

The Forgotten Heroes

Tucked away in the salubrious surroundings of Khareghat Colony, on Huges Road, Mumbai, stands a quiet stone cenotaph. Believed to be the first and oldest War Memorial in the country, erected by the Citizens of the city. It commemorates the Parsis who laid down their lives in Europe during World War I. On three sides, the Memorial bears the names of Parsi Officers & Men who sacrificed their lives in this war. This Cenotaph was erected in 1926 by the Bombay Parsi Panchayat, from donations received from the Parsi citizens. Every year on "All Souls Day" by the Zoroastrian Calendar, a wreath laying ceremony is held at the Memorial, with Parsi citizens, Veterans and a Naval Bugler in attendance, playing the Last Post.



Subsequently, in its vicinity, a small memorial was also erected in memory of those valiant Parsis who died in the subsequent wars, including the 1965, 1971 & Kargil Wars.



But, beyond this memorial lies an extraordinary, and largely forgotten, chapter of Indian military history: the story of **The Parsi Battalion**.

Formed during the First World War, the Parsi Battalion was unlike any other Indian regiment. While most Indian battalions had a limited sanctioned strength the Parsis, were granted a full strength of officers and men, the same status and strength as British Army units. Even more remarkably, while other Indian battalions were commanded by British officers, the Parsi Battalion had its own Commanding Officer of full Colonel rank, with Parsis filling every rank from officers to soldiers.

The Battalion also maintained a reserve force of 551 men in Bombay, trained for guard duty should the war reach Indian shores. Battle experience led to a practice of leaving behind 108 specialists—including instructors, signallers, and stretcher-bearers—to rebuild in case of heavy losses.

The Parsis were not just equal in structure but also in honour & status. They were entitled to and received the same perks & privileges as did the British Officers & men, some being even rare among British troops. They were equipped with Lee-Enfield rifles, sword-bayonets, and ample machine-gun support; they carried significantly more firepower than other Indian forces.

The Parsi Battalion was also the first among British forces to receive "Little Willie", the world's earliest battle tank, and the newly introduced metal helmets. On the Western Front—stretching from the English Channel to Switzerland—they held forward trenches across miles of Europe's bloodiest battlefields.

Their valour was recognised at the highest levels. **The first two Indians ever awarded the Distinguished Service Order (DSO) were Parsis:** Capt. (later Maj. Gen.) Cursetjee and Capt. (later Col.) Bharucha, both from the medical services. Many soldiers were as young as 16, having lied about their age to enlist.

Yet, despite their exceptional role, the Battalion slipped into obscurity. Maybe the reason lies in our bureaucratic mindset: since they were counted as a British force, not as part of the Indian Army.

Today, the cenotaph at Hughes Road, which will celebrate its 100th Year in 2026, is one of the few reminders of these forgotten heroes. The Parsis, a small community with immense patriotic spirit, had raised a battalion that fought shoulder-to-shoulder with the British Army, held trenches on the Western Front, and earned some of the earliest Indian military honours in Europe. Maybe in keeping with the rhetorical promise made centuries ago.



Inauguration of the Zoroastrian War Memorial - 1926

It is time India reclaims and remembers the story of the Parsi Battalion—not just as a Parsi legacy, but as a proud chapter of our Nation's glorious military history.

Commodore M Bhada (Retd)