Introduction

Indian Expeditionary Force A

The thirty-six red London buses bore advertisements for Buchanan's 'Black & White' Scotch whisky, Carter's Little Liver Pills and Glaxo baby food. They were trundling along an unpaved road in Belgian Flanders, in the late morning of 22 October 1914. They carried two regiments of the British imperial Indian army, the 57th Wilde's Rifles (Frontier Force) and the 129th Baluchis; in their wake were several small Indian carts, drawn by mules with Punjabi drivers, and laden with rifle ammunition, cooking pots and other supplies.[1] By the day's end, Wilde's Rifles, the 129th and other Indian regiments had joined the Allied line at the First Battle of Ypres. Having sailed from Karachi eights weeks earlier, they were the vanguard of Indian Expeditionary Force A (IEFA). This had been summoned by the Cabinet at 10 Downing Street to bolster the British Expeditionary Force (BEF), and it was to fight on the western front up to February 1918.

India in fact provided seven overseas expeditionary forces for the British war effort.[2] Besides IEFA, there were IEFs B and C to East Africa, D to Mesopotamia, E and F to Egypt, and G to Gallipoli. They were all originally made up of pre-war Indian and British army units of the Army in India, the imperial garrison of the subcontinent. IEFA blended into the BEF, and did not fight as a discrete entity. Of its combatant units, the Indian contained a total of 85,000 Indian troops under 1,500 British officers, and the British 17,000 officers and men; in direct support of both it had 26,000 Indian non-combatants.[3] This book is a military

[1] G. Corrigan, *Sepoys in the Trenches* (Staplehurst: Spellmount, 1999), pp. 54–55; J. Edmonds (ed.), *Military Operations, France and Belgium*, 14 vols. (London: Macmillan, 1922–48), 1915, vol. 1, p. 182; A. Home, *The Diary of a World War I Cavalry Officer* (Tunbridge Wells: Costello, 1985), p. 32.

[2] 'India' as in British India, covering what became independent India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Burma.

[3] War Office (ed.), *Statistics of the Military Effort of the British Empire during the Great War, 1914–1920* (London: HMSO, 1922), p. 777.

history of IEFA, with a focus on the Indian army. Its chief concerns are threefold. First, tactics: the fighting ways of lower-level formations including battalions, companies and platoons. Second, operations: the battle-handling of higher-level fighting formations, such as divisions and army corps, by senior commanders and their staffs. And third, administration: the activities of transport, medical and other non-combatant support services that help to put fighting forces in the field and maintain them there.

On the eve of war in 1914, the Indian army had a grand total of 190,140 combatants, accounting for three-quarters of the Army in India. It was led by its own British officer corps of 2,600 active members and 40 reservists. The majority of them had been born in the British Isles, into middle-class families of English clergymen, Scottish small businessmen or minor Anglo-Irish landlords. Most of the others had been born in India, into similar families, albeit ones likelier to have traditions of serving the imperial mission there. They were all attracted to the subcontinent as a land of career opportunities and living standards that their family backgrounds, for want of money or connections, denied them in Britain. Further, they took it for granted that they should serve in India because they possessed an inherent ability to lead 'native' soldiers better than any 'native' could. They perceived in themselves a certain character – a supreme combination of incorruptibility, intelligence, fairness and other leadership traits – supposedly unique to their Anglo-Saxon race. To preserve their officer corps' 'natural' qualities, membership was limited to men of British and all-white family; 'Anglo-Indians', who had one white European parent and one Indian parent or grandparent, were not welcome.[4]

The Indian army's active Indian soldiers totalled 152,500, and its Indian reservists 35,000.[5] They were not ethnically 'Indian' so much as south Asian, but were commonly known as 'Indian' (as this book refers to them) after the army they served. They were volunteers and professionals, and generally illiterate. They came mostly from peasant farming villages that were dotted about northern British India, now covering Pakistan, its Federally Autonomous Tribal Areas (FATA) and several Indian states adjoining the Himalayas. They also came from central India, and from independent Nepal and Afghanistan. Around 40 per cent of them were Muslim, nearly as many were Hindu, and 19 per cent were Sikh.[6] Having

[4] G. MacMunn, *The Martial Races of India* (London: Sampson Low, 1933), pp. 270–71.
[5] Government of India (ed.), *The Army in India and Its Evolution* (Calcutta: Superintendent Government Printing, 1924), p. 219.
[6] D. Ellinwood, 'The Indian Soldier, the Indian Army, and Change, 1914–1918', in D. Ellinwood and S. Pradhan (eds.), *India and World War I* (New Delhi: Manohar, 1978), p. 186.

joined up in their late teens, they tended to be long-serving in return for a monthly wage, a pension and a land grant.

Indian recruitment was restricted to a thin range of rural communities identified by the British as 'martial races'. Among these were Pathan (pronounced Pat'han) tribes – from the Afridis and Orakzais to the Mahsuds and Waziris – of the Pathan tribal areas, a strip of independent Muslim territory lying between Afghanistan and the annexed, British-administered districts of the North-West Frontier Province (NWFP).[7] Other Muslim martial races included the Khattaks and the Yusufzais, both Pathan tribes of NWFP; the Hazaras, refugees from central Afghanistan who had settled in the Indian province of Baluchistan; and Punjabi Muslims, such as the Gakkhar and other northern Punjabi clans of the desolate Salt Range between the Indus and Jhelum rivers. Among their Hindu counterparts were Dogras of Kangra and Jats of Rohtak, both Punjabi, and Garhwalis from the United Provinces of Agra and Oudh. The Sikh martial races included Jats and Muzbees of the Gujranwala and Lyallpur districts of central Punjab. From Nepal came Magars, Gurungs and other Gurkha tribesmen, of Hindu-Buddhist heritage.

Of the British army's total strength of 247,000 active regulars, 74,500 were temporarily posted to India. They had been released from the Home Army, the garrison of the British Isles and the Army in India's counterpoint in imperial defence.[8] The British service's officers were a caste apart from their Indian army peers. They tended to have been born in Britain into more upper-class, richer and better-connected families, and not to aspire to a life in India. They lacked family traditions of carving out subcontinental careers, could better afford the higher costs of living in Britain, and more keenly felt the pull of the royal social orbit. They commonly regarded the Indian army's British officers as their social inferiors, disparaging them as 'Hindus', and frowning upon marriage between one of their own and a 'Hindu daughter'.

The Army in India's senior commanders and staff officers were selected from both the Indian and the British armies; to distinguish them from the higher ranks of the Home Army, they were known as 'Indian'. At

[7] 'Pathan', an Urdu and a Hindi term, was usually used by the British when speaking in English. They preferred it to 'Pashtun', 'Pashtoon', 'Pakhtun' or 'Pukhtun', all Pashtu versions of the same word, which the frontier tribesmen would have used when speaking of themselves in their own Pashtu dialects. 'Pathan' is used here in order to help distinguish the border tribes as a people more associated with the British imperial sphere than were their Pashtun neighbours of Afghanistan; only the latter were formally thought of as Afghans in the British official mind – they lived behind the Durand Line, which demarcated sovereign Afghan territory from the independent tribal areas, later FATA.

[8] Government of India, *The Army in India*, pp. 63 and 219.

the bottom of the Army in India were 45,500 Indian non-combatants. Of these, 32,000 belonged to the Indian army, and the remainder to the British.[9] They came from rural communities – Punjabi, Bengali and Nepali – that were officially recognised as non-martial.

In August 1914, in response to Germany's use of Belgium as a corridor of conquest into France, the British government created the BEF out of the Home Army. It also decided that imperial contingents from around the globe should be reeled in as reinforcements. 'We are unsheathing our swords in a just cause and in defence of principles the maintenance of which is vital to the civilisation of the world', Herbert Asquith, the Liberal prime minister, explained to the House of Commons. 'If we are entering into the struggle, let us now make sure that all the resources, not only of this United Kingdom, but of the vast Empire of which it is the centre, shall be thrown into the scale.'[10] IEFA was shipped to France via the Arabian Sea and Suez, and its first convoy landed at Marseilles on 26 September.

By October, IEFA contained two infantry divisions and six cavalry brigades.[11] For BEF service, they became parts of army corps, a type of higher formation that had existed in peacetime England, but not in India. IEFA's two infantry divisions went into the Indian Corps. One of them was the Lahore Division, commanded by Henry Watkis (Indian army), with Andrew Cobbe (Indian army) as his chief staff officer. Its brigades were:

1. *Ferozepore Brigade*. Commander: Raleigh Egerton (Indian army). 1st/Connaught Rangers, 9th Bhopals, 57th Wilde's Rifles (Frontier Force), 129th Baluchis.
2. *Jullundur Brigade*. Commander: Philip Carnegy (Indian army). 1st/Manchesters, 15th Sikhs, 47th Sikhs, 59th Scinde Rifles (Frontier Force).
3. *Sirhind Brigade*. Commander: James Brunker (British army). 1st/Highland Light Infantry, 125th Napier's Rifles, 1st/1st Gurkhas, 1st/4th Gurkhas.
4. *Attached 'divisional' troops*. Technical units: 34th Sikh Pioneers; 20th and 21st companies of the 3rd Sappers and Miners; one Indian signal company. Cavalry: 15th (Indian) Lancers.

[9] Ibid., pp. 230–35; and War Office (ed.), *Statistics*, p. 777.
[10] Asquith's Commons address of 6 August, quoted in J. Spender and C. Asquith, *Life of Herbert Henry Asquith*, 2 vols. (London: Hutchinson, 1932), vol. 2, pp. 114–15.
[11] IOR, L/MIL/17/5/3088: *IEFA War Diary* (Simla, October 1914), p. 136.

The Indian Corps' other division was the Meerut, commanded by Charles Anderson (British army). His chief staff officer was Claud Jacob (Indian army). The Meerut Division's brigades were:

1. *Dehra Dun Brigade*. Commander: Charles Johnson (Indian army). 1st/Seaforth Highlanders, 6th Jats, 1st/9th Gurkhas, 2nd/2nd Gurkhas.
2. *Garhwal Brigade*. Commander: Henry Keary (Indian army). 2nd/Leicesters, 1st/39th Garhwals, 2nd/39th Garhwals, 2nd/3rd Gurkhas.
3. *Bareilly Brigade*. Commander: Forbes Macbean (British army). 2nd/Black Watch, 41st Dogras, 58th Vaughan's Rifles (Frontier Force), 2nd/8th Gurkhas.
4. *Attached 'divisional' troops*. Technical units: 107th Pioneers; 3rd and 4th companies of the 1st Sappers and Miners; one Indian signal company. Cavalry: 4th (Indian) Cavalry.

James Willcocks, a British army officer, was the Indian Corps' commander. He had fought in fourteen campaigns from Afghanistan to Ashanti (later Ghana), leading Indian troops in twelve of them, including the Third Burmese War of 1885–87, in which leech bites left him with a limp for life in his right leg. 'A pretty tough character, who stood up for his subordinates', recalled one of his junior officers, 'we knew him as James "by the grace of God"'.[12] Willcocks was in fact the British army's most decorated soldier for active service, and the BEF's third-most senior officer.[13] Havelock Hudson (Indian army) was his chief staff officer. A dozen or so Indian princes and landed nobles with military training held honorary staff posts within the Indian Corps. For instance, the Punjabi landowner Umar Hayat Khan was attached to the Ferozepore Brigade's headquarters, and the Maharaja of Bikaner to the Meerut Division's.[14]

IEFA's six cavalry brigades went into the Indian Cavalry Corps. Three of them formed the 1st Indian Cavalry Division, under Hew Fanshawe (British army):

1. *Sialkot Brigade*. Commander: Henry Leader (British army). 17th (British) Lancers, 6th (Indian) Cavalry, 19th Fane's Horse.

[12] B. Blacker (ed.), *The Adventures & Inventions of Stewart Blacker* (Barnsley: Pen & Sword, 2006), p. 26.
[13] J. Merewether and F. E. Smith, *The Indian Corps in France*, second edition (London: John Murray, 1919), p. 18.
[14] Ellinwood, *Between Two Worlds: A Rajput Officer in the Indian Army, 1905–1921, Based on the Diary of Amar Singh of Jaipur* (Lanham: Hamilton, 2005), p. 399.

2. *Ambala Brigade*. Commander: Charles Pirie (Indian army). 8th Hussars, 9th Hodson's Horse, 30th (Indian) Lancers.
3. *Lucknow Brigade*. Commander: William Fasken (Indian army). 1st Dragoon Guards, 29th (Indian) Lancers, 36th Jacob's Horse.

IEFA's three other cavalry brigades were in the 2nd Indian Cavalry Division, under George Cookson (Indian army):

1. *Mhow Brigade*. Commander: George Barrow (Indian army). 6th Dragoons, 2nd (Indian) Lancers, 38th Central India Horse.
2. *Meerut Brigade*. Commander: Fitz-James Edwards (Indian army). 13th Hussars, 3rd Skinner's Horse, 18th (Indian) Lancers.
3. *Secunderabad Brigade*. Commander: Frederick Wadeson (Indian army). 7th Dragoon Guards, 20th Deccan Horse, 34th Poona Horse. Also with the brigade were the Jodhpur Lancers, led by Pratap Singh, the prince regent of Jodhpur.

Michael Rimington (British army) was the Indian Cavalry Corps' commander. He was best known for leading his 'Tigers', an irregular mounted troop, in the South African War of 1899 to 1902. 'He ought', wrote one Tiger, 'to have lived 500 years ago and dressed in chain mail, and led out his lances to plunder and foray. Picturesque is the word that best describes him'.[15] The Indian Cavalry Corps' chief staff officer was Henry Macandrew (Indian army), another veteran of South Africa. The corps also had Indian princes and landed nobles in honorary staff posts.[16]

The Indian non-combatants in direct support of IEFA's infantry and cavalry belonged largely to Indian army administrative units. Some served with animal transport including mule packs, and others with medical units such as field ambulances, stretcher-bearer companies and stationary hospitals.[17] 'We of Headquarters Mule Transport', wrote one of its staff officers, 'recognised that our part was but a modest one, but we were prepared to play it to the full, and to do all in our humble power to further the good cause.'[18]

[15] *The Times*, 20 December 1928: 'Obituary: General Sir M. Rimington'.
[16] Ibid., 20 March 1930: 'Obituary: Afsur-ul-Mulk'. G. S. Sandhu, *The Indian Cavalry: History of the Indian Armoured Corps*, 2 vols. (New Delhi: Vision Books, 1981), vol. 1, pp. 294–98.
[17] H. Alexander, *On Two Fronts, being the Adventures of an Indian Mule Corps in France and Gallipoli* (New York: Dutton, 1917), pp. 3 and 29; and M. Harrison, *The Medical War: British Military Medicine in the First World War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), pp. 52–58.
[18] Alexander, *On Two Fronts*, p. 51.

The duties of IEFA's fighting formations and Indian administrative units were spread over three phases. The first was IEFA's delivery to Flanders from India – the force had to mobilise on the subcontinent, move to Indian ports, get on and off its transport ships that sailed to Marseilles via Egypt, and then get to Flanders. The second phase was IEFA's active part in First Ypres from 23 October to 5 November 1914. The Indian Corps, with the Secunderabad (Cavalry) Brigade attached, was fragmented into small parts to defend BEF front trenches. Its Indian administrative support, meanwhile, had to keep pace with many battalion movements while developing contact with the BEF's Home Army administrative network. 'The dovetailing into one another of the British and Indian systems of Supply and Transport was far from simple', commented the British captain of one Indian mule pack. 'The [Home Army] officers on the Staff of the Lines of Communication did not understand the Indian system, and we knew little of the British.'[19]

During phase three, which ran from mid-November 1914 to February 1918, the Indian infantry's fighting duties were mainly defensive. For the seven weeks up to Christmas 1914, the Indian Corps held its own sector at the southern end of the BEF line, by the village of Neuve Chapelle. In that time, it was directly under the orders of John French, the BEF's Commander-in-Chief at the British General Headquarters in the field (GHQ). Between January and November 1915, the Indian Corps continued to hold trenches by Neuve Chapelle; in April, the Lahore Division marched to the northern end of the BEF line, where it spent a fortnight helping to counter the German advance at the Second Battle of Ypres.

In New Year 1915, the Indian Corps had joined Douglas Haig's new First Army, with which it took the offensive for a total of twelve days, at the battles of Neuve Chapelle (10–12 March), Aubers Ridge (9 May), Festubert (15–25 May) and Loos (25 September to mid-October). At the end of October, the Lahore and Meerut Divisions were ordered to leave for Egypt. By Boxing Day, they had sailed from Marseilles, and the Indian Corps had ceased to exist.[20]

The Indian Cavalry Corps fought from winter 1914 to spring 1916, when it was disbanded. Its units were then put into new BEF cavalry divisions alongside British and Canadian troops.[21] The Indian cavalrymen's duties were mostly defensive as they undertook brief but repeated periods of dismounted trench-holding. They initially did this in the Indian Corps' line, before they moved to the Somme valley to hold either their

[19] Ibid., p. 42.
[20] TNA, WO 95/1090: *Indian Corps War Diary* (October to December 1914).
[21] Sandhu, *Indian Cavalry*, vol. 1, pp. 304–08.

own sectors or parts of British army ones. They went on the offensive in 1916 and 1917, at the battles of the Somme and of Cambrai. In early 1918, the Indian cavalry regiments in France were sent to the Egyptian Expeditionary Force (EEF) in Palestine.

All the while, the Indian non-combatants attached to IEFA's fighting formations did their routine jobs. For example, the mule packs in the first line of transport – linking supply depots near railheads and the trenches – carried supplies over short distances between the same fixed points. In addition, the Indian non-combatants co-operated with the administrative services of the British army and of India, both of which gave them supplies and other support.

The Indian troops' thoughts on the western front survive mainly through their wartime letters home. The letters were dictated to scribes, at the front or in hospital; they remain with us in the form of translations by British and Indian censors. Indian voices also survive in sources from Germany, including transcripts of Indian prisoner interrogations by German military intelligence. Trench diaries or notebooks by the Indian ranks were few and far between. Just one, by a Muslim soldier (who deserted to the Germans), is known to survive. Its author, however, seems to have written not so much to describe his frontline experiences as to learn words in Urdu and English, composing long lists of them, from 'haversack', 'blanket' and 'please' to 'honeymoon', 'testacles' [*sic*] and 'brests' [*sic*].[22] More revealing are the letters and reports of Walter Lawrence, of the Indian Civil Service. In light of his ability to speak to the Indian troops in several of their own languages, he was appointed in 1914 as a special British government commissioner to monitor the Indian wounded and sick in France and England. Day after day he went from hospital to hospital, chatting to the Indian patients for hours on end. 'I gained a new knowledge of the mentality of Indians, sitting with them and listening to their strange impressions of this wonderful new world into which they had tumbled.'[23] As we shall see, they told him many things.

Not sharing in the Western soldier's tradition of writing military reminiscences and commentaries, the Indian troops produced no memoirists of regimental life like Ernst Jünger or Robert Graves, let alone soldier-scholars like those of the British and German armies who wrote official war histories. The members of IEFA who did publish their views

[22] S. Das, 'Introduction', in S. Das (ed.) *Race, Empire and First World War Writing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), p. 1.
[23] W. Lawrence, *The India We Served* (London: Cassell, 1928), p. 271.

on it were invariably British officers. Their writings have recently been joined in print by the war diaries of Thakur Amar Singh, a Hindu aristocrat and aide-de-camp at the Sirhind Brigade's headquarters.[24] In France for a year from December 1914, Amar Singh had no fighting role and was kept comfortably behind the front line. Nonetheless, he wrote in detail on military business and gossip, and his diaries offer an eloquent response to the biases and injustices suffered by his colonial generation.[25]

How Has IEFA's Indian Army Tactical Performance Been Judged?

Here tactical performance encompasses not only fighting techniques among lower-level units, but also various other things that directly shaped units' fighting efficiency, for instance the replacement of casualties. What has been written hitherto may be divided into positive and negative ideas. Among the positive ideas, the first is that before the war, IEFA's Indian battalions were well trained. These were welcomed as such in autumn 1914 in GHQ press releases and British newspapers.[26] James Willcocks, in his *With the Indians in France* (1920), looked back on the Indian infantry's pre-war training as having 'reached a far higher scale of efficiency than had ever previously been the case'.[27] He gave no real explanation of quite how this was so; he only implied that it was related to a type of warfare not to be found in Flanders:

> The Indian troops . . . were unfortunate in the choice of ground assigned to them. Its very nature left no scope for indulging in the particular tactics in which many of them were adepts. . . . Oh! if some one who knew what many of our Indian battalions could do (outside of eternal mire) had given us a chance in France, even for a short spell, what an opportunity it would have been of proving once for all that the hillmen of India with British officers cannot be beaten in hilly country no matter who the foe.[28]

[24] An edited version of Amar Singh's war diaries has been published in Ellinwood, *Between Two Worlds*. Also see S. Hoeber Rudolph and L. I. Rudolph with M. S. Kanota (eds.), *Reversing the Gaze, Amar Singh's Diary, A Colonial Subject's Narrative of Imperial India* (Boulder: Westview Press, 2002).

[25] See Das, 'Indians at Home, Mesopotamia and France, 1914–1918', in Das, *Race, Empire and First World War Writing*, pp. 75–77.

[26] *The Times*, 28 October 1914, p. 7. Press Bureau, *Eye-witness's Narrative of the War, from the Marne to Neuve Chapelle, September 1915–March 1915* (London: Edward Arnold, 1915), p. 75.

[27] J. Willcocks, *With the Indians in France* (London: Constable, 1920), p. 9.

[28] Willcocks, 'The Indian Army Corps in France', *Blackwoods Magazine* MCCXXI (1917), p. 7, and *With the Indians*, p. 263.

James Edmonds (Royal Engineers) served with the BEF from 1914 to 1918, primarily as a staff officer at GHQ. His intellectual reputation had already gained him the nickname 'Archimedes', and in 1919 it earned him the directorship of the British government's Historical Section charged with producing the BEF's multi-volume official history, *Military Operations, France and Belgium* (1922-48), of which he was the author-in-chief. Of Edmonds' contemporaries, foremost among the many less scholarly but better known minds was F. E. Smith, a King's Counsel at the London Bar and a Conservative Member of Parliament for Liverpool. 'The Right Hon. Frederick Edwin Smith', *The New York Times* reported in September 1914, 'has been described as the cleverest man in England. . . . His present income is said to be larger than that of any other English barrister.' 'He is only 42 years old', the newspaper continued, 'and has already achieved such prominence in the ranks of the Opposition that it is taken for granted that he will have Cabinet rank. . . . Though bitter political enemies, Mr. Smith and the First Lord of the Admiralty, Winston Churchill, are close personal friends.'[29] That September, Smith left London, where he had been Director of the Official Press Bureau, for France, to become the Indian Corps' 'Recording Officer'. As such, he was responsible for writing eye-witness press releases on the BEF's Indian infantry, and for gathering evidence for a future book about them. He did both things at the front for six months until April 1915, when he quit the Indian Corps to resume his legal and political career at home, first as the Solicitor General, and from October in Cabinet as the Attorney-General.[30]

Smith's replacement as the Indian Corps' Recording Officer was John Merewether, an Indian service officer. 'Merewether', wrote James Willcocks, 'remained with the Corps till it left France':

> He was an old regimental comrade and a man full of energy and wit: a clever writer and a very entertaining companion; his presence at our Headquarters was much appreciated. He was constantly with me when I visited billets, trenches, etc., and he acquired a very detailed knowledge of all that went on in the Corps. He devoted his whole time to visiting officers and men of every unit and collecting all the information he could gain. The results have been embodied in the book, *The Indian Corps in France*, compiled by him and Sir Frederick Smith, dedicated to His Majesty the King-Emperor, and published under the authority of His Majesty's Secretary of State for India.[31]

[29] *The New York Times*, 25 September 1914.
[30] J. Campbell, *F. E. Smith, First Earl of Birkenhead* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1983), pp. 372–94.
[31] Willcocks, *With the Indians*, p. 55.