

## INDIAN ARMY AIRBORNE/SPECIAL FORCES UNITS

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This paper is a review of the airborne and special forces units of the Indian Army. It begins with the raising of the initial airborne units in the subcontinent during the Second World War, but its main focus is on the period after partition in 1947. From 1952 the parachute and (later) special forces battalions of the Indian Army have been part of one unit, the Parachute Regiment.<sup>1</sup>

### *Second World War*

The first airborne unit formed in India was the all-British 151<sup>st</sup> Parachute Battalion, activated 24 September 1941. (The battalion was formed with volunteers from 23 different infantry battalions in India.) The Commander-in-Chief, India, had actually authorized a three-battalion brigade back in December 1940, but was told by the War Office to hold off until the policy regarding airborne units was decided. The brigade was finally approved in May 1941 and instructions to form it sent out in August 1941. 50<sup>th</sup> Indian Parachute Brigade was formed October 1941 at Delhi. On that date it had the following units:

- Brigade Headquarters
- Brigade Signal Section
- 151<sup>st</sup> Parachute Battalion<sup>2</sup>
- 152<sup>nd</sup> Indian Parachute Battalion
- 153<sup>rd</sup> Gurkha Parachute Battalion
- 411<sup>th</sup> (Royal Bombay) Parachute Section IE

Headquarters was mixed British, Indian and Gurkha; the signal section all-British; and the battalion composition (for other ranks at least) was indicated by their names. Officers were all or mainly British.

Although parachute units could be activated, the theater was short of both parachutes and transport aircraft. Even where men completed initial parachute training, they might then go months with no further jumps. The brigade's first operational role was internal security in Delhi in the wake of riots that began across India in August 1942. Following that service, 151<sup>st</sup> Bn Parachute Regiment was withdrawn and sent to the Middle East. (It would there be renumbered as 156<sup>th</sup> Bn and later destroyed in 1944 at Arnhem.) In 1943 the 3<sup>rd</sup>/7<sup>th</sup> Gurkha Rifles were assigned to the brigade, rebuilt after their service in Burma, and converted to the parachute role. They were redesignated by that autumn as 154<sup>th</sup> Gurkha Parachute Battalion. The Indian Engineers unit was expanded to a squadron, and the brigade gained 50<sup>th</sup> Parachute Brigade Machine Gun Company, 50<sup>th</sup> Independent Parachute Platoon [a pathfinder unit], and 80<sup>th</sup> Indian Parachute Field Ambulance. By late 1943 the signal section had Indian as well as British personnel, but the new independent parachute platoon was all British.

The brigade (less the new 154<sup>th</sup> Gurkha Parachute Bn) was sent to the Kohima area at the end of February 1944 to acquire battle experience. Following service at Imphal the brigade was withdrawn to Secunderabad in July 1944 and then moved to Rawalpindi the next month, joining the 154<sup>th</sup> Gurkha Parachute Battalion already there. Plans for creation of an Indian airborne division had been in existence for some time, and approval was given in October 1944.<sup>3</sup>

The new division, 44<sup>th</sup> Indian Airborne Division, was activated 15 April 1944, taking over the number, headquarters, and some service units from the recently disbanded 44<sup>th</sup> Indian Armoured Division.<sup>4</sup> However, the division formed slowly since part of the HQ staff and some support units were transferred that month to the temporary 21<sup>st</sup> Indian Infantry Division, returning the end of July 1944. The existing 50<sup>th</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> This paper restricts its examination of current Indian special forces to those that derive from the Parachute Regiment; there are a variety of other Indian military or para-military organizations that would qualify as special forces in the generic sense.

<sup>2</sup> When the [British] Parachute Regiment was formed 1 August 1942, this unit became 151<sup>st</sup> Bn Parachute Regiment.

<sup>3</sup> Apparently, a skeleton headquarters designated 9<sup>th</sup> Indian Airborne Division was formed in November 1943.

<sup>4</sup> The first commander had been with HQ 9<sup>th</sup> Indian Airborne Division from early in 1944.

Indian Parachute Brigade did not come under command until September, and 14<sup>th</sup> Airlanding Brigade was assigned 1 November 1944.<sup>5</sup> The last brigade, 77<sup>th</sup> Indian Parachute, was assigned 1 March 1945. The units that would make up the division came from a variety of sources.<sup>6</sup>

14<sup>th</sup> Indian Airlanding Brigade ultimately brought with it only 2<sup>nd</sup> Bn The Black Watch from its Chindit service.<sup>7</sup> It was completed with 4<sup>th</sup>/6<sup>th</sup> Rajputana Rifles (1 November 1944) and 6<sup>th</sup>/16<sup>th</sup> Punjab Regiment (1 April 1945). The former had served with 4<sup>th</sup> Indian Division until early 1944, and the latter had been the demonstration battalion at the Tactical School, Dehra Dun.

On 18 December 1944 the Indian parachute units became part of the new Indian Parachute Regiment. The 153<sup>rd</sup> and 154<sup>th</sup> Gurkha Parachute Battalions were simply redesignated as 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> Bns Indian Parachute Regiment.<sup>8</sup> 152<sup>nd</sup> Indian Parachute Battalion was divided in two: Hindu personnel were used to form 1<sup>st</sup> Bn Indian Parachute Regiment and Moslem personnel used to form 4<sup>th</sup> Bn Indian Parachute Regiment. The new regiment was theoretically to have the 14<sup>th</sup>, 23<sup>rd</sup>, 44<sup>th</sup> and 77<sup>th</sup> Independent Parachute Companies (as pathfinder units), but it appears that only the divisional unit (44<sup>th</sup>) was actually formed. The British formed two new parachute battalions at Rawalpindi: 15<sup>th</sup> Bn Parachute Regiment 1 March 1945 and 16<sup>th</sup> Bn Parachute Regiment 1-22 March 1945.

The composition of the division as of July 1945 was:

- 50<sup>th</sup> Indian Parachute Brigade
  - 16<sup>th</sup> Bn Parachute Regiment<sup>9</sup>
  - 1<sup>st</sup> Bn Indian Parachute Regiment
  - 3<sup>rd</sup> Bn Indian Parachute Regiment
- 77<sup>th</sup> Indian Parachute Brigade
  - 15<sup>th</sup> Bn Parachute Regiment
  - 2<sup>nd</sup> Bn Indian Parachute Regiment
  - 4<sup>th</sup> Bn Indian Parachute Regiment
- 14<sup>th</sup> Airlanding Brigade
  - 2<sup>nd</sup> Bn Black Watch
  - 4<sup>th</sup>/6<sup>th</sup> Rajputana Rifles
  - 6<sup>th</sup>/16<sup>th</sup> Punjab Regiment
- Division Troops
  - 44<sup>th</sup> Indian Airborne Division Recce Squadron (GGBG)<sup>10</sup>
  - 44<sup>th</sup> Indian Airborne Division Pathfinder Company<sup>11</sup>
- Artillery
  - 123<sup>rd</sup> Parachute Field Regiment RA [assigned 18 January 1945]<sup>12</sup>
  - 159<sup>th</sup> Parachute Field Regiment RA [assigned 20 January 1945]<sup>13</sup>
  - 23<sup>rd</sup> Parachute LAA/AT Regiment RA<sup>14</sup> [assigned 5 February 1945]

<sup>5</sup> There are discrepancies in the sources as to whether the 14<sup>th</sup> [British] Infantry Brigade was redesignated as 14<sup>th</sup> Airlanding Brigade or 14<sup>th</sup> Indian Airlanding Brigade. It had been part of Special Force (3<sup>rd</sup> Indian Infantry Division, the Chindits).

<sup>6</sup> The original intent was to provide the division with a British parachute brigade; in January 1945 it was clear that this could not be accomplished and the new division would thus have two Indian parachute brigades. HQ 77<sup>th</sup> Indian Parachute Brigade had been HQ 77<sup>th</sup> Indian Infantry Brigade, the original (1943) Chindits formation and later part of Special Force.

<sup>7</sup> 2<sup>nd</sup> Bn King's Own Royal Regiment (Lancaster) had also come with the brigade, but was reassigned 12 February 1945. The fact that the brigade began with two British battalions suggests that it did not add "Indian" to its title, at least initially.

<sup>8</sup> Sometimes shown as 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> Gurkha Bns Indian Parachute Regiment.

<sup>9</sup> Originally part of the new 77<sup>th</sup> Indian Parachute Brigade, and transferred in August 1945 to the 50<sup>th</sup>.

<sup>10</sup> Formed from the Governor-General's Bodyguard.

<sup>11</sup> Theoretically redesignated March 1945 as 44<sup>th</sup> Coy Indian Parachute Regiment, but apparently all-British.

<sup>12</sup> Left the division 28 June 1945.

<sup>13</sup> Assigned 18 December 1944 as 159<sup>th</sup> Field Regiment RA and redesignated in January 1945.

<sup>14</sup> Organized and designated as 23<sup>rd</sup> LAA Regiment RA until converted to Parachute LAA/AT 19 February 1945.

#### Engineers

- 12<sup>th</sup> Parachute Squadron RE [assigned March 1945]
- 33<sup>rd</sup> (Bengal) Parachute Squadron IE
- 411<sup>th</sup> (Royal Bombay) Parachute Squadron IE
- 40<sup>th</sup> (Bengal) Airborne Field Park Squadron IE [assigned April 1945]

#### RIASC

- Parachute Supply Company
- 610<sup>th</sup> Airborne Light (Jeep) Company
- 604<sup>th</sup> Airborne GT Company
- 165<sup>th</sup> Airborne GT Company

#### IAMC/IMS

- 7<sup>th</sup> Indian Parachute Field Ambulance
- 60<sup>th</sup> Indian Parachute Field Ambulance
- 80<sup>th</sup> Indian Parachute Field Ambulance
- 44<sup>th</sup> Indian Airborne Division Workshop IEME

The new division moved in July 1945 from Rawalpindi and Secunderabad to Bilaspur and new camps were built in the jungle. Troops completed the parachute course, but there were no real opportunities for unit parachute jumps, and the air landing troops (whose role was to go into combat via gliders) were hampered by the lack of gliders. While gliders were manned in Europe by members of The Glider Pilot Regiment (an Army unit), glider units in India were ultimately under the RAF. Although containing some Army glider pilots, the RAF formed Nos. 343 and 344 Glider Pilot Wings in December 1944.<sup>15</sup> Of course, forming the units did not solve the problem of a general lack of gliders for training or operations.

The division never saw active service. The only airborne operation was in support of Operation DRACULA, the capture of Rangoon. A provisional battalion was formed from the two Gurkha parachute battalions, joined by detachments from support units (e.g., a section of 411<sup>th</sup> Parachute Squadron IE). The battalion was flown by US air units with RCAF jumpmasters; despite all of these improvisations, the battalion was dropped on location 1 May 1945. After some combat, they were later moved by sea to Rangoon, operating on security duties there until embarking for India 17 May 1945.

Headquarters 1 Airborne Corps came out to India in August 1945 and 44<sup>th</sup> Indian Airborne Division was placed under its command in anticipation of future operations. However, the Japanese surrender some two weeks later ended the need for any operations, and the corps headquarters was disbanded in October 1945. With the end of the war, the division itself redeployed to Karachi, less one parachute brigade group to Quetta. This move was completed in November 1945, and the division was redesignated that month as 2<sup>nd</sup> Indian Airborne Division.

#### *Peace and Partition*

A number of changes were made to the division following the end of the war. The first was to withdraw all British units in November 1945; they were grouped as 6<sup>th</sup> Independent Parachute Brigade before disappearing entirely.<sup>16</sup> Gurkhas were also to be withdrawn and the division was to be Nationalized (the term used at the time to describe the replacement of British by Indian personnel) as rapidly as possible. It would also be reorganized with three parachute brigades, the same model adopted for the surviving postwar British airborne division. The Indian Parachute Regiment was to be disbanded and parachute battalions associated with existing regiments of the Indian Army.

In the 14<sup>th</sup> Airlanding Brigade, the British battalion (2<sup>nd</sup> Black Watch) left November 1945, replaced by 1<sup>st</sup> Bn Frontier Force Regiment. The brigade was redesignated March 1946 as 14<sup>th</sup> Indian Parachute Brigade,

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<sup>15</sup> The former had Nos. 668-670 Glider Pilot Squadrons and the latter Nos. 671-673.

<sup>16</sup> The 159<sup>th</sup> Parachute Field Regiment RA and 12<sup>th</sup> Parachute Squadron RE remained with the division until December 1945.

stationed at Quetta. When the two British battalions left the 50<sup>th</sup> and 77<sup>th</sup> Indian Parachute Brigades in November 1945 they were not replaced. A major change came 26 October 1946 when the Indian Parachute Regiment and its battalions were disbanded. The three infantry battalions already in 14<sup>th</sup> Indian Parachute Brigade were simply redesignated as “(Parachute)” and six new battalions were similarly redesignated as “(Parachute)” and assigned to the 50<sup>th</sup> and 77<sup>th</sup> Indian Parachute Brigades.<sup>17</sup> The two divisional infantry battalions also joined in 26 October 1946.

The Governor-General’s Bodyguard was relieved from the division 1 April 1946 and reverted to its former role and designation. On the same date, the 3<sup>rd</sup> Cavalry—lost at Singapore in 1942—was reconstituted at Lucknow as an airborne recce regiment for the division.

Artillery and other elements of the division were replaced as well, generally during 1946—although the last elements were assigned as late as 1947.

The final organization of 2<sup>nd</sup> Indian Airborne Division, in January 1947, was:

- 14<sup>th</sup> Indian Parachute Brigade
  - 4<sup>th</sup> (Para) Bn Rajputana Rifles
  - 1<sup>st</sup> (Para) Bn Frontier Force Regiment
  - 3<sup>rd</sup> (Para) Bn 16<sup>th</sup> Punjab Regiment
- 50<sup>th</sup> Indian Parachute Brigade
  - 3<sup>rd</sup> (Para) Bn 1<sup>st</sup> Punjab Regiment
  - 3<sup>rd</sup> (Para) Bn The Baluch Regiment
  - 2<sup>nd</sup> (Para) Bn The Madras Regiment
- 77<sup>th</sup> Indian Parachute Brigade
  - 1<sup>st</sup> (Para) Bn 2<sup>nd</sup> Punjab Regiment
  - 3<sup>rd</sup> (Para) Bn Mahratta Light Infantry
  - 3<sup>rd</sup> (Para) Bn Rajput Regiment
- Division Troops
  - 3<sup>rd</sup> Cavalry [recce]
  - 1<sup>st</sup> (Para) Bn Kumaon Regiment [division HQ battalion]
  - 3<sup>rd</sup> (Para) Bn 15<sup>th</sup> Punjab Regiment [MG battalion]
- Artillery
  - 9<sup>th</sup> Parachute Field Regiment RIA
  - 12<sup>th</sup> (Punjab) Parachute Field Regiment RIA [joined 1947]
  - 17<sup>th</sup> Parachute Field Regiment RIA [joined 1947]
  - 36<sup>th</sup> (Mahratta) Parachute AT Regiment RIA
  - 28<sup>th</sup> (Punjab) Parachute LAA Regiment RIA [joined 1947]
- Engineers
  - 33<sup>rd</sup> Parachute Squadron RIE
  - 36<sup>th</sup> Parachute Squadron RIE
  - 411<sup>th</sup> Parachute Squadron RIE
  - 40<sup>th</sup> Airborne Field Park Squadron RIE
- RIASC
  - 601<sup>st</sup> Parachute Supply Company
  - 621<sup>st</sup> Airborne Light Jeep Company
  - 622<sup>nd</sup> Airborne Transport Company (3 ton)
  - 623<sup>rd</sup> Airborne Transport Company (3 ton)
- IAMC/IMS
  - 7<sup>th</sup> (Parachute) Light Field Ambulance
  - 60<sup>th</sup> Parachute Field Ambulance
  - 80<sup>th</sup> Parachute Field Ambulance

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<sup>17</sup> Presumably parachute-trained personnel of the 1<sup>st</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> Bns Indian Parachute Regiment were spread through the new “parachute” battalions while the Gurkhas of the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> Bns Indian Parachute Regiment went to Gurkha Rifles regiments.

3<sup>rd</sup> Airborne Field Hygiene Section  
2<sup>nd</sup> Ordnance Field Park IAOC  
IEME  
2<sup>nd</sup> Infantry Workshop Company  
63<sup>rd</sup> Infantry Workshop Company  
134<sup>th</sup> Infantry Workshop Company  
2<sup>nd</sup> Airborne Division Company  
2<sup>nd</sup> Airborne Division Provost Company

The 14<sup>th</sup> Indian Parachute Brigade was at Quetta, moving to the Punjab Boundary Force in July 1947, then temporarily at Lahore in August. 50<sup>th</sup> Indian Parachute Brigade was at Quetta as well, remaining there. 77<sup>th</sup> Indian Parachute Brigade was at Baleli, although temporarily at Multan in August 1947.

With independence the night of 14/15 August 1947 came partition into two new states and the division, like the rest of the former Indian Army, went out of existence.<sup>18</sup> Of the parachute brigades and battalions, the following units went to Pakistan and thus disappear from this history:

HQ 14<sup>th</sup> Parachute Brigade  
3<sup>rd</sup> (Para) Bn 15<sup>th</sup> Punjab Regiment [MG]  
3<sup>rd</sup> (Para) Bn 1<sup>st</sup> Punjab Regiment  
1<sup>st</sup> (Para) Bn Frontier Force Regiment  
3<sup>rd</sup> (Para) Bn 16<sup>th</sup> Punjab Regiment  
3<sup>rd</sup> (Para) Bn The Baluch Regiment

The [new] Indian Army gained the other two parachute brigade headquarters and the remaining parachute battalions. The transfer of some of the other units to India can be inferred from their later appearance in the Indian Army orbat (such as 9<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> Parachute Field Regiments and 411<sup>th</sup> Parachute Squadron) and the transfer of the 60<sup>th</sup> Parachute Field Ambulance is known. However, I have not seen any definitive list on how the other divisional troops were divided between the two states.

The division of the former British-ruled India into India and Pakistan was neither smooth nor peaceful, with final boundary lines in the Punjab not announced until 17 August 1947 and inter-communal rioting and murders occurring across the sub-continent before and after that date. Another complication were the nominally sovereign 500-plus princely states, which were variously enticed or forced into the two new nations. One who stalled was the Maharajah of Jammu and Kashmir, the Hindu ruler of a largely Moslem population and on the border between India and Pakistan, who apparently hoped to remain independent. While he dithered, Pakistan supported the infiltration of armed tribesmen and then of their own troops beginning in October 1947. When the maharajah signed an instrument of accession to India on the 27<sup>th</sup>, the Indian Army sent troops in. Thus the two new countries found themselves at war as they were creating both their countries and their armies.

### *Independent India*

#### The Early Years

The new Army began with two parachute brigades, which *may* have been organized as:<sup>19</sup>

50<sup>th</sup> Parachute Brigade  
1<sup>st</sup> (Para) Bn Punjab Regiment  
3<sup>rd</sup> (Para) Bn Maratha Light Infantry  
1<sup>st</sup> (Para) Bn Kumaon Regiment

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<sup>18</sup> With demobilization, the Indian Army was reduced to about 400,000 men; the approximate division was 260,000 to India and 140,000 to Pakistan. While the regiments and other units were allotted to the two new countries, battalions and squadrons in them were not necessarily all composed of the same class. Partition required separating Hindu and Sikh units from regiments going to Pakistan, and Moslem units from regiments going to India. The Gurkhas were divided between India and Great Britain, requiring their departure from Pakistan.

<sup>19</sup> Based on the battalions that survived in 1950; however the organization in Kashmir suggests other possibilities in 1948.

77<sup>th</sup> Parachute Brigade  
2<sup>nd</sup> (Para) Bn Madras Regiment  
4<sup>th</sup> (Para) Bn Rajputana Rifles  
3<sup>rd</sup> (Para) Bn Rajput Regiment

As already noted, India and Pakistan began their existence engaged in war over Kashmir. Initially the 161<sup>st</sup> Infantry Brigade was the only Indian formation involved; it must have had at least one parachute battalion under its control, since Shelatang (November 1947) would become the first battle honour of the later Parachute Regiment. Logistic problems forced the Indians back from the border areas in December. Additional Indian troops were introduced, including the 50<sup>th</sup> Parachute Brigade Group. This formation played a key role in taking and then holding Naushahra (another battle honour) in February 1948, and then joining another brigade in the recapture of Jhangar (still another battle honour).<sup>20</sup> UN mediation finally brought the conflict to a halt on 1 January 1949, with about 30% of Kashmir under Pakistani control and the remainder in India.<sup>21</sup>

The original parachute school at Chaklala had gone to Pakistan, and India opened a new one at Agra in November 1949. The next year, Indian parachute forces were reduced to one brigade (the 50<sup>th</sup>); the 77<sup>th</sup> and its battalions reverted to infantry. By this point the 50<sup>th</sup> added “(Independent)” to its title.

A new Indian parachute regiment was formed 15 April 1952, designated the Parachute Regiment and ranked second in order of precedence behind the Brigade of Guards. The three remaining parachute battalions were renumbered as 1<sup>st</sup> Bn (former 1<sup>st</sup> Punjab), 2<sup>nd</sup> Bn (former 3<sup>rd</sup> Maratha Light Infantry), and 3<sup>rd</sup> Bn (former 1<sup>st</sup> Kumaon).<sup>22</sup> On the same date, the Parachute Regiment Depot and Records was established at the Agra parachute training center. This was expanded and redesignated 22 June 1963 as The Parachute Regiment Training Centre, at Agra Fort.<sup>23</sup> The Centre moved to Morar Cantonment, Gwalior on 5 February 1965, returning to Agra 2 October 1975. Finally, on 15 January 1992 the Parachute Regiment Training Centre and other administrative elements relocated to Bangalore. However, parachute training remained at Agra.

India contributed the 60<sup>th</sup> Parachute Field Ambulance to the UN forces in Korea. Some of its personnel engaged in a parachute drop with the US 187<sup>th</sup> Airborne Regimental Combat Team 23 March 1951 at Musan-Ni. With the armistice in 1953, an Indian general was appointed Chairman of the Neutral Nations Repatriation Commission (NNRC), and India contributed five battalions (including 2<sup>nd</sup> Parachute) to the UN Custodian Force. This force replaced US and Korean troops in control of Communist prisoners of war until their repatriation.

The next overseas operation came beginning 1 November 1956, with establishment of the UN Emergency Force (UNEF) in the Gaza Strip, Egypt, and Israel following the 1956 war. India would participate until the UNEF was dissolved and removed in 1967, just before another war in the region. The 3<sup>rd</sup> and then 1<sup>st</sup> Parachute were in the initial Indian contributions to this mission.

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<sup>20</sup> 1<sup>st</sup> (Para) Kumaon operated with 268<sup>th</sup> Infantry Brigade during this period, and 50<sup>th</sup> Parachute Brigade Group had 3<sup>rd</sup> (Para) Rajput, 3<sup>rd</sup> (Para) Maratha Light Infantry, 1<sup>st</sup> Patiala, and elements of other units under command at various times February-March 1948.

<sup>21</sup> Pakistan refers to the portion it controls as Azad [Free] Kashmir (India calls it Pakistani-occupied Kashmir, or POK), while the remainder is the state of Jammu and Kashmir within India; the state is commonly referred to simply as Kashmir, sometimes as J&K.

<sup>22</sup> Following practice in the Indian Army for newly formed regiments, the battalions retained their former regimental titles in parentheses: e.g., 2<sup>nd</sup> Para (3<sup>rd</sup> Maratha). 1<sup>st</sup> Punjab was the old 67<sup>th</sup> Punjabi Regiment, and ended World War II in the 10<sup>th</sup> Indian Division's 20<sup>th</sup> Indian Infantry Brigade in Italy. 3<sup>rd</sup> Maratha Light Infantry was the old 110<sup>th</sup> Mahratta Light Infantry, and also ended World War II in the 20<sup>th</sup> Indian Infantry Brigade. 1<sup>st</sup> Kumaon was the old 94<sup>th</sup> Russell's Infantry, and ended World War II in Burma with the 20<sup>th</sup> Indian Division's 80<sup>th</sup> Indian Infantry Brigade.

<sup>23</sup> A training wing of the Parachute Regiment was established 1 May 1962 at Kota, under the Brigade of Guards Training Center, for direct recruitment and training of recruits for the regiment. This moved to Agra on 26 September 1963.

The regiment raised its first new battalion (4<sup>th</sup>) in August 1960; a parachute pathfinder squadron had been raised (outside the regiment) the prior June, created from the President's Bodyguard.<sup>24</sup> 50<sup>th</sup> (Independent) Parachute Brigade participated in the December 1961 occupation of Goa, under operational control of 17<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division. Conflict with China in 1962 led to a gradual doubling of the Parachute Regiment: 5<sup>th</sup> Bn January 1963, 6<sup>th</sup> Bn February later 1963, 7<sup>th</sup> Bn October 1964 and 8<sup>th</sup> Bn in January 1965. A new parachute brigade (51<sup>st</sup>) was formed in 1965. The new 51<sup>st</sup> (Independent) Parachute Brigade was deployed to the border with China, and assigned to the Himachal Pradesh area.<sup>25</sup> This marked the high point of the Parachute Regiment as an all-airborne force.

## Two Wars

While the Second Kashmir War of 1965 may be regarded as having begun in August, there were actually conflicts before that. These began in February 1965 in the Rann of Kutch, marshes and salt wastes in northwestern Gujerat. The boundary between Kutch and Sind (Pakistan) had never been completely demarcated, even before 1947. An Indian brigade commander was authorized to move into a disputed area in February; both India and Pakistan began to build up forces and a parachute battalion was placed on 24 hours notice. Pakistani attacks began on the new Sardar Post in April 1965; 50<sup>th</sup> (Independent) Parachute Brigade (less a battalion) came under Southern Command 17 April and Kilo Sector (designation for the Indian forces in the area) three days later. Brigade headquarters was at Khavda, and it had elements of 2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> Parachute deployed. Pakistan began to attack the Indian screen positions on the 25<sup>th</sup>, and the forward parachute elements withdrew. 11<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division took over from Kilo Sector in June 1965 and operations petered out. India did build up troops in the Punjab, to the north, during May and June as a result of these operations.

In late May 1965 Pakistani troops occupied a ridge on the Indian side of the cease-fire line, but an attack 5 June drove them back. There continued to be firing incidents along the line in June and July as both sides built up their forces. The official start of the war has been set at 5 August, when infiltrators with Pakistani officers began moving into [Indian] Kashmir and engaging the Indian forces. Gradually regular Pakistani troops were introduced, and fighting in August included Punch, another battle honour for the Parachute Regiment.<sup>26</sup>

Indian gains in Kashmir led to a Pakistani counter-attack in the Punjab on 1 September. After heavy fighting, the two sides agreed to another cease-fire, and the war ended 23 September. It does not appear that the Parachute Regiment played any further part in the war. However, a raiding unit (Meghdoot Force) had been formed in August under Major Megh Singh, from his regiment (3<sup>rd</sup> Rajput) and other sources, and these conducted operations behind Pakistani lines in Kashmir during September.

Meghdoot Force became the source of the next unit raised in the Parachute Regiment, 9<sup>th</sup> Para-Commando Battalion on 1 July 1966, and it was followed by 10<sup>th</sup> Para-Commando Battalion 1 June 1967.<sup>27</sup> At some point during this time, 5<sup>th</sup> Parachute spent a period fighting rebels in Assam.

The next war with Pakistan came in 1971, although this one grew out of political unrest in East Pakistan rather than direct problems between India and Pakistan in Kashmir or elsewhere on the western front. Suppression by the Pakistani Army beginning in March 1971 led to thousands of deaths, a flood of refugees into West Bengal (in India), and Indian support for the Mukti Bahini (the East Pakistani—East Bengal—armed resistance). India massed forces for possible intervention in East Bengal, as well as putting other

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<sup>24</sup> Known as the President's Body Guard, it is currently a two-company recce force. Under its former title, the Governor General's Body Guard had been used in World War II to form the 44<sup>th</sup> Indian Airborne Division Recce Squadron (GGBG), so this marked a return to a similar role for the unit.

<sup>25</sup> It is hard to imagine what purpose a parachute brigade would serve in the Himalayas; perhaps their deployment reflected the fact that parachute battalions are usually much lighter in vehicles and equipment than conventional infantry.

<sup>26</sup> Presumably earned by 1<sup>st</sup> Parachute, which was with 19<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division's 68<sup>th</sup> Infantry Brigade in Kashmir. This area is sometimes shown as Poonch.

<sup>27</sup> These were first designated as parachute battalions, taking the designation para-commando in July 1967 (although at least one source suggests the new designation came as late as 1969).

troops on alert in the west. A sort of undeclared war on the borders of East Bengal began as early as June, with more widespread probes in November. The Parachute Regiment would see service on both fronts, earning three more battle honours.<sup>28</sup>

The actual war began with an attack by the Pakistani Air Force against Indian airfields in the western sector on 3 December 1971, followed by attacks in Kashmir, Punjab and Rajasthan. 51<sup>st</sup> (Independent) Parachute Brigade was in the Punjab (Ganganagar area), part of 'F' Sector in 11 Corps. It had the 4<sup>th</sup> and one other parachute battalion, along with 11<sup>th</sup> Dogra. There was no major action in its sector, just some raiding. 9<sup>th</sup> Para-Commando operated in the Chhamb area and in the Chicken Neck offensive in Jammu and Kashmir, and probably elsewhere, but there are no details. 10<sup>th</sup> Para-Commando operated in Southern Command, the Sindh desert, where the Official History notes that they "played a significant part in these operations." Notable here was their infiltration behind Pakistani lines the night of 5 December, followed by the 7 December raid on Chachro, facilitating its capture, and then raids to Khimsar and Virawah the next day.

50<sup>th</sup> (Independent) Parachute Brigade was initially directly under Eastern Command, and was committed in a ground role in East Bengal on 6 December 1971 (utilizing the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> Parachute), advancing to capture Jessore. During the advance on 8 December, the CO of 7<sup>th</sup> Parachute (Lt. Col. R. P. Sing.) was among those killed in a firefight. The brigade had been placed under II Corps' 9<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division, but was withdrawn from their control on 10 December to move to the west. However, 2<sup>nd</sup> Parachute (with 49 Parachute Field Battery) was left behind. Assigned to 101<sup>st</sup> Communications Zone, they dropped on the afternoon of 11 December 1971 near Tangail, with the objective of securing Poongli Bridge.<sup>29</sup> They secured the bridge and ferry that evening. By 15 December they were securing the Mirpur Bridge just outside Dacca (Dhaka). By the morning of the 16<sup>th</sup> they had secured the western bank as well, with two infantry battalions in support. With the Pakistani surrender in East Bengal that day, 2<sup>nd</sup> Parachute became the first unit to move into the city.

Following its brief involvement in the east, 50<sup>th</sup> (Independent) Parachute Brigade (less 2<sup>nd</sup> Parachute) was shifted to the west, taking over operational responsibility south of the Sutlej in the Punjab on 13 December 1971. It does not appear it was involved in any active operations. India offered a cease fire in the west on 17 December 1971 and it was accepted the same day by Pakistan. The result of the war was to leave things essentially unchanged in the west, while the former East Pakistan became the independent nation of Bangladesh.

#### Recent Years

After the 1971 war the 51<sup>st</sup> (Independent) Parachute Brigade remained in the Fazilka-Ganganager area. In 1972 it was converted to infantry, as a brigade in the new 16<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division, although it appears only one of the existing parachute battalions (8<sup>th</sup>) was converted, becoming 16<sup>th</sup> Mahar Regiment.<sup>30</sup> At least at that time, both of the Parachute Field Regiments (9<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup>) were retained in the artillery, although only one would serve with 50<sup>th</sup> (Independent) Parachute Brigade at any given time.<sup>31</sup> The two para-commando battalions developed specialized roles, with 9<sup>th</sup> specializing in mountain warfare and 10<sup>th</sup> desert-specialized in Southern Command.

1<sup>st</sup> Parachute converted to the commando role in 1977, becoming a GHQ unit directly under Army command. According to some sources, it took over the mountain warfare specialized role, and 9<sup>th</sup> Para-Commando shifted to specializing in jungle warfare.

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<sup>28</sup> In addition, it received three theater honours: Sindh - 1971, Jammu & Kashmir - 1971, and East Pakistan - 1971.

<sup>29</sup> The drop on 11 December totaled 750 men, with a further 40 dropping the next day.

<sup>30</sup> The battalion was later shifted, becoming 12<sup>th</sup> Bn The Mechanised Infantry.

<sup>31</sup> 9<sup>th</sup> Parachute Field Regiment had the 22<sup>nd</sup>, 23<sup>rd</sup> and 24<sup>th</sup> (Parachute) Field Batteries; 17<sup>th</sup> Parachute Field Regiment had the 49<sup>th</sup>, 51<sup>st</sup> and 52<sup>nd</sup> (Parachute) Field Batteries. The other supporting units for the brigade are 411 (Independent) Parachute Field Company [engineers], 50 (Independent) Parachute Brigade Signal Company, 622 (Composite) Parachute Company ASC, 50 (Independent) Parachute Ordnance Field Park, 2 Parachute Infantry Workshop Company EME, and 60 Parachute Field Ambulance.



In common with other armies, the Army's special forces (the para-commando battalions) could also assume internal security roles. In May 1984, Sikh extremists occupied the Golden Temple in Amritsar. After efforts at negotiation failed, the Prime Minister ordered the Army to storm the temple. Elements of 1<sup>st</sup> Para-Commando were part of the force attacking on 3 June 1984, beginning a 24-hour firefight to secure the temple.

Most of the regiment (five battalions) would serve in Sri Lanka, beginning around August 1987 with 10<sup>th</sup> Para-Commando an early part of the Indian Peacekeeping Force (IPKF). They operated as a divisional reserve unit. 5<sup>th</sup> Parachute was flown in by October 1987, and then various other battalions of the regiment rotated in and out of the IPKF. 9<sup>th</sup> Para-Commando replaced the 10<sup>th</sup> in early 1988. The Parachute Regiment were last troops to leave Sri Lanka in March 1990.

There was a move in the 1980s to create a distinct Special Forces regiment. Although this failed and the battalions remained part of the Parachute Regiment, special forces did succeed in establishing a separate training center at Nahan, Himachal Pradesh in 1995.<sup>32</sup> By that point the para-commando battalions were redesignated as parachute (special forces). On 1 February 1996 the regiment gained another battalion when 21<sup>st</sup> Maratha Light Infantry converted as 21<sup>st</sup> Parachute (Special Forces). In 2001 the existing 2<sup>nd</sup> Parachute also converted, as 2<sup>nd</sup> Parachute (Special Forces). By this point it appears that the special forces battalions were all cross-trained, abandoning the earlier specialized roles. Elements of the regiment have served in a counterinsurgency role, both in the North East and in Jammu and Kashmir.

In 1988, Kashmiri Muslims began an armed struggle for autonomy and India sent troops to the region in December 1989. The next year it created a new regiment, the Rashtriya Rifles [National Rifles], which would specialize in a counter-insurgency role. This was a unique regiment, since it had no regimental center and personnel were only seconded to it. Each battalion is affiliated to an existing infantry regiment, which provides about 70% of the personnel. (The remainder are drawn from other arms and services.) Personnel serve two years with a Rashtriya Rifles battalion and then return to their regiment or corps. The 31<sup>st</sup> Rashtriya Rifles was raised by 1994, when the original six battalions were expanded to 36, and was affiliated to the Parachute Regiment. The battalion is assigned to Kishtwar in the 9<sup>th</sup> Sector (sectors are the rough equivalent of a brigade). Although its personnel are drawn from the parachute and special forces battalions of the Parachute Regiment, there are no indications that it was organized or operated any differently from other Rashtriya Rifles battalions. These all have a distinct organization as a light infantry force oriented to counter-insurgency.

By the end of the century, the Parachute Regiment was essentially two regiments. One part was the traditional parachute force, with the 3<sup>rd</sup>, 4<sup>th</sup>, 5<sup>th</sup>, 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> Parachute.<sup>33</sup> The other part was the special forces, with the 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup>, 9<sup>th</sup>, 10<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> Parachute (Special Forces). The Indian Army's official web site notes that "The parachute and parachute commando units, which are part of the Indian Army's special forces, are ready reaction troops" although their use "is heavily dependent on the Air Force air transport fleet." An example they gave was the November 1988 move of 50<sup>th</sup> (Independent) Parachute Brigade elements (including 3<sup>rd</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> Parachute) some 2500 miles from its base to the international airport at Hulale and the capital Male of the Maldives, in response to an attempted coup; 10<sup>th</sup> Parachute (Special Forces) was also sent. Nine of the regiment's ten battalions served in the 1999 Kargil war.

The government announced the intended creation in 2003 of four new special forces battalions, to be trained in cooperation with Israel.<sup>34</sup> The intended role for these units was to stop cross-border infiltration in Kashmir, although they were to be trained for cross-border raids as well. One source indicated that, in 2004, the 5<sup>th</sup> Parachute was converting to the special forces role; however, it was actually the 4<sup>th</sup> that converted. There are no open source indications that the remaining battalions were ever actually formed; the Regiment's official web site shows no additional battalions. Nor is there any indication that the 5<sup>th</sup> was other than a normal special forces battalion.

<sup>32</sup> One source suggests that the special forces had a training wing at Belgaum and a headquarters at Nahan in 1992.

<sup>33</sup> The squadron-sized President's Body Guard remains parachute-trained, and also has some light armoured vehicles as part of its nominal operational role. However, its main task is as a ceremonial unit.

<sup>34</sup> Creation of such units was proposed as early as spring 2000.

*Honours.* The Parachute Regiment has been awarded the following:<sup>35</sup>

- Theatre Honours: Sindh - 1971, Jammu & Kashmir – 1971, East Pakistan (Bangladesh) – 1971, Kargill 1999
- Battle Honours: Shelatang [1947], Naushera [24 Jan-7 Feb 1947], Punch [20 Nov 1947-23 Nov 1948], Jhangar [15-18 Mar 1947], Hajipir [26-31 Aug 1965], Poongli Bridge [11-12 Dec 1971], Chachro [7 Dec 1971]

Individual battalions have also received COAS [Chief of Army Staff] Unit Citations:<sup>36</sup>

Operation Rakschak 1992:	21 <sup>st</sup> Para (SF)
Operation Rakschak 1995:	9 <sup>th</sup> Para (SF)
Operation Orchid 1996:	5 <sup>th</sup> Para
Operation Orchid 1997:	3 <sup>rd</sup> Para
Operation Orchid 1998:	1 <sup>st</sup> Para (SF)
Operation Rakschak 1998:	2 <sup>nd</sup> Para (SF)
Operation Meghdoot 2000:	5 <sup>th</sup> Para
Operation Rakschak 2000:	6 <sup>th</sup> Para
Operation Rakschak 2001:	9 <sup>th</sup> Para (SF), 31 <sup>st</sup> RR (Cdo)
Operation Rakschak 2003:	3 <sup>rd</sup> Para, 9 <sup>th</sup> Para (SF)
Operation Rakschak 2004:	2 <sup>nd</sup> Para (SF), 31 <sup>st</sup> RR (Cdo)
Operation Rakschak 2005:	5 <sup>th</sup> Para, 10 <sup>th</sup> Para (SF)

*Insignia.* The regimental badge for the Parachute Regiment is an open parachute, partially behind a circle with the word “Parachute” at the top and a scroll at the bottom with the word “Regiment”; wings are spread out from the circle, and a dagger is superimposed on the parachute and upper portion of the circle; the whole in silver metal. As with much of the world’s parachute forces, the normal headgear is a maroon beret, although there is a maroon pagri for Sikhs. The maroon beret is the basis for the unofficial nickname “The Red Devils.”

The special forces battalions now have a distinct insignia: a commando knife, point downwards, with two wings extending from the blade upwards and a scroll superimposed on the blade, with the word “Baldan” in Sanskrit lettering;<sup>37</sup> the whole in silver metal on a red cloth rectangle.

There remains a single airborne brevet (what the US would call parachute wings): an open parachute in white, with light blue wings extended from it, the whole on a grey-green drab background. (Some other variants have existed for summer or dress uniforms, e.g., with gold wings on a red background, or the normal colors on a tan background). This was formerly worn on the upper right sleeve but now appears above the right chest pocket. There is also a small enameled version (white parachute with blue, yellow, or red wings) worn on the left pocket as Jump Indicator Wings (for 25, 50 or 100 descents, respectively).

*Motto:* Shatrujeet (The Conqueror)

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<sup>35</sup> These are the honours shown on the official Indian Army website. The regiment, on its own website, also shows honours earned by its battalions in their earlier history as infantry, or as parachute battalions before creation of the regiment in 1952. It is not clear why the official Army website shows battle honours for 1947 and 1948 but not the theater honour, Jammu & Kashmir 1947-48.

<sup>36</sup> Operation Rakschak is the counterinsurgency campaign in Jammu and Kashmir; Operation Orchid occurred in northeastern India; Operation Meghdoot refers to operations around the Siachen glacier in the Himalayas between India and Pakistan.

<sup>37</sup> This can be understood in English as “I give my strength” or “I sacrifice my strength”; in the latter case, it is sacrifice in the sense of willingly giving.

THE PARACHUTE REGIMENT  
Battalion Summary

15 Apr 1952	1 <sup>st</sup> Para (Punjab)	converted 1977 as 1 <sup>st</sup> Para-Cdo, later Para (SF)
15 Apr 1952	2 <sup>nd</sup> Para (Maratha)	converted 2001 as 2 <sup>nd</sup> Para (SF)
15 Apr 1952	3 <sup>rd</sup> Para (Kumaon)	converted after 2001 as 3 <sup>rd</sup> Para (SF)
Aug 1960	4 <sup>th</sup> Para	converted ca. 2004 as 4 <sup>th</sup> Para (SF)
Jan 1963	5 <sup>th</sup> Para	
Feb 1963	6 <sup>th</sup> Para	
Oct 1964	7 <sup>th</sup> Para	
Jan 1965	8 <sup>th</sup> Para	converted to infantry ca. 1972 as 16 <sup>th</sup> Mahar
1 Jul 1966	9 <sup>th</sup> Para-Cdo	later redesignated 9 <sup>th</sup> Para (SF)
1 Jun 1967	10 <sup>th</sup> Para-Cdo	later redesignated 10 <sup>th</sup> Para (SF)
1 Feb 1996	21 <sup>st</sup> Para (SF)	<conversion of 21 <sup>st</sup> Maratha LI>

The 31<sup>st</sup> Rashtriya Rifles (Commando) is affiliated with the Parachute Regiment and there are also two affiliated Territorial Army battalions: 106<sup>th</sup> Infantry Bn (TA) at Bangalore and 116<sup>th</sup> Infantry Bn (TA) at Deolali. It does not appear that any of these are organized to operate as parachute or special forces battalions.

## SOURCES:

The period prior to 1947 is largely adapted from the author's "Indian Army Airborne Formations, 1941—1947" which appeared in Volume 1, Issue 30, of *Orbat Web Magazine*. Its sources at the time were:

The most comprehensive source is Lt-Col T.B.H. Otway, *Airborne Forces* (The Second World War, 1939-1945, Army) (reprinted London: Imperial War Museum, 1990). This was originally a confidential publication prepared by the War Office in 1951. Also useful was R.J. Bragg and Roy Turner, *Parachute Badges and Insignia of the World in Colour* (Blandford Colour Series) (Poole, Dorset: Blandford Press, 1979). These were supplemented by my own notes on the British and related military forces in the Second World War.

That material was supplemented and improved with information from Chris Kempton, *'Loyalty & Honour': The Indian Army September 1939—August 1947*, Part I Divisions, Part II Brigades and Part III (all Milton Keynes: The Military Press, 2003).

For the period after 1947, the most comprehensive source is Bharat Rakshak's [unofficial] Indian Army site, <http://www.bharat-rakshak.com/LAND-FORCES/Army/>. This has a great variety of current and historical material. The site includes electronic copies of the Indian official histories of the 1965 and 1971 wars. Unfortunately, some parts of the latter are corrupt files that cannot be opened or read, and some of the other material is illegible along page edges (it appears that the books were held down against a scanner).

The official site for the Indian Army, <http://indianarmy.nic.in/>, varies in its coverage and the amount of detail provided, but does have some information on the airborne forces. There is also an official site for the Parachute Regiment, <http://www.indianparachuteregiment.kar.nic.in/home.html>. As noted. the two official sites are inconsistent in the display of battle honours.

This was supplemented by material on the Orbat.com site, in particular "Indian Army: Parachute Units" by P.V.S. Jagan (May 13, 2001), "Indian Army Special Forces" by Ravi Rikhye (February 16, 2003), and "The Rashtriya Rifles" (November 16, 2003) also by Ravi Rikhye.

Also of value for the post-Independence period was R.J. Bragg and Roy Turner, *Parachute Badges and Insignia of the World in Colour* (Blandford Colour Series) (Poole, Dorset: Blandford Press, 1979). Some material on the special forces units can be found at the Special Operations.com web site, <http://www.specialoperations.com/Foreign/India/Default.htm>. However, much of this was simply reprinted with permission from Bharat Rakshak. Lists of campaign honours for the post-war period, apparently with a few omissions, can be found at Todd Mills' web site, <http://regiments.org/milhist/wars/bhx-in.htm>; this is part of his page on India, <http://regiments.org/milhist/southasia/india.htm>.

For a general overview of the various wars, I have relied upon the summaries contained in the data of OnWar.com (<http://www.onwar.com/aced/chrono/c1900s/>).