

INDIANS Unheralded heroes

ARHAM, the Association de Recherches Historiques, Archéologiques et Militaires, and its president, Dominique Faivre are hugely knowledgeable when it comes to the Indian presence in Northern France during the Great War – a presence that left its mark both as a result of fighting and of soldiers being billeted in the region.

With their dark skin, turbans, hair buns, beards and exotic cuisine, the Indians made a striking impression on local inhabitants. “When I was very little I used to listen to my grandmother from Saint-Venant talk about the Indians.” By listening to the older generations reminisce about these soldiers, Dominique developed a soft spot for this unique army, taking advantage of a long period of illness in 2004 and 2005 to accumulate documents and research British regimental journals. “The subject is hugely complex: this was a skilled army which undoubtedly based its operation around that of the British army, but with the added aspect of numerous ethnic and religious groups”. This local historian had to familiarise himself with the customs of Sikhs, Gurkhas, Balochs, Dogras, Garhwalis, Jats, Pathans, Rajputs and Punjabis before delving further into their battles. The first Indian troops arrived in Marseille in late September 1914, heading north in October via the Cercottes camp near Orléans. “Indians arrived at the railway stations of Arques and Blendecques on the night of 19 to 20 October; the 47th Sikhs were billeted in the Abbaye de Wisques”, Dominique adds. From the 23rd, the Ferozepore Brigade headed down into the trenches around Messines, to be followed by a true baptism of fire a few days later – events which engaged the Indian Corps fully during the battles of Neuve-Chapelle

(28 October and 2 November 1914, then from 10 to 13 March 1915), Festubert (23 and 24 November 1914, and 16 May 1915), Givenchy (19 to 22 December 1914), Aubers (9 May 1915), and Moulin de Piètre (25 September 1915). “Butchery, slaughter, courage, heroism”, says Dominique Faivre. “From Fauquissart to Givenchy-lès-la-Bassée, they spent a year in the muddy trenches, enduring frozen feet and pneumonia. At Festubert, Darwan Singh Negi was decorated with the Victoria Cross, the highest British military decoration, which George V awarded him personally in Saint-Omer on 9 December.” In the soldiers’ quarters around the villages of Lillers, Auchel and Aire-sur-la-Lys life re-assumed some semblance of normality: “I know that in England there are five hundred unpublished photos of the daily lives of Indian soldiers in Saint-Floris.” A war reporter wrote the following description in the magazine *Le Flambeau* in 1915: “They made themselves at home in our farms as if they had been born there, and our brave peasants were amazed to see them wander around their farmyards with such ease. As for the Indians, nothing surprised them. Provided that the British Supply Corps provided them with plentiful quantities of ghee (clarified butter), goat meat – a ritual abattoir was set up in Aire – or, failing that, mutton, and red pepper, they accepted their lot with the unconcerned attitude that is so typical of Eastern cultures.”

Its regiments bled dry and deprived of reinforcements, the Indian Corps left the north and the Pas-de-Calais to be sent to Mesopotamia at the end of September 1915, with only two cavalry divisions left behind. In a little more than a year, the Indian Corps suffered 34,000 losses, taking into account the dead (7,000), wounded and prisoners of war. In Saint-Floris, Saint-Hilaire-Cottes and

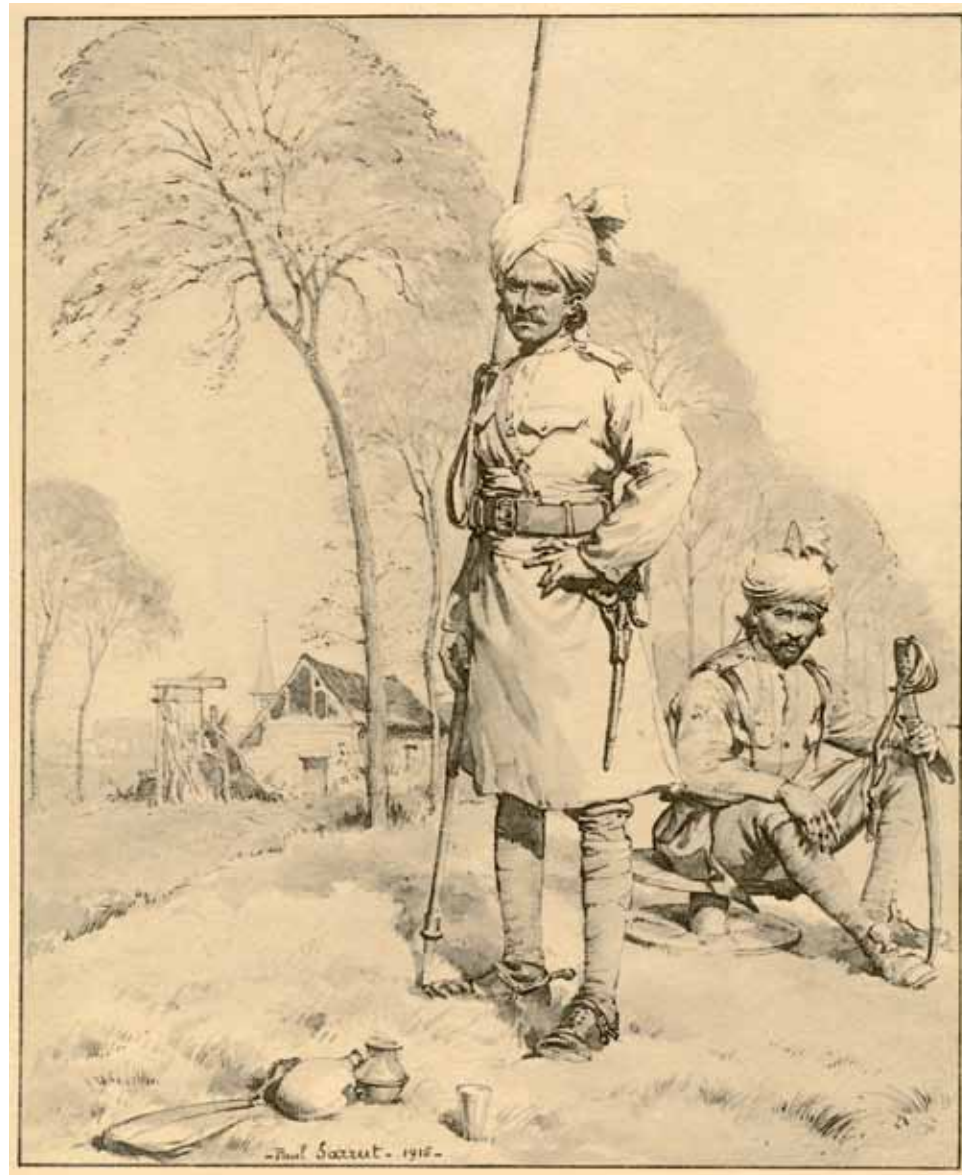


Photo: ARHAM collection

ARHAM has purchased some magnificent lithographs by Paul Sarrut on the internet. This French liaison officer ‘wandered’ around the camps of Indian troops in Warnes, Isbergues, Allouagne, Emy-Saint-Julien etc in order to capture real-life images of these fascinating soldiers and officers.

Emy-Saint-Julien, the children who observed from near or far the “rest time” taken by these extraordinary soldiers will never forget them. Dominique Faivre reasserts the fact that during a difficult period in his life, “my research into the Indian Corps was

hugely therapeutic”. At some stage he will delve further into the story of the Sikhs and Gurkhas in our region, perhaps at the time when “all the correspondence that was censored and archived in England” will become freely available to the public.

“The unfortunate Indians...”

In a book published in 1993, “*Mon devoir de mémoire*” (*My Duty of Remembrance*), Paul Raoult, the son of the primary schoolteacher in Saint-Floris, also remembered “the unfortunate Indians”. “They had great difficulty adapting to our weather. They suffered from the cold in the harsh winter of 1914, both in the trenches and in the barns in their billets. One of them, who showed particular kindness towards me, knocked on our window one evening. We hesitated as to whether to let him in: “Maman”, he said, addressing my grandmother who was with us at the time, “Moi Maman, beaucoup froid”, and he coughed deliberately to emphasize the fact. In the end my mother let him in. He came in the kitchen and stood quietly by the stove, dressed in his large tunic buttoned at the shoulder and covering him down to his knees. Once he had warmed up, he bowed to thank us then went on his way, but not before handing me a small jar of Chesebrough vaseline, the prophylactic qualities of which I was unaware of, and a few cigarettes that my mother took no time at all in confiscating.”

Photo: Alain Jacques documentary collection



It was at a place known as La Bombe, between Neuve-Chapelle and Richebourg, once a crossroads and now a roundabout, that the Meerut Division attacked in March 1915, and it is here that two stone tigers stand at the entrance to the Indian Memorial, designed by Sir Herbert Baker and inaugurated on 7 October 1927 in the presence of Marshal Foch, the Maharajah of Kapurthala, the novelist Rudyard Kipling and other dignitaries. The marshal reminded those attending that “over a million Indian troops fought on the French front and in the Dardanelles”. The memorial pays tribute to 4,843 men, listed according to their unit. “France will never forget those who rushed from all parts of the globe to fight against force and tyranny”, added the Minister of the Colonies. In 1964, a bronze plaque was added bearing the names of 206 Indian soldiers who had died in Germany, where they were prisoners of war.