

## **Colonies, Colonialism and World War Two**

By Marika Sherwood

African, Indian, Caribbean and other colonial troops and personnel played a crucial role in supporting the Allied cause in World War Two. So much so, that Marika Sherwood wonders whether the war could have been won without their help.

### ***India***

Troops from the British Empire fought in every theatre of war through the years of World War Two - as they had fought in a range of conflicts, on the side of Britain, for the past 150 years or so.

There were over two and a half million Indian citizens in uniform during the war. The Fifth Indian Division, for example, fought in the Sudan against the Italians, and then in Libya against the Germans. From North Africa the Division was moved to Iraq to protect the oilfields.

After this relatively easy posting, the Division was moved to the Burma front, together with eight other Indian Divisions, and then occupied Malaya. It was then moved to Java to disarm the Japanese garrison there. The men from this Division won four Victoria Crosses. In addition, Indians served in the Royal Indian Navy and in the Indian Air Force which, in recognition of its war contribution, was granted royal status in 1945.

'... Indian personnel received 4,000 awards for gallantry, and 31 VCs.'

The Fourth Indian Division also fought in North Africa, Syria, Palestine, Cyprus and then in Italy. Together with the 8th and 10th Division it participated in the taking of Monte Cassino, after which it was moved to Greece. Four men of the Fourth were awarded Victoria Crosses.

Over 36,000 Indian members of the armed forces were killed or went missing in action, and 64,354 were wounded during the war. Indian personnel received 4,000 awards for gallantry, and 31 VCs. The only VC winner from elsewhere in the Empire was Corporal Sefanaia Sukanaivalu, of the Fiji Military Forces, who earned this highest of all commendations in June 1944, at Bougainville.

The story of one of the 31 recipients of the VC is that of Havildar Gaje Ghale, who, in May 1943 was in command of D platoon, 2nd battalion, 5th Royal Gurkha Rifles. Although badly wounded, he continued to lead a charge against the Japanese forces on the Tiddim Road in Burma.

The citation for his Victoria Cross stated that he had 'dominated the fight' with 'his outstanding example, doubtless courage and superb leadership...[C]overed in blood from his own wounds, he led assault after assault'.

The land of India also served as an assault and training base, and provided vast quantities of foods and other materials to British and Commonwealth forces, and to the British at home. This necessitated the involvement of more millions of men and women in war work and war production.