

## **India and the Great War : Centenary Commemoration Project - An Update**

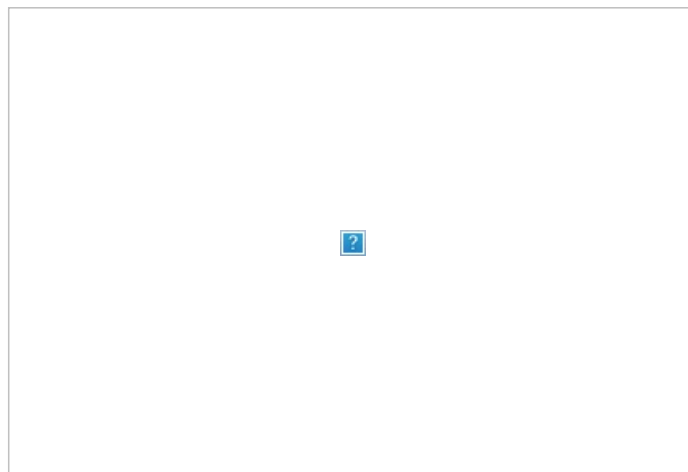
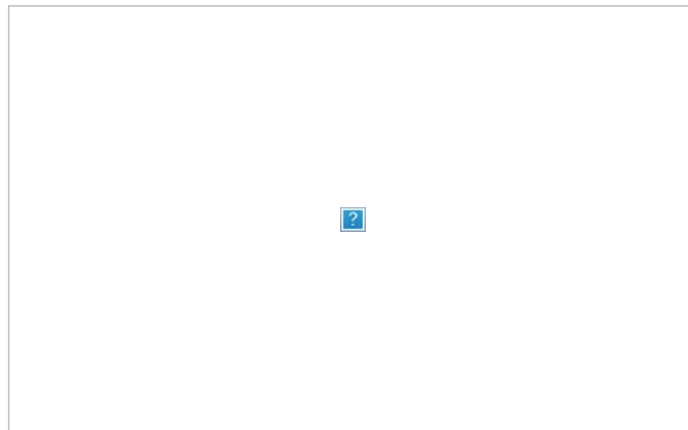
### **Shri Adil Chhina@**

Activities being undertaken as part of the joint USI - MEA 'India and the Great War' centenary commemoration project by the Centre for Armed Forces Historical Research, peaked during the period under review.

A book discussion coinciding with the launch of Vedica Kant's book *If I die here, who will remember me?* India and the First World War was held in the USI auditorium on 30th September. Another panel discussion on India and the Great War was held at the Khushwant Singh Literature Festival at Kasauli on 11th October with Squadron Leader Rana TS Chhina (Retd), Secretary USI CAFHR, Brigadier Brian McCall, British Defence Attaché to India and Captain Amarinder Singh. A unique seminar on Remembering World War I and exploring the future of non-violence was held aboard the Belgian Navy Ship 'Leopold I' in Mumbai on 13th October. The panel consisted of Dominiek Dendooven, Squadron Leader Chhina and Prof Shiv Visvanathan.

Various talks on the subject of India's sterling contribution to the war were given in France and Belgium in the last week of October 2014. On 22nd October, the first programme was organised by the Indian Embassy in Brussels at the Royal Museum of Armed Forces and Military History. A large hall lined with displays of World War I uniforms and weapons from various countries made an appropriate setting for the talks. The speakers of the evening were Squadron Leader Rana Chhina (Retd), Mr Dominiek Dendooven and Brigadier MS Jodha. The chief guest of the event was General Gerard Van Caelenberge, Chief of the Belgian Defence Staff.

In the first ever USI event to be held in Europe, a mirror conference of the one held in March at the USI was organised at the 'In Flanders Fields' Museum in close collaboration with King's College, London in Ypres. This conference is part of the EU sponsored Humanities in the European Research Area (HERA) Joint Research Programme, Cultural exchange in a time of global conflict: Colonials, Neutrals and Belligerents during the First World War. It was a two-day event in the small and picturesque town of Ypres that had been destroyed completely a 100 years ago and rebuilt to what it had looked before the war began.



The first day, talks were given by the speakers on various aspects of the war. In the evening, a special Last Post ceremony was conducted for the Indian High Commission at the Menin Gate Memorial. Ambassador Manjeev Puri and Squadron Leader Chhina laid wreaths at the memorial. The next day, the conference participants were taken on a guided bus tour of the Western Front to various spots where the Indian Army had fought. The tour was conducted by Mr Tom Donovan and Mr Simon Doherty authors of the USI - UK sponsored battlefield guide of the Indian Army on the Western Front. The tour ended in a small village where a local French gentleman Mr Dominique Faivre had set up an exhibition on the Indian Army of the Western Front which included a visual exhibition accompanied by artefacts which Mr Favre had collected over the years from the former battle fields in and around the area. At the end of the day, the participants were graciously hosted by the owner of the Chateau La Peyrouse in Saint Venant. The chateau had been the headquarters of the Indian Corps fighting in France and Flanders. On 27th October another talk on the subject was delivered by Squadron Leader Chhina at the Indian Embassy in Paris, France.

The big event of the year for the project was held on 30th October. A joint reception was hosted by the USI

and the British High Commission at the residence of the High Commissioner Sir James Bevan, KCMG. The USI-CAFHR team had painstakingly put together an exhibition at the residence in the lawn area comprising twenty-five large storyboards, which gave visitors a broad overview of the war with striking images gathered from archives across the globe. In addition to the storyboards, the High Commission staff had set up large TV screens around the lawn and on stage which showed footage of Indian troops from the war. The Royal Air Force band was specially flown in and along with the Indian Air Force band played a wide range of music through the evening.

Prior to the main event, a preliminary event was held at 1745 hours at which a total of 31 war diaries were presented by Lieutenant General PK Singh, PVSM, AVSM (Retd), Director USI to retired Colonels/senior officers of the descendant regiments that had fought on the Western Front in WW I. These war diaries had been specially printed and bound in full leather with regimental crests embossed in gilt. This was followed by the joint release, by Ambassador Navtej Sarna, representing the Ministry of External Affairs, and the UK Secretary of State for Defence Rt Hon Michael Fallon, MP, of the coffee table book *India and the First World War, 1914-1918* authored by Squadron Leader Rana Chhina, and a battlefield guide book titled *The Indian Corps on the Western Front: A Handbook and Battlefield Guide* by Tom Donovan and Simon Dohortey. The battlefield guide was jointly sponsored by the USI and the UK and will fill a void in the existing literature on the subject. This preliminary event concluded with a vote of thanks given by Lieutenant General PK Singh, PVSM, AVSM (Retd), Director USI.

The main event was well received and the crowd in the lawn swelled to about a 1000 guests. Many descendants of WW I veterans attended the event, several of them had flown in from across the country and many of them hailed from small towns and villages. Many descendants were proudly wearing the medals of their ancestors on the right side of their chest. This old tradition/custom to wear the medals of an ancestor on the right side of the chest to honour them at special commemorative events was specially revived for the event. In Europe it is still followed and one can see many descendants, even small children wearing the medals of their forefathers proudly on Remembrance Day ceremonies every year. In India the custom has been largely forgotten, in part because there has been very little public space for the families of veterans to remember and honour their forefathers.

At 1900 hours, the Defence Minister Shri Arun Jaitley arrived with the COAS, General Dalbir Singh, PVSM, UYSM, AVSM, VSM, ADC. A little later the UK Secretary of State for Defence, Rt Hon Michael Fallon addressed all present where he mentioned that his grandfather, Captain Harold Smith, was part of the Indian Army Reserve of Officers and served with the 1st Sappers and Miners, Indian Army. When the war broke out he sailed in 1914 from Mumbai with the Indian Expeditionary Force 'D' to Mesopotamia. Mr Fallon then went on to unveil the six Victoria Cross memorial markers to Indian recipients one by one. The markers, which were designed by Mr Snehanshu Mukherjee and Squadron Leader Chhina consist of a four sided white sandstone block with inscription on all four faces. These will subsequently be installed at an appropriate place in the States from where those six brave men hailed. He then presented Shri Arun Jaitley with a digital drive containing softcopies of all the Indian Army western front War Diaries to be given to the National Archives of India. These war diaries which were held at the UK National Archives had been specially digitised as a part of the Indo - UK centenary commemoration project. Shri Arun Jaitley then made a notable extempore speech in which he highlighted the need to commemorate the sacrifices of Indian soldiers and said that an official history of the Great War in particular and all wars before and after Independence needs to be undertaken in both print and celluloid form. This announcement was greatly welcomed by the assembled guests and the retired military fraternity in particular.

The event was a huge success and while departing, all guests were handed a copy of the coffee table book released earlier in the evening and a specially commissioned graphic novel - *India in World War I; An Illustrated Story* by Major General Ian Cardozo AVSM, SM (Retd) and Rishi Kumar.

A special programme was conducted by the BBC as part of the BBC World Service show *The War that changed the World: India and Imperialism* on 1st November at the India International Centre, New Delhi. The episode was aired on 8 Nov 2014. The programme engaged with the audience and included them in the discussion. Dr Shashi Tharoor also presented his essay on India and World War I on the show. The programme included special inputs and references to the USI's efforts in highlighting India's contribution in WW I.

Finally, Prime Minister Narendra Modi visited Australia in November and made a trip to the Australian War Memorial where he spoke of Indians and Anzacs fighting shoulder-to-shoulder in Gallipoli in 1915 to highlight the historic ties between the two countries. He also made a presentation of a replica of a First World War trophy belonging to the Sikh Regiment to Australian PM Tony Abbott. The replica has the miniature statue of Jemadar Man Singh of 14 King George's Own Ferozepore Sikhs lobbing a jam-tin grenade at the enemy in Gallipoli. The suggestion to make use of this particularly significant memento was given by USI-CAFHR to the Prime Minister's office which was graciously accepted by them.

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Journal of the United Service Institution of India, Vol. CXLIV, No. 598, October-December 2014.