

**National Ambulance
BME Forum**

Working to improve the
experience of Black and Minority
Ethnic Staff and communities

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Remembering those who have fallen



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An introduction



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As we approach Remembrance Sunday, seeing how various services across our sector are honouring those who served and made the ultimate sacrifice has filled us with pride.

Over the coming days and weeks, there will be many colleagues from across the ambulance sector taking part in Remembrance parades and services. This alongside the Remembrance Day liveried vehicles serve to remind us that we must never forget our history, and with this in mind we wanted to highlight the contribution of those who are often forgotten in the history books.



Ambulances from South East Coast, Yorkshire, and London Ambulance Services all proudly displaying their Remembrance Day liveries





Remembrance Day

The unsung heroes



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After Britain joined the First World War on 4 August 1914, Black and Minority Ethnic recruits could be found in all branches of the armed forces. In comparison to the armies of France, Germany and Russia, Britain had small trained army of 700,000 men, Even after the voluntary signup, Britain needed the support of it Empire and the Empire came to the aid of its King and country.

Soon after the war started, soldiers from **Nigeria, the Gold Coast, Sierra Leone, Gambia** and other parts of Africa were recruited. They helped to defend the borders of their countries which adjoined German territories and later played an important role in the campaigns to remove the Germans from Africa.

Throughout the war, **60,000 Black South African** and **120,000 other Africans** also served in uniformed Labour Units. In addition, there were also **1.5 million Soldiers from the Indian Subcontinent** served on the Western Front during World War I. and **100,000 Chinese labourers** to

form the Chinese Labour Corps, which were responsible for constructing essential infrastructures for the war effort.

Estimates put the number of soldiers from across the Empire at **over 3 million**. Many of the BME soldiers experienced discrimination during First World War, and few moved beyond the rank of Sergeant. Nonetheless, they were still loyal to their country and the British Empire.



British propaganda showing the British Bulldog, with five others representing Australia, Canada, India, South Africa and New Zealand





Remembrance Day

Lest We Forget



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Among the various colonies of the British empire, the **Indian subcontinent**, made up of what is now India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Burma and Sri Lanka, contributed the largest number of men, with approximately 1.5 million recruited during the war up to December 1919.

They served in places as diverse as France and Belgium, Mesopotamia, Egypt, Gallipoli, Palestine and Sinai, and East and West Africa. Over 74,000 of them lost their lives. But history has mostly forgotten these sacrifices.



Indian and New Zealand troops fought together in Gallipoli, where out of a total of 3000 Indian combatants, some 1624 were killed, a loss of more than 50 per cent.

140,00 were sent to France throughout WWI, Most of them served there from October 1914 to December 1915, taking part in the battles of Ypres, Givenchy, Neuve Chapelle, Festubert and Loos.

Injured soldiers were treated across the south coast of England, most famously at the Brighton Pavilion. However, barbed wire surrounded the hospital grounds so that the Indian sepoys (soldiers) could not venture into town, and the most senior Indian officer remained inferior in rank to the most junior English officer.



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There are many stories of individual heroism, one such story is that of **Flying ace Indra Lal Roy.**

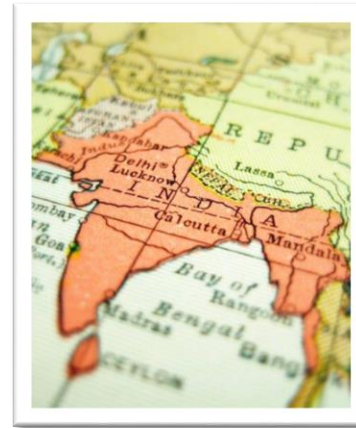
Indra Lal Roy was from a Bengali family originally from the Barisal district in present-day Bangladesh, and came to Britain for his schooling in 1908. Keen to join Britain's war effort, he enlisted with the Royal Flying Corps, the precursor of the Royal Air Force (RAF).

He is designated as the First Indian Aircraft Fighter Pilot, overcoming many obstacles to receive his commission and flew as part of George McElroy's Squadron 40 and was a successful fighter pilot.



Indra Lal Roy on a 2019 stamp of India

Between 6 and 19 July 1918, in only 170 hours and 15 minutes of flying time, he shot down 10 enemy aircraft. He died in action, aged 19, on 22 July 1918. He was posthumously awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross.



The Indian army was a multi-ethnic, multi-lingual and multi-religious force. Over 50% were recruited from North India, (spread across

present-day India and Pakistan) came from diverse religious backgrounds, including Punjabi Muslims, Sikhs and Hindus.





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Gurkhas have served in the British Army for over 200 years. Originally serving the East India Trading Company, they joined the British Army in 1857 and are known as an Elite fighting force.

The 3,500 Gurkhas in the British Army today all originate from the hill-town region of Gorkha, one of the 75 districts of modern Nepal. Their name is said to derive from an 8th century Hindu warrior-saint Guru Gorakhnath and that he gave the Gurkhas the famous curved bladed knife, the kukri. The Gurkhas are mainly impoverished hill farmers

- **200,000** Gurkha **solders** served in WWI.
- They suffered **20,000 casualties**.
- **2,000** of the Gurkha soldiers who served were awarded **medals for gallantry**.



Gurkha memorial,
London



Gurkha soldiers in World War I

In 1915, at the Battle of Loos a Gurkha battalion fought literally to the last man. Sir Ralph Turner MC served alongside them and then wrote an epitaph which read;

"Bravest of the brave, most generous of the generous, never had a country more faithful friends than you".





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From 1914 **Black Britons** volunteered at recruitment centres and were joined by West Indian colonials. They travelled to the 'Mother Country' from the Caribbean at their own expense to take part in the fight.

One of those who came was Guyanese merchant seaman **Lionel Turpin**. He enlisted in the British army at age 19 and was sent to the Western Front in Europe with the No. 32 British Expeditionary Force. Turpin fought in the battles of the Somme and his army service ended in 1919 with two medals, two gas-burnt lungs and a shell wounds in his back. Lionel died in 1929 from the after-effects of war-time gassing.



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Walter Tull has become the most celebrated black British soldier of the First World War. He enlisted in December 1914, suffered shell shock, returned to action in the battle of the Somme and was decorated with the 1914-15 star and other British war and victory medals.

Commissioned as an officer in 1917, Walter was mentioned in dispatches for his 'gallantry



Walter Tull

and coolness' at the battle of Piave in Italy in January 1918. Walter was killed in No Man's Land during the second battle of the Somme just two months later.

Michael Morpugo's bestseller, *A Medal for Leroy* was inspired by Walter's story.



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Lest We Forget

The **British West Indies Regiment (BWIR)** was formed as a separate black unit within the British Army in 1915 and saw the first recruits sail into Seaford, Sussex from Jamaica in October that year.

The 3rd battalion arrived in early 1916 in Plymouth whilst other battalions sailed direct to Egypt. By the end of the war (November 1918), 15,204 black men, representing British Guiana and all the Caribbean colonies, had served in the BWIR with 66% of these being from Jamaica.

However, the black soldiers of the BWIR received lower pay and allowances than their white counterparts. They were mostly led by white officers and used as non-combatant soldiers in Egypt, Mesopotamia (corresponding to modern day Iraq, parts of Iran, Syria and Turkey) and parts of Europe. The BWIR spent much of their time at labouring work, such as loading ammunition, laying telephone wires and digging trenches, and were not permitted to fight as a battalion.



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By the end of the war the BWIR had lost 185 soldiers (killed or died of wounds). A further 1,071 died of illness and 697 were wounded. In Seaford Cemetery there are more than 300 Commonwealth War Graves and nineteen of the headstones display the crest of the BWIR.

Some of the Black servicemen made the ultimate sacrifice but, with the passage of time, with the exception of Walter Tull, the contributions of black servicemen have been forgotten. It is hoped that the centenary of the First World War will change that.





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The contribution of those who served in the **Chinese labour corps** during of WWI has been almost entirely forgotten. These farmers who left their homes and villages to work for Britain were hardly acknowledged at the end of the war, and no mention of them is made on any of our memorials.

Described as the “forgotten of the forgotten” they were denied an opportunity to settle in Britain once the war ended, and records of those who served were largely lost during the second world war.

It's believed up to 20,000 died on the journey over which began by ship across the Pacific, followed by six days crossing Canada in sealed trains to avoid paying landing taxes, another ship to Liverpool, a train again to Folkestone, and on to France and Belgium, where they lived in labour camps. They worked digging trenches, unloading ships and trains, laying tracks and building roads, and repairing tanks



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A memorial has been created largely from the donations of the chines community in Britain, however to date there is no agreement as to where this will be sited.

Carvings on the memorial include four poppies representing the UK, France, Belgium and China and a “Y” symbol, a nod to the Young Men’s Christian Association, or YMCA, that provided welfare and educational support to the Chinese labourers.



Members of the Chinese Labour Corps rivet together sections of tank in a workshop on the Western Front



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There are many **Gypsy and Traveller** names are to be found amongst the 40% of surviving records of soldiers who served in the First World War.

Many Gypsies and Travellers volunteered at the outbreak of war in 1914, and evidence of their participation can be found on the Medal Roles with a number of military medals being awarded to members of the community including at least one Victoria Cross. Their expertise with horses resulted in some being sent into the Veterinary Corps. One such Silvester Gordon Boswell was sent to Woolwich Common for training, then on to a veterinary hospital about three kilometres from Boulogne. Six of his brothers also fought in France.

Their prowess in hunting small game at night gave them sniper skills which were not only an asset in enemy territory but also when it came to foraging for food.

The skills of those men unfit for active service were put to use elsewhere, including making of camouflage nets, and slings, production of industrial timbers and in the cities, they acted as demolition workers, clearing up after bombing.

Members of the Gypsy and Traveller community today seldom speak of their military service but the many photographs of fathers, brothers, uncles and cousins in uniform are part of treasured family albums.



John Cole, who served in WWI





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At 11am on the 11th November, the nation will fall silent in honour of **all our fallen soldiers, past and present.**

We ask that you join us in remembering all who served, including those who have been missed from the history books, their sacrifices and that of all the families, both here in Britain and abroad.

As more and more time passes it becomes more important than ever for us to share the realities of the Great War, and remind ourselves that even then it **was the strength of our diversity and the involvement of people from across the British Empire that helped us to succeed.**

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