

# The Corps of Madras Pioneers

Colonel Harjeet Singh (Retd)<sup>®</sup>

*"They which build on the wall, and they that bare burdens, with those that laded, everyone with one of his hands wrought in the work, and with the other hand held a weapon".*

**-Nehemiah**

## Abstract

*Pioneers have been defined as the men who lead the way, who go ahead to prepare the way for others. The Madras Pioneers were the first fighting force raised by the British in India, in 1780. On 10 February 1933, the Pioneer Regiments of the British Indian Army were disbanded for reasons of financial stringency. The Madras Pioneers were the senior most in the Corps. Their history is a chequered one, highlighting the prominent role the pioneer regiments played in several campaigns as well as in many construction projects, most of which exist today as witness to their achievements.*

## Origins

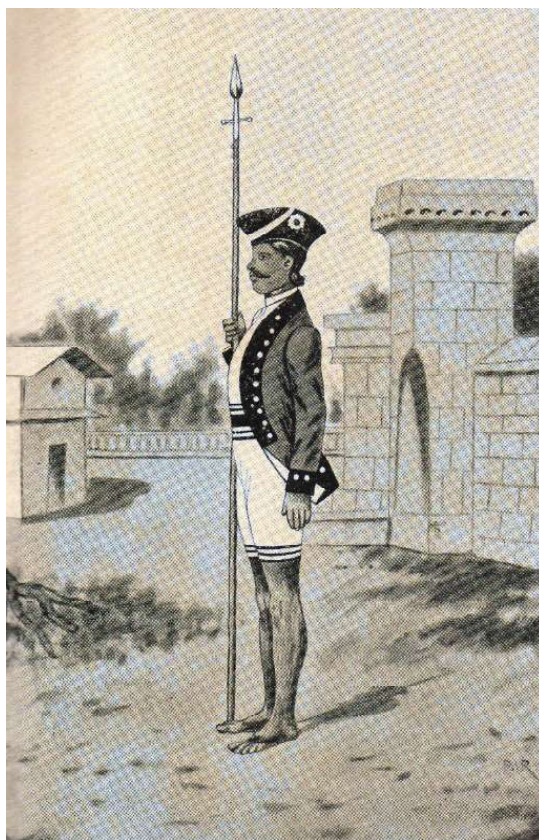
Since 1639, the East India Company had its business headquarters at Fort St George, near the village of Madraspattinam. The French were then the only other European trader in the region to give the British competition. The death of Charles VI, in 1743, led to the War of Austrian Succession in which Britain and France were in opposite camps. It took a year for the news to reach the Coromandel Coast. The commercial rivalry between these two warring nations was sufficiently intense for them to enter into a power game in India. In 1746, the French, under Dupleix, seized Fort St George from the British, which was handed back, two years later, by the terms of the treaty of Aix-la-Chapelle.

---

<sup>®</sup>Colonel Harjeet Singh (Retd) holds an MSc and MPhil in Defence and Strategic Studies from the University of Madras. He is from the Sikh Light Infantry which carries on the legacy of the Pioneers. He is a prolific writer who has authored a number of books on military history and military affairs.

The East India Company established their factories on the coasts of India in the 17th century. In their efforts to extend trade into the interior, they were faced with European rivals and then the rulers of the country. They realised that trade must be supported with force and so, by 1759, the first company of sepoys was established. Some of these sepoys were used to construct mud walls around the factories, under the supervision of a gunner who was recognised as the military engineer. During the next 15 years, British and French traders in south India were in a perpetual state of war with the aim of taking over the opponent's trade. This series of clashes is known as the Carnatic Wars which transformed the East India Company from a trading body to a territorial power.

During the siege of Fort St George, Madras by the French, from December 1758 to February 1759, it was realised that the infantry working parties could not cope up with the damage inflicted by the enemy artillery on the fort. To cope with the situation, Captain Call, the Chief Engineer, formed a Pioneer Company from European volunteers and employed them on repairing the fort walls. Later, two more Pioneer companies of sepoys were formed on the same plan. These units appear to be the first Pioneer companies raised with a proper organisation. From 1759 to 1780, Pioneer companies were formed whenever required and disbanded when no longer needed. They were used to develop tracks for the movement of gun carriages, digging trenches and saps, and clearing hedges. They were employed at many sieges but they were neither armed nor trained to fight which led to their abandoning the task on hand and fleeing as soon as the first shot was fired. A more formal armed organisation with proper military training was required. The Pioneer Corps, thus, has its origins in the Madras Presidency.



**Sepoy, Madras Pioneers, 1780**

(Coat, blue with black facings; shirt and drawers white; *pagri* black)

## Campaigns

### Carnatic Wars (1780-81)

As early as 1770, the first Pioneer companies were formed to replace the '*matti* men', i.e., labourers with some form of spade and pick (*mamoottie*). Lieutenant Joseph Moorhouse of the Madras Artillery Commissary of Stores, in 1780, put forward a proposal of raising two companies of native Pioneers. He suggested that putting them in uniform and arming them with light pistols and pikestaffs and training them would instil military discipline different from the Engineers *coolie*. From then onward, the need for these trained soldiers increased as the various Presidency Armies carried out their campaigns to take over the country and establish their rule.

Their first bleeding in a regular military campaign occurred when Haider Ali, the ruler of Mysore, marched into the Carnatic plain with an 80,000 strong force. A brief campaign, the First Mysore War, followed which was totally disastrous for the British. This led to reformation in the Company's Army, when the Board of Directors of the East India Company, issued instructions for raising a 'Corps of Pioneers' officered from the line. On 30 September 1780, two companies of Pioneers, each consisting of 2 Sergeants, 3 Corporals, 5 Havildars, 5 Naiks and 100 Pioneers, were raised at Dawleshwaram. 50 of the Pioneers were to be armed with light pistols, and the remainder with 6 feet long pikestuffs. They were to be employed to march ahead of the army to clear and mend roads, and take part in siege operations. The defeat of the Mysore Army at Sholinghur in 1781 was commemorated by the Battle Honours of 'Carnatic and Sholinghur'.

A third company was raised in 1783, during the Mysore War, after the ruler, Haider Ali, died. His son, Tipu Sultan, continued to wage war against the British for another 17 years. In 1790, the strength of Pioneers was increased to five companies of about 100 Indian ranks each, who were provided cutting and digging tools. In 1791, the impregnable fort of Sewandroog, 19 miles from Bangalore, was attacked and taken by the British assisted by the Pioneers. In 1793, they were formed into a 'corps' of six companies with an establishment of four Officers, and four Assistant Surgeons with the companies having 1 Sergeant, one Jemadar and 106 Indian Other Ranks. The strength was progressively increased, and by 1803, the Corps had two battalions of eight companies each. A scale of equipment was also laid down. Over the next few years, as requirements increased, the number rose to eight companies, first named from 'A' to 'H' then '1' to '8' and finally '9' to '16', the status at which they remained for close to 150 years. Almost as soon as they were formed, the two companies, under Lieutenant John Lanes, participated in what was known as the Second Mysore War. The main objective was the fort of Seringapatam.

### **Seringapatam (1799)**

The island of Seringapatam (Srirangapatnam) lies on the river Kaveri approximately 120 km from Bangalore. In February 1799, companies of the Madras Pioneers under Captain Dowse and

Lieutenant Cormick marched towards Seringapatam. They were part of the 31,000 strong 'Grand Army' under Lord Harris, Commander-in-Chief of the Madras Army. The 6,400 strong Bombay Army operated under Lieutenant General James Stuart. The campaign strategy was to approach the town simultaneously from the east and the west. Prior to the storming of the fort, on 08 April, the Madras Pioneers were kept busy working on the construction of enfilading batteries and the excavation of several zigzag approach trenches or saps. For the final assault, they were part of the two assaulting groups under the command of General David Baird. For their role in the campaign, the Madras Pioneers were awarded the Battle Honour 'Seringapatam'.

### **Egypt (1800-02)**

The first instance of deployment of Indian troops outside Asia came in December 1800, with an expedition to Egypt. The purpose was to drive the French Army out of the Red Sea ports, from where an invasion of the Indian subcontinent was a serious threat. The Expeditionary Force sailed from Bombay in a 7,000-strong contingent commanded by General David Baird, landing at Kosseir on 08 June 1801. Included in the force was a company of Madras Pioneers, under Captain J Fitzpatrick, which had been serving in Ceylon. This unit had embarked at Trincomalee in December 1800 but was delayed for several weeks at Bombay while the transports were being prepared for the voyage across the Arabian Sea.

On landing in Egypt, it found itself on a bare and inhospitable coast with a desert march of 120 km, ahead to Kenna. Water was in short supply wherever available; it was brackish and caused dysentery among the troops. In those days, the journey frequently outlasted its purpose; while the contingent was traversing the desert, the French surrendered. The Pioneers, however, were ordered to proceed to Cairo. They stayed in Egypt until June 1802. For their efforts the honour 'Egypt 1801' was bestowed on the Madras Pioneers.

### **The Mahratta War (1803-05)**

The Mahratta War was a result of the distrust of the increasing influence of the British. The two main opponents were Scindia of Gwalior and Bhonsle of Berar, who were part of the Mahratta Confederacy. In January 1803, the Madras Pioneers, under Major

Joseph Hill, were at Bangalore when they were made part of the force under Lieutenant General John Stuart. On arrival of Major General Arthur Wellesley on 06 March, part of Lieutenant General Stuart's force was divided, the former being given a division – about 10,600 strong – to strike towards Poona – which was occupied on 20 April. Wellesley's next plan was to attack Ahmednagar to secure his communications with Poona and Bombay. After the capture of Ahmednagar on 11 August, Wellesley set out north for Aurangabad and contacted the Mahratta force there.

On 23 September 1803, a decisive battle was fought by the British forces under Major General Arthur Wellesley, against the combined Maratha Army led by Dowlat Rao Scindia. The battlefield was Assaye, a small village near the Ajanta caves, off Aurangabad. Two companies of the Madras Pioneers, under Captain Heitland, were part of the attack launched by General Arthur Wellesley, with 4,500 men against the 40,000 strong Maratha army. The Madras Pioneers, 755 strong, were in the thick of the fight and had 26 killed and 90 wounded. (General Wellesley later became the Duke of Wellington. Even after his victory at Waterloo, he regarded Assaye as the most difficult battle he ever fought). For this battle, the Madras Pioneers were granted the battle honour 'Assaye' and the badge of 'The Elephant'.

### **The Travancore War (1808-09)**

Towards the end of 1808, a subsidy payable by the Raja of Travancore fell into arrears. For this, the Resident, Lieutenant Colonel Macaulay, insisted on the removal of the Dewan. This resulted in an attack on the latter's house but he managed to escape. At the same time, 31 sailors were killed at Alleppey. This led to a general rebellion by the Nairs with an attack on British troops in Quilon. In January 1809, the British forces (of which the Madras Pioneers, under Colonel Chalmers, was part) converged on Quilon from three directions. The resultant battle led to the total defeat of the enemy with heavy loss and capture of 14 guns. There were other smaller actions later which resulted in the occupation of Trivandrum.

Later, the Madras Pioneers went on expeditions to Java in 1811 and Burma in 1824. Until 1811, the only Pioneer units employed overseas came exclusively from the Madras Presidency.

In 1831, the first battalion of the Madras Pioneers was converted into the 'Corps of Madras Sappers and Miners'. It was entitled to all honours and distinctions that they won as Pioneers. The second battalion of Pioneers was absorbed into the Corps in 1834, without any increase in the establishment. The Headquarters and three companies were located at Bangalore, two companies each were in the Nilgiris and Hyderabad, and one company was at Madras.

### **The Afghan War (1879-80)**

With the failure of the British mission to Kabul and the massacre of the British garrison there, on 03 September 1879, the campaign against Afghanistan was ordered. The 4th Regiment of Madras Native Infantry (Pioneers), then in Bangalore, proceeded to Jhelum by rail and then marched to Ali Masjid by way of Peshawar. In January 1880, the Mohmands rose up against the British and the 4th Regiment of Madras Native Infantry (Pioneers) was part of the force deployed against them. They had the onerous and difficult duty of being the rear guard and saw action at Fort Battye in March 1880 and later against the Waziri tribes. The battalion was awarded the honours of Afghanistan 1879-80.'

### **Egypt (1882)**

A second opportunity for service in Egypt came in 1882 when an Indian contingent was mobilised to join an expeditionary force under Lieutenant General Sir Garnet Wolseley, to suppress a military revolt against the ruler or Khedive of Egypt and Sudan, Tewfik Pasha. The safety of the Suez Canal was the primary concern. For their role in the campaign, they were awarded the honour 'Egypt'. They were also awarded the badge of 'The Sphinx'.

### **Suakin and Tofrek (1885)**

In 1885, a force was sent under Sir Gerald Graham, VC. RE, to clear the Sudanese Coast and build a railway from Suakin to Berber, on the Nile. At that time, the warlord Osman Digna was very active in the region. One company of Pioneers was part of this force of 4,000 men and an enormous convoy of camels and reached Sudan, in March 1885, where they set to work. As a safeguard against surprise attacks, two thick-thorn bushy fenced enclosures or *zarebas* were built five miles apart. While building a *zareba* at Tofrek, six miles from Suakin, the cavalry guarding the troops rushed towards the enclosure followed by swarms of

Sudanese at their heels. When the Sudanese moved into the central square, a party of Madras Pioneers gathered around a pile of stores and biscuit boxes and, firing with great steadiness, checked the assault. For this action, the honour 'Suakinand Tofrek' was bestowed on the Madras Pioneers.

### **NWFP (1891-99)**

The tribal areas of Afghanistan and NWFP were in constant turmoil. From 1821 onwards, the Madras Pioneers were pressed into service in Tirah, Hazara, Malakand, Buner, and Zakka Khel. They also built the Khushalgarh-Kohat railroad. They were awarded the honours 'Punjab Frontier', 'Malakand', and 'Tirah'.

### **Burma (1913-15)**

The 64th Pioneers moved to Burma in November 1913. Landing at Rangoon, they moved to Myitkina by rail. They were involved in action against the Kachin uprising in January and February 1915.

### **Mesopotamia (1916-19)**

The 64th Pioneers moved to Basra on their return from Burma. The main tasks they participated in during the campaign in Mesopotamia were constructing flood bunds on the Tigris River, supporting the advance to Kut-al-Amara, and constructing retaining bunds along the river. Thereafter, they were involved in work for the extension of the railway line to Baghdad and constructing bunds on the River Diala. Finally, they were involved in the construction of the railway line to Fellujah. Thereafter, in 1919, they were moved to Persia and located at Kermanshah. Their main task was the construction of the Kermanshah-Hamadan road and garrison duties to protect the line of communication. They returned to India in May 1921, in time to be involved in action against the Moplah Rebellion.

### **The Corps of Madras Pioneers**

In 1929, the Pioneer regiments were taken out of the line infantry and grouped into the Corps of Madras Pioneers (three battalions), the Corps of Bombay Pioneers (five battalions), the Corps of Sikh Pioneers (four battalions), and the Corps of Hazara Pioneers (one



battalion). Being the senior-most, the Madras Pioneers became the 1st Madras Pioneers. Its components were:

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

### **Designations of the Madras Pioneers**

#### **61st King George's Own Pioneers**



- 1758 1st Battalion of Coast Sepoys
- 1769 1st Carnatic Battalion
- 1784 1st Madras Battalion
- 1796 1st Battalion, 1st Regiment of Madras Native Infantry
- 1807 1st Battalion, 24th Regiment of Madras Native Infantry
- 1818 1st Battalion 1st Regiment of Madras Native Infantry
- 1824 1st Regiment of Madras Native Infantry
- 1883 1st Regiment of Madras Native Infantry (Pioneers)
- 1885 1st Regiment of Madras Infantry (Pioneers)
- 1901 1st Madras Pioneers
- 1903 61st Pioneers

- 1906 61st Prince of Wales's Own Pioneers
- 1910 61st King George's Own Pioneers
- 1922 1st Battalion Madras Pioneers, formed from 61st King George's Own Pioneers and 81st Pioneers

### **Battle Honours**

- Carnatic, Mysore, Seringapatam, Seetabuldee, Nagpore, Ava, Pegu, Central India, Afghanistan 1879-80, Burma 1885-87, and China 1900

### **64th Pioneers**



- 1759 5th Battalion of Coast Sepoys
- 1769 5th Carnatic Battalion
- 1770 4th Carnatic Battalion
- 1784 4th Madras Battalion
- 1796 1st Battalion, 4th Regiment of Madras Native Infantry
- 1824 4th Regiment of Madras Native Infantry
- 1883 4th Regiment of Madras Native Infantry (Pioneers)
- 1885 4th Regiment of Madras Infantry (Pioneers)
- 1901 4th Madras Pioneers
- 1903 64th Pioneers
- 1922 2nd Battalion, 1st Madras Pioneers (formed from 61st King George's Own Pioneers, and 81st Pioneers)

### Battle Honours

- Sholinghur, Carnatic, Mysore, Assaye, Afghanistan 1879-80 The Elephant badge superscribed "Assaye".

### 81st Pioneers



- 1786 28th Madras Battalion
- 1796 1st Battalion, 11th Regiment of Madras Native Infantry
- 1824 21st Regiment of Madras Native Infantry
- 1885 21st Regiment of Madras Infantry
- 1891 21st Regiment of Madras Infantry (Pioneers)
- 1901 21st Madras Infantry (Pioneers)
- 1903 81st Pioneers
- 1922 10th (Training) Battalion Madras Pioneers

### Battle Honours

- Mysore, Seringapatam, Nagpore, Afghanistan 1878-80, Burma 1885-87, Tirah, and Punjab Frontier

### Conclusion

During 1897-98, the Madras Pioneers were involved in the Ootacamund Lake Reclamation Project. In 1904, they were given the responsibility for the construction of the Coonoor-Ootacamund Railway, the only rack railway in India, which now has a UNESCO World Heritage status. Construction was completed in 1909. General SM Srinagesh, the 3rd Chief of the Army Staff of the Indian Army, served in the 2nd Battalion of the 1st Madras Pioneers (erstwhile 64th Pioneers) from 14 October 1924, mostly in Burma, until it was disbanded, in 1933 for reasons of economy.



**Wellington Nilgiri Railway, 1908**

The war memorial of the Madras Pioneers is located on the Brigade Road-Residency Road Junction in Bengaluru, built in the memory of the officers, NCOs, and pioneers who laid down their lives during the various wars fought between 1885 and 1917. It is the only memorial that is in a public place in Bengaluru, The memorial is a four sided block and each side is dedicated to a different theatre of war in which the Pioneers fought.

### **Bibliography**

1. 64th Pioneers Regimental Records, 2nd Battalion 1st Madras Pioneers, 1903-1925
2. The Military History of the Madras Engineers and Pioneers, from 1743 Up to the Present Time, Major H. M. Vibart (two volumes) (London: WH Allen & Co., 1883)
3. Baillie-Ki-Paltan: Being a History of the 2nd Battalion, Madras Pioneers 1759-1930, Major HF Murland