Camouflaged

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Forgotten Stories from Battlefields

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Chapters 7 and 9 – While the events in these stories are based on true incidents, all the names of individuals mentioned in these chapters have been changed to protect the identities of the real people involved.

This book contains some reconstructed or modifed dialogue based on available historical evidence and sources.

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Nisha, my wife and the spouses of those
who serve in the line of duty.

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Introduction

On a wall of the Pithoragarh fort in Uttarakhand, there is a marble plaque that tells us that 1,005 men from one village went to fight in World War I (WWI) in Europe in 1914. Later in the decade, Honorary Lieutenant Rudra Bir Sen from Pithoragarh would take part in the Third Anglo-Afghan War in Waziristan in 1919 and receive the Indian Order of Merit for bravery. Around 90,000 Indian soldiers died in these wars. Ninety years later, Rudra Bir's grandson Lieutenant Colonel Sundeep Sen led the action against terrorists at Nariman House during the Mumbai attacks of 2008. Incredible stories from battlefields both far away and at home have spanned many generations of soldiering in the Indian Army.

In fact, there are many Indian families where several generations have served in the army for over a hundred years. Brigadier Saurabh Singh Shekhawat's great-grandfather fought in WWI. Stories of his battles in the war were passed on to Saurabh by his grandfather. An inspired Saurabh would continue the tradition of serving in combat units.

As a kid, Colonel Rajendra Singh Rathore would look agape at a portrait of his grandfather Gobind with medals emblazoned on his chest. Rajendra's father was five years old when Gobind died in 1942, but Rajendra grew up hearing about his grandfather's incredible bravery in the Battle of

Cambrai. Rajendra, his father and grandfather Gobind served in the 2nd Lancers regiment – ensuring a generational continuity in the same regiment over a century.

It isn't uncommon to find oneself listening to fascinating tales in messes and regimental gatherings in military cantonments. Many of these stories are not publicly known. Others are in danger of being forgotten altogether. These stories range from the renowned stands to eccentric little tales. However, most of these stories have remained neglected, and occasionally been recorded in footnotes, featured in articles, family tales or regimental histories. They are seldom mentioned in history books. This book is a modest attempt to fix this.

The Indian Army, among the most versatile, busiest and inclusive of all armies in the world, has had an enviable history of participating in several major wars in the last century beginning from WWI to the more recent ones on terrorism. Soldiers from different regions, religions and economic classes across India have been a part of the now nearly 1.5 million military. A glorious range of stories have spawned over a hundred years involving incredible experiences of Indian soldiers in battlefields across continents.

This book comprises ten unique stories in three parts, beginning from 1912 to 2008. These stories from different periods mirror the journey and changing priorities of the nation over a century. They reflect the various moods and circumstances of the eras they are nestled in.

My book doesn't claim to cover all the forgotten stories. Among the stories in the book, a few have been mentioned briefly in regimental histories and newspaper articles. Some of the stories haven't been published at all. While some of the stories have featured in a different form in earlier books, they

have been retold here distinctively, using a different lens, and with additional information and context that hadn't been told earlier. Besides, I felt these stories deserve to be told from different perspectives to reach a larger audience. The ten stories chosen for this book were determined by their extraordinary uniqueness, distinct protagonist voices, and context and relevance to the theme of the book, which represents forgotten stories from timelines of important points in India's history.

A century in three parts

Part I of the book begins with stories from WWI when 1.5 million Indian soldiers went to war fighting for Britain in the battlefields of France, Belgium and in the Middle East against Germany. This was the largest expeditionary force – bigger than the combined numbers from Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland in the war. The readers might find it intriguing that neither were these men fighting for a free country of their own nor did they harbour enmity towards Germany or have any familiarity with Belgium or France. But the soldiers landed in unfamiliar territory, fought hard battles and won the hearts of the locals. In World War II (WWII), while most Indian Army soldiers fought on the side of the Allies against the fascist Nazis, some were faced with a testing predicament as Indian freedom fighter Netaji Subhas Bose's Indian National Army (INA) fought on the enemy's side in the war. There is a story in this book in which a protagonist, fighting in WWII, faces this dilemma. Stories of resilience and survival ran alongside a period of the country's history when Britain's political and economic needs were inextricably linked to the supply of manpower and raw materials from India.

The British belief in the supremacy of martial races led to large-scale army recruitment from among the Sikhs, Gorkhas, Garhwalis, Rajputs, Pathans and others. The soldiers mostly came from designated fighter classes from villages whereas officers were largely from among privileged royals. One of the stories in the book explores a different category of fighters – pioneers who came from a class that was neither the royal class (the kings and nawabs who mobilized their forces during the war) nor hardy rural folk, but an upwardly mobile professional class. These men were led by their ambition to fly in the skies. Laddie Roy and Hardit Malik were pioneering flyers who were obsessed with flying planes at a time when war pilots were known as the '20-minute club'. This was because, in 1916, the average life expectancy of a pilot in combat was twenty minutes. Stories about trailblazing Indians whose roles in tank and airplane combat – two of the most destructive vehicles in twentieth-century warfare – have remained largely unsung. One story involves the deep trauma of a prisoner of war, who fought a lonely battle all by himself. When Chanan Singh Dhillon went to serve with his unit in Africa in 1940, little did he know that he would spend the entire WWII with his captors, oscillating between life and death. While in prison, he wrote meticulous notes in a diary, preserved and shared by his children, which found its way into this book as a story.

Part II of the book traces stories of soldiers whose actions while defending India's territorial integrity reflected the fierce pride of a new, independent nation. In a story from 1948, a young Ladakhi boy volunteered to join the army to protect his land from invaders. Inspired by his ancestors, Chhewang Rinchen would go on to become a remarkable figure in India's military history. The indomitable Chhewang took part in

every war that India fought: in 1948, 1962, 1965 and 1971, and returned undefeated each time.

India's leadership lapses and tragic reverses in the 1962 war with China were an ironic contrast to the dogged courage of its young officers and soldiers who unflinchingly put their lives on the line. The story of Haripal Kaushik helps us understand a phase of India's history when the country was dealing with a serious challenge from an emerging neighbour and simultaneously faced another bête noire across the border to its north. The story also features the effect of conflict on post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and mental health. In this period India's borders were vulnerable, its leadership was rattled and its adversaries were posing a stiff challenge.

Nine years later, the contagious energy among fighter pilots in a story at the edge of the 1971 India–Pakistan war reveals a new, confident nation. India's turnaround was bolstered by a military that had acquired a definite national character but retained its ethos and fairness. As borders turned porous and geopolitical changes occurred in Afghanistan in the 1980s, the world began to face the twin issues of insurgencies and cross-border militancy. Adversarial governments in countries such as Pakistan began to fund terrorists, leading to a rise in violence in the Kashmir valley.

The stories in Part III of the book deal with complex modern era issues of internal security, the effect of conflict on entire generations who never had the chance to participate fully in life: lost generations, and the impact of violence on the people involved and their kin. This part highlights how the trauma of battlefields had shifted closer home, and conflicts began to be beamed live, affecting soldiers and their families. Insurgencies became a prominent feature in the 1990s, leading to faceless

adversaries. In the nation's quest against rising militancy in Kashmir, soldiers in operational areas were the ones with ears to the ground as they sought to win back the hearts and minds of disaffected youths who faced difficult choices. Whilst we are familiar with events around the Kargil War, Kashmir militancy and the Mumbai terrorist attacks of 26/11, I was both surprised and fascinated by the unusual and powerful stories that lay concealed beneath well-known events.

Not heroism alone

Aside from gallantry and courage, the stories reveal the vulnerability and humaneness of the protagonists. Going beyond the binary of 'friend' and 'enemy', amid the fog of war, the narratives uncover interesting relationships between adversaries. There are instances of mutual recognition of abilities and duties. For instance, the story of Hardit Malik in WWI led to an unexpected reunion with an enemy six decades later. The story of daring pilots from the 1971 India–Pakistan war was centred around a fascinating encounter between adversaries who acknowledged each other's abilities many years later. In another story, when two foes were poised to enter a battle in the Himalayas and discovered more about each other, they invented a reason to save lives on both sides. In another story, an army captain was involved in an encounter with a militant where they kept firing at each other in between having conversations on the subjects of terrorism and jihad. In a ferocious battle with no quarters given, the two adversaries kept their cool and maintained decorum despite the strongest provocations.

Some stories in the book explore a human's quest for

freedom, longing for their homeland, while some others evoke incredulity. Stories of protagonists offer different perspectives into the landscape of war – where no experience is right or wrong, and hope and honour become central to survival and the aftermath. The stories pursue a fresh take on Indian military history and battlefield experiences that go beyond the stereotypes of 'gallantry and heroics' and explore a wider canvas.

Preserving stories

There are recorded, illustrious works of many exceptional writers and historians on war. I am grateful to historians such as Santanu Das, Shrabani Basu, Jagmohan Sapru, Kaushik Roy, George Morton-Jack and others whose remarkable writings on World Wars have helped acquire insight into the travails of Indian soldiers in the wars. Notes in the diary of Lieutenant Colonel Chanan Singh Dhillon, shared by his son Gurbinder, helped reconstruct his astonishing journey in WWII. In post-independence India, the works of Samir Chopra and P.V.S Jagan Mohan, Shiv Kunal Verma, Arjun Subramaniam, Claude Arpi, Gary J. Bass and many others helped understand the context of stories in this period. One of the more fascinating aspects during research was in listening to the experiences of soldiers involved in operations and events. These sources were not writers, but characters in their own stories, whose narratives – candid, intuitive and first-hand – provided irreplaceable, original and rare insights. The research on this book began during Covid-19 when travel was limited. Thereafter, interviews and meetings took me to Punjab, Leh and the Galwan region in Ladakh, the Kashmir

valley, the East Khasi hills in Meghalaya, Kalimpong, Pune, Kumaon in Uttaranchal, Karnataka among others. During the course of writing this book, apart from many hours of research and gathering information from multiple secondary sources, I interviewed 40 sources spending around 400 hours on discussions, with multiple extensive sessions and phone calls with several of them in order to reconstruct their stories.

The purpose of the book is to contribute to the preservation of the perspectives of protagonists that would be otherwise lost over time. In Britain, the Imperial War Museum's archives have a war diary from the battle of Cambrai with handwritten notes scribbled about the time, nature and place of actions involving Lance Daffadar Gobind Singh and his unit. A gate-pass for an Indian soldier signed by the Nazi supervisor of a German prisoner camp in WWII survives with the family who have carefully archived memories from the war. A letter written by the Pakistani air chief to an Indian Air Force officer many years after the former was beaten in an air battle in 1971 is a piece of rare history presently in possession of his rival: the Indian Air Force pilot. This book can be seen in this tradition of preservation and taking these stories to a general readership.

Another aim of the book is to support a growing interest in the history of the Indian Army through the medium of short stories. In 1915, Indian soldiers recorded the only victory of the Allies in the Gallipoli campaign against the Turks. Today, the Gallipoli campaign is commemorated on ANZAC day, a national day of remembrance, each year in Australia and New Zealand because their troops fought in Gallipoli. Sikh, Punjabi and Gurkha troops who fought in the same campaign have sadly been forgotten. Memories, weapons and items

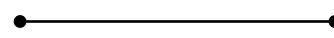
from the Gallipoli campaign are carefully preserved in the Australian War Memorial in Canberra, which I happened to visit. But we have none of this specific memorialization in India beyond the war memorial at India Gate in New Delhi which commemorates generally the sacrifices of Indians who died in the World Wars and the National War Memorial, built in 2019, which honours soldiers who gave up their lives fighting for independent India.

Despite the fact that several thousand Indians participated in the two world wars, rarely have Indian characters been featured in Hollywood's war films. In fact, the story of a recent Hollywood film bore uncanny similarities with one of the stories in the book about an Indian war hero. The Hollywood film went on to win three Oscars whereas the Indian hero of Cambrai has remained largely unsung, except for being celebrated as a legend by his regiment.

India ought to have more war stories than any other nation. The last hundred years of history have witnessed significant changes in political and geographical identities that impact soldiers, their families and others involved in these events. These experiences reveal a range of emotions including joy, pain, survival and sacrifice that have long lain hidden in cryptic notes of war diaries, in regimental chronicles or in the anecdotes of military veterans. It is this collection of forgotten, lesser-known stories that this book, *Camouflaged*, brings to you.

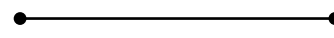
Part I

Indian Soldiers, Foreign Wars



In World War I (WWI) and World War II (WWII), Indian soldiers embarked on journeys across continents, enduring long separations from their families while fighting in wars that were not their own. Many of them faced years of imprisonment or died without recognition, and their tales of bravery and survival remained unknown.

These chapters showcase the hidden heroes, from pioneers and adventurers to prisoners of war (POWs). Their stories tell us about a time when war was far away from home. In unknown lands.



1

Sultans of the Sky

Hardit Singh Malik and Indra Lal 'Laddie' Roy

On 17 December 1903, Orville and Wilbur Wright flew the first aircraft at Kill Devil Hills, North Carolina, with Orville piloting the plane that they had invented, called the Wright Flyer. Eleven years later, their invention emerged as the world's foremost killing machine during World War I (WWI): bombs rained down from airplanes during the conflict.

And thus, the modern air force was born.

By 1918, WWI had been raging for four long years. The violent duels in the air – close-range aerial battles that took place between opposing fighter planes, whose pilots engaged in combat manoeuvres and tried to shoot down enemy aircraft – kept the people down below on tenterhooks, as these dogfights often ended in plane crashes leading to the destruction of their land and homes. The fear of the sky falling on them had never been more real, and they lived in constant anticipation of the next devastating event.

On 22 July 1918, villagers in Carvin in western France

awoke to a familiar sight. Four German Fokker D.VII fighter planes were tussling with a lone British aircraft. Ground troops on the front, including an Indian gunner, were riveted to the unequal contest that was unfolding. The British fighter was hit by enemy fire and suffered damage to the fuselage (main body) of his plane. Yet, the fearless pilot emerged as the underdog winner of the contest, taking down two from the enemy pack with aerial gunfire in a final hurrah before plunging into flames.

After the war, a majestic monument was erected for the young fighter of that battle in the Estevelles Communal Cemetery in rural France. His name was Indra Lal 'Laddie' Roy.

Few persons who have exhibited such extraordinary bravery have died so far from their motherland. The epitaph on Laddie's tomb was in two languages – French and Bengali. 'Mahabirer samadhi; sambhram dekhao, sparsho koro na . . .' (The grave of a brave warrior; show respect, don't touch it . . .)

While much has been said about fighter planes revolutionizing warfare during WWI, the valiant Indian fighter pilots who ventured into the heart of battle have remained largely unknown. Fearless flyer Laddie Roy was following in the footsteps of Hardit Singh Malik, the first Indian fighter pilot.

This is their story.

On 1 June 1912, author Sir Arthur Conan Doyle,[1] playing for the Sussex Martlets, stepped up to bowl to a stylish Indian

batsman from an Eastbourne cricket team, from the town of East Sussex, UK. During that match, the Indian batsman scored 19 runs out of a total of 85[2] before being stumped by Doyle's wily off-spin delivery.[3] His impressive batting skills caught the attention of a friend of Ranjitsinhji, the Indian cricketer, who recommended the teenager, Hardit Singh Malik, to Sussex cricket team captain Herbert Chaplin.[4] By 1914, Hardit was playing for the Sussex County in the English cricket league. However, his future was about to take a dramatic turn, changed by an event in Sarajevo.

On 28 June 1914, the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand, the heir presumptive of the Austro-Hungarian throne, and his wife Sophie, by a Bosnian revolutionary in Sarajevo, had led to the outbreak of war. As Germany, Russia and France issued ultimatums to each other, the long shadow of war fell upon Great Britain which would soon join the conflict.

Hardit, who had been sent to England from India to study at the age of 14, was at Balliol College, Oxford, and paving new paths on the cricket field when war broke out. When he took the field on a rainy day in August that year, playing against Kent, the future of the cricket season was uncertain. Inclement weather interrupted play at Canterbury. During the rain break, Hardit strolled across the ground with his friend, Kenneth Woodroffe. Their chat gravitated towards the war. Woodroffe declared he would join the army and fight if and when Britain joined the war. He then asked Hardit what he would do. The Indian smiled, shrugged his shoulders and ambled towards the pavilion.

That was the day Great Britain entered the war.

Ten days later, Woodroffe joined the 6th Battalion, Rifle

Source: http://www.empirefaithwar.com/page-3

Hardit played five County matches for Sussex in 1914.

Brigade. Three weeks later, the county cricket season was called off due to the war. Within a year, Woodroffe was killed in the Battle of Neuve Chapelle.[5] Hardit eventually went to war too. However, unlike Woodroffe, his journey to the frontlines took a different path.

WWI witnessed the widespread use of trenches in battlefields and drew infantry soldiers from various countries, including over a million from India, all fighting under the banner of the British Empire. The era marked a shift in warfare, as newly invented potent forms of grenades, artillery and explosives

decided the fates of soldiers skilled in close-quarter battles with rifles and bayonets. And then came the aircraft, whose introduction brought about a radical transformation in the war.

Hardit

Flying had always fired Hardit's imagination. He even had a premonition about his destiny, as a child.

Born in 1894 in Rawalpindi, west Punjab, he grew up in a privileged home and enjoyed an idyllic childhood. Flying kites was a beloved activity, and he would join the other boys in launching them across terraces and gardens. In a sky speckled with colourful paper kites, Hardit delighted in their

Source: ESPN Sports Media Ltd

Hardit Malik: a portrait

leisurely flight and eagerly joined the kite duels, revelling in the victories as defeated kites gently descended to the ground.

Kites fuelled his dreams. *Would he be on a flying machine in the sky, some day?*

At Oxford, the choice wasn't easy. To fulfil his passion for flying, Hardit would have to fight for a colonial power that ruled his country by force. Though, ironically, he would be participating in a war against an expansionist power, as part of the Allied Forces (including countries such as Great Britain, France, Russia and later the US) opposing the Central Powers (including Germany, Austria-Hungary and the Ottoman Empire).

Watching his peers at Oxford head to the frontlines, Hardit applied for a fighter pilot's position at the Royal Flying Corps (RFC). The prospect of an Indian in that role raised a few sniggers, and his application was rejected. Undaunted, Hardit urged Francis Urquhart, his Oxford tutor, to recommend him for a civilian support role in France.[6]

After graduating in 1915, Hardit was hired by the French Red Cross to drive a motor ambulance to the frontlines. It was an uneventful assignment until fate intervened unexpectedly.

While driving through the picturesque countryside, Hardit would witness formations of airplanes zooming overhead. Watching those planes triggered memories of his childhood days, that were spent flying kites and another powerful realization: his true passion was flying. He couldn't let this opportunity slip through his grasp.

He asked a friend in Cognac if he could apply to the Aéronautique Militaire (French Air Service) and, to his surprise, they accepted his application. Filled with excitement, Hardit wrote to Urquhart, who was far from elated to hear

that a British resident was to join the French Air Force. Urquhart, a respected academic, shot off a terse letter to Major General David Henderson, chief of the RFC. He wrote, if Hardit Singh Malik as a British subject was good enough for the French, why wasn't he good enough for the British Armed Forces?[7] The letter worked, and a few days later, Hardit was summoned to England and found himself facing General Henderson in the latter's office. On 5 April 1917, he was fast-tracked into service as Honourable Second Lieutenant H.S. Malik, RFC, Special Reserve.

Hardit's resolute push for what he wanted didn't end there. As a cadet at the prominent military training academy in Aldershot, he stood out as a devout Sikh, proudly wearing a beard and turban. At the time, British Army regulations mandated clean-shaven appearances and prohibited headgear, to ensure the effectiveness of protective equipment and uniform conformity. The sergeant major was aghast at this departure from regulations, but Hardit stood firm on religious grounds. The matter was taken to the commanding officer (CO), who faced a difficult decision as there was no prior occurrence. For that matter, the induction of Indians into the air force also lacked precedent.

Eventually, the demands of war required the setting aside of colonial egos. Hardit was given a special helmet made to fit over his turban. His unique appearance earned him the nickname 'Flying Hobgoblin' at flying school!

Hardit's incredible story finally took wing. Action awaited him in the skies.

Tales of soldiers from the frontlines inspired young men to join the war. However, until then, no one had heard of Indian fighter pilots. Lieutenant Jeejeebhoy Piroshaw Bomanjee had become the RFC's first Indian pilot,[8] but he resigned due to ill-health.[9] After him, as Hardit broke barriers and opened doors, other Indians started to follow in his footsteps.

Unlike the British Indian Army, the air force was devoid of any legacy of 'martial races' policy that enabled the British to exclude the educated populace from military service.[10] (During the colonial era, the British classified specific ethnic groups or communities as having inherent martial qualities and gave them priority in military recruitment. While the Sikhs, Rajputs, Pathans and Gurkhas were perceived as loyal and possessing fighting qualities, certain regional groups were thought to be dangerous and disloyal to the British, and thus were considered unfit for the military.)

The RFC played a role in shaping a new class of fighters – privileged Indians. Errol Suvo Chunder Sen and Shirikrishna Chunda Welinkar, hailing from well-heeled families, would later join Hardit as fighter pilots in the war.

As did a third pilot who, having just completed his training, was about to script a sensational story in the skies.

Laddie

On the sunny afternoon of 28 October 1917, Major Rainsford Balcombe-Brown, CO, 56 Squadron, looked at his watch. With an hour until the evening parade, he reclined on his couch, engrossed in a two-week-old edition of *The Times*.

A young Indian boy, fresh from flying school, entered the room.

'How old are you?' Brown asked.[11]

'Nearly 20, sir,' the boy said. (He was 18.)

'Get plenty of flying in, because you will need all your skills,' was Brown's advice. He added, 'I suppose you are too young to think and too old to listen. Are you valiant, gallant and dashing?'

The question was met with a quiet affirmation.

Brown seemed unconvinced. 'Why are you in this war?'

'Sir, I don't understand.'

'You are an Indian prince. Why should you be in this war? No one has compelled you and conscription does not apply to you.' (He wasn't actually a prince but came from a prominent zamindar [landowner] family.)

The boy paused for a moment. 'I volunteered, sir.'

Brown tried to dissuade him. 'I suppose you wanted adventure . . . do you know it's a killing field? You have to survive and fight. And then survive again.'

'I came prepared for that, sir,' the boy said calmly.

'Welcome aboard,' Brown shot back with a smile.

And that's how Indra Lal 'Laddie' Roy arrived as a fighter pilot and became a part of the war.

Years ago, in 1901, Lolita Ray, wife of Piera Lal Roy, an eminent barrister from Calcutta (now Kolkata), arrived in England with her children, hoping to ensure a proper English education for them. The family had its roots in Barisal (now part of Bangladesh), a region known for the fiery temper and raw courage of its inhabitants.

The boys, who were sent to St Paul's School for boys in

Source: St. Paul's School

Laddie at school

Hammersmith, were of a sporty temperament. Paresh, the elder, was the school's boxing champion while Laddie played rugby and captained the swimming team.[12]

When news of war broke, the boys – who had grown up to be true Englishmen[13] – immediately expressed their desire to enlist. Paresh had just graduated from Cambridge and was 'keen to prove that the non-martial Bengali could fight as well as any other soldier'[14] while Laddie, who had won a scholarship to Oxford, dreamt of flying. The heroic exploits of Albert Ball, VC, renowned British flying ace during WWI, kept him awake. Laddie spent long hours by the window, immersed in thoughts about the new winged machines that now ruled the sky. He wanted to be a fighter pilot, like Ball.

He got off to a disappointing start. Laddie's application