

## **The Indian Army at Gallipoli 1915**

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The contribution of the Indian Army in Gallipoli is a neglected subject, and this broad recapitulation of the role of those forgotten soldiers is as much a tribute to their valour and sacrifice as it is a resurrection of a memory. The Indian expeditionary force that served in the Dardanelles was not very large in numbers; barely 5000 men in a campaign that swelled from 75,000, to nearly half a million allied troops engaged by the end of the campaign. Yet it had a significant impact upon the course of the operations, and no account of the campaign can ignore the contribution of the 14th Sikhs in the Third Battle of Krithia, or the 1-6th Gurkhas in the climactic Battle of Sari Bair.

However, despite the fact that it served with honour at Gallipoli, not just with, but as a part of, the Australian and New Zealand Army Corps from August onwards, this contribution has been relegated largely to a passing mention in most accounts of the campaign. Part of the reason for this lies in the political history of British India. On the eve of the First World War, India was still a colony, agitating for Dominion status within the Empire; a status that the colonial authorities were loath to confer.

In India, therefore, the war was seen as an opportunity to press for home rule by proving its loyalty to the Empire. As a measure of its support to the Imperial cause, India provided Britain with not just men and material, but money as well. Apart from the 1,440,437 men recruited, and the 1,381,050 men sent for service overseas, India also bore the cost of these troops which were being largely used for Imperial, rather than Indian purposes, and in 1917 she made an outright gift of £100 million towards the cost of the war. The British Indian Army, often derided as a mercenary force by educated nationalists in a veiled attack on British policy in India, and on the British presence itself, was to serve with distinction in nearly every theatre of war. However, in spite of India's sterling contribution to the war effort, it would be nearly three decades before her demands for political representation, by then hardened from home rule to complete independence, would fructify.

By then, world events were to be overtaken by another world war, and with Indian independence the regiments and batteries that served on Gallipoli were split between

three armies – those of India, Pakistan and Britain – and the memory of those soldiers who had served a now discredited empire, were all but forgotten in the post-colonial world. The lack of a political identity in 1915, thus served to rob Indian soldiers not just of an acknowledgement of their role, or of a commemoration of their sacrifice, but also of their place in history.

### **India and the Dardanelles**

As far as India was concerned, events in the Dardanelles were more directly linked to domestic security issues rather than grander Imperial strategic concerns. The somewhat vague emotional attachment of Indian Muslims to the Sultan of Turkey as *Khalifah* was being exploited by political agitators in India, who were publicising the ideal of a Pan-Islamic movement that laid stress upon the kind of international solidarity and unity of all Muslims, or *Ummah*, which had been fostered by the Sultan for decades. The Viceroy of India, Lord Hardinge, noted with concern early in 1915 that if the Allies suffered any more reverses in the Dardanelles he feared ‘serious results’ in India. The *Khilafat* movement also had its impact upon the Indian Army and there were a number of desertions from amongst Muslim soldiers which were thought to be the work of extremist elements in India, working to undermine the loyalty of Indian troops and endeavouring to advance Pan-Islamic propaganda to the detriment of British Imperial interests. This was held to be especially the case as regards Pathans and other Pushtu-speaking classes, who were supposedly more susceptible to such influences than other Indian Muslims.

The manpower demands of the Great War led to an expansion of the recruiting base for the duration of the war at least, and simultaneously raised the level of awareness and expectations of large sections of the Indian public regarding the very significant role of the Indian Army in Imperial defence and the political concessions that they hoped would follow as a result.

During the war India functioned as an Imperial strategic reserve. The global nature of its commitments is exemplified by none other than the 89th Punjabis turned away from Gallipoli on account of the Muslim soldiers in its ranks, to fight the un-Islamic Germans in France. The battalion had the distinction of serving in more theatres of the war than any perhaps other single battalion in the Commonwealth. Having sailed from India in November 1914, by the time it returned home in September 1920, it had served in South-West Arabia, in Egypt, in Gallipoli, in France, in Mesopotamia, on the North-West Frontier, in Salonica, in the Caucasus, and finally at Constantinople with the Army of the Black Sea.

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As the German general Hans Kannengiesser who commanded a Turkish Division at Gallipoli wryly remarked, “seldom have so many countries of the world, races and nations sent their representatives to so small a place with the praiseworthy intention of killing one another”. Hence along with the Australians, New Zealanders, Maoris, British, Zionists, French, Senegalese, Turks and Germans, among others, India added some of the finest classes of its fighting men to the mix at Gallipoli.

The strength of the British Indian Army lay in its regimental system. The “class system” of recruitment exuded enormous clan spirit and the homogeneity generated by the close-knit regimental ties where son followed father into the same unit, ensured that very high standards could be set and obtained under dedicated officers. Indian units that served on Gallipoli therefore were composed of soldiers from various ethnic groups or classes, comprising Sikhs, Punjabi Muslims, Punjabi Hindus, Brahmins, Rajputs and Gurkhas.

The Indian Army was represented at Gallipoli by the 7th Indian Mountain Artillery Brigade, the Indian mule corps, a medical establishment, and the 29th Indian Infantry Brigade. The infantry served in the Helles area from the 1st of May till the 10th of July, being transferred to Anzac after a brief period of rest and reorganisation at Imbros, just in time to take part in the August offensive; while the artillery landed with the ANZAC and shared all the travails and vicissitudes of that corps, from the day of the first landings on the 25th of April till the final evacuation in December.

### **The 7th Indian Mountain Artillery Brigade**

After the great uprising of 1857, the British had disbanded all Indian artillery save the mountain batteries. The 7th Indian Mountain Artillery Brigade that proceeded to Gallipoli from Egypt was composed of the 21<sup>st</sup> Kohat and 26<sup>th</sup> Jacob’s Mountain Battery manned by Sikh and Punjabi Muslim gunners. The latter were the only allied Muslim troops in action against the Turks on the peninsula. The brigade was a complete formation with ammunition column, field ambulance section, ordnance field park, supply section and post office.

The batteries were armed with 10-pr. breech loading screw guns which were brought into action disassembled on a 7-mule gun line. Each battery had six guns organised into three sections. The Indian mountain batteries served throughout the campaign on the peninsula without even a day’s relief, as an integral part of the ANZAC, and 26<sup>th</sup> Jacob’s Battery prided itself as being the first in and last out amongst the artillery units on

Gallipoli. The services of this battery during the landing at Anzac on the 25<sup>th</sup> of May were described as being of inestimable value owing to the encouragement which its fire gave to the Australian troops at a critical juncture when they were hard put to hold it on their own, and to the fact that it relieved the infantry of a good deal of pressure by drawing fire upon itself.

During the August offensive on the Sari Bair Ridge the two Indian Mountain Batteries, less one section each, formed part of the two assaulting columns and rendered full support to the infantry. By all accounts, the Indian gunners made a mark for themselves and were long remembered with affection and regard by their former Anzac comrades.

### **Indian Mule Transport**

It may come as no surprise that when the Gallipoli expedition was planned in January 1915 transport was not included since it was expected that the landing force would only be required to march over the narrow peninsula.

However, even with subsequent authorisation, the lack of roads on the peninsula rendered motor transport useless. The transport difficulty was largely resolved by the allotment of an Indian mule transport train from France consisting of 4316 mules and 2000 carts. The transport was organised into four Mule Cart Corps, each consisting of ten troops of 108 mules and 50 carts with 60 drivers each. The total strength of a corps was 650 men and 1086 mules. 10,000 tons of hay, barley and maize from India accompanied the force for animal feed.

Service in the Mule Corps was not one of the most soldierly of activities; but in no other theatre of war did the lowly mules or their gallant drivers share more equally in the hardships and dangers of their frontline comrades than on the beaches and gullies of Gallipoli.

The mules were also landed on Gallipoli on the very first day. One Mule Cart Corps was to land at Cape Helles with the 29th Division while the rest were to go ashore with the ANZAC at Gaba Tepe.

The Indian Mule Corps soon established themselves in what came to be known as "Mule Gully" and for the rest of the campaign the mules and their drivers were a familiar and welcome sight to the soldiers holding onto their precarious perches in the heights above, as they cheerfully went about their task of delivering ammunition and supplies to

the trenches ahead. However, there was no let up from enemy fire, and even Mule Gully was under constant sniper fire during the day which led to most of the movement being undertaken under cover of darkness.

In spite of all precautions the transport suffered daily shelling in its camps and in the trips forward. The entire stretch of the track from Mule Gully up to the first line mule camp was under direct enemy fire and every convoy was machine gunned. It was not uncommon to see mule and driver dashing at full gallop across particularly bad stretches. At Anzac alone the transport suffered 177 personnel and 858 mules killed and wounded.

With the allied landings at Suvla Bay, the Headquarters of the Indian Mule Train was established there. When the force was finally withdrawn from the peninsula under cover of darkness, in December, 50 of the best squeaking carts were used in the last convoy before evacuation, to give the impression that the AT convoys were operating as usual. Before embarking a large number of mules and horses were shot in their standings to prevent them from falling into the hands of the enemy.

### **The 29th Indian Infantry Brigade**

The GOC Mediterranean Force, General Sir Ian Hamilton, was conscious of the inadequate size of the force at his disposal for the task at hand. Though extremely reluctant to ask for the additional troops that were required, he did provide himself with a safety margin by requesting for one Gurkha brigade from Egypt, in exchange for which he offered to leave four mounted brigades in Egypt.

Ian Hamilton had done most of his service in India, during which time he had developed an admiration for the Gurkhas in particular, and was not slow to realise that they would be ideally suited to warfare in the hilly Gallipoli terrain. There was no purely Gurkha brigade serving in Egypt at the time and hence the 29th Indian Infantry Brigade of the 10th Indian Division was ordered to Gallipoli. As originally constituted in October 1914 the brigade consisted of the 14th King George's Own Ferozepore Sikhs, 69th Punjabis, 89th Punjabis and the 1/6th Gurkha Rifles. It sailed from Karachi for Egypt on 2nd November 1914 under the command of Brigadier General H.V. Cox, CB, CSI. For the next six months it was engaged in the defence of the Suez Canal before it sailed for Gallipoli arriving off Cape Helles at midday on the 30th. Disembarking at V Beach on the 1st of May, it was attached as an extra brigade of the much depleted 29th Division. It moved into the front line on the 9th, relieving the British 87th Brigade on the extreme left of the line. It was to occupy this sector throughout its stay at Helles.

The first significant action of the brigade was the capture of 'Gurkha Bluff', on the 12th May, thereby extending the line of the allied defences down to the sea.

On 14th May the 69th Punjabis and 89th Punjabis were withdrawn from the line and embarked for Egypt, en route to France, on the 15th as they contained a significant proportion of Muslim troops. In the short period that these units had been on the peninsula the 89th Punjabis had suffered over a 100 casualties, while the 69th Punjabis which had not been engaged in the front line lost 10 killed and 23 wounded. These units were replaced by the 1-5th and the 2-10th Gurkha Rifles, but not until 2nd June; in the meantime the brigade was brought up to strength by the temporary addition of two British battalions.

During its stay at Helles the brigade was involved the Third Battle of Krithia and the action of Gully Ravine. During the Third Battle of Krithia on the 4th of June, the 14th Sikhs, one of the few non-Gurkha pure class battalions of the Indian Army, composed entirely of seasoned Jat Sikh soldiers from the Punjab, launched repeated attacks, in the face of murderous machine gun fire, against the Turkish positions astride Gully Ravine. Held up by the barbed wire that was unaffected by the allied artillery bombardment a section of men leapt the barbed wire as if it were a hurdle on a sports field and charged the Turks with the bayonet. However, human valour was unavailing against modern weapons of war, and on that day the battalion's casualties amounted to 82 percent of the men actually engaged in the battle. Only 3 British officers were left unwounded. Writing to the Commander-in-Chief in India a few weeks after the event, General Sir Ian Hamilton paid noble tribute to the heroism of all ranks:

In the highest sense of the word extreme gallantry has been shown by this fine Battalion. . . . In spite of these tremendous losses there was not a sign of wavering all day. Not an inch of ground gained was given up and not a single straggler came back. The ends of the enemy's trenches leading into the ravine were found [after the successful British advance on the 28th June] to be blocked with the bodies of Sikhs and of the enemy who died fighting at close quarters, and the glacis slope is thickly dotted with the bodies of these fine soldiers all lying on their faces as they fell in their steady advance on the enemy.

The history of the Sikhs affords many instances of their value as soldiers, but it may be safely asserted that nothing finer than the grim valour and steady discipline displayed by them on the 4th June has ever been done by soldiers of the *Khalsa*. Their devotion to duty and their splendid loyalty to their orders and to their leaders make a record their nation should look back upon with pride for many generations.

The heavy casualties suffered in the previous fighting were somewhat offset by the equally heavy punishment inflicted upon the Turks during their gallant counter-attacks on the 3rd and 5th of July.

The repulse of the Turkish attacks on the 5th of July marked the end of serious fighting for the Indian brigade in the Helles area and after a few days spent in bivouac on the coast it was moved to the island of Imbros for rest and reorganisation on the 9/10th. By then the brigade had dwindled to a skeleton. The 1-5th and 1-6th Gurkha Rifles had been temporarily amalgamated and the 14th Sikhs were by now so depleted in numbers (1 BO, 1 VCO and 117 ORs) that they were attached to the 2-10th Gurkhas for rations and maintenance. Like the 14th the 1-5th also had only one BO left. Indeed the 5th Gurkhas' history records that only 8 BOs remained in the brigade as a whole, including the staff, and every unit was greatly reduced in numbers. The shortage of British officers was the primary reason for withdrawing the brigade from the firing line.

During its stay at Imbros the brigade was once again brought up to strength by the arrival of drafts from linked battalions and from depots in India.

While there is no doubt that officer casualties in all Allied units were very high, but they were nowhere more keenly felt than in Indian units where it became exceedingly difficult to replace officers who could not only speak the language of the men but were often deeply respected and implicitly trusted by the troops. In keeping with their regimental traditions, officers made it a point to set an example, often leading to unnecessary loss of life. On one occasion, an officer of the 1-5th Gurkhas drew his sword – he was probably the only officer on the peninsula who wore one – and led his men in a gallant, though doomed, charge against the enemy.

On 21 Jul 15 the Indian troops with the Mediterranean Expeditionary Force (MEF) were designated Indian Expeditionary Force (IEF) "G". Brought up to strength by reinforcements in July, Force "G" took the field as a part of the August offensive on the Anzac front, and fought side by side with the Anzacs till the final evacuation from the peninsula in late December.

The approximately 4800 strong Indian detachment was to serve at the northern flank of Anzac after the 29th Indian Brigade landed at Anzac cove on the 5th/6th of August to take part in what would be last major attempt to break the stalemate by a bold and, in retrospect, overambitious plan. This called for a vigorous offensive from Anzac (ANZAC, 13 Div and 29 Ind Bde) combined with a surprise landing at Suvla Bay (IX Corps)

under cover of a diversionary attack in the Helles area to pin down the Turkish forces and prevent reinforcements being sent to the north. 'Zulu' day for the break-out from Anzac as well as the Suvla landings was fixed for the night of 6/7 August.

The Indian Brigade played a crucial part in this offensive as a part of the left assaulting column, under Brigadier General H.V. Cox. In the fierce fighting that took place over the next four days the Indian troops were continuously engaged in action, with little rest or sleep, till the 10th. Despite this, they rose magnificently to the occasion and played a vital role in the battle of the Sari Bair Ridge.

The climax of the battle of Sari Bair was to take place on the morning of the ninth, when the ridge was crested for the last and final time by any allied troops in the campaign. This occurred when the 6th Gurkhas and small detachments from the 6th South Lancashire and 9th Warwickshire led by Lt Col CJL Allanson, the CO of 6 GR, charged up the slope as dawn broke over Asia, and for a short while beheld the object of the offensive in their sight. John North in his book *Gallipoli: The Fading Vision*, notes that " – the lonely advance of these British and Gurkha skirmishers to the crest of the ridge when the battle was already lost must always remain one of the most gallant episodes in the whole campaign."

However, as the Gurkhas advanced on the enemy retreating down the opposite slope, just as they had gone three hundred yards they were suddenly hit by a salvo of artillery shells which, combined with heavy fire from the directions of Abdel Rehman Bair and a Turkish counterattack, drove them from the summit. They were eventually rallied on the line held the previous night, all British officers of 1/6 GR except the medical officer being casualties. The main attack which should have taken place at the same time, viz 5.15 a.m., did not develop until about 9 a.m. by which time it was fairly evident it would not succeed, and permission was obtained to hold and consolidate the line on which the troops stood. However, the battle for Sari Bair was by now lost, and strong Turkish counter-attacks on the 10th managed to push the allies to a line along the lower slopes of the great ridge, which was entrenched and held till the end of the campaign.

The Indian Brigade was further actively involved in the subsidiary action of Hill 60 on the 21st August, the last battle of any magnitude to be undertaken by it on the peninsula. After the capture of Hill 60 on the 28th, the entire line settled down to the routine of trench war. The Indian Brigade held a front on the extreme left flank of the Anzac defences, extending northward from Hill 60 and joining up with the right of IX Corps at Suvla. It remained in these positions till the final evacuation on the 20th of December.



Paradoxically, this was the most successful of allied operations during the campaign. Executed with meticulous planning and accomplished with a measure of success beyond expectation, the evacuation of Gallipoli was to become one of the Punjabi soldier's defining memories of the *laam ki larai*, – the long war – the tales of the guns fitted with water-controlled mechanisms that enabled them to fire long after the *morchas*, or trenches, were empty, ranked with those of the ill-fated Indian garrison of Kut-al Amara, where the troops were reduced to eating horse flesh in order to survive.

### **Conclusion**

At Gallipoli the Indian contingent, in common with the rest of the British force, was short of most of the equipment required for the type of warfare it was committed to. There were shortages of machine guns and of artillery shells, and the guns and their ammunition were not suited for the short ranges over which they had to be employed. An acute shortage of grenades caused numerous avoidable casualties in the close proximity combat at Helles. During the main battle of Sari Bair, described as one of the great soldiers battles of all time, the Indian brigade more than held its own. Ultimately, a shortage of officers, poor communications, inadequate command and control of the tactical battle and a plan far too ambitious in its ambit lost the battle for the allies. While one argument suggests that it would have been necessary to capture all the three high points of Sari Bair for the whole operation to succeed, the official history opines that the chief mistake of the British plan was the 'choice of so wide an objective' by including the capture of Hill 971 in the first night's plan. The latter view is supported by the BM of the Indian Brigade, who wrote that the plan was much too complicated for successful execution even during peace: 'In war it was impossible'.

The source of the half dozen fateful shells that drove Allanson and his small band from the crest of Sari Bair must remain as one of the great 'whodunits' of the Gallipoli campaign.

In the larger scheme of things the Indian contingent that served on the peninsula was but a minuscule of the total troops employed. It was sorely tried but emerged from the fray with credit having suffered a total of 4130 casualties during the campaign. The high point of its deployment at Gallipoli was its conduct during the battle for Sari Bair when one of its battalions gained the crest of the mighty ridge and for a short while may have held the key to victory in its grasp. The forlorn hope of this small band, as it waited in vain for reinforcements which never came, before it was hurled off the crest by a storm of fire and an unfortunate salvo of artillery fire, must remain as one of the most poignant images of the entire campaign.

Yet there are other images as well. Although unlike the Australian and New Zealand armies, which turned the historian's gaze upon the involvement of their soldiers, the story of the Indian Army at Gallipoli, and indeed in the Great War as a whole, received no such separate scrutiny. The Indian story, and it was a substantial one, must therefore be unravelled from amongst the larger official accounts of the war. There are almost no records that preserve the subaltern voice of the Indian rank and file, apart from the fortuitous collection of letters passed down by the Indian censors in France. The Gallipoli narrative gets a human touch by the accounts of a few British officers of the Indian Army, who recount the doings of their men in passing. We hence have the enduring snapshot of the Gurkha subedar major weeping in frustration as his wounds forced him to leave his battalion and be carried off the battlefield during the assault on Hill 60; of the Indian gunner, Karam Singh, continuing to relay fire orders from the OP officer to the guns of his battery long after he had been rendered stone blind by a shrapnel; of Gunner Jan Mohamed pumping 17 out of 22 shells into the gun ports of a Turkish battery opposite Quinn's Post, even though his gun emplacement was knocked down by H.E.; of the grieving mule drivers bringing wreaths of wild flowers to lay on the grave of the noble hearted John Simpson, or 'Murphy'; and numerous others that serve to remind us that behind the dry statistics and official reports, there lies another story, that can perhaps now never be told.