

About some of the Indian units that participated The Battle of Tanga, November 1914, Part 1

Introduction

The immediate reason for this article seeing the light of day is a newspaper clipping from *The Madras Mail*, dated July 5, 1921, which I recently acquired along with some other papers.

The 83rd Wallajahbad Light Infantry turns out to have quite an interesting history and soldiers from the regiment took part in the landing operation in November 1914 at Tanga in German East Africa, and my article *The Battle of Tanga - 1914* can be usefully read together with this description.

Infantry regiments from the southern part of India

Together, the southern part of India was referred to as *The Carnatic*, about which you can read more in the *Carnatic Region* (Wikipedia).



Carnatic Infantry.

Drawn by AC Lovett, 1910.

Postcard from the National Army Museum, London.

From left: (*Naik*

= corporal; *havildar* = sergeant; *subadar* = captain).

1. 79th Carnatic Infantry, Naik, (*Madras Musalman*)

2. 86th Carnatic Infantry, Havildar (*Madrasi Musalman*) 3. 75th Carnatic Infantry (*Parayan*) 4. 63rd Palamcottah Light Infantry (*Tamil*) 5. 83rd Wallajahbad Light Infantry, Havildar (*Christian*) 6. 80th Carnatic Infantry, Subadar (*Madrasi Musalman*) 7. 73rd Carnatic Infantry, Subadar (*Madrasi Musalman*)

The banner belongs to the 80th Carnatic Infantry and bears the inscriptions "Hyder Ally, Sholinghur, Hezira, 1195".

The description of the plate in *Armies of India* by Major AC Lovett and Major GF MacMunn, Adam and Charles Black, London 1911, omits a description of the first figure identified here using information from the Indian Army (The British Empire); however, the corporal's religious/caste affiliation is a guess.

Organisation

One of the weaknesses of the Indian Army that was exposed during the First World War was the army's ability to supply the units with personnel replacement.

To some extent, they had tried to counter this problem by letting the otherwise independent regiments form pairs, so that from a common pool of recruits these could be added to the active battalions.

The 83rd Wallajahbad Light Infantry and 63rd Palamcottah Light Infantry regiments formed one such pair (designated as *link*). Although the unit designations are regiments, in practice they are independent battalions that consisted of 8 companies. The companies could work together in 4 *double companies*, and two double companies, i.e. half a battalion, were called a *wing*.

This organization had been in force in the regular English Army in the years leading up to the First World War, but had been abandoned in favor of the 4 light company organization which became the standard organization for many years to come. The Indian Army adapted to the new organization, but analogously to the volunteer units in the British Army, the change was only in place during 1915.

63rd Palamcottah Light Infantry



Regimentsmärke

63rd Palamcottah

Light Infantry.

From Source 2.

Historical summary

1759: 4th Battalion, Coast Sepoys
1769: 4th Carnatic Battalion
1770: 3rd Carnatic Battalion
1784: 3rd Madras Battalion
1796: 3rd Madras Native Infantry
1811: Palamcottah Light Infantry
1824: 3rd Palamcottah Light Infantry Regiment, Madras Native Infantry
1885: 3rd Palamcottah Regiment, Madras Light Infantry
1903: 63rd Palamcottah Light Infantry
1922: The regiment is disbanded (savings)

83rd Wallajahbad Light Infantry



Regimentsmærke

83rd Wallajahbad

Light Infantry.

From Source 2.

Historical summary

1794: 33rd Madras Battalion
1797: 1st Battalion, 12th Regiment of Madras Native Infantry
1823: 23rd Wallajahbad Light Infantry Regiment of Madras Native Infantry
1885: 23rd Wallajahbad Light Infantry Regiment of Madras Infantry
1901: 23rd Wallajahbad Light Infantry, Madras Infantry
1903: 83rd Wallajahbad Light Infantry
1922: 4th Battalion, 3rd Madras Regiment
1923: The regiment is disbanded (savings)

The landing at Tanga in German East Africa, November 1914

At the start of the First World War, one half of the 83rd Wallajahbad Light Infantry was transferred to the 63rd Palamcottah Light Infantry, which - as part of the 27th (Bangalore) Infantry Brigade of the Indian Army's Expeditionary Force B - was sent to East Africa in the autumn 1914.

The battalion took part here in the landing at Tanga in early November 1914, and - in line with the other participating Indian units - still used the old organisation.

Table 1: Strength figures - 63rd Palamcottah Light Infantry (Source 3)

	Quantity
Pr. 1. november 1914	
English officers	13
Indian officers	17
Indian NCOs and Privates	732
Total	762
In addition:	
Helpers	53
Mule	15
Machine guns	2

Of the listed helpers (*followers*), 13 were paid by the battalion itself.

In addition, around 4 non-commissioned officers and privates were assigned to serve at the brigade staff or the Expeditionary Force staff, probably as guard personnel and/or orderlies.

For a general discussion of the battles at Tanga, refer to my article *The Battle of Tanga - 1914*, as well as to *History of the Great War, Military Operations East Africa, Volume I* (Source 3), which contains a very detailed description of the battles. This includes, among other things, that the 63rd Palamcottah Light Infantry did not make a particularly lucky appearance during the fighting

Table 2: Casualties - 63rd Palamcottah Light Infantry (Source 3)

Tab	Fallen Wounded Missing Total			
	Fallen	Wounded	Missing	Total
English officers	1	3		4
Indian officers	3	3		6
	8	31	36	75

12 37 36 85

Total

The fallen officer was Captain JHM Fuller, who had the 83rd Wallajahbad Light Infantry as the parent regiment.

Source 1 refers to the casualty figures as 1 English officer and 12 privates (dead), 17 privates (wounded) and a number of prisoners, of whom 1 Indian officer and 2 privates died in captivity.

In the mention of The Tanga Memorial Cemetery (Commonwealth War Graves Commission) there is a list of 394 names, of which 392 fell during the fighting 3 to 5 November 1914 - see Cemetery Reports. An analysis of these names yields 13 names from the 83rd Wallajahbad Light Infantry and 17 names from the 63rd Palamcottah Light Infantry. The information about Captain Fuller comes from this list of names.

63rd Palamcottah Light Infantry at Tanga, November 1914

The peacekeeping force, in line with other units located far from potential combat areas, was limited, so the aforementioned supply from the 83rd Wallajahbad Light Infantry was necessary to bring the battalion to combat strength.

The regiments in South India generally recruited personnel from the smaller "warlike" population groups (*martial races*), such as e.g. Sikhs and Gurkhas, and further the area's most suitable recruits went to the local engineer troops *Sappers and Miners* and *the 61st Pioneers*.

**Table 3: Religious/Caste Belonging to
63rd Palamcottah Light Infantry (Source 3)**

	Quantity
Pr. 1. november 1914	
<i>Madrasi Muslims</i>	315
<i>Parayans</i>	82
<i>Tamils</i>	210
<i>Others, various</i>	142
Total	749
	Companies
Distribution by companies	

<i>Madrasi Muslims</i>	4
	2
<i>Tamils</i>	
	2
<i>Parayans and Christians</i>	
	8
Total	

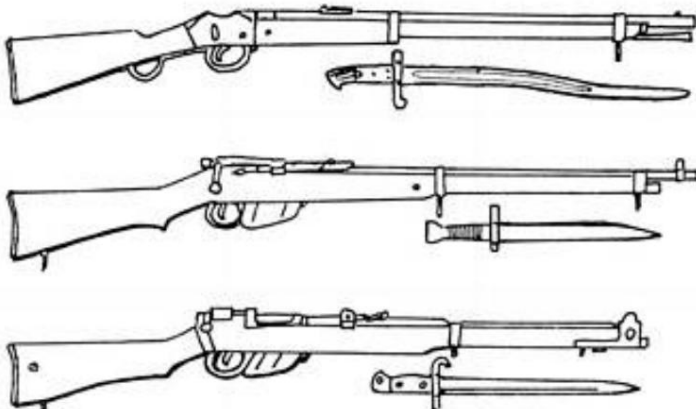
Of the 13 English officers who were part of the battalion, only 7 mobilized with the battalion, while the remaining 6 were commissioned from other units. The new officers came to the battalion at the last minute, the last 2 even only on the last day before embarkation, and neither the officers nor the soldiers had the opportunity to get to know each other better.

The closest the regiment had been to active service was in 1900, when it was supposed to take part in the China Campaign (Boxer Rebellion), but despite the banner China 1900, the regiment did not get further than Hong Kong. The majority of the personnel were generally awaiting retirement, so it was hardly, after all, where a fresh young recruit looked when he wanted to join the army.

The situation was more or less similar in the other battalions from South India, but when it was decided to send these units into battle after all, it is because they were the only ones that could be spared at this time.

New weapons

In terms of armament, the starting point was not much better, as the Indian army was generally equipped with rifles of an older model than the Lee-Enfield (1902), called *short*, which was the standard weapon in the British army. The regular Indian units were equipped with the predecessor - Lee-Enfield (1895), designated *long*, in a special Indian version, designated *Lee-Enfield Rifle Mk 1 (Indian Pattern)*.



Gun types

- *Lee-Enfield (long)*, 1895.
- *Lee-Enfield (short)*, 1902.

The Indian standard rifle resembles the long version of the rifle.

From *British Infantry Regiments, 1660-1914* by AH Bowling, Almark Publications, London 1970, ISBN 0-85524-001-6.

Immediately after mobilisation, the personnel were given the short rifles, the sights and other functions of which were different from the rifles they were familiar with beforehand. There was no time left to load the rifles or make much use of practicing the soldiers in operating the new weapons.



A Sikh Maxim gun squad.

From a postcard, sent April 11, 1907 1). __

In terms of machine guns, the situation was not much better, and only two of the Expeditionary Corps' regular Indian battalions - the 101st Grenadiers and the 61st Pioneers - were already equipped with machine guns. In a hurry, the 63rd Palamcottah Light Infantry and the 98th Infantry (both 27th (Bangalore) Infantry Brigade) as well as the 13th Rajputs (The Shekhawati Regiment) (from the Expeditionary Corps' second brigade, the Imperial Service Brigade) had to be equipped with machine guns, just as manpower had to be spared to operate the machine guns.

History does not say what type of machine guns were issued, but they were probably Maxim type machine guns, which were the standard weapon before the well-known Vickers machine gun was introduced.

Underway



Indian troops embarking horses at Bombay.
From FirstWorldWar.com.

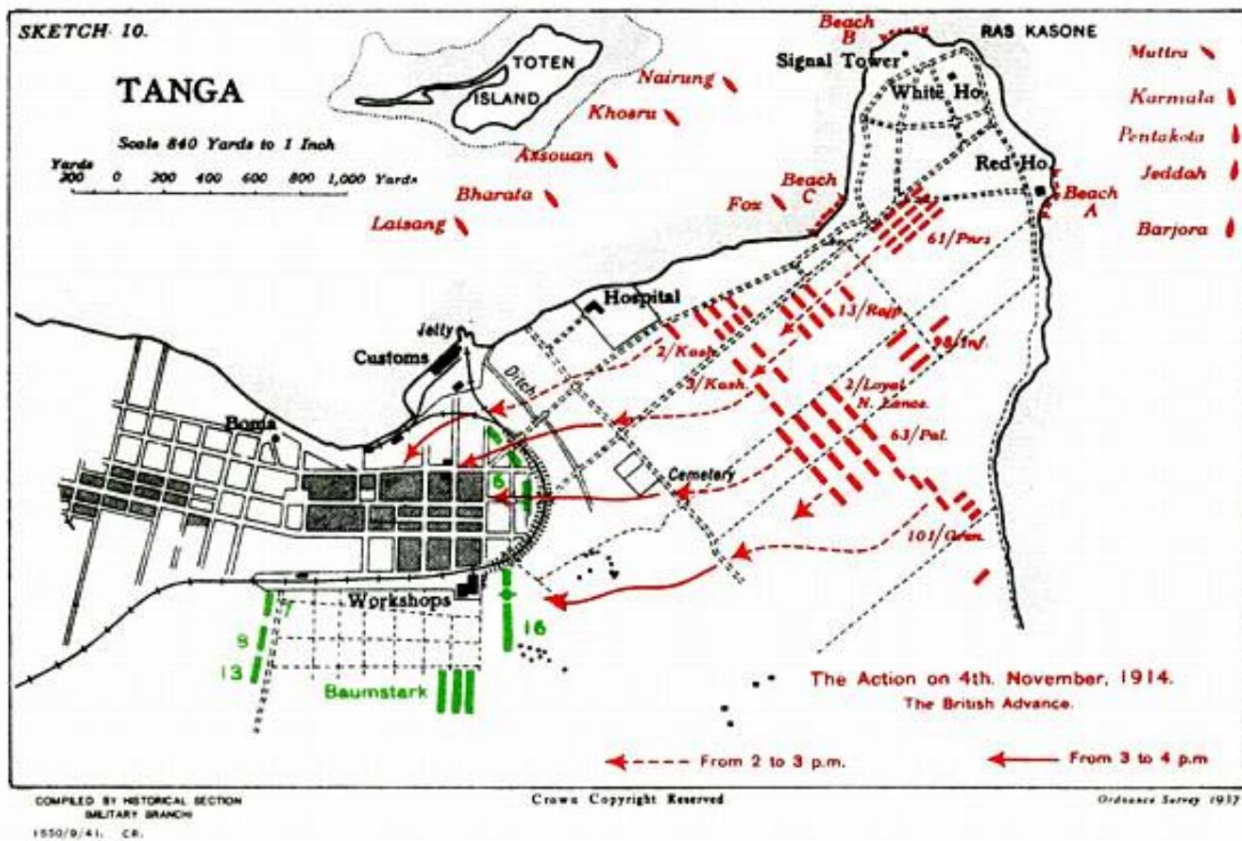
Expeditionary Force B left Bombay on 16 October 1914 and headed for Mombasa in British East Africa, which was reached on 30 October 1914.

However, the 63rd Palamcottah Light Infantry, which was garrisoned in a town called Kamptee in central India, was shipped out from the port city of Karachi as early as 30 September 1914. (Source 4)

The overcrowding on board the transport ships was great, and conditions on the S/S ASSOUAN (of approx. 1,600 tons), which transported the 63rd Palamcottah Light Infantry, are highlighted in Source 3 as even very cramped. None of the soldiers were seafarers and therefore suffered all the pangs of seasickness. It was not possible to provide all the special foods that the soldiers used to get or - according to their religion - had to consume. The physical conditions were very cramped and it was only possible for a few soldiers at a time to be on deck.

After a short stay at Mombasa, where the Expeditionary Force remained on board the transport ships and only certain members of the staff were allowed to go ashore in connection with finalizing the planning of the landing operation, they proceeded to Tanga, which was reached just before dawn on the 2nd. November 1914.

The country statement



Situation map - Tanga, 4 November 1914 (D+1).
From Source 3.

On D+1 - 4 November 1914 - the 63rd Palamcottah Light Infantry is landed together with the other Indian battalions of the 27th (Bangalore) Infantry Brigade - 98th Infantry and 101st Grenadiers - as well as the brigade's signal section on C Beach. The brigade, whose English battalion - 2nd Bn. The Loyal North Lancashire Regiment, landed on the night of D+1 - is now full.

The 27th (Bangalore) Infantry Brigade is deployed with the Imperial Service Brigade, supported as far as possible by the guns of HMS Fox and the mountain guns of the 28th Mountain Battery, on board the S/S Bharata, in a frontal attack on Tanga.

On the first day of operations, the 13th Rajputs (The Shekhawati Regiment) and three companies of the 61st King George's Own Pioneers had sought to push through the densely wooded terrain between A Beach and Tanga, where they were halted at the deep ditch running east of Tanga .

Interlude on D-Day

Neither the infantrymen nor the pioneers had a lucky escape from this first day and the commander of the 13th Rajputs, Lieutenant Colonel HW Codrington, was mortally wounded and two of his officers killed as they sought out a small hill for better observation. One of the fallen officers arrives to make a report, but movement gives away the position and a barrage of German machine gun fire quickly follows.



Types of India:

Some gallant Indian Pioneers. 61st Regiment, ca. 1920.

From a simultaneous postcard.

The incident spreads uncertainty among the inexperienced soldiers and panic begins to spread. The battalion's machine gun platoon comes under fire and the African carriers carrying the 2 machine guns panic and the carriers flee in all directions. The battalion begins to fall back.

The 3 pioneer companies are deployed to stop a German counterattack, but the inexperienced and exhausted Indian soldiers cannot put up much against the well-trained German askaris. Two fresh pioneer companies are now deployed and create space for the other forces - on orders from Brigadier General MJ Tighe - can retreat to A Beach.

The back of the postcard gives the following description:

The part played by Native Regiments from India in the Great War is too splendid to be adequately recorded here and too recent to need recounting.

The King has been the Spokesman of the whole Empire in expressing the heartfelt thanks and admiration due to the gallant officers and men of the Indian Army.

63rd Palamcottah Light Infantry attack

Impressed by the events of D-Day, the Commander of the Expeditionary Force, Major General AE Aitken, did not have high expectations for the 63rd Palamcottah Light Infantry.

He therefore chooses to deploy the battalion (marked with a blue circle on the above map) between his two best battalions - 2nd Bn. The Loyal North Lancashire Regiment and the 101st Grenadiers, while the battalions weakened by yesterday's fighting form the reserve. The general later stated that he hoped the weakened units would recover when they saw the progress of their comrades.

The attack begins at 12:10, in intense heat. On the right wing, things go fairly well at the beginning - the then manage to penetrate Tanga city for a while, 13th Rajputs can decorate its somewhat tarnished reputation, and Captain CRF Seamour manages to climb onto the roof of the Hotel Kaiser and tear two German flag down.

As the 63rd Palamcottah Light Infantry advance through the densely wooded terrain, they are hampered by the intense heat and their leather armor. As a result of the advance on the right wing, the three attacking battalions are ordered to join up to the right, but the order only reaches the 2nd Bn. Loyal North Lancashire Regiment and half of the 63rd Palamcottah Light Infantry.

This creates a gap in the English front, which is quickly exploited by German units, who can thereby shoot flankingly at the 63rd Palamcottah Light Infantry. It quickly becomes too much for the exhausted and thirsty soldiers, and when they are also fired upon by machine guns, the battalion begins to disintegrate.

The English officers, who - as previously mentioned - were largely unknown to the Indian soldiers, are unable to stop the breakdown, as appeals to loyalty to the officers, which are otherwise said to have a good effect on Indian soldiers, do not work .

In the newly formed machine gun division, led by Major KCT McCaskill and Captain EA Breithaupt, things are better. Despite its improvised nature, the English officers here have certainly succeeded in winning the respect of the soldiers, and given their ranks, it is hardly the lowest officers who are selected to man the machine guns.

Other smaller parts of the battalion also hold together, and it was the good fortune of Lieutenant GN Proctor, who was seconded from the 83rd Wallajahbad Light Infantry, and jemadar (native lieutenant) Abdul Rahman, with 25 men, to push forward to the railway line and take up position here. However, they did not last long, as all soldiers fell. Unsupported as the officers were, they had no option but to retreat, under which the jemadar Rahman fell.

The battalion ceases to function as a unit and the soldiers disperse into the dense jungle, heading back towards C Beach. The gap in the front thereby becomes even larger, and has to be closed in a hurry by the 101st Grenadiers, who were originally expected to attack Tanga from the south.

The unrest quickly spread to the 98th Infantry, which was behind the 63rd Palamcottah Light Infantry. On their way forward, they are attacked by swarms of wild bees (which at various times bothered both parties), and the soldiers scatter to all winds. Except for a single company, it is not possible to get this battalion to advance.

To round off the story, it can be added that the attacking force loses its footing in Tanga when the German Commander-in-Chief von Lettow-Vorbeck launches an energetic counter-attack. The Indian and English units are ordered back, and at nightfall hold positions concentrated around the Hospital and the beaches. General Aitken now decides that he has no chance of taking Tanga and calls off the operation.



Soldiers of the 98th Infantry bring supplies ashore at C Beach.
From Source 4.

D+2 the invasion force withdraws - an operation apparently proceeding efficiently and in good order - to their transport vessels, which then sail back to Mombasa.

Large quantities of supplies are left on the beaches, including several machine guns, and the German forces in East Africa benefit from these items for a long time to come.

About the artillery support

Source 3 mentions that the battery fired a good 150 rounds from positions on the deck of S/S Bharata. Forward observers were not the order of the day, and most of the shots were aimed at the sound of firing.

The battery commander allowed himself to be hoisted to the top of a mast, but did not have much opportunity for effective observation.



28th Mountain Battery aboard S/S BHARATA.
From Source 4.

In the background you can see the Hospital, and at the same time you get an impression of the dense vegetation along the coast, and thus the battery's poor observation opportunities.

Apart from one of the ship's boats, which is sent ashore on another occasion, the battery has no connection with land and therefore no sense of the situation.

The battery commander at one point requests to send an officer ashore, but this is refused as unnecessary.



Cannon exercise with a 6-inch cannon, approx. 1905.

From a simultaneous postcard [3](#).

The situation is no better for the guns aboard HMS FOX (6-inch and 4.7-inch guns), nor is it possible to provide any effective support from here.

Some of the shots from HMS FOX hit among own units and a single shot hit the Hospital.

A German medical aid immediately runs out and plants a Red Cross flag in front of the hospital, while the mountain battery from the S/S BHARATA signals the firing on its own units. HMS FOX must therefore stop shooting.

After Tanga

General Aitken telegraphed his report on the events at Tanga to London on 5 November 1914.

It is decided here - under the impression of the hardship at Ypres - that the story should not be published immediately, and several months passed before the story was passed on to the press.

Similarly, precautions were also taken so that the story did not spread to India either. General Aitken proposed that the 63rd Palamcottah Light Infantry and the 98th Infantry be sent back to India "in disgrace", but given the desire to keep the events secret this did not happen and the two battalions remained in Africa until the end of 1916.

The similar, but less fortunate, 61st King George's Own Pioneers remained in East Africa until the 20th. February 1918.

The 63rd Palamcottah Light Infantry was disbanded in 1922, due to austerity, while the 98th Infantry became the 4th Bn., 19th Hyderabad Regiment by the Army Scheme of 1922.

At the same time, 61st King George's Own Pioneers became 1st Bn., 1st Madras Pioneers (King George's Own). This regiment was disbanded in 1932, also due to austerity.



Infantry of the former "Hyderabad Contingent".

Drawn by AC Lovett, 1910.

From *Armies of India* by Major AC Lovett and Major GF MacMunn, Adam and Charles Black, London 1911.

From the left you can see:

- 1) 94th Russel's Infantry (*Dekhani Musalman*)
- 2) 95th Russel's Infantry (*Hindustani Musalman*)
- 3) 98th Infantry (*Ahir of the Eastern Punjab*)
- 4) 98th Bekar Infantry (*Jyt*)
- 5) 97th Deccan Infantry (*Rajput*)

98th Infantry



Regimentsmærke - 98th Infantry.

From Source 2.

Historical summary

1797: 1st Regiment, Salabat Khan's Elichpur Brigade 1826: 7th Infantry [Nizam of Hyderabad's Army] 1854: 5th Infantry, Hyderabad Contingent 1903: 98th Infantry 1922: 4th Battalion, 19th Hyderabad Regiment

Closing

Although there may not be much positive to say about the English part of the operations, in assessing the efforts of the units one must take into account the conditions under which they had to operate.

A unit like the 63rd Palamcottah Light Infantry, which consisted of non-co-operative soldiers, under the command of officers they did not know, and who did not know the soldiers, could hardly be expected to be in tip-top shape immediately landed after more than a month at sea. The only time the soldiers had to get used to being back on land was from about 06:00, when the battalion disembarks, to 12:10, when it begins its attack.

When you also consider the midday heat, lack of water, a totally unknown terrain, wild bees, as well as the fact that it was the first time that the soldiers were under enemy fire, it is understandable that things did not go better.

Sources

1. ~~83rd~~ Wallajahbad Light Infantry - Return from active service, artikel i The Madras Mail, 5. juli 1921.
2. ~~83rd~~ Wallajahbad Light Infantry og 63rd Palamcottah Light Infantry (The British Empire).
3. *History of the Great War, Military Operations East Africa, Volume I, August 1914 - September 1916* by Second Lieutenant Charles Hordern, HSMO, London 1941. (Can be borrowed from the Royal Garrison Library.)
4. *The Battle of Tanga 1914* af Ross Anderson, Tempus Publishing Ltd., Stroud, Gloucestershire 2002, ISBN 0-7524-2349-5

To note:

1) Bagsiden af kortet indeholder følgende beskrivelse: *The Sikhs are a native race of religious origin inhabiting the Punjab. In the middle of the 19th century they gave the Indian Government considerable trouble, but since their final subjugation in 1849, they have been loyal subjects of England, remaining fast to their allegiance during the Indian Mutiny of 1857. There are eight battalions in the Indian army composed solely of Sikhs.*

2) I assume that the physical conditions can also be an explanation for why the soldiers were not trained in the operation of their new rifles, including the ability to shoot.

3) For a more detailed description of the postcard, refer to my article About English naval uniforms and HMS IRRESISTIBLE.