

# INDIAN SOLDIERS IN FRANCE DURING WORLD WARS

## War Memorials and Cemeteries

Over the course of World War I, more than 140,000 Indian soldiers fought in Europe with valour and distinction; 90,000 serving in the infantry and cavalry, and as many as 50,000 non-combatant labourers. They hailed from the length and breadth of India: from Punjab, Garhwal, Bengal and Tamil Nadu. Of the combatants, over 8,550 were killed and 50,000 were wounded. During World War II, in 1940, four mule companies of the British Indian Army Service Corps comprising of 300 Indian soldiers joined the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) in France. 99 of these brave soldiers sacrificed their lives. In France, there are two Indian War Memorials and 162 Cemeteries maintained by the Commonwealth War Graves Commission that have names and graves of over 5,000 identified Indian army soldiers. These sites not only serve as places of remembrance but also stand as enduring symbols of India's contribution to global peace and the shared history between India and France. (*These sites are listed in the Appendix.*)

2. The most prominent of these is the Neuve-Chapelle Indian Memorial in northern France that has inscriptions in English, Gurmukhi, Hindi and Urdu to reflect the diverse backgrounds

*To the honour of the Army of India  
which fought in France and  
Belgium, 1914-1918, and in  
perpetual remembrance of those of  
their dead whose names are here  
recorded and who have no known  
grave.*

Inscription on the Neuve-Chapelle  
Memorial

of the 4,863 Indian soldiers and labourers who fell during World War I on the Western Front and are commemorated at this Memorial. It was at Neuve-Chapelle that the Indian Corps fought its first major battle as a single unit. The Memorial was designed by Sir Herbert Baker and unveiled in 1927 in the presence of the Maharaja of Kapurthala, Marshal Ferdinand Foch and a large contingent of Indian veterans. Speaking on the occasion, Marshal Foch said: "Return to your homes in the distant sun-bathed East and proclaim

how your countrymen drenched with their blood the cold northern land of France and Flanders, how they delivered it by their ardent spirit from



the firm grip of a determined enemy; tell all India that we shall watch over their graves with the devotion due to all our dead. We shall cherish above all the memory of their example. They showed us the way; they made the first steps towards the final victory." The Memorial has a column that stands almost 15 feet high and was inspired by the famous



inscribed columns erected by the Emperor Ashoka throughout India in the 3rd century BC. On the lower part of the column, the words 'God is One, He is the Victory' are inscribed in English, with similar texts in Arabic, Gurmukhi and Hindi. On 11 April 2015, Prime Minister Narendra Modi visited Neuve-Chapelle to pay his respects to these soldiers.

3. The Mazargues War Cemetery in Marseille is the second largest site after the Neuve-Chapelle War Memorial where 1,003 Indian soldiers are

*In memory of these soldiers and followers of the Indian Army who fell in the war of 1914-1918 and are honoured here.*

Inscription at the Mazargues Cemetery

commemorated. Marseille was the base for Indian troops in France during World War I. Created in 1918, this site has a Memorial that was unveiled in 1925 by Field Marshal Sir William Birdwood to honour the 205 Indian casualties



who were cremated here. On 12 February 2025, President Emmanuel Macron and Prime Minister Modi visited the Mazargues Cemetery.

4. Another prominent Indian war memorial is at Villers-Guislain in northern France that commemorates Indian soldiers who sacrificed

*A La Memoire  
Des Militaires Indiens  
Morts En France  
Pendant La Premiere Guerre Mondiale  
1914-1919  
Satyamev Jayate*

Inscription at the Villers-Guislain Memorial

themselves during the Battle of Cambrai in November-December 1917. The Indian Cavalry, comprising the Deccan Horse, Poona Horse, Hodson's Horse, Central India Horse and 18 Cavalry, charged into German defences during this Battle. It was for bravery during this Battle that a Victoria Cross was awarded to Lance Dafadar Gobind Singh. Villers-Guislain was occupied by

the Commonwealth forces from April 1917 until the German counter attacks (in the Battle of Cambrai) at the end of November 1917. It was lost on 30 November and retained by the



Germans on 1 December in spite of the fierce attacks of the Guards Division and tanks. The village was finally abandoned by the Germans on 30 September 1918, after heavy fighting. Built by the Government of India on a piece of land donated by the Government of France, this Memorial was inaugurated on 10 November 2018 by the Vice-President of India Shri M Venkaiah Naidu.

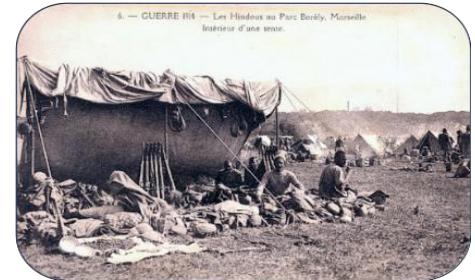


## World War I (1914-1918)

5. Within weeks of Britain's declaration of war on 4 August 1914, the Indian Army was sent to Europe on a large scale. The first two infantry divisions and three cavalry brigades of the Indian Expeditionary Force A began arriving at Marseille and Orléans from 26 September 1914. The sepoys were greeted with flowers and cheers by French civilians who shouted "Vive les Hindous!" The troops were immediately moved north to the Western Front as the British Expeditionary Force had suffered heavy losses in the retreat from Mons and the Battle of the Marne.



Grosset & Son. — Au Camp de l'Indian Army — Marseille.



6. The major battles and actions seen by Indian troops during WWI are as below:

- a) First Battle of Ypres (October–November 1914)

*Indian troops played a critical role in holding the line near Neuve-Chapelle, Festubert, and Givenchy. The 47th Sikhs and 129<sup>th</sup> Baluchis suffered over 80% casualties in desperate counter-attacks.*

- b) Givenchy (19–20 December 1914)

*Garhwal Rifles and 58th Vaughan's Rifles recaptured lost trenches in hand-to-hand fighting. Two Victoria Crosses were awarded (Sepoy Khudadad Khan of 129th Baluchis and Darwan Singh Negi of 39th Garhwalis).*

- c) The infamous "Christmas Truce" of 1914 that saw Gurkhas and Jats fraternising with German troops in some sectors.

- d) Neuve-Chapelle (10–13 March 1915)

*First major British offensive of 1915 in which the Garhwal and Meerut Divisions spearheaded the initial breakthrough, capturing the village in 90 minutes. Failure to exploit this success led to 11,000+ Allied casualties, including heavy Indian losses.*

- e) Second Battle of Ypres (April–May 1915)

*Indian cavalry fought dismounted in trenches; 15th Sikhs and 40th Pathans endured the first German poison-gas attacks.*

- f) Festubert (15–27 May 1915)



*Lahore Division attacked in waterlogged ground; 40th Pathans reduced from 600 to 120 men in one day.*

g) Loos (25 September – October 1915)

*Last major action of the Indian infantry on the Western Front; 3<sup>rd</sup> Lahore and 7<sup>th</sup> Meerut Divisions suffered 4,000 casualties in futile attacks.*

7. Following Loos, the Indian infantry divisions were withdrawn from France and sent to Mesopotamia, leaving only the cavalry. After 1915, two Indian cavalry divisions remained in France, fighting dismounted in trenches through the Somme (1916) and Cambrai (1917). They were finally remounted for the great Allied offensives of 1918. The major actions were:

a) Battle of the Somme (1916)

*2<sup>nd</sup> Lancers (Gardner's Horse) and Deccan Horse fought at Bazentin Ridge and High Wood.*

b) Cambrai (November 1917)

*Famous charge of Hodson's Horse and 5<sup>th</sup> Cavalry Brigade through German lines.*

c) Megiddo and the Final Advance (1918)

*Although most Indian cavalry had moved to Palestine by 1918, some regiments remained in France until the Armistice.*



|                          |               |  |                              |
|--------------------------|---------------|--|------------------------------|
| <b>Khudadad Khan</b>     | Sepoy         | 129th Duke of Connaught's Own Baluchis   | First Battle of Ypres, 1914  |
| <b>Darwan Singh Negi</b> | Naik          | 1st Battalion, 39th Garhwal Rifles       | Festubert, France, 1914      |
| <b>Kulbir Thapa</b>      | Rifleman      | 2nd Battalion, 3rd Gurkha Rifles         | Loos, France, 1915           |
| <b>Mir Dast</b>          | Subedar       | 55th Coke's Rifles (Frontier Force)      | Ypres, Belgium, 1915         |
| <b>Gabar Singh Negi</b>  | Rifleman      | 2nd Battalion, 39th Garhwal Rifles       | Neuve-Chapelle, France, 1915 |
| <b>Gobind Singh</b>      | Lance Dafadar | 28th Light Cavalry, attached 2nd Lancers | Cambrai, France, 1917        |

## **Honours and Awards During World War I**

8. Victoria Crosses, Indian Orders of Merit, and numerous Distinguished Conduct Medals were awarded to the Indian Soldiers during World War I. The Indian soldiers who received the Victoria Cross during World War I were recognized for their extraordinary bravery. The list of decorated heroes is as below:

## **World War II (1939–1945)**

9. Indian troops served primarily in support roles during the early phases of the war in Europe, particularly with the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) in 1940. Four mule companies from the Royal Indian Army Service Corps were attached to the BEF. These units, specializing in animal transport, were deployed because British troops lacked expertise in handling mules which were essential for moving supplies over difficult terrain, especially in harsh winter conditions where motorized vehicles were less effective. 300 Indian soldiers of 25th Animal Transport Company travelled over 11,000 kilometres to France with their mules. They arrived in late 1939 or early 1940 and were stationed in northern France, near Lille, where they maintained the animals, conducted exercises, and even organized gymkhana featuring mule tricks and traditional *bhangra* dances to build rapport with local villagers. These troops were unarmed, as no weapons had been issued to them prior to deployment.



10. As the German blitzkrieg advanced in May 1940, these Indian units faced intense combat conditions despite their support role. They endured aerial bombings, shelling, and strafing attacks while protecting their men and animals. Jamadar Maula Dad Khan was commended for his "magnificent courage, coolness, and decision" in leading his troops under fire. Major Mohammad Akbar Khan commanded 300 Indian soldiers and 23 British troops during the retreat to Dunkirk, navigating through bombed harbours to reach evacuation points on 28 May 1940. Nearly all 300 soldiers were successfully evacuated from Dunkirk as part of Operation Dynamo, though some were captured by German forces and held in POW camps.

## **Indian Prisoners of War and the French Resistance (1943–1945)**

11. Beyond the 1940 campaign, Indian soldiers captured by Axis forces earlier in the war, often in North Africa, found themselves in France as POWs. Some escaped and joined the

French Resistance (Maquis) against Nazi occupation. One notable escape involved around 500 Indian POWs from a camp in Épinal, France, in 1943–1944. These soldiers, leveraging their military training, integrated into resistance networks, conducting sabotage and guerrilla operations. Their involvement added a multicultural dimension to the French Resistance, though exact numbers and specific actions remain under-documented in mainstream histories.

## APPENDIX

| S. No. | Name of Memorial and Cemetery             | Number of Indian Army Soldiers' Names and Graves                      |
|--------|---|---|
| 1      | Indian War Memorial Neuve-Chapelle        | 4863  |
| 2      | Indian War Memorial Villers Guislain      | Dedicated to Indian Cavalry Division that fought at Battle of Cambrai |
| 3      | Mazargues War Cemetery                    | 1003  |
| 4      | La Chapelette British and Indian Cemetery | 320   |
| 5      | Meerut Military Cemetery                  | 313   |
| 6      | St Sever Communal Cemetery Extension      | 271   |
| 7      | Saint-Sever Cemetery                      | 74  |
| 8      | Lillers Communal Cemetery and Extension   | 153   |
| 9      | Rue-du-Bacquerot No. 1 Military Cemetery  | 144   |
| 10     | Zelobes Indian Cemetery                   | 105   |
| 11     | Vieille-Chapelle New Military Cemetery    | 72  |
| 12     | Merville Communal Cemetery                | 97  |
| 13     | Gorre British & Indian Cemetery           | 96  |
| 14     | St. Venant Communal Cemetery              | 85  |
| 15     | Laventie Military Cemetery                | 71  |
| 16     | Pont du Hem Military Cemetery             | 25  |
| 17     | Epinale French National Cemetery          | 71  |
| 18     | Y-Farm Military Cemetery                  | 58  |
| 19     | St Vaast Post Military Cemetery           | 55  |
| 20     | Le Touret Military Cemetery               | 9   |
| 21     | Ayette Indian & Chinese Cemetery CWGC     | 52  |
| 22     | Blargies Communal Cemetery Extension      | 46  |
| 23     | Charmes Military Cemetery                 | 44  |
| 24     | Rue-David Military Cemetery               | 44  |
| 25     | St. Riquier British Cemetery              | 40  |
| 26     | Chocques Military Cemetery                | 36  |
| 27     | Bethune Town Cemetery                     | 26  |

| S. No. | Name of Memorial and Cemetery                 | Number of Indian Army Soldiers' Names and Graves |
|--------|---|--|
| 28     | Neuville-Sous-Montreuil Indian Cemetery       | 25   |
| 29     | Hargicourt British Cemetery                   | 22   |
| 30     | Tincourt New British Cemetery                 | 20   |
| 31     | Etaples Military Cemetery                     | 23   |
| 32     | Meteren Military Cemetery                     | 17   |
| 33     | Arques-la-Bataille British Cemetery           | 15   |
| 34     | Cabaret-Rouge British Cemetery                | 15   |
| 35     | Bray Military Cemetery                        | 13   |
| 36     | Hazebrouck Communal Cemetery                  | 12   |
| 37     | Rambervillers French National Cemetery        | 10   |
| 38     | Villers Communal Cemetery Extension           | 10   |
| 39     | Barly French Military Cemetery                | 9  |
| 40     | Bruay Communal Cemetery Extension             | 9  |
| 41     | Faubourg d'Amiens Cemetery                    | 9  |
| 42     | Guards Cemetery Windy Corner                  | 9  |
| 43     | Martigny-Les-Bains Communal Cemetery          | 9  |
| 44     | Pernes British Cemetery                       | 10   |
| 45     | Daours Communal Cemetery Extension            | 8  |
| 46     | Estaires Communal Cemetery and Extension      | 8  |
| 47     | Estaires Communal Cemetery Extension          | 1  |
| 48     | Les Baraques Military Cemetery                | 7  |
| 49     | Nancy Southern Cemetery                       | 12   |
| 50     | Saint-Germain-au-Mont-d'Or Cemetery           | 3  |
| 51     | Saint-Germain-au-Mont-d'Or Cemetery Extension | 7  |
| 52     | Vadencourt British Cemetery                   | 7  |
| 53     | La Chapelle-St-Mesmin Communal Cemetery       | 6  |
| 54     | Longuenesse (St. Omer) Souvenir Cemetery      | 6  |
| 55     | Rennes Eastern Communal Cemetery              | 6  |
| 56     | Meaulte Military Cemetery                     | 6  |
| 57     | Arras Flying Services Memorial                | 6  |
| 58     | Bailleul Communal Cemetery Extension          | 5  |
| 59     | Bailleul Communal Cemetery (Nord)             | 4  |
| 60     | Beuvry Communal Cemetery                      | 5  |
| 61     | Boulogne Eastern Cemetery                     | 5  |
| 62     | Dernancourt Communal Cemetery Extension       | 5  |
| 63     | La Gorgue Communal Cemetery                   | 5  |
| 64     | Orleans Main Cemetery                         | 5  |
| 65     | Saint-Roch Communal Cemetery Valenciennes     | 5  |
| 66     | Aire Communal Cemetery                        | 4  |
| 67     | Anzin-St.Aubin British Cemetery               | 4  |

| S. No. | Name of Memorial and Cemetery           | Number of Indian Army Soldiers' Names and Graves |
|--------|---|--|
| 68     | Azelot Communal Cemetery                | 4  |
| 69     | Corbie Communal Cemetery Extension      | 4  |
| 70     | Terlincthun British Cemetery            | 5  |
| 71     | Pernois British Cemetery                | 4  |
| 72     | St. Hilaire Cemetery                    | 4  |
| 73     | St Ouen Communal Cemetery               | 4  |
| 74     | Unicorn Cemetery                        | 4  |
| 75     | Albert Communal Cemetery Extension      | 3  |
| 76     | Caudry British Cemetery                 | 3  |
| 77     | Duisans British Cemetery                | 3  |
| 78     | Godewaersvelde British Cemetery         | 3  |
| 79     | Grevillers British Cemetery             | 3  |
| 80     | Jarville Communal Cemetery              | 3  |
| 81     | La Targette British Cemetery            | 3  |
| 82     | Solesmes British Cemetery               | 3  |
| 83     | Ste Marie Cemetery                      | 3  |
| 84     | Templeux le Guerard British Cemetery    | 3  |
| 85     | Warlus Churchyard                       | 3  |
| 86     | Abbeville Communal Cemetery             | 2  |
| 87     | Abbeville Communal Cemetery Extension   | 2  |
| 88     | Ascq Communal Cemetery                  | 2  |
| 89     | Auchel Communal Cemetery                | 2  |
| 90     | Aveluy Communal Cemetery Extension      | 2  |
| 91     | Bronfay Farm Military Cemetery          | 2  |
| 92     | CWGC Crouy British Cemetery             | 2  |
| 93     | Dunkirk War Memorial                    | 5  |
| 94     | Dunkirk Town Cemetery                   | 2  |
| 95     | Gezaincourt Communal Cemetery Extension | 2  |
| 96     | Hannescamps New Military Cemetery       | 2  |
| 97     | Heudicourt Communal Cemetery Extension  | 2  |
| 98     | London Cemetery and Extension           | 2  |
| 99     | Maroeuil British Cemetery               | 2  |
| 100    | Schoenenbourg Churchyard                | 2  |
| 101    | Strasbourg Southern Communal Cemetery   | 2  |
| 102    | Strasbourg Western Communal Cemetery    | 1  |
| 103    | Royal Irish Rifles Graveyard            | 2  |
| 104    | Rue des Berceaux Military Cemetery      | 2  |
| 105    | St. Pierre Cemetery                     | 2  |
| 106    | St Souplet British Cemetery             | 2  |
| 107    | Choloy War Cemetery                     | 2  |

| S. No. | Name of Memorial and Cemetery                      | Number of Indian Army Soldiers' Names and Graves |
|--------|--|--|
| 108    | Aubers Ridge British Cemetery                      | 1  |
| 109    | Awoingt British Cemetery                           | 1  |
| 110    | Bagneux British Cemetery                           | 1  |
| 111    | Bapaume Australian Cemetery                        | 1  |
| 112    | Beaulencourt British Cemetery                      | 1  |
| 113    | Bernafay Wood British Cemetery                     | 1  |
| 114    | Bucquoy Road Cemetery                              | 1  |
| 115    | Calonne-Sur-La-Lys Communal Cemetery               | 1  |
| 116    | Cambrin Churchyard Extension                       | 1  |
| 117    | Canadian Cemetery No 2                             | 1  |
| 118    | Cayeux Military Cemetery                           | 1  |
| 119    | Chalon-Sur-Saone Communal Cemetery (West Cemetery) | 1  |
| 120    | Chambrecy British Cemetery                         | 1  |
| 121    | Couin British Cemetery                             | 1  |
| 122    | Dantzig Alley British Cemetery                     | 1  |
| 123    | Dartmoor Cemetery                                  | 1  |
| 124    | Doullens Cemetery Extension No 1                   | 1  |
| 125    | Esquelbecq Military Cemetery                       | 1  |
| 126    | Euston Post Cemetery                               | 1  |
| 127    | Euston Road Cemetery                               | 1  |
| 128    | Five Points Cemetery                               | 1  |
| 129    | Gordon Dump Cemetery                               | 1  |
| 130    | Gouzeaucourt New British Cemetery                  | 1  |
| 131    | Haute-Avesnes British Cemetery                     | 1  |
| 132    | Hervin Farm British Cemetery                       | 1  |
| 133    | Le Treport Military Cemetery                       | 1  |
| 134    | Lillers Communal Cemetery Extension                | 1  |
| 135    | Mandres-Sur-Vair Communal Cemetery                 | 1  |
| 136    | Marthes Churchyard                                 | 1  |
| 137    | Pornic War Cemetery                                | 1  |
| 138    | Wormhoudt Communal Cemetery                        | 1  |
| 139    | Mont Huon Military Cemetery                        | 1  |
| 140    | Montargis Communal Cemetery                        | 1  |
| 141    | Morlancourt British Cemetery No 1                  | 1  |
| 142    | Noeux-les-Mines Communal Cemetery                  | 1  |
| 143    | Norfolk Cemetery (Becordel-Becourt)                | 1  |
| 144    | Post Office Rifles Cemetery                        | 1  |
| 145    | Premont British Cemetery                           | 1  |
| 146    | Quatre-Vents Military Cemetery                     | 1  |
| 147    | Ribemont Communal Cemetery Extension               | 1  |

| S. No.       | Name of Memorial and Cemetery              | Number of Indian Army Soldiers' Names and Graves |
|--------------|--|--|
| 148          | Rue-du-Bois Military Cemetery              | 1  |
| 149          | Rue-Petillon Military Cemetery             | 3  |
| 150          | Sandpits British Cemetery                  | 1  |
| 151          | Saint Amand British Cemetery               | 1  |
| 152          | St. Leger British Cemetery                 | 1  |
| 153          | Trefcon British Cemetery                   | 1  |
| 154          | Trois Arbres Cemetery                      | 1  |
| 155          | Valence-Sur-Rhone Communal Cemetery        | 1  |
| 156          | Vermelles British Cemetery                 | 1  |
| 157          | Vignancourt British Cemetery               | 1  |
| 158          | Villeret Old Churchyard                    | 1  |
| 159          | Vitry-Le-Francois French National Cemetery | 1  |
| 160          | Le Touret Memorial                         | 1  |
| 161          | Bayonne Saint-Leon Communal Cemetery       | 1  |
| 162          | Champenoux Communal Cemetery               | 1  |
| 163          | Chenebier Protestant Cemetery              | 1  |
| 164          | Dieppe Canadian War Cemetery               | 1  |
| <b>Total</b> |  | <b>8,707</b>                                     |