

## Sideshows of Indian Army in World War I\*

Major General VK Singh (Retd)<sup>®</sup>

This book by Harry Fecitt is a treasure house of information on the actions in which Indian troops took part during World War I. Most of us are aware of the significant contribution of the Indian *sepoys* and *sowars* in famous battles such as Neuve Chapelle and Ypres in France; Kut in Mesopotamia and Gallipoli in Turkey. However, very few know about the role of Indian soldiers in the 'sideshows' in Southern Europe, East, North and West Africa, Middle East, Central Asia and the Far East. Some of the places where these actions took place were Macedonia, the North West Frontier and Baluchistan, China, Somaliland, the Suez Canal, Egypt, Sinai and Palestine; Seistan in East and Bushire in South Persia; British, Portuguese and German East Africa; Transcaspia (present Turkmenistan); German Kamerun in West Africa; Ramadi in Mesopotamia; and the Kuki Rising in Northeast India and Burma.

The Indian involvement in these actions was not limited to soldiers of the regular Indian Army alone. There was a considerable complement of the infantry, in addition to artillery and sappers from the Indian State Forces, some of which also provided camels, mules and porters for carrying loads and evacuating casualties. There were also several volunteer forces, which fought alongside the regular troops, manned artillery as well as machine guns and performed various other duties. A number of Labour Corps were raised in India including a Jail Labour Corps that comprised convicts lodged in various jails who volunteered for the assignment. In addition to Indian and British troops, other Allied troops who took part in the operations in East Africa came from the South African Army and the Kings African Rifles (KAR); from the Australian and New Zealand Corps (ANZACs) and Egypt during the actions on the Suez Canal; and from Japan during the fall of Tsingtao in China. The enemies in these actions were many – Germans,

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\***Sideshows of Indian Army in World War I.** By Harry Fecitt, (New Delhi : Vij Books, 2017), pp..331, Price Rs 1095, ISBN 9789386457240.

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Bulgarians, Turks, African Askari (locals recruited by the enemy), Arab irregular troops, Mesopotamian insurgents, Somali, Senussi, Baluchi and Persian tribesmen and Russian Bolsheviks who used Austrian and Hungarian prisoners of war.

The book is meticulously researched and details of casualties as well as gallantry awards have been given in almost every operation, along with brief citations. In most cases, these have been written on the spot by an officer who witnessed the action or based on accounts of eye witnesses. The large number of casualties, which includes a number of British officers, is testimony to the fighting spirit and valour of the troops. They did face reverses, but morale did not waver and there were very few cases of cowardice. Fallen comrades were always brought back, even at the risk of more casualties. In most cases, cannons, machine guns and ammunition were also retrieved. In addition to those sustained in action, there were many casualties due to the extreme heat and various insects and flies that affected not only men but animals. The 22<sup>nd</sup> Derajat Mountain Battery had 164 mules when it arrived in East Africa in December 1916. By March 1917, all the mules were dead from Tse-tse fly bites.

There were several examples of old world chivalry. After a fierce battle near Tandmuti Hill in East Africa in August 1917, the 30<sup>th</sup> Punjabis withdrew after sustaining heavy casualties. The Germans over-ran the British advanced field hospital, but respected it. German officers removed quinine from the hospital stores but protected the patients from bayonet wielding German Askari. On 30<sup>th</sup> June 1917 the 5<sup>th</sup> Light Infantry suffered a reverse with very heavy casualties at Lutende in East Africa. Only 55 officers and men reached their base at Naitiwi, leaving behind the Commanding Officer, Lieutenant Colonel AL Wilford, DSO. On the following day, the Germans returned the dying Colonel Wilford under a flag of truce along with the severely wounded Subedar Major. A similar instance had occurred in September 1916 when Naik Sanak Gul of 40<sup>th</sup> Pathans was returned with a broken leg during operations along the coast of German East Africa. The Germans often returned wounded prisoners under a flag of truce, to reduce their logistical burden and casualty evacuation problems.

The actions described in the book bring to light several

customs and practices followed during those times by soldiers of various nationalities that would appear strange today.

(a) In February 1917, a column of 50 men of the South Waziristan Militia under the command of Major FL Hughes was attacked by Mahsuds, killing the officer and 20 men. Eleven men were captured and handed over by the Mahsuds to their womenfolk for their 'unpleasant attentions'.

(b) In February 1915, the 2/7<sup>th</sup> Gurkhas embarked on the HMS *Minerva* at Suez for the action at Tor in the Sinai. During the operation, one Gurkha soldier was killed and another wounded. At the insistence of the Captain of HMS *Minerva*, a military funeral was held for the solitary Gurkha soldier, with a guard of honour by the Royal Navy and a party of the Royal Marines firing the salute. All British ships in harbour flew their flags at half mast and a wreath was placed over the grave by men of HMS *Minerva*.

(c) Three *Ghauribardars* and three *Dhooly* Bearers from No. 5 Company, Army Bearer Corps, Mhow, were attached to the 5<sup>th</sup> Light Infantry in German Kamerun in 1915-16.

(d) For the action at Wadi Senab in Egyptian Western Desert in November 1915, two 4-inch guns were manned by the Royal Marines and a six-car detachment was provided by the Royal Naval Armoured Car Division. The Germans also employed naval guns recovered from the sunken cruiser *Konigsberg* manned by naval personnel for the attack on Kibata in East Africa, held by the 129<sup>th</sup> Baluchis.

(e) Indian soldiers had to face racial prejudice from white South African troops in East Africa, who considered the sepoys as having the same standing as 'coolies' and labourers.

This book describes several hitherto unknown actions involving Indian soldiers during World War I. The author deserves the gratitude of military historians as well as lay readers for filling a void and bringing to light the sterling contribution of the Indian soldiers during the Great War.

## Review Article 2

# Women at War: Subhas Chandra Bose and the Rani of Jhansi Regiment\*

Professor KC Yadav®

**M**eticulously chronicled and clearly voiced, this story of the Rani of Jhansi Regiment (RJR) of the Azad Hind Fauj (Indian National Army), during the Second World War, is a product of industry, insight and erudition. The author has visited about half a dozen countries for interviewing the surviving members of the RJR, popularly called Ranis, and others, who were directly or indirectly linked with the Regiment, and collecting relevant material from archives, libraries and private collections there. She has evaluated and used the rich material thus collected with care and dispassion.

The book has, besides a brief introduction and a detailed bibliography, 16 chapters: In Chapter 1, the author tells the interesting story about how she reached her sources; Chapters 2-7 provide background material useful for understanding the complexities and dynamics of the subject; Chapters 8-15, deal with the RJS's birth, mission, recruitment, training, routine life in camp, deployment in Rangoon, Maymyo, retreat from Rangoon and end of the quest; and the last Chapter 16, contains reflections on Bose and RJR.

The RJR was a unique formation, the like of which was perhaps not available then with any country throughout the world. There were, no doubt, fighting women in the UK, Germany, the US and the USSR forces, but they were, as the author recounts, 'not in all female infantry units, and were not sent into battle zones.' Moreover, those fighting women were there mostly for money (salary), defence of their countries or their colonial expansion. But the Ranis were there for none of these. They were there to serve a greater and nobler cause – freedom of their country – India.

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\***Women at War: Subhas Chandra Bose and the Rani of Jhansi Regiment.** By Vera Hilderbrand, (New Delhi : Harper Collins Publishers India, 2017), Price Rs. 499. pp..320, ISBN 9789352640690

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This begs a question. Perhaps none of those Ranis (except Lakshmi Swaminathan) had ever seen India. Most of them were also unaware of the developments that were taking place in the national arena there. None of them was either politically active or had served, unlike many of their male counterparts in the INA, in the Army before. How then they joined Army and opted to play with fire, the fire that even seraphs would have feared to face, to attain freedom for India?

The author has given many reasons for this. Of these, three seem important to me: one, collapse of the ruling regimes (British) in the region (Southeast Asia); two, inspiring ambience of patriotic idealism created by the Indian Independence League (IIL) and Subhas Chandra Bose; and three, repugnance against the atrocious colonial rule.

Some Bose's critics, however, think differently: Bose, they say, had blinded those 'young and undeveloped minds' by emotional propagandas to join the RJR. Calling it his 'puppet show', a propaganda tool, 'decoration', etc., they criticise him for putting the lives of the Ranis at risk and jeopardy to satisfy his ego. The present author has put it a shade differently – 'Ever fond of memorable tableaux and re-enactments, Bose may have wanted to stage a dramatic scene in which the Ranis, cast as reincarnations of the original Rani Lakshmi bai, were slaughtered as martyrs on the battlefield' to 'generate an emotional mass movement of outrage and indignation across India and the whole world', as the Jallianwala Bagh massacre did. But he did not get a chance to do that. Most of the relevant evidence the author has given here, and is available today, does not support the surmise, or the above critique.

The fact is this: taking a leaf out of the book of the Indian revolutionaries and the Indian National Congress, Bose had brought in women in the INA movement. He cared more for their safety and honour than his own. Although the Ranis were pressing him hard to send them to the front to fight the enemy, he did not oblige them, because they were not meant to fight there, but inside India. He was almost sure that once they were in Assam and Bengal, with rifles in their hands, 'our countrymen, civilians and sepoys serving in the British Indian Army will come over' and take rifles from them and carry on the fight for their country's freedom. (see

Bose's recruitment speech, 18 July 1943. He was right: didn't that happen in Singapore and in other British colonies nearby? And why it couldn't have happened in India after the fall of Kohima and Imphal where political environment was more conducive than elsewhere?

There are some points that I would like the author to give, if convinced, a second look to. For instance, her use of the word 'cunning' for Mahatma Gandhi. 'Shrewd' would be a better word. Her assessment of Bose borders on the ordinary and lacks the profound insight that she has displayed in dealing with other issues. Then her positing of strained relationship between Bose and Captain Lakshmi 'sometime in the early summer' also needs re-checking in the light of the diary of Lieutenant General Kawabe, C-in-C, Japanese-Burma Area Army, 1943-44, that the author considers an important document, and other sources. Another matter that needs a re-look is her covering of about half-a-dozen-page space with un-cross-examined romantic stuff even after acknowledging that, 'like Captain Lakshmi, most of the Ranis claimed that they had no knowledge of any fraternisation', and 'all the Ranis, agreed that romantic relationships had no place in an army camp'.

These opinion variances, which usually come up in reviews, notwithstanding, Vera Hildebrand's work are of eminent merit and value. It is an authoritative portrait of the Ranis, their diet and dress, training and discipline, dedication and determination, hopes and aspirations, numbers, strengths, weaknesses; in short, everything. I can think of no better words to close the review than the ones the author has closed her book with: 'Their (Ranis') courage, their resolve, their loyalty to the cause and to one another have exemplary relevance for the women's movement today, indeed for the human race.... Despite the failure of their noble ambitions, the Ranis and their leader deserve to be honored for their commitment to the highest of the human aspirations – freedom'.