

# About armored car units in India under First world War

## Introduction

This article can be read in conjunction with [On the 15th Ludhiana Sikhs during the First World War](#), and as a supplement to the discussion of the [Mohmand uprising from 1915 to 1917](#).

## Operations against the Mohmands, 1915-1917

The operations against the Mohmands were the first in India to involve the active use of armored vehicles.

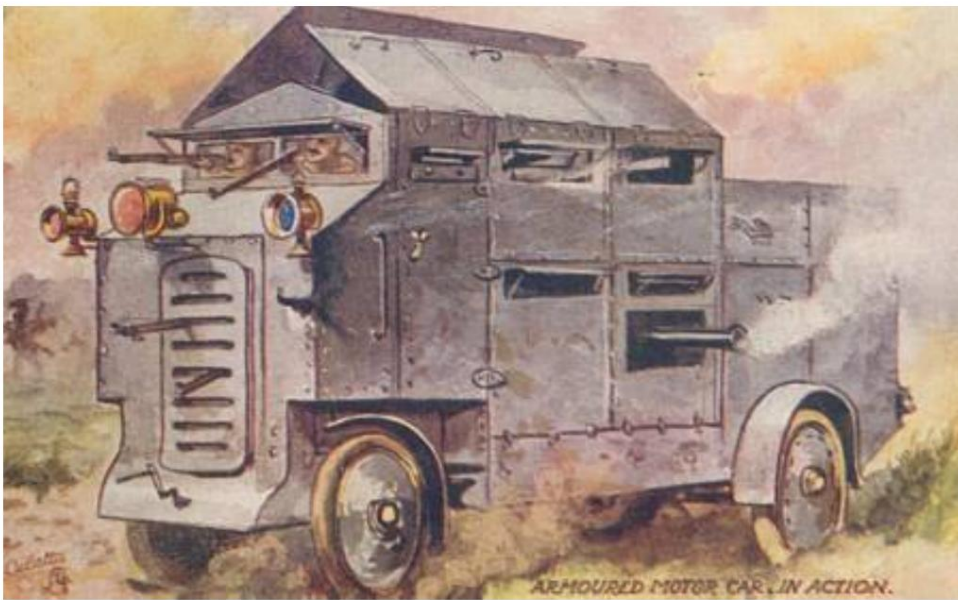


*Armored cars at the Kohat Pass, May 1915.*

From Source 1.

The tall officer (with hands behind his back) to the left of the armored cars is the author of Source 4, then Brigadier General Lionel C. Dunsterville, originally 20th Punjabis and from May 1915, commander of the Peshawar Infantry Brigade.

## Indian armored vehicles



*Armoured Motor Car in Action, ca. 1916.*

From a simultaneous postcard.

The armored car shown here, or perhaps rather what we would today call an armored personnel carrier or infantry fighting vehicle, is reminiscent of the types used against the Mohmands.

However, these vehicles were open, but the subject of the postcard could very well be one of three armored vehicles built in Calcutta in 1916.

The unit was intended to be deployed in Calcutta itself as part of the preparedness against internal disturbances. The vehicles thus had to operate in built-up areas, and precisely for this reason the vehicles, which were originally manufactured open, were equipped with a cover that secured the crew against e.g. bottles that were thrown at the wagon.

The armored vehicles had a crew of a driver and a vehicle commander, and usually carried 6 men. The wagon could be equipped with one or more machine guns, as is also evident from the postcard.

The chassis was manufactured by Cadillac, while the sheet metal work was done by the East Indian Railway's Lillooah workshop.

## Armoured Motor Units

The 15th Armored Motor Unit was part of the volunteer European units in Calcutta [2](#)) and belonged to [The](#) Residency Battalion, Calcutta Volunteer Rifles. A total of 16 such Armored Motor Units existed; the remaining 15 correspondingly belonged to other volunteer infantry units.

Each unit was in principle equipped with three armored vehicles, of very different designs, and a supply vehicle. The wagons were built on a number of different chassis - i.a. Fiat, Daimler, Mercedes, Minerva, Rolls-Royce and as mentioned, Cadillac. It was sought to print vehicles of the same make in "sets" of three, but as motor vehicles were relatively rare in India at this time, several different models were often involved.



### Motor Fortress.

Card No. 9 in the Military Motors cigarette card series, published by WD & HO Wills in 1916, and republished in 1993 by Imperial Publishing Ltd.

The following text appears on the back of the card:

*"For outpost duty and for scouting purposes as well as for the execution of daring raids, mobility, speed, and reliability are necessary essentials for ensuring the success of these Motor Forts.*

*Their engines are almost noiseless, thanks to the invention of the sleeve-valve engine. The car is covered with light, tough, steel plates which rifle and machine gun fire will not penetrate, and most of the vulnerable parts are protected.*

*Sometimes two machine guns are carried, and a crew of from four to eight men."*

David Fletcher states in Source 8 that an observer in India compared the Cadillac wagons to Noah's Ark ... Even on firm ground they were quite unstable to drive, probably due to a high center of gravity.

## Signalmidler



*Armored vehicles rescue an emergency landing plane.*

From Source 10.

The armored vehicles were, among other things, deployed to patrol the barricade lines against the Mohmands, and during these operations the patrols communicated with the fixed posts by means of signal flags and heliographs. You could also connect to the field telephone network that was laid out in connection with the barrier lines.

The photograph possibly originates from Mesopotamia, but is here to illustrate the armored vehicles' means of communication.

## New armored vehicles are available



*Jeffrey Armoured Car, Niagara Camp 1915,  
Eaton Motor Machine Gun Battery.  
Fra Jeffrey Armoured Car (Colin Stevens).*

In 1917, 16 units arrived. Jeffrey Quad armored cars from England to India.

Part of the armored cars had belonged to one of the Canadian armored car companies, the Eaton Motor Machine Gun Battery, which later became part of The Canadian Motor Machine Gun Brigade [2](#)).

The armored vehicles originated from the American car factory, the Thomas Jeffrey Company in Wisconsin. A total of 40 units were built. of this type and they were financed by the Canadian businessman Timothy Eaton, who also named his own armored car company. The armored cars were quite advanced for their time and also had a reverse driver.

When the company arrived in England in 1916, there was not much need for armored vehicles on the Western Front, and the vehicles were left unused for a time. Consideration was given to converting the armored cars back to the trucks they had originally been, but the Indian government became interested in the cars in July 1917. The idea was to deploy them in Mesopotamia, but it was decided to send them to India instead.

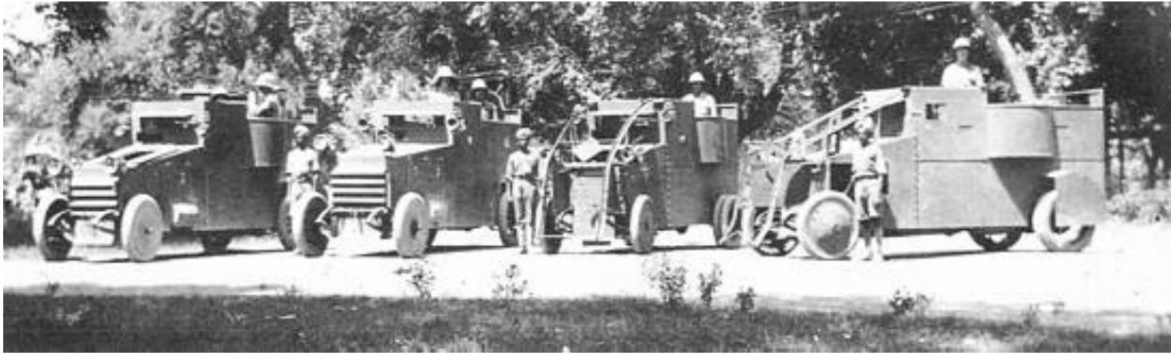
Four armored cars and a large number of spare parts were lost en route to India when the transport vessel was sunk in the Mediterranean, but 16 arrived intact. The remaining 20 had meanwhile been taken over by the British government for use during the disturbances in Ireland.

Later, a number of armored cars of the type *Rolls-Royce Armoured Car, 1914 Admiralty Pattern* [3](#)) that had served [in](#) the Middle East were also added.

## Sources

1. *War Cars - British Armoured Cars in the First World War* af David Fletcher, HSMO Books, London 1987, ISBN 0-11-290439-4.
2. *AFVs of World War One* af Duncan Crow (red.), Profile Publications Ltd. Windsor/Berkshire 1970.
3. *British Armoured Cars at War - The First Fifty Years, Part 4* af Charles Messenger, Airfix Magazine, August 1981.
4. *Stilk's Memoirs* by LC Dunsterville, Gyldendalske Boghandel - Nordisk Forlag, Copenhagen

1930. (The original title is *Stalky's Reminiscences*, and originally published in 1928 by Jonathan Cape, London.)



*Indian armored cars, approx. 1916.*  
From Source 1.

Per Finsted

The Indian armored cars were not serially produced; each individual vehicle often appeared different from the others, which makes concrete type determination difficult.

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**To note:**

- 1) See my article On the Indian Expeditionary Force C in East Africa, 1914.
- 2) Se min artikel The Canadian Motor Machine Gun Brigade.
- 3) See my article On British armored car units in Egypt, 1915-1917.