

Neuve Chapelle Memorial



CWGC
Commonwealth War Graves Commission

The Neuve Chapelle Memorial

The Indian Memorial at Neuve Chapelle commemorates over 4,700 Indian soldiers and labourers who lost their lives on the Western Front during the First World War and have no known graves. The location of the memorial was specially chosen as it was at Neuve Chapelle in March 1915 that the Indian Corps fought its first major action as a single unit. The memorial takes the form of a sanctuary enclosed within a circular wall after the manner of the enclosing railings of early Indian shrines. The column in the foreground of the enclosure 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. The column is surmounted with a Lotus Capital, the Imperial British Crown and the Star of India. Two tigers are carved on either side of the column guarding the temple of the dead. On the lower part of the column the words 'God is One, His is the Victory' are inscribed in English, with similar texts in Arabic, Hindi, and Gurmukhi.

Neuve Chapelle was occupied by the Germans during the Second World War and served as a base for the Luftwaffe. It was also the scene of heavy fighting during the German retreat in 1944. Shrapnel damage dating from this period can be seen beneath the column.

The memorial was designed by Sir Herbert Baker and Sir Charles Wheeler and unveiled by the Earl of Birkenhead on 7



October 1927. Lord Birkenhead, then Secretary of State for India, had served as a staff officer with the Indian Corps during the war. The ceremony was also attended by the Maharaja of Karputhala, Marshal Ferdinand Foch, Rudyard Kipling, and a large contingent of Indian veterans.

The Indian Expeditionary Force on the Western Front

Within days of the British declaration of war on Germany on 4 August 1914, two infantry Divisions and a cavalry Brigade of the

Indian Army were ordered to mobilise and prepare for overseas service. Units of the Indian Expeditionary Force began arriving in France in September and by late October they were involved in heavy fighting on the Messines Ridge in Belgium.

The Indian Corps, which was composed of the 3rd (Lahore) and 7th (Meerut) Divisions, went on to fight in some of the bloodiest battles of the first year of the war. At Neuve Chapelle, from 10 – 13 March 1915, Indian soldiers made up half of the attacking force and despite suffering very heavy casualties succeeded in capturing important sections of the German line.

The officers and men of the Corps further distinguished themselves at St. Julien in the Ypres Salient in April 1915, at Aubers Ridge and Festubert in May, and at Loos in September before being redeployed to the Middle East in December. The Indian Cavalry Corps remained on the Western Front until the spring of 1918 and Indian labour companies, which began arriving in France in 1917, performed vital and often dangerous logistical work behind the lines until after the Armistice.

Over the course of the war, India sent over 140,000 men to the Western Front – 90,000 serving in the infantry and cavalry along with as many as 50,000 non-combatant labourers. They hailed from the length and breadth of undivided India: from the Punjab, Garhwal, the Frontiers, Bengal, Nepal, Madras and Burma, and represented an extremely diverse range of religious, linguistic,

and ethnic cultures. The officer corps was composed, for the most part, of men of European descent. Of the combatants, over 8,550 were killed and as many as 50,000 more were wounded. Almost 5,000 of the dead have no known grave and are commemorated on the Menin Gate at Ieper and here at Neuve Chapelle.



Left: The unveiling of the memorial, October 1927

À gauche : inauguration du mémorial, octobre 1927

Above: Indian bicycle troops in France, 1916

G-dessus : troupes cyclistes indiennes en France, 1916

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The Commission is responsible for the commemoration of almost 1,700,000 members of the Commonwealth forces who gave their lives in the two world wars. The graves and memorials of these men and women, who came from all parts of the Commonwealth and who were of many faiths and of none, are found around the globe in some 150 countries. For more information about the Commission, our work and how to search our records online visit www.cwgc.org Enquiries are also welcome at our offices: **CWGC** Head Office Tel: + 44 (0) 1628 507200

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For more information about this location and some of those commemorated here, scan the QR code (right).

