

The USI Centre for Armed Forces Historical Research 2000-2020¹

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Background

In 1996, Army Headquarters (HQs) came up with a proposal to set up an Armed Forces Historical Research Society at the United Service Institution (USI) of India. Its envisaged scope of activities/study was, however, limited only to the army. The proposal was then revised in January 1998 to include all the three Services within its ambit. After due consideration by the Service HQs, the suggestion to establish an Armed Forces Historical Research Centre at the USI was accepted in principle at a meeting of the Joint Training Committee (JTC) in Mar 1999. The proposal was then examined in detail by the USI and a draft Constitution was prepared and discussed by the USI Council in December. The Council was unanimous in accepting the desirability of establishing the Centre under the USI but directed a review of the scope and purpose of the proposed activities. A revised Constitution was accordingly prepared in consultation with the JTC and after approval by the Army, Navy and Air HQs, it was ratified by the USI Executive Committee on 23 Jun 2000. The Centre for Armed Forces Historical Research (CAFHR) began functioning from 01 Dec 2000, under the aegis of the Council of the Institution.

Early Years

The primary purpose of the Centre was to, "...Commission and encourage research and study into the past and contemporary history of the Indian Armed Forces, for an objective understanding of events that have taken place; and equally importantly, to record for posterity, the lessons that have been learnt. The Centre is to be funded by a Corpus set up at the USI with grants from the three Service Headquarters, and its activities monitored by a Board of Management constituted by the USI Council. The

Service Headquarters would position some essential staff under Director USI, for running of the Centre”.²

The Centre’s aim was later condensed to, “Encourage the study of the military history of India in general and the Indian Armed Forces in particular”. As a first step towards setting up the Centre, a suitable re-employed officer of the rank of Colonel was to be posted as Secretary and Editor. Accordingly, Colonel Mahinder Kumar, Corps of Indian Engineers, was posted to the USI on 02 Jan 2001 and served as the first Secretary of the Centre up till 01 Jan 2003. The author joined the Centre as a Research Associate in Dec 2001 and was appointed Secretary and Editor of the Centre after Colonel Mahinder Kumar relinquished the post. A Board of Management (BoM) was appointed by the USI Council. It consisted of ex-officio representatives from the training and military operations directorates from each of the three Services as well as HQ IDS and three senior retired officers of each Service. The Chairman of the Board was to be appointed in rotation from amongst the latter. The first Chairman was Lieutenant General Mathew Thomas, PVSM, AVSM, VSM (Retd). The Board held its first meeting on 10 Apr 2001 to discuss the Centre’s draft Constitution.

In the initial years, after the Centre was established, the focus was on the grant of the two research fellowships³ with the intention of encouraging research and publication of studies dealing with different aspects of Indian military history. The Centre’s corpus only allowed for the grant of two fellowships. However, after a few years it was felt that the scope of the Centre’s activities needed to be expanded in order to attract a better standard of scholarship and build it up to an international standard of excellence. There were, in addition, a number of areas for improvement within the Indian military ecosystem and, to address these, a ‘Vision Document’ was prepared and accepted by the BoM on 01 Dec 2003. In January of the same year, the Centre also took over the administration of the General Palit Military Studies Trust (GPMST), which has enabled greater assistance to be provided to scholars in the form of small research and travel grants over the years.

Research Activities

Over time, in addition to its own research fellowship grants, the Centre began to undertake projects sponsored by the Service HQs or Ministries of the Government of India. While it is not possible to list all the projects undertaken by the Centre, some of the prominent ones are briefly touched upon in the succeeding paragraphs.

In 2004, the Centre undertook an editorial review and revision of the official histories of the 1962 Sino-Indian conflict and the 1971 Indo-Pak war for the Ministry of Defence (MoD); and an illustrated history of the Indian Army for Army HQs (2007). It also worked on the official history of Indian Peacekeeping, compiled under the authorship of Lieutenant General Satish Nambiar (Retd) (2008)⁴; and on a compendium of Indian War Memorials around the world (2014)⁵ for the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA). In addition, for the very first time, copies of two official Chinese accounts of the 1962 conflict were obtained, translated for use by researchers and released as a book⁶. Other significant and ground-breaking research projects undertaken by the Centre were compilations of the Historical Records and Iconography of Indian Cavalry Regiments 1750–2007⁷ and a History of the Indian State Forces⁸.

‘India and the Great War’ Centenary Commemoration

However, by far the most ambitious venture embarked upon by the Centre was the Joint USI-MEA ‘India and the Great War’ centenary commemoration project (2014-2018), which sought to examine both, the role played by India in the conflict and also the social, political and military changes that resulted within India as a result of its involvement with the war. To this end, the project engaged with a wide spectrum of partners, from governments down to individuals including descendants of veterans of the Great War from all countries of South Asia. Carried out with the support of the Government of India, MEA, as a public diplomacy initiative, the project reached out to audiences in the UK, France, Belgium, Australia, New Zealand and Bangladesh. It produced a number of

publications including a history of the Indian Army at Gallipoli⁹ and a history of the Indian State Forces in the Great War¹⁰.



'India and the Great War' Conference: 2014

Through the course of the four years, the project undertook and supported a number of commemorative activities, academic research and community engagement projects, all of which combined to influence the manner in which the war — with its colonial roots and postcolonial legacies — was viewed and understood within India. The project significantly helped shape public perception of the Indian involvement in the Great War, both within India and abroad.

Another major achievement of the Centre was the construction of an Indian War Memorial in France. To honour the sacrifices of Indian servicemen who fell in France, the Centre conceptualised the plans for the Indian Great War Military Memorial in collaboration with the commune of Villers-Guislain, the Indian Armed Forces and the MEA. Although a memorial dedicated to the Indian war dead, maintained by the Commonwealth War Graves Commission (CWGC) exists at

Neuve Chapelle, a need was felt to build a unique Indian Memorial incorporating the Indian national emblem to honour the services of the Indian Armed Forces in France in WW1. The Hon'ble Vice President of India, Shri M Venkaiah Naidu, inaugurated the Indian Memorial at Villers-Guislain on 10 Nov 2018. The then Director USI, Lieutenant General PK Singh, PVSM, AVSM (Retd), attended the ceremony on behalf of the Institution. It is the first Indian national memorial in France and is located near the battlefield where Lance Dafadar Gobind Singh won the Victoria Cross for his death defying deeds of valour on 01 Dec 1917. An annual ceremony of 'Remembrance' is now held here on the weekend closest to 26 Sep, the date on which the first Indian troops set foot on French soil in 1914.



Construction of Indian Armed Forces Memorial at Villers-Guislain in France: 2018

In continuation of its Remembrance activities, from Jul to Nov 2017, the Centre worked on a joint Indo-Belgium project in

collaboration with the Embassy of the Kingdom of Belgium, New Delhi, the Indian Army and the In Flanders Fields Museum, Ypres. Through a publication and an exhibition titled 'India In Flanders Fields', the project marked 70 years of bilateral relations between India and Belgium; and further cemented the historical ties, that have existed between the two countries, by highlighting the sacrifices of Indian soldiers who laid down their lives for Belgian freedom during WW1. The publication and the exhibition were released and inaugurated respectively by their Majesties, the King and Queen of the Belgians, during their State Visit to India on 08 Nov 2017. The month long exhibition at the National Museum in Delhi was extended by another fortnight on popular demand.

In addition, the USI-CAFHR also assisted a French production house in making a documentary on the Indian Contribution in WW1. The documentary film, by Ms Mandakini Gahlot, titled 'India-The Forgotten Army' was screened at the Embassy of France in New Delhi on 13 Nov 2018 and was subsequently aired on Channel News Asia.

Bangladesh Liberation War Museum

From Mar to Jun 2017, the CAFHR was also tasked with collating material for the Bangladesh Liberation War Museum, Dhaka, on behalf of the MEA. The project focused on the landmark political, diplomatic and military events that occurred through the course of the Indo-Pak war of 1971 with special reference to the role played by India in the conflict. The collation of material included sourcing relevant images from archives and personal collections along with archival audio and video clippings of statements or speeches made at the time by political and military leaders of India and Bangladesh, etc. Interviews of a number of veterans who served in various operations during the war were also recorded.

On 08 April 2017, a ceremony was organised by MEA at Manekshaw Centre to honour the soldiers who laid down their lives in the 1971 war. It was attended by Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and Prime Minister Narendra Modi. At the ceremony, an exhibition curated by the CAFHR as part of the Bangladesh Liberation War Museum Project was showcased and a brief on the project and the exhibition was provided by Secretary CAFHR to the two Prime Ministers.



**USI curated exhibition on Bangladesh Liberation
War Museum: 2017**

Bangladesh National Museum

The USI-CAFHR assisted the Bangladesh National Museum (BNM), Dhaka to reorganise and renovate its permanent exhibition galleries (four in numbers) relating to the War of Liberation of 1971 and the Museum of Independence it operates. In this regard, Mr. Faizul Latif Chowdhury, Director General, BNM, invited Secretary CAFHR and Mr AR Ramanathan, Architect M/s TEAM and Expert on Design of Museums & Exhibitions, to participate as trainers in a three day training workshop for Curatorial Staff of BNM and other museums. The visit of the two experts was facilitated by the High Commission of India at Dhaka, Bangladesh.

Staff Rides

The USI-CAFHR tri-service 'Staff Ride' concept is based on the principle that the study of historical military campaigns and battles emphasises the enduring nature of warfare as well as its changing character. Confronting the realities of the former and

managing the latter are eternal challenges to the soldier, and the commander in particular. Especially, as the modern officer is not now often engaged on operations of significant scale, the value of Staff Rides in keeping the conceptual component of fighting power in good order is being freshly appreciated in professional armed forces.

As part of this project, the first Staff Ride was conducted for a period of four days, jointly with the UK Centre for Historical Analysis and Conflict Research (CHACR) and the Service HQs. It covered the sites of 1857 in Delhi. The exercise instructed and educated service officers in various aspects of strategy, tactics and doctrine through the medium of military history, in keeping with the professional requirements of the Indian military. It was attended by officers of the Indian and UK Armed Forces.

After the success of the first Staff Ride, USI-CAFHR conducted a two-day Staff Ride focused on the Chhamb battles of 1965 and 1971. It was organised at Kachreal, Jammu in collaboration with the Military Operations (MO) Directorate of Army HQs. The Staff Ride was conducted in Sep 2018 by Major General Ian Cardozo, AVSM, SM (Retd), Chairman of the Centre's Board of Management, and Major General AJS Sandhu, VSM (Retd). It was attended by officers of an Infantry Division.

As an adjunct to the Staff Rides, the Centre is promoting the concept of 'Battlefield Tourism' to enable visitors to historic battlefields to understand the sequence of events that then took place and relate them to the present terrain and surviving landmarks. The Centre's first Battlefield Guide titled 'The Indian Corps on the Western Front' was published in 2014.¹¹

Remembrance and Commemoration

In an attempt to inculcate a grassroots culture of remembrance in the country, the Centre launched the 'India Remembers' project in collaboration with the CWGC. The pilot project commenced on 14 Jul 2016 and culminated on 07 Dec 2016. Through the course of six months, the project engaged with diverse community groups (schools, NGOs, etc.) from across the country and encouraged them to undertake various commemorative activities. To support

the project, participating groups from Kalimpong and Darjeeling in West Bengal, Bangalore in Karnataka, Kohima in Nagaland, Surat in Gujrat, Jaipur in Rajasthan and New Delhi organised commemorative events to raise awareness about the project and to highlight the importance of remembrance amongst the local communities. At most commemorative events, held on various days, war veterans and serving and retired defence personnel from the respective regions were felicitated. The groups also visited local war memorials in an effort to explore their regional military heritage. The project's last event was held on 11 December in Pune: a commemorative cycle rally, which began from CWGC Kirkee War Cemetery and ended with a reception at the Apshinge Military Village in Satara, covering a distance of 130 km (one way).

In May 2017, at the request of the Indian High Commission (IHC) UK, the Centre organised a wreath laying ceremony at India Gate to commemorate the Indian Labour Corps that had participated in WWI. The ceremony was organised as part of the 'India Remembers' and 'Unremembered' projects. The latter was an initiative undertaken by the IHC, UK to highlight the role of Indian communities who served in the Labour Corps in WWI. A similar event was held on the same date and time at the Arch of Remembrance in Leicester, which is a prototype of India Gate. This event connected the two memorials together, for the first time, with a powerful remembrance moment by the simultaneous playing of the Last Post on the 'Dilruba' instead of military bugles. The High Commissioners of India and Great Britain laid marigold wreaths at the memorials in Leicester and New Delhi respectively.

In 2019, the Centre was active in the commemorations of the 75th anniversary of the epic Battles of Kohima and Imphal. It participated in ceremonies at both these places where wreaths were laid by the Ambassador of Japan to India as well as the British High Commissioner in a spirit of friendship and reconciliation.

Also as part of its Remembrance project, the USI-CAFHR mooted the proposal that the 'marigold flower' join the poppy as an Indian symbol of Remembrance. Since 2016, the marigold has been widely used in India-related commemorative events around

the world. The Great War Indian War Memorial that was inaugurated at Villers-Guislain in France on 10 Nov 2018 has a bronze marigold wreath as an integral part of its design. The USI continues to promote the marigold as an Indian symbol of remembrance and aims for its symbolic significance to be understood at a grass-roots level. The marigold was chosen because it is easily and widely available and also because saffron is often seen as a colour of sacrifice.

Other Activities

In addition to its research activities, the Centre has been actively lobbying for the adoption of a comprehensive military record management policy by the Indian Armed Forces. The maintenance of records is a statutory requirement under the Public Records Act but the preservation of records is far from satisfactory. The Official Secrets Act provides a cover for ineptitude and excessive caution which, combined with bureaucratic apathy, serves as a deterrent to the transfer of military records into the public domain. As a result, records pertaining to significant aspects of our nation's military history are regularly destroyed instead of being preserved for posterity.

The Centre has also been campaigning to establish a 'national military oral archive' but has not as yet been successful in its endeavours although the Centre's oral recordings include the reminiscences of the late Havildar Umrao Singh, VC, the late Lieutenant General Dewan Prem Chand, PVSM, whose United Nations (UN) service was extraordinary and who served a Force Commander on three UN missions, among numerous others. Another proposal along similar lines is the suggestion to establish a National Military Heritage Trust for the conservation of the country's tangible and intangible military heritage.

British-Indian Military Heritage Partnership

Since Jan 2019, the Centre has been working closely with the National Army Museum (NAM), UK, to build upon areas of mutual interest and shared history. An annual Military Museum Curators' Course has been launched to build up the military heritage sector in India. Other activities to facilitate training, education, community

engagement, and academic exchanges are also being undertaken under the aegis of the joint USI-NAM British-Indian Military Heritage Partnership. The intent of the partnership is to strengthen the strong bonds that exist between India and the UK through projects and activities that serve to both educate and inform a wide spectrum of communities in both countries, with a special focus on a younger demographic.

Conclusion

In the two decades of its existence, the Centre has made a significant contribution to the field of Indian military history in general and the history of the Indian Armed Forces in particular. This is reflected in the quality of its publications and its achievements in the field of military diplomacy and community engagement. In Dec 2019, it was decided to expand the scope of activities of the Centre to include research in a broader range of subjects and the name was accordingly changed to 'Centre for Military History and Conflict Studies (CMHCS)'. As the country embarks into a new decade laden with fresh challenges, the Centre has its work cut out to map these in the years ahead.

Endnotes

¹ Now the USI Centre for Military History and Conflict Studies or CMHCS.

² USI CAFHR. F No. 1059/USI/CAFHR (1), 'Draft Press Release', May 2000.

³ These were named the Maharana Pratap and Chhatrapati Shivaji Chairs, respectively.

⁴ Lt Gen Satish Nambiar, *For the Honour of India: A History of Indian Peacekeeping*, New Delhi: USI, 2008.

⁵ Sqn Ldr Rana Chhina, *Last Post: Indian War Memorials around the World*, New Delhi: USI, 2014.

⁶ See Maj Gen *PJS Sandhu, 1962: A View from the Other Side of the Hill*, New Delhi: VIJ Books, 2015.

⁷ Ashok Nath, *Izzat: Historical Records and Iconography of Indian Cavalry Regiments 1750-2007*, New Delhi: USI, 2009.

⁸ Richard Head, Tony McClenaghan, *The Maharajas' Paltans: A History of the Indian State Forces (1888-1948)*, New Delhi: Manohar Publishers, 2013.

⁹ Peter Stanley, *Die in Battle, Do Not Despair: The Indians on Gallipoli, 1915*, West Midlands: Helion & Company, 2015.

¹⁰ Tony McClenaghan, *For the Honour of My House: The Contribution of the Indian Princely States to the First World War (War & Military Culture in South Asia)*, West Midlands: Helion & Company, 2019.

¹¹ Simon Doherty and Tom Donovan, *The Indian Corps on the Western Front: A Handbook and Battlefield Guide*, Brighton: Tom Donovan Editions, 2014. A series of guide books is currently being published by Harper Collins India.

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