

# Britains figures - Royal Indian Army Service Corps

## Introduction

Among the more unusual units in the British Expeditionary Force in France 1939-40 there were six pack transport companies. The companies carried ammunition and supplies to forward positions, impassable to wheeled vehicles because of heavy shelling.

Presumably, the British experiences from the First World War brought back the idea of mule transport companies in 1939, where the conditions in France were similar to the First World War.

In October 1939 it was decided that each division should have an *Animal-Transport Company*, consisting of 500 mules. Four of the companies came from the Indian Army - *Royal Indian Army Service Corps* [1](#) - where as the men for the two remaining companies came from Cyprus. To this force a Remount Depot and veterinary officers were added. The Indian companies included two veterinary assistant surgeons from *Indian Army Veterinary Corps*; the Cypriot companies were served by Royal Army Veterinary Corps officers.



*Somewhere in France, 1939-40*  
*Inspection of an Indian Pack Transport Company.*  
From Source 2.

All animals - 2.700 mules - came from India, and were shipped to France *Special Force K6*.

From the end of January 1940 the units made good use of their pack mules, and despite the extreme cold weather, only 2.4% of the mules went sick. One of the major problems encountered were that the mules had a hard time on the paved ice-bound roads. The unusual weather had not been foreseen, and field forges were not part of the equipment shipped to France together with mules.

The officers in the Indian pack transport companies were presumably British.

After the German attack in May 1940, the pack transport companies were ordered towards the coast. One of the companies [2](#), which served in the Saar Region, were made prisoners-of-war, together with a temporary attached British veterinary officer, but the other companies made for Dunquerque and St. Nazaire.

It was not possible to ship the mules to England, and they were left in France. The men sailed to England, later to return to India.

## Addendum

Since this article was published in 2003, Ms Giovanna Bloor has written an interesting article on the three Pack Transport Companies which made their way to England. Here they were stationed in Wales, and issued with ex-French cavalry horses. In 1941, the horses were substituted by 1.000 mules, imported from America. From Wales the companies went to Scotland, and in January 1944 left for India, arriving at 25 April 1944. The companies later took part in the Burma Campaign.

For Ms Giovanna Bloor's interesting article on the Wales interlude, see The Royal Indian Army's flying visit (Source 10).

## Britains figures

In 1940 Britains Ltd introduced a number of Indian sets, with figures in khaki uniforms:

- 1892: Infantry (marching at the trail), Service Dress, with Officer (8 figures).
- 1893: Royal Indian Army Service Corps, with Officer and Mule (7 figures).
- 1903: Mountain Battery with Gun, Gunners, Mules and Mounted Officer, Service Dress (12 figures).



*Britains Set 1893:  
Royal Indian Army Service Corps, with Officer and Mule.*  
The figures are in the pre-war painting, from 1940.

The figures were produced until 1941, where the wartime economic measures no longer permitted production of lead toys. Set 1893 were revived in 1946 and stayed in the catalogue until 1959. The post-war figures were painted in a darker shade of khaki. Due to the short production run of the pre-war figures, they are scarce today.

The Mountain Battery - Set 1903 - is extremely rare, and commands huge prices when on auction from time to time.

## Uniforms



*Soldier with rifle from Britains Set 1893:  
Royal Indian Army Service Corps.*

The figures used for the Indian soldiers introduced in 1940 were based on a casting from 1896, thus showing the *Slade-Wallace Equipment*, introduced in 1888. This type of equipment was used in the British and Indian Army until 1903. However, it does not look that outdated on the 1940-figure.

Despite the fact that khaki uniforms derived from India, Britains Ltd. painted most of their Indian figures in the more colourful peace time uniforms.



*Mule and muleteer from Britains Set 1893:  
Royal Indian Army Service Corps.*

The three 1940-sets and Set 1621: 12<sup>th</sup> Frontier Force Regiment, 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion (Sikhs) being the exceptions.

The muleteer is similar to other figures, the arm holding the rifle being substituted by a "plain" arm.

The mule is similar to the casting used for the Mountain Artillery (Sets 28 and 1903), and the various accoutrements on the pack saddle are meant to support parts of the mountain gun. However, it still looks very appropriate as a pack mule.

The casting for the mule is from about 1925.



*The lid of the boxes for Sets 1892 and 1893 were labelled as shown here.*

*(From Source 9.)*



*British officer from Britains Set 1893:  
Royal Indian Army Service Corps.*



*British officer, Norway 1940.  
From Source 4.*

The casting of the British officer, in battledress, was first introduced in 1940.

Britains Ltd made an appropriate representation of the Model 1937 webbing equipment, as shown on the photo to the right.

The pistol holster is worn on the left thigh. In 1942 this method was substituted by a traditional belt holster. The method was preferred by early armoured units.

The Britains figure shows short puttees in stead of the normal gaiters, shown on the photo. Short puttees were however common in 1939-40.

## Sets 1893 and 1903

The figures used in these sets are similar to the figures in Set 1892. Set 1892 contained 1 officer and 7 marching soldiers, armed with rifles. Set 1903 contained a mounted Indian officer [3](#)), six muleteers, four mules, 1 gun (spilt in three parts) and 10 metal shells.

## In conclusion

Britains Ltd - and other toy companies - sought to catch the popular images of the time in order to further their products.



*Somewhere in France, 1939-40 - Indian Army muleteers with pack-saddles.*

From Source 5, this however gives another explanation, stating that the soldiers are from 1<sup>st</sup> Punjab Regiment.

It is my theory, that Britains Ltd was motivated to produce the figures from the Royal Indian Army Service Corps by press reports and photos of the Indian Army Pack Companies in France.

## And why take the easy way...?

However, when you compare this photo with the last one in this article, and you will see that is it is from the same sequence.

## Sources

1. *The History of the Royal Army Veterinary Corps 1919-1961* by J. Clabby, J.A. Allen & Co., London 1963.
2. *Britain's Wonderful Fighting Forces*, Odhams Press Limited, London (no year), ca. 1941.
3. *The Indian Army 1914-1947* by Ian Summer, Osprey Elite 72, London 2001, ISBN 1-84176-196-6.
4. *The British Army 1939-45 (1), North-West Europe* by Martin J. Brayley, Men-at-Arms Nr. 354, Osprey, London 2001, ISBN 1-84176-052-8

5. *The Cavalry of World War II* by Janusz Piekalkiewicz, Orbis Publishing Limited, London 1979, ISBN 0-85613-022-2.
6. *Britains catalogue 1940*, reprinted by Almark Publishing Co. Ltd, New Malden/Surrey 1972, ISBN 1-85524-102-0.
7. *Armies of the World, Britains Ltd. Lead Soldiers 1925 - 1941* by Joe Wallis, Private publication, 1993, ISBN 0-9605950-2-3.
8. *Regiments of all Nations, Britains Ltd. Lead Soldiers 1946-66* by Joe Wallis, Private publication, 1981, ISBN 0-9605950-0-7.
9. *The Great Book on Britains - 100 Years of Britains Toy Soldiers* by James Opie, New Cavendish Books, London 1993, ISBN 1-872727-32-8.
10. The Royal Indian Army's flying visit (BBC - North West Wales History).

## Postscript



*Somewhere in France, 1939-40  
Indian Army muleteer carrying harness.  
From Source 2.*

During the Campaign in Italy 1943-1945 mules came to good use in the mountainous terrain. Seven Indian, four North African, five Cypriot [4](#), six Italian and eight French mule transport companies, with more than 10.000 mules, took part in the Campaign from 1943.

An estimated 1.000 mules were needed each month to supplement losses in dead and sick animals, and in order to build up a reserve of mules. In addition to that mules were needed for the mountain artillery batteries (British and American), as well as mules for other units.

Earlier this year (2006), the book "The British Empire and the Second World War" by Ashley Jackson (ISBN: 1-85285-417-0) has been published. Among the illustrations there is a photo of one of the Indian soldiers, photographed in Wales. From browsing through the book in London, I recall that the photo is from the Imperial War Museum photo collection, thus making this a place for further research.

Per Finsted

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### Notes:

- 1) Until 1923: *The Supply and Transport Corps*; then *Indian Army Service Corps*; the *Royal* status were given in 1935.
- 2) No. 22 Pack Transport Company (Source 10).

3) An *Indianazation* programme was introduced in the Indian Army in the 1930'ies, and perhaps Britains honoured this with the mounted Indian officer.

4) I am not aware of the connections (if any) between the 1939-40 and the later Cypriot companies, nor what happened to two Cypriot companies in France, and perhaps evacuated to England from Dunquerque and/or St. Nazaire.