

The Corps of Bombay Pioneers

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Abstract

There were five Bombay pioneer regiments in existence prior to 1922, when they were re-designated and merged into the 2nd Bombay Pioneers that year. They were renamed The Corps of Bombay Pioneers in 1929, and were disbanded for reasons of economy in 1933. They were looked upon as energetic helpers in large projects and as brave fighters when occasion demanded that the shovel be abandoned for the rifle. Their history is a chequered one, worthy of the prominent role the pioneer regiments played in several campaigns.



Introduction

On 10 February 1933 all the Pioneers of the Indian Army were disbanded. As a prelude to this history of the battalions from which the Corps of Bombay Pioneers was formed, it may be well to describe what was implied by the name of 'Pioneers'. The dictionary definition of a pioneer as 'one that goes before to clear the way' gives a good description of the original idea of their special work. They were required for operations in undeveloped regions where few roads existed or were passable for an army, and where road making had to be done in proximity to an enemy. They were also always available and ready to be used as infantry.

In the 'Orders of Battle' of the armies which fought in India in the eighteenth century, there often appears the name Pioneers. They were the parent units of the present Corps of Sappers and

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Miners, and none of the battalions of the Bombay Pioneers can claim direct lineage from them. The history of the Corps of Bombay Pioneers is in reality a history of five different regiments, which eventually became Pioneer Battalions. Prior to 1888 the Bombay Army had no Pioneers units, but campaign after campaign proved that no force could be complete without a Pioneer Regiment in its composition. In 1888, the 28th Bombay Infantry became the 28th (Pioneer) Regiment of Bombay Infantry, on the model of the already existing Madras and Punjab Pioneer regiments, and was the first unit of this kind in the Bombay Army. They were soldiers who, with tools and training, carried out field engineering tasks and assisted in the construction of roads and tracks.

The Corps of Bombay Pioneers consisted of a Corps Headquarters and two active battalions, named the 1st (Marine) Battalion and the 2nd (Kelat-i-Ghilzie) Battalion, Bombay Pioneers. This Corps was formed in 1929 by merging the 1st, 2nd, 3rd and 10th Battalions, 2nd Bombay Pioneers in such a way that each of the new unit would contain an equal number of officers and men from each of the old battalions. This not only helped in avoiding the disbandment of any battalion, but also none of the new units could claim to be exclusively descended from any one battalion of the former organisation. The names given at the time they were raised, and changed in 1903, when Lord Kitchener was Commander-in-Chief in India, are:

Original Name	Name in 1903
3rd Regiment of Bengal Infantry, 12th Pioneers	Shah Shuja's Force (The Kelat-i-Ghilzie Regiment)
48th Regiment of Bengal Infantry 4th Battalion of Bombay Sepoys	48th Pioneers (Pioneers) 107th Pioneers
The Marine Battalion 28th Regiment of Bombay Native	121st Pioneers 128th Pioneers Infantry

The History of Each of the Five Battalions

121st Pioneers (The Marine Battalion)

It was necessary for the English to defeat the Portuguese Navy before they could secure a firm foothold in India. This they

did at Swally in 1615. A small force of grabs and gallivants, which had been raised by the Agent of the Honourable East India Company at Surat, assisted at this important victory. (Grabs were ships up to 300 tons, having from one to three masts, and armed with 6, 9 or 10-pound guns. Gallivants were vessels up to 70 tons, propelled by oars, and carrying 2 or 4 pounder guns). This was the start of what came to be known as the Bombay Marine, and in 1830 as His Majesty's Indian Navy.

In 1661 King Charles II, on his marriage to Catherine of Braganza, came into possession of Bombay, which he leased, in 1668, to the East India Company for £10 a year. On account of its splendid harbour, Bombay soon superseded Surat as the base for the fleet.

Up to 1777, small detachments from the Bombay troops were often employed as marines. The British then decided on the raising of a Marine Battalion especially for this duty, and this battalion eventually became as the 121st Pioneers. When the Bombay Army was reorganised in 1796, the Marine Battalion was increased to ten companies. In times of peace, the duties of the Bombay Marine were:-

- Protection of trade.
- Suppression of piracy.
- Convoying transports and conveying troops.
- Maritime surveys.
- Assisting merchantmen in the monsoon.

In 1779, a Grenadier Battalion (later 101st Grenadiers) was formed of personnel from six companies of Bombay Sepoys and from two companies of the Marine Battalion. In January 1818, the Battalion was formed into a regular Regiment and designated as the 11th Regiment Native Infantry, of which, the 1st Battalion consisted of the former Marine Battalion. The 1st Battalion was called the 1st (or Marine) Battalion, 11th Regiment of Bombay Native Infantry, but the 2nd Battalion was not a Marine Battalion.

During 1824-26, the Bombay Marine played an important part in the first Burmese War. In 1827, some of its ships blocked Berbera. Its sphere of action included the African coast from

Madagascar northwards, the Red Sea, the Persian Gulf, the Indian Ocean, the Bay of Bengal, the Irrawaddy, the Malay Archipelago, the China seas and the Australian coast. It must be remembered that piracy was rampant in the Indian Ocean at the time.

When the system of regiments of two battalions was discontinued in 1824, the Battalion became the 121st Pioneers or Marine Battalion, and later in the same year it was again designated simply The Marine Battalion. It continued to be called so until 1861, when it was designated the 121st Regiment of Bombay Native Infantry (The Marine Battalion).

In 1862, King Theodore II of Abyssinia made a request to the British for munitions and military experts. He thought that expertise from the British could help his rule. However, the British Foreign Office completely ignored his request. This did not please the King and he was further infuriated when he found out that the British Consul, Captain Charles Cameron, had just returned back to Abyssinia after a visit to neighbouring Egypt, a country that the King considered to be one of his enemies. Exasperated by this antipathy of the British, King Theodore held Captain Cameron, and others, as hostages until he received a reply to his letter.

To secure the release of the hostages, Sir Robert Napier was appointed Commander of the expeditionary force which landed in Abyssinia, marched deep into the interior of the country on a 400-mile trek, kept its supply lines open and fought and won a battle at the mountain fortress of Magdala. The force comprising British and Indian regiments included the 121st Battalion Pioneers (Marine) and 12th Kelat-i-Ghilzie Regiment. It took almost three months for it to reach Magdala which was surrounded and later torched. King Theodore committed suicide. The battle honour 'Abyssinia' was awarded for the forces who participated in this expedition.

The 121st Battalion Pioneers was moved to Poona in 1904. However, for a period of 127 years, the headquarters of The Marine Battalion was continuously stationed in Bombay. In 1796, the Battalion took possession of the new cantonment at Colaba, in Bombay, which had been built for it. These 'Lines' were destroyed by fire in 1812, 1820 and 1829. Subsequently, permanent barracks were erected at the site now known as Marine Lines.

107th Pioneers

In the account of the raising of the battalions, the 107th Pioneers took priority over the 121st Pioneers on parade by virtue of the date of it becoming a regular regiment.

Till 1768, the organisation of the East India Company's native troops in Bombay had been by companies known by the names of the officers commanding them. In 1768, these companies were formed into two battalions, the 1st and 2nd Battalion of Bombay Sepoys respectively. By 1780, there were fifteen battalions, exclusive of the Marine Battalion, in the Bombay Army. In 1784, the Bombay Native Army was reorganised and formed into eight battalions plus the Grenadier and the Marine Battalions. Two of these eight battalions were disbanded shortly after.

When the peace with Tipu Sultan did not last, it was necessary to increase the strength of the Bombay Army again. The existing seven battalions were increased to twelve battalions, the Marine Battalion being left alone. Of the new battalions, formed in 1788, the 4th Battalion of Bombay Sepoys eventually became the 107th Pioneers; and claimed descent from the original 2nd Battalion of Bombay Sepoys raised in 1768. It remained in Bombay till 1790. In the following year, it embarked for Tellicherry for field service in Mysore. The regiment's first action was in the Third Anglo-Mysore War. It also took part in the Fourth Anglo-Mysore War being at the two major battles, Seedaseer and Seringapatam.

In 1796, the Bombay Army was again reorganised and formed into four regiments. This system of regiments, each of two battalions, was discontinued in 1824, the battalions being disconnected and renumbered. Thus, the 1st Battalion 4th Regiment became the 7th Regiment of Bombay Native Infantry.

Rampant piracy in Eastern Arabia and the Persian Gulf Region led the East India Company to carry out a punitive expedition in 1819 to Ras al Khaimah to destroy the pirate base and remove the threat from the Persian Gulf. The expedition sailed from Bombay in October 1820 to Sur via Muscat where they landed. The small force proceeded inland to Balad Bani bu Hasan, the tribal capital, where it was attacked and almost annihilated. This was a major blow to British prestige in Arabia and a second stronger expedition was assembled. This force contained elements

of the Bombay Presidency Army, 121st Battalion Pioneers (Marine) and also the Kelat-i-Ghilzie Regiment. The force disembarked at Sur on 27 January and marched into the interior. Repulsing an attack on 10 February, they reached Balad Bani boo Hassan on 02 March. The Arabs fought bravely but the Beni boo Ali tribe were beaten, leaving behind 500 dead and many wounded. The fort at Balad was occupied after a brief bombardment. Later, the expedition returned to Sur where they embarked for Bombay. All units which served in the expedition were awarded the battle honour 'Beni Boo Ali'.

The name of the Battalion was changed in June 1900, whilst it was stationed at Fort Pishin, near Quetta, when orders were received for its conversion into Pioneers, with the name of the 7th Bombay Infantry (Pioneers). In 1903, it became the 107th Pioneers. Soon after their conversion to Pioneers, they were part of the force sent to Somaliland for the subjugation of the 'mad mullah' in 1903. They arrived at Berbera in December and had to march to Mudag. There were no roads and water was scarce. Transport was by camel and the route was via the Sheikh Pass at a height of 4,600 feet on the Golis Range, which involved a steep climb over a route that had thick thorny scrub. The Regiment was involved in road construction. They returned to India in November 1904. The 107th Pioneers received orders on 09 August 1914 to mobilise as Divisional troops of the 7th (Meerut) Division. Embarking from Bombay on 02 September, they reached Marseilles on 26 September. They were rushed to the front lines at Calonne and Festubert in October, where the shortage of infantry made it necessary to use them as infantry with the Bareilly Brigade. Their trenches were just 120 yards from the German positions and they saw action immediately on arrival. They were relieved after a month of action.

January 1915 saw the Battalion involved in building breast works and revetments in the area of Neuve Chapelle. This was a difficult task as most of the trenches were water-logged. After the miserable winter, the next major action was at Neuve Chapelle on 23-24 March 1915. It was the first large scale organised attack undertaken by the British Army during the war. The night before the attack was wet, with light snow, which turned to damp mist on 10 March. Three infantry brigades were ordered to advance quickly as soon as the barrage lifted from the front line at 8.05am. The

Garhwal Brigade, with which the 107th Pioneers were grouped, advanced successfully, with the exception of the 1/39th Garhwal Rifles on the extreme right that went astray and plunged into defences untouched by the bombardment, suffering large losses. There were delays in sending further orders and reinforcements forward, but by, nightfall, the village had been captured. During the night the Germans reinforced their second line in front of the Bois de Biez, and all further attempts over the next few days brought little material success. The 107th Pioneers had 13 killed and 67 wounded in the fighting.

Their next action was at the Battle of Loos from 25 September. The task allotted to the 107th Pioneers, was to connect up the front line with the German trenches, after they were captured. They got orders to advance to the German trenches which had only been partially captured, making their task very difficult. They were then re-deployed at Neuve Chapelle till November, when the Indian Corps was moved from France to the Middle East.

The 107th Pioneers arrived in Mesopotamia on 04 December 1915, along with the 128th Pioneers as part of the force launched for the relief of Kut-al-Amara with the 7th Division. As large areas of the Tigris River had floods, they were involved in making bunds. This work was mainly done under constant enemy sniping. They saw fighting at The Dujaila Redoubt and then at Saniyat in April 1916. The effort to reach Kut-al-Amara was to no avail as the garrison, of which the 48th Pioneers were part, surrendered on 29 April 1916. The 48th Pioneers had no officers left with it. Of the 300 men captured, only 90 returned from captivity.

The 107th Pioneers returned to Quetta and were relieved by the 121st Pioneers in September 1916. The 12th (Khelat-i-Ghilzie) Pioneers also moved into the theatre while the 48th Pioneers were raised anew. (A second battalion was raised in place of the captured regiment but took its number. When the Kut prisoners were released at the conclusion of the war, the personnel still fit for service joined this re-formed battalion). The pioneers were kept busy during the campaign in making the railway, preparing the roads, constructing flood bunds and improving the communications for the advance to Baghdad and beyond, mostly under enemy fire, for the rest of the campaign. After World War I, the Indian Government reformed the army, moving from single

battalion regiments to multi-battalion regiments. In 1922, the 107th Pioneers became the 1st Battalion 2nd Bombay Pioneers.

12th Pioneers (The Kelat-i-Ghilzie Regiment)

In 1838, internal troubles in Afghanistan, the fear of the spread of Russian influence, and the threat of an invasion by Persia compelled the British Government to establish their nominee Shuja-ul-Mulk as Amir of Kabul so that a buffer state would exist between British India till the potential danger posed by Russia and Persia attenuated. Shuja-ul-Mulk who had spent the previous 30 years in exile in Ludhiana entered Afghanistan with his own troops and six regiments of infantry, which were recruited for him. One of the regiments of this army was the 3rd Regiment of Infantry, the forbearer of the 12th Pioneers, which had been raised at Ludhiana.

Shah Shuja was installed as ruler and Dost Mohammed, his rival, fled. The 3rd Regiment proved themselves to be a useful unit for mountain fighting and were posted to a partially ruined fort called Kelat-i-Ghilzie which lay between Ghazni and Kandahar. The murder of the British envoy provoked an evacuation of the British garrison, most of which was massacred on its march back to India. The British forces in Afghanistan were for a short while confined to the fort of Khelat-i-Ghilzie and the garrison of Jalalabad.

Shah Shuja was murdered in April 1842 and Ghazni was captured bringing about the release of Afghan troops and tribesmen. Kelat-i-Ghilzie was besieged for several months. The 600 men of the 3rd Regiment along with 250 of the 43rd Regiment and about 40 British artillerymen, all commanded by Captain Craigie of the 3rd Regiment, repulsed the attacks of some 6,000 Afghans. Amazingly there were no fatalities amongst the defenders, only 4 men from the 3rd and 2 from the 43rd were wounded. Khelat-i-Ghilzie withstood an even longer siege than Jalalabad, holding out for four months before its eventual relief in the campaign that restored British control in the area.

The particularly dogged defence by the Shah's own Afghan contingent caused them to be enrolled thereafter in the British forces as the Khelat-al-Gilzie Regiment, otherwise listed as the 2nd Battalion of the 2nd Bombay Pioneers which was incorporated into the Bengal Army under a General Order dated 04 October 1842. All ranks present within Kelat-i-Ghilzie were presented a

silver medal bearing a mural crown with the superscription of 'Kelat-i-Ghilzie', and on the reverse the word INVICTA 1842. The regimental colour of the Regiment was composed of the three colours of the military ribbon of India, and in the centre was inscribed the word 'Kelat-i-Ghilzie'. For its services, the Kelat-i-Ghilzie Regiment was awarded the Battle Honour 'Ghazni, 1839'.

The 3rd Regiment was taken on to the strength of the Bengal Army as an extra regiment with the name of the fort it defended as its own name for its heroic efforts. When the Bengal Army was reorganised after the Mutiny, the Kelat-i-Ghilzie was brought into the Bombay Army on 03 May 1861, and numbered the 13th. In October of the same year, this numbering was altered and it became the 12th Regiment of Bengal Native Infantry with (Kelat-i-Ghilzie) being added after the number in 1864. On 03 March 1903, it was reconstituted as Pioneers and became the 12th Bengal Pioneers. On 31 July of the same year, its name was again changed to the 12th Pioneers (The Kelat-i-Ghilzie Regiment).

In 1897, there was a violent uprising of tribes on the North West Frontier, which led to operations in the Mohmand and Tirah. In the force which marched on the expedition were the 12th (Kelat-i-Ghilzie) Bengal Infantry and 28th (Pioneer) Regiment of Bombay Infantry. The 12th (Kelat-i-Ghilzie) Bengal Infantry operated in the Kurram valley till January 1898. The 28th (Pioneer) Regiment of Bombay Infantry operated in the area of Ali Masjid and the Khyber Pass as part of the Tirah Field Force. They saw action against the recalcitrant Mohmand tribes till April 1898.

The 12th (Kelat-i-Ghilzie) Pioneers remained in India throughout World War I, though it sent many officers and large drafts of men to other battalions in France and Mesopotamia. They, however, saw action against the Mahsuds in Waziristan during 1919. After World War I, it became the 2nd Battalion 2nd Bombay Pioneers stationed at Kirkee. The disbandment of the Bombay Pioneers was a protracted affair starting in 1926 with the 4th battalion and ending on 10 February 1933 when the other three Pioneer regiments were struck off the strength of the Indian Army.

128th Pioneers

When the Bengal Army objected to serve in the newly-conquered territory of Sind and was on the verge of mutiny, it was decided

to provide this garrison from the Bombay Army. This made it necessary to increase the number of Bombay troops and three regiments of Bombay Native Infantry were raised in addition to the existing twenty-six regiments. The 28th Regiment of Bombay Native Infantry was raised at Ahmednagar on 21 January 1846. On 01 March 1888, the Battalion was converted into Pioneers under the name of 28th (Pioneer) Regiment of Bombay Native Infantry. The Regiment thus became the first Pioneer Battalion in the Bombay Army.

On 10 February 1885, the 28th Bombay Infantry were ordered to proceed to Suakin, on the Red Sea coast of Sudan, after the defeat of the British expeditionary force under Gen Charles Gordon. From Suakin, the force marched towards Khartoum on 22 March when it decided to halt at a small open space in the scrub known as Tofrek. Here it constructed defensive positions of scrub bushes, called 'zeribas'. The defences came under a determined surprise attack by the Arabs. The 28th Bombay Infantry were deployed in an area where the scrub was thicker than elsewhere giving absolute cover to the Arabs and fought back tenaciously. In half an hour they fired 22,500 rounds from their snider rifles, some of the men's hands being burnt by the rifles becoming so hot from firing. The enemy were beaten back leaving 1,500 dead. They then returned to Suakin where they remained till withdrawn to Bombay in October 1885. They were awarded the battle honours of 'Tofrek' and 'Suakin'.

The 128th Pioneers were mobilised in October 1914 and sent to the Suez Canal to prepare the canal defences between Lake Timsah and the Great Bitter Lake. They saw action against the Turks when their posts were attacked on 02-03 February 1915. The attacks were beaten back and two years lapsed before they saw action again.

The 121st Pioneers disembarked at Suez on 15 January 1918 and were immediately put to work on making embankments, bridges and culverts to join up the railway from Rafa to Beersheba in Palestine. Northwards of this, they saw action when their parties were attacked during the work to extend the railway through the Jordan valley.

Meanwhile, the second battalion to all single-battalion pioneer regiments were raised and most saw action in Palestine. The

2/107th Pioneers saw much action in the advance to Tulkarm and Megiddo during the summer months of 1918. Fighting and operations continued all through 1919. It was only in 1920 that most pioneer regiments returned to India.

The total casualties of the Bombay Pioneers during operations in Egypt and Palestine are difficult to estimate accurately owing to drafts having been received from and sent to other regiments. The figures published at the time of disbandment were: 23 officers and nearly 1,000 Indian ranks killed, and 22 officers and approximately 2,800 Indian ranks wounded.

48th Pioneers

In March 1901, the 48th Regiment of Bengal Infantry (Pioneers) was raised at Lucknow, and later renamed as 48th Bengal Pioneers. This was the only one of the five battalions which was raised as Pioneers. In 1903, it became the 48th Pioneers.

The 48th Pioneers were the first to be ordered to Mesopotamia as part of the 6th (Poona) Division. Reaching Saniya on 14 November 1914, they were immediately involved in the fighting with the Turks while their baggage was lost during a gale which destroyed their boats. After the capture of Basra, they were involved in the defence of Shaiba. They next saw action in the capture of Kut-al-Amara, in June 1915 after which they were launched into battle at Ctesiphon where they lost 8 British officers, 9 Indian officers and 259 rank and file. They were then moved back to Kut-al-Amara to be part of the besieged force. The regiment was captured in its entirety at the Siege of Kut. A 2/48th Pioneers was reformed in Mesopotamia in May 1916 and attached to the 15 Indian Division. After World War I, when the army changed from single-battalion regiments to multi-battalion regiments, the 48th Pioneers became the 4th Battalion, 2nd Bombay Pioneers in 1921.

Conclusion

The article in brief covered the journey of various Pioneer units of Indian Army over the period of time. It is pertinent to highlight that on 10 Feb 1933 all Pioneer of the Indian Army were disbanded.



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