

# Indian Sanitary Units under First world War

## Introduction

The following is not a complete record of the many units that supported the Indian Army during the First World War, but a collection of scraps from which to get an idea of organization etc.

## Indian Health Troops - Historical Summary

Unit	Created	Remarks
Indian Medical Service	1886	The Indian Medical Corps, until 1943. From 1915, a larger number of Indian doctors were recruited, a development which continued thereafter.
Indian Medical Department	1896	Organized English (few), Anglo-Indian and Indian doctors, with a shorter medical education. Up to approx. 1920 designated as <i>Indian Subordinate Medical Department</i> .
Army Hospital Corps	1896	The Corps - <i>Army Hospital Native Corps</i> (from 1881) - organized medical assistants and supervised the hospital service for the British units stationed in India.
Army Bearer Corps	1901	Organized sick bearers, recruited from the population groups that had "carrying" as a special profession - e.g. <i>kaharis</i> - which later became a common term for Indian sick-bearers.
Queen Alexandra's Military Nursing Service for India	1914-1918	Women's Corps, with English nurses who cared for the sick and wounded from English units. From 1926 part of <i>Queen Alexandra's Imperial Military Nursing Service</i> . (Source 6)
Indian Hospital Corps	1920	The experiences of the First World War brought together <i>the Army Hospital Corps</i> and <i>the Army Bearer Corps</i> into one unit.
Indian Troops Nursing Services	1926	Women's Corps, with Indian nurses, created with the inspiration of <i>QAMNS/QAIMNS</i> for the purpose of caring for the sick and wounded of the Indian Army. Later renamed <i>Indian Military Nursing Services</i> .
Indian Army Dental Corps	1941	Dentists were carved out of <i>the Indian Medical Service/Indian Medical Department</i> and formed an independent corps.

1943

Indian Army  
Medical Corps

Combined *Indian Medical Service, Indian Medical Department* and *Indian Hospital Corps*.

1950

Army Medical  
Corps

In connection with the reorganization of the Indian Army after independence, the Medical Corps assumed its present name.

## Indian Medical Service



*Indian Medical  
Service Corps Badge, 1940.*  
From Source 1.

The military medical service in India traces its history back to 1612, when the East India Company employed its first physician-general, John Woodall, under whom a number of civilian doctors were employed. As the company's areas of interest - and its military forces - expanded, employees' actual military doctors.

From 1764 these became a permanent part of the Company's army forces with the creation of the Bengal Medical Service, followed by the creation of the Madras Medical Service in 1767 and the Bombay Medical Service in 1779. In April 1886 these medical corps were amalgamated into one - the Indian Medical Service - with a General Physician in the tip.

The organization was civilian in nature, not unlike the training units [1](#)), and sanitary units were also set up ad hoc. From 1912, the organization came into a firmer, military framework, and the creation of organizational sanitary units began.

The medical corps worked with both the sick and wounded from the British units serving in India, as well as the soldiers of the Indian army. The English units were also supported by personnel from the British medical corps - Royal Army Medical Corps - in which units, however, also included Indian personnel.

### Degree sign

#### Danish degrees (1979)

General practitioner

Major General

Staff physician of the 1st grade

Oberst

Staff physician of the 2nd grade

Lieutenant Colonel

	Major
Chief Physician	
	Captain
Reserve doctor of the 1st grade	
	First lieutenant
Reserve doctor of the 2nd grade	
	Lieutenant
Reserve doctor of the 3rd grade	
	Sergeant
Undergraduate	

Whereas in the early 1920s 681 doctors were employed in the Indian Medical Service, in military and civil posts, is only 150 of the doctors are Indians, of whom 102 were employed from 1915 onwards. (Source 2)

The structure of Indian society is quite clear here - an English background and an English recognized medical education places one at the top of the system, while a native background and some medical education places one at the bottom of the system.

However, it is also the area where a recognized medical education gives access to the higher levels of the system, although the number of Indians/Anglo-Indians with an English medical education is limited.



*Indian Medical Service.*

Kort nr. 25 i serien

Colonial & Indian Army Badges, John Player & Sons, 1917.

The doctors in the Indian Medical Service are trained according to the regulations of the British Army, and have a medical education recognized by the British Medical Association. All doctors are royally appointed (*King's Commission*), and hold the same officer ranks as the English army.

The text on the back of the card reads as follows:

*The badge of the Indian Medical Service. This service supplies medical officers for the Indian regiments, and shares with the Royal Army Medical Corps the higher military medical appointments in India. In addition, about half the officers of the service are, in time of peace, in civil employ, and it finds officers*

for the civil medical appointments in India.

## Indian Medical Department



*Indian*

*Medical Department Corps Badge, 1940.*

From Source 1.

The corps traces its history back to the East India Company's armies in Bengal, Bombay and Madras, and the first local corps was established around 1812. From 1896, the local corps were united into one, which until approx. 1920 bore the designation Indian Subordinate Medical Department.

The doctors in the Indian Medical Department - English (only a few), Anglo-Indian and Indian - have a shorter medical education (= a three-year medical education not recognized by the English Medical Association). The corps' English and Anglo-Indian doctors (*assistant surgeons*) primarily serve with English units in subordinate functions - the highest (added) ranks are major, captain and lieutenant.

The corps' Indian doctors (*sub-assistant surgeons*) primarily serve in Indian units, and carry Indian ranks (Viceroy's Commissioned Officers) - *subadar-major*, *subadar* and *jemadar*, roughly equivalent to captain, first lieutenant and lieutenant.

## Army Hospital Corps

A well-functioning hospital service for Indian soldiers was first introduced during the First World War.

Until then, the hospitals and infirmaries serving Indian soldiers were quite primitive, containing at best a number of beds, mattresses and pillows and a modest stock of blankets, basins and medical equipment. When a soldier was hospitalized, he brought his own clothes and bedding. The food was the normal one, supplemented by the special diet that had to be determined as part of the treatment.

### **Northern Army**

### **Southern Army og Burma**

1st (Peshawar) Division 4th (Quetta) Division

2nd (Rawalpindi) Division 5th (Mhow) Division

3rd (Lahore) Division 6th (Poona) Division

7th (Meerut) Division 9th (Secunderabad) Division

8th (Lucknow) Division Burma Division

The department's doctor led the infirmary, assisted by a junior doctor and some soldiers who had not received special training in nursing. A number of helpers - cooks, water carriers and sweepers - also worked in the infirmary. The saying - "that it takes good health to be sick" - seems appropriate, but

it must be remembered that the treatment options in civil Indian society have certainly not been better...

Nurses - and from 1903 also the Army Bearer Corps - were organized in 10 companies, corresponding to the Indian Army's 10 infantry divisions, cf. Source 3 2).

---



*Indian Medical Bearer,  
Army Bearer Corps,  
Middle East, c. 1916.  
From Source 8.*

## **Army Bearer Corps**

The Army Bearer Corps was established in 1901, and in the class-divided Indian society "carrying" was reserved for special population groups - *kaharis* 3) - and the term *kahar* is also partly synonymous with an Indian sick bearer; however, the term *dooly bearer* is also used (*dooly* = stretcher).



*Indian Civil Auxiliaries, Marseilles, 1914.*

From a contemporaneous postcard, sent 13 February 1915.

I am not sure what this corps badge looked like, but the soldier on the left wears a shoulder badge with the corps' abbreviated name - *ABC* - on his turban. The three downward-facing angles on the left forearm mark more than 12 years of satisfactory service, and the two vertical bars that the soldier has been wounded twice. The ribbons are *the Indian General Service Medal* and *the 1914 Star*. Analogous to English practice, the sickbearers were noncombatants, and thus unarmed.

*The Army Bearer Corps* was assisted by a larger number of civilian helpers.

### Strength figure

The following information is taken from *the Field Service Pocket Book (1914)* (Source 7), which, however, does not give information on the detailed organization of the units. Usually, however, the field ambulances of the period are organized into three platoons, each with a tent section and a medical carrier section.

#### Indian Field Ambulance, 1914

Employee	Quantity	Animals and tree coachman	Quantity
Officers	4	Riding horses	14
NCOs and Privates (English)	1	Ambulance/medical transport carts ( <i>tonga</i> )	8
NCOs and Privates (Indian)	14	Oxen (draft animals)	16
Assistants (on the official payroll)	157 4)	Mule (pack animal)	16
Helpers (privately paid)	22	Camels (pack animals)	38

**Indian Cavalry Field Ambulance, 1914**

<b>Employee</b>	<b>Quantity</b>	<b>Quantity</b>
		<b>Animals and tree coachman</b>
Officers	4	Riding horses
NCOs and Privates (English)	1	Ambulance/medical transport carts ( <i>AT cart</i> )
NCOs and Privates (Indian)	14	Mule (draught animal)
Assistants (on the official payroll)	165	Train driver
Helpers (privately paid)	22	

The English field ambulances in India are organized according to roughly the same pattern as the Indian ones, although with slightly more helpers. The distinction between who treated the wounded is - at least in peacetime - sharp. Indian field ambulances treat Indian soldiers, while English field ambulances treat English soldiers. Only during the war are more universal units developed that can treat all soldiers.

<b>Mobilization stocks</b>	<b>Quantity</b>
British Field Ambulances	24
Indian Field Ambulances	41
British Clearing Hospitals	3
Indian Clearing Hospitals	12
British Stationary Hospitals	40
Indian Stationary Hospitals	0

British General Hospitals (500 beds) 4

8

Indian General Hospitals (500 beds)

7

Advanced Depots of Medical Stores

## Mobilization stocks

Source 7 mentions that in India there were obvious mobilization stocks for a number of sanitary units.

The overview also indicates the most common types of sanitary units.

Material and personnel could be combined as needed, thereby adapting the strength that the relevant sanitary unit had to support, cf. later mention of the sanitary units in Expeditionary Corps B (East Africa 1914).

## Transport equipment



*Mule Cart (AT Cart), France, 1914.*

From a contemporary French postcard.

The photograph shows an Indian doctor and an English sanitary non-commissioned officer.

In the reproduction of the map in *The Indian Army - On Training Units of the First World War, Part 2* I have described the doctor as belonging to the *Indian Medical Department*, but whether this or *the Indian Medical Service* belongs cannot be determined with certainty.





*Bullock cart (Tonga), Mesopotamia.*  
From Source 8.

The Indian field ambulances sent to France in 1914 were equipped with mule carts, while bullock carts and camels were used in warmer climes. Actual camel-borne field ambulances were also established here.

For example, from the summer of 1918, the 154th, 166th and 165th Camel Field Ambulance were included in the 10th Division, in Palestine 5). [\\_\\_](#)



*Mule Cart (AT Cart), France, 1914.*  
From a simultaneous postcard.

Used as a sick transport vehicle, an ox and mule cart can carry 2 seriously injured (on stretchers) or 4 slightly injured (sitting) 6).

[\\_\\_](#)

The cart in the picture is probably used more as an ordinary transport vehicle than as a hospital transport vehicle.

Before the war, the number of motor vehicles in India was quite modest, but when the Expeditionary Force arrived in France in September 1914, the Indian soldiers began to become familiar with this modern technique, i.a. in the form of a number of ambulances that were made available for the field ambulances in the corps' two divisions.



*Train Constable F. Ingrey, Army Service Corps, backing his wagon out of the mud at Richebourg L'Avoué, 29 October 1914* [7](#).

The 111th Indian Field Ambulance belonged to the 3rd (Lahore) Division of the Indian Expeditionary Force [8](#).

The Indian Corps took its place in the line from 22 October 1914 on the Ypres front, and was soon involved in heavy fighting.

On October 29, it rained heavily, which hampered the troop's movements, and Constable Ingrey's ambulance got stuck. He was ordered to leave the wagon behind as the area was under enemy fire, but would not give up and eventually managed to get the wagon free. Train Constable Ingrey is awarded *the Distinguished Conduct Medal* for his efforts.

## France

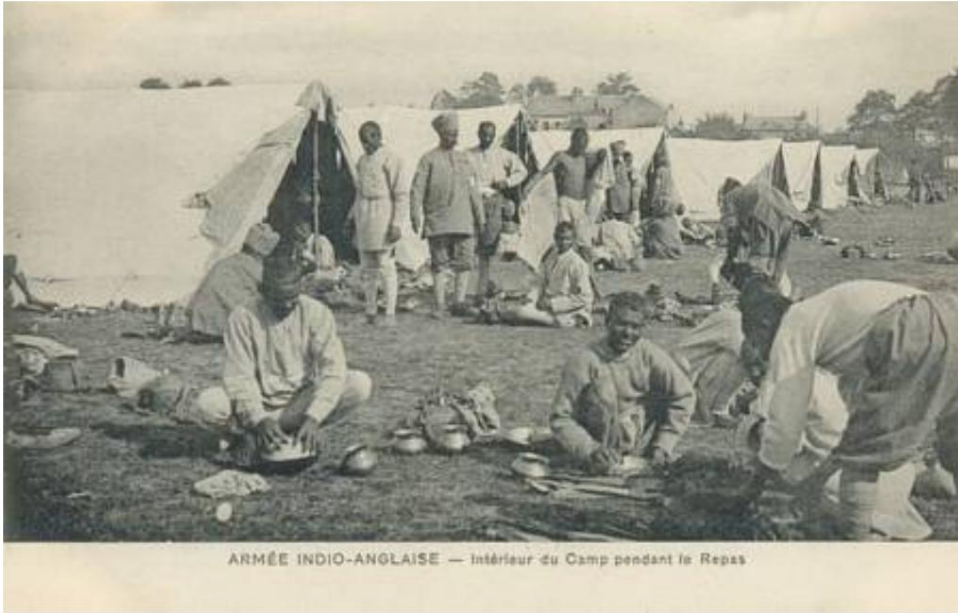


*Soldiers from an Indian field ambulance, France, 1914.*  
From a simultaneous postcard.

Although the dress and attitude look somewhat casual, it could look like it's an inspection.

The tall English officer is perhaps the chief physician.

The conventions of the time required that a field ambulance and a field hospital should be marked with both the Red Cross flag and the national flag.



*Soldiers from an Indian field ambulance, France, 1914.*

From a simultaneous postcard.

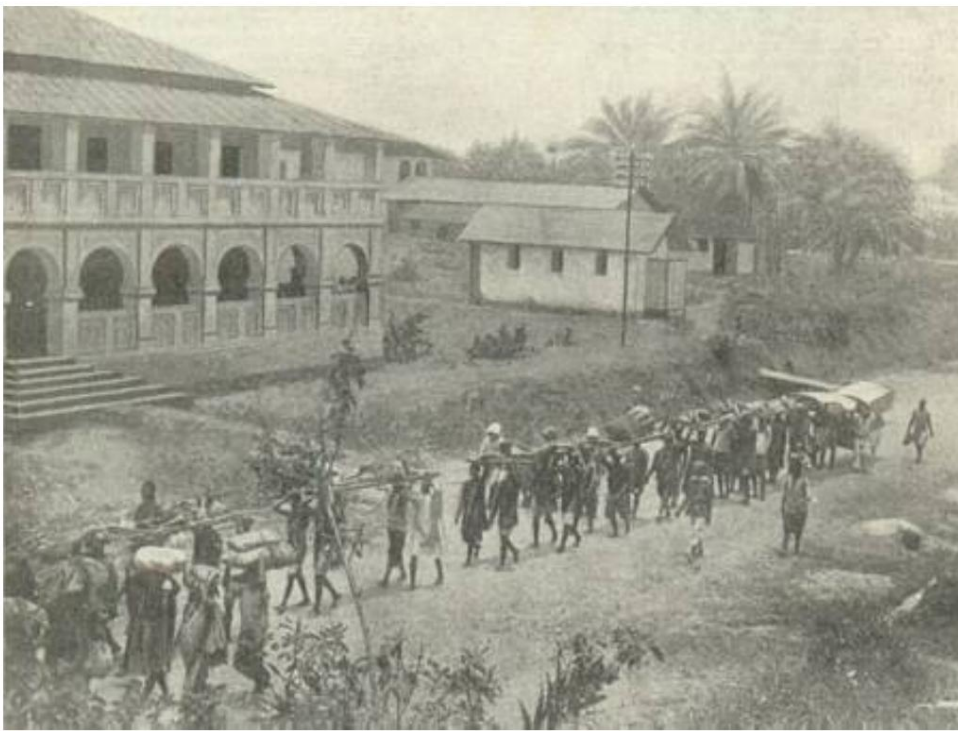
Here, the soldiers seem to have just been ordered, and are starting the morning meal.

In the center of the picture is a sergeant (havildar) who wears a Red Cross armband on his left arm.

## East Africa

The Indian Expeditionary Force B [9](#), which **lands** in German East Africa in November 1914, is supported, cf. Source 9 (which does not, however, provide the names of all the units), by the following sanitary units:

	Personel		Employee
<b>½ British Field Ambulance</b>		<b>1½ Indian Field Ambulance</b>	
Officers	2	Officers	7
NCOs and Privates (English)	11	NCOs and Privates (English)	2
NCOs and Privates (Indian)	-	NCOs and Privates (Indian)	30
Assistants (on the official payroll)	29	Assistants (on the official payroll)	39
Helpers (privately paid)	5	Helpers (privately paid)	15



Native porters transport wounded, Cameroon 10), approx. 1915. [\\_\\_\\_\\_\\_](#)

Apart from a section with 10 motor ordnance, the expeditionary force brought no rolling stock. Instead, an Indian *Coolie Corps* of 508 porters was used, in addition to a large, but unknown, number of African porters recruited in Mombasa.

The expeditionary force's 343 mules, of which 164 belonged to the 28th Mountain Battery, were not landed during the fighting.

Although the image originates from Central Africa, it gives an impression of the form of transport.

	Employee		Employee
<b>2 sections, Indian Clearing Hospital</b>		<b>1 British Stationary Hospital</b>	
Officers	2	Officers	1
NCOs and Privates (English)	1	NCOs and Privates (English)	5
NCOs and Privates (Indian)	10	NCOs and Privates (Indian)	-
Assistants (on the official payroll)	19	Assistants (on the official payroll)	15
Helpers (privately paid)	4	Helpers (privately paid)	3
<b>½ section, No. 3 British General Hospital</b>		<b>3 sections, No. 6 Indian General Hospital</b>	
	2		6

Officers		Officers	
	5		1
NCOs and Privates (English)		NCOs and Privates (English)	
	-		32
NCOs and Privates (Indian)		NCOs and Privates (Indian)	
	22		55
Assistants (on the official payroll)		Assistants (on the official payroll)	
	3		12
Helpers (privately paid)		Helpers (privately paid)	

**No. 38 Sanitary Section**

		Additionally included:	
Officers	1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● <i>No. 2 Advanced Depot, Medical Stores</i>, with 1 English non-commissioned officer and 6 assistants (5+1)</li> <li>● <i>X-Ray Section</i>, with 1 officer and 1 English non-commissioned officer/private as well as 5 assistants (3+2).</li> </ul>	
NCOs and Privates (English)	10		
	14		
NCOs and Privates (Indian)			
	75		
Assistants (on the official payroll)			
	1		
Helpers (privately paid)			

Source 7 refers to all officers as being English, but given the ranks in the Indian Medical Service, some of the officers may be Indian doctors.

All the sanitary units were under the command of Colonel R. Robertson, Indian Medical Service, who held the position of *Assistant Director Medical Service* on the staff of the Expeditionary Corps.

**Employee**

**Sanitary units of Expeditionary Force C**

Officers	22
	37
NCOs and Privates (English)	
	86
NCOs and Privates (Indian)	
	262

Assistants (on the official payroll)

46

Helpers (privately paid)

The somewhat smaller Indian Expeditionary Force C, which arrived in Mombasa from 27 August 1914 to reinforce the troops in British East Africa, included the *120th Indian Field Ambulance*. Source 9 does not directly mention that it is an Indian field ambulance, but also does not - like others - refer to it as English; perhaps a joint (*combined*) unit.

## Gallipoli 1915



*Indian Bivouacks at Anzac Cove (Dardanelles), 1915.*

From a simultaneous postcard.

Whether the soldiers are from the 2nd Indian Field Ambulance, which was sent to Gallipoli with the 7th Indian Mountain Artillery Brigade [11](#)), see my article [The Indian Army - On mountain batteries, 1890-1940](#), is not known.

See also my article [The Indian Army - On training units during the First World War, Part 1 and Part 2](#) for a mention of the Mule Corps, which i.a. participated in the transport of the wounded.

## Mesopotamia



Major, Indian Medical Service, Middle East, c. 1916.  
From Source 8.

The Indian Expeditionary Force D, whose first units landed south of Basra on 6 November 1914, included 6th (Poona) Division [12](#)), with the following sanitary units: \_\_\_\_\_

**Sanitetsenheder i 6th (Poona) Division (September 1914)** 16th (British)

Field Ambulance 19th Combined Clearing Hospital 17th (British) Field Ambulance

57th (Indian) Stationary Hospital

125th (Indian) Field Ambulances 3rd (British) General Hospital

126th (Indian) Field Ambulances 9th (Indian) General Hospital

127th (Indian) Field Ambulances

The only Victoria Cross awarded to the Indian Medical Corps during the First World War was given for action in Mesopotamia. Captain John Alexander Sinton Indian Medical Service, was the regimental doctor of the 37th Dogras, and was awarded the Victoria Cross for his efforts during the Battle of El-Hanna [13](#)), which was one of the many attempts to rescue the besieged Kut-el-Amara. Although wounded in both arms and in one side, he refused all attempts to evacuate, and continued, despite enemy fire, to render aid to the wounded. (Source 10)

On the epaulettes, the major wears the abbreviated name of the medical corps - *IMS*, under his insignia ; the cherry red collar mirrors show that the major is on staff duty.



*Indian dressing station in Palestine, approx. 1918* [15](#)).     

The first year of the war revealed great deficiencies in the supply service and in the evacuation and care of the sick and wounded. Only when Lieutenant-General Sir Stanley Maude [14](#)), nicknamed *Systematic Joe*, takes over command in Mesopotamia in July 1916, does the situation really get in order.

The wounded in the foreground are Turkish prisoners of war.

The ambulance in the background appears to be of the Ford T type. However, the number of motor vehicles in Mesopotamia was very modest.

The problems for the sanitary service included that the number of sanitary units was not on par with the number of fighting units. There was a large lack of doctors and other trained personnel. The supply of medicine and dressings also left much to be desired, and despite the great efforts of the sanitary units, the sick and wounded suffered extra. (Source 11)



*Hospital Paddle Steamer No. 5, photographed on the Tigris River* [16](#)).     

The battles in Mesopotamia took place to a large extent along the Tigris river, which played a central role as a supply route.

Evacuation of the sick and injured took place i.a. using riverboats - often local barges - for sanitary installations ashore or actual hospital ships anchored at Basra.



## Sources

1. *India's Army* af Donovan Jackson, Purnell and Sons, London 1940.
2. *The Army of India and Its Evolution* - An Official Report published in Calcutta 1924 and reprinted by Picton Publishing, Chippenham/Wiltshire 1992, ISBN 0-948251-69-9.
3. Army Medical Corps (Indian Army).
4. *Doctors in the Great War* af Ian R. Whitehead, Leo Cooper, Barnsley 1999, ISBN 0-85052-691-4.
5. *The Indian Corps in France* by Lieutenant-Colonel Merewether and Sir Frederick Smith; original published in December 1917, and reprinted by Naval & Military Press, London in 2001, ISBN 1-84342-38-4. The book's Appendices 1 and 2 - Description of the Indian Army and Health of the Indian Troops in France are available through Project South Asia.
6. *Queen Alezandra's Royal Army Nursing Corps* af Julian Paget, Leo Cooper, London 1975, ISBN 0-85052-193-9.
7. *Field Service Pocket Book (1914)*, published by the General Staff, War Office, London 1914, Reprint af David & Charles Reprints, London 1971, ISBN 0-7153-5225-3.
8. *The Indian Army 1914-1947* af Ian Summer, Osprey Elite 72, London 2001, ISBN 1-84176-196-6.
9. *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.)
10. *VCs of the First World War - The Sideshows* af Gerald Gliddon, Sutton Publishing, Stroud/ Gloucestershire 2005, ISBN 0-7509-2084-X.
11. *Battles on the Tigris - The Mesopotamian Campaign of the First World War* af Ron Wilcox, Pen & Sword Military, Barnsley/South Yorkshire, 2006, ISBN 1-84415-430-0. Bogen omtaler bl.a. problemerne for sanitetstjenesten.



Corps Badge

Indian Army

Medical Corps 17). \_\_\_\_



Korpsfarver:

Indian Army Medical Corps.

From Source 3.

From 1944 (Source 3) , *the Indian Army Medical Corps* adopts the colors cherry red (*dull cherry*), black (*black*) and golden (*old golden*) and the colors are continued by *the Army Medical Service*, with the following symbolism:

**Cherry Red:** Represents the heraldic color of the English *Royal Army Medical Corps*; symbolizes good health, helping others and being free from disease.

**Black:** Represents *the Indian Hospital Corps*, which had black as its heraldic colour; symbolizing a formless mixture of birth and death.

**Golden:** The color represents *the Indian Medical Service*; symbolizes the sun god *Æsculaps*, who is the god of medicine.

Per Finsted

---

**To note:**

- 1) See my article *The Indian Army - On Training Units in World War I, Part 1 and Part 2*.
- 2) Source 7, however, mentions the number 11 plus a reserve. The 11th company can be distributed among the 3 independent brigades at the North-West border as well as the independent brigade in Aden.
- 3) Se f.eks. Kaharis (Banglapedia)
- 4) The strength figure for auxiliaries on the official payroll is given in one place in the book as 6 (War Establishment/Indian Field Ambulance), while in another place (War Establishment/Infantry division), covering three Indian field ambulances, it is given as 471. How is the difference to be explained, I am not aware, but I assume that in the first case you are assigned helpers/carriers from a pool, e.g. a *Coolie Corps*. The figure in my summary is a third of 471.
- 5) 10th (Irish) Division (The Long, Long Trail)
- 6) See also the article *Ambulance* (Encyclopedia Britannica, 1911).
- 7) From a plate drawn by JH Valda, seen for sale at MILPRINTS. The plan comes from the book *Deeds that Thrill the Empire*, Standard Art Book Co. Ltd., approx. 1920.
- 8) Se Captain Arthur Hilary Clifton Hill, *Indian Medical Service* (Great War Forum). En anden af the division's field ambulances may be the 8th Indian Field Ambulance mentioned in *War Story of the Canadian Army Medical Corps* by J. George Adami, from c. 1918.
- 9) See our article *The Battle of Tanga* -
- 10) Cameroon was - from 5 July 1884 - a German colony in western Central Africa. After the First World War, the country was divided into a French and an English mandate area. See more in *History of Cameroon* (Wikipedia) and *Cameroon* (Wikipedia).
- 11) 29th Indian Infantry Brigade & Indian Mountain Artillery at Gallipoli (Digger History).
- 12) See my article *The Road to Basra, 1914*, from which the overview originates.
- 13) Se *The attempts to relieve Kut, January - April 1916* (The Long, Long Trail).
- 14) Lieutenant General Sir Frederic Stanley Maude (1864-1917) (FirstWorldWar.com).
- 15) From *the World War (Booklet 256-57)* by H. Jenssen-Tusch, Johs. Lindbæk, H. Styrmer and E. Gyldenkrone, Gyldendalske Bookshop, Nordisk Forlag, Copenhagen 1920.
- 16) Fra *History of the First World War, Volume 3, No. 10*, Purnell, BPC Publishing Ltd., London 1970.
- 17) Fra *Badges of Military Units from India*.