The East India Company and Indian Regiments

In studying carbines made for use on the Indian sub continent we are fortunate to have the comprehensive four volume work by David Harding. To try to better this or, indeed, to come near the comprehensive study in his book would be impossible and since he has written the ‘bible’, largely pointless. I am indebted to him for his permission to use his classifications and words in this article.

From its early days, until the Indian Mutiny, the EIC purchased weapons from the London gunmakers to arm the troops under its control. In order to understand the wide range of English made carbines used on the Indian sub continent, we need to understand some of the history of the conquest of India in the name of trade and civilisation and indeed, the vast commercial machine that the East India Company (EIC) became.

A SHORT HISTORY OF THE BRITISH IN INDIA

In 1600 Queen Elizabeth I granted a charter to the ‘The Governor and Company of Merchants of London trading to the East Indies’, giving a monopoly to develop England’s trade with the Far East and India. The company set up local trading factories where it would purchase goods for shipment back to England. In the early days most of the trade was with the South East Asian ‘Spice Islands’, with the first factory in India being established at Surat, near Bombay, in 1611. King Charles II received Bombay, from Portugal, as part of the dowry of Catherine of Braganza, in 1662. In Southern India, Fort St George was built at Madras, in 1639 and in the North East, Fort William, Calcutta, was established in 1696. These three Presidencies of Bombay, Madras and Bengal continued throughout the rule of the EIC, each with its own administration and army.

In the 17th century a largely Hindu India was under the rule of the Muslim Muhgal emperors. Their power waned during the 18th century as local rulers vied with one another for power. Into this growing anarchy came the European traders from Britain, France, Holland and Portugal, all intent on snatching power at the expense of each other and the local rulers. This trade struggle, primarily between Britain and France, lasted nearly 100 years, with Britain eventually becoming master of India. Of course armed struggle needs vast amounts of weaponry to sustain it and with the prize of a continent’s wealth to be won, the EIC invested large sums in procuring high quality arms from the London gunmakers.

It is outside the scope of this book to detail all the actions fought by the British in India, indeed there are many books which categorise the campaigns and wars in great detail. However the subjugation of India was effected between 1660 and the end of the 2nd Sikh war in 1849. During the early period the British defeated the French at Arcot (Madras) in 1750 and Plassey (Bengal) in 1757. Later the French were defeated in Madras, at Condore in 1758, and Masulipatam in 1759. After a defeat at Wandiwash and the loss of their forts, including Pondicherry in 1760, the French military power in India never recovered.

There were, however, powerful local leaders to contend with and between 1767 and 1799, the British fought four wars in Southern India, with the Mahrajahs of Mysore, culminating in the defeat of Tippoo Sultan at Seringapatam in 1799. In Western and Central India the British were faced with the Maratha Confederacy of the Peshwar, Holkar, Sindia, Bhonsla and Gaekwar. Three wars were fought between 1778 and 1818, culminating in the surrender of the Peshwar in 1818, which finally gave the British supremacy in Central India.

Although Central and Southern India had been subdued, the Company still had some way to go to establish supremacy over the warrior states of the North West and Burma in the east. Two wars were fought to subdue Burma, in 1824-1826 and 1852-1853. However, the main preoccupation was with the North West frontier of India and the fear of a Russian invasion, through India, into Central Asia. In 1838 Britain invaded Afghanistan and occupied Kabul in 1839. In 1841 the Afghans in Kabul rose in revolt and the British were forced to retreat through the Khyber pass to India. The retreat and massacre of the total British garrison was one of the worst defeats for the British in India but worse, it showed the warlike tribes of northern India, particularly the Baluchis and the Sikhs, that the British could be defeated. It also brought home to the British that, if India was to be safe from invasion from the north, then control of the northern tribes must be achieved.

In 1843 the Baluchis of Sind attacked the British residency in Hyderabad. Britain reacted quickly and defeated the Baluchis at the battle of Miani and in a series of minor actions. In the Punjab, relations with the Sikhs deteriorated after the death of the pro British ruler, Ranjit Singh, in 1839. In 1845 a Sikh army invaded British territory but were defeated at Moodkee, Ferozeshah and Aliwal, resulting in the British occupying Lahore and the Punjab becoming a British protectorate. The second Sikh war broke out in 1848 when Multan was taken by the Sikh army. Two inconclusive battles were fought at Ramnagar (1848) and Chilianwallah (1849) followed by the final decisive defeat of the Sikhs, at Gujerat, in 1849. Until the Indian Mutiny in 1857, all India prospered under British rule under the auspices of the EIC.
THE ARMIES OF INDIA

During the time of war and conquest the EIC had been building, strengthening and maintaining armies in the three presidencies of Bengal, Bombay and Madras to protect trade and expand its territories. The company had five primary types of forces available.

i) British army regiments sent out from England, the first of which had been the 39th Foot sent out in 1754.
ii) Locally formed European regiments paid for and equipped by the EIC.
iii) Locally raised sepoy native regiments paid for and equipped by the EIC in the style of European regiments and with European officers.
iv) Irregular native troops, mostly cavalry, operating on the traditional Indian 'sillidar' system, where the EIC or the regimental officers provided firearms and ammunition. These were from the early 19th century and mostly named after the British officer who formed them.
v) The native armies of local rulers loyal to the EIC.

BENGAL

The Bengal army was first raised by Clive in 1757, and by 1796 had three artillery battalions, three regiments of European infantry, twelve, two battalion regiments of native infantry and ten regiments of native cavalry. The native cavalry were first formed, in 1773, with the Governor’s Troop of Moguls, followed by the Oudh Cavalry in 1776 and the Kandahar Horse in 1778. In 1803 a regiment of irregular cavalry, Skinner’s Horse, was brought in from Sindia. Later irregular regiments of horse were Gardner’s Horse (1809), 1st, 2nd and 3rd Rohilla Cavalry (1815) and Gough’s Horse (1823). By 1842 there were 11 regiments of regular native Bengal Light Cavalry and by 1846 18 regiments of Local Horse, renamed Bengal Irregular Cavalry in 1840. Bengal also formed a troop of Horse Artillery in 1806, which expanded to seven all European troops by 1818.

BOMBAY

In 1668 King Charles II handed over Bombay to the Company and the garrison entered Company service becoming the Bombay European Regiment. In 1759 the sepoy companies still had their own native officers but by 1780 there were 15 battalions of native infantry along European lines, with European officers. These battalion numbers went up and down according to the demands of war at the time. The Bombay presidency had no cavalry of its own and tended to rely on the mounted troops provided by its Indian allies. Since these could be unreliable, in 1804 a troop of regular cavalry was raised and in 1817, during the 3rd Maratha War, an auxiliary force of 5,000 native cavalry was trained by British officers and became the Poona Auxiliary Horse, a sillidar regiment of cavalry. By 1820 there were also three regiments of regular light cavalry. In 1839 the irregular units were increased with the formation of the Gujarat Irregular Horse and the Scinde Irregular Horse. The Bombay army also had units of Horse artillery. In 1846 the 2nd Scinde Irregular Horse was raised followed in 1850 by the South Maharatta Horse.

MADRAS

In Madras, in 1758, it was decided to form some 3,000 native foot soldiers into four native infantry battalions under European officers. By 1796 there were two regiments of European infantry, eleven regiments each of two battalion of native infantry, two battalions of five artillery companies and four regiments of native cavalry. By 1824 there were 25 regiments of native infantry, with two more raised by 1830. By 1840, Madras had eight regiments of native Light Cavalry, four of which were disbanded between 1857 and 1860. While the Madras Army did not have irregular troops they did introduce rifles (1814) and light infantry (1811), later they had several troops of Horse Artillery. With the emphasis on conquest and pacification in the North West, Madras was something of a back water by 1840 but was the main source of troops for the wars in Burma and China.

OTHER STATES

In 1826 five regiments of regular cavalry were formed in Hyderabad. These were ostensibly to protect The Nizam of Hyderabad but also to keep Hyderabad in check. With British officers they were first named 1st - 4th Regiment Nizam’s Cavalry and the 5th Regiment Ellichpur Horse, but in 1854 they were renamed 1st – 4th Cavalry, Hyderabad Contingent.

After the 1st Sikh war, when the British annexed the Punjab, local native forces were formed. In 1846 a Corps of Guides, consisting of one troop of cavalry and two companies of infantry was raised. These troops wore white cotton dyed with mud which was the first use of a khaki uniform. In 1849 five further troops of cavalry were raised (1st – 5th Punjub Cavalry).
THE MUTINY 1857 - 1861

By 1857 the army in India had over 350,00 men under arms of which just over 10% were British. The Bengal army was by far the largest with 137,500 troops and officers. The causes of the mutiny were numerous but two primary reasons were the imposition of British law banning traditional Hindu practises, together with changes in the conditions of service for sepoys. Poor morale was also engendered as younger enthusiastic officers went into political and civil service, leaving the army under the command of elderly and disinterested officers. Against this background the familiar story of the greased Enfield cartridge became the straw that broke the camel’s back. Once the mutiny started many local princes sought to regain power by supporting the rebels. The mutiny, however, was largely confined to the Bengal army and in particular the recently annexed Oudh. Some Bombay units were affected but none from Madras. Gurkha, Sikh and other Punjabi troops remained loyal.

After the mutiny had been put down the Indian army, particularly the Bengal army, was reformed with a new force built around the units which had not mutinied, with many mutinying infantry and cavalry regiments being disbanded. In many ways this was the end of an era, with the responsibility for governing India being taken out of the hands of the EIC and taken over by Queen Victoria and the British government. The mutiny was also to signal an end to the private procurement of arms for India. However, this process had already started before the mutiny with control and purchase of arms being taken over by the War Office in 1856.

This War Office take over resulted in some native forces being issued with obsolete smoothbore muskets and carbines as opposed to the British army’s latest rifled guns. Smoothbore carbines issued with a 0.656in bore were:

i) Native Sappers carbine, 1858 (30.8in barrel)
ii) Native Foot Police carbine, 1858 (30.1in barrel)
iii) Constabulary carbine, 1858 (26.4in barrel)
iv) Native Mounted Police carbine, 1858 (20.3in barrel)
v) Bengal Cavalry carbine, 1867 (20.3in barrel)
vi) Bombay Foot Police carbine, 1870 (30.9in barrel)

All the above are Ordnance pattern carbines, with (iv) & (v) being relatively common to collectors.
CARBINES FOR THE EIC REGULAR AND IRREGULAR REGIMENTS

As we have seen the EIC ruled India for 100 years after the French defeats in the mid 18th century. Before this time and until 1861, the EIC built large armies to control and defend India. These armies were uniformed and armed by the Company out of the vast profits gained through trade with the sub continent. The EIC established specifications for the armaments destined for India and had inspectors to control the quality of armaments, eventually just as strict as those imposed by the Board of Ordnance for government issue weapons. As with BO guns, EIC issue small arms are stamped with inspection marks and EIC marks to indicate ownership.

EIC small arms were issued mainly to the company’s native and European forces, together with forces from local rulers who were friendly to the company. In addition, many regiments of the British army were sent out to India to supplement the Company’s army. They would arrive with BO issue weapons of standard pattern. In action, however, guns would be lost, broken or simply wear out and the company then assumed the responsibility to re-arm the cavalry and infantry. It is possible to find EIC weapons with British regimental markings, indeed since the EIC paid for the British Army in India, the army acted almost as mercenaries with the EIC owning the weapons issued to the army.

EIC privately made small arms broadly followed the pattern of those made for the Board of Ordnance but were rarely exactly the same. They were privately made by various London gunsmiths and all carry London private proof marks or Tower private proof marks. They also had the Company mark engraved, or later stamped on the gun, sometimes on the barrel but always on the lock plate. From 1759 until about 1818, on locks and barrels the Company Mark was used, this was a heart under a 4 (a simplified cross to avoid offending non Christian trading partners!), with V, E, C, I inside the heart, standing for United East India Company. From 1808 until the end of the Company issue of arms in 1856, the lock mark was changed to a lion ‘rampant’ holding a crown.

Almost 100 different gun makers were involved in setting up arms and supplying the EIC and some of these such as Baker, Manton, Mortimer, Nock and Twigg were amongst the most famous gun makers of the 18th and 19th centuries. Indeed Eziekiel Baker was involved in redesigning the EIC small arms between 1818
and 1820. Some EIC carbines had features not normally seen on BO arms or other privately made weapons. The ‘bun’ nut retained hammer is typical of some EIC carbines and muskets. That is the hammer is retained by a rounded nut rather than the traditional wide head, narrow shank screw.

The British Government competed with the EIC for supply of weapons via the English gun trade, and it was often the case that gunmakers would prefer to supply the more lucrative and promptly paid EIC contracts rather than the government.

A second group of privately made carbines were those purchased for the irregular cavalry which came under the Company’s authority in the 19th century. Until about 1840, these mercenary sildar cavalry units were armed with matchlock muskets of Indian make. These, in skilled hands, could be very effective but with the advent of the percussion system became more and more obsolete. By the 1840’s many officers applied for permission to purchase short barrel percussion carbines. These carbines, today, are comparatively rare, however some remaining specimens and written records allow us to detail which units were issued with percussion carbines. Interestingly many of these were retailed, (though not made), by Robert Garden of Piccadilly, London.

A rare short swivel carbine, circa 1849, retailed by Garden, 200, Piccadilly, London and issued to the 3rd Regiment Punjab Irregular Cavalry. It has a 20in barrel, of 18 bore (0.639in) with Birmingham post 1813 private proofs marks.

A double barrel cavalry troopers carbine made by Swinburn & Sons, 1857. 21in twist iron barrels of reduced musket bore (0.733in). These carbines were issued to the Scinde Irregular Horse, probably the most famous regiment of irregular cavalry which fought on the Indian sub continent.

Bengal Cavalry carbine of 1867 with a 0.656in barrel, smooth bore. This carbine was one of the un-rifled Ordnance carbines made at Enfield and issued to the Bengal cavalry after the mutiny. This carbine can be differentiated from the similar Native Police carbine by its two piece butt plate.