

# Pioneer Regiments of the British Indian Army

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*“A typical pioneer’s job was this — be present under shell fire all day in support of the main attack. Then move forward and grab ground and dig trenches in so-called no man’s land under enemy fire at night. Go back before day break, sleep and start all over again. Casualties no object!”*

—Captain G S Fillingham, 1916

## Abstract

*This article is a brief history of the British Indian Army’s Corps of Pioneers which on disbandment had its 23rd, 32nd and 34th Royal Sikh Pioneers converted into the Sikh Light Infantry, a distinguished Infantry regiment of the Indian Army. Pioneers have been defined as “the men who lead the way”. They are those groups of far-sighted, tough, skilled and undeterrable workers-adventurers who go ahead to prepare the way for others. In the later part of World War I, the Germans combined Pioneers with light personal weapons, explosives and some heavier close support weapons, using them as “Stormtroopers” who breached barbed wire and created a path for the main attacking troops.*

## Introduction

The origin of Pioneers in the British Indian Army dates back to 1758, in Madras, where the first pioneer companies were formed under the Madras Presidency Army to take the place of the ‘*matti*’ men,<sup>1</sup> i.e., labourers with some form of spade and pick. The men were armed and disciplined soldiers as distinct from the engineer’s coolie, impressed or hired. In 1780, two companies of

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Bombay and Bengal pioneers were formed. They were later increased to 16 in 1803, and divided into two battalions.

### **Later Years**

Extensive use was made of pioneers in the British Indian Army because of the demands of campaigning in difficult terrain with little or no infrastructure. The Pioneer regiments of the time were specialised infantry, rather than engineers. Regarded as amongst the elite, they were additionally skilled in road and railway building and their abilities were prized in the North West Frontier theatre. They were described as “a superior kind of infantry, as expert with the rifle as with pick and shovel” and rarely, if ever, did a Frontier expedition set out without a Pioneer regiment. The frequency with which they saw active service made postings to pioneer regiments popular with British officers. Prior to World War I, each sepoy in a Pioneer regiment carried a pickaxe or a light spade in special leather equipment as well as a rifle and bayonet. NCOs and buglers carried axes, saws and billhooks. Heavier equipment such as explosives were carried by mule. The unit was, therefore, well equipped for simple field engineering tasks, as well as being able to defend itself in hostile territory.

**World War I.** When World War I broke out, there were twelve pioneer regiments consisting of one battalion each in the Army. These were the 12th, 23rd, 32nd, 34th and 48th known as the Bengal Regiments, (the 23rd, 32nd and 34th being the Sikh Pioneers); the 61st, 64th and 81st of the Madras Army; the 107th, 121st and 128th of the Bombay Pioneers and 106th of the Hazara Pioneers. They were trained and equipped for road, rail and engineering work, as well as for conventional infantry service. In the British Army a Pioneer battalion was raised, during the First World War, for every infantry division. After the war these British battalions were amalgamated with the Royal Engineers, but the process was not applied to the Pioneer battalions of the Indian Army because their high traditions justified their continued existence. For many years, the Sappers and Miners worked alongside their brethren, the Pioneers who were looked upon as energetic helpers in large projects and as brave fighters when occasion demanded that the shovel be abandoned for the rifle.

## Organisation and Role

In 1916, a Pioneer Battalion was organised in four companies each of about 209 rifles. There was no Headquarter Wing — that came in 1921. Each company consisted of four platoons with no Light Machine Guns. Before the War and up to the end of 1916, there was a section of Machine Guns in the Battalion Headquarters. These were then replaced by Lewis Guns and gradually more were acquired till there was one per platoon. Pioneer Battalions had a full quota of signallers. So, from an Infantry or fighting point of view, it will be seen that a Pioneer Battalion was really a very strong infantry battalion less machine guns.

Each pioneer carried a tool of some sort or other on his back — the simple “rule of thumb” was “front rank a pick, rear rank a “*phawda*””. Lance Naiks carried a felling axe, other NCOs, a billhook and hand-axe and so on. The idea of this was that men had their tools with them and there was no waiting for mules to arrive before they got on to a job of work. The “tail” of each Pioneer Company was pretty considerable for, apart from Lewis Gun mules, it had a string of eight mules carrying crowbars, jumping bars, tamping bars, guncotton as well as an Animal Transport (AT) cart carrying the remaining four mule loads which were such things as an anvil and grindstone, carpenters’ box, smiths’ box, spare helms etc.

**Role.** The role of the Pioneer Battalion was the execution of semi-technical works and, in emergency, fighting as infantry. Brigadiers were always very glad to have a Pioneer Company or Battalion in their areas as they automatically became a Brigade Reserve. Their role was not the digging of other units’ trenches, nor the erection of their barbed wire. A good infantry unit looks on it as a point of honour to do these things for themselves. But there were other units which were very different. One battalion was digging and saw a Pioneer Company going out to a job of work; with a cry of “*Pioneer aa gaye*” they downed tools....

The Pioneer Battalion was normally Divisional Troops under the direct command of the Commander Royal Engineers (CRE). Sometimes they were used as Corps Troops and very occasionally as Army Troops. The CRE had three Field Companies of Sappers & Miners which were practically permanently allotted one to each Infantry Brigade. The Pioneer Battalion he kept up his sleeve for

work wherever needed; he might allot the whole Battalion to one particular Brigade or send one Company to each Brigade according to circumstances.

### **Post-World War I**

Due to their proven usefulness during World War I, twelve more battalions of Indian Pioneers, six of which were to the Sikh Pioneers, were added. During the war, the increased specialisation required of Pioneers made them too valuable to use as regular assault infantry. After World War I, reorganisation was carried out in 1922, and single battalion Corps were replaced by regiments of several battalions. Three pioneer regiments were created, grouped and numbered according to their original historical date of raising. However, when the whole army was grouped into regiments, the historical position was taken according to the date of the original raising, whether as Pioneers or ordinary Infantry. The three pioneer regiments now formed, had a total of nine service battalions and three training or depot battalions, with a single battalion of the Hazara Pioneers.

In 1923 there were four Corps of Indian Pioneers — the Madras, Bombay, Sikh and Hazara Pioneers — the first three totalling 12 battalions and the last being an independent battalion. An order was issued in 1927 defining the role of Pioneers: *“Pioneers are primarily technical and are maintained and trained in peace for their technical duties in war. Pioneer battalions are organised into three companies to suit technical requirements primarily. Consequently, they will only be employed as infantry in an emergency or as a secondary role.”*

In 1929, the Pioneer regiments were taken out of the line infantry and grouped into the Corps of Madras Pioneers, the Corps of Bombay Pioneers, the Corps of Sikhs Pioneers, and the Hazara Pioneers (one battalion). They were as follows:

- **1st Madras Pioneers**

- 1st Battalion (raised in 1758) earlier known as 61st King George's Own Pioneers
- 2nd Battalion (raised in 1759) earlier known as 64th Pioneers (The Elephant)
- 10th Battalion (Training) raised in 1786 as 81st Pioneers

- **2nd Bombay Pioneers**

- 1st Battalion (raised in 1788) earlier known as 107th Pioneers
- 2nd Battalion (raised in 1838) earlier known as 12th Pioneers (Khelat-i-Ghilzai)
- 3rd Battalion (raised in 1846) earlier known as 128th Pioneers
- 4th Battalion (raised in 1901) earlier known as 48th Pioneers
- 10th Battalion (Marine) (Training) raised in 1777 as 121st Pioneers

- **3rd Sikh Pioneers**

- 1st Battalion (raised in 1857) earlier known as 23rd Sikh Pioneers
- 2nd Battalion (raised in 1857) earlier known as 32nd Sikh Pioneers
- 3rd Battalion (raised in 1887) earlier known as 34th Royal Sikh Pioneers
- 10th Battalion (Training) raised in 1917 as 2/23rd Sikh Pioneers

- **4th Hazara Pioneers.** 1st Battalion (raised in 1904) earlier known as 106th Hazara Pioneers

By 1932, however, amalgamations had reduced the total to six battalions and the Hazara battalion. Each pioneer battalion had eight companies.

**The Disbandment of the Pioneer.** The Pioneer battalions, with their high traditions, continued to justify their existence till the advent of technology forced them to be disbanded. Up to 1914, they were most useful as road-makers in expeditions across the administrative border on the North West Frontier; but as such expeditions became rare, and the regular garrisons stationed across the border were provided with permanent roads built by civil contract, the Pioneers were no longer needed for road work. It was also desirable that the engineer troops of any division should be homogeneous. The end of Pioneers was in sight when Field

Service Regulations came out laying down that Pioneers were technical troops and must not be used as infantry, and by the taking away of such essential personnel as signallers (in 1929). But before and during World War I, there were no such restrictions and Pioneers were Infantry “with just a little something that the others hadn’t got”.

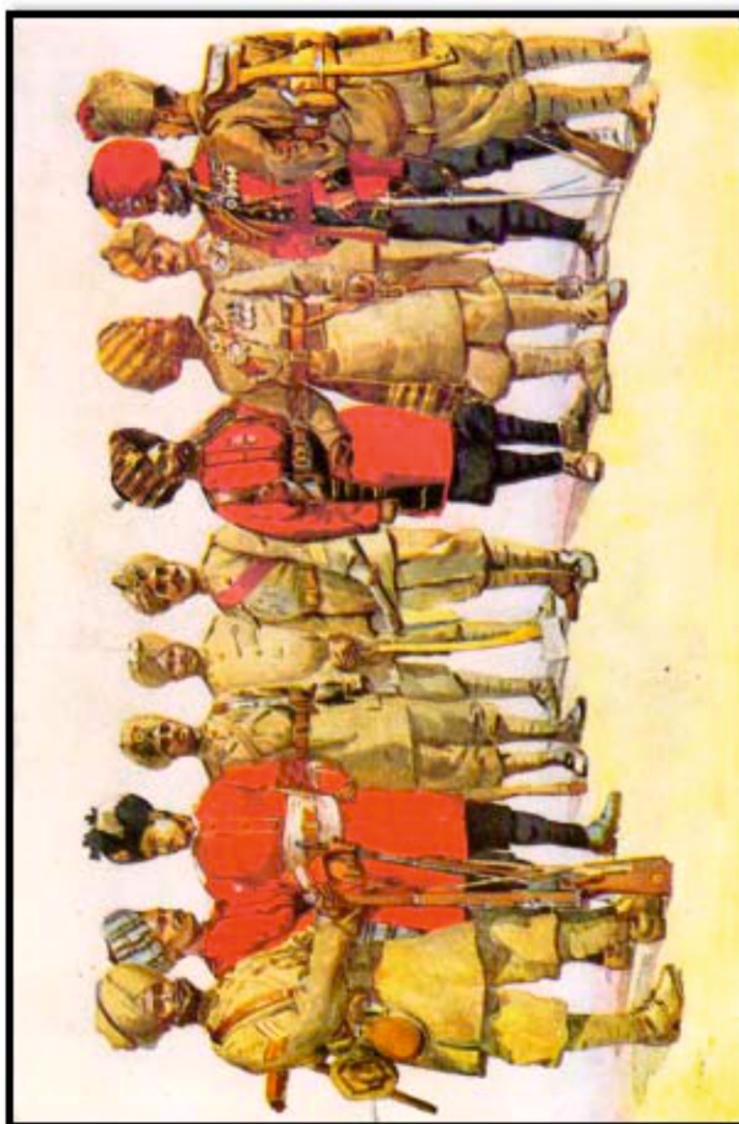
These facts, coupled with serious financial stringency, caused the Government of India to make the decision in 1932 that the Pioneers should be abolished from the Indian Army and that a part of the financial saving so effected should be applied towards an increase in the strength of the three Corps of Sappers and Miners.

The battalions of Pioneers formed a solid backing for the three Corps of Sappers and Miners and a link between them and the infantry. But the conditions of modern warfare as well as fiscal constraints brought about many changes in their organisation and the Pioneer battalions vanished from the Indian Army in 1933. The specialisation demanded by modern warfare killed the Pioneer. It was apparent that, under modern conditions, Pioneers could hardly be both fully trained infantry and expert engineers, and that by reason of their and training they were better fitted to be engineers than infantry.

### **Disbandment**

As given above, serious financial stringency, forced the Government of India to make the important decision in 1932 that the Pioneers should be abolished from the Indian Army. It was thought that further developments might take one of the following courses:

- Pioneer companies would take over all the duties of Field Engineer companies with Indian Divisions, and Sappers and Miners do the more highly technical work usually allotted to Engineer companies with Corps and Armies.
- The former role of Pioneers would be reintroduced, i.e., that they be armed and trained as infantry, and in battle normally be used as such, whilst being available and trained to assist in the less-technical forms of field engineering, such as road and railway making, at other times, when required.
- Pioneers would be reconverted into infantry battalions.



Left to right: 34th Sikh Pioneers, 12th Pioneers, 128th Pioneers, 81st Pioneers, 64th Pioneers, 61st King George's Own Pioneers, 48th Pioneers, 23rd Sikh Pioneers, 106th Hazara Pioneers, 34th Sikh Pioneers, 107th Pioneers  
 (Painting by Maj AC Lovett, reproduced from *The Armies of India* by Lt Gen George MacMunn)

- Pioneers would be disbanded and all engineering in the field be undertaken by Sappers and Miners, whose strength would be suitably augmented.

In July, 1932, the decision was announced by the Commander-in-Chief in India, H.E. General Sir Philip Chetwode, Bart, G.C.B, K.C.M.G, D.S.O, that all Pioneers were to be disbanded, the official reasons for this decision being given as follows:

- The changed policy on the Frontier under which local civilian labour would be employed for road construction.
- There were two types of field engineering units, one of which, i.e., Pioneers, cannot assume the role of the other, i.e., Sappers and Miners.
- Engineering troops of a division must be homogeneous and organised on lines suitable for their general role. The Sapper and Miner is that most suited to the tasks of a division and, moreover, the work of Field Companies embodies everything now done by Pioneers.
- By concentration of work in a single unit, greater efficiency will be obtained in respect of direction, control and output, and an unnecessary link in the chain of administration will be eliminated.
- The retention of an organisation which is not fully suited to needs cannot be justified.

All four Pioneer Corps were disbanded in 1933 and their personnel mostly transferred into the Corps of Sappers and Miners, whose role they had come to parallel.

### **Conclusion**

**The Legacy.** The history of the Pioneer Regiments is a record of gallantry, of the surmounting of obstacles, and of successful achievements in the face of discouragement and sometimes of failure. It reflects in some measure the experiences of their comrades of the other arms; but there is no doubt that long years of fighting in various war theatres, had created almost a genius for improvisation which stood them in good stead, during the course of their history. In every theatre, they were woefully deficient in

modern weapons, transport and technical equipment; but everywhere, they accepted the inevitable and made the best of it, emerging triumphant by dint of their physical endurance, boundless energy, and the charmed life they seemed to bear, which contributed in no small measure to the success in the campaign in which they participated.

For many years the Sappers and Miners had worked alongside the Pioneers as energetic helpers in large projects and as brave fighters when occasion demanded. On the other hand, the 13 battalions of Pioneers had formed a solid backing for the Infantry. But the conditions of modern warfare had brought about much alteration and the gradual withering away of the role of Pioneers. It was found that the organisation, equipment and system of training of the Pioneers had made them Engineers more than Infantry, and so a large proportion of them were transferred to the Sappers and Miners, and the remainder, with most of their British officers, absorbed into the Indian Infantry. The Sappers and Miners welcomed the Pioneers into their ranks as they had also descended from Pioneers.

An Indian Pioneer Corps was re-established in 1943. Today, there are pioneer units still in existence in the Indian Army. They are intended to provide disciplined and well-trained manpower, where civilian labour is either not available, or its employment is not desirable for reasons of security. Pioneer units are mostly committed in forward and operational areas. They may also be employed as guards and escorts for headquarters, installations, ammunition trains and convoys but they are not classified as 'combat' troops.

#### **Distinguished Pioneers.**

- Field Marshal Sir Claud William Jacob GCB, GCSI, KCMG (21 November 1863 – 2 June 1948) raised the 106th Hazara Pioneers. He was its Colonel from 1916 till its disbandment in 1933. He became Chief of the General Staff in India in January 1920 and was then both promoted to full General. He returned home to England in 1924, and in November of that year was given the Northern Command in India. When Lord Rawlinson died in March 1925, he acted temporarily as Commander-in-Chief, India, until Sir William

Birdwood took over that role in August 1925 and Jacob returned home again. He took up the appointment of Military Secretary to the India Office in April 1926 and, having been promoted Field Marshal on 30 November 1926, he remained at the India Office until he retired in May 1930.

- General SM Shrinagesh (11 May 1903 – 27 December 1977) was among the earliest batches of Indians to be nominated for the Royal Military College, Sandhurst, in England. He was subsequently commissioned onto the Unattached List for the Indian Army on 30 August 1923. After the mandatory one-year attachment to a British regiment in India (1st Battalion North Staffordshire Regiment) he was posted to the 2nd Battalion 1st Madras Pioneers on 14 October 1924 with which he served mostly in Burma until it was disbanded, in 1933. He was then transferred to the 19th Hyderabad Regiment, presently Kumaon Regiment. In January 1948, he was appointed as the Adjutant General at the Army Headquarters and held that post till August of the same year. He was appointed the overall commander of all troops in Jammu & Kashmir during the 1947–48 Indo-Pakistan War and held this command till the ceasefire on 1 January 1949. Promoted to the rank of Lieutenant General in 1950, he was appointed the GOC-in-C Western Command on 15 January 1949. He was then appointed as the GOC-in-C Southern Command and held that post, till he assumed charge as the Army Chief on 14 May 1955. General Shrinagesh retired on 7 May 1957, completing 34 years of distinguished military service. Post retirement, he served as the Governor of Assam from 1959 to 1962, then as the Governor of Andhra Pradesh from 1962 to 1964 and finally as Governor of Mysore (now Karnataka) from 1964 to 1965. From 1957 to 1959, he was the Principal of the Administrative Staff College in Hyderabad.

- General Muhammad Musa Khan Hazara H.Pk., HJ, HQA, MBE (1908–1991) was the eldest son of Sardar Yazdan Khan, hailing from Quetta. He was recruited to the British Indian Army as a Sepoy at the age of 18 in 1926. He was a Naik in the 4th Hazara Pioneers when he was selected to train at the Indian Military Academy Dehra Dun, as a cadet in October 1932. He was commissioned with the first batch as Second

Lieutenant on 1 February 1935 and posted to the 6th Royal Battalion of the 13th Frontier Force Rifles. He served with distinction in the Pakistani Army and rose to be the fourth Commander-in-Chief of the Pakistan Army (1958–1966). He succeeded Field Marshal Ayub Khan, who took over the Presidency of Pakistan in the 1958 Pakistani coup d'état. General Mohammed Musa commanded the Army in the Indo-Pakistan War of 1965, and had overall responsibility for operations throughout the conflict. After retirement from the Pakistan Army, he served as Governor of West Punjab (1966 to 1969) and then Governor of Balochistan Province (1985 to 1991). He died in office as Governor of Balochistan on 12 March 1991.

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> *Matti* is the Hindi/Urdu word for 'Mud'.

<sup>2</sup> In the Indian subcontinent, the word *Phawda* is used for a Hoe, the spade is called a *Belcha*.

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