

Murree and Poonch Mountain Batteries in the 1918 Palestine Campaign

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(Source: *The History of the Indian Mountain Artillery* by Brigadier-General C.A.L. Graham, D.S.O., O.B.E., D.L., p.s.c., Aldershot: Gale & Polden Ltd, 1957)

Introduction to Mountain Batteries

Mountain artillery batteries are a fascinating study of the Indian Army during the colonial period. Even in English literature, mountain gunners or the pack artillery has been eulogised in the

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famous poem 'Screw-Guns' by Rudyard Kipling:

*"Smokin' my pipe on the mountings, snifin' the mornin' cool,
I walks in my old brown gaiters along o' my old brown mule...."*

Regular artillery companies had been approved by the East India Company in 1748 for the three Presidency Armies of Bengal, Madras and Bombay. Before the First War of Independence (called Great Indian Mutiny of 1857 by the British or the rebellion), "the Company's artillery consisted of mountain units, the horse artillery and the somewhat curiously termed 'foot' artillery (field gunners). The last two were made of British and Indians, but the new mountain trains consisted of Indians only under a British commanding officer.¹ The First War of Independence or the rebellion 'saw almost the entire Bengal native artillery rise in arms except the newly raised mountain trains and the horse field batteries employed on the frontier.'² Post 1857 till outbreak of the war, only 12 mountain pack batteries were entrusted to Indian units for action in the tribal belt against insurgents in the northwest of India.

Murree and Poonch Batteries

On 01 March 1898, 9th (Native) Mountain Battery was raised at Abbottabad. Later in 1907 another battery – 'Poonch' was raised. The lineage and services from 1914-1918 of the two batteries is at **Appendix A**. Batteries always operated together in most of their history under command of a regimental HQ. Both batteries (26 Murree and 27 Poonch) are now a part of 24 Field Regiment. The troop composition was based on sections of Jat Sikhs and Punjabi Musalmans (PMs). In September 1944, the PMs were to be transferred to 21st Indian Light Mountain Regiment, which may now be the 1st Mountain Regiment with Pakistan Artillery, consisting of 1st (Jacob's), 2nd (Kohat) and 4th (Lahore) Mountain Batteries.³ Interestingly, due to shortage of military labour market of so called 'martial races', Ahirs were also enrolled during the war.

Animals, Equipment and Men

To the old pack mountain gunners it was the rustic charm of animals, equipment and men or soldering was an equation of animal, equipment and man management. 9th (Murree) Mountain battery

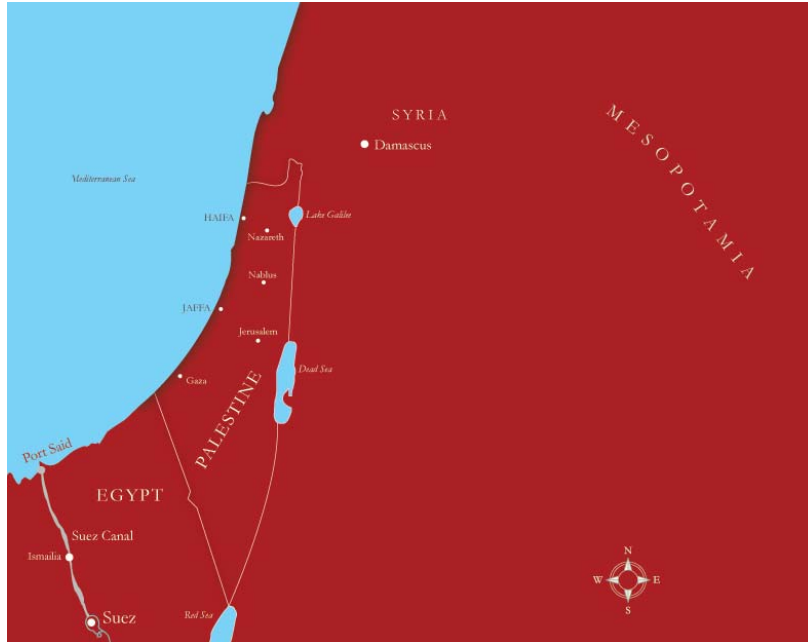
was raised with 2.5" howitzer (Screw Gun), which had to be transported or moved on mules. On raising, the battery had 4 ponies and 76 mules. Later in 1903 the guns were the 10 lb B/L (Breach Loading) and in 1918, 2.75" B/L. The Mule Artillery (MA) or 'Khachar' is a cross between a donkey stallion and a pony mare. It inherits its hind portion from the horse and the fore portion from a donkey. This inheritance makes it very tough, sturdy and sure-footed animal. Unless you love the animal and take care of it, it will let you down (or kick, buck or bite you).⁴ Like all animals trained for warfare, it had also to be trained and disciplined and at times it required some tough handling and nuanced 'animal-management'. The heady mixture of mountains, howitzers and mules with the characteristic smell (aroma may be a better word) more overpowering than the smell of cordite was one reason for the cohesion of man and animal. Therefore, the stoic mountain gunner with his mule had an élan of his own.⁵

Source Material and Manuscript Battery Histories

Unlike the 25 volume Official History of the Indian Armed Forces in the Second World War, there is no official history of the Indian Armed Forces in the First World War. Secondary sources like *The History of the Indian Artillery* for the Palestine campaign is extremely brief: "The 29th and 32nd proceeded to Palestine in 1918, and took part in the closing phases of the battle of Meggido and Nablus."⁶ Nevertheless, the story purely from an artillery perspective is available in a seminal book *The History of the Indian Mountain Artillery* (1957) by Brigadier-General CAL Graham.⁷ This book is perhaps the only secondary source to trace the raising, numbering, renumbering, deployment and employment of mountain artillery.

Fortunately, the mountain batteries had a tradition of recording in manuscript form the diary or the battery history.⁸ Although not comprehensive about the entire action and operations, the entries do give a sense of what was happening at a particular period in time in the life of the battery. The extracts from battery history books during the Palestine Campaign is given at **Appendix B** which gives a good idea of the kind of activities that the batteries were carrying out during the Campaign.

The Palestine Campaign (see Map for Area of Operations)



(Source: Harry Fecitt (authored), Rana TS Chhina (Ed.), *Indian Army and the Great War - Egypt and Palestine*, USI of India and XPD Division, Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, 2015.)

Operations in Brief Outline. To quote Harry Fecitt, “The Suez Canal was the lifeline of the British Empire and its safety was crucial to the Allied war effort in Europe. With Turkey entering the war as an ally of Germany, the defence of the Suez Canal became the focus of the campaign in Egypt. As the war progressed, the Egyptian Expeditionary Force with its very significant Indian element, under command of General Edmund Allenby, advanced up through Palestine all the way to Damascus in Syria till Turkish Forces surrendered in October 1918.”⁹

Micro Picture of the Mountain Artillery

The history of Murree and Poonch batteries in a way begins at the fag end of the war in 1917. To recapitulate:

On 14th November, 1915, the Sultan of Turkey proclaimed a jihad on all those making war on Turkey or her allies...The advance was dependent on the speed with which the railway

and a 12-inch water pipe were pushed forward, and it continued until, on 19th April, 1917, the army was checked on the line Beersheba- Gaza, and reinforcements became necessary.

By June, 1917, when General Sir Edmund Allenby took over command of the Egyptian Expeditionary Force (EEF), it had grown to three cavalry and four infantry divisions, with two more infantry divisions in the process of forming. Our own and the enemy troops were facing each other in trenches in Gaza, and Allenby's instructions were to drive the Turks out of Palestine....

Beersheba, Jaffa, Jerusalem and Jericho fell to Allenby's victorious army by the spring of 1918, when our set-back on the Western Front led to weakening of the EEF by withdrawal of reinforcements to France. In exchange 3rd (Lahore) and 7th (Meerut) Divisions came over from Mesopotamia, and India sent the 10th Indian Mountain Artillery (IMA) Brigade ... consisting of 9th (Murree), 12th (Poonch) and 19th (Myanmo) Mountain Batteries.¹⁰ ... The Brigade concentrated in June, 1918, at Kantara , where it drew armament – four 2.75-inch B/L guns for each battery – and mules, good but untrained.¹¹

To get an idea of the strength of a battery, The 9th (Murree) was mobilised at the strength of : 6 British Officers, 4 Indian officers, 99 gunners, 16 drivers, 23 public followers and 3 private followers.¹²

The Chaytor's Force

Graham records:

'Brigade Headquarters with the 9th (Murree) and 12th (Poonch) Batteries joined General Chaytor's mounted force which was guarding the right flank of the pivot of the operations. Both batteries were in the right sector covering the bridgehead at the Wadi Aujah up to Z day, and carried out harassing fire. On 21st September the 9th (Murree) Battery moved at night with the New Zealand Mounted Brigade to Damiye to cut off an enemy column retreating from Nablus, and the British column bumped into a considerable Turkish column in the dark. The situation was not adjusted until daylight, when the 1st Light Horse Brigade arrived and a

number of Turks were captured. The battery fired 121 rounds that morning, and the next day received orders to march to *Es Salt* with the New Zealand Mounted Brigade. Chaytor's Force was now in hot pursuit with four columns in the hills on a fifteen-mile front. *Es Salt* was outflanked and surrendered that afternoon with 500 prisoners.

During the night (23rd/24th September) General Chaytor received orders to continue the pressure and to cut off the enemy's retreat from Amman. There was a delay owing to the non-arrival of rations, but at 6 a.m. on the 25th two columns, each of a brigade of the Australian and New Zealand Mounted divisions, supported by an Indian mountain battery, advanced on Amman. The Turks put up a fight at first, but the result was that prisoners numbering 2,500 and ten guns were captured. A number of enemy troops had evacuated by train, but the Arabs were making breaches in the railway farther North, so they must have been forced to detrain in haste. The 12th (Poonch) Battery had some shooting on trenches from a covered position, and the Forward Observation Officer (FOO) knocked out some machine guns, but the affair was soon over.

This was the end of the campaign for mountain batteries: three cavalry divisions of the Desert Mounted Corps were pursuing the Turks through Damascus to Aleppo as fast as their horses could go, and there was no employment for pack guns.....

Jemadar Kifayat Ullah and Lance Naik Sham Singh were awarded the Indian Distinguished Service Medal. The 12th (Poonch) Mountain Battery remained in Palestine until December, 1920, when it was sent to Jutogh. The 9th (Murree) Mountain Battery returned to Dehradun in January, 1922. The three batteries, 9th (Murree), 12th (Poonch), and 19th (Maymyo), were granted the right to bear on their Colours and appointments:

The Great War - "Palestine 1918", "Megiddo", "Nablus".¹³

It needs to be noted that post-Independence battle honours were categorised as being repugnant and non-repugnant. In general most overseas campaigns and operations were included in the

non - repugnant list till the Second World War and those where military force was applied for internal security or coercion were graded as repugnant. The Palestine Campaign is in 'non- repugnant' list.¹⁴

Conclusion

This short article is meant to generate interest and assist the scholars in recording and locating original source documents for further research in the history of Mountain Artillery of that era. Indian soldiers had made a great contribution to the outcome of the Great War 1914-18 and the batteries of Mountain Artillery played an important part in many of the campaigns. They fought in almost all the theatres of the Great War. It is, therefore, important for Indian voices to be recorded for posterity.

Endnotes

¹ John Gaylor, *Sons of John Company : The Indian and Pakistan Armies 1903-1991*, New Delhi: Lancer International, 1993, pp.106-107.

² Ibid, p.107.

³ Brigadier-General CAL Graham, DSO, OBE, DL, psc, *The History of the Indian Mountain Artillery*, Aldershot : Gale & Polden Ltd, 1957, p.424.

⁴ More than 30 registers were maintained for each animal. They were routinely inspected to be 'fit' or 'unfit' for war by the fearsome veterinary doctors from the Remount and Veterinary Corps (RVC).

⁵ The Mule Artillery has been transferred to the Army Service Corps (ASC). Now it is only a pack animal for mortar batteries loaned on need basis. Pack mountain regiments were converted as 'towed' in the 1970s, including one unit of pack camel artillery which shed the animals for mechanical transport and the camels were transferred to the Border Security Force (BSF).

⁶ *History of the Regiment of Artillery: Indian Army*, Dehradun: Palit & Dutt Publishers, (Published under the authority of the Director of Artillery, Army Headquarters, New Delhi), 1971, p.39.

⁷ CAL Graham, op cit, pp. 193-197.

⁸ For the second World War, the stories of some mountain gunners are available in CH. MacFetridge and JP Warren (eds.), *Tales of the Mountain Gunners: An Anthology, compiled by those who served with them*, Edinburg : William Blackwood, 1973. See AB Howard, '12 (Poonch) Indian Mountain Battery in World War II', pp.132-141.

⁹ Harry Fecitt (authored) , Rana TS Chhina (Ed.), *Indian Army and the Great War - Egypt and Palestine*, USI of India and XPD Division, Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, 2015, summary in back-cover.

¹⁰ At this time designated 29th, 32nd and 39th Mountain Batteries respectively.

¹¹ CAL Graham, op cit, pp.193-194.

¹² Ibid, p.194.

¹³ Ibid, pp.196-197.

¹⁴ Sam Manekshaw, 'Foreword', in Maj Sarbans Singh, *Battle Honours of the Indian Army : 1757- 1971*, New Delhi, Bombay : Vision Books, 1993, pp.9-10.

¹⁵ Based on 24 Field Regiment demi- official letter no. 308703/03/A of 29 July 2013 from the Adjutant Capt Angad Poundarik to me. I am grateful to the then Commanding Officer Col Ranjit Gill in making this possible.

Appendix A**Battery Lineage as provided by the Centre for Armed Forces Historical Research, USI of India****Murree Battery**

- 1899 9th Native Mountain Bty
- 1901 Murree Mountain Bty
- 1903 29th Mountain Bty
- 1920 29th Pack Bty
- 1921 109th [Murree] Pack Bty
- 1927 9th [Murree] Indian Mountain Bty RA1928 9th [Murree] Mountain Bty RA
- 1942 9th [Murree] Indian Mtn Bty IA [1]

Poonch Battery

- 1907 2nd Mountain Bty
- 1920 32nd Pack Bty
- 1921 112th [Poonch] Pack Bty
- 1927 12th [Poonch] Indian Mtn Bty RA
- 1928 12th [Poonch] Mountain Bty RA
- 1942 12th [Poonch] Indian Mtn Bty IA[1]

Note [1]: During 1942-3 designated Light Mountain Btys.

Service Rendered : 1914 - 1918**29th (Murree) Mountain Battery**

August 1914: Rawalpindi, 2nd Rawalpindi Division. Transferred January 1915 to Miranshah, Bannu Brigade, North West Frontier. June 1918 moved to Egypt. November 1918: Palestine, attached to Chaytor's Force.

32nd (Poonch) Mountain Battery

August 1914: Dera Ismail Khan, Derajat Brigade, North West Frontier. By January 1916 at Tank, Derajat Brigade. Transferred December 1916 to Maymyo, Burma Division. June 1918 moved to Corps Troops in Egypt. November 1918: Palestine, Chaytor's Force.

Appendix B¹⁵**Extracts from Battery History Book of
Murree Battery (1917-1919)**

05 February 1917	Capt J.W. English joined on appointment
03 March 1917	Capt R.E. Wilson joined on appointment as Commandant vice Major C.R. Crowdy transferred
04 March 1917	2/Lt J.O. Day left on transfer to new mountain battery
15 March 1917	Capt R.E. Wilson left on transfer new mountain battery
27 March 1917	Capt J.B. Somerville joined on appointment as Commandant vice Capt Wilson
03 March 1918	Bty left Bannu by special troop active train at 7:30 AM for active service in Egyptian Expeditionary Force
10-17 September 1918	Harassing fire (50 rounds on enemy ... are fired daily). Subsection moved to new position during night 10/11, registered targets on 11 September and withdrawn during night 11/12 September
17 September 1918	Fired 66 rounds on BAQHALAT HILLS between 0415 and 0425 hrs
21- 22 September 1918	Battery shelled western approaches of DAMIEH Bridge at ranges from 4000 to 3300. Fired 126 rounds, 11 AM fire stopped
25 September 1918	Battery was detailed to cover advance of Auckland MR on our left. No.1 Section fired on enemy mountain guns at 2300 and silenced them and then on various targets, trenches and machine guns from 1000 to 4500 ranges
March 1919	4x 3.7 Q.F. Howitzers and equipment arrived from 9 th Brigade under Lt Morrison and were taken over by battery

**Extracts from Battery History Book of Poonch Battery
(1918-1920)**

18 April 1918	Battery moved for service in Indian Egyptian Expeditionary Force
08 May 1918	Mobilization of battery completed
07 June 1918	Battery embarked on "Royal George" which left Bombay for Aden till Suez. Battery served in the Indian Cavalry 'Base Depot'
12 August 1918	Reached Jerusalem
14 August 1918	Arrived Meshrab
15 August 1918	Left Meshrab for Jericho
18 August 1918	Accident occurred. While washing mules, few mules were swept away and Hav Baj Singh hurt severely
21 August 1918	Enemy have not dropped a shell into the bridge head since our arrival
26 August 1918	Left section fired 55 rounds on upper JORDAN near UMM-ES-SNART returning at 2000hrs. No notice was taken by the enemy
29 August 1918	Australian patrol met with rifle fire, one man got wounded. Battery fired 04 rounds over dead horse ridge 0500 hrs.
10-17 September 1918	Harassing fire in the MELLAHAN in the position previously taken up for the purpose fired 100 rounds a day till 16th instant
19 September 1918	Ration party came under fire and our logistics wagon team was hit. One Egyptian driver, one horse and one mule killed. L/Nk Shan Singh riding the lead mule gallantly cut out the horses which were wounded.
25 September 1918	At 0730 hrs battery fired 10 rounds on the enemy's outpost direction 2 or 3 miles east of AIN-ES-SIR

Palestine	Fired 30 rounds on Turkish rear position near AMMAN citadel at 1100 hrs. Battery came into action fired 50 rounds on the last manned trenches
26 September 1918	Battery covered right flank of advance of 7 th Regiment upto last moment. 1500h Lt Barrett cleared one sniper with 10 rounds on eastside of Wadi Amman
26-30 September 1918	Jemadar Kifayat Ullah and No. 491 L/ Nk Sham Singh were awarded Indian Distinguished Service Medal
December 1920	Battery returned to SUEZ, handed over guns, equipment, mules etc to 41 Mountain Battery (newly raised)