

Photograph courtesy of the Imperial War Museum, London, IWM 206.

Photograph courtesy of the Imperial War Museum, London, IWM 1536.

EMPIRE AT WAR

The 81st West African Division on jungle training in India.

The Second World War was the largest and most costly war in human history. Around 80 countries took part directly or were affected by the conflict. Many of them were part of Britain's empire. The wartime role of the empire and its people is not widely understood in Britain today. This exhibition highlights the experiences and contribution of the empire's citizens through the memories of Coventry residents.

Millions of people across the empire volunteered to fight for Britain. Even more worked in the industries providing essential supplies for the war effort. The natural resources of the colonies were invaluable to Britain. So was their financial support in donations and interest free loans. Thousands of people with family roots in the empire were already living in Britain when the war began. They too contributed by working in war industries or joining the armed forces.

The war affected everyday life across the world. Throughout the colonies there were widespread shortages and rationing. Some countries were at risk of invasion and introduced blackouts and other air raid precautions. In occupied colonies people evacuated their homes or became civilian internees in camps or prisons.

Empire at War reveals the shared history and experiences of Britain and its colonies during the Second World War.

If you would like more information about the Empire At War project or want to share your memories with us, please call The Herbert on 024 7683 2386.



Dual control English and Indian pilots at the wheel of their bomber.

Photograph courtesy of the Imperial War Museum, London, IWM 1031.

West Indian Royal Air Force recruits arriving in England, 1944.

Photograph courtesy of the Imperial War Museum, London, IWM 1031.



Over 100 West Indian female recruits served in Britain during the war.



Bob Hall joined the RAF and served in Scotland and Iceland.



Mr Kohli joined the Royal Indian Engineers in 1941.



Ray Hall joined the Royal Navy and was stationed in Bermuda.

For King and Country

Millions of citizens from the colonies voluntarily fought for Britain during the war. The British army, Royal Navy and RAF contained local regiments or sections from across the empire. Two and a half million Indians served in the Indian Army, making it the largest volunteer army ever formed. They enlisted for many different reasons.

Mr Sidhu joined the Royal Indian Army Service Corps in 1942: **I was only interested to see a new place. Young people were enthusiastic and didn't care for danger. I'd jump in a well if someone told me to.**

Karem Singh Gill served in the Middle East for five years: **I couldn't get a good civil service (job), then like so many other graduates I joined the army when the war broke out.**

Mr Kohli volunteered for the army when he was sixteen: **We could hear stories from soldiers who were returning from there what the life was like, but I tell you we were not afraid of it. The aim was to defeat the enemy, the Japanese who are invading our country, India.**

People living in Britain who had family roots in the empire also joined the forces. Bill Hall's grandfather was from Barbados and had settled in Coventry in the early 1900s: **They got the call and they went. They saw themselves very much as English and they went and fought for their King and country. My uncle Bob was in the RAF and my uncle Ray was in the navy. My uncle Alf was in the army and he was very young at the time, and I know he was on the D-day landing and I know he was in North Africa as well.**



Women's Royal Indian Naval Service recruits undertook administrative tasks at Royal Indian Navy shore establishments.

Photograph courtesy of the Imperial War Museum, London, IWO 4411.



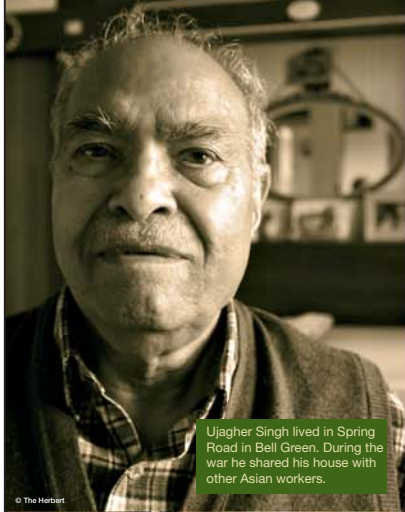
Indian women labourers engaged in airfield construction work in Bengal.

Photograph courtesy of the Imperial War Museum, London, CF166.



Many West Indian nurses came to Britain to work and train during the war.

Photograph courtesy of the Imperial War Museum, London, PL 9570.



Ujagher Singh lived in Spring Road in Bell Green. During the war he shared his house with other Asian workers.

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The Hall family. Evelyn (left) and Beatrice (second right) made munitions and Sylvia (right) was in the Salvation Army helping those affected by bombing.

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A Vital Contribution

The empire made a huge contribution to the war and its support was vital for ensuring victory. The colonies supplied food for those on the home front as well as the troops. Their natural resources also proved crucial. Citizens of the empire bought items for the war effort, collected for war charities and paid extra taxes.

Millions of people were employed in war industries across Africa, India and the Caribbean. They made munitions, built army bases and worked in agriculture. Thousands responded to the skills shortage in Britain and arrived to fill the jobs. They joined people from their home countries who were already living in Britain when war broke out. Ujagher Singh had come to England from India in 1937:

The factory was Self Changing Gear in Lythalls Lane. I worked on the machines. We made engines for the military tanks. I worked night shift from 8pm till 8am for about three years.

There was a small Indian community living in Coventry when the war began. Mr Cheema's father was among them: **My father told me when the war started they were working in the Baginton airport on the runway. They were working outside, there was no work inside. But his friend was able to find work in Holyhead Road where they used to produce tanks and ammunition. It's called 'old Alvis' and he worked during the war in the factory because he spoke a little bit of English.**

The Hall family had roots in Barbados and had made Coventry their home in the early 1900s. Bill Hall recalls: **My dad wasn't in the forces because he had a reserved occupation. He was an aircraft woodworker and he worked through the war. Two of my aunts worked at Rootes, the car firm, making munitions.**

Photograph courtesy of the Imperial War Museum, London, ZZZ 7104D.

The Indian Training Scheme

Welcome Recruits to the War of Production

THE war is bringing about an enormous and rapid development of the armaments and munitions industries in India. These industries now face to face all the problems which a changeover to mass production involves, and during the difficult period of transition India is drawing on the industrial experience of Britain. Re-industrialisation in this country has been a relatively gradual process, spread over more than 150 years. Even so it has at times been a painful process. A rapid transition such as India has to make is naturally more difficult in many respects than a slow development, but India should be able to profit by the experience which has been made in a number of ways. Training schemes on the lines of those mentioned here have been set up in India, and work in this country to help to staff the Centres. In addition, a scheme has recently been devised for training a number of Indian workers in this country. The scheme is still in the experimental stage. The first party of Indian recruits for training, selected by the National Service Labour Tribunal from the large number of volunteers who presented themselves, arrived in this country at the beginning of May, 1941. The party consisted of fifty men, mostly between the ages of 20 and 30, drawn from all parts of India. About three-quarters of the recruits were already skilled workers; others had some work experience, in their field or in other parts of technical schools; and the rest were more junior grade men. The educational standard of the men was on the whole very good. They all spoke English.



A trainee from Bhubairi being trained in the Centres. The first changes to come from India concerning armaments were in the form of these men from Bhubairi.



A mobile canteen presented to the Ministry of Food by the people of British Honduras.

Photograph courtesy of the Imperial War Museum, London, CH14 8770.



Indian workers check fuel tanks at the Hindustani Aircraft Factory in Bangalore.



VJ Day celebration parade by the East Africa Army Service Corps in Nairobi.

Celebration and Sadness

News of the end of the war was celebrated by many people across the empire. Mr Robinson recalls the events in Barbados: **I can remember these planes coming over and people rejoicing in the street that it's finished, and we came out from school and I think we sang Rule Britannia. We knew that song – I can't remember how we came to learn it but we knew it!**

Ram Krishan remembers hearing the news at his school in India: **One of our friends said 'Oh I heard the King, the King spoke last night – the war ended'. So war ended and there was a holiday.**

Other young people did not understand the importance of the announcement. Mrs Kaulshal was a child when victory was declared and found the celebrations confusing: **Somebody came in and brought ludoos, which are Indian sweets, to tell the war has been won. At that time we didn't know what war was, we were happy we got sweets!**

After the fighting stopped it was a long time before some kind of normality was resumed. This was true for Mr Sidhu, an officer in the Indian Army: **I heard about the end of the war whilst travelling by ship from Burma to south India, they announced it. It still took two more years to disband and finish.**

For many it was a time of great sadness as Indian casualties alone numbered 36,000. Vir Sehgal remembers the effect on his town: **I can recollect when the war finished we found out quite a lot of people, young men and older men, didn't come back. Nearly 30 per cent of people lost somebody in their family. It was a bit of celebration for some but sad days for people whose sons and husbands didn't come back.**



Ram Krishan's family had fled their home in Calcutta and were settled in Namasher in the Punjab when the war ended.



Mr Kohli received his medals through the post after he was medically discharged.



Training for air raid precautions (ARP) duties in Bombay, 1942.

Photograph courtesy of the Imperial War Museum, London, IND 1482.



Mrs Lal Sarin walked to India from Burma on a long and treacherous journey that took her through mountains and jungles.



Members of the Indian Workers Association distributed information posters during the war. They used chapatti flour to stick them up as it was longer lasting than the glue they were given!



Galvanised Corrugated Steel Shelter.

Dangerous Times

Many British colonies were directly threatened by enemy forces and introduced blackouts and other air raid precautions. Mrs Lal Sarin lived in Burma and left because of the danger from Japanese raids:

We had trenches in our school and trenches built in my uncle's place, and there were snakes inside. Whenever we heard the sirens I refused to go to the trench, thinking there'd be a snake in there!

Japanese forces conquered all of Britain's Asian colonies apart from India and Ceylon (Sri Lanka). Don Newman remembers his family's attempts to escape:

The Japanese kept coming. The only other thing to do from there was to leave Singapore on any of the boats that were leaving, taking people who wanted to escape. The only problem we had there was every other boat was being bombed. As a result we decided we won't take that chance – better on the land than drowning!

Other colonies were at risk from enemy submarines hunting supply ships going to Britain and the US. Mr Robinson remembers an incident in Barbados:

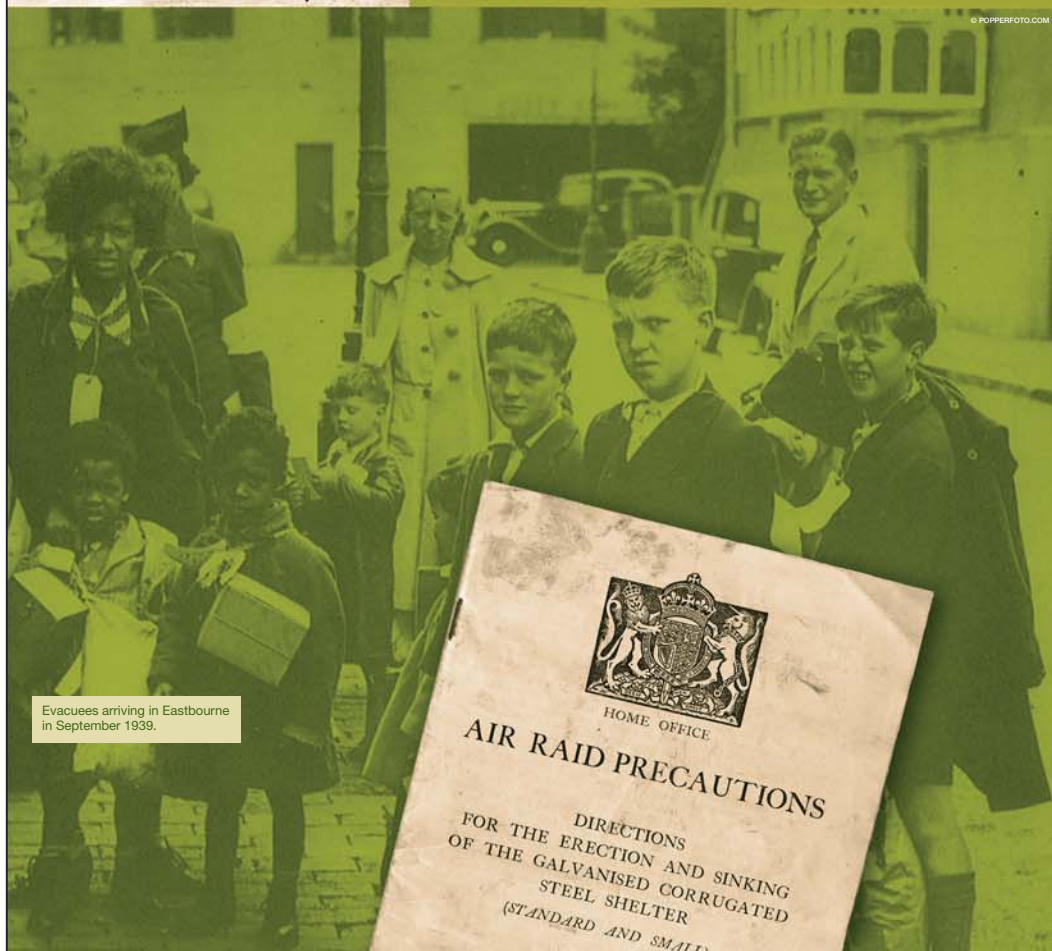
A ship was in the harbour dropping off supplies. I didn't understand what was going on, I just heard the ship got torpedoed in the harbour and it went down. The war, it came home to us.

People from the colonies who were living in Britain when war broke out also experienced bombing. Ujagher Singh had come to England in 1937 to work for his uncle's business:

It was dangerous, bombs were falling. At night we would have to get up and go to the public shelters. Sometimes we just stayed at home.

For many years Mr Cheema's father still had nightmares about the Coventry Blitz:

He told me what they had to do. Sometimes during the day, with the Salvation Army or the other volunteers, they were digging to get the bodies out and they would take them to the cemetery on the London Road.



Evacuees arriving in Eastbourne in September 1939.

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Winston Churchill meeting Indian troops.

Photograph courtesy of the Imperial War Museum, London, E.8647.



Indian soldiers on the move.

Photograph courtesy of the Imperial War Museum, London, FE.822.



Divided Loyalties

The outbreak of war produced mixed feelings among Indians struggling for an independent state. Many of them were disappointed by British reluctance to guarantee independence after the war. Ram Krishan was aware of the tension:

Those days were very, very stormy in two respects. One respect was war was breaking out, but Indians were also fighting for their independence. Although we were kids we knew that India was a slave and we were fighting for our independence, so how should we help?

Mr Kohli's father shared the opinions of many other Indians:

My father was a nationalist but when the war broke out he said 'Eventually, I tell you, the British will win the war'. My father, I wouldn't say he was pro-British but he was against Nazis.

Some Indians saw joining the army as an act of treachery. Others felt that by enlisting they could defend their country from invasion by Japan. Karem Singh Gill made the decision after much soul searching:

From my heart I wanted the British to leave India but when I joined the army it meant I was helping the British. From my heart I tell you, every Indian wanted the British to leave our country.

An Indian National Army fought alongside the Japanese. They tried to recruit the Indians fighting for the British, like Mr Kohli: **Our commander, he was Sikh, he said 'Young men, we must tell you that you have to confront Indian National Army as well, we have to face them. They will ask you to join them but I tell you that it will be miserable if you join them. You have taken oath to be loyal.' I remember before going to the field we were given an oath, we will be faithful to Queen Victoria and her descendents, on the holy book. We never thought of joining the Indian National Army, no, never.**

TOGETHER

MINISTRY OF
FOOD
1953 - 1954



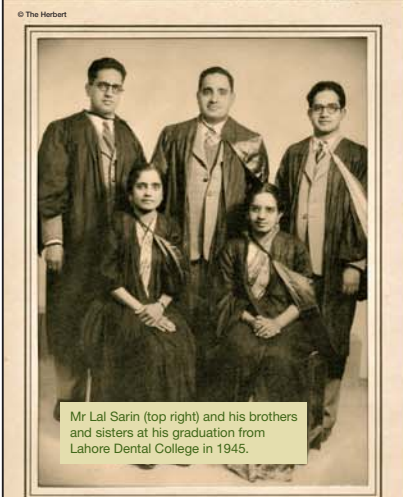
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Mr Lal Sarin



Mr Lal Sarin (top right) and his brothers and sisters at his graduation from Lahore Dental College in 1945.

Hard Times

War caused shortages and rationing across Britain and the empire as industry and transport links were disrupted. Mr Lal Sarin was a student in India and remembers being short of school equipment and petrol:

At that time there was hardly anything manufactured in India. All had to be imported from England and there was an acute shortage of all things, we were short of everything!

Mr Robinson remembers life in Barbados:

Your parents tell you as a boy growing up, you wanted things, you can't have it because the war is on and you can't get it. That's your memories about it – you couldn't have this and you couldn't have that. You'd hear the adults talking about the things they can't get.

Don Newman was interned in Changi Prison in Singapore:

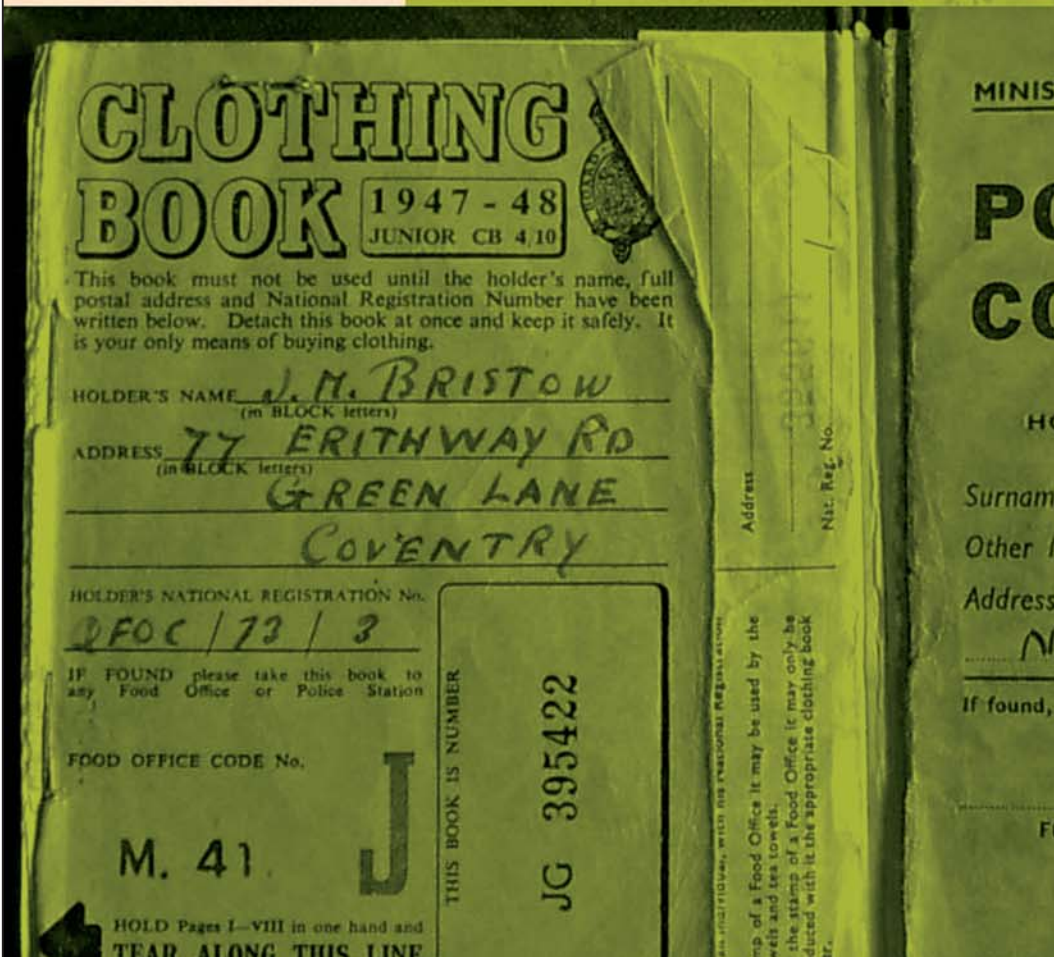
You got used to starving, you got used to not having a lot of food. When we first went in there obviously there was enough food, enough but not a lot. Over the three and a half years it came down to a little half a cup of raw rice and that was it, nothing else.

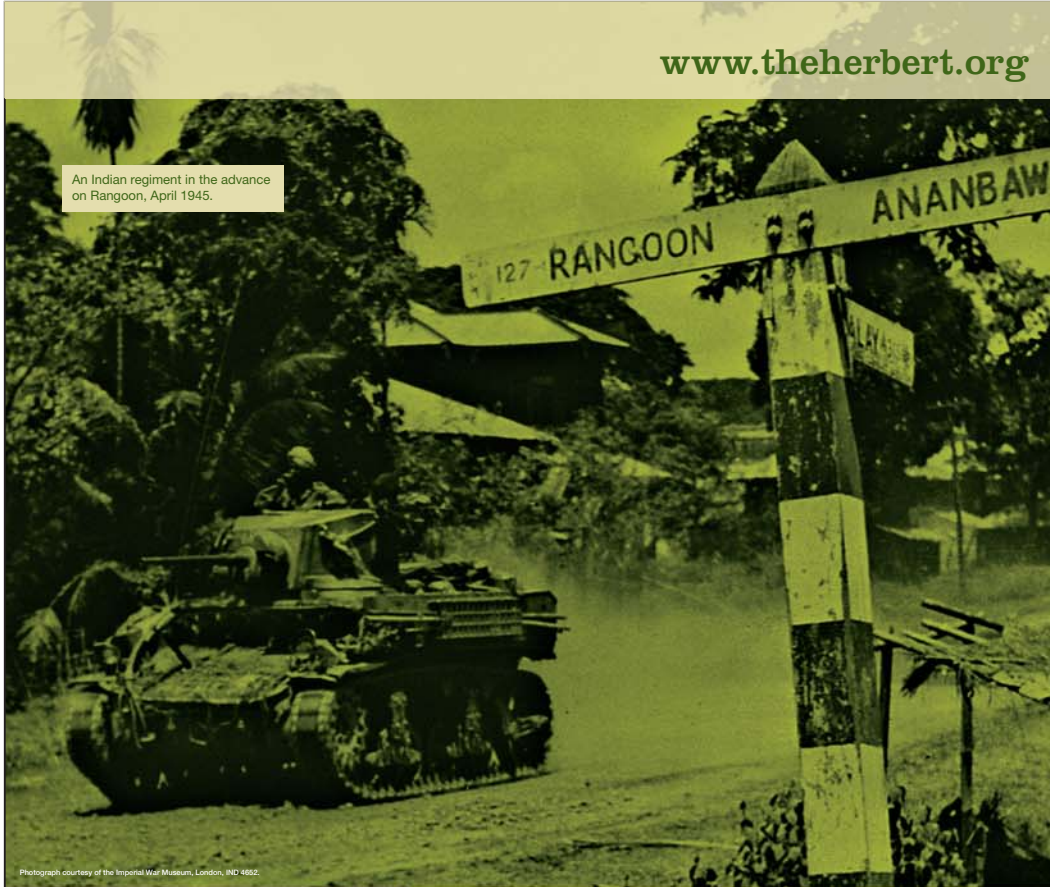
Two million Bengalis died during a wartime famine. Crop failure and damaged transport links meant it was hard to get food to where it was needed. Ram Krishan's father was in Calcutta at the time:

Father used to write that children are dying, people are dying and we were saying we are a bit lucky that we can get wheat and milk and ghee, although they were rationed.

As in Britain, shortages led to a black market trade. However, Ram's father belonged to the Marwari Relief Society which helped to distribute food:

There were some of our own rich people who were indulging in that sort of thing and storing the food and making a profit. It was humanity in both shapes – people who were helping and people who were making a profit.





An Indian regiment in the advance on Rangoon, April 1945.

Photograph courtesy of the Imperial War Museum, London, IND 4852.



Karam Singh Gill was a prisoner of war in Libya and then in Italy.

Photograph courtesy of the Imperial War Museum, London, IND 3562.



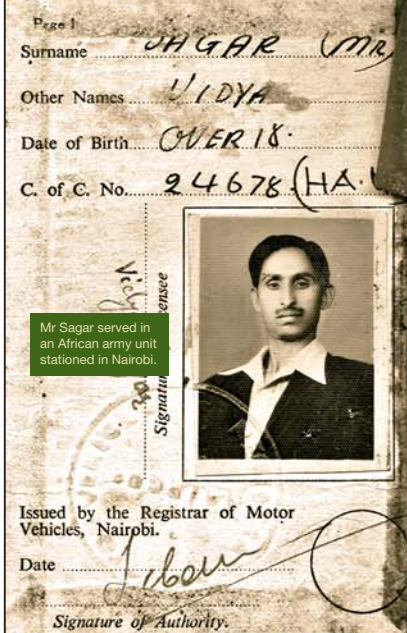
Indian soldiers drive out the Japanese during the monsoon season.

Photograph courtesy of the Imperial War Museum, London, SE 4817.



Indian soldiers about to be executed by Japanese forces.

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Mr Sagar served in an African army unit stationed in Nairobi.

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Date

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The Frontline

Troops from India, the Caribbean and British colonies in Africa served in all the major areas of conflict. They fought against the Japanese, German and Italian forces. Mr Sagar was living in Kenya when the war began and worked as an army driver: **We were in the path of Italian fighter planes, they would come over. It was dangerous – you have to be very alert and aware at all times. We never got a good night's rest. The discipline was very hard.**

Tarlok Singh Gill volunteered to fight and was sent to Burma: **The condition was bad, the Japanese were very strong. We were trapped by the Japanese army in Kohima. After about two months we were able to get free. Lots got hurt and died, we took many to the hospitals.**

Karam Singh's unit served in the Middle East, North Africa and Europe. Like many other troops from the empire he was captured and became a prisoner of war: **Men from nearly every country were prisoners of war at that time, I was one of them. Living on half rations is very difficult – you are neither full nor hungry. These kinds of difficulties, which you go through in life, personal struggles, but you get through them because you are young and you are not alone, you look at the others around you who are in the same position as you.**

Troops from the empire fought bravely and won numerous awards for gallantry. Thousands of them lost their lives. Mr Linton was born in Jamaica, where his father joined the army: **My father served with the British forces in North Africa and of course passed away because of the wounds he received.**



A mortar team from the Caribbean Regiment ready for action in Egypt.