of one wounded soldier. Because he refused to surrender, he committed suicide with his last bullet. All the British officers of the 57th Wilde's Rifles located in that part of the front were killed. The 57th Wilde's Rifles had suffered many losses in the two last days of October 1914: no fewer than 300 of the 750 men of the battalion were killed, wounded or taken prisoner. There were 240 losses in the 129th Baluchis.

During the events described above another brigade of the Lahore Division, the Jullundur Brigade, was stationed just across the French border in the area of Neuve-Chapelle that would soon become the Indian sector. There too, the Indian troops were thrown into battle almost immediately. From 29 October the complete Meerut Division would arrive there too.

In early November 1914 the Ferozepore Brigade was also transferred to the Indian sector between Givenchy and Neuve-Chapelle (in France). On 7 December 1914 the Sirhind Brigade also arrived there from Egypt, together with reinforcements from India. The Indian 1st Cavalry Division had also arrived in mid November followed by the Indian 2nd Cavalry Division a month later. Those two divisions would stay on the western front after the rest of the Indian Corps left for Mesopotamia in late 1915. There was heavy fighting in the sector of the Indian Corps in December 1914 and on 10 March 1915 the Battle of Neuve-Chapelle was fought there, with unparalleled level of casualties for the Indian troops.

The Second Battle of Ypres:



Indian Front north of Ypres, April 1915

In the first months of 1915 the Germans had prepared a new attempt to break through the allied lines at Ypres. Under the impulse of Fritz Haber - later chemistry Nobel Prize laureate - a chlorine gas offensive was being prepared. On 22 April 1915, at 5 pm, the Second Battle of Ypres made history in the north of the now infamous Salient with the first successful chemical attack. That evening and night the new weapon took the life of some two thousand French soldiers. The breakthrough the Germans were hoping for did not materialise because their commanders were quite suspicious of the promised success of the gas attack and saw the event rather as an experiment. They therefore omitted to plan sufficient reserve troops to consolidate and exploit a possible breakthrough. Still, the German front moved a few kilometres nearer to Ypres, while there was no new final allied defence line in place there yet.

Again, the Indian Corps was deployed to close a gap in the line. On 23 April the 1st Army (to which the Indian Corps belonged) was given the order that the Lahore Division had to get ready to move shortly. The division marched north the next day. In the morning of 25 April the column arrived in Ouderdom, a hamlet between Reningelst and Vlamertinge. The men were exhausted on arrival in Ouderdom. They had marched for 24 hours in a sometimes hilly landscape along cobbled roads, slippery from the rain. They were only given a short break in Boeschepe on the French-Belgian border.



Indian soldiers wearing gas masks, September 1915

The Lahore Division now came under the command of the British Second Army of Smith-Dorrien. The warning was issued to the Indian troops that when gas was used, they had to place a handkerchief or a flannel over their mouths. It was recommended to soak the handkerchief in urine.

After the gas offensive the Germans had gained much ground in the region of Langemarck and Sint-Juliaan. The British now wanted to launch a counter attack on the Germans with the French and drive them away from their new positions. In the morning of 26 April the Lahore Division rallied between Wieltje to the right and the Ypres-Langemarck road to the left, some 600 metres north of the La Brique hamlet. The Ferozepore Brigade had reached its position via Vlamertinge but the Jullundur Brigade had moved to its rallying

point on the road outside the Ypres remparts. There they came under heavy fire. Most shells fell in the water of the moat or struck the thick walls. The men cheered from time to time as a shell fell in the water. But one heavy shell landed in the middle of a company of the 40th Pathans, with 23 casualties as a consequence. As soon as the division set up in the fields near the Wieltje hamlet, it was showered with tear gas shells. German airplanes carried out observation flights over the heads of the Indian troops but nothing was done against it. On the other side of the Ypres-Langemarck road the French deployed their North African troops, and the British 5th Army Corps was positioned to the right of the Indians. The Ferozepore Brigade was deployed left and the Jullundur Brigade right. The Sirhind Brigade was in reserve in Sint-Jan. The headquarters of the division was located in Potijze.

After a prior shelling of barely 40 minutes, the sign for the attack was given in the afternoon of that 26 April at five past two. Two officers per unit were sent ahead to explore the field, but none of them had returned. There was no information about the exact location of the German trenches or their distance. The men of the Lahore Division were exhausted after the long march and their position was located by the enemy as the Germans could observe undisturbed. Furthermore, the troops first had to cross open ground for a few hundred metres, up to more than a kilometre before reaching the first German line and proceed with the actual offensive. The surface relief was not favourable either as the soil first rose over a few hundred metres then dropped over a few hundred metres and finally rose again towards the German frontline.



Maharajah Bhupinder Singh inspects a Guard of Honour

The British-Indian artillery was light and ineffective - it did not know the exact position of the Germans either. Once outside the trenches, any sense of direction was soon lost and the various attacking units, French, French colonial troops, British and Indians, ended up mixed together. After the first slope they found themselves in an inferno of gun fire, machine gun fire and shells, including tear gas shells. The men fell like flies and soon the offensive was stopped. No reinforcements arrived.

The number of casualties was extremely high. The 47th Sikhs that attacked in first line lost 348 out of 444 men or 78% of the regiment. In total the offensive claimed almost 2 000 casualties in the two brigades. Following this offensive corporal Issy Smith of the 1st Manchesters, which was part of the Jullundur Brigade, was awarded the Victoria Cross. Despite the constant heavy fire he had incessantly evacuated the wounded. Mula Singh and Rur Singh of the 47th Sikhs also managed to save many wounded. Bhan Singh, a Sikh of the 57th Wilde's Rifles, had been injured in the face early on in the offensive. He nevertheless stayed close to his officer, Captain Banks. When Banks fell, Bhan Singh thought of only one thing: bringing him back, dead or alive. As weak as he was, he stumbled under heavy fire, carrying Banks' body until he fell down exhausted and had to give up. Still, he did not return before first saving Banks' personal belongings.

None of the attacking troops managed to reach the first enemy line. Each attempt to consolidate the positions failed when the Germans opened the gas bottles again around 2.30 pm. When the gas reached the Indian troops, the soil was almost instantly covered with men being tortured in the most atrocious manner. Although all the attackers had to endure the effects of the gas, the Ferozepore Brigade and the French to their left were hit the hardest. They retreated amidst great confusion, while the dead and the dying were left behind in no-man's-land. A small group led by Major Deacon still managed to ward off a German attack and withstand in no-man's-land. Jemadar Mir Dast of the 55th Coke's Rifles, attached to the 57th Wilde's Rifles stayed in no-man's-land after all his officers were killed or wounded. He rallied all the men he could find including quite a few who were lightly gassed, and stood his ground with them until dawn. He only retreated then and brought many wounded soldiers with him. He also helped other injured Indians and British, although he was wounded himself. He was awarded the Victoria Cross for his actions.

The smell of chlorine gas lingered all night. It was late in the night until what remained of Major Deacon's group could be rescued. The Ferozepore Brigade and the Jullundur Brigade were pulled back to Brieke, while the Sirhind Brigade replaced it in the first line. Men of the 34th Sikh Pioneers tried to reinforce the precarious position where Major Deacon managed to stand his ground. Two members of that unit, the sappers Jai Singh and Gujar Singh, were later awarded the Indian Distinguished Service Medal because they had restored the lines of communication under constant fire.

The action was repeated again and again over the next three days, but always unsuccessfully for the North Africans, British and Indians. The Germans resorted to their cannisters the next days too. Shortly after 1 pm on 27 April the French Colonial Troops, the Sirhind Brigade and the Ferozepore Brigade attacked again, this time with the support of the Canadian artillery. The two Gurkha battalions, the 4th London Regiment and the 9th Bhopal Infantry, led the attack and therefore suffered most. When they noticed that the barbed wire in front of the German trenches was untouched, the action was abandoned.

In the night of 29 to 30 April 1915 the Jullundur and the Ferozepore Brigade pulled back to their quarters near Ouderdom. Because they regularly came under fire there too, the men stayed outside instead of sheltering in their tents. A shelling early in the morning of 1 May made the pack animals of the 47th Sikhs bolt. Finally, after a last desperate attempt to reach the enemy lines, the Sirhind Brigade was withdrawn from battle too. On 2 May it joined the rest of the division in Ouderdom. The division started the return march to the rest of the Indian Corps near Neuve-Chapelle the next day. The Lahore Division had lost 3 889 men from 24 April to 1 May, or approximately 30% of the men deployed.

This was to be the last time that the Indian troops were massively deployed in the Ypres Salient. After May 1915 the Indian Corps became active near Aubers Ridge, Festubert and Loos. After the Battle of Loos, in late September 1915 the Indian Corps was transferred to Mesopotamia. In fourteen months it had lost 34 252 men, including 12 807 from the British units of the corps and 21 445 from the Indian battalions.

After the departure of the Indian Corps in 1915 the Indians were no longer present in large numbers on the western front. That does not mean to say that Indian units were no longer present, on the contrary. In Flanders too, Indians could still be seen from time to time until the end of the war. In Lijssenthoek Military Cemetery near Poperinghe a Sikh is remembered, a cavalryman who fell on 2 November 1917, and a Hindu who belonged to the Royal Field Artillery who fell on 12 October 1918.

Units of the Indian Labour Corps were also active in Flanders at the end of the war and in the first post war years. Their arrival was welcomed by the local population.

Conclusions:

The contribution of the Indian troops in the western front, though largely underplayed by their British commanders, was hugely crucial. They filled the gaps - gaps that could have potentially allowed a German breakthrough. Deployed as storm troops in counter offensives where all circumstances were to their disadvantage, they explored and prepared the field so it could be expanded into a new allied line of defence by others after them.

For the Indian military the deployment in Ypres in 1914 and 1915 was very important. It had its baptism of fire during the First World War while simultaneously fighting for the first time on European soil. Probably even more important was the fact that the Indian Army faced brutal confrontation with war on an industrial scale in which heavy artillery played a decisive part and in which aeroplanes were used. In late April 1915, during the Second Battle of Ypres, the Indian military were among the first to be exposed to chemical warfare. The deployment in Ypres not only represents a symbolic important moment in the history of the

Indian troops, it must undoubtedly also have been a hard learning curve.

Remembering India In Flanders Fields:

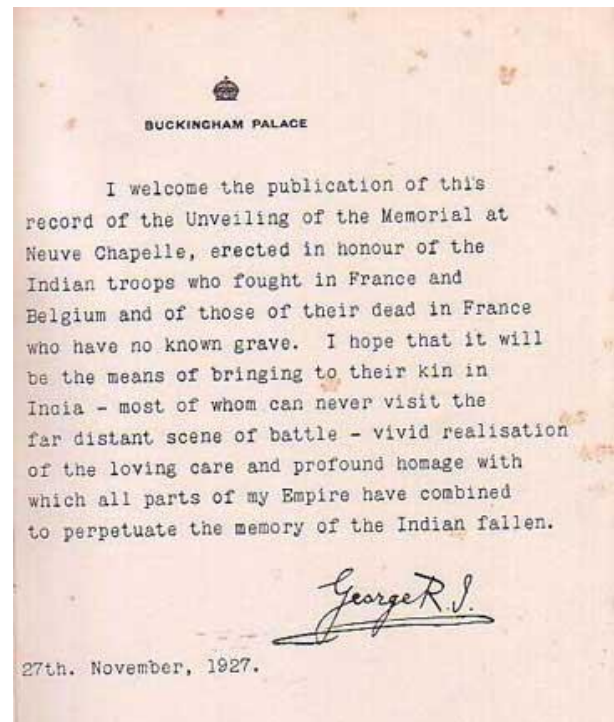
In Europe, there were attempts to set the memory of the Indian presence on the Western Front in stone: on headstones and special memorials in British military cemeteries, but also with specific monuments. In Brighton, where the Indian base hospitals were, the Chattri memorial was unveiled in 1920-1921 on the spot where the deceased Sikhs and Hindus were cremated.



Indian Memorial at Neuve Chappelle

In the center of the main sector of the Indian Army Corps, in Neuve-Chapelle, the beautiful memorial by Herbert Baker was unveiled on 7 October 1927. The memorial was designed to honour India, its culture and traditions. The column is surmounted with a Lotus Capital and star of India. On either side, two carved tigers guard the memorial. Within the walls are two *chattris*. Around 4700 names of Indian soldiers are engraved on the walls of the monument, many of whom lost their lives on the Western Front during the WW I and have no known graves. The walls also bear the following inscription:

" TO THE HONOUR OF THE ARMY OF INDIA WHICH FOUGHT IN FRANCE AND BELGIUM, 1914-1918, AND IN PERPETUAL REMEMBRANCE OF THOSE OF THEIR DEAD WHOSE NAMES ARE HERE RECORDED AND WHO HAVE NO KNOWN GRAVE "



Letter by King George V acknowledging sacrifice of Indian troops in France and Belgium

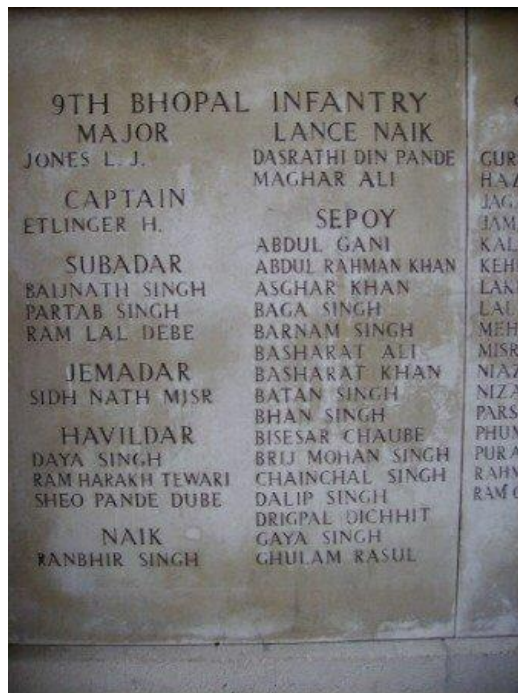
A few months earlier, on 24 July 1927, the Menin Gate was unveiled in Ypres, arguably the most important Memorial to the Missing on the Western front, even if only because with the Last Post it is the only place in the world where a remembrance ceremony for the casualties of the First World War takes place every day.



Menin Gate, Ypres

Besides the thousands of names of British, Irish, Australians and Canadians, more than 400 names of Indians reported missing in the Battles of Ypres are also engraved on it. However, we must point out that despite the fact that some Indians who fell in Ypres are mentioned on the Neuve-Chapelle memorial,

their numbers on either memorials are vastly underestimated.



Names of Indian soldiers on the walls of Menin Gate

The example of the 47th Sikhs alone makes it clear: the Menin Gate lists only 14 dead for that regiment, whereas the regiment's history, for 26 April 1915 alone, mentions that 348 of the 444 deployed men did not return.

In 2002, a separate 'Memorial Stone' was installed on the lawns of 'Menin Gate' in the honour of the Indian Soldiers who came from afar to fight with the greatest dedication in a land they had possibly not even heard of earlier and

had bore the brunt of the first gas attacks and stopped the German advance which prevented the town of Ieper from being captured by the Germans through the war. On 12 March 2011, the original monument was replaced by a replica of the Indian National Emblem.



Indian Memorial at Ypres

At Ypres Indian and Belgian history meet. That makes it a meeting place, a place where we realise we have a common history and where, by cherishing that mutual past, we also can work on our mutual future.

Dominek Dendooven
In Flanders Fields Museum, Ypres, Belgium

Appendix: composition of the Lahore Division in October 1914

Infantry

Ferozepore Brigade: *1/Connaught Rangers*
 57th Wilde's Rifles
 9th Bhopal Infantry
 129th Duke of Connaught's Own Baluchis
(April 1915: + 4/London Regt)

Jullundur Brigade: *1/Manchesters*
 15th Ludhiana Sikhs
 47th Sikhs
 59th Scinde Rifles (Frontier Force)
(April 1915: - 15th Ludhiana Sikhs, + 4/Suffolks, + 40th Pathans)

Sirhind Brigade *1/ Highland Light Infantry*
 1/1st Gurkhas
 1/4th Gurkhas
 125th Napiers Rifles
(April 1915: + 4/(King's) Liverpool Regt, + 15th Ludhiana Sikhs)

divisional troops

15th Lancers (Cureton's Multanis)
 34th Sikh Pioneers
 20th and 21st companies Bombay sappers and miners

Artillery

5th, 11th, 18th Brigades, RFA
 109th Heavy Battery

Field Ambulances

7th & 8th Field Ambulance (British)
 111th, 112th & 113th Field Ambulance (Indian)