

British Journal for Military History

Volume 10, Issue 1, March 2024

The China Gun Lascars 1841-1892

Mandeep Singh

ISSN: 2057-0422

Date of Publication: 22 March 2024

Citation: Mandeep Singh, 'The China Gun Lascars 1841-1892', *British Journal for Military History*, 10.1 (2024), pp. 2-23.

www.bjmh.org.uk



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License.



The BJMH is produced with the support of **Goldsmiths**
UNIVERSITY OF LONDON

The China Gun Lascars 1841-1892

MANDEEP SINGH*

Independent Scholar, India

Email: mandeep502@yahoo.co.in

ABSTRACT

During the first Opium War four companies of Gun Lascars were sent from India in 1841 to serve with the Third Brigade under Lord Saltoun as part of the British Expeditionary Force and were later used to reinforce the garrison at Hong Kong. One company of the Gun Lascars stayed after the war and served with the Royal Artillery at Hong Kong. The Gun Lascars expanded over the years to include a company raised in 1881 and a company later raised for Singapore. The paper looks at the history of China Gun Lascars that served for over five decades before being re-formed in 1892 as part of Asiatic Artillery.

Introduction

The word 'lascar' derives from *lashkar* the Persian term for 'army or camp followers' while *lav lashkar* came to describe Army followers who moved along with the ammunition and rations. The word *lashkar* was first adopted for usage by the Portuguese, who used the term *lascarim* though it only identified those men specifically from any area lying to the east of the Cape of Good Hope and was used to describe men serving in a military capacity either on land as soldiers or on ships as seamen.¹

The term lascar also came to be used as a racial slur as it carried connotations of a low, subordinate status and of inferiority to Europeans when it was a belief, almost an acceptable fact, among Europeans that the Asians were not good enough to be sailors

*Colonel Mandeep Singh, an Indian Army veteran, is an occasional writer and has authored nine books on military history.

Note. An earlier version of this article appeared in the *Journal of the Society for Army Historical Research*, no. 101 (2023), pp. 115-125.

DOI: [10.25602/GOLD.bjmh.v10i1.1771](https://doi.org/10.25602/GOLD.bjmh.v10i1.1771)

¹Aaron Jaffer, *Lascars and Indian Ocean Seafaring, 1780-1860: Shipboard Life, Unrest and Mutiny*, (Martlesham: Boydell & Brewer, 2015), p. 1.

www.bjmh.org.uk

CHINA GUN LASCARS 1841-1892

or gunners and could only work as lascars. Johnson's Universal Cyclopaedia published in 1886 even described Lascars as 'low-caste menials who are cruel and treacherous.'² One of the first recorded uses of Gun Lascars in India was in 1742 when the guns from some of the East India Company's (EIC) ships were taken ashore by the Bengal Army under 'gun room crews' to be used by the hastily raised European Militia against the Marathas. Several lascars were enlisted to assist the gun-room crew in working the guns and preparing and looking after the Ordnance stores.³

As the use of lascars for the handling of guns became more common, the term 'gun lascars' came to be used to differentiate them from other lascars and was meant only for the men employed with the artillery to help work the guns. Though no definitive record is available, the term 'gun lascar' was first used by the Madras Army in 1748 when orders were received from the Court of Directors of the EIC for the regular establishment of a company of artillery 115 strong (exclusive of gun lascars) under a captain. By 1770, each sepoy battalion had two short brass 3-pounder guns for which a European gunner and a lascar were appointed.⁴

The gun lascars' duties included the construction of gun positions, hauling the guns over short distances, the laying of guns, and the loading/unloading of stores and ammunition, but they never fired the guns themselves. They were ranked below a gunner and were paid less than gunners though their status was more elevated than that of a foot soldier. The lascars had their own ranks which were adopted from maritime usage using Portuguese etymology. These were Gun Lascar (Private), Second Tindal (Corporal), First Tindal (Sergeant) and Syrang (Jemadar).⁵

The Madras Artillery, though nominally a European Corps, had maintained Indian gun lascars though there was no fixed allotment of gun lascars to the artillery companies,

²Ravi Ahuja, Networks of subordination – networks of the subordinated: The ordered spaces of South Asian maritime labour in an age of imperialism (c. 1890–1947) in Ashwini Tumbe and Harald Fischer Tiné (eds), *The Limits of British Colonial Control in South Asia*, (Abingdon: Routledge, 2009), pp. 13-14. See also Fredrick A.P. Barnard (ed.), *Johnson's (Revised) Universal Cyclopaedia*, (New York: A.J. Johnson & Company, 1886).

³European, Armenian, and Portuguese inhabitants were for the first time embodied into a Militia in 1742 to take up defences against a possible Maratha advance against Calcutta. Arthur Broome, *History of the Rise and Progress of the Bengal Army*, (Calcutta: W. Thacker & Co., 1850), p. 41.

⁴E. G. Pythian-Adams, *The Madras Soldier 1746-1946*, (Madras: Government Press, 1948), p. 141.

⁵Romesh C. Butalia, *The Evolution of the Artillery in India: From the Battle of Plassey 1757 to the Revolt of 1857*, (New Delhi: Allied Publishers, 1999), p. 120.

and they were provided on an as required basis. By 1831 the number of gun lascars provided for each artillery company had been standardised and they were being used in all campaigns undertaken by the Presidency armies. Similar practice was also followed in the other Presidency Armies.⁶



Figure 1: Madras Gun Lascars 1791-1798⁷

This practice continued as the Presidency Armies remained busy in the expansion of the British Empire in India with the lascars participating in almost all the campaigns. A

⁶The proceedings of the Permanent Artillery Select Committee, Assembled by the Order of Brigadier Fredrick Derville, Commandant of Artillery at Artillery Depot, Saint Thomas's Mount, 27th June 1849 - 'On the Organization, Equipment and Proportion of Ordnance for the Madras Artillery, Relatively with the Artilleries of Bengal and Bombay', (Madras: Christian Knowledge Society's Press, printed by Reuben Twigg, 1849).

⁷Lyall, Charles, '1791-8. Madras Gun Lascar Corps' (1903). *Prints, Drawings and Watercolors from the Anne S.K. Brown Military Collection*. Brown Digital Repository. Brown University Library (Public Domain)

CHINA GUN LASCARS 1841-1892

major change was to come with the employment of the Presidency Armies for overseas campaigns. As most sepoys, especially Hindus, considered going beyond *Kala Pani* to be against their religious and cultural practices, only those regiments that volunteered were sent on these expeditions. This was especially so in the case of the Bengal Army which had a larger share of Brahmins. Enhanced pay and benefits offered for these campaigns did act as inducements, but for the most part, the Bengal Army Regiments were not very keen on such service. It was for this reason that the British Expeditionary Force sent to China in 1840 included only a small force of about 600 sepoys from the Bengal Army. The British flotilla reached Hong Kong in June 1840 and sailed northward to the mouth of the Bei River but the year-long skirmishes and negotiations with the Chinese failed to yield any decisive results.⁸

In 1841 a select Committee was formed by the First Earl of Ellenborough, the Governor-General of India to look into the conduct of military operations. The select Committee was of the view that the existing force in China was not capable of delivering any decisive results and expressed the apprehension that unless this core issue was addressed and an adequate force level provided for in China, a decisive result would remain elusive. For this, the Committee recommended that the expeditionary force should be provided with four British Regiments and an equal number of regiments should be provided by the Presidency Armies. In this, the Bengal Army was to provide one regiment of volunteers while three regiments were to be provided by the Madras Army. A complement of artillery, sappers and miners amounting to 750 men was also to form part of the expeditionary force, to be accompanied by 500 Gun Lascars from the Madras Army. The select Committee while laying down the timeline for raising this force specified that it should be ready by April 1842 and reach Singapore by mid 1842.⁹

Meanwhile, Ellenborough had also sought advice from the Duke of Wellington on the same issue. The Duke, in response, recommended that the Bengal and Bombay Armies should not be weakened in order to provide troops for China, nor should any native troops be taken from the Bombay Army. The recommendations for milking the

⁸The first overseas campaign was undertaken by the Madras Army in 1762 when an expedition under Colonel Draper left Madras on 1 August for the Philippines following the declaration of war with Spain. *Kala Pani* literally means 'Black Water'. For Hindus It was considered unholy to cross the seas to foreign lands and led to the loss of one's caste - social respectability - as well as the deterioration of one's cultural character and posterity. Phythian-Adams, *The Madras Soldier*, pp. 19-20.

⁹Copies or Extracts of further Correspondence and Returns relative to the Supply of Troops, Vessels and munitions of War for carrying on the Military Operations in China, (London: Printed by the orders of, House of Commons, Colonial Office, 1843), pp. 16-17.

Presidency Armies were the same as that of the Select Committee with the suggestion that the Gun Lascars be selected from the Horse Artillery and that they should be trained as drivers as well.¹⁰

A decision was taken therefore to raise four new companies for the Expeditionary Force, as the 5,000 Gun Lascars already raised on the establishment of the Madras Army were all committed and could not be despatched to China.¹¹

The formal orders for the raising of the China Gun Lascar companies were issued on 9 March 1841 and they had been recruited and assembled by the end of February 1842 at Mount, Madras.¹² *The Asiatic journal and monthly register for British and foreign India, China and Australasia* of 1842 records:

Under instructions from the Right Honourable the governor in Council, four companies of Gun Lascars have been raised for service in China, each consisting of 1 subedar, 1 jemadar, 8 havildars, 115 lascars and 2 bheasties. The companies are to be lettered from A to D, and will be under the orders of the officer commanding the Madras Artillery in China for the general duties of the Corps. Officers in command of these companies are authorized to draw an allowance of Rs 30 a month for stationer, &c.¹³

Orders to assemble the Company's regiments earmarked for service in China were issued in March 1842 and, as the lascar companies had to be recruited from scratch, they were amongst the last to reach China in June 1842. The four Gun Lascar companies were commanded by Fred Blundell who had recently been given the local rank of Major while each company was under a *Subedar*.¹⁴

¹⁰C.A. Colchester (ed.), *History of the Indian Administration of Lord Ellenborough; In His Correspondence with the Duke of Wellington*, (London: Richard Bentley & Son, 1874), pp. 139-164.

¹¹*Ibid.*

¹²Robert Montgomery Martin (ed.), *The Colonial Magazine and Commercial – Maritime Journal*, Vol. VII (January-April, 1842).

¹³*The Asiatic Journal and Monthly register for British and Foreign India, China and Australasia*, Vol. XXXVIII (May-August, 1842), pp. 48-49.

¹⁴“Journal during the Chinese Expedition in 1841 and 1842 by a Royal Artillery Officer”, *The United Service Magazine*, Vol.147 (May-April, 1878), pp. 503-505; *English Chronicle and Whitehall Evening Post* (10 May 1842) and *Army List* (January-July 1842), p. 18.

CHINA GUN LASCARS 1841-1892

The lascars were dressed in the same way as the garrison gunners of the time, while the Havildar-Major wore a warrant officers' uniform. The uniform was an unlined navy blue tunic, a white waistcoat, and white trousers worn with ankle boots. During winter white trousers were replaced by blue ones. The Gun Lascars normally wore helmets, but the China Gun Lascars instead wore turbans, though the helmets were to be worn when in the field. Navy blue in colour, a new pattern of turban was introduced by Madras Army Order No 768 of 5 June 1843 with the main objective being that it should be light and comfortable.¹⁵

The turban was to be tied around a wooden *kutora*, made of *moochie*, with plain cotton stuffing and the lower part being pliable so as to fit the lascar's head. The turban was 6½ inches high from bottom to the bulge and 1½ inches from the bulge to the bottom of the *kutora*. The *kutora* itself was 2 inches with the crescent being ½ inch. To be able to fit properly and be comfortable, the circumference of the bulge to be 4½ inches more than the lascar's head. The *kutora* was to be of the lightest wood procurable (*moochie*). The lower part of the turban was required to be pliable so as to fit the man's head while the stuffing should be of plain cotton 'not pasted rag which retains the heat, is heavier, and breeds insects.' The dimensions were to be:¹⁶

| | |
|---|----------------------|
| From bottom to bulge | 6½ inches |
| Bulge to the level of the bottom of <i>Kutora</i> | 1½ inches |
| Half ball of <i>Kutora</i> | 2 inches |
| Crescent of <i>Kutora</i> | ¾ inch ¹¹ |

The rank chevrons, made of gold-coloured material, were worn on the right arm only; the *Havildar Major* (Sergeant-Major) wearing a four-bar chevron with a crown above on the upper arm with the point downwards, while the others wore the chevron below the elbow with point upwards. The number of bars was the same as for other arms as the *Havildar* (Sergeant) wore a three bar chevron and the *Naique* (Corporal) wore a two bar chevron.¹⁷

¹⁵The details of the uniform have been taken from a modern print of Madras Gun Lascars by William Hunsley in J. Singh, *Artillery – The Battle Winning Arm*, (New Delhi: Lancer, 2006).

¹⁶P. E. Abbott, 'Further Notes on the Dress of the Madras Artillery', *Journal of the Society for Army Historical Research*, Vol. 86, No. 348, (2008), pp. 310–314.

¹⁷Use of the *Tindal* and *Syrang* had by now been replaced by use of army ranks i.e. *Havildar* (Sergeant), *Naique* (Corporal) were now the accepted ranks for Lascars as well. The Indian Officers were called *Subedar* (lieutenant) and *Jemadar* (2 Lieutenant). *Regulations for the Supply of Clothing and Necessaries to the Regular Forces* (London: War Office, Printed under the Supervision of Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1881), pp. 157, 208, 216, 319.

On reaching China, the Gun Lascars joined the Third Brigade under Lord Saltoun that included the 98th Regiment, two regiments of Madras Native infantry, a battery of Royal Artillery and a troop of Royal Horse Artillery, and they were used for sapper tasks. Their duties included mainly the relief of

...the Europeans of the more laborious duties connected with the movements of guns, where horses could not be employed, saving all unnecessary hardship and exposure to the gunners, by dragging their pieces, carrying ammunition, mounting guard over stores where the sentry had no cover from the sun, and in a variety of other ways.¹⁸

There are not many accounts that mention their contribution during the campaign and one of the rare accounts that acknowledges their contribution is a journal by an unknown Royal Artillery officer published in 1878.¹⁹ After the arrival of the relief force in July 1842 the fleet moved up the River Yangtze, the Gun Lascars were employed to prepare the landing places for the guns and horses, and in manhandling the guns and other equipment. The journal mentions that before the fighting troops were required to disembark the Gun Lascars were hard at work to prepare a landing stage and managed to finish it, just, at daybreak when the ships reached the designated place of disembarkation. Later, during the final assault on the Chinkiangfu (Zhenjiang), the lascars helped the battery of Royal Artillery move their guns nearer to the town and they were used for other sapper and labouring tasks during the operation.

The bloody engagement leading to the taking and virtual destruction of the town of Chinkiangfu was the prelude to the major assault on the Yangtze river port of Nanjing. It was there that the treaty which finally ended the First Opium War was concluded on 29 August 1842. The British and Indian troops left Nanjing only after the Chinese emperor's assent to the treaty was received on 15 September. In November the bulk of the British and Indian forces, including the China Gun Lascars, re-assembled at Hong Kong, which had been ceded to the United Kingdom in the treaty that had ended the war. Apart from a garrison left there; the rest of the troops left China on 20 December 1842.²⁰

¹⁸John Ouchterlony, *The Chinese War: An Account of All the Operations of the British Forces from the Commencement to the Treaty of Nanking*, (London: Saunders and Otley, 1844), pp. 329-330.

¹⁹Anon., 'Journal during the Chinese Expedition in 1841 and 1842 by a Royal Artillery Officer', *The United Service Magazine*, Vol. 147 (May-April, 1878), pp. 503-505.

²⁰H. M. Vibart, *The Military History of the Madras Engineers and Pioneers, from 1743 Up to the Present Time*, Vol. 2, (London: W.H. Allen & Company, 1887), p.181.

CHINA GUN LASCARS 1841-1892

The garrison of Hong Kong included part of the British Expeditionary Force under the command of Lord Saltoun, consisting of part of the 98th Foot, the left wing of the 55th Foot, the right wing of the 41st Madras Native Infantry, a company of Royal Artillery, one company of Madras Sappers and Miners and 'B' company of the Madras Gun Lascars. The remaining three Gun Lascar companies set sail from China on 20 December 1842 along with the rest of the expeditionary force. They were disbanded on reaching India. The single surviving China Gun Lascar company was attached to the company of the Royal Artillery on the island.²¹

The contribution of the Madras Army troops, including that of the Gun Lascars, during the campaign was acknowledged by the Commander-in Chief who ordered that 'a salute be fired in commemoration of the highly favourable peace that has been ratified between the British Government and the Emperor of China and for the prominent part the corps of Artillery, Sappers, and Miners, Sepoys, and Gun Lascars belonging to the Madras Army, have taken in bringing the war to so satisfactory a conclusion by their steadiness and gallantry.'²²

Overall the China Gun Lascars had fared better in terms of casualties compared to the other troops during the expedition of 1841-42 and were 'exceedingly healthy' with the annual casualty rate among the first batch of Gun Lascars amounting to only 1.75% as compared to about 9% sick per annum among the European troops. The reasons for high mortality rates were said to be the unhealthy environs, unsuitable camping grounds surrounded by paddy fields that gave off 'noxious vapours' and the substandard rations including the 'flour that was sour, the biscuits moldy and full of worms. the butts spoiled; many had smelled offensively even while being loaded at Calcutta.' The lower casualties among the lascars was attributed to them being from lower castes; that they were more suited to service in China as compared to the other sepoy of caste because the former had no inhibitions in eating 'all sorts of animal food'.²³

²¹Vibart, *The Military History of the Madras Engineers and Pioneers*, p. 181; K.W. Maurice-Jones, *The History of Coast Artillery in the British Army*, (Uckfield: Naval & Military Press Ltd, 2005), p. 135.

²²'General Orders by the Commander-in-Chief', *Weekly Chronicle* (22 January 1843), p. 2.

²³S. Rogers & A. Lorimer (eds), *The Madras Quarterly Medical Journal*, Vol. 5 (April-September, 1843), pp. 376-378; Peter Ward Fay, *The Opium Wars 1840-1842: Barbarians in the Celestial Empire in the Early Part of the Nineteenth Century and the War by Which They Forced Her Gates Ajar* (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), p. 281.



Figure 2: Mat Sheds in Hong Kong.²⁴

The good health enjoyed by the lascars did not last long and the initial stay at Hong Kong was especially hard on them. While the European soldiers were permitted to remain on board in the relatively healthier environs of their transport ships, the Indian sepoy and lascars were compelled to stay ashore in mat-sheds made of bamboo, tied together with rattan, with not a nail being used in their construction. They were rather long, with the arms kept down the middle while the lascars slept on either side. The personal belongings were also kept along the sidewalls. As the makeshift sheds exposed the lascars to the rigours of both the hot sun and the torrential rains, the sickness and mortality rate of the Gun Lascars increased.²⁵

These sheds were sited on Artillery Hill to the south of Queen's Road. An account mentions that 'while the Sappers and Miners occupied two small brick barracks, facing each other on the west and east sides of a parallelogram 220 by 110 feet in length and

²⁴The Illustrated London News, 1857 (Public Domain).

²⁵The Illustrated London News, Vol. 22; and Vol. 31 (15 August 1857), p. 176.

CHINA GUN LASCARS 1841-1892

breadth; the south being formed by the Native Ordnance Hospital and a guard house with the north side left open for the Queen's Road to pass. Behind this square at various distances were two quarters for officers, a storeroom, and mat buildings for Gun Lascars.¹²⁶

The high mortality rate caused a perpetual shortfall in the number of gun lascars, as a result of which local recruitment was necessary to, resulting in the Company having 'Madrassie Christians, Madrassie Mohammedans, Sayyad Mohammedans, Portuguese half-castes, Jews, Punjabis Mohammedans and Malayee Mohammedans' on its rolls.²⁷ The Gun Lascars continued to be used for fatigue and menial tasks with an occasional employment for ceremonial duties, as during the celebrations of Queen Victoria's twenty-sixth birthday on 24 May 1845:

We had a grand parade on the evening of the 24th instant, followed up by a ball and supper, in honour of her Majesty's birthday; the troops in line, the Royal Artillery on the right, 18th Royal Irish Regiment, 42nd Regiment Madras N. I. and China Gun Lascars, on the left; the shipping in the harbour were gaily decorated...²⁸

In 1845 the Board of Ordnance decided to raise a new company of Gun Lascars for the Royal Artillery, for service in Hong Kong. It approached the EIC for their cooperation in raising this company with the strength of one *Jemadar*, two *Havildars*, four *Naiques* and 81 lascars. The Royal Warrant informed that 'Pensions and good conduct pay will be granted, and the total expense of the company will be charged on the Ordnance estimates.'²⁹

The men were to be of 18 to 25 years of age with a minimum height of 5 feet 4 inches and a chest measurement not less than 32 inches, though particularly athletic men could be taken with a height of 5 feet 2 inches. The officer entrusted with raising and organising the company was allowed a sum of 50 rupees per month to cover all contingencies. The local reports also mentioned that the pay was a fixed sum of 13 rupees per month with clothing, quarters, and free rations, which was considered

²⁶Thomas Graham, *Transactions of The Medical and Physical Society of Bombay*, (Madras: American Mission Press, 1849), p. 20.

²⁷Chi Man Kwong, *Hong Kongers in the British Armed Forces, 1860-1997* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022), p 44, quoting Philip Bruce, 'The Hong Kong and Singapore Battalion Royal Artillery', *History Notes Hong Kong*, Vol. I (c.1985), unpaginated.

²⁸Although the Queen's birthday was on 24 May the report only appeared four months later – see *Saint James's Chronicle* (18 September 1845).

²⁹Maurice-Jones, *The History of Coast Artillery in the British Army*, p. 135. Also, *The Scotsman* (10 January 1849), p. 4.

adequate to 'induce the Indians to engage for service in the Colonies for a period of five years.'³⁰

The task of enrolling and raising the Gun Lascars was entrusted to Lieutenant-Colonel K.H. Brereton of the Royal Artillery. As it was also planned to enrol Gun Lascars from other colonies, the Board of Ordnance wrote to the Governor of Bengal requesting him to instruct the Governor of Prince of Wales Island to provide all possible assistance to Brereton in the raising of the company.³¹

The new company had an average strength of 80 men and was initially stationed at Victoria, the capital of the Hong Kong territory, but in 1858 a detachment was sent to Canton and stayed there until 1861. The designation of the Gun Lascars underwent a change in 1859 when the unit was re-named the Royal Gun Lascars, but by 1866 it had reverted to its original designation of Gun Lascars.³²

The fate of the original China Gun Lascar Company is obscure because no records appear to exist detailing what happened to it after 1845. It is not known whether its personnel were sent back to India and the unit was disbanded there, or whether the men were transferred out of the Madras Army and absorbed into the new Gun Lascar Company established in 1845, though some later documents, including pay rolls, do indicate that South Indian personnel continued to serve in the lascar company after 1845.

The Gun Lascars were the only Indian troops in Hong Kong between the period 1850 to 1857 when Indian troops were first sent to Hong Kong in 1857. During this period the Gun Lascars' stay in Hong Kong was uneventful and they continued with their routine duties. A detachment of Gun Lascars was moved to Canton to support the Royal Artillery company, although they were used for menial tasks there. The only

³⁰Homeward Mail from India, China and the East (30 November 1857), p. 27.

³¹Prince of Wales Island is now called Penang, in Malaysia. In 1857 it was administered by the Bengal Presidency. There are no records of any Malay being enrolled for the company at that time. Letter from The Court of Directors to Governor of Bengal Presidency, 17 June 1846, No. 43, Para. 1, National Archives of India, New Delhi (Hereinafter NAI).

³²The change in designation is noted in the Report from Committees on 'Mortality in China' 1 February to 10 August 1866, Vol. XV, Ordered by House of Commons, 1866 though the reasons for the change of designation and reverting to original designation are unknown.

CHINA GUN LASCARS 1841-1892

noticeable action involving Gun Lascars was during the clearing of the area around the British factories, meaning warehouses, at Canton.³³

The Gun Lascars' routine at Hong Kong was broken at times by run-ins with the law, as they were often wont to be involved in scuffles and fights with the locals as well as with the police and British troops in Hong Kong. One reason was the ill-treatment and racial abuse they faced, resulting in the lascars taking to violence to try and get even. In most cases, these were in the form of minor scuffles, but it led to some major incidents as well. One of the most well-known of such incidents occurred in 1856 when a group of lascars cornered some half dozen privates of the 59th Regiment and attacked them with bludgeons and stones, killing a young drummer, Haggarty. Three lascars were arrested and tried for the crime.³⁴

The Gun Lascars positioned at Canton also find mention in some reports for looting and similar acts of violence. One such incident occurred in 1862 when, after the expedition of Kah, the Gun Lascars were looting a village when a Chinese boy resisted, he was shot at by the Gun Lascars. Such cases of ill-discipline were common not only amongst Gun Lascars but almost all troops in China. 'Avengers in Canton', an article published in *The Illustrated London News*, gave details of the destruction and loot of the city by the British troops:

British forces in China ... have been destroying, looting, and burning, and are loaded with all manner of property, and all are delighted with their morning's fun, as everything in the fighting or destroying line is humorously called ... Then came such a scene of destruction and looting as would astonish you. These monkeys of coolies were quickly on the house-tops, smashing, crashing, breaking, tearing, and looting ... the lascars were cutting, chopping, and knocking down all wood in the shape of posts and pillars ... Every man loaded with something that he had not purchased.³⁵

³³Samuel Pasfield Oliver, *On and off duty, leaves from an officer's note-book*, (London: W.H. Allen & Co., 1881), p. 7; *China : Being a Military Report on the North-eastern Portions of the Provinces of Chih-li and Shan-tung, Nanking and Its Approaches, Canton and Its Approaches: Together with an Account of the Chinese Civil, Naval and Military Administrations, and a Narrative of the Wars Between Great Britain and China, Vol. 2*, (Calcutta: Quarter Master General's Department, Intelligence Branch, Government Central Branch Press, 1884).

³⁴*Caledonian Mercury* (9 July 1856), p. 2.

³⁵Report of Shanghai Hospital, Eighth-tenth, Fifteenth, Sixteenth, Eighteenth Annual Report from Jan. 1, 1854 to Dec. 31, 1864, Issues 8-10; Issues 15-16, Shanghai Chinese Hospital, 1865; *Illustrated London News* (15 May 1858).

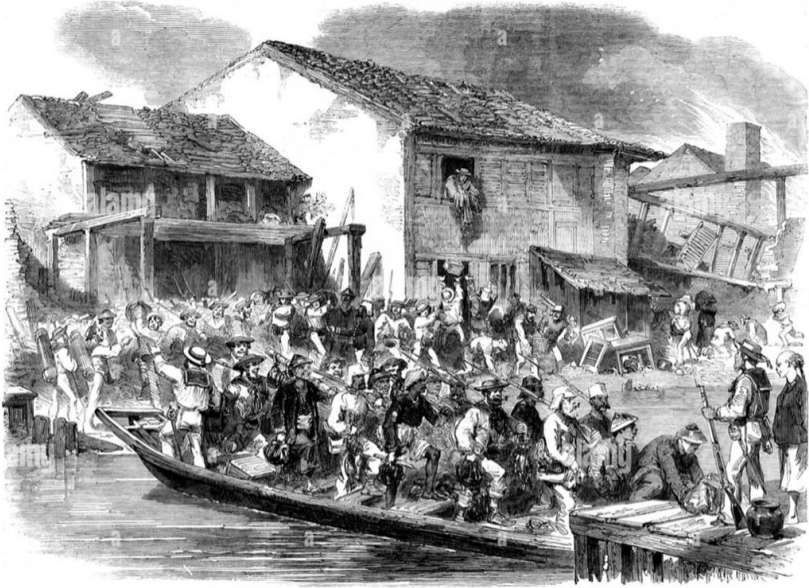


Figure 3: Avengers in Canton.³⁶

The campaign was also marked by the ill-treatment of Chinese prisoners, especially during the capture of Taitsan, which came in for severe criticism. Several journals published articles on the treatment and torture of the Chinese. Major-General Brown, commanding the British Troops in China, in his despatch to the Secretary of State for War refuted the allegations and claimed that not only were the prisoners treated humanely, but some of them were even recruited as Gun Lascars:

I have no reason to believe otherwise than that the Foutai is equally anxious to be as humane as possible to his prisoners, some hundreds were lately captured at Quang-san, and so far from being cruelly or severely dealt with, have actually, to a great extent, been incorporated by Major Gordon into his own Regiment; and I have also asked for some to be sent down to me from Quang-san to be drilled with, and attached to, the batteries of Chinese artillery Gun Lascars,

³⁶The Illustrated London News, 1858 (Public Domain)

CHINA GUN LASCARS 1841-1892

which are under the command of the Officer Commanding Royal Artillery, who reports them most useful and efficient.³⁷

In 1866 a select committee was ordered to be set up by the House of Commons to inquire into the causes of the mortality of the troops in China, including the territory of Hong Kong, and to examine the conduct of the government departments responsible for the welfare of the troops. It found that although the Gun Lascars had a lower mortality rate compared to white troops, they fared worse than other Asian troops. Apart from the problems with their accommodation, which had not improved significantly in the last 20 years, the higher mortality and 'sick rate' amongst the Gun Lascars was attributed to them having 'forsaken the temperate habits of their countrymen, and [that they] have so far acquired the habits of European soldiers as to indulge from time to time in spirituous and other strong liquors'. The hot and moist climate 'no doubt conduces to excite the disease in men accustomed to a warm dry atmosphere'.³⁸

The high mortality rate notwithstanding, one major factor in favour of maintaining the Gun Lascars recruited in India, Penang and elsewhere in the region was that it was far less costly than employing British troops in the same role. With the daily pay of one *Havildar Major* at 2 shillings and 3 pence, two *Havildars* at 1 shilling and 4 pence each, one bugler at 11 pence, four *Naiques* at one shilling each and 80 privates at 11 pence each, the total annual regimental pay was £3,036. A sum of £10 was allowed as additional pay, and £120 was provided as a contingency allowance for the Officer of Artillery in charge, making the cost of maintaining the lascars £3,136 per annum. Due to the economics, no change was made in the existing arrangements except resorting to the recruiting from the local population to maintain the company at the required strength. This additionally saved the cost of transportation to and from India of the recruiting parties and the recruits.³⁹

The next year another Select Committee was formed; this time to look into the proposal of using Indian and other colonial troops in times of peace to substitute for English troops in the Colonies. It favoured the continuation of using Indian troops for the colonial forces though some members were in favour of using only Sikhs and hill tribes. Interestingly, Sir Richard Graves MacDonnell, C.B., Governor of Hong Kong, was in favour of having a small contingent of Sikhs located in the colony and believed

³⁷'Despatch by Major-General Brown, Commanding the British Troops in China to Lord Russell by the Secretary of State for War', *The Edinburgh Gazette*, No. 7365 (25 September 1863).

³⁸Report from Committees on 'Mortality in China' 1 February to 10 August 1866, Vol. XV, 1866, Ordered by House of Commons, 1866.

³⁹*Ibid.*

that ‘(we are) throwing money away to raise such corps as the Ceylon Rifles and Gun Lascars.’ These prejudices aside, the financial reasons for maintaining lascars were too important to be ignored and the Gun Lascars continued to be enrolled as hitherto.⁴⁰

All the same, a major administrative reform was carried out to revise the pay and allowances of the Army. The new pay and pension admissible to the Gun Lascars was follows:

| | 28 Days | | | 29 Days | | | 30 Days | | | 31 Days | | |
|------------------------|---------|------|-------|---------|------|-------|---------|------|-------|---------|------|-------|
| | Rupees | Anna | Paise | Rupees | Anna | Paise | Rupees | Anna | Paise | Rupees | Anna | Paise |
| <i>Havildar Major</i> | 30 | 8 | 8 | 31 | 10 | 2 | 32 | 11 | 7 | 33 | 13 | 1 |
| <i>Havildar</i> | 19 | 1 | 5 | 19 | 12 | 4 | 20 | 7 | 3 | 21 | 2 | 2 |
| <i>Naique</i> | 14 | 0 | 0 | 14 | 8 | 0 | 15 | 0 | 0 | 15 | 8 | 0 |
| <i>Private/ Bugler</i> | 12 | 11 | 7 | 13 | 2 | 10 | 13 | 10 | 2 | 14 | 1 | 5 |

Table 1: Pay Scales⁴¹

| | <i>Havildar Major & Havildars</i> | | | <i>Naiques</i> | | | <i>Privates & Buglers</i> | | |
|-------------------------|---------------------------------------|------|-------|----------------|------|-------|-------------------------------|------|-------|
| | Rupees | Anna | Paise | Rupees | Anna | Paise | Rupees | Anna | Paise |
| After 21 years' service | 4 | 14 | 8 | 4 | 3 | 4 | 3 | 8 | 0 |

Table 2: Rate for Ordinary Pension⁴²

The new rates of pay notwithstanding, the Gun Lascars were often short-changed and denied their due entitlements. The reason was the exchange rate adopted for calculating their pay. The Gun Lascars were enlisted on the condition that they would be paid in Mexican or Hong Kong Dollars and the Dollar-Rupee exchange rate was

⁴⁰Report from Committees: Army (India and the Colonies) Session 5 February to 21 August 1867, Vol. VII, 1867, p. 236.

⁴¹‘The Army Pay Warrant’, *Broad Arrow* (27 May 1876); *Naval & Military Gazette* (20 September 1876), p. 10.

⁴²‘The Army Pay Warrant’, *Broad Arrow* (27 May 1876); *Naval & Military Gazette* (20 September 1876), p. 10.

CHINA GUN LASCARS 1841-1892

fixed at 2s 1½ d to a rupee.⁴³ In November 1877 the War Office directed that the men were to be paid in dollars at the current rate of exchange that was 1s 2d to a rupee at that time. The Gun Lascars protested against these orders with seventeen of them even refusing to receive the reduced pay. No action was taken against the dissenting lascars; but they were not paid their full dues either. This was the first instance of a mutiny – for want of any other word – for the collective disobedience of orders by the Gun Lascars.⁴⁴

The Gun Lascars may not have received their dues as far as pay was concerned, but they did get a revised scale of personal kit. The ‘free kit’ authorized to the recruits joining the China Gun Lascars is given below.

| | |
|-------------------|--------------------------------|
| 1 Tin of blacking | 1 Clasp Knife |
| 1 Pair of Braces | 1 Knapsack with board & slings |
| 1 Button Brass | 4 White cotton shirts |
| 1 Blacking Brush | 2 Pairs worsted socks |
| 1 Brass Brush | 1 Pipeclay sponge |
| 1 Cloth Brush | 1 Chin Strap |
| 1 Hard Brush | 1 Pair Great Coat straps |
| 1 Polishing Brush | 2 Towels |
| 1 Forage Cap | 2 Suits of Winter Clothing |
| 1 Comb | |

The Army circular stipulated that ‘the white clothing will be provided by the commanding officer, and for this purpose an allowance not exceeding 16s. for each recruit will be granted, the expense incurred on this account being charged in the pay list.’ The remaining articles were to be bought from the regimental store, but it was also specified that this scale of kit was not to be issued with retrospective effect.⁴⁵

The period between 1860 and 1880 was one of major organisational changes in the Royal Artillery, to bring it into line with other fighting arms of the British Army after the abolition of the Board of Ordnance in 1855. The old Artillery brigades were abolished, and new ones were formed with their headquarters at home in Great Britain. Each brigade had 18 to 20 batteries including some deployed overseas. This was done to improve relief within the batteries, but these changes did not last long and the Royal Artillery underwent another change in 1881 when the Garrison Artillery

⁴³The Mexican Silver dollar was the common medium of exchange in Hong Kong at this period. Hong Kong dollars of matching value were minted locally from 1866 but were not generally accepted and the mint closed in 1868.

⁴⁴*North Devon Herald* (1 November 1877), p. 9.

⁴⁵Army Warrants and Circulars (July, 1871), p. 368.

was organised into eleven brigades, with each allotted a territorial district from which to draw its recruits. The same year saw an increase in the armament of Hong Kong and with this, the War Office sanctioned another company of Gun Lascars.⁴⁶

For recruitment the British looked to the Punjab, specifically Sikhs, as recruits for the new company. One major factor favouring this decision was the recommendation of Colonel Hall, Hong Kong's senior Artillery officer. The other was the settlement's favourable experience with Sikh policemen. The responsibility for recruiting Sikhs was given to a former Sikh police officer, Surmut Singh of Philoki who came from the Gujranwala District in India.⁴⁷

The recruits reached Hong Kong in July 1881 and formed B Company China Gun Lascars. A report in the local press notes that they were a 'set of strong looking men, the shortest of whom is some five feet nine inches in height.' The two companies were now maintained at one *Havildar-Major*, two *Havildars*, 1 Bugler, 4 *Naiques* and 80 Privates, though 'A' Company had three Buglers for some time. Both were dressed alike except that the Sikhs wore a red turban instead of a helmet.⁴⁸

Meanwhile, A Company's ranks were by now a mix of Malays, Portuguese Eurasians, Jews and locally settled Indians, and it was more of a foreign legion than a Native Corps.⁴⁴ The same year, a provision was allowed for soldiers to 'buy off' their discharge. In case of Gun Lascars, a lascar could leave the service within three months of enlistment by paying £8. After three months, the discharge was procurable for £12. One reason for introducing this provision was to induce more young men to remain and make a go of it.⁴⁹

After the initial recruitment of Sikhs from India, the two companies were kept up to strength both by local enlistment and enlistment from India, the passage money being paid to the recruiter. This practice was similar to that followed in India with the

⁴⁶B.M. Frederick, *Lineage Book of British Land Forces, 1660-1978*, Vol. 2, (Yorkshire: Microform Academic, 1984), p. 886.

⁴⁷M. Thampi, 'Indian Soldiers, Policemen and Watchmen in China in the Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries', *China Report*, Vol. 35, No. 4 (1999), p. 406; Surmut Singh had meanwhile joined Gun Lascars as a Havildar: *London and China Telegraph* (7 August 1881), p. 2.

⁴⁸*Times of India* (28 July 1881), p 3; 'Army Circulars', issued by the order of Secretary of State for War, War office, 1 January 1883 (London: H.M. Stationery office, 1883).

⁴⁹These rates were for Gun Lascars. For other branches of service (except Malta Fencibles and West India regiments), they were £10 and £18 respectively. *Edinburgh Evening News* (23 July 1881), p. 2.

CHINA GUN LASCARS 1841-1892

enlisted men being responsible for getting new recruits for the Regiments. To enlist as Gun Lascars, Sikhs travelled from the Punjab to Hong Kong to take service, and the verification of the antecedents of the recruits was provided by the *Jemadar* of the Colonial Sikh Police. As the majority of new recruits were either from the same families or the same villages as the Sikhs serving in the Police, the verification was not as stringent as the procedure adopted by the district authorities in India, and as a result several 'undesirable' men joined the ranks of the lascars. This practice also led to malpractice as the recruiters promised higher pay to the men seeking enrolment and pay from the day of their 'contract' in Punjab. This often led to court cases when the new recruits claimed the difference in pay from the day they were selected by the recruiters. Not unsurprisingly, none of these cases were entertained by the courts, primarily for want of a written agreement. But it did reveal a glaring limitation in the (then) prevailing recruitment process. The enrolment of Punjabis also led to a steady decline in local recruitment in Hong Kong and of South Indians in the Corps.⁵⁰

By now, the Gun Lascars were regularly carrying out gun drills, including practice to engage a standing target with RML (Rifled, Muzzle Loading) 64pdr and the old RML 7pdr guns. A report of April 1882 informs that

A Company of the China Gun Lascars were put to 64-pounder single gun drill, while B company of the Lascars performed the same exercise with a 7-pounder field gun. The whole of the exercises was executed in a very creditable manner.⁵¹

A later report mentions that the Gun Lascars engaged

...the floating target stationed 1400 yards distant; and the men fired with common shell; shrapnel; double common shell, reduced charge; and the Palliser shell. *The shooting throughout was good, in some instances excellent* (emphasis added).⁵²

The arrival of Sikhs as Gun Lascars also resulted in an unwarranted comparison between them and the earlier South Indian troops, with the British looking down on the latter as being 'unsoldierly'. It was a prejudiced and bigoted view when the South

⁵⁰Nuttah Singh vs Surnoohk (\$18.33)', *Overland China Mail* (12 December 1881), p 7. The specific case referred in the news of a recruit claiming arrears of \$18.33 towards the difference in pay promised to him vis a vis the pay at which he was enrolled in Hong Kong. The laxity in the recruitment process was also highlighted in the official *The History of The Royal Artillery: From the Indian Mutiny to the Great War* that brought out 'the necessity for expert assistance in recruiting if abuses were to be avoided.'

⁵¹*Overland China Mail* (28 April 1882), p. 2.

⁵²*Overland China Mail* (22 January 1884), p 7

Indian lascars had performed creditably to date. The following is just one example of the views held by the British officers of the South Indian lascars:

The Madras company is in most respects inferior to the Sikhs. Undersized, feebly built, contemptible in cast of features, they approximate to the usual type of the cringing eastern. Those splendid Punjaubees, on the other hand, of powerful physique, handsome features, grave and dignified, are fine specimens of Orientals.⁵³

Another change during this time was the move to better accommodation in 1883 when the Gun Lascars occupied MacGregor's Barracks along with a company of infantry. The lascars finally had a proper barracks although it was only a detachment that had moved in. The three-storied barracks was located at the east end of the town and was built of granite with broad, deep verandahs on both sides.⁵⁴

The recruitment of Sikhs as Gun Lascars was not without challenges. Their discipline was lax at times and a large number of them became embroiled in money-lending to the local Chinese population which frequently resulted in violence and court cases. Brawls and fights with the police constabulary were also common occurrences. In addition to these incidents, the lascars started protesting against the poor quality of rations, particularly the *atta* (flour) in November 1882. This discontent continued for over three months and in January 1883, the Sikh lascars ceased, of their own accord, to draw their rations. An act of mass insubordination followed on 2 February 1883 with nine Lascars refusing to obey orders to draw rations. Though all of them were court-martialled, the discontent itself was allayed only by the grant of an allowance of 5½ pence per day in lieu of rations. The permission for this granting of a ration allowance was not received in Hong Kong from the Home authorities until much later, on or about 16 March 1883. This was yet another instance of mass insubordination by the Lascars and again care was taken not to term it a mutiny, even though there was no doubt of the seriousness of the offence.⁵⁵

The rations were just one of the grievances, the Sikh Lascars were also dissatisfied with their designation as lascars feeling that it was demeaning for them to be classified as such, especially when they had been enlisted with the assurance of serving in the

⁵³H. Knollys, *English Life in China*, (London: Smith, Elder & Co, 1885), p. 57.

⁵⁴London and China Telegraph (16 May 1881), p. 15.

⁵⁵'Gun Lascars as Usurers', *Straits Budget* (24 April 1894), p. 28; 'Disorderly Gun Lascars', *The China Mail* (30 March 1882); 'Assault on a Constable by Gun Lascar', *The China Mail* (13 May 1882), p. 3; NAI, 'Report on the alleged grievances of certain Sikh Gun Lascars in Hong Kong', File No. s.580-581, May 1884.

CHINA GUN LASCARS 1841-1892

Topkhana (Artillery) as *Golundaaz* (gunners). The other grievances were the denial of furlough and the grant of pension only after 21 years of service when it was granted to the Colonial Sikh Police after 10 years of service. These issues were addressed by the local authorities and a report was sent by the General-Officer-Commanding in China and the Straits Settlements to the Adjutant-General in December 1883 stating that all grievances had been investigated and that the Sikh lascars were now quite contented. Notwithstanding that report, Lieutenant-Colonel and Brevet Colonel A. G. Ross, Bengal Staff Corps, Second-in-Command and Wing Commander of the 1st Sikh Infantry, Punjab Frontier Force, was sent on special duty to Hong Kong to enquire into the Sikhs' grievances. He reported to Lieutenant-General John Sargent, the GOC China and the Straits Settlements on 4 February 1884. Though Sargent was not keen on another enquiry, especially by an officer sent from India, as he felt that 'an enquiry into the old grievances of the Sikhs, made by an officer sent from India for the purpose, would do more harm than good', Ross met the Sikh lascars to enquire into their complaints. He recommended changes in the administration and interior economy of the lascar companies and gave his opinion that they should have a British commanding officer. He also recommended the introduction of an Indian officer and an increase in the number of non-commissioned officers along with the adoption of the recruitment procedures followed by the Indian Army. Ross also recommended the early grant of furlough and pensions, but his recommendations were not acted upon until 1892 when the lascars were re-organised as the Asiatic Artillery Company.⁵⁶

In 1883 a detachment consisting of three *havildars*, one *naique* and 12 privates was sent to Singapore to form the nucleus of a new company to be raised there.⁷⁷ The Sikh lascars were stationed at Sepoy Lines near Pearl's Hill in temporary accommodation within Fort Canning until such time as more suitable accommodation was arranged for them. However, local recruitment in the Straits Settlements was not successful and the cadre did not expand into a company. Though the reason for the delay is unknown, it was not until eight years later that the first batch of Indian personnel, consisting of a *Subedar* and 61 Sikh Gun Lascars, reached Singapore in December 1891.⁵⁷

This delay in forming the new company could have been because of the difficulty in finding suitable recruits, owing to the better service conditions introduced for the

⁵⁶'Report on the alleged grievances of certain Sikh Gun Lascars in Hong Kong', File No. s.580-581, May 1884, aAlso, Maurice-Jones, *The History of Coast Artillery in the British Army*, p. 160.

⁵⁷The lascars were stationed in the old prison building for some time before moving to their new accommodation: *Straits Times* (2 July 1884), p. 7. The report of them being housed at Pearl's Hill can be found in 'Blakang Mati', *Straits Times Annual* (1 January 1969), p. 110-111.

Indian Army. As one news report put it, 'a pension of \$1.55 per mensem after 21 years' service is not very alluring and is now actually below what the Sepoy obtains by remaining at home and serving in his own country.'⁵⁸ It was not surprising that the Gun Lascar company was 'never up to its full complement and was compelled to accept those rejected by the other service.'⁵⁹

In 1891 it was proposed that the Gun Lascar companies in Hong Kong and Singapore be merged as one unit and the strength increased to double-companies. In the early 1890s the Indian Army was finding it difficult to recruit Sikhs in the desired numbers for its own regiments as well as for the colonial forces that depended on recruitment in the Punjab. One of the measures recommended to tide over this difficulty was to recruit Punjabi Muslims who were considered to be of the same stock and race as Jat Sikhs and were thus also a martial race.⁶⁰ The ranks of the new company at Singapore were accordingly filled up with Punjabi Muslims, though the senior lascars were Sikhs who had been part of the detachment in 1883 or had been added to it in 1891. This led to another instance of dissent as the Muslim lascars resented being officered by Sikhs. There were reports of simmering discontent in the local press, but it was another year before the gunners collectively took up the issue and staged a protest.⁶¹

The next year, in 1892, the China Gun Lascars along with the Gun Lascar companies at Ceylon (now Sri Lanka) and Mauritius were re-organised as double-companies and designated as Asiatic Artillery, a corps of the British Army. This brought an end to the five-decade old existence of the China Gun Lascars of Hong Kong and they passed into history, but the foundation laid by them survived into the Hong Kong-Singapore Royal Artillery that went on to serve during the two World Wars with distinction and honour.

⁵⁸*Overland China Mail* (6 July 1882), p. 2.

⁵⁹*Overland China Mail* (7 March 1882), p 7.

⁶⁰It would help if a brief note could be added here on the British bias towards 'martial races' for the Indian Army of that time – many readers would be unaware of that racial prejudice.

⁶¹NAI, 'Difficulty in getting Jat Sikhs for Regiments of Punjab Frontier Force', Military Department, Pro A, September 1890, Nos. 177-181. The procedure of recruiting at Hong Kong was also stopped in 1891 when a decision was taken to re-organize the Gun Lascar companies as 'Asiatic Artillery Companies' and it was decided to recruit directly from India: Maurice-Jones, *The History of Coast Artillery in the British Army*, p. 160; 'The Asiatic Artillery at Singapore: Discontent Among Men', *Overland China Mail* (1 June 1892). The Lascar Companies had been re-formed as part of Asiatic Artillery by 1892 and the lascars were now designated as gunners.

CHINA GUN LASCARS 1841-1892

The Gun Lascars of China are a forgotten corps today although they were 'a most useful class of men who saved the European artillerymen from fatal exposure and fatigue; while they themselves are not of a class ever to become dangerous.'⁶² For all their contributions they were for the most part badly administered, with no officer cadre of their own. While the Viceroy's Commissioned Officers (VCOs) were brought in from other Regiments or Corps of the Indian Army, most of the British officers had no knowledge of any Indian language resulting in their dependence on interpreters. The Gun Lascar thus had no recourse for redressal of their grievances – both real and imagined. Most of the cases of their indiscipline and dissent could have been nipped in the bud had they had good officers and had even a modicum of care been taken to ensure sound administration. But as notices published in *The London Gazette* of the unclaimed dues of Gun Lascars show, the Gun Lascars were an 'ill paid class, who have moreover to assist in limbering up the gun' yet were treated as 'slaveys [sic] to the Artillery.'⁶³

With the raising of the Asiatic Artillery, the gun lascars may have been elevated to the status of gunners, but it was still a sad end to a fine corps of Indian soldiers that served the Royal Artillery for over five decades with their contributions rarely, if ever acknowledged.

⁶²*Newcastle Journal* (12 June 1858), p 2

⁶³*Newcastle Journal* (12 June 1858), p 2; *The Friend of India* (27 April 1854), p. 5; *Fifeshire Journal* (18 May 1882), p. 3. The details of unclaimed dues of soldiers, including Gun Lascars, were published in the *London Gazette*. While these may have been accessible to the family of British soldiers, in Britain, it is rather doubtful if the families of Indian Gun Lascars living in Punjab or other parts of India would have been able to access the Gazettes and understand that they could claim the dues. See also *Huddersfield Chronicle* (2 September 1891), p 4.