

MEMORIAL GATES CEREMONY – 9 MARCH 2015

Just four days after the British government declared war on Germany in August 1914, two infantry divisions and a cavalry brigade of the **Indian Army** were ordered to mobilise and prepare for overseas service.

Units of the Indian Expeditionary Force began arriving in France in September and by late October they were involved in heavy fighting on the Messines Ridge in Belgium.

(It was at Messines on 31 October 1914 that **Khudadad Khan** performed the act of gallantry for which he was later awarded the **Victoria Cross**, becoming the first Indian born soldier to be so honoured).

Today we particularly remember the commitment and bravery of some of those for whom this memorial was inaugurated.

During the first World War, a century ago, this very week, from 10 to 13 March 1915 at **Neuve Chapelle**, a Belgian village some 20 miles south of Ypres, Indian soldiers made up half of the attacking force.

Despite suffering very heavy casualties they succeeded in capturing important sections of the German line.

With the employment of carefully co-ordinated attacks of often hand-to-hand fighting by British and Indian infantry, initial progress was rapid, quickly breaking through a section of the German line. It took just four hours to secure the village.

Allied casualties during the battle were 11,200 (7,000 British, 4,200 Indian).

The officers and men of the Indian Corps further distinguished themselves at St. Julien in the Ypres Salient in April, at Aubers Ridge and Festubert in May, and at Loos in September before being redeployed to the Middle East at the end of 1915.

Over the course of the war, India sent over 140,000 men to the Western Front – 90,000 serving in the infantry and cavalry and some 50,000 non-combatant labourers.

They hailed from the length and breadth of British India and represented an extremely diverse range of religious, linguistic, and ethnic cultures.

Of the combatants, over 8,550 were killed and as many as 50,000 more were wounded. Almost 5,000 of the dead have no known grave and are commemorated on the Menin Gate at Ypres and at Neuve Chapelle memorial.

Later this year, on 15 August, we shall commemorate the 70th anniversary of the end of the Second World War.

The Japanese surrender was celebrated but **V-J Day**, as it has become known, is a day for mourning of war dead and praying for peace.

To all those who took part in these conflicts we owe a great debt. We honour their service and sacrifice.