

The Bikaner Camel Corps, 1914-15

Introduction

The Camel Corps of Bikaner (also spelled Bikanir) is one of the units provided to the Indian government by the local Indian rulers. Although the corps unofficially traces its history back to 1465, when the first prince, Rao Bika, came to Bikaner, it was not actually established until 1889.

The camel corps (= Risala) was named after the then Maharaja Ganga Singh of Bikaner, hence the name Bikaner Ganga Risala. Under various names, the corps functioned as a camel-mounted unit until its disbandment in 1975; today the name is carried on by a local border gendarme unit (*Border Security Force*).



Regimentsmærke

Bikaner Camel Corps, ca. 1914.

From Source 1.

Bikaner Camel Corps / Bikaner Ganga Risala

Bikaner Camel Corps - Historical Summary

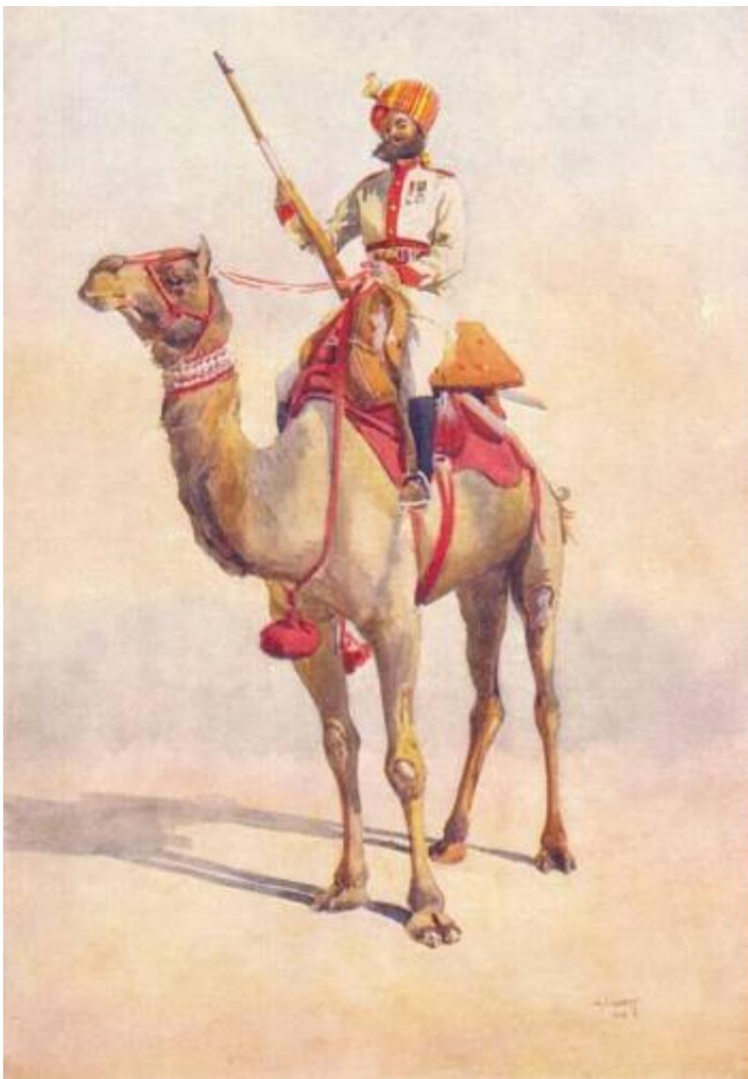
1889: Bikaner Ganga Risala (Imperial Service Troops)

1925: Bikaner Ganga Risala (Indian State Forces)

1951: Ganga Jaisalmer Risala (on merger with Jaisalmer Risala)

1955: 13th Battalion, The Grenadiers (fra 1922: 4th Bombay Grenadiers) [1](#))__

1975: The battalion was converted into a regular infantry battalion



Bikaner Ganga Risala, Sowar (menig).
Drawn by AC Lowett, 1910.
Postcard from the National Army Museum, London.
The soldier is a *Rathore Rajput*.

Tab ribbon

China 1900; Somaliland 1901-04; Suez Canal; Egypt 1915-17.

About Bikaner

Bikaner was an independent state (approx. 37,000 m²), located in the northern part of India (Rajputana), with approx. 585,000 inhabitants in 1901 [2](#)).

The army force numbered 1,516 men (1911), of whom 805 belonged to the Imperial Service Troops (Bikaner Ganga Risala with 450 men; Sadul Light Infantry with 355 men).

The Indian General Staff report of 1911 describes the remaining units as "... of no military value..." (Source 1), while the camel corps had already by this time garnered honors for its efforts in China and Somaliland.

Renderings of the camel corps' saddles show them as quite long; they had to be able to take two men, which gives great flexibility in case of loss of mounts.

The time before the First World War

Immediately after the establishment of the camel corps, there were bids for it, but without camels. 400 men, led by the Maharaja, left for China on 1 September 1900 to assist England in putting down the Boxer Rebellion.



Lieutenant William George Walker, 4th Gurkha Rifles, serving with the Bikaner Camel Corps, was awarded the Victoria Cross on 22 April 1903.

Fra Campaigns & Wars 1862-1914 (Haileybury) [3](#). [__](#)

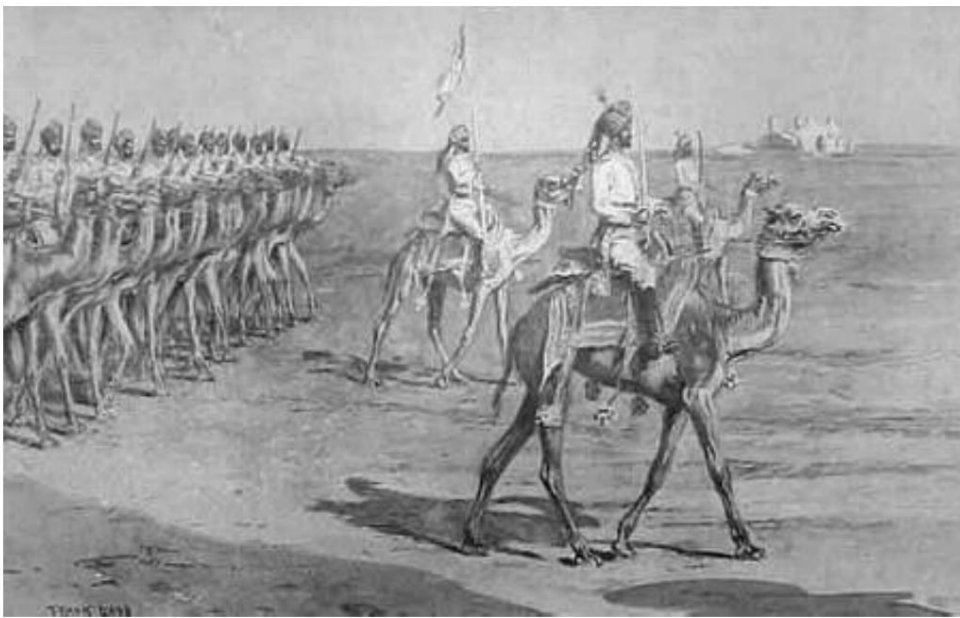
The corps arrived in Tientsin at the end of October, when the actual fighting was over. The regiment served until 26 May 1901 in securing supply columns and other guard duty.

In 1903 there was another bid for the regiment, this time with camels.

The battles against The Mad Mullah [4](#)) in Somaliland required the deployment of camel-mounted units and here the desert-accustomed soldiers from Bikaner came into their own. 215 men and 250 camels left India on 10 January 1903 bound for Somaliland.



Bikaner Camel Corps, 1905 [5](#)). [_](#)



Bikaner Camel Corps, 1912. From a page from *The Graphic*, December 1912.
Set for sale on the Internet.

A further 50 men and 150 camels were added in October 1903 to compensate for losses.

The effort lasted until 1904.

I have not been able to provide a more detailed description of the standard. Any information in this regard is received with interest.



Bikaner Camel Corps, 1898.
From Source 5.

The camels

Dr. Sumant Vyas, National Research Center on Camel, Bikaner, states in Source 3 that the Bikaner Ganga Risala used camels of the Jaisalmeri breed, which are among the finest camels [6](#)).

Jaisalmer [7](#)) [was](#) a neighboring state to Bikaner, which itself has a large camel population. It was natural to assume that it was these camels that were used, but the Maharaja evidently selected the best of the best for his camel corps.



Maharaja Sir Ganga Singh of Bikaner, ca. 1910 8).
From Source 2.

Maharaja Sir Ganga Singh of Bikaner

Following the best traditions of the Imperial Service units, the Maharaja of Bikaner also personally led his regiment on several occasions.

He thus participated in the campaign to China and was present in Egypt during the Turkish attack in February 1915.

At the outbreak of the First World War, he made himself and his resources available to the Indian government - on an equal footing with the other 700 or so local princes.

He also financed 500 riding camels, which were quickly sent to Egypt.

He himself, along with the 70-year-old Maharaja of Jodhpur, Lieutenant General Sir Pertab Singh, were selected as representatives of the Indian independent states and traveled to France with the Indian Expeditionary Force 9), [where](#) he served [until](#) 1915.

He was just on his way back to India and stopped in Egypt when the Turkish attack on the Suez Canal was imminent...

World War One



Sadul Light Infantry. Havildar.
A Rahtor Rajput of Bikaner.

Sadul Light Infantry, Havildar (sergeant), ca. 1910.
From Source 2.

The Camel Corps was mobilized in August 1914 and prepared for overseas deployment. The corps was reinforced with personnel from the Sadul Light Infantry, Bikaner's other Imperial Service unit.

The Sadul Light Infantry did not serve as an independent unit, but served as a replacement unit for the Bikaner Ganga Risala throughout the First World War.

The sergeant, with the imposing beard, is a *Rathore Rajput*.

Strength and organization

The commander of the Bikaner Ganga Risala was Lieutenant Colonel Thakur Jeoraj Singh, who had the English officers Major AK Rawlins (24th Punjabis) and Captain AJH Chope (2nd Gurkha Rifles) attached as advisers (*Special Service Officers*).

Table 1: Power figures

Officers Crew Helpers Camels *) Horses

Statutory strength figure	16	434	81	548	-
Current strength figure per August 1914	17	477	96	600	2

*) The figure includes both riding camels and pack camels. The information in the table comes from Source 1.



Bikaner Camel Corps, ca. 1914.

Fra Microsoft Encarta Online Encyclopedia.

The corps left Bikaner at the end of August, and arrived via Karachi at Suez on 30 October 1914.

The corps was organized into 6 companies:

- 4 companies composed of *Rathore Rajputs*,
- 1 company of *Shekhawat Rajputs*, *Bhatti Rajputs*, *Kaim Khanis*
- 1 company composed of other groups.

Suez Canal (1914-1917)

The Camel Corps was deployed to guard the Suez Canal, initially at Kantara (Sector 3) and began patrolling the east side of the canal [10](#)). The corps was reinforced with 2 Egyptian mountain guns [11](#)), an [Egyptian](#) camel-mounted engineer detachment and an English telegraph division.



"Flanagan with Bikanir Camel Corps."

From the photo

album Great Grandad Wood's
Gallipoli (Maz Hewitt).

The caption is from the original photo album and "Flanagan" may be a mate of Maz Hewitt's great grandfather who judging by other photos served with the East Lancashire Divisional Signal 42nd (East Lancs.) Divisional Signal Company, later Company.

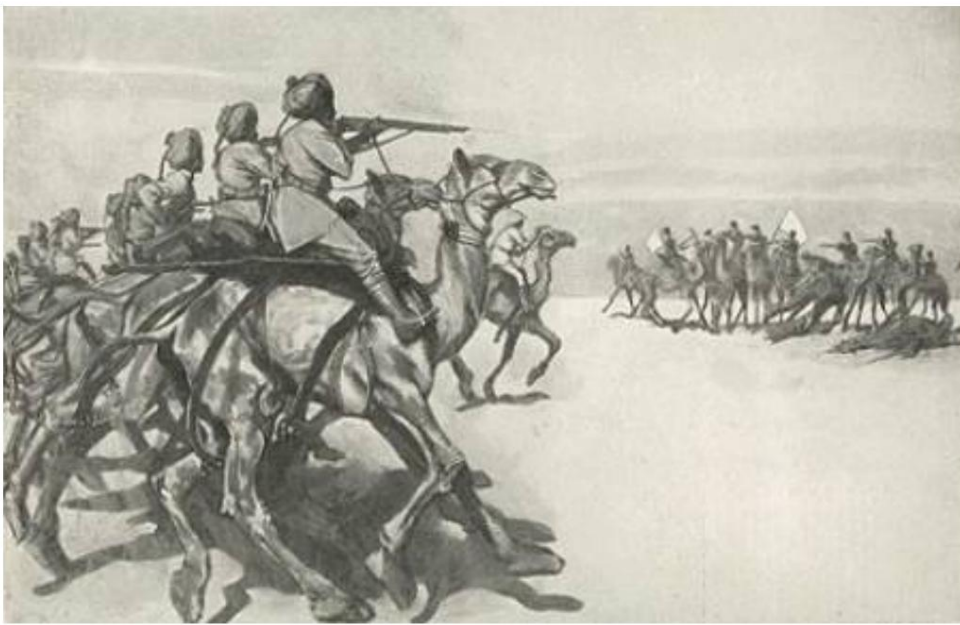
Source 1 does not state the affiliation of the telegraph division, but since the division was in principle the only English unit in Egypt at this time, it is likely that the division comes precisely from the mentioned telegraph company. The unit history [12](#)) does not, however, mention anything about the collaboration with the Bikaner Camel Corps.

It is interesting, in any case, that this English telegraph soldier has donned a turban, by which he will of course not stand out from the Indian soldiers in the same way as if he had worn a troop helmet.

The possibility of a pure set-up in honor of the photographer is of course present, admittedly, but I think my theory sounds plausible.

Further, parts of the Bahawalpur Imperial Service Mounted Rifles were assigned Egyptian camels and attached to the Bikaner Camel Corps [13](#)). The mounted infantry from Bahawalpur had already been reinforced with parts of the Alwar Imperial Service Infantry. The Camel Corps thus reached a total of 8 companies.

The Skirmish at Bir-el-Nuss (Bir-en-Nuss) (Map 1, Item 1)



The skirmish at Bir-el-Nuss, 20 November 1914, between a patrol of the Bikaner Camel Corps and Turkish units, whose white flags falsely suggest surrender.

Fra The Memorable Desert Battle for Egypt (Great War in a Different Light).

On 20 November 1914 a patrol consisting of Captain AJH Chope, an Indian officer and 20 non-commissioned officers and privates [14](#)) was involved in the first skirmish between British and Turkish units on this section of the front which took place at Bir el Nuss, c. 30 km east of Kantara.

Source 7 describes the battles as follows:

"A patrol of the Bikanir Camel Corps ... encountered a force of some 200 Bedouins and Turks ... near Bir el-Nuss, and in spite of the enemy's treacherous attack, due to the abuse of the white flag, extricated itself successfully from a somewhat difficult position.

Our patrol, which lost one Indian officer and twelve other ranks killed and three Sepoys wounded, inflicted some sixty casualties on the enemy. For their gallant conduct on this occasion, No. 1534 Sepoy [15](#)) Ali Khan was awarded the Indian Order of Merit, 2nd Class, and No. 115 Sepoy Faiz Ali Khan the Distinguished Conduct Medal."

Source 7 adds that the patrol was accompanied by some scouts from the Egyptian Coast Guard who proved quite disloyal, surrendering to the enemy in a manner that most resembled desertion.

Continued patrol duty

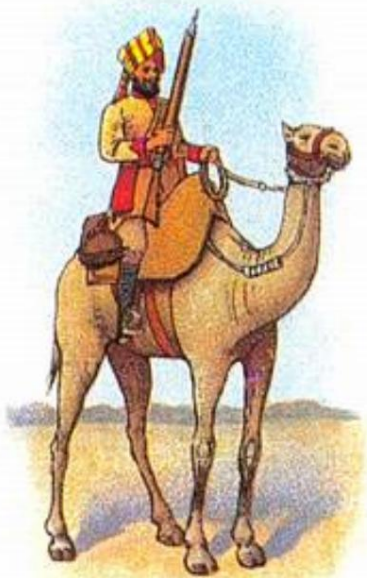


*Maharaja Sir Ganga Singh
of Bikaner, ca. 1915.
From FirstWorldWar.com.*

Per On 1 January 1915, the corps' location was given as the ferry port at Ismalia (Sector 2), with one company distributed in Sector 1 (El Kubri) and two companies in Sector 3 (Kantara). Patrolling on the Sinai Peninsula is continued and patrols maintain contact with the Turkish units during their advance towards the Suez Canal [16](#)).

As such, the corps was not involved in the Turkish attack on the night of 2-3 February 1915, but manned its defensive positions, for a time under the command of the Maharaja himself.

During the Turkish retreat, patrols from the corps take part in the first pursuit of the enemy. However, the English units in Egypt do not have the strength to launch an actual counter-offensive, so when it is established after a few days that the Turks have finally withdrawn, no further action is taken.



INDIAN REGIMENTS

*Bikaner Camel Corps,
Sowar (many), c. 1910.*

Card No. 36 in British
and American Tobacco's

Indian Army

Regiments cigarette card

series, issued 1912; reprinted 2000.

Although there were upwards of 70,000 men in Egypt, the level of training of the units was generally not high enough to launch an offensive. Equally significant was that they had not had the opportunity to organize a proper water supply, which was vital for fighting in the Sinai desert.

Intelligence on the condition and location of the Turkish units also proved somewhat uncertain, and everything from full retreat to the expectation of large reinforcements was reported. The fact was that the Turkish forces, with the exception of a small unit under the command of the German Colonel Kress von Kressenstein, had been ordered to withdraw towards Beersheba, but when the French and British planes which had given such valuable information during the Turkish advance, was temporarily out of service [17](#)), it was difficult to get a full overview of the situation.

A skirmish near El Kubri (Map 1, Item 2)

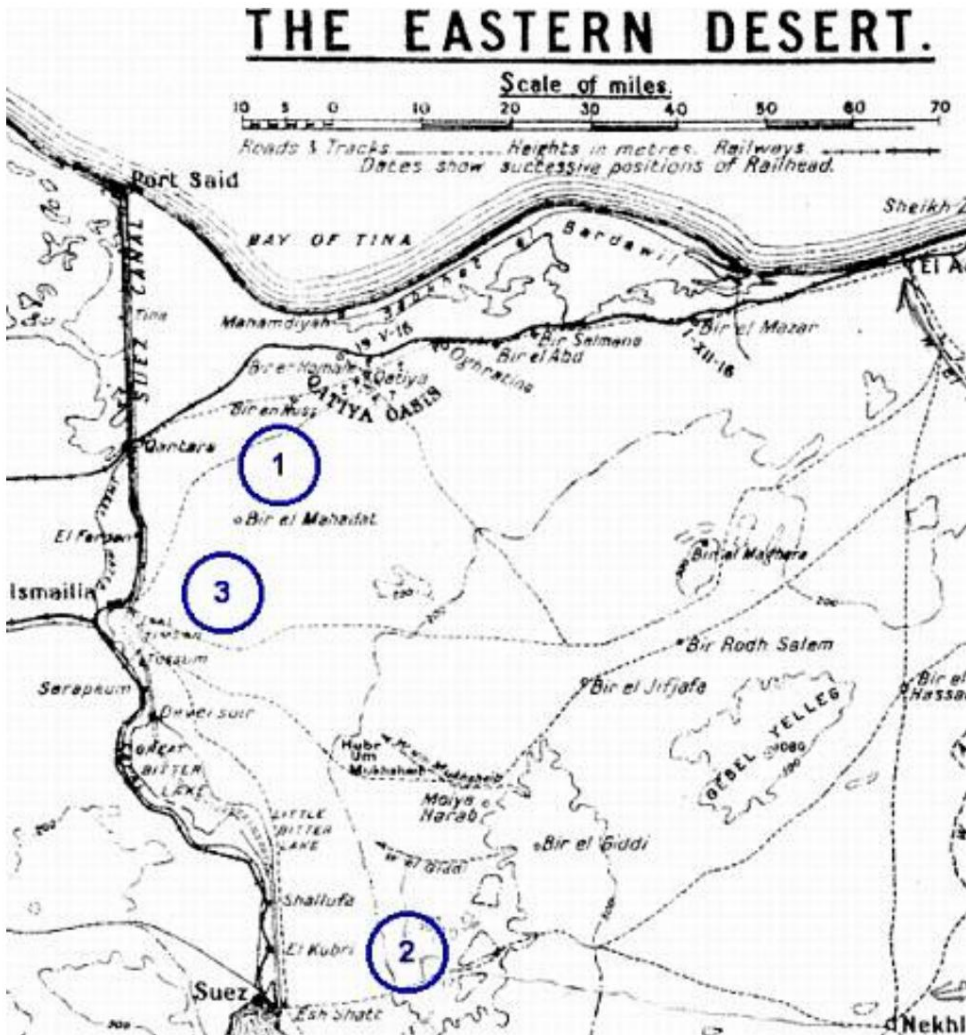
On 23 March 1915, a detachment from the Camel Corps took part in a skirmish approx. 15 km east of El Kubri. The skirmish took place as a result of a Turkish fire attack on El Kubri, early in the morning of 22 March 1915. The attackers were driven off and patrols reported a Turkish force of approx. 1,000 men, including 200 horsemen, in the area.

It was decided to send a larger force across the Suez Canal to drive the enemy away from the area where he was apparently digging in.

The Allied force, commanded by Lt Col GH Boisragon [18](#)), VC, 1/5th Gurkha Rifles, consisted of:

- Hyderabad Lancers (2 eskadroner) 1/5th
- Lancashire Battery, Royal Field Artillery (Territorial Force)
- Bikanir Camel Corps (et detachment) 51st Sikhs
- 53rd Sikhs
- 1/5th Gurkha
- Rifles (en halv batallion).

It was intended that the force should pass the canal during the night of the 23rd, but severe weather prevented the use of a pontoon bridge.



Map 1: Excerpt from map of the Sinai desert.
From Source 6.

The force therefore had to sail across the channel, which was only possible on the morning of the 23rd. The force now marched the approx. 15 km forward towards the enemy and attack directly from movement. The Turkish force lost approx. 50 men and fled, leaving weapons and ammunition behind. The greater part was brought back to the west side of the canal, the rest buried.

The two lancer squadrons had been sent north of the Turkish positions, but arrived so late that the fugitives could not be cut off; the lancers' movements were apparently severely hampered by soft sand.

A skirmish near Ismailia (Map 1, Item 3)

On 28 April 1915, a 100-strong patrol from the camel corps operated approx. 20 km east of Ismailia; the patrol had been dispatched to investigate reports of abandoned enemy weapons and ammunition. Instead, the patrol encountered an enemy force of 2-300 Turkish soldiers and Bedouins, incl. a couple of cannons. After one

short and frantic firefight the patrol retreated, against the loss of 3 dead, 4 wounded and 2 missing.

Imperial Service Cavalry Brigade

Later that day, the enemy force was observed nearby and it was decided to send a commando out to chase the enemy away. The command consisted of 8 squadrons of the Imperial Service Cavalry Brigade, half a battalion of the 27th Punjabis and an Egyptian gun platoon. The Turkish force withdraws, followed by patrols and renewed aerial reconnaissance [19](#)), and in the afternoon of the 29th there is a minor skirmish with the Turkish rearguard.

The Imperial Service Cavalry Brigade at this time consisted of: (Source 8)

- 1st Hyderabad Imperial Service Lancers [20](#))
- Mysore Imperial Service Lancers
- Patiala Imperial Service Lancers
- Imperial Service Brigade Field Ambulance
- Imperial Service Cavalry Mobile Veterinary Section.



Patiala Lancers, ca. 1915.

From the photo album Great Grandad Wood's Gallipoli (Maz Hewitt).

The Bikaner Camel Corps was attached to the brigade administratively.

The Imperial Service Cavalry Brigade, which on 22 July 1918 became the 15th (Imperial Service) Cavalry Brigade, arrived in Egypt in November 1914.

The brigade served throughout the war in Egypt and Palestine.

The Patiala Imperial Service Lancers left the brigade in 1916 and were replaced in 1918 by the 1st Jodhpur Imperial Service [Lancers 21](#)).

Reinforcements from India (From Source 1)

Officers Crew Helpers Camels *)

Table 2: Access

February 1915	3	148	27	181
August 1915		20		
January 1916				200
March 1918		140		
At other times	3	9		
3 new companies	7	242	43	273

*) The figure includes both riding camels and pack camels.

At the special request of the Indian Government, three more companies were raised and arrived in Egypt in November 1916.

In addition, there was a training reserve of 350 men at the corps' depot in Bikaner throughout the war.

Loss figure

Table 3: Casualties English officers Indian officers Personnel Total

Died		1	16	17
Died of wounds			1	1
Died of disease		1	37	38
Wounded	1	1	5	7
Total	1	3	59	63

A note in Source 2 draws attention to figures from other sources; namely, 2 dead officers and 45 dead among the crew.

It is thus possible that the figures given here also include loss figures for members of the corps who served in other units.

Closing

The Camel Corps continued its patrol activities in connection with the Suez Canal, whose defenses during 1916 were moved further east in preparation for the offensive across the Sinai Peninsula and further up through Palestine, under which the Corps fielded three companies to guard the supply lines across the Sinai.

During the rest of the war, Bikanir Ganga Risala was deployed in the western part of Egypt, and took part in the suppression of

Senussi Uprising (1915-16) [22](#)) as well as guarding the Egyptian border with Libya and the Mediterranean coast.

Sources

1. *Armies of the Indian Princely States - Volume VI: The Bikaner Army* af Richard Head og Tony McClenaghan, The Military Press, Milton Keynes/Buckinghamshire, 2000. ISBN 0-85420-221-8.
2. *Armies of India* af Major A.C. Lovett (illustrationer) og Major G.F. MacMunn (tekst.), Adam and Charles Black, London 1911
3. Camel Sector in India af Dr. Sumant Vyas, National Research Center on Camel, Bikaner (VET Helpline, India).
4. Camel Breeds of India af N.D. Khanna, A.K. Rai og S.N. Tandon, National Research Centre on Camel, Bikaner (Journal of Camel Science).
5. *Horses and Saddlery* by Major G. Tylden, JA Allen & Company in association with the Army Museums Ogilby Trust, London 1965 (1980 reprint).
6. *History of the Great War, Military Operations Egypt & Palestine, Volume I, From the outbreak of war with Germany to June 1917* by Lieutenant General Sir George Macmunn and Captain Cyril Falls, HSMO, London 1927. Available for loan from the Royal Garrison Library, catalog number 426261 .
7. Sir John Maxwell's Egypt Despatch (The Long, Long Trail).
8. *Armies of the Indian Princely States - Volume I: An Historical Overview* af Richard Head og Tony McClenaghan, The Military Press, Milton Keynes/Buckinghamshire, 1998. ISBN 0-85420-070-3.



Use the State Forces.

Cigaretkort nr. 29 fra
Player's serie
Military Uniforms of
the British Empire
Overseas, 1938.

Per Finsted

The following is printed on the back of the card:

"The Bikanir State Forces number about 1,800, consisting of one battery of Artillery, two motor machine gun sections, two squadrons of Lancers, an Infantry battalion, and the Ganga Risala, a Captain of which is shown in our picture in Full Dress.

This famous Camel Corps rendered good service in the early days of the Great War in the fighting east of the Suez Canal. Bikanir is one of the largest of the Rajputana States, but much of it is desert, and its population numbers less than one million. The Maharaja of Bikanir holds the honorary rank of General in the British Army and is an extra Aide de Camp to the King.

The Old Palace and Fort, Bikanir, are shown in the background."

To note:

- 1) See The Indian Army's Camel Troops 1948-75 af Mandeep Singh Bajwa (Orbat.com).
- 2) Fra Bikanir (LoveToKnow 1911).
- 3) English officers in 1914 are assumed to have been equipped etc. as shown in the photo of Lieutenant William George Walker.
- 4) The battles are mentioned in The Anglo-Somali War 1901-1920, but without mention in the Bikaner Ganga Risala.
- 5) From The Maharajah's Camel Corps at Bikaner, 1905 (University of Columbia); originally appeared in *The Sphere*, 25 November 1905 on the occasion of the visit of the Prince of Wales to Bikaner.
- 6) See more about camels in my article The Imperial Camel Corps. See also Source 4 for information on different camel breeds.
- 7) See Rajasthan (Wikipedia)
- 8) See General HH Sri Raj Rajeshwar Maharajadhiraj Narendra Maharaja Shiromani Sir Ganga Singh Bahadur, Maharaja of Bikaner (1880-1943) (Royal and Ruling Houses of Africa, Asia, Oceania and the Americas) .
- 9) See my article The Indian Army - About Training Units during the First World War.
- 10) See Defense of the Suez Canal, for the zoning and detailed information on the defense of the Suez Canal.
- 11) The information about the mountain guns comes from Source 1, while Source 6 mentions the reinforcement as the machine gun division from the Egyptian Camel Corps; there may be different situations.
- 12) See kapitlet *Short History of the 42nd (East Lancs.) Divisional Signal Company* i A History of the East Lancashire Royal Engineers, fra 1921; genoptrykt i 2003 af Naval & Military Press, ISBN 1-84342-680- 3.
- 13) Source 6 states the unit's name as Bahawalpur Rifles, but it must be the Bahawalpur Mounted Rifles, which, among other things, was awarded the banners Suez and Egypt, 1915-17. See my article The Indian Army - On Training Units of the First World War for a rendering of the Bahawalpur Mounted Rifles (and Camel Transport Corps) and the Alwar Infantry.

14) Sources 6 and 7 mention the number as 20 men, while Source 1 states 40 men.

15) The sources alternately refer to the common soldiers in the Bikaner Ganga Risala as *sepoys* (common infantrymen) or *sowars* (common horsemen), which is attributed to their status as mounted infantrymen.

16) See my article On Turkish Units at the Suez Canal, February 1915 for a discussion of this advance.

17) See my article On British and French Air Forces in Egypt, 1914-15. The machines had been involved in almost uninterrupted flight for 14 days and necessary maintenance now had to be carried out.

18) What Guy Hudleston Hates (Wikipedia).

19) The French hydroplane squadron has meanwhile been reinforced with three new machines.

20) My article The Indian Army - On Training Units of the First World War shows renderings of the lancer regiments.

21) On this regiment see my review of the book Indian Cavalry Officer 1914-15 by Roly Grimshaw.

22) The Corps' efforts in this context will be discussed in a future article Glimpse of the Egyptian Army during the First World War, Part 2fg.