



Commonwealth War Graves Commission



INDIA AND THE COMMONWEALTH WAR GRAVES COMMISSION

The Role of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission

The Commonwealth War Graves Commission was established by Royal Charter of 21 May 1917, the provisions of which were amended and extended by a Supplemental Charter of 8 June 1964.

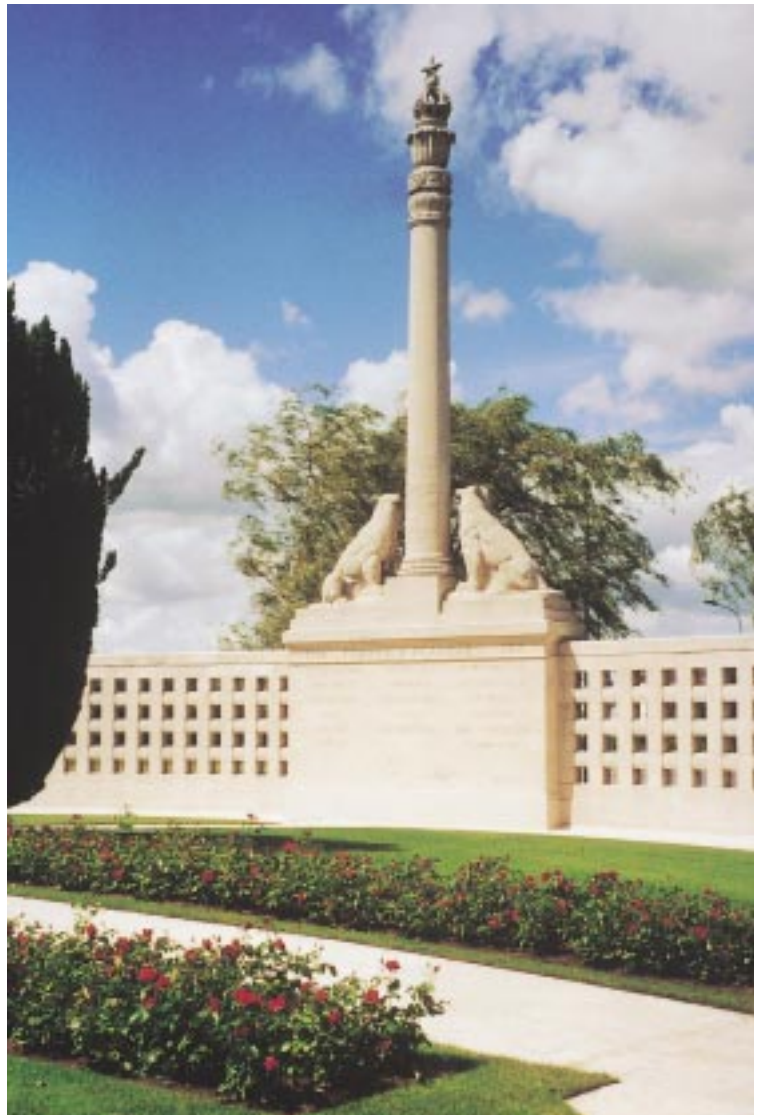
Its duties are to mark and maintain the graves of the members of the forces of the Commonwealth who died in the two world wars, to build and maintain memorials to the dead whose graves are unknown, and to keep records and registers. The cost is shared by the partner governments - those of Australia, Canada, India, New Zealand, South Africa and the United Kingdom - in proportions based on the numbers of their graves. The Commission acts for its member governments in all matters concerning their war graves of the two world wars.

The Commission's work is guided by fundamental principles which were established in 1920:

- that each of the dead should be commemorated individually by name either on a headstone over the grave or by an inscription on a memorial if the grave was unidentified;
- that the headstones and memorials should be permanent;
- that the headstones should be uniform; and
- that there should be no distinction made on account of military or civil rank, race or creed.

The theme of common sacrifice and equal honour in death was reflected in the policy of non-repatriation of remains and contributed to the non-sectarian design of the headstones used throughout the world. Non-repatriation was strictly applied during both world wars for members of the Commonwealth's forces and resulted in the location of the memorials and cemeteries truly reflecting the scope of both conflicts. Indeed, the Commission's mandate encompasses 1.7 million war dead commemorated in 150 countries in over 23,000 burial grounds.

To be considered war dead a member of the forces must have died in service or as a result of service within the two war periods designated by the participating governments; ie, 4 August 1914 - 31 August 1921 or 3 September 1939 - 31 December 1947.



Neuve-Chapelle Memorial, France



Mazargues War Cemetery, France

The Commission's Head Office is located in Maidenhead, Berkshire, United Kingdom. Normal day to day operations are the responsibility of the Director General and the Commission's members meet quarterly to approve corporate plans and review progress of work against those plans. India is represented on the Commission by her High Commissioner resident in London.

The Commission's responsibilities are executed through geographically organised Areas or in some cases Agency arrangements are made. For example, the Canadian Agency of the Commission is responsible for the maintenance of war graves in North America while Director, France Area maintains all war graves in France, Monaco and Switzerland. All ensure



that war graves in their care receive the necessary attention and there is a solid management cycle in place which allocates and expends the funds granted to the Commission by the participating governments.

The War Dead of India

The forces of undivided India, including Gurkha regiments, played a significant part in both world wars, and her 160,000 war dead are buried



Delhi Memorial, India

and commemorated in 50 countries. India's massive volunteer army suffered by far the heaviest losses, but other branches of the Indian services also played their part.

The Royal Indian Marine was armed in 1914, some of its ships serving with the Royal Navy on escort duties and others as coastal minesweepers or river gunboats in the Mesopotamia campaign. As the Royal Indian Navy in the Second World War, its ships saw

action in the Red Sea, the Indian and Atlantic Oceans, the Bay of Bengal and the Mediterranean, as well as in combined operations off the coasts of Sicily and Burma. In both wars, the role of the Indian merchant services in transportation and supply was no less essential than that of their comrades in arms.

The Royal Indian Air Force was formed only in 1933. Initially a small tactical air force, it grew in size throughout the war, joining forces

with the army in the Burma campaign. Many of its officers also served with the Royal Air Force in Burma and other theatres.

In accordance with the requirements of their faith, most Hindu and Sikh servicemen who died are commemorated on special cremation memorials erected in many of the war cemeteries, whilst the graves of most of the Muslim casualties are marked by headstones. The names of those servicemen who have no known grave are inscribed on memorials to the missing in the main campaign areas.

India in the First World War

During the First World War, the strength of the Indian Army rose sixfold to over 1,400,000 men and it was active from the earliest days, first seeing action in German colonies in China in August 1914. By the end of October 1914 the Indian

Rimini Gurkha War Cemetery, Italy



The Rangoon Memorial above and the Cremation Memorial, right, both in Taukkyan War Cemetery, Myanmar

Expeditionary Force was in the line on the Western Front, facing a winter of mud and bitter cold, having arrived just in time to stem the German onslaught, a feat which would not have been possible without them. The Indian Corps fought its first great action as a single force at Neuve-Chapelle in March 1915, and Indian troops further distinguished themselves in the Ypres Salient and at Loos, before the two infantry divisions of the force left for other theatres in November 1915, the two cavalry divisions remaining. Of the 130,000 Indians who served in France and Belgium, almost 9,000 died.

A force of nearly 150,000 Indians saw action in Egypt and Palestine, playing a major part in the defence of the Suez Canal between February 1915 and August 1916 and the final phase of the Palestine campaign in September and October 1918. Almost 7,000 Indian lives were lost. An Indian Brigade also took part in the ill-fated Gallipoli campaign of 1915, most notably at 'Y' Beach, Gully Spur and Gully Ravine. In the assault on Sari Bair in August, men of the 1/6th Gurkha Rifles were the only troops to reach the summit of the ridge before being forced back by Turkish counterfire. More than 1,500 Indians were killed in fighting on the peninsula.

An Indian expeditionary force of two brigades also campaigned against the Germans in East Africa, but it was in Mesopotamia that the Indian forces

El Alamein Memorial, Egypt

volunteer army the world had ever seen. These figures include the units of the Indian State Forces, which by the end of the war totalled some 100,000 troops, of whom over 41,000 were serving outside their states, many of them overseas.

Again, the Indian Army participated in early operations, with a mule company



suffered their heaviest losses. Over half a million Indian troops swelled the expeditionary force that fought there against the Turks in what was a long and difficult campaign, made more hazardous by climate and disease which claimed almost 45,000 Indian lives.

By the end of the First World War, 1,100,000 Indians had served overseas, at a cost of 60,000 dead, earning over 9,200 decorations, including eleven VCs. These figures include the contributions of 26,000 Indian State Force Imperial Service troops who served overseas.

India in the Second World War

With 2½ million men, from an initial 195,000, the Indian Army of the Second World War was the largest

of the Royal Indian Army Service Corps in France as part of the British Expeditionary Force evacuated from Dunkirk in May 1940, and the 4th Indian Division seeing action against Italian forces, playing a major role in their expulsion from Egypt in December 1940, from Abyssinia in May 1941, and, along with the 5th Indian Division, from Eritrea in May 1941.

For the next two years Indian divisions took part in the see-saw struggle between Allied and Axis forces across the deserts of North Africa, culminating in the Battle of El Alamein in October 1942 and the pursuit into Libya and Tunisia in the early months of 1943. During the most critical period of the campaign, when Axis forces threatened to break through into Asia, six of the fourteen divisions under Allied Command were Indian and the Axis surrender on 6 May





Kohima War Cemetery, India

was taken by an officer of the Indian Army. Campaigns in North and East Africa cost 2,500 Indian lives.

Three Indian divisions, half of the Commonwealth force, also fought in Italy between 1943 and 1945, leading the assault on the German defensive Bernhardt Line, and taking part in the battle for Monte Cassino and the pursuit of German forces northwards. More than 5,500 Indians died in this campaign.

On the Malay peninsula, Indian troops had already been sent to reinforce local defences when the Japanese invaded in December 1941, but the Japanese advance could not be contained and, by the time Singapore fell in February 1942, 65,000 Indian soldiers were prisoners of war. More than 16,000 Indians died in the short and violent campaign, or later in captivity. The Japanese went on to take Burma (Myanmar) and to occupy a part of North East India, and Indian forces again played a key role in their recovery in 1944/45, but with a loss of more than 25,000 lives.

The Commitment in India

Over 62,000 Commonwealth war dead of the two world wars are commemorated by the Commission in India. Casualties during the First World War died on the North West

Frontier or in garrisons, and, as it was not possible to maintain all the civil, cantonment and outpost cemeteries in which many of them were buried, their names are recorded on memorials in the war cemeteries at Delhi, Madras and Kirkee, and on the Memorial Arch in New Delhi (today known as the India Gate).

During the Second World War, cemeteries for hospitals and lines of communication were established at Ranchi, Kirkee, Madras, Digboi and Gauhati, and for the battlefields at Imphal and Kohima. Delhi War Cemetery was established after independence to accommodate wartime graves from cantonments in Northern, Western and Central India.



Maintenance and Visits

The cemeteries and memorials are maintained by locally engaged staff under the management of two group supervisors. One based at Kohima War Cemetery is responsible for the sites in North East India and the other, based at Delhi War Cemetery, for all the others. Inspection visits are regularly made by the Commission's officials from Maidenhead. Also based in Delhi is the Commission's Honorary Liaison Officer, who acts as a line of communication between the Commission and the Indian government.

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