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## The Royal Indian Army's flying visit

Last updated: 31 March 2009

**Giovanna Bloor from Llanfrothen** recounts the Indian Army and their mules' brief but memorable stay in Wales during WWII.



"At the beginning of WWII the British Army was completely mechanised. All animal transport companies had been phased out. But at the last moment they decided they did after all need animal transport to bring ammunition and supplies up to the front, quietly with mules (the mules were "di-voiced" to stop them braying).

India at the time had 36 animal transport companies and when asked by Britain they sent four companies at very short notice, by sea with all their mules and horses.

They embarked from Bombay in 1939 - it was the severest winter in Europe for 125 years - to Marseilles on the south coast of France. None of the animals were lost.

The 22nd company got captured by the Germans just before Dunkirk and were prisoners of war. The other three companies were evacuated from Dunkirk, and the men were very distressed at having to leave their mules and horses behind. Mule drivers became very attached to their animals. They had to give them away to local people in Northern France.

Having arrived in Britain, to begin with they were given French Army horses. In 1941 1,000 mules were imported from the USA. It is my impression that the authorities did not know quite what to do with the three companies when they got to Britain. They thought it would be demoralising to send them back to India so soon.

First they were stationed in Cornwall, then Crickhowell in South Wales, where eight died in a flu epidemic and are buried in the local graveyard with Islamic inscriptions on their tomb stones.

On April 2 1942 they arrived by train in Porthmadog (with all their mules and horses in cattle trucks which were not very suitable for their animals) and set up camp in Llanfrothen and Nantmor. 32nd company was camped in tents around Beudy Newydd and the Gwernydd in Llanfrothen and the other two companies were around Dolfriog in Nantmor.

As far as I can gather from reading the war diaries of the three companies in the Public Record Office in London, they spent their time here practising mountain warfare in our local



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mountains of Cnicht, the Moelwyns, Cwm Strallyn, Moel Ddu.

I think the men were all Muslims, but there was one Christian. They came from a mountainous region called Rawalpindi in the North West of India (now in Pakistan). They wore turbans and most of the men could not speak much English.

They had white officers but there was an Indian doctor and an Indian vet. The mules and horses were taken out each day for exercise, three abreast, and used to take over an hour to pass, with the vet at the head of the troop on a white horse. His name was Malik Mohammed Khan. I think altogether there must have been about 1,000 men and 1,000 animals between Croesor and Nantmor.

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#### your comments

**Alwyn Roberts, Bala**

I was born in Llanfrothen and lived on a farm named Bronynys which is situated between Llanfrothen and Prenteg. I remember well visiting a tented camp full of Indian soldiers and they gave us some bread shaped like a pancake to eat. I had never seen anything like it before.

Tue May 12 09:45:40 2009

**Peter Robson, Cape Town**

I'm very interested in the history of the RIASC in Kakul, NW Frontier. My grandfather Arthur Bethell served there at some time during the Second World War, presumably under H.S Woods' command. I have a couple of pictures of him during that time, including one marked; "Main Road Kakul '45". I wonder if the volumes mentioned by Chris Woods contain any list of serving officers at that time?

Mon Apr 20 09:33:34 2009

**Chris Woods**

My uncle, H.S.Woods, was regular I.A. Supply Corp 1917-47 and was latterly commandant of the R.I.A.S.C.training school in Kakul. If you visit the British Library they have histories of the Corps available to read, including:'History of the I.A.S.C.' Vol 3 by B.M.Majumdar OIOC ref IOL T17962 OIOCandVol III & IV by V.J.Moharir OIOC ref IOL T43127

There is also the extremely rare:'The Royal Indian Army Service Corp, World War 2' Anon publ. about 1948 although I don't know if the B/L has a copy.

Mon Feb 9 10:15:48 2009

**Tauranga, New Zealand**

Interesting to read your comments - my father John Hill was a Captain in the RIASC, training people to use mules to supply Imphal (and ?Kohima) He was born in India, was a teacher, and died in Australia 33 years ago

Thu Nov 13 10:16:00 2008

**Bob Crump Brithdir Gwynedd.**

The Indian Army and there mules were at one period during

the war stationed on what was known as "The Polo Ground" situated on the road between Griffithstown and New Inn. I lived in Sebastopol at the time and we children would cycle over there to see the troops and their mules. Also I believe they exercised these animals up on the mountains above Penyrheol I did not see them there as I was in school at Panteg Wern Sebastopol.

Wed Aug 13 09:28:24 2008

**John Graham, Kingsbridge, Devon**

I have a question for Giovanna Bloor rather than a contribution. I am trying to find out about some Indian Army soldiers equipped with mules said to have been stationed here (near Kingsbridge, south Devon) in WW2. I see that on the BBC website Ian Stephenson mentions 25 Mule Company RIASC moving from Cornwall to Devon in 1941. Does anybody know where in Devon they went? Can you suggest any sources of information on RIASC units in the UK during WW2? Many thanks!

Mon Jan 7 09:29:00 2008

**Ian Stephenson**

I was a child (probably about 3 yrs old) and remember some soldiers with mules walking past the farm I was staying in at Charlestown, Cornwall. They seemed to be very noisy and I remember that some mules had smashed into a shop window as the horses (mules) were turning the corner. On a recent return to Cornwall there are 3 Muslim graves of Indian soldiers at Campdown cemetery, St Austell. They were killed by a large tree being blown down on the chalets where the soldiers were sleeping in November 1940. In this aerea there seemed to be the 25 Mule Company RIASC who moved to Devon in 1941 and were replaced by 07 Mule Company from South Wales.

Fri Oct 26 09:32:38 2007

**Alec frazer of Cwmbran**

My wife and I have found a gravestone in Panteg cemetery facing in a different direction from the other gravestones. It bears the name KALU. Royal Indian Army Service Corp, 21st May 1943. 50163 driver. We are interested to know about Kalu and his solitary grave in a huge Christian cemetery. any information would be appreciated.

Mon Mar 19 10:20:56 2007

**Mandeep Singh Bajwa from Chandigarh, India**

All these soldiers were part of 'K' Force of the RIASC. Unlike WW 1 it was decided in 1939 that Indian soldiers would not serve in France. The Animal Transport Companies of the RIASC were needed since the British Army had no AT. After being evacuated from France where they had to abandon their mules and horses, to their great distress 'K' Force was stationed in Britain for the duration of the war.

Most of the rank and file were Punjabi Mussalmans (Muslims for Punjab Province). The Liberal leader Paddy Ashdown's father was an officer with the unit.

Mon Dec 18 10:09:02 2006

**Gwyn Jones from Stockport**

Having recently seen this article I have consulted my mother

who is still resident in Llanfrothen and she remembers the soldiers clearly. She would be 18 in April '42 and was resident in Tan Lan (the terrace of houses about half a mile outside Llanfrothen on the Beddgelert road) and hence close to one of the camp sites. She and other local girls used to man evening canteens for the soldiers in the area. She recalls that they were more deferential than other soldiers she had met when manning the kitchens.

Mon Jul 24 11:55:06 2006

**David Owen ex Gellilydan**

I remember the Indian Gunners well. Our House was beside the old road from Maentwrog, and we stood in the doorway and watched the continuous stream of mules and men passing by. My recollection may not be accurate, but the unit continued past for what seemed to be an hour or so. One of the ladies of the village used to entertain these chaps, and I have a recollection of one very impressive bearded soldier standing in the doorway. They seemed very well behaved and friendly.

Thu Mar 23 10:55:29 2006

**Per Finsted, Danish Military Historical Society**

Very interesting story! Some photos of the Royal Indian Army Service Corps were taken in France, and are found in "Britain's Wonderful Fighting Forces", Odhams Press Limited, London, ca. 1941. Further, the Indians were portrayed as toy soldiery by Britains Ltd. in 1940.

Sat Mar 11 05:50:56 2006

**Martin Briscoe, Fort William**

Interesting to read about the Indian Army in Snowdonia. I came across nine war graves of mule drivers from the Royal Indian Army Service Corps in Kingussie whilst photographing some Newfoundland war graves for the Maple Leaf Legacy Project. I was told that they had been brought to the Scottish Highlands to train with the British for a possible invasion of Norway.

Thu Feb 16 20:08:32 2006

**Meirion Foulkes from Chester**

In the spring of 1942 a detachment of Indian Army Muleteers were also stationed in Trawsfynydd and had a small tented camp on Ty Llwyd Farm adjacent to the Bala/Ffestiniog Railway line. I can remember one fine morning seeing a long column of pack animals on the march and it must have been at least ten miles in length. They all disappeared at about the time of embarkation for the North African Operation `Torch` campaign. I think that the concrete base of their main tent is still visible at Ty Llwyd.

Thu Nov 17 11:52:03 2005

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## The Royal Indian Army's flying visit

The Indians were only here for just over three months in the spring/summer of 1942 but they made a big impression, partly because local people at that time had never before seen faces of a different colour. People remember the Indians as being very polite and well behaved. The area seemed very quiet when they left.

As local people spoke mostly or even wholly Welsh and the soldiers had little English (though they had been taught to say their name, rank and number in English while in France, in case they were captured), communication must have been difficult.

They went to dances in Penrhyn and Porthmadog on Saturdays and they seem to have been well liked and got on particularly well with the local children. There are some local people now in their 70s and 80s who can still sing the Indian nursery rhymes that the Indians taught them!

There is even a spot on the Roman Road from Croesor to Nantmor that is called Pont Traed y Mul to this day by the locals (The Bridge of The Mules' Leg). It was named after the occasion when one of the mules got its leg stuck in the gap between two large, flat slates over a drain, could not be extricated and had to be destroyed, leaving the leg stuck between the slates.

The men took the mules to the Dwyryd river at Penrhyndeudraeth for the mules to practice swimming a river - which later in Burma they had to do very often. At the beginning of the war the Indians were not armed, but this must have changed as they used to go to the firing range at Trawsfynydd army camp to practise firing.

The round, white tents of the camp would be in rows and the animals were tethered in rows on 'standings'. A bugle would be blown when it was time for feeding and watering the animals at the river.

One local I spoke to could remember the Indians kneeling, praying in rows and the murmuring sound of their praying.

They were not the only soldiers in the area during WWII as the Durham Light Infantry, the Royal Artillery and the Black Watch were also here at various times. When the Indians left the Yanks came to the Dolfrig area and the 2nd Dutch Troop Commandos were in Porthmadog for a while. The area seems to have been well used during WWII for mountain training purposes.

After leaving Llanfrothen the Royal Indian Army spent quite some time in the North of Scotland and in January 1944 the force sailed back to India, arriving 25.4.1944. They were soon in operation in other theatres of war, including Burma,



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where they were invaluable. In fact the war in Burma could not have been fought without the men and their mules.

Altogether two and a half million Indians fought in WWII. Thirty thousand mules were used in the battles in Burma.

I am particularly interested in the effect the Indians had on this small, remote, Welsh speaking area and how they interacted with local people. Did their presence upset local people and farmers and cause a nuisance? I am interested in what people remember about them and any stories people may have. Has anyone any photos of the Indians?

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