

"In the Line of Duty" : Remembering India's Fallen in The World Wars

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India and her soldiers have made seminal contributions to the cause of stability and security in the world across the last century, in terms of material, personnel and fighting capability, at great cost to the country and her citizens. In the two world wars, India contributed more than four million men under arms, all of whom were volunteers, with 161,439 members of the Indian Armed Forces laying down their lives in the line of duty.¹ It is appropriate, therefore, for their sacrifices to be remembered and memory honoured. India has regularly remembered her soldiers at various memorials set-up in their honour, including those who served and fell in the two World Wars. Commemoration of the latter has been done regularly as part of the annual Commonwealth Remembrance Day ceremony and also on other occasions in various parts of the world. The memorials commemorating fallen Indian troops span 59 countries, extending from the Pacific rim to the Atlantic coast, marking the massive area of operations undertaken by Indian forces and honouring their deeds of valour. These include the Tehran Commonwealth War Cemetery and Memorial, where 3,464 members of the Indian Armed Forces are commemorated. These soldiers laid down their lives in the course of duty whilst serving in the Iran sector in the First and Second World Wars. A dedicated 'Indian Remembrance Day' was held at the Tehran Memorial on 27th October 2005 to honour these soldiers, coinciding with the Indian 'Infantry Day' as the vast majority of the fallen were from the Infantry. To complete the homage to their memory, it is important to remember their role and sacrifice as part of the overall role and contribution of the Indian Armed Forces in the two world wars.

Dual Perspective of India's Involvement in the World Wars

The issue of remembering our fallen has at times given rise to mixed views when it comes to the pre-Independence 'colonial' period, centered on whether the Indians who served and fought in

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the two world wars did so in India's core interests or were, in a sense, furthering the interests of the colonial power. The issue was, and perhaps will always remain, debatable to some extent. But, the duality above needs to be recognised as being inherent in and characteristic of India's growth and evolution as a modern, democratic power, and accordingly viewed through the lenses of prevailing political perceptions, realities and also contradictions, as well as the military cultural ethos of India. In the First World War, in contrast to the call of Mrs Annie Besant for opposing the war, none other than Mahatma Gandhi, the apostle of non-violence, disagreed. In fact, he raised a Volunteer Field Ambulance Corps to serve in the European battlefields, looking upon it as the duty of a citizen of a larger nation under war.²

In the Second World War, Pandit Nehru and the Indian National Congress held unequivocal views in opposition to Nazism, Fascism and Militarism. They proffered sympathy on the side of democracy and freedom, and maintained their readiness to support the Allies in the war, but under conditions of sovereignty, so as to resolve the moral dilemma of Indian forces fighting for world freedom and democracy even whilst India herself remained a colony.³ Although such a political settlement could not be reached during the period of war, it did not alter their core views. Nor does it seem to have led to efforts by them to curtail or counter India's burgeoning contribution to the War, which they could presumably have done but evidently chose not to, and instead they chose a deliberate policy of non-embarrassment.⁴ In fact, at key moments when the war seemed to be going the worst for the Allies, such as after Dunkirk and onset of the Japanese advance to India's sea and land borders, the Indian leadership called off planned civil disobedience movements so as not to jeopardise the war effort, even as they continued with other political projections of India's case.⁵ This duality of approach no doubt harboured inherent contradictions, but these are integral to India's history, role and evolution, which were also seen in India becoming a founder member of the United Nations in 1945, even though still a colony, in evident recognition of its significant role and contribution to the War.

The fact is that, all Indians who served in the Indian Armed Forces in the two world wars were volunteers. They were part of the political evolution of India, on the one hand, and personification

of the concept of duty on the other hand, which is embodied in Indian cultural and military ethos and encapsulated in the Holy Gita. Mahatma Gandhi once wrote of soldiers that, "like Arjuna, they went to the battlefield, because it was their duty."⁶ The military contribution of India's Armed Forces was central to the success of the Allies and defeat of Fascism, Nazism and Militarism. In reviewing the role and contribution of the Indian Armed Forces in the two world wars and sacrifices made in the line of duty, there is a need to look beyond the above duality per se towards their seminal contribution to freedom, democracy, equality, peace and stability – issues which were at the time, and remain to date, at the core of India's political philosophy.

Indian Armed Forces in the First World War

In the First World War, India contributed over 1,400,000 volunteers to the Indian Army,⁷ with nearly 75,000 laying down their lives in the course of war.⁸ The Indian Army saw action in August 1914 in the former German colonies in China, played a vital part in the first critical battles of 1914-15 in France and Flanders, formed the major part of the forces in the war in Mesopotamia, Egypt and Palestine, and fought in Gallipoli, East Africa and Salonica.⁹ Two Indian infantry divisions, the 3rd Lahore Division and the 7th Meerut Division, covered themselves with glory in France and Flanders, especially at the Battles of Neuve-Chapelle and Ypres in spite of enormous casualties that left some battalions with only a quarter of their strength after the battle. Of the courage of Indian troops, a poignant tribute came from a German soldier in his letter published in the *Frankfurter Zeitung* where he said¹⁰:-

"At a hundred metres we opened a destructive fire which mowed down hundreds but in spite of that others advanced. In no time they were in our trenches ... and with butt ends, bayonets, swords and daggers we fought each other..."

The Indian forces in Mesopotamia swelled to over half a million troops and fought a long and difficult campaign, which claimed almost 40,000 Indian lives.¹¹ In Egypt and Palestine, a force of nearly 150,000 Indians played a major part in defence of the Suez Canal (1915-16) and final phase of the Palestine campaign (Sep-Oct 1918). Indian forces took part in the ill-fated Gallipoli campaign and in the assault on Sari Bair (Aug 1915), India's 1/6th Gurkha

Rifles were the only troops to reach the summit of the ridge.¹² Indian forces also campaigned in East Africa. The Indian Army was mostly deployed overseas in the various campaigns of the First World War and, by the end of the war, about 1.1 million Indians had served overseas, making a seminal contribution to the successful conclusion of the war.¹³

Indian Armed Forces in the Second World War

In the Second World War, India contributed a total of 2,786,764 volunteers to the Indian Armed Forces¹⁴, of which nearly 90,000 laid down their lives.¹⁵ This Indian Army was the largest volunteer Army the world has ever seen, to date, with an active strength during the War of nearly 2.5 million men.¹⁶ It participated in the 1940 campaign in Europe, culminating in the evacuation at Dunkirk. Divisions of the Indian Army won lasting renown in the campaigns in North Africa, in the Western Desert, Eritrea and Ethiopia, in the Middle East, Italy, Greece, and in Burma and the Far East.¹⁷

In the critical period of the North African campaign (1942-43), six of the fourteen Allied Divisions were Indian and 2,500 Indians laid down their lives in the North and East African campaigns.¹⁸ In the Italian campaign (1943-45), Indian divisions constituted half the Commonwealth force and lost 5,500 troops.¹⁹ In the Burma and South East Asia sectors, Indian forces were the mainstay of defence against the Japanese advance. More than 16,000 Indian soldiers were sacrificed in the Malay campaign (1941-42), and more than 25,000 Indian soldiers laid down their lives in the famous turn-around of 'defeat into victory' in the second Burma campaign and subsequent liberation of SE Asia (1944-45).²⁰

The large Indian Army was ably supported by the fledgling Indian Navy and Indian Air Force. The Indian Navy drew 30,572 volunteers during the war, growing from a force of 1,600 at the start.²¹ It made significant contributions in actions in the Indian and Atlantic Oceans, Mediterranean Sea, Red Sea, Bay of Bengal and in combined operations off Sicily and Burma.²² The Indian merchant marine provided essential support through transportation of forces and logistic supplies. The Indian Air Force, which joined the Second World War with only 200 personnel, drew another 52,845 volunteers during the war.²³ Indian officers also served with the Royal Air Force, besides the above. The IAF made seminal contribution in defence of the Burma front, and its most significant operation was

against the Japanese siege of Imphal, where a crucial role was played by the IAF's No. 1 Squadron (commanded by then Sqn Ldr Arjan Singh, later IAF Chief and present Marshal of the IAF).²⁴ It was also the IAF's newly created Coastal Defence Flight that detected the sailing of the Japanese Fleet into the Bay of Bengal in 1942, an event that has been considered by some, including then British PM Winston Churchill, as a turning point in the World War.²⁵

Gallantry Awards

The hard-fought campaigns and India's large contribution therein was aptly reflected by the large numbers of gallantry awards won by members of its Armed Forces. These total 15,500 gallantry awards of different categories in the two World Wars, including 143 Victoria Crosses. These were won by the combined British and Indian members of the Indian Armed Forces. The Indian members themselves accounted for 8,676 gallantry awards, as follows (in their order of precedence)²⁶ :-

Victoria Cross	-	39.
George Cross	-	7.
Distinguished Service Order	-	18.
Indian Order of Merit	-	1467.
Distinguished Service Cross	-	4.
Military Cross	-	911.
Distinguished Flying Cross	-	23.
Indian Distinguished Service Medal	-	4406.
Distinguished Service Medal	-	28.
Military Medal	-	1773.

Indian Armed Forces Deployed in Iran

Indian Army units were first deployed to Iran (then Persia) in 1911-12,²⁷ as a deterrent force to safeguard Iran's territorial integrity and independence against external aggression. Later, with the onset of the First World War, the Indian Army was deployed to Iran in January 1915 near Ahvaz, starting with the 7th Rajputs and the

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4th Rajputs.²⁸ The Indian Armed Forces carried out operations in Ahwaz, Bushehr, Bandar Abbas, Kerman, Yazd, Isfahan, Shiraz, Baluchistan, Makran coast, Azerbaijan, and in the Caspian region. In the Baluchistan sector, Indian troops were deployed to protect the line of communication with India. Indian forces remained deployed in Iran until 1924,²⁹ and took part in various other operations after World War I for assisting security and order. The total losses of the Indian forces in all the above operations, and who have been commemorated in the Tehran Memorial, are 3,446.³⁰

The various forces of the Indian Army deployed to Iran during the War, and whose members have been commemorated in the Tehran Memorial, comprise the following³¹:-

Infantry Regiments (in alphabetical order)

- 124th, 126th, 127th and 129th **Baluchistan Infantry.**
- 1st and 1/3rd **Brahmans.**
- 79th and 88th **Carnatic Infantry.**
- 2/39th and 3/39th **Garhwal Rifles.**
- 2nd, 4th and 6th **Gurkhas.**
- 5th, 42nd (Deoli), 43rd (Erinpura), 44th (Merwara), 55th, 57th, 83rd (Wallajahbad), 108th and 113th **Infantry.**
- 6th and 10th **Jats.**
- 94th, 95th, 96th (Berar), 97th (Deccan), and 98th **Infantry**³².
- 117th **Marathas.**
- 15th, 19th, 20th, 21st, 22nd, 24th, 25th, 26th, 31st, 62nd, 66th, 67th, 71st, 72nd, 74th, 76th, 82nd, 84th, 89th **Punjabis.**
- 120th and 122nd **Rajputana Rifles.**
- 2nd, 4th, 7th, 8th and 16th (Lucknow) **Rajputs.**
- 14th, 36th, 51st and 54th **Sikhs.**

Cavalry and Lancer Regiments

- 11th Lancers (Probyn's Horse), 12th Cavalry, 13th Lancers (Watson's Horse), 15th Lancers (Multanis), 17th Cavalry, 21st Cavalry (Daly's Horse), 22nd Cavalry (Sam Browne's), 26th

Cavalry, 27th Cavalry, 28th Cavalry, 33rd Cavalry, 34th (Poona Horse), 36th (Jacob's Horse), 37th Lancers (Baluch Horse), 39th (Central India Horse), 40th Cavalry, 41st Cavalry, 42nd Cavalry, and the Gwalior Lancers.

Artillery Regiments

- **Indian Mountain Artillery**, including 2nd, 21st, 22nd, 23rd, 25th, 26th, 28th, 30th, 31st, 32nd, 33rd, 35th and 36th Mountain Batteries, and 1st **Kashmir Mtn Artillery**.

Sappers and Pioneers

- 23rd (Sikh), 64th, 106th (Hazara), 107th and 128th **Pioneers**.
- 1st, 2nd and 3rd **Sappers**.

Support Services

- Units of the **Supply, Ordnance and Transport Corps**.
- Units of the Army **Medical and Veterinary Corps**.
- Units of **Military Police**.
- Units of the **Indian Signal Corps**.

In the Second World War, Indian Armed Forces were deployed to Iran as part of the PAI FORCE, to guard against an Axis threat from Anatolia or through the Caucasus.³³ The Allied strategy defined India-Iran-Iraq-Egypt region as the 'Central Bastion', which had to be defended from the east, north and west. India was to be the arsenal for this bastion. If the Central Bastion were to have been lost, the only option for the Allies would have been to fall back on controlling the sea in the Indian Ocean and the Atlantic Ocean.³⁴

The 24th Indian Infantry Brigade led the advance into Iran, landing at Abadan as part of a seaborne force on 25th August 1941.³⁵ The 18th Infantry Brigade simultaneously advanced across the desert from the Basra sector to arrive at Khorramshahr on 25th August 1941, and thence made a thrust towards Ahvaz, along with the 25th Indian Infantry Brigade.³⁶ The 21st Indian Infantry Brigade moved from Khanaqin to Karind on 25th – 27th August 1941, as part of the thrust to Kemlanshah.³⁷ The resultant truce and ensuing Anglo-Soviet-Iranian Treaty of Alliance allowed the Iranian sector to become one of the principal routes of aid to the Soviet Union,

which had become a member of the Grand Alliance against the fascist Axis powers, during the Second World War.³⁸ Two members of the Royal Indian Army Service Corps TPT Companies, engaged in the hazardous 'Aid to Russia' convoys, were awarded the Soviet Order of the Red Star.³⁹ Indian forces lost 18 personnel in these operations, who have been commemorated at the Tehran Memorial.⁴⁰

A Matter of Honour

In the overall context of the two world wars, and the massive contribution of the Indian Armed Forces therein, the Iran sector saw relatively lesser action. However, the role played by the soldiers was vital to the overall war effort, and a large number of them lost their lives in the process. As the Commonwealth War Graves Commission Booklet on India's War Dead notes,⁴¹

Every man who served in the Armed Forces of India was a volunteer, and each did so as a matter of honour. Those who died had accepted a duty and were faithful unto death. Of no man can more be said than this.

Post World War II Contribution

The Indian Armed Forces have continued in the post-World War II era to contribute substantially to international peace and security. India is among the longest serving and largest troop contributors to UN Peacekeeping activities, and has had an excellent record of performance therein. Indian forces have taken part in 41 of the total 62 UN peacekeeping operations, contributing more than 85,000 personnel to date. In these operations, 116 Indian soldiers have made the supreme sacrifice in the line of duty and have been awarded the 'Dag Hammarskjöld' Medals.⁴² Currently, also, Indian Armed Forces are participating in nine of the ongoing 16 UN peacekeeping operations world-wide, with about 6,500 personnel deployed.⁴³

In Context - Remembering the Fallen

India's Armed Forces have a proud military record and history of contributing to the cause of international peace and stability, which has been done in accordance with India's core beliefs, and this record extends back into the two world wars. Many of its members laid down their lives in the line of duty. In context, these

soldiers discharged their duty as laid down in the precepts enshrined in the Holy Gita. In remembering them and their deeds, we both honour their sacrifice and endorse the precepts of Duty, and acknowledge their living by, and ultimately laying down their lives by the pledge enunciated by Guru Govind Singh, when he took up arms against oppression:

Grant me, O Lord, this boon, that I may not falter in doing good. That I may entertain no fear of the enemy when engaged with him in battle. And that I may always be sure of my victory. May my mind be trained in the desire to dwell upon thy goodness. And, when the last moment of my life should arrive, may I die in the thick of battle.

Notes

1. Figures provided by the Commonwealth War Graves Commission (CWGC), Berkshire, UK.
2. Robert Payne, *The Life and Death of Mahatma Gandhi* (New Delhi, Rupa & Co, 1997), pp 277-278.
3. Jawaharlal Nehru, *The Discovery of India* (New Delhi, Jawaharlal Nehru Memorial Fund, 1981), pp 422-423, 426-427.
4. *Ibid*, p. 472.
5. *Ibid*, pp. 435, 442, 451.
6. Robert Payne, n. 2, p. 121.
7. *India and the Commonwealth War Graves Commission*, (Berkshire, CWGC. Apr 2002), p. 2.
8. As per data provided by the CWGC *ibid* and also the Centre for Armed Forces Historical Research (CAFHR), United Service Institution (USI) of India, New Delhi.
9. Commonwealth War Graves Commission (CWGC). 'Commemoration of the War Dead of Undivided India 1914-18 and 1939-45' (Berkshire: CWGC), p.2.
10. Philip Mason, *A Matter of Honour* (Harrnondsworth, Penguin Books, 1974) p. 413
11. *India and the CWGC*, n. 7., p. 3.
12. *Ibid*.
13. *Ibid*.

14. Dr Nandan Prasad, 'Expansion of the Armed Forces and Defence Organisation 1939-45', Appendices 15 and 16, in '*Official History of the Indian Armed Forces In the Second World War*', Fourth Volume, Edited Dr Bisheshwar Prasad (New Delhi: Combined Inter-Services Historical Section India & Pakistan, 1956).
15. CWGC, Op Cit, n.4.
16. *Official History of the Indian Armed Forces In the Second World War*, Op Cit.
17. *Ibid.*
18. *Ibid*, p.4.
19. *Ibid.*
20. *Ibid.*
21. *Ibid.*
22. *Ibid.*
23. *Ibid.*
24. Inputs provided by the Centre for Air Power Studies (CAPS), New Delhi
25. *Ibid.*
26. Data from CAFHR, USI, New Delhi. Op Cit. The Order of Precedence noted is from the Indian Army Order 752/1947, provided courtesy CAFHR
27. R Ernest Dupuy and Trevor N Dupuy, *The Encyclopedia of Military History: from 3500 BC to the Present* (London, Macdonald, 1970) p 1007 This is also endorsed by some engravings at the Persepolis site, near Shiraz, marking the presence of Sikh troops, Central India Horse, etc in this period.
28. CWGC, Tehran Memorial Booklet. p.1
29. CWGC Booklet *Op Cit*, n.15, p.4
30. As per data provided by the CWGC
31. As per names and units inscribed at the Tehran Memorial
32. As per inputs from Brig PK Saxena, former Commandant of the Kumaon Regimental Centre, these regiments were later formed into the Kumoan Regt.

33. Compiled from inputs provided by the CAFHR, USI of India. New Delhi
34. Philip Mason, *Op Cit.*, note 4, p. 474-5
35. Inputs provided by CAFHR, USI of India. New Delhi.
36. *Ibid.*
37. *Ibid.*
38. *Ibid.*
39. *Ibid.*
40. *Ibid.*
41. CWGC, *Op Cit*, p.2.
42. Inputs provided by the Centre for UNPK, USI. New Delhi.
43. *Ibid.*