

India and the Great War Centenary Commemoration Project - An Update

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During the period under review (Apr-Jun 2015) the Centre for Armed Forces Historical Research has continued with its efforts to highlight the role of India in the First World War through the joint MEA-USI India and the Great War Centenary Commemoration Project. Towards this end the Centre has completed publication of the following books which provide a broad overview of the Indian contribution from a variety of perspectives:

- (a) A large and well-illustrated Coffee Table Book titled India and the Great War by Sqn Ldr Rana TS Chhina (Retd).
- (b) A boxed set of eight illustrated booklets on the theme 'India and the Great War'. The subjects/authors of the individual booklets are :
 - (i) Overview by Sqn Ldr Rana TS Chhina (Retd)
 - (ii) France and Flanders by Tom Donovan
 - (iii) Gallipoli by Sqn Ldr Rana TS Chhina (Retd)
 - (iv) Mesopotamia by Harry Fecitt
 - (v) Egypt and Palestine by Harry Fecitt
 - (vi) East Africa by Harry Fecitt
 - (vii) Indian State Forces by Tony McClenaghan
 - (viii) Indian VCs 1914-18 by Adil Chhina

Another illustrated Coffee Table Book titled Les Hindous: The Indian Army on the Western Front is in the pipeline and will be published in the next couple of months. All these publications are being sent by MEA to Indian missions abroad for onward distribution. Copies are also available on payment from the USI. The publications are unique for the use of rare period images showing Indian soldiers and airmen in action in different theatres of the war. Many of these images have been sourced from various archives and collections and never been seen before, greatly adding to the value of the publications.

An event commemorating the Centenary of the Gallipoli Campaign was organised at the Salar Jang Museum by the Turkish Consulate in Hyderabad in collaboration with INTACH-Hyderabad on 24 March 2015, represented by Mr Murat Omeroglu and Mrs Anuradha Reddy, respectively. The event was well attended by the local public. Papers were presented by Prof Kahraman Sakul, a Turkish historian and Sqn Ldr Rana Chhina (Retd). The chief guest on the occasion was Maj Gen RK Jagga, VSM, GOC Bison Div, whose presence was greatly appreciated by the convenors.

Subsequently, in April, a seminar to mark '100 Years of the Use of Chemical Weapons' was jointly organised by the USI and the Embassy of Belgium, New Delhi on 24 April 2015.

A hundred years ago, in Belgium, the first mass use of asphyxiating gas by the Germans during the Second battle of Ypres (22 April 1915) marked the advent of the use of chemical weapons in warfare. Hence, weapons of mass destruction were born on the Western Front in the First World War. The first casualties at Ypres were mainly French troops in the path of the chlorine gas cloud. They suffered nearly 6000 casualties, many of whom died within minutes from asphyxiation and tissue damage in the lungs, while many were blinded, as the gas formed hypochlorous acid when combined with water, destroying moist tissues such as eyes and lungs. On 25 April 1915, the Indian Corps arrived in the Ypres Salient by forced marches from the part of the line held by them across the Belgian border in Northern France. They were used to plug the gaping holes in the front line caused by the German gas attacks and to launch counter attacks to regain the lost ground. They also became casualties of chemical warfare when the gas canisters were reopened by the Germans on 26 April. On this day, Jemadar Mir Dast, 55th Coke's Rifles, attached to the 57th Wilde's Rifles (FF) won the Victoria Cross for supreme gallantry in action.

Today, both India and Belgium are signatories to the Chemical Weapons Convention and the commitment of both nations to chemical disarmament is widely acknowledged. The seminar brought together leading international experts to examine both the historical and contemporary aspects of the use of chemical weapons in warfare. The seminar's inaugural address was given by Ambassador Navtej Sarna, Secretary (West), Ministry of External Affairs. The Ambassador noted how he had not envisaged that the WWI Commemoration Project would be as big as it had become. This was followed by the keynote address given by HE Mr Jan Luykx, Ambassador of Belgium, where he spoke of Indo-Belgian ties and acknowledged the role of Indian soldiers in defending Belgian soil during the war.

The seminar was conducted in two sessions, chaired by Lt Gen PK Singh, PVSM, AVSM (Retd), Director USI. The first session dealt with the Indian and Belgian perspectives of the Great War in Flanders. The first speaker was Sqn Ldr Rana Chhina (Retd), Secretary and Editor, USI-CAFHR who gave an overview of India and the First World War with special reference to Indian troops in Belgium. This acquainted the audience with the background of what was to follow as part of the seminar's theme. The second speaker in the session was Mr Dominiek Dendooven from the In Flander's Fields Museum, Ieper, and he spoke about the Belgian perspective of the Great War, again with a special emphasis on Indian soldiers in Belgium.

The second session dealt with Chemical Weapons Warfare and the impact of these weapons in the contemporary world. The session started with a paper by Gp Capt Ajay Lele (Retd), Fellow, Institute of Defence Studies and Analyses

(IDSA) where he spoke on the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC) and the mechanism of the convention since beginning till the present. The second talk was presented by Cdr Glen Nolett, officer commanding the bomb disposal unit in the Belgian Army. He gave an overview of the problem of unexploded chemical ammunition from the First World War, and the working of the bomb disposal unit in great detail. He took all present for the seminar by surprise when he stated that well over a 100 tonnes of unexploded ordnance from the First World War are still unearthed every year to this day from Belgian soil. The third talk of the session was presented by Col (Dr) Can Akdogan (Retd), Regional Delegate to Armed and Security Forces, International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC). He gave an overview of the Geneva Conventions, legal constraints of war, and the role of ICRC during the Great War. The Valedictory Address was given by Dr GS Sandhu, IAS, Chairman, National Authority, Chemical Weapons Convention, Government of India.

In addition to the seminar, a joint USI-Belgian Embassy reception was held at the Belgian Ambassador's residence in New Delhi on the evening of the same day. This reception showcased an exhibition depicting the role of Indian and Belgian soldiers during the Great War and was curated by the USI-CAFHR team. Another exhibition on the Belgian experience of the war was also simultaneously displayed.

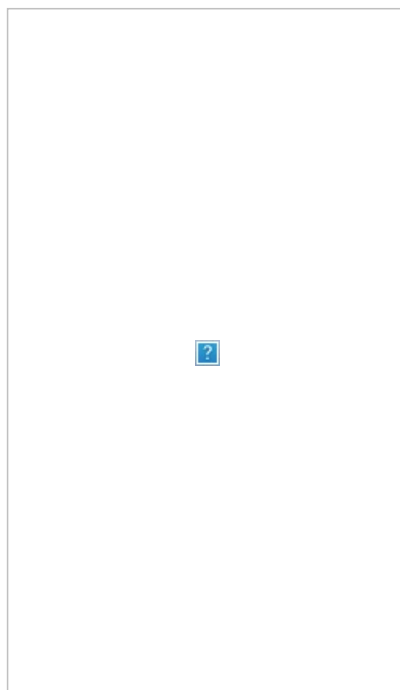
On the same day in the evening before the reception at the Belgian Ambassador's residence, a joint USI-Australian High Commission exhibition 'Gallipoli One Hundred' was inaugurated at the Australian High Commission in New Delhi to commemorate the Centenary of the landings at Gallipoli, in which the Indians and ANZACs fought side by side as comrades in arms. The exhibition had a central element - 'Camera on Gallipoli' accompanied by a supplementary exhibition - 'Indians and ANZACs' which was curated by Sqn Ldr Rana TS Chhina (Retd) and Prof Peter Stanley. The New Zealand High Commission was an active partner in these ANZAC Day commemorative activities.

A dawn service was held on 25th April hosted by the High Commissions of New Zealand and Australia at the Delhi War Cemetery, Brar Square, Delhi Cantt. This dawn service is held every year to commemorate the ANZAC contribution at Gallipoli but for the first time, the Indian participation was officially recognised and commemorated as well. The dawn service was followed by a 'Gunfire Breakfast' on the lawns at the rear of the Australian High Commissioner's residence where the 'Indians and ANZACs' photo exhibition was again prominently displayed.

A lecture was given by Sqn Ldr Rana Chhina (Retd) at the National Archives of India (NAI) on 29 May 2015. The subject of his lecture was: First World War: Records, Memory and Memorialisation. The talk was well received and well attended. This was part of a lecture series being organised by the NAI on the occasion of their 125th Foundation Year celebrations.

On 17th June 2015, a joint USI-New Zealand wreath laying ceremony was organised at the India Gate at 0900hrs. The New Zealand Chief of Naval Staff Rear Admiral Jack Steer laid a wreath on behalf of his country to pay homage to the Indian soldiers who lost their lives in the First World War. A wreath was laid by Maj Gen PJS Sandhu (Retd), Deputy Director and Editor on behalf of the USI. General Sandhu wore his uniform for this occasion and descendants of WWI veterans were wearing the medals of their ancestors on the right side. A wreath was also laid by Maj Gen Ian Cardozo, AVSM, SM (Retd) and Sqn Ldr Rana Chhina (Retd) on behalf of the Indian veterans. The last post was played by Naval buglers. Rear Admiral Steer in his impromptu remarks to the gathering after the ceremony emphasised the importance of the event and recalled the sacrifices made by Indian and New Zealand soldiers at Gallipoli a century ago.

In the forthcoming months, the Centre will participate in a conference at the University of the Fraser Valley in British Columbia, Canada, titled 'India and the Great War: Memory and Memorialisation' being held from 30 Sep to 02 Oct 2015. It will also present a paper on the Indian involvement in Gallipoli at a conference at Cannakale University in Turkey on 14 Nov 2015. Papers will also be presented at the Joint USI-Royal Pavilion Brighton conference titled 'Voices of India: The First World War' in the UK on 21 Nov 2015. The first of the India and the Great War theatre histories 'Die in Battle, Do not Despair: The Indians on Gallipoli, 1915' by Prof Peter Stanley, will also be released at a function being organised at the USI in December 2015.





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