



# The Spire Sentinel



**The Newsletter & Magazine of The  
Chesterfield Branch of The Western Front  
Association**



**ISSUE 69 - October 2021**

Our aims are 'Remembrance and Sharing the History of the  
Great War'.

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- 51 .....and finally....

We're pleased to give you information about WFA webinars in the coming weeks

First of all, on Monday 11 October 2021 at 8.00pm (UK time), we have Jim Tanner, with **'Lawrence and the Arab Revolt'**. Jim will talk about the Arab Revolt with a particular focus on the campaign against the Hejaz Railway in what is today western Saudi Arabia. His consideration is less about the clash of empires and more about an astonishing feat of railway building, a British guided insurgency and a modern-day journey through a stunning panorama where the archaeology of the Great War remains largely untouched. Fuller details and how to register to watch this are available on this link. ['Lawrence and the Arab Revolt'](#)

On Monday 25 October 2021, at the usual time of 8.00pm (UK time) we have Fraser Skirrow who will give a talk **'Ill met by moonlight - British and German raiders clash in the outpost war'**. This talk is the story of a couple of raids, one British (by the 2/6<sup>th</sup> Battalion, West Yorkshire Regiment), one German. These took place in the area of 'The Apex' near Bullecourt on the nights of 11 and 13 September 1917. What is unusual is that we have the story from the contemporary British account, the results of prisoner interviews and detailed accounts from the German raiders and defenders. Comparing and contrasting these stories gives us a vivid and personal insight into two violent nights in the outpost war, and the circumstances surrounding the deaths of individual soldiers on both sides. Fuller details and how to register to watch this are available on this link. ['Ill Met By Moonlight': British and German raiders clash in the outpost war.](#)

And finally, on Monday 1 November 2021, Dr Emily Mayhew will give a talk entitled **'Walking quietly away into a hail of lead to carry away a wounded man: Stretcher bearers of the Western Front'**. During the Great War, the battalion and regimental stretcher bearers transformed the medical landscape of the western front battlefield and beyond. In this presentation, Emily Mayhew will detail how bearers developed extraordinary skills at both the point of wounding and during the casualty evacuation phase that ensured casualties were able to survive complex injuries that would otherwise have been deemed fatal. Fuller details and how to register to watch this are available on this link. ['Walking quietly into a hail of lead to carry away a wounded man': Stretcher Bearers of the Western Front](#)

*Any opinions expressed in this Newsletter / Magazine are not necessarily those of the Western Front Association, Chesterfield Branch, in particular, or the Western Front Association in general*

## **Our Speaker - Tuesday 5<sup>th</sup> October - Paul Handford MBE**

### **Women Ambulance Drivers on the Western Front 1914 - 1918.**

*The talk covers women's experiences driving ambulances for the British, Belgium and French Armies on the Western Front during WW1. The talk is complimented by many original, rare and wonderful photographs from Paul's private collection, and also reflects on the Edwardian prejudices towards women and how their war experiences changed their lives.*

### **Biography of Paul Handford MBE**

Paul joined the West Midlands Police 1976.

He helped to establish and develop the National Neighbourhood Policing Programme and in 2006 his work was recognized in the Queen's New Year's Honours list when he was made a Member of the British Empire, "***for services to policing***".

Since retiring in 2006, Paul was able to focus more on his passion, the research and medal collecting to British civilian volunteer ambulance drivers and units during WW1. Paul and his wife Su, have travelled extensively along the entire length of the Western Front in pursuit of this research. Paul also enjoys presenting talks on the subject to various history groups and organisations up and down the country and has supported exhibitions at the 'In Flanders' Fields Museum' in Ypres, Belgium, and the Cadbury Research Library at the University of Birmingham, where medals and other related items from his personal collection were exhibited. Paul is a member of the Orders of Medals Research Society and was a guest speaker at their 2014 and 2019 National Conferences; a member of the Western Front Association, Chair of the Military History Society of West Midland Police, Committee member of the Birmingham Medals Society and Committee member of the West Midlands Police Heritage Museum.

### **November - 2<sup>nd</sup> with Tim Lynch The Home Front 1914-18**

The First World War created an entirely new sphere of war - the Home Front. Every single person in the country was affected in some way by the experience. In this talk Tim will look at some of the bits of the history that have been overlooked including a Hull man's plans for a Kamikaze unit to tackle Zeppelins, the danger of transvestite spies, the importance of cocaine, lipstick, knickers and elephants and why feeding ducks could mean a six month jail sentence.

### **December 7<sup>th</sup> with John Taylor 'A Prelude to War' (An Archduke's Visit) - a classic and true tale of 'what if?'**

John is a professional historian, researcher, lecturer and guide specializing in military and arts history from The Norman period up to the Nineteenth Century but I also venture into a much wider field as and when required. I have appeared on TV and radio and acted in a research capacity on numerous occasions for various media sources. The talk will be about the visit of Archduke Franz Ferdinand to Worksop and Welbeck Abbey in November 1913 .....and an event which could have changed world history



## *Secretary's Scribbles*

Dear Members and Friends,

Welcome to the October issue of the Branch newsletter and magazine.

With two meetings `under our belts` I think we can say that `we`re back` The September attendance was a bit above that for August - let`s hope we can continue this excellent recovery.

As our Branch chair (and National WFA Chair) Tony Bolton said at the last meeting he proposed to run a trip (minibus ?) to London on November 11<sup>th</sup> to attend the Western Front Association`s ceremony at the Cenotaph in Whitehall. We have a number of folks interested in going...if you are thinking about it, please let us know ASAP...either at Tuesday`s meeting or send me an e mail or phone me....number below.

Just to recap, here`s the conditions which we agreed with our hosts the Chesterfield Labour Club.

1. Hand sanitizer is provided at the entrance and must be used. It will also be provided in the meeting room.
2. Masks must be worn while at the bar, otherwise discretionary.
3. No leaning on, or touching the bar.
4. Windows of the meeting room to be open to provide ventilation.
5. As far as practicable, seating to be distanced.

**In addition to our normal raffle at the end of the meeting, I will be having a book sale table. No fixed prices...take your pick...all we ask is a modest donation to Branch funds**

I am pleased to advise that we now have speakers lined up for the rest of the year....more about these elsewhere. Now that these are in place, I am looking to prepare a list of presentations for next year...any suggestions from members on subjects or speakers themselves would be most welcome.

Look forward to seeing as many of you as possible on Tuesday

Take care

Grant Cullen.....Branch Secretary.....07824628638



# BRANDED GOODS AVAILABILITY

New items are always being considered, so please check the Branded goods part of the shop for all items available.

Prices are inclusive of postage within UK (Branded Items Nos 1-11)

[www.westernfrontassociation.com/shop/wfa-branded-items/?p=2](http://www.westernfrontassociation.com/shop/wfa-branded-items/?p=2)  
or call Head Office (Sarah Gunn or Maya Shapland) on 020 7118 1914

And the (Branded Clothing, Nos 12- 18) note new prices (under) effective from 1st July.

Order direct from supplier (West Coast Workwear) [www.westernfrontassociation.com/shop/branded-clothing/](http://www.westernfrontassociation.com/shop/branded-clothing/)  
or ring (0800 169 2228 or 01704 873301)



- |    |                   |          |  |
|----|-------------------|----------|--|
| 1  | Fridge Magnet     | (£5)     | 59mm dia, front metal plate, high strength neodymium magnetic backplate, and plastic mylar front cover       |
| 2  | Anniv' Coaster    | (£8.50)  | 4" in diameter hand crafted slate. Individually polished, screen printed by hand and backed by a baize       |
| 3  | Mousemats         | (£6)     | 196 x 235mm fabric surface and are of high quality. They have a rubberised base layer                        |
| 4  | Bookmarks         | (£2)     | (dims 55 x 175mm) rich UV High Gloss Coating provides protection against stains and damage                   |
| 5  | Baseball Caps     | (£8)     | Lightweight 5 Panel cotton cap, adjustable with velcro rip-strip, one size fits all                          |
| 6  | Ties              | (£11)    | Length 142cm, width 9cm (at widest part), 100% Polyester   |
| 7  | Lapel Badges      | (£2.50)  | 25mm Dia. Die struck + imitation hard enamel, Silver Nickel Plating, Butterfly clutch pin                    |
| 8  | Mug               | (£10)    | 11oz ceramic mug (95mm high x 85mm diameter) features the bold official WFA logo design (two sides)          |
| 9  | Messenger Bag     | (£27)    | 37 x 29 x 11cm, 100% Cotton. Full cotton lining. Zippered organiser section, Capacity:13 litres              |
| 10 | Despatch Bag      | (£30)    | 40 x 30 x 12 cm, (10) Washed Canvas, dual rear pouch pockets. Multiple zippered pockets. Capacity: 14 litres |
| 11 | Shoulder Bag      | (£25)    | 40 x 28 x 18 cm, (10) (11) Polyester. Internal valuables pocket. Zippered front pocket. Capacity: 14 litres  |
| 12 | Oxford Shirt      | (£27)    | Kustom Kit Short Sleeve Corporate Oxford Shirt. Easy iron button down collar, 85% cotton, 15% polyester      |
| 13 | Breathable Jacket | (£71)    | Russell Hydro Plus 2000 Jacket. Nylon taslon with PU Coating   |
| 14 | Rugby Shirt       | (£25)    | Front Row Classic Rugby Shirt, 100% Cotton   |
| 15 | Fleece            | (£24)    | Regatta Thor 111 Fleece Jacket, 100% polyester anti pill   |
| 16 | T-shirt           | (£17)    | Russell Classic Cotton T-Shirt. 100% ringspun cotton   |
| 17 | Sweat Shirt       | (£22.50) | Gents Russell Jerzees Raglan / Ladies Fruit Of The Loom Raglan   |
| 18 | Polo Shirt        | (£20.50) | Russell Cotton Pique Polo Shirt. 100% cotton   |

## WFA 2022 CALENDARS ARE NOW AVAILABLE



The WFA 2022 Calendar is now available for purchase @ £10 each (Including Postage)  
The WFA would like to thank most warmly the photographers who have donated their excellent work freely for the 2022 Calendar project. Please support the Photographers and the WFA by purchasing online at the Eshop., here is the link to the Calendars on the Eshop.  
<http://www.westernfrontassociation.com/shop/wfa-branded-items/wfa-calendar-2022/>

Of course, Calendars are also available at our Branch Meetings, so of the £10 you pay at Branch, £5 of that is retained by the Branch, which really is an all-round win - as not only does it help your branch with fund-raising, but it also helps the WFA sell more calendars, and finally it enables WFA members to support the WFA in its ongoing aims and objectives.

*Mark*

**Mark Macartney | Branded Goods Trustee | The Western Front Association**

## September Meeting - Steve Brunt - The Commonwealth War Graves Commission



Stephen Brunt - MA, BA Hons - Honorary Alderman of Chesterfield . CWGC Kantor Volunteer Speaker

Steve's presentation to the Chesterfield Branch of the WFA looked at who the CWGC are and the origins of the organisation, it's national and international commitment and its work going forward. From 1994 to 2015 Steve worked at Northern College for adult residential education as a Senior Tutor/Business Development Manager. In his former role he was able to develop and deliver a series of courses around the Great War. He first visited the western front WW1 battlefields with his wife Jill back in 1996 and they have been visiting them ever since. The knowledge he

has gained through numerous visits enabled him to develop a unique expertise in the field. He joined the Western Front Association 20 years ago and his first Bulletin is dated September 2001.

As a Councillor and senior Cabinet member on Chesterfield Borough Council Steve initiated a Whistle for the Somme ceremony and event in front of the Town Hall. The ceremony was extremely well attended and took place on 1<sup>st</sup> July 2016 to commemorate the 100 year anniversary of the start of the infamous battle of the Somme. Steve also delivered a series of presentations across the Borough and beyond examining the Somme battle of 1916 in greater detail. As Mayor of Chesterfield (2016/2017) he along with his wife Jill and Councillor John Burrows laid a wreath at the Menin Gate in Ypres, for the people of Chesterfield in January 2017. Steve was also instrumental in developing and chairing the WW1 Commemorations group on Chesterfield Borough Council which initiated a number of commemorative events across the borough for the centenary of the Great War. This was recognised locally and nationally as a huge success and certainly did the Town of Chesterfield proud during that commemorative year. In 2020 during the lockdown he undertook a series of interviews and training events (on zoom) organised by the CWGC to enable him to become a CWGC volunteer speaker for the organisation.

Steve was welcomed to the meeting by Branch Chair Tony Bolton in front a good `post lockdown` attendance.

Steve said he would break down his talk in four sections....the Commonwealth War Graves Commission....

### ***Who We Are***

#### ***Origins***

#### ***Global Commitment***

#### ***The Work Continues***

On the last part Steve mentioned a report which he said he would talk about later on, a report which has made the work of the Commission, quite challenging over the next couple of years.

**Who We Are** Clearly we commemorate the war dead...First World War...Second World War.. and we also tend non-war graves on a contractual arrangement with the MOD that fall outside our qualifying structure.

Steve now put up some facts and figures....

1.7 million Commonwealth servicemen and women are commemorated at 53000 locations around the world in 153 countries. There are 1300 staff of which 500 have been with them for over 20 years. 1.1 million headstones are maintained. We have 850 gardeners and 160 craftsmen spread over 50 nationalities who work for the Commission.

The area of grass cut is equivalent to 994 football pitches and the average length of service of staff members is 16 years. 98,237,000 square meters of grass is cut across the Western Front each year! The average number of casualties found and re-buried each year is 36.

The largest cemetery is Tyne Cot...whilst the smallest cemetery is in North Carolina in the US with four graves



Tyne Cot Cemetery

11,965 burials , of which 8,369 are unnamed

The stone wall at the rear of the Cemetery is the Memorial to the Missing and contains the names of 33,783 soldiers of the UK forces, plus a further 1,176 New Zealanders for whom there is no known grave.

Steve then spoke about the youngest soldier to die he was 14 , the oldest 68. We are told that John Condon was the youngest to die the Commission list a further 44

boys of the same age who fell in the Great War . Just as an aside Steve mentioned Pte George Sidney Lewis, who enlisted aged 12. “Private Sidney Lewis was born on March 12, 1903, and enlisted in August 1915. That makes him the youngest authenticated serving soldier of the First World War. It is astonishing to think he went on to serve on the Western Front for at least six weeks without anyone in authority realising his true age. He was exceptionally mature looking for his age standing 6` 2 ins!

Steve then mentioned the CWGC member governments - Australia, Canada, India, New Zealand, South Africa and the UK...with an annual budget of around £60M and each government contributes in proportion to the number of burials of their soldiers...for example the UK contributes 78%, India 1.2%. The latest report, if the recommendations are acted upon, will certainly alter those figures.

Who does the CWGC commemorate - a wide range of British and Commonwealth troops and to illustrate this Steve put up the following figures...

Individual commemorated by the CWGC if they were a serving member of the Armed Forces, Merchant Navy or other organisation recognised by the British Empire and Commonwealth....or.....an individual who served in another capacity but whose death is attributed to their service and who died during the First or Second World War as defined by the CWGC death responsibility. The work of recovery is ongoing and each year 30 to 40 servicemen`s remains are recovered and every effort is used to try and identify the remains by use of scientific techniques like DNA.



The qualifying date is 4<sup>th</sup> August 1914 to 3<sup>rd</sup> August 1921 for the Great War and 3<sup>rd</sup> September 1939 to 31<sup>st</sup> December 1947 for the Second World War. The first dates are those that Britain declared war on Germany, but the end dates are more complicated as peace treaties were often concluded with belligerents at different times. As we all know the First world war did not end with the Armistice on the

11<sup>th</sup> November 1918. The Treaty of Versailles was signed on 28<sup>th</sup> June 1919 but did not come into force until 10<sup>th</sup> November 1920 but peace treaties with various belligerents became effective in the intervening period. To all intents and purposes the war was declared as ended on 31<sup>st</sup> August 1921. This is the date used by the Commission.

Similarly with the second world war but in this case there was not an Act of Parliament to end the war compared with such an Act ending WW1. After consultation with Allied governments the government used the 31<sup>st</sup> December 1947 as the agreed end date.

Steve said that when he took on this voluntary role with the CWGC he was sent five presentations, which he has looked at and in one of these it looks at the origins and establishment of the CWGC, as that was not without controversy.



We owe so much to this man, Fabian Ware.

**Sir Fabian Arthur Goulstone**

**Ware** KCVO KBE CB CMG (17 June 1869 - 28 April 1949) was a British educator, journalist, and the founder of the Imperial War Graves Commission (IWGC), now the Commonwealth War Graves Commission (CWGC). He also served as Director of Education for the Transvaal Colony and editor of *The Morning Post*.

Born in Clifton, Bristol, he graduated from the University of Paris in 1894. After working in various education capacities, he travelled to the Transvaal Colony where, as a member of Milner's Kindergarten, he became Director of Education in 1903. Two years later, Ware became editor of *The Morning Post* and

returned to England. While editor, he expanded the paper and reoriented it to focus on colonial affairs. After several controversies, culminating in a failed effort to purchase an airship for the United Kingdom, Ware was forced to retire in 1911.

When the First World War started in August 1914, Ware attempted to join the British Army but was rejected because he was too old. With the assistance of Alfred Milner, he obtained an appointment as the commander of a mobile ambulance unit provided by the British Red Cross Society. In this role he began marking and recording the graves of those killed. The unit soon began to focus exclusively on graves, and the organisation was transferred to the British Army in 1915. The following year the Army Department of Graves Registration and Enquiries was created with Ware at its head. On 21 May 1917 the Imperial War Graves Commission was founded. Ware served as vice-chairman. He ended the war as a major-general, having been mentioned in despatches twice.

Post-war, Ware was heavily involved in the IWGC's function. He frequently led negotiations with foreign nations over cemeteries and memorials, dealt with prominent figures in the commission, and worked to ensure the commission's financial security. Ware also attempted to raise support for his ideal of cooperation between

the Dominions. In the lead-up to the Second World War, he attempted to use the IWGC's work as a tool for ensuring peace. When war broke out, he continued to serve as vice-chairman of the IWGC and was re-appointed director-general of Graves Registration and Enquiries. He retired from the Commission in 1948 and died the following year.

By 1918 some 578000 graves had been identified and of these 550000 with no known name but whose headstone would carry Kipling's words.. `Known Unto God`. The work was the greatest memorialising since the Pharaohs.

Opposition and anger was directed at the Commission and one of the big arguments was for repatriation of remains. Against this it was considered undesirable on health grounds, bringing bodies back on ferries, chartered trains and distributing remains to towns and villages throughout the country. Another contentious issue was the rounded headstone as it did not represent the cross or take the form of cruciform. Most of the voices of protest came from women and Sarah Smith, a Leeds working class housewife who had lost a son, she started a petition. She believed those soldiers killed in action who could be brought home for burial should be, as was the case with some other Allied troops. She fought for this cause for some years along with many people from Yorkshire and other parts of the country. In the Yorkshire Evening News of 17 February 1919 there was a report of a statement by Rudyard Kipling. It said, in part: In view of the enormous numbers (over half a million) of our dead in France alone, the removal of the bodies to England would be impossible, even if there was a desire for it. But the overwhelming majority of relatives are content that their kin should lie - officers and men together - in the countries that they have redeemed. Judging from what many gallant fighters have said and written before they in turn fell this, in all but a few special cases, is the desire of the dead themselves.

In response, and after it was reported that Edith Cavell's body was to be brought home for burial, an anonymous letter (signed 'Mother') in the Yorkshire Evening News on 9 May 1919:

#### **Soldiers and their Graves**

Now the government has decided to remove the bodies of the fallen from the scattered cemeteries to large central cemeteries, why cannot they allow relatives who so desire to have them brought home to be placed in the family grave.

Nurse Cavell's body is being brought over to England, and why not others?

I think the feeling is very strong against this attitude of the government, who claimed our boys when living, and now they have sacrificed their lives we are to be robbed of their dear remains, which belong to us and are ours alone.

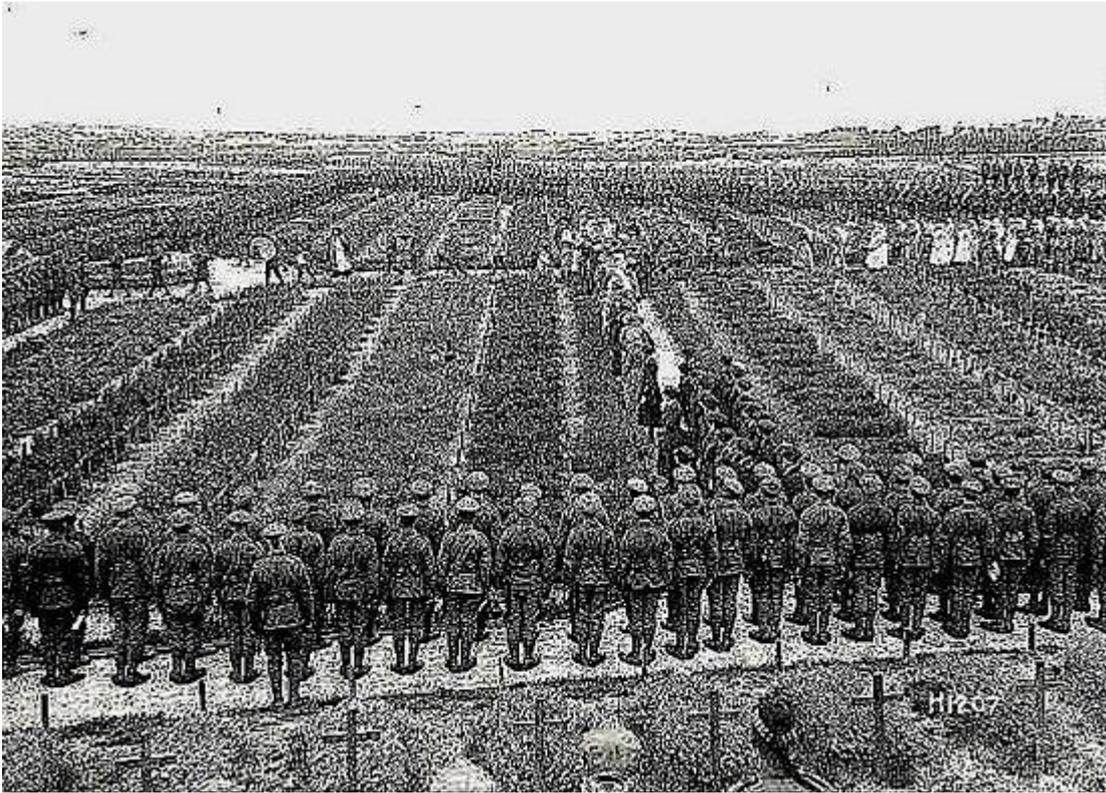
This letter illustrates the strength of feeling in many mothers and wives who were bereaved. It may or may not have been written by Mrs Smith but she is the likely author as it is written in her style. It elicited several responses from readers, and a letter of 20 May 1919, this time signed by Mrs Smith, launched a petition, which led to the formation of the British War Graves Association which eventually failed 20 years later but did provide a service to enable families to visit battlefield cemeteries.



In 1920 a debate in parliament took place and the case for the Imperial War Graves Commission was presented being that `the Commission had every consideration for the bereaved` and that noting could be further from the truth to say that it was `being driven by the spirit of officialdom and bureaucracy`. Winston Churchill, the then Secretary of State for War closed the debate with words of resounding approval of the work being done by the Commission.

As we were told this was to be `The War to End All Wars` 1 million from Britain and Empire, 2.5 million French, 2 million Germans and 4.5 million Russians had perished. Thousands of small cemeteries and burial sites littered the landscape and the decision was taken to concentrate these isolated sites and create new cemeteries. Almost all CWG cemeteries have at least some element of concentration.

Steve mentioned one of the biggest cemeteries at Etaples...with slides of `Then and Now`



□

The guiding principles as defined by the Kenyon Report of 1918. `Each of the dead should be commemorated by a headstone or memorial which should be permanent and headstones should be uniform with no distinction for rank or status.



We have the regimental badge, the service particulars...name, rank, service and other details , if known. Date of death, again, if known and the religious emblem. Of course many have personal inscriptions which was quite controversial when first introduced. The cost per letter to inscribe the stone was well beyond the budget of many ordinary people.

Within CWGC cemeteries, where there is 40+ burials, there is a Cross of Sacrifice designed by Sir Reginald Blomfeld and the Stone of Remembrance by Sir Edward Lutyens. The latter is usually found in cemeteries where more than 1000 are interred.

When the Menin Gate was unveiled in 24<sup>th</sup> July 1927 commemorating 54395 soldiers who perished in the Salient and who have no known grave, Field Marshall Plumer uttered these words... `He is Not Missing...He is Here`

As Mayor of Chesterfield (2016/2017) Steve along with his wife Jill and Councillor John Burrows laid a wreath at the Menin Gate in Ypres, for the people of Chesterfield in January 2017.

### **The CWGC Global Commitment .**

Across Europe 1.221 million graves are looked after, across Asia 270,000, Africa (currently) 162,000, Oceania 25,000, North America 20,000, South America 133.

Our largest site - and most of us will have been to these - is Tyne Cot Cemetery in Belgium and Thiepval Memorial to the Missing of the Somme



Tyne Cot - the Memorial Wall with 35,000 names



Thiepval Memorial to the Missing of the Somme

In front of this memorial there are 300 French and 300 British graves to demonstrate that this was a Franco-British Alliance in the war.

Steve mentioned the practice of non-repatriation which meant that Commonwealth men and women who died abroad were buried abroad. Therefore the majority of the men and women who are buried in the UK were those who died at home, the majority in hospitals, indeed there are more than 170000 casualties from the Great War buried in the UK, many in family graves. In addition there are memorials to those who died on active service but who have no known grave, giving a total , either buried or commemorated, 300000 military personnel in the UK.



Shorncliffe Military Cemetery

In both world wars, ground was set aside in cemeteries and churchyards specifically for war graves and today there are 600 plots with over 20000 graves.

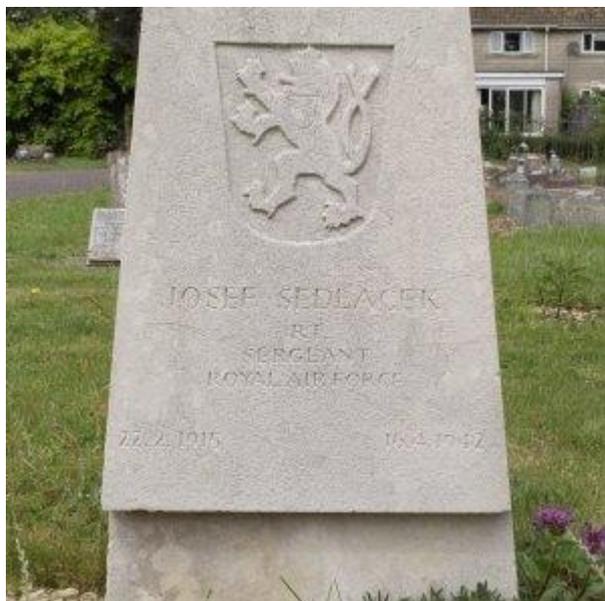


Typical is that of Kilbirnie, in North Ayrshire, Scotland

Another feature of cemeteries in the UK is the use of different stones, the vast majority of CWGC graves in Europe being of Portland stone. Different nationalities had different designs of stones, here we have Polish and Czech.



Each of the headstones of the Polish war graves at Jeanfield cemetery in Perth has been covered with a red and white sash to remember the sacrifice of the Polish Armed Forces in World War Two. Polish scouts 3 RDH "Nieprzemakalni" from Edinburgh placed the sashes on the headstones. (31 October 2015)



Czech War Grave headstone

Steve then drew attention to local Spital Cemetery in Chesterfield where there are 43 war graves. He also mentioned other cemeteries in the district where there are war graves. The Friends of Spital Cemetery ( Note. We report on their activities regularly in this newsletter) are seeking a new Chairman. In this cemetery there are graves of those who died directly or indirectly from world war one. 37 servicemen and one servicewoman lie in this cemetery who died of wounds or illness as a result of this war. The majority have CWGC headstones although five have family graves. Steve then put up a picture of Anzac Day this year, April 25<sup>th</sup>



If anyone wants to attend this Commemoration in future it takes place at 5am on the 25<sup>th</sup> April, each year.

The Friends of Spital Cemetery do Cemetery tours, second Sunday of each month...and it is not just all about war graves.

Recently a plaque was unveiled at the former home of the only woman who died during service in World War One - Nurse Anne Veronica Fletcher



After training at Bradford Hospital Anne joined the Territorial Free Nursing Service in 1915 as a staff nurse. She was posted to East Leeds War Hospital to care for wounded soldiers. The King is said to have complimented her on her bandaging skills. However, Anne contracted tuberculosis and she was forced to resign due to ill health in 1917. She was admitted to Walton Sanatorium and died at home on March 14, 1918, when she was just 27 years old.

Her obituary in the Derbyshire Courier stated: "Heroic sacrifice, the result of untiring devotion to duty in nursing sick and injured soldiers fresh from the battlefield was made by Nurse Anne Veronica Fletcher. Overwork and exposure undermined her constitution."

On the 100th anniversary of her death and International Women's Day wreaths were laid by the British Legion, UNISON and Chesterfield Royal Hospital.

The work of the CWGC continues across the globe - 1750 acres - 150 countries - 900 gardeners. Architectural conservation is ongoing, both in this country and abroad. Picture shows work at Thiepval



Reconstruction takes place - Habbaniya Cemetery in Iraq had been totally wrecked in the aftermath of the Iraq war but has now been carefully restored. The first picture shows the scene when the CWGC team started work, the second the completed restoration.



Reburials take place, the new cemetery (Pheasant Wood) at Fromelles being one of the most notable.

This First World War cemetery built by the Commonwealth War Graves Commission on the outskirts of Fromelles in northern France, near the Belgian border. Constructed between 2009 and 2010, it was the first new Commonwealth War Graves Commission cemetery for more than 50 years, the last such cemeteries having been built after

the Second World War. The cemetery contains the graves of 250 British and Australian soldiers who died on 19 July 1916 in the Battle of Fromelles.

The bodies were discovered following historical research that included analysis of aerial photographs showing the presence of mass graves on the edge of Pheasant Wood (*Bois Faisan*), just outside the village of Fromelles. The presence of the bodies was confirmed in May 2008, and the bodies were recovered during excavation work in 2009. A specially convened Identification Board published a report on 17 March 2010 announcing the first 75 bodies to have been successfully identified using DNA analysis. Further identification continues where possible.



Steve and his wife attended ten burials on one day in January 2010. The dead soldiers were reburied with full military honours. The cemetery contains 250 graves of whom 225 were Australians



In 2003 a new cemetery was constructed in Dar es Salaam in Tanzania



Despite the passage of time the CWGC records are not complete, new names are often found and need to be added to the Casualty Archive and new headstones or memorials erected.

In December 2019, the Commonwealth War Graves Commission (CWGC) appointed a Special Committee to probe the early history of the Imperial War Graves Commission (IWGC) to identify inequalities in the way the organisation commemorated the dead of the British Empire from the two world wars. Where such inequalities were identified, it was asked to produce a set of recommendations that might assist and guide the present-day CWGC in responding to them.

This report can be read here....

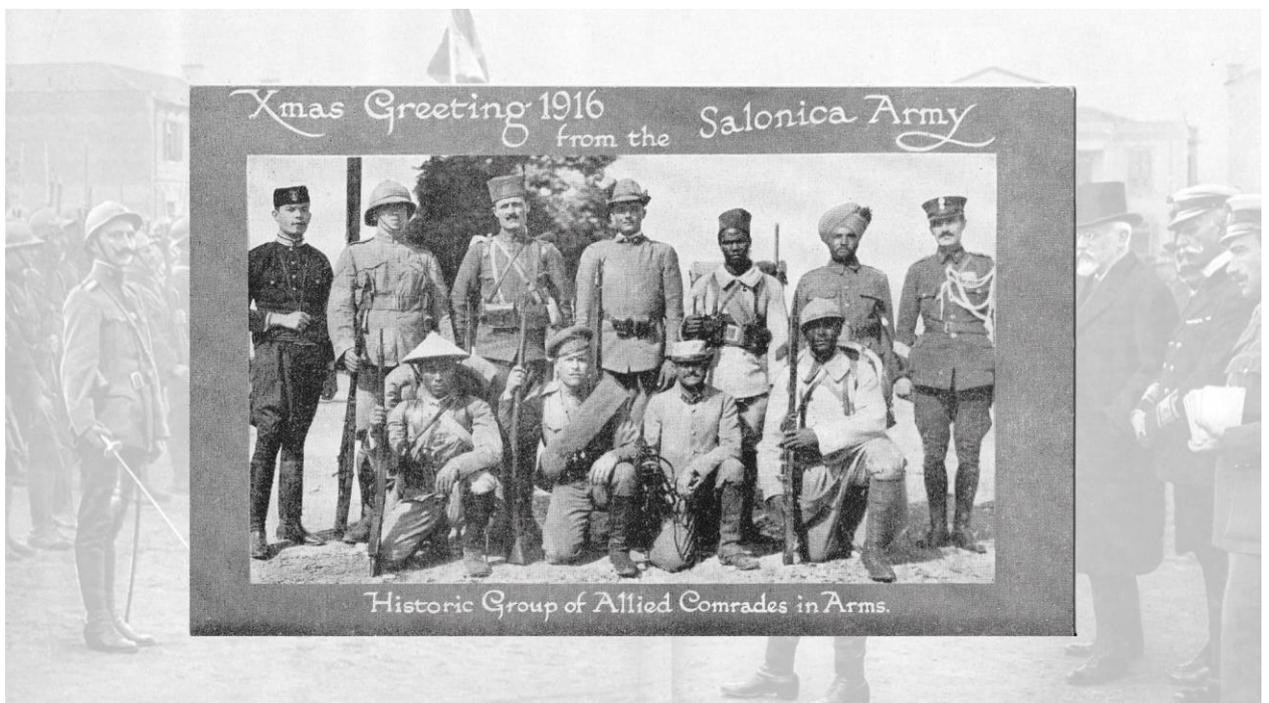
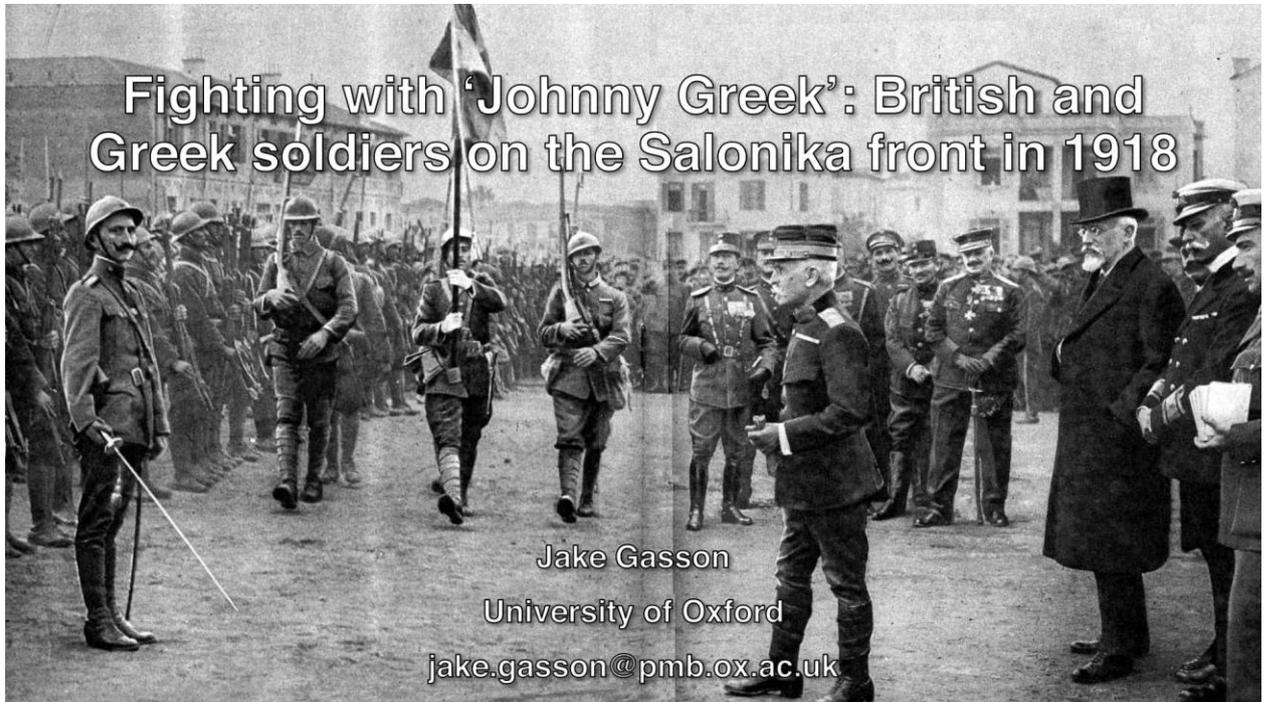
<https://www.cwgc.org/media/noantj4i/report-of-the-special-committee-to-review-historical-inequalities-in-commemoration.pdf>

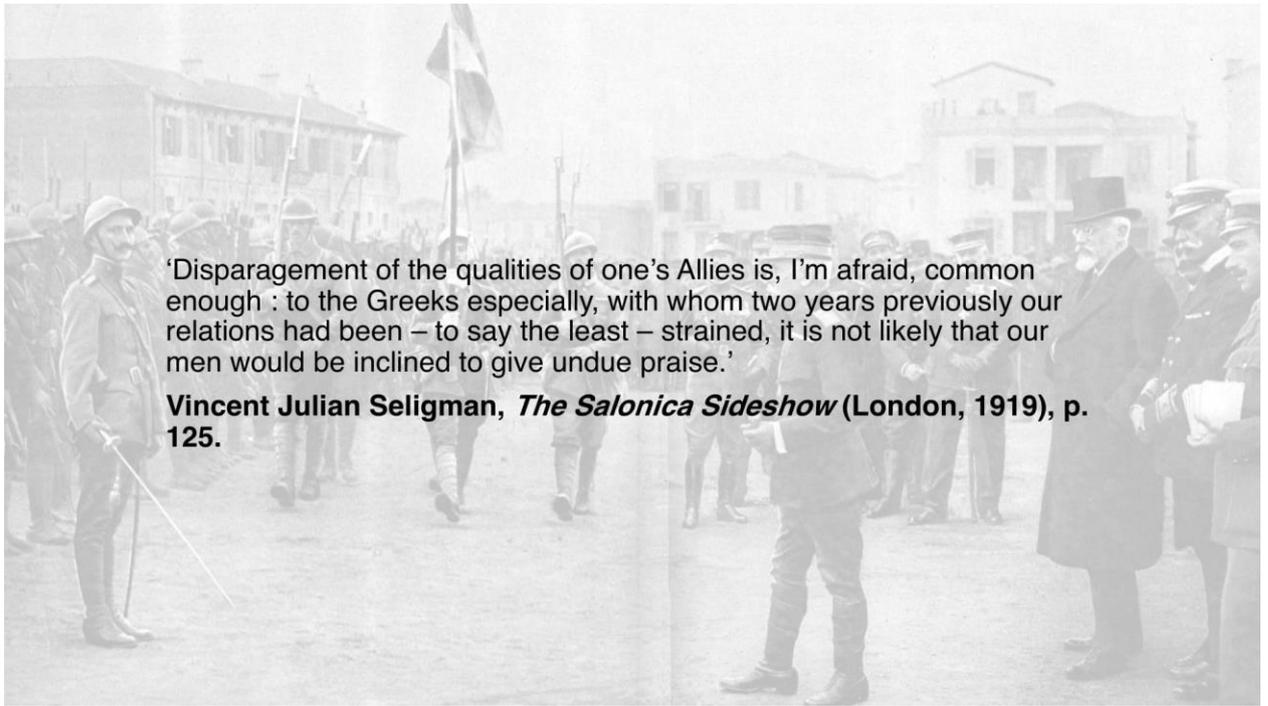
Steve concluded by mentioning the Commonwealth War Graves Foundation  
The Commonwealth War Graves Foundation (CWGF) aims to engage and educate people - especially the young - with the work of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission (CWGC) and the inspiring stories of the men and women who died whilst fighting in the two World Wars. Your support will help the Commonwealth War Graves Foundation support key projects like our Eyes On, Hands On volunteer programme which has already helped us inspect over 50,000 scattered war graves in the UK. For more details..... <https://cwgf.enthuse.com/profile>

On September 22<sup>nd</sup> we had another joint webinar with our Lincoln friends `The British Army and the Greeks at Salonika in 1918` presented by Jake Gasson.

Salonika is a much forgotten theatre of the war and I think we will all learn more about the British Army deployed there, and its sometimes complex relationship with the Greek Army.

Here is a selection of the slides that Jake used to illustrate his talk....



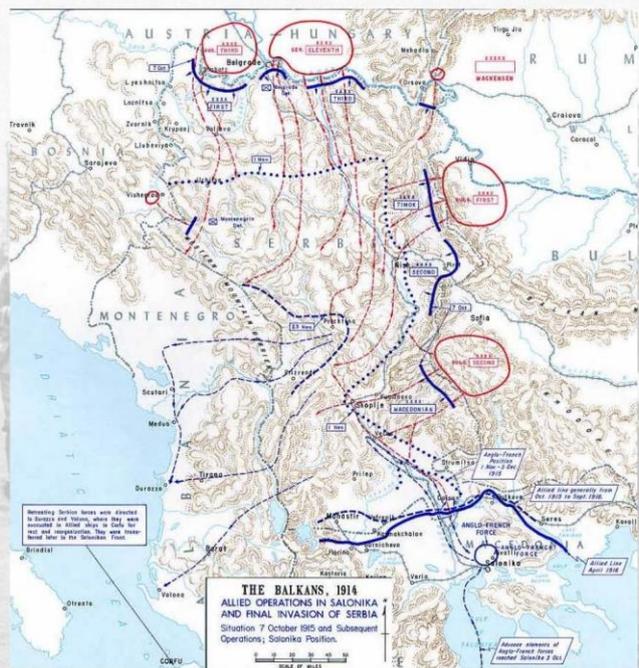


‘Disparagement of the qualities of one’s Allies is, I’m afraid, common enough : to the Greeks especially, with whom two years previously our relations had been – to say the least – strained, it is not likely that our men would be inclined to give undue praise.’

**Vincent Julian Seligman, *The Salonica Sideshow* (London, 1919), p. 125.**



## The Salonika Campaign





Eleftherios Venizelos (Library of Congress)



King Constantine I (Library of Congress)



Greek supporters of the National Defence movement, October 1916 (Wikimedia Commons)



Venizelos inspects the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion Greek National Defence Army Corps (© IWM Q 32514)



French artillery overlooking the Acropolis around the time of the Battle of Athens on 1 December 1916 (Wikimedia Commons)



Venizelos arriving at Athens on 27 June 1917 to assume office as Prime Minister of a united Greece (gallica.bnf.fr)



Greek and British soldiers, 1915 (gallica.bnf.fr)

## British Views of the Greeks

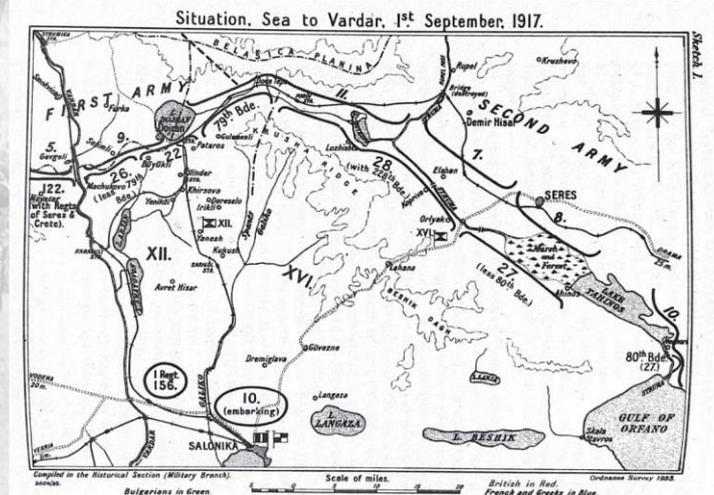
'We were told that certain of the Greeks were followers of a chap named Venizelos and they might be considered not too bad; on the other hand, the Greeks in King Constantine's party were definitely suspect. How were we to distinguish between friend and foe?'

**Private Bernard Livermore, 20<sup>th</sup> London Regiment (Blackheath and Woolwich)**

'The place seems stuffed with Greek troops who are a most sloppy-looking lot of cut-throats. The officers are generally very smartly dressed and look fearfully pleased with themselves. However I don't much like the look of those I have seen as they seem effeminate and out of condition and are sneaky looking.'

**Captain Noel Drury, 6<sup>th</sup> Royal Dublin Fusiliers, 12 October 1915**

## The Struma Front



## Mobilising the Royal Greek Army

- Distinct force from the Army of National Defence formed after the Salonika Revolution
- Lacked the necessary quality and quantity of officers
- Little enthusiasm for the war
- Widespread desertion and mutinies
- Lacked weapons and equipment



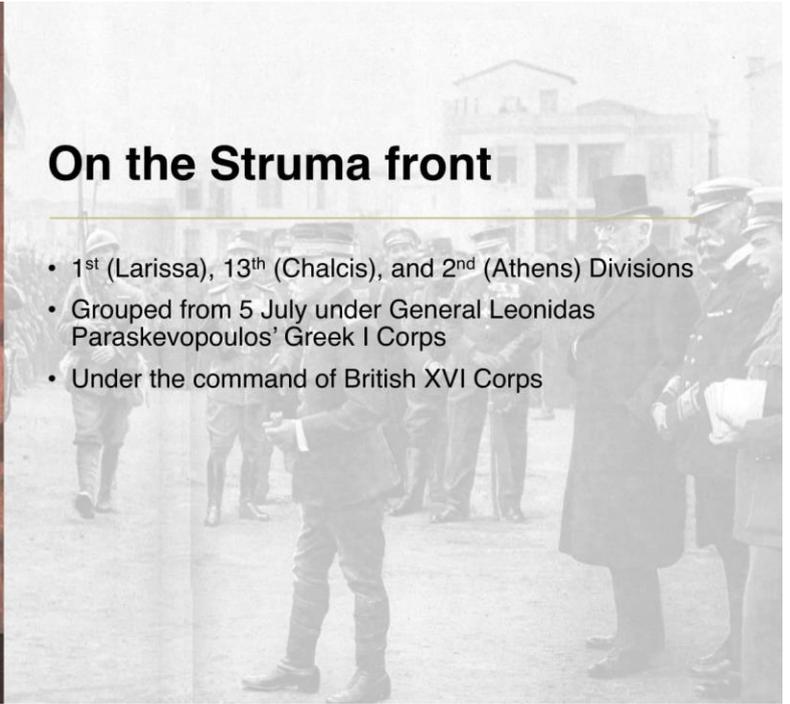
Venizelos inspecting Greek troops on the Macedonian front, 1918 (Wikimedia Commons)



General Leonidas Paraskevopoulos (Wikimedia Commons)

## On the Struma front

- 1<sup>st</sup> (Larissa), 13<sup>th</sup> (Chalcis), and 2<sup>nd</sup> (Athens) Divisions
- Grouped from 5 July under General Leonidas Paraskevopoulos' Greek I Corps
- Under the command of British XVI Corps



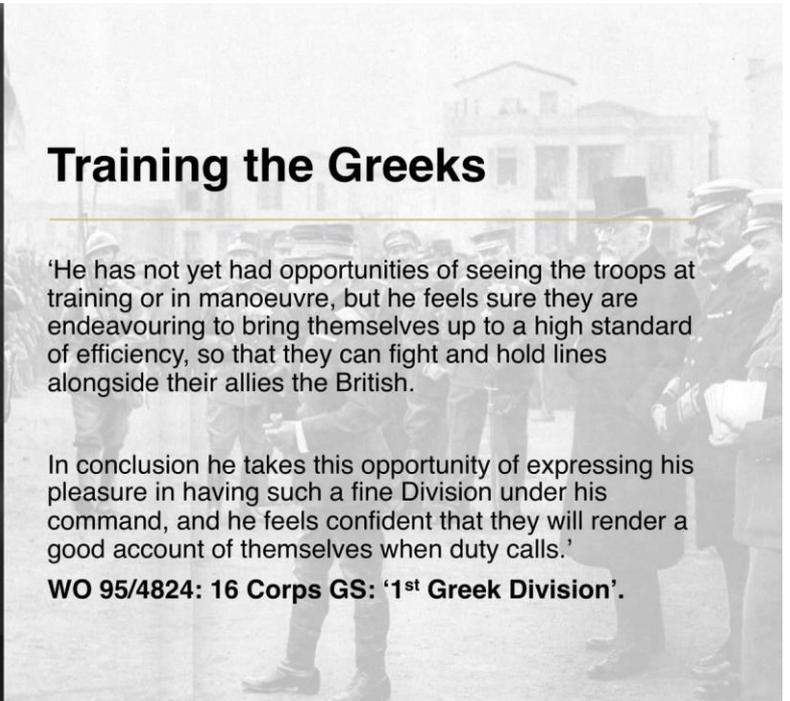
Lieutenant-General Charles James Briggs, GOC XVI Corps (Wikimedia Commons)

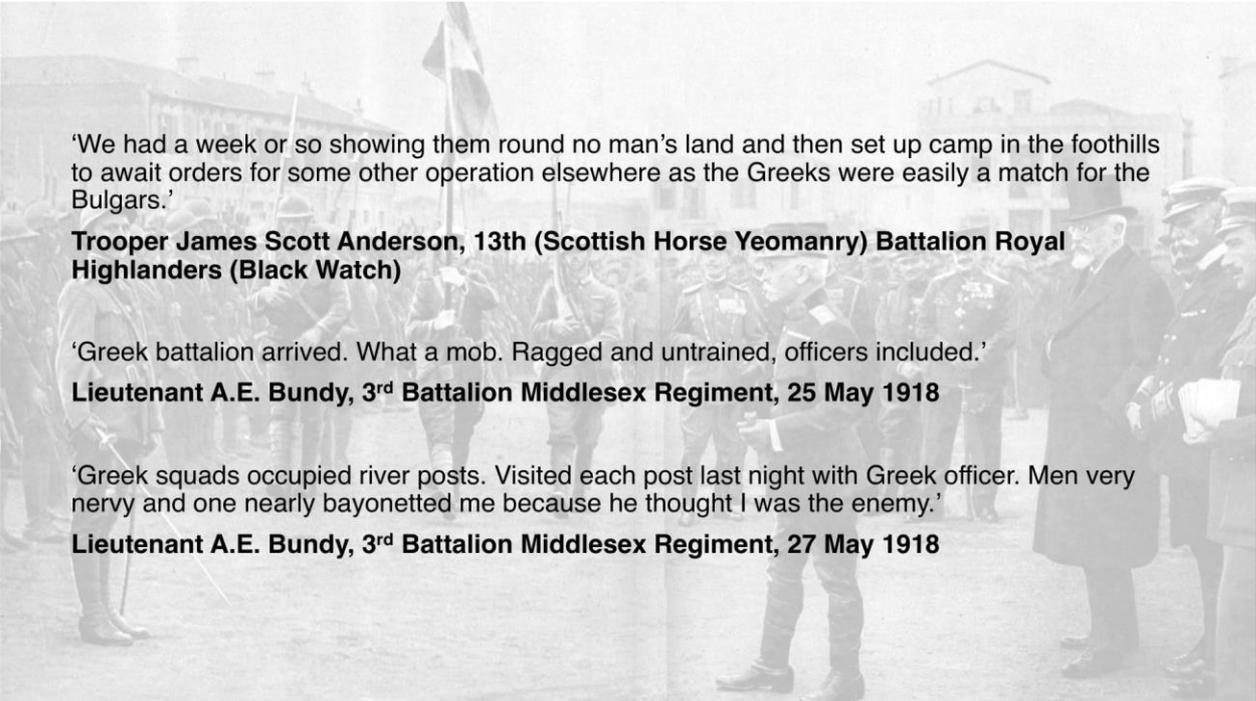
## Training the Greeks

'He has not yet had opportunities of seeing the troops at training or in manoeuvre, but he feels sure they are endeavouring to bring themselves up to a high standard of efficiency, so that they can fight and hold lines alongside their allies the British.'

In conclusion he takes this opportunity of expressing his pleasure in having such a fine Division under his command, and he feels confident that they will render a good account of themselves when duty calls.'

**WO 95/4824: 16 Corps GS: '1<sup>st</sup> Greek Division'.**





'We had a week or so showing them round no man's land and then set up camp in the foothills to await orders for some other operation elsewhere as the Greeks were easily a match for the Bulgars.'

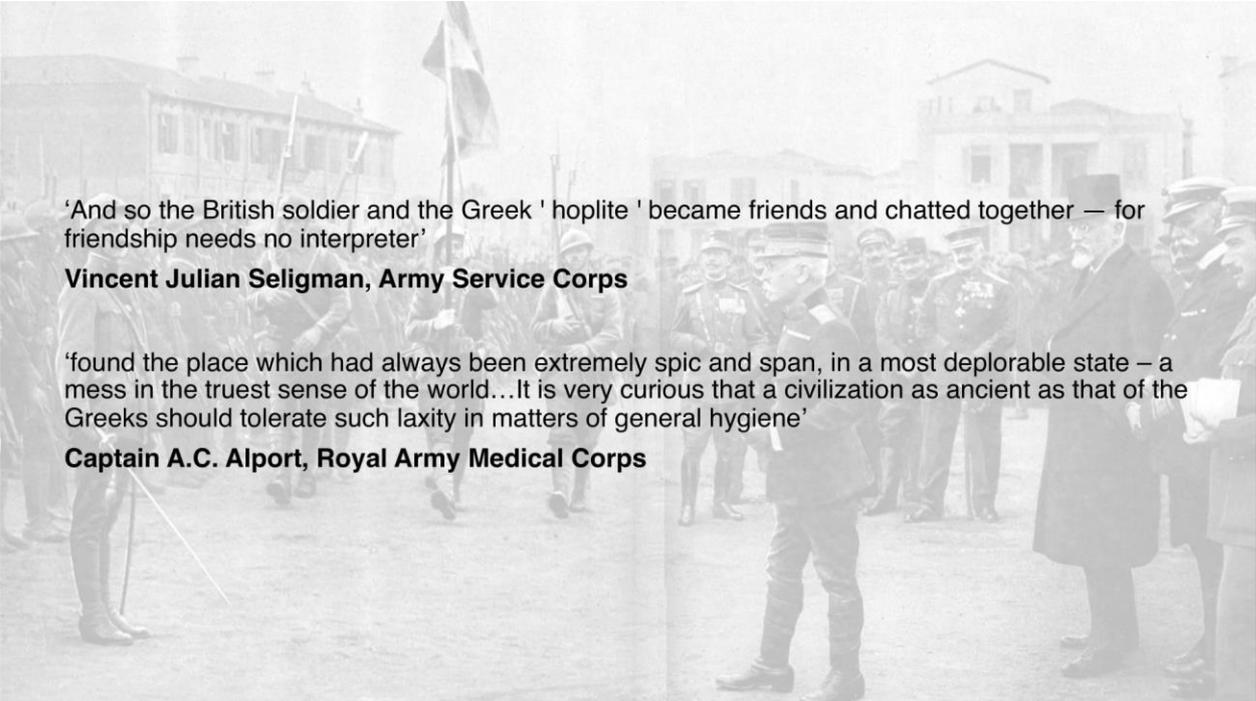
**Trooper James Scott Anderson, 13th (Scottish Horse Yeomanry) Battalion Royal Highlanders (Black Watch)**

'Greek battalion arrived. What a mob. Ragged and untrained, officers included.'

**Lieutenant A.E. Bundy, 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion Middlesex Regiment, 25 May 1918**

'Greek squads occupied river posts. Visited each post last night with Greek officer. Men very nervy and one nearly bayoneted me because he thought I was the enemy.'

**Lieutenant A.E. Bundy, 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion Middlesex Regiment, 27 May 1918**



'And so the British soldier and the Greek 'hoplite' became friends and chatted together — for friendship needs no interpreter'

**Vincent Julian Seligman, Army Service Corps**

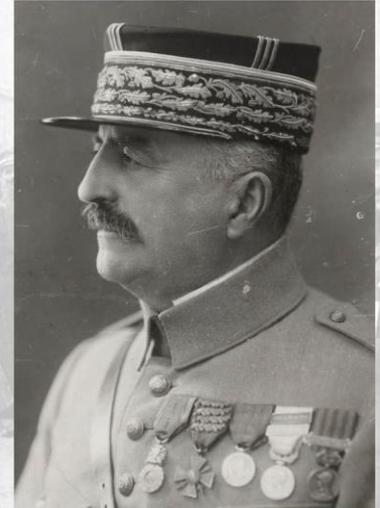
'found the place which had always been extremely spic and span, in a most deplorable state — a mess in the truest sense of the world...It is very curious that a civilization as ancient as that of the Greeks should tolerate such laxity in matters of general hygiene'

**Captain A.C. Alport, Royal Army Medical Corps**

## The Final Allied Offensive, September 1918

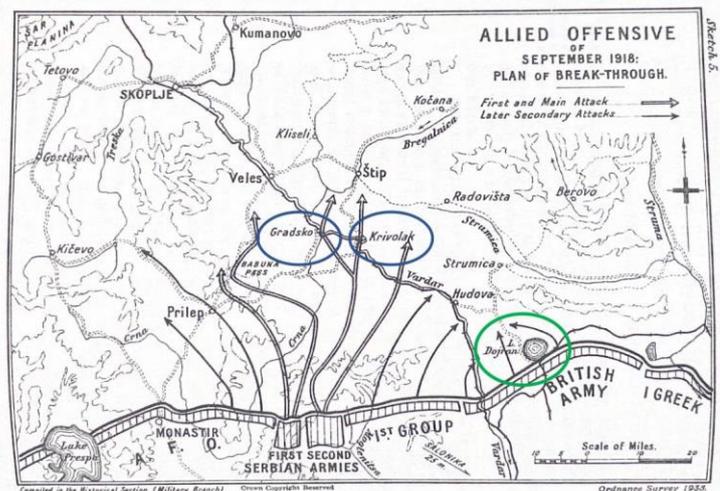


General Adolphe Guillaumat, commander of the *Armées alliées en Orient* December 1917-June 1918 (Wikimedia Commons)

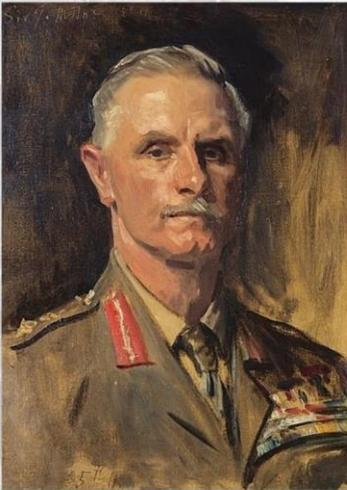


General Franchet d'Espèrey, commander of the *Armées alliées en Orient* from June 1918

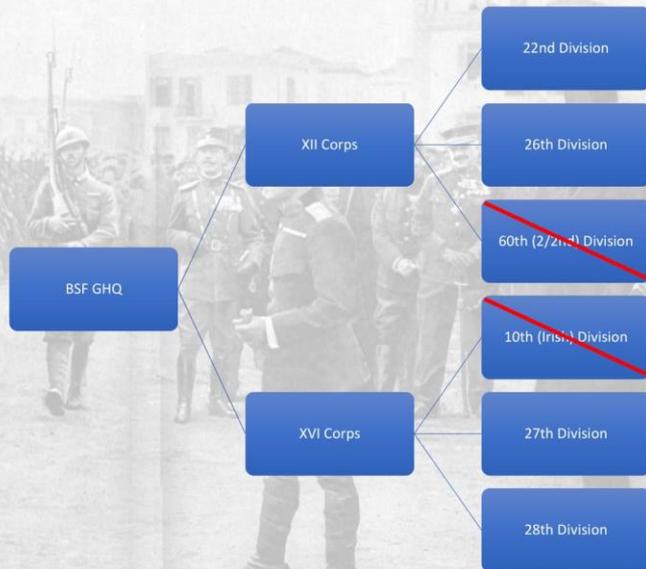
## The Allied Plan



## The British Salonika Force in September 1918



Field Marshal George Francis Milne  
(Wikimedia Commons)

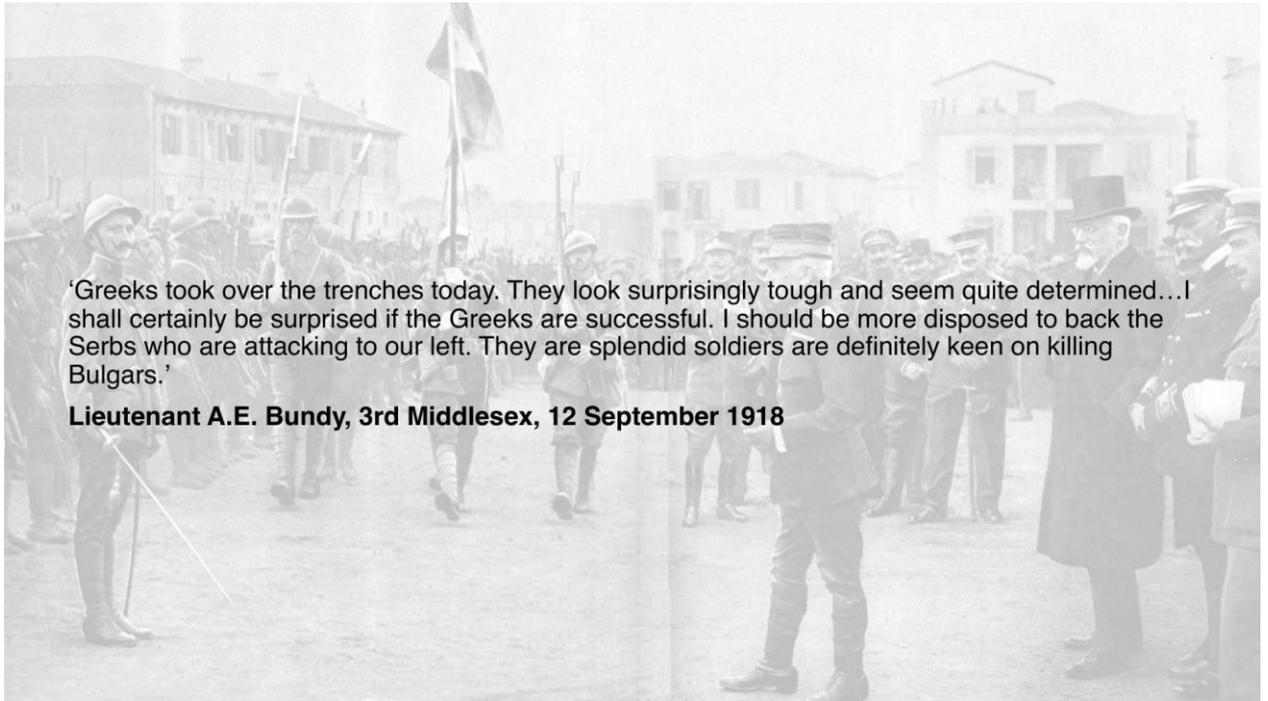


## Cretan and Serres Divisions

- Raised as part of the Army of National Defence
- More experienced and committed than the units of the Royal Greek Army
- Both participated in the Greek victory at the Battle of Skra di Legen, 29-30 May 1918

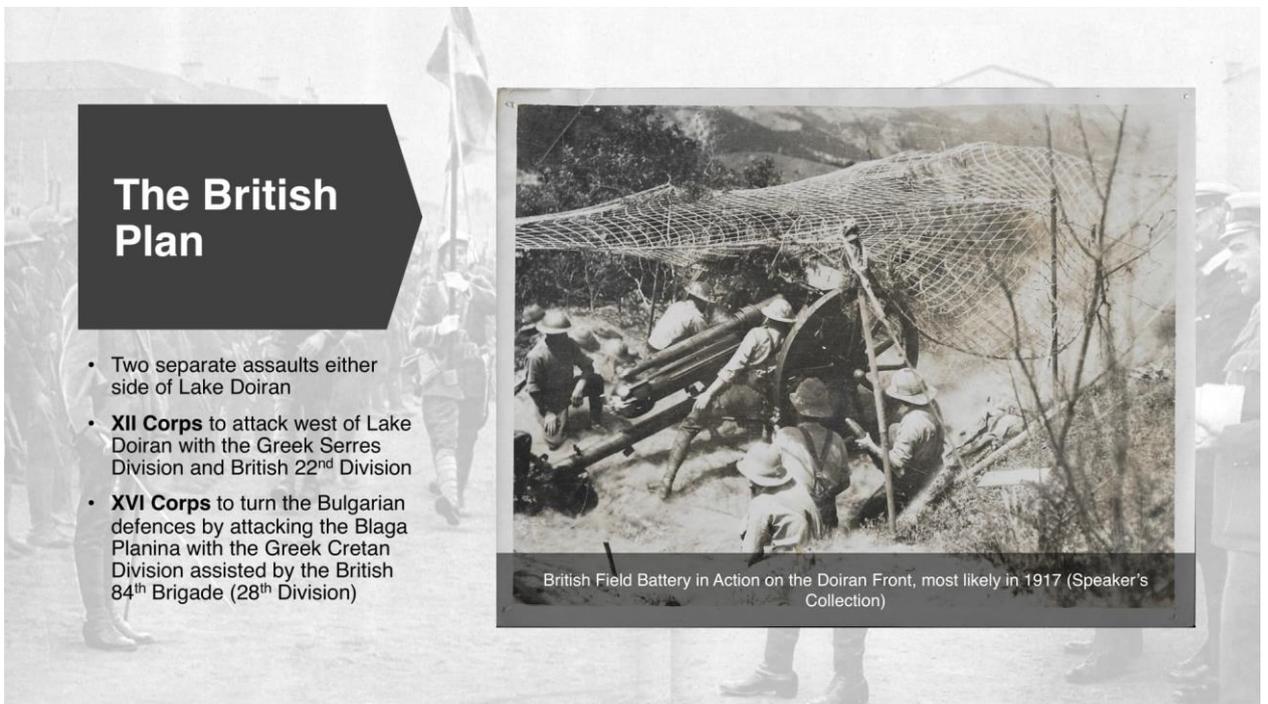


The presentation of the regimental war flag to the Serres Division, December 1916  
(Wikimedia Commons)



'Greeks took over the trenches today. They look surprisingly tough and seem quite determined...I shall certainly be surprised if the Greeks are successful. I should be more disposed to back the Serbs who are attacking to our left. They are splendid soldiers are definitely keen on killing Bulgars.'

**Lieutenant A.E. Bundy, 3rd Middlesex, 12 September 1918**



## The British Plan

- Two separate assaults either side of Lake Doiran
- **XII Corps** to attack west of Lake Doiran with the Greek Serres Division and British 22<sup>nd</sup> Division
- **XVI Corps** to turn the Bulgarian defences by attacking the Blaga Planina with the Greek Cretan Division assisted by the British 84<sup>th</sup> Brigade (28<sup>th</sup> Division)

British Field Battery in Action on the Doiran Front, most likely in 1917 (Speaker's Collection)

## The Bulgarian Defences

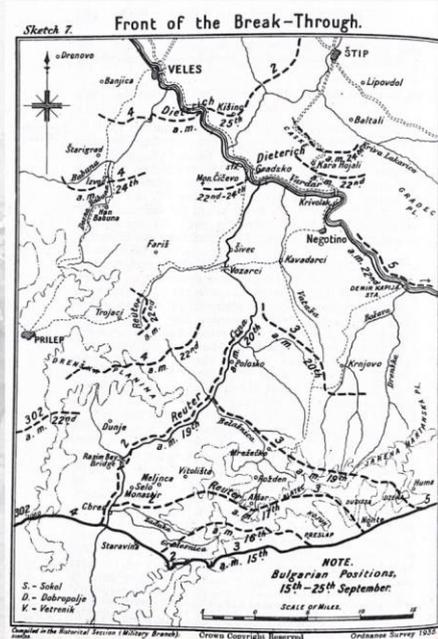
- West of Lake Doiran strongly fortified and held by the 9<sup>th</sup> (Pleven) Division
- North-east of Lake Doiran held by the 1<sup>st</sup> Macedonian Brigade



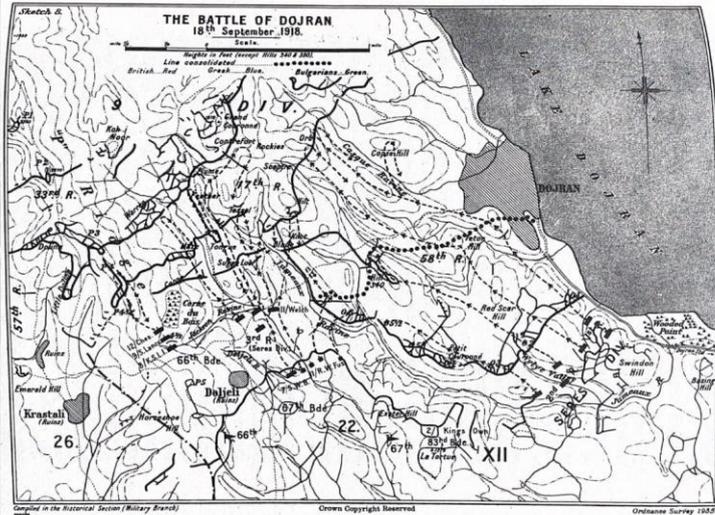
View of the Grand Couronné (© IWM Q 14978)

## The Battle of Dobro Pole

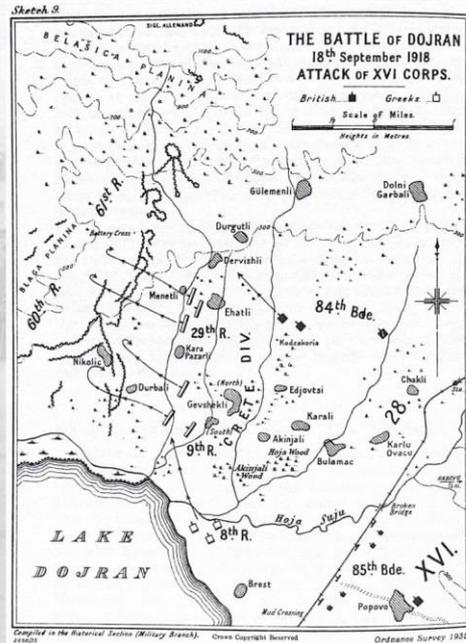
- Bombardment began at 7:00am on 14 September, followed by the Franco-Serbian infantry assault at 5:30am on 15 September
- 30 kilometre breach in the Bulgarian front by 17 September
- Bulgarian retirement descended into a rout and morale collapsed

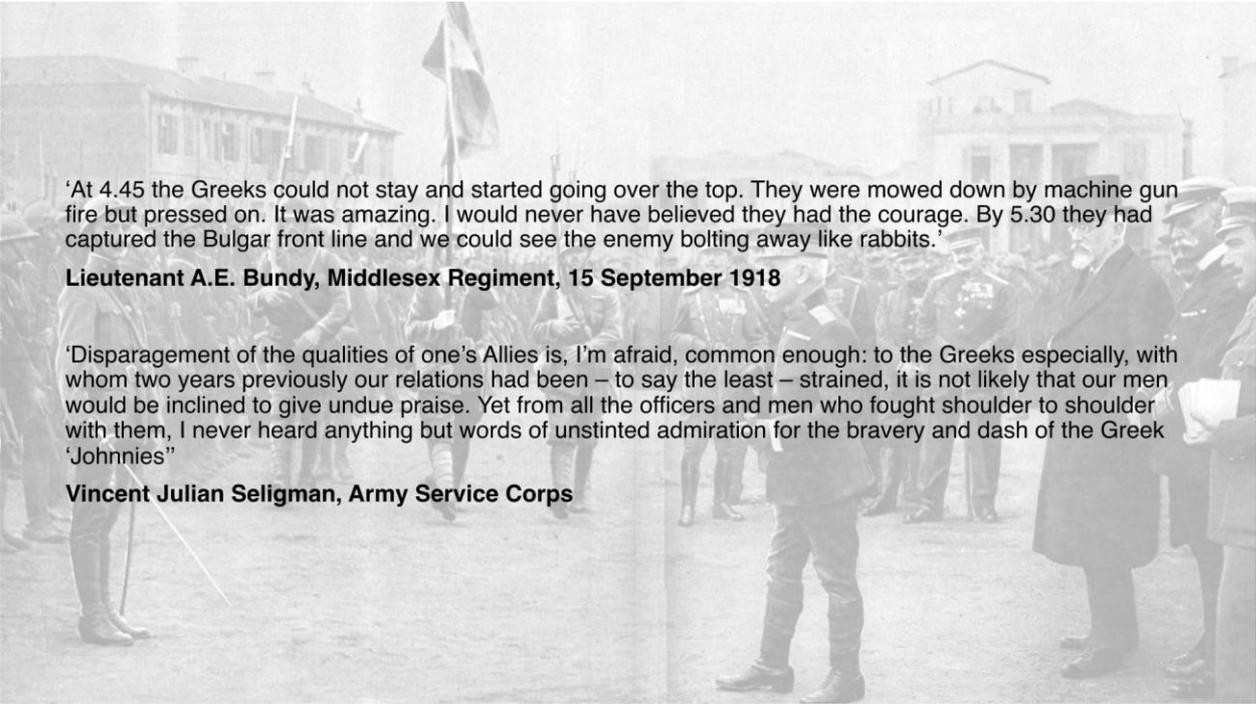


**XII Corps  
operations  
west of  
Lake Doiran**



**XVI Corps  
operations  
northeast of  
Lake Doiran**





'At 4.45 the Greeks could not stay and started going over the top. They were mowed down by machine gun fire but pressed on. It was amazing. I would never have believed they had the courage. By 5.30 they had captured the Bulgar front line and we could see the enemy bolting away like rabbits.'

**Lieutenant A.E. Bundy, Middlesex Regiment, 15 September 1918**

'Disparagement of the qualities of one's Allies is, I'm afraid, common enough: to the Greeks especially, with whom two years previously our relations had been – to say the least – strained, it is not likely that our men would be inclined to give undue praise. Yet from all the officers and men who fought shoulder to shoulder with them, I never heard anything but words of unstinted admiration for the bravery and dash of the Greek 'Johnnies''

**Vincent Julian Seligman, Army Service Corps**

## Conclusions and Questions



The unveiling of the Doiran Memorial, 25 September 1926 (Speaker's collection)

**Recording of the voice of Emperor of Austria Hungary Franz Josef. Made and broadcast on the 15 December 1915 it was the first time many of his subjects ever heard his voice.**



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PdcGCEz32UI>

What His Imperial and Royal Highness says

"Ich begleite das Wirken des österreichischen Militär- Witwen- und Waisenfonds mit meinen herzlichsten Wünschen. Möge seinen edlen Bestrebungen zum Wohle der Hinterbliebenen meiner braven Krieger voller Erfolg beschieden werden."

Translation:

"I support the work of the Austrian military fund for widows and orphans with my most cordial wishes. May its noble endeavours for the good of my dutiful warrior's surviving dependants be awarded with complete success."

## **Indians in the Ypres Salient 1914-1918**

In this contribution I address the presence of Indian troops on and behind the front line in Belgium in the First World War. I will only mention the presence of the Indian front sector near Neuve-Chapelle in passing. Not because I think that the Battle of Neuve-Chapelle and the Indian sector there is of a lesser importance, on the contrary. However, I am convinced that others are better qualified than myself to examine Neuve-Chapelle and will do so at this conference. As a Belgian First World War historian I am of the opinion it is my task to study the passage of Indian army units in my country, and Ypres in particular, the city where I live and work. This contribution is therefore a local study, a piece of military and socio-cultural history which - besides describing the events - asks what the importance and the ultimate meaning was of deploying Indian troops near Ypres.

In Belgium, the front line ran for fifty kilometres, from Nieuport on the coast to Ploegsteert on the French-Belgian border. The deadlock here began in October 1914 with the Battle of the Yser and the 1<sup>st</sup> Battle of Ypres, and ended on 28 September 1918, when the war of movement finally resumed with the 'Liberation Offensive'.<sup>1</sup> The war-stricken zone was the southern part of the province of West Flanders, a rural backwater which was less densely populated than the rest of the country and better known under its unofficial name Westhoek ('West Corner'). The front line ran through or near the towns of Nieuport (Nieuwpoort), Dixmude (Diksmuide) and Ypres (Ieper) while Furnes (Veurne) and Poperinghe (Poperinge) formed the backbone of the rear area.<sup>2</sup> These five towns were all small in size – none had more than 17,000 inhabitants – but had a rich cultural heritage. The language spoken in this region was a local dialect, one of the many Flemish versions of Dutch, and nearly all belonged to the Roman-Catholic Church.<sup>3</sup> In September and October 1914, many refugees from more eastern parts of Belgium arrived here, spurred by the German advance.<sup>4</sup> Some stayed in Flanders' Westhoek, in an attempt to remain on Belgian territory; most, however, continued their flight and ended up in France or the United Kingdom. The local inhabitants, who held on in their own region, were marginalised not only by the refugees, but also by thousands of troops. In the Yser area (Nieuport-

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<sup>1</sup> The Liberation Offensive is the name given in Belgium to that part of the Final Offensive in which occupied Belgium was liberated. The offensive started on 28 September 1918 and was stopped by the declaration of armistice on 11 November 1918. It was conducted by the 'Army Group Flanders', led by King Albert I of the Belgians as Commander-in-Chief. M. Weemaes, *De l'Yser à Bruxelles : offensive libératrice de l'armée belge le 28 septembre 1918* (Bruxelles: Impr. P. François, 1969), p. 411 gives a detailed account of the offensive.

<sup>2</sup> I have used the French names here, as this is how these towns would be known to the British (and the French) then and now. However, the recent official Dutch version is shown in brackets.

<sup>3</sup> P. Chielens, D. Dendooven and H. Decoodt (eds.), *De Laatste Getuige. Het Oorlogslandschap van Vlaanderen* (Tielt: Lannoo, 2006), 12-85. This book (*The Last Witness. The War Landscape of Flanders*), as yet unpublished in English, offers an overview of World War 1 in Flanders, with the landscape as starting point.

<sup>4</sup> M. Amara, *Strangers in a Strange Land. Belgian Refugees 1914-1918* (Leuven, Davidsfonds, 2004), 7-36 and M. Amara, *Des Belges à l'épreuve de l'exil. Les réfugiés de la Première Guerre mondiale (France, Grande-Bretagne, Pays-bas) 1914-1918* (Bruxelles: Université Libre de Bruxelles, 2007), 405. The latter is the first in-depth study of the Belgian refugees of First World War.

Dixmude), the majority of the military belonged to the Belgian Army, but near Ypres and Poperinghe, it was a multinational and multiracial force that occupied the territory. For the local population, most of whom had never come into contact with foreigners (except for French people), it was a most extraordinary situation which is reflected in their diaries, memoirs and interviews. It is important to stress the multicultural aspects of the military forces present in Flanders. Recent research showed that during the First World War and the immediate post-war period representatives of not less than 55 different cultures, hailing from the same number of actual states were present in this little corner of unoccupied country. Apart from the Belgian, French, British, German, Portuguese and American armies who were all involved in the fighting in Flanders, the French and the British brought over troops from every corner of their respective empires. Relatively few Indians were stationed near Ypres, compared to some other troops from the British Commonwealth, like Canadians or Australians. However, they played an important part in the First Battle of Ypres and the Second Battle of Ypres.

### The First Battle of Ypres

The British-Indian army's involvement on the Western front started on 6 August 1914. That day, the War Council in London requested two infantry divisions and a cavalry brigade from the Viceroy's government to be sent to Egypt. The two selected infantry divisions were the Lahore Division (3rd India War Division) and the Meerut Division (7th Indian War Division). Together they formed the Indian Corps. The Secunderabad Cavalry Brigade was added later. On 27 August 1914 the British government decided that the Indian divisions had to be sent immediately to France, as reinforcement of the British Expeditionary Force, which had already suffered heavy losses in the Battle of Mons. Part of the Lahore Division had since already left. Its new destination was Marseille. It arrived in late September 1914. Along the way, the Lahore Division had left one of its brigades, the Sirhind Brigade, behind in the region of the Suez Canal. Because some of the units of the Jullundur Brigade did not leave India until the end of September, only the Ferozepore Brigade was at full strength. Marseille must have looked particularly colourful at the time, because the French colonial troops usually arrived in that harbour too. The British officers compared the Indian troops to the Algerians, Moroccans, Tunisians and Senegalese. Marseille would remain the Indian 'base port' for the 14 months that the Indian Corps served in Europe.

To the Indians, Europe was a completely new and very strange experience. They did not understand the language and the culture was completely different too. The Indians and the French (or Belgians) were puzzled by each other. Still, the Indians were given a friendly welcome by the French population, especially at the start of the war. From Marseille they travelled north via Orleans. When the 47th Sikhs left for the front, the battalion stayed in a large monastery near Saint-Omer on 20 October. The Sikhs were helped by the monks to the best of their abilities. They were puzzled by the statues of the

twelve apostles in one of the monastery(s) hall. The explanation that these were the gurus of the Christians was gratefully accepted, as mentioned in their regiment's history.<sup>5</sup>

In the meantime, the First Battle of Ypres had started a day earlier. That battle - which according to the official nomenclature would rage until 22 November - was the ultimate attempt by the Germans to end the war to their advantage in 1914. The city of Ypres literally was the last gap in the line. The front had already ground to a halt more to the south and the Belgian army had installed a last line of defence to the north of the city. If the German troops broke through in Ypres, there were few obstacles in their way to reaching the canal ports and cutting off the British troops from their lifeline or at least making the arrival of their supplies extremely difficult. Although the French armies provided the majority of the troops on the Allied side and would also become neighbours to some Indian units in Ypres, the First Battle of Ypres would mainly become legendary in British history. It was in this battle that the original British Expeditionary Force, the small professional British army, was decimated and complemented with territorials for the first time. Together with their French allies and the colonial troops the British would manage to stop the Germans in their tracks however. Both matters - the annihilation of the original BEF and the definitive stop to the German advance towards the canal ports - ensured that Ypres was already considered sacred ground by the British in late 1914, a symbol that had to be preserved at all costs. The Ypres Salient was already formed at the start of the battle, the infamous bulge in the frontline around the city, which was very detrimental to the defenders. The Salient would not be broken through until late September 1918 after the battles had claimed almost half a million lives in four years.<sup>6</sup>

On 22 October 1914 the Ferozepore Brigade must enter the freshly dug trenches between Hollebeke in the north and Messines in the south for the first time. The 1st Battalion Connaught Rangers - the first British battalion that belonged to the brigade - had to undergo its baptism of fire first. The first Indian battalion to be deployed into battle was the 57th Wilde's Rifles in the region of Wijtschate-Oosttaverne. Soldiers of that unit are pictured in a famous photo in front of the pub *'t Nieuw Staenzyzer*. That day, the first Indian casualty of war on the western front fell too.<sup>7</sup> The Indian troops continued to be brought in. Achiel Van Wallegghem, priest in Dikkebus, writes in his diary that, for the whole night from 22 to 23 October, the Indian troops were brought in with English double-decker buses. He also wrote that it was the first time that the sounds of war could be heard so clearly in his municipality.<sup>8</sup> The next day, on 23 October, the 129th Baluchis made their way to the trenches near Hollebeke and the last battalion of the Ferozepore Brigade, the 9th Bhopal Infantry, arrived.

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<sup>5</sup> *47th Sikhs War Record. The Great War 1914-1918*. Chippenham, Picton Publishing, 1992, p. 13.

<sup>6</sup> A good summary of the First Battle of Ypres can be found in: Ian Beckett: *Ypres: The First Battle, 1914* (Longman/Pearson, 2004)

<sup>7</sup> One Indian victim is indicated on the Menin Gate as having fallen on 22 October 1914: "LATURIA, Naik, 57th Wilde's Rifles (F.F.). 55th Coke's Rifles (F.F.). 22nd October 1914. Son of Phehu, of Tikar, Hamirpur, Kangra, Punjab".

<sup>8</sup> VAN WALLEGHEM (A.). *De oorlog te Dickebusch en omstreken*, part 1, Bruges, 1964, p. 18

The Connaughts and the Wilde's Rifles were placed under the command of the 1st British Cavalry Division, the Baluchis under the 2nd Cavalry Division. The remainder of the Lahore Division, now without two of the three brigades, was deployed on the other side of the French border.

On 26 October, a grey and foggy day, the troops of the Indian army attacked the German trenches near Gapaard (a hamlet near Messines). It had been raining all night and the trenches were full of mud and water. The trenches were still considered temporary at the time and often were not much more than shallow ditches. There was also no continued line of defence yet. Here and there, there still were large 'gaps' between the various positions which enabled the enemy to infiltrate the line more easily. It was then also more difficult to make a distinction between an enemy trench and an old trench abandoned by the own troops.

The result of the attack on 26 October 1914 was a few hundred metres of land, but as the start position was better from all perspectives than the new line, the men had to retreat to their original positions - to the great incomprehension and even disappointment of the Indian troops.

After heavy fire on 30 October 1914 the Germans on Zandvoorde ridge attacked the Indian troops. Indians and British were the minority, they had little ammunition and little artillery support. It is therefore obvious that it became very difficult for them to stand firm. Two companies of the 57th Wilde's Rifles retreated to Messines, where they spread in the streets. One officer showed all those he met the direction of the headquarters, but some got lost and ended up four kilometres too far away in Kemmel (instead of Wijtschate). Other units of the Wilde's Rifles also had to retreat. A Sikh unit had to take up new positions in the proximity of a battery near the windmill east of the Wijtschate-Messines road. One unit did not receive the order to retreat because all means of communication were cut off. When the message finally got through it was already too late and they were already surrounded by German troops. The Baluchis in the region of the chateau of Hollebeke, on the other side of the canal and the Ypres-Comines rail track had a particularly hard time to stay standing.

The battle continued until the next day. After incessant fire overnight, Messines was attacked by nine German battalions. They overran the trenches of the 57th Wilde's Rifles. Various units of the battalion were killed to the last man: Jemadar Ram Singh was the only survivor of his group. Another Sikh, Jemadar Kapur Singh continued fighting until everyone was out of action, with the exception of one wounded soldier. Because he refused to surrender, he committed suicide with his last bullet. All the British officers of the 57th Wilde's Rifles located in that part of the front were killed.

On the same day of 31 October 1914 an action took place near Hollebeke for which Khudadad Khan of the 129th Baluchis would be awarded the Victoria Cross a few months later, as the first Indian ever. In the night from 30 to 31 October the Baluchis had lost their position in a farm because they could not distinguish German soldiers

from the French. They therefore noticed too late that they were being approached by Germans - and not by the French who were fighting to their left. Khudadad Khan belonged to the unit that operated the two machine guns of the battalion. He was badly wounded later that day, while still operating the only remaining machine gun for as long as possible. Earlier the other machine gunner had been lost when a shell struck, the British officer had been wounded and the other five men of the unit were killed. As if by magic Khudadad Khan managed to join his company after disabling his own machine gun.

The 57th Wilde's Rifles had suffered many losses in the two last days of October 1914: no fewer than 300 of the 750 men of the battalion were killed, wounded or taken prisoner. There were 240 losses in the 129th Baluchis.

After the actions near Messines and Hollebeke the British press started to report how a certain Ganga Singh of the 129th Baluchis had won a Victoria Cross. Lord Kitchener, the British War Minister, asked for more details by telegram from General Willcocks, the 58 year old commander of the Indian Corps. As the latter was completely unaware, he started an investigation. The true story was as follows: one NCO, Havildar Gagna (and not Ganga Singh) of the 57th Wilde's Rifles, had killed five German soldiers with his bayonet in close combat until his weapon broke off. He then continued with a hastily picked-up sabre until he lost consciousness after being wounded five to six times. After the trench was reclaimed by the Indian troops, he was found still alive. He was awarded the Indian Order of Merit for his action. It would take another year before his wounds were healed enough to transport him to India. He would survive the war, just like Khudadad Khan. But even after the true events were known, cigarette cards with 'Ganga Singh' proudly posing with a Victoria Cross still surfaced.<sup>9</sup>

During the events described above another brigade of the Lahore Division, the Jullundur Brigade, was stationed just across the French border in the area of Neuve-Chapelle that would soon become the Indian sector *par excellence*. There too, the Indian troops were thrown into battle almost immediately. From 29 October the complete Meerut Division would arrive there too. As this contribution is limited to the Ypres Salient, we will not detail this further.

It is important to point out however that the Lahore Division was not deployed in full. The Indian units were considered 'reservoirs of men' deployed by the British where they needed manpower most urgently. Battalions, half battalions and even companies were deployed separately to support various British divisions - while the Indian troops had at least expected to stay together. On 29 October 1914 general Willcocks wrote in his diary: "*Where is my Lahore Division? Sirhind Brigade: left in Egypt, Ferozopore Brigade: somewhere in the north, divided in three or four pieces,*

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<sup>9</sup> The In Flanders Fields Museum holds a copy.

*Jullundur Brigade: the Manchesters in the south with the 5<sup>th</sup> division, the 47<sup>th</sup> Sikhs half with the one or the other British division, for the other half somewhere else. The 59<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> Sikhs: in the trenches...*". It is obvious that all this was not favourable to co-ordination or the morale of the Indian troops.<sup>10</sup>

Thousands of miles away from home, in a strange environment and completely unprepared for the terrible weather conditions, the Indians fought for a cause that some of them barely understood. In that context, the special role of a British officer in the Indian Army Corps and his relation with the men is very important. That relation can best be described as paternalistic. The officer understood his troops more or less: as a rule he not only spoke their language, but he was also familiar with their customs, ethics and culture. That created a mutual trust to a certain extent. When many of those officers fell in the first battles, the Indian soldiers felt orphaned and let down. British-Indian companies finding themselves without commanding officer were integrated in British units where nobody understood them.

The Indians seemed to have problems with some new technologies too. In the beginning they fired at every airplane they saw in the sky, irrespective of whether it was a German or an allied plane. They could not believe that such a flying monster could have other than bad intentions. After some time the novelty wore off and they barely looked up when airplanes flew past.<sup>11</sup>

In early November the Ferozepore Brigade was also transferred to the Indian sector between Givenchy and Neuve-Chapelle. On 7 December 1914 the Sirhind Brigade also arrived there from Egypt, together with reinforcements from India. The Indian 1st Cavalry Division had also arrived in mid November followed by the Indian 2nd Cavalry Division a month later. Those two divisions would stay on the western front after the rest of the Indian Corps left for Mesopotamia in late 1915. There was heavy fighting in the sector of the Indian Corps in December 1914 and on 10 March 1915 the Battle of Neuve-Chapelle was fought there, an unparalleled slaughter for the Indian troops. All the above explains why the magnificent Indian Monument to the Missing was erected in that French municipality. The losses after the Battle of Neuve-Chapelle were so high that the Indian Corps was reorganised. From then on, each brigade consisted of two British battalions and three Indian ones.

## The Second Battle of Ypres

In the first months of 1915 the Germans had prepared a new attempt to break through the allied lines at Ypres. Under the impulse of Fritz Haber - later chemistry Nobel Prize laureate - a chlorine gas offensive was being prepared. On 22 April

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<sup>10</sup> WILLCOCKS (J.). *With the Indians in France*. London, Constable, 1920, p. 65.

<sup>11</sup> MEREWETHER (J.W.B.) & SMITH (F.). *The Indian Corps in France*. London, Murray, 1917, p. 107-108.

1915, at 5 pm, the Second Battle of Ypres made history in the north of the now infamous Salient with the first successful chemical attack. That evening and night the new weapon took the life of some two thousand French soldiers. The breakthrough the Germans were hoping for did not materialise because their commanders were quite suspicious of the promised success of the gas attack and saw the event rather as an experiment. They therefore omitted to plan sufficient reserve troops to consolidate and exploit a possible breakthrough. Still, the German front moved a few kilometres nearer to Ypres, while there was no new final allied defence line in place there yet.

Again, the Indian Corps was deployed to close a gap in the line. On 23 April the 1st Army (to which the Indian Corps belonged) was given the order that the Lahore Division had to get ready to move shortly. The division marched north the next day. The headquarter of the division was installed in Godewaersvelde - called 'Gertie wears velvet' by the British Tommies. The main part of the division was then already two kilometres farther in Boeschepe, on the French-Belgian border. In the morning of 25 April the column arrived in Ouderdom, a hamlet between Reningelst and Vlamertinge. Priest Van Wallegghem of Dikkebus specifies: "*The Indians set up quarters in the farms of Maerten, Lievens and Desmarets.*"<sup>12</sup> The men were exhausted on arrival in Ouderdom. They had marched for 24 hours in a sometimes hilly landscape along cobbled roads, slippery from the rain. They were only given a short break in Boeschepe.

The Lahore Division now came under the command of the British Second Army of Smith-Dorrien. The warning was issued to the Indian troops that when gas was used, they had to place a handkerchief or a flannel over their mouths. It was recommended to soak the handkerchief in urine.<sup>13</sup>

After the gas offensive the Germans had gained much ground in the region of Langemarck and Sint-Juliaan. The British now wanted to launch a counter attack on the Germans with the French and drive them away from their new positions. In the morning of 26 April the Lahore Division rallied between Wieltje to the right and the Ypres-Langemarck road to the left, some 600 metres north of the La Brique hamlet. The Ferozepore Brigade had reached its position via Vlamertinge but the Jullundur Brigade had moved to its rallying point on the road outside the Ypres remparts. There they came under heavy fire. Most shells fell in the water of the moat or struck the thick walls. The men cheered from time to time as a shell fell in the water. But one heavy shell landed in the middle of a company of the 40th Pathans, with 23 casualties as a consequence. As soon as the division set up in the fields near the Wieltje hamlet, it was showered with tear gas shells. German airplanes carried out observation flights over the heads of the Indian troops but nothing was done against it. On the other side of the Ypres-Langemarck road the French deployed their North African troops, and the British 5th Army Corps was positioned to the right of the Indians. The Ferozepore Brigade was deployed left and the Jullundur Brigade right.

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<sup>12</sup> VAN WALLEGHEM, op.cit., p. 109.

<sup>13</sup> *47th Sikhs War Record*, p. 85.

The Sirhind Brigade was in reserve in Sint-Jan. The headquarters of the division was located in Potijze.

After a prior shelling of barely 40 minutes, the sign for the attack was given in the afternoon of that 26 April at five past two. Two officers per unit were sent ahead to explore the field, but none of them had returned. There was no information about the exact location of the German trenches or their distance. The men of the Lahore Division were exhausted after the long march and their position was located by the enemy as the Germans could observe undisturbed. Furthermore, the troops first had to cross open ground for a few hundred metres, up to more than a kilometre before reaching the first German line and proceed with the actual offensive. The surface relief was not favourable either as the soil first rose over a few hundred metres then dropped over a few hundred metres and finally rose again towards the German frontline. The British-Indian artillery was light and ineffective - it did not know the exact position of the Germans either. Once outside the trenches, any sense of direction was soon lost and the various attacking units, French, Moroccans, British and Indians, ended up mixed together. After the first slope they found themselves in an inferno of gun fire, machine gun fire and shells, including tear gas shells. The men fell like flies and soon the offensive was stopped. No reinforcements arrived.

It is therefore no surprise that the number of casualties was extremely high. The 47th Sikhs that attacked in first line lost 348 out of 444 men or 78% of the regiment. It hardly existed any more. In total the offensive claimed almost 2 000 casualties in the two brigades. Following this offensive corporal Issy Smith of the 1st Manchesters, which was part of the Jullundur Brigade, was awarded the Victoria Cross. Despite the constant heavy fire he had incessantly evacuated the wounded. Mula Singh and Rur Singh of the 47th Sikhs also managed to save many wounded.<sup>14</sup> Bhan Singh, a Sikh of the 57th Wilde's Rifles, had been injured in the face early on in the offensive. He nevertheless stayed close to his officer, captain Banks. When Banks fell, Bhan Singh thought of only one thing: bringing him back, dead or alive. As weak as he was, he stumbled under heavy fire, carrying Banks' body until he fell down exhausted and had to give up. Still, he did not return before first saving Banks' personal belongings.

None of the attacking troops managed to reach the first enemy line. Each attempt to consolidate the reached positions failed when the Germans opened the gas bottles again around 2.30 pm. When the gas reached the Indian troops, the soil was almost instantly covered with men being tortured in the most atrocious manner. Although all the attackers had to endure the effects of the gas, the Ferozepore Brigade and the French to their left were hit the hardest. They retreated amidst great confusion, while the dead and the dying were left behind in no-man's-land. A small group led by major Deacon still managed to ward off a German attack and withstand

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<sup>14</sup> Ibidem, p. 86-88

in no-man's-land. Jemadar Mir Dast of the 55th Coke's Rifles, attached to the 57th Wilde's Rifles stayed in no-man's-land after all his officers were killed or wounded. He rallied all the men he could find including quite a few who were lightly gassed, and stood his ground with them until dawn. He only retreated then and brought many wounded soldiers with him. He also helped other injured Indians and British, although he was wounded himself. He was awarded the Victoria Cross for his actions.<sup>15</sup>

The smell of chlorine gas lingered all night. It was late in the night until what remained of major Deacon's group could be rescued. The Ferozepore Brigade and the Jullundur Brigade were pulled back to Brieke, while the Sirhind Brigade replaced it in the first line. Men of the 34th Sikh Pioneers tried to reinforce the precarious position where Major Deacon managed to stand his ground. Two members of that unit, the sappers Jai Singh and Gujar Singh, were later awarded the Indian Distinguished Service Medal because they had restored the lines of communication under constant fire.

The action was repeated again and again over the next three days, but always unsuccessfully for the North Africans, British and Indians. The Germans resorted to their cannisters the next days too. Shortly after 1 pm on 27 April the Moroccans, the Sirhind Brigade and the Ferozepore Brigade attacked again, this time with the support of the Canadian artillery. The two Gurkha battalions, the 4th London Regiment and the 9th Bhopal Infantry, led the attack and therefore suffered most. When they noticed that the barbed wire in front of the German trenches was untouched, the action was abandoned.

In the night of 29 to 30 April 1915 the Jullundur and the Ferozepore Brigade pulled back to their quarters near Ouderdom. Because they regularly came under fire there too, the men stayed outside instead of sheltering in their tents. A shelling early in the morning of 1 May made the pack animals of the 47th Sikhs bolt.<sup>16</sup> Finally, after a last desperate attempt to reach the enemy lines, the Sirhind Brigade was withdrawn from battle too. On 2 May it joined the rest of the division in Ouderdom. The division started the return march to the rest of the Indian Corps near Neuve-Chapelle the next day. The Lahore Division had lost 3 889 men from 24 April to 1 May, or approximately 30% of the men deployed.

The great sacrifice of the Indian troops does not mean that their efforts were appreciated by the High Command: Early May 1915, when the British-French

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<sup>15</sup> It is an irony of history that some time before, at Neuve Chapelle, his brother Mir Mast Afridi, who belonged to the 58<sup>th</sup> Vaughan's Rifles had crossed over to the German lines along with 14 other Afridi Tribal Pathans. May decades later, Mir Dast's grandson, Dr. Shakil Afridi, assisted the US [Central Intelligence Agency](#) in locating the compound in which [Osama Bin Laden](#) was living in [Abbottabad](#), Pakistan. After the raid that resulted in the [death of Osama bin Laden](#) the Pakistani authorities arrested Dr. Afridi.

<sup>16</sup> *47th Sikhs War Record*, p. 89.

command in the Ypres Salient decided to make a strategic retreat, the British Generals French and Plumer voiced their concern about the strength of the French wing. The French commander General Foch assured them that the British flank in the North would be secured by 'really good troops'. Plumer explained that according to him this should mean: 'Not less than three regular French divisions should be kept between the British left and the Belgian right, and that French troops (not coloured) be placed on the immediate left of my troops. The Indian troops which were on my left have now been relieved by white troops.' Or in other words, if we manage to get rid of the weak coloured units, then so must you.<sup>17</sup> Such latently present or explicitly voiced racist thinking was omnipresent in the armies of the First World War. Simply add up the figures: coloured troops fell in the same proportion and, if deployed, in the same numbers, i.e. as courageously and honourably as their white colleagues. But in nationalistic, colonial and imperialistic thinking penetrated by European supremacy and superiority there was no other option but that the other was inferior, primitive, different.<sup>18</sup> The colonial troops were made the scapegoat for the European ineffectiveness and failures.

It was to be the last time that the Indian troops were massively deployed in the Ypres Salient. But Indians could still be regularly seen in Belgium. Priest Van Wallegghem of Dikkebus indicates in June 1915 that 'Indian troops' had been staying in the region for a few weeks. His diary entry of 6 June 1915 deserves to be quoted in full. It is a perfect illustration of how the local population felt about the Indians, an attitude that of course was laced with a few xenophobic traits. We should not forget that virtually no-one in this corner of Flanders had ever seen a person with a different coloured skin before the war. His diary entries tell us almost as much about the mentality of the writer as the people he describes: "Several Indian soldiers are also staying at the parish closest to Vlamertinghe. Their skin is dark, their army dress typically British apart from a turban which they have artfully wound around their heads. They speak English, some even French. They are very curious and ask and talk a lot. They would walk for half an hour to get some milk, stand around watching your every move as you serve them, are highly suspicious, but they can hardly be trusted themselves. If they can make a run for it without having to pay, they won't have a second thought about it, even if it means a quarrel. They get their Indian money out, called the rupee (2.80) and get angry when people refuse to accept their currency. They do not (or feign not to) understand the value of our money and when they want to exchange, they want more in return than the amount they have given. In fact, the people prefer not to do business with them. By and large they are friendly and polite, yet their curiosity often gets the upper hand as they take you in from head to toe. They especially like to take a peek through the windows of our homes. They bake some type of pancakes and eat a type of seed with a very strong taste"<sup>19</sup> Despite

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<sup>17</sup> The National Archives, Kew: WO 158/201: Second Army: Plumer's force: Operations April 27-May 11, 1915, quoted by Julian Putkowski in *Toxic Shock, the British Army's reaction to German discharges of poison gas during the Second Battle of Ypres* (paper presented at the conference *1915: Innocence Slaughtered?*, Ypres 17-19 November 2005).

<sup>18</sup> Dominiek Dendooven & Piet Chielens: *World War I. Five Continents in Flanders*. Tielt, Lannoo, 2008, p. 7

<sup>19</sup> VAN WALLEGHEM. op.cit., p. 134-135.

the sometimes negative comments this fragment demonstrates that there were frequent encounters between the local population and the Indian troops. That could hardly be avoided as the troops were often quartered in or near occupied farms. And, although the diary writer accuses the Indians of being curious, his words show that the curiosity for each other was completely mutual: Van Wallegghem even tasted Indian food.

After May 1915 the Indian Corps became active near Aubers Ridge, Festubert and Loos. After the Battle of Loos, in late September 1915 the Indian Corps was exhausted and the decision was made to transfer the Indian troops to Mesopotamia. By late 1915 almost the whole Indian Corps had left Europe. In fourteen months it had lost 34 252 men, including 12 807 from the British units of the corps and 21445 from the Indian battalions. A few Indian battalions stayed on the western front however.

In addition to the terrible conditions the Indian troops had to fight in, the two major problems they had to face were the poor reinforcements (from India) and the high number of casualties amongst British officers. The corps arrived in France with 10 percent reserves for the Indian units. Those reserves were already used up for the replacement of the sick and unfit even before the corps arrived on the front. The reserve system in India was completely inappropriate and a large number of Indians arriving in Marseille as reinforcement proved to be unsuitable for service, because they were too old, too weak, suffered from ill health or were untrained. The high number of casualties made the problem even more acute. The solution was found by sending complete Indian units from India to Europe, without looking for new recruits. That in turn caused problems in India. Replacing the British officers in the Indian army was just as serious a problem. The special relationship between the British officer and his Indian men was already mentioned above. It is obvious that the arrival of new officers who did not understand the Indians at all, did not know their background and had problems communicating with them, was not favourable to the morale of the Indian troops.

After 1915

After the departure of the Indian Corps in 1915 the Indians were no longer present in large numbers on the western front. That does not mean to say that Indian units were no longer present, on the contrary. In Flanders too, Indians could still be seen from time to time until the end of the war. In Lijssenthoek Military Cemetery near

Poperinghe a Sikh is remembered, a cavalryman who fell on 2 November 1917, and a Hindu who belonged to the Royal Field Artillery who fell on 12 October 1918.<sup>20</sup>

The Indians remained a special experience for the Belgian population: “*There were 'Hindus' in the Hellegat and in the pine wood. They cooked those big pancakes there. Once, a few were sitting there on their bums, with open legs. Around a bucket. They were smoking. But not like we do. They had a long tube that they passed on to each other. They asked if I had some tobacco. I gave my tobacco pouch to one of those men. He put his hand in it and gave me back my pouch: empty of course. As dusk fell they started to sing songs in their own way.*”<sup>21</sup> Another witness: “*In the Hellegat, it was full with men from India, men wearing turbans. Hindus, the people said. They ate all sorts of pancakes, thick pancakes. We had a look from time to time and they were spluttering to make those pancakes. They were not here for warfare, for fighting. They carried ammunition to the front for the guns.*”<sup>22</sup>

Not all experiences with Indians were that positive. Marie Beck from Westouter had the fright of her life: “*One day the shop's bell rang. I went to serve the customer. A huge man was standing at the counter and was looking around: a Hindu, with hair sticking out of his turban here and there. He reeked of smoke and continued to look. Finally he bought shoe laces. He couldn't stop staring at me. I thought: there is something wrong with that guy. He paid and left. The bell rang again. It was the same guy. I thought: heck!, it's me he's after! He put his hands in his pockets and took out a gold ring and a few coins. He looked into my eyes and put his thumb between two fingers. I immediately fled to the kitchen, the military police were sitting there. Quick, I said, there's a Hindu in the shop and he's definitely after me. They went up to him and threw him out. He was never allowed in our shop any more.*”<sup>23</sup>

Units of the Indian Labour Corps were also active in Flanders at the end of the war and in the first post war years. Their arrival was welcomed by the local population. The Indian labourers came to replace the men of the Chinese Labour Corps who had a very bad reputation after a few crimes had been committed against Flemish civilians. In September 1919 the feared so-called ‘chings’ (Chinese) were replaced by ‘Hindus’ to the greatest relief of the returned population: “*These (=the ‘hindus’) were quite curious and liked to have a look everywhere, but they were not bad*”.<sup>24</sup> The tasks of these Indian labourers should not be underestimated: more than a year after the Armistice the former front zone was a real desert where many unexploded

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<sup>20</sup> Sowar) Hardit Singh, 21st Cavalry attd 20th Deccan Horse and driver Susai, 41st Div Ammunition Column, Royal Field Artillery.

<sup>21</sup> Oscar Ricour in: Elfnovembergroep. *Van den Grooten Oorlog, volksboek*. Kemmel, Malegijs, 1978, p. 130-131. The Hellegat is located on the north flank of the Rodeberg, near Westouter.

<sup>22</sup> Maurits Liefoghe op. cit., p. 132.

<sup>23</sup> Marie Beck op. cit., p. 131.

<sup>24</sup> VAN WALLEGHEM (A.). *De oorlog te Dickebusch en omstreken*, part 3, p. 146.

ammunition and half-buried corpses were still lying around among the rubble and the weeds.

## Conclusion

Despite the fact that the Indian Army Corps was deployed only twice on the front line near Ypres for brief periods, their contribution should not be underestimated: these were important moments where the input of the Indian military was crucial. They filled the gaps - gaps that could have potentially allowed a German breakthrough. In the First Battle of Ypres it was all hands on deck for the British Expeditionary Force; every man counted and the question is whether the British would have succeeded in stopping the German surge if the Indian divisions would not have provided reinforcements on time. The fact that the Indian Army Corps was spread and that battalions or even companies were added to British units separately was of course not favourable for the internal cohesion of the Indian Army Corps or the morale of the Indian rank and file.

Regarding their deployment in the first days of the Second Battle of Ypres it would be easy to argue that colonial troops - which on the British side means Indians - were used as cannon fodder. They were indeed deployed as storm troops in a counter offensive where all circumstances were to their disadvantage: the exhausted troops had to attack in a place that was unknown to them without sufficient airborne and artillery support and against a virtually invisible enemy. They explored and prepared the field however, so it could be expanded into a new allied line of defence by others after them. The fact that their contribution was played down by their own High Command and was hardly even appreciated makes the great sacrifice they made even more bitter.

For the Indian military itself the deployment in Ypres in 1914 and 1915 was not unimportant. It not only had its baptism of fire during THE FIRST WORLD WAR, but simultaneously it was the first time that Indian soldiers were fighting on European soil. Probably even more important was the fact that it was a brutal confrontation with war on an industrial scale in which the (heavy) artillery played a decisive part and in which aeroplanes were used. In late April 1915, during the Second Battle of Ypres, the Indian military were among the first to be exposed to chemical warfare. The deployment in Ypres not only represents a symbolic important moment in the history of the Indian troops, it must undoubtedly also have been a hard learning curve.

There is also the awareness linked to a deployment in Europe. Without detailing this too extensively - the topic will undoubtedly be addressed by other contributions in this conference - their presence in Europe was equally important for the subsequent social and political evolution of the Indian military. In their letters home they show

admiration or criticism for the European way of life: they want to learn from its strengths or protect themselves from what they consider wrong. The Indian troops also started looking at the British with different eyes. More particularly, they must have strongly felt the contrast between the official reason why war was being fought, i.e. the freedom and independence of Belgium, and their own fate as colonial subjects under British administration and that will undoubtedly have sharpened their political awareness.

The bloody deployment in the First World War and not least the passage in Europe was not easily forgotten and when that proven dedication and loyalty to the British rulers did not lead to the anticipated and deserved autonomy for the Indians, but on the contrary to the ruthless oppression of post-war protests, it could only lead to more radical positions. This phenomenon is common to India and many other people worldwide. All over the world there were people who contributed to the war effort with the hope of just reward afterwards, only to see their hopes crushed.

Finally, something about the remembrance of the Indian presence in Europe

In Europe, there were attempts to set the memory of the Indian presence on the Western Front in stone: on headstones and special memorials in British military cemeteries, but also with specific monuments. In Brighton, where the Indian base hospitals were, the Chattri memorial was unveiled in 1920-1921 on the spot where the deceased Sikhs and Hindus were cremated. In the centre of the main sector of the Indian Army Corps, in Neuve-Chapelle, the beautiful memorial by Herbert Baker was unveiled on 7 October 1927, with the names of the Indian soldiers missing in action and the places where they fought engraved on its walls. A few months earlier, on 24 July 1927, the Menin Gate was unveiled in Ypres, arguably the most important Memorial to the Missing on the Western front, even if only because with the Last Post it is the only place in the world where a remembrance ceremony for the casualties of the First World War takes place every day. Besides the thousands of names of British, Irish, Australians and Canadians, more than 400 names of Indians reported missing in the Battles of Ypres are also engraved on it. However, we must point out that despite the fact that some Indians who fell in Ypres are mentioned on the Neuve-Chapelle memorial, their numbers on either memorials are vastly underestimated. The example of the 47th Sikhs alone makes it clear: the Menin Gate lists only 14 dead for that regiment, whereas the regiment's history, for 26 April 1915 alone, mentions that 348 of the 444 deployed men did not return.

Despite the monuments and headstones, the Indian presence soon disappeared from the collective memory of the former front region. It is only in the late 1990s that interest was generated again; for instance under the impulse of Sikhs in *diaspora* who came to honour their fallen ancestors. In 2002, at the request of the Republic of India, a modest monument with the inscription India in Flanders Fields was erected on the lawn south of the Menin Gate. That memorial was visited by Sonia Gandhi among others, and was replaced with a new one topped with a Lion Capital

of Asoka. Each year, on 12 November, it is the location of a remembrance ceremony in cooperation with the Indian embassy in Brussels.

In addition to these remembrance initiatives the museum I work for tries to spread historical awareness about the Indian Army Corps since 1999, among other things by organising three exhibitions that were fully or for a large part dedicated to the Indian presence and by ensuring that attention is also given in the permanent exhibition to the Indian military who fought near Ypres.

As a First World War historian I think that both the remembrance and historical research of the Indian presence is extremely significant. Ypres is the only place in Belgium where Indian and Belgian history, yours and mine in other words, coincide. That makes it a meeting place, a place where we realise we have a common history and where, by cherishing that mutual past, we also can work on our mutual future.

Dominiek Dendooven

In Flanders Fields Museum, Ypres, Belgium

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And finally..... yes I know its not WWI but it is quite amusing....

