

IN THE Proncynain Cemetery at Dornoch there are three graves facing east.

Two of them mark the last resting place of Muslim soldiers who were stationed in Sutherland during the Second World War and who succumbed to tuberculosis, and the third is that of commercial traveller Ram Bhopal, a Hindu who lived at the Mound, who died in 1960 and was well known throughout the East Sutherland area

The soldiers were Driver Ghulam Nabi who died on 28th September 1943, aged 24, and Naik Abdul Rakhman who died on 1st January 1944, aged 37. Both deaths took place in Dornoch and were registered there. Each soldier's headstone has inscriptions top and bottom in Arabic which translate as "Hu'al Gaafer He is forgiving, The Merciful", and "To Allah We belong and To Him we return".

The soldiers were members of the Royal Indian Army Service Corps, Force K-6, Animal Transport (AT) Companies, stationed at Lairg during the Second World War.

Joan Leed, Brook Cottage, Lairg, remembers them well as a small girl who was photographed with three of the 25 Mule Company. She recalls being awakened by the daily call to prayer from the muezzin to the soldiers. On warm sunny days prayer mats would be spread by some Indians on the banks of the burn and they would proceed with their devotions. The Army cookhouse was on Laundry Road and an appetising smell of chapatis cooking would drift out to waiting children – the soldiers were particularly kind to the Lairg children.

The following is an extract from the *History of the Royal Indian Army Service Corps*, written by Brigadier Moharir: "The Force was undoubtedly very popular in Britain. Their good turnout, discipline and helpful attitude towards all made the AT boys welcome wherever they went. The British showed their gratitude most eloquently. Officers and men were invited by local organisations and individuals. In fact welfare was almost showered on them. ...

"How well liked and popular the men had made themselves can best be seen from the touching appreciation contained in a letter from the Secretary of Lairg Women's Voluntary Service. She writes: 'We folks of Lairg were exceedingly sorry when we heard that 25 Mule Company was to leave. A tea party was arranged and the Lairg WVS collected money for the purpose throughout the parish. Every family contributed handsomely and many ladies promised to give home-made cakes.

'Later in the evening the Indian officers and men entertained us with song, dance and story and we were enthralled, for such a performance had never before been witnessed in this Highland village. Lairg is bleak and deserted now they are gone, and the empty stables are a mute reminder of the happy faces and the busy figures that were



Facing east, the graves of Ghulam Nabi and Abdul Rakhman in Proncynain Cemetery, Dornoch.

ever seen there. The children have lost their 'good companions' from whom they were never separated during the months of the Indian sojourn in Lairg and the great majority of firesides have an empty chair to-night. Lairg is a village of memories."

As a result of reading this extract Jean S Macleod of Brecon in Mid-Wales, visited Lairg in 1998 where she spoke to the residents, in particular Joan Leed and Elizabeth Ross, about their wartime childhood experiences. Jean has researched and continues to research the role of Muslim soldiers in Wales and Scotland. After her visit she sent the following letter to the *Muslim News*.

by James Ritchie

"In 1992 I came to live in Brecon, Mid-Wales, after working for a number of years in Brunei Darussalam. Brecon is a small market town situated on the banks of the rivers Usk and Honddu at the foot of the Brecon Beacons.

"A short distance walk from my home is our local cemetery and on my first walk through there I noticed a cluster of eight well tended War Graves. On closer inspection I saw that these graves were of men of the Royal Indian Army Service Corps – mainly mule drivers – who had died here in 1941 and 1942. The names of the men, I realised, were all Islamic and each headstone having two inscriptions in Arabic. I made some initial enquiries at that time but was unable

to gather much information Since retiring – and with more time available – I've resumed my enquiries.

"The RIASC men were part of Animal Transport Companies who had been brought over from India to France early in World War II – the first of the units of the Indian Army to take the field in the war in Europe. They were evacuated from France (St Nazaire) to Britain about the time of Dunkirk.

"Here in Britain the men were sent to bases in the hills of Wales and Scotland to participate in hill training for a possible landing with pack animals in Norway. This landing did not materialise. From information gathered, the men were recruited mainly from the northern areas of Pakistan and in Kashmir, for example Rawalpindi, Mirpur, Pouch, Gujrat, Shalpur, Jhelum, etc.

"Last month, I made a journey to Scotland where I spoke to the residents of a village in Sutherland where mainly RIASC men were based. The villagers recalled many warm memories of their wartime 'guests'.

"One man recalled, as a boy, rushing home from school in order to go to the stables and help the soldiers with the animals. He remembers sharing the meat-filled chapatis which the men had prepared – all this before 'take-aways'!

"An old Masonic Hall (previously the United Free Church) was given to the soldiers for use as a mosque. The call of the muezzin to prayer and the sight of rows of shoes at the entrance to the 'mosque' became commonplace to the people of this Highland village.

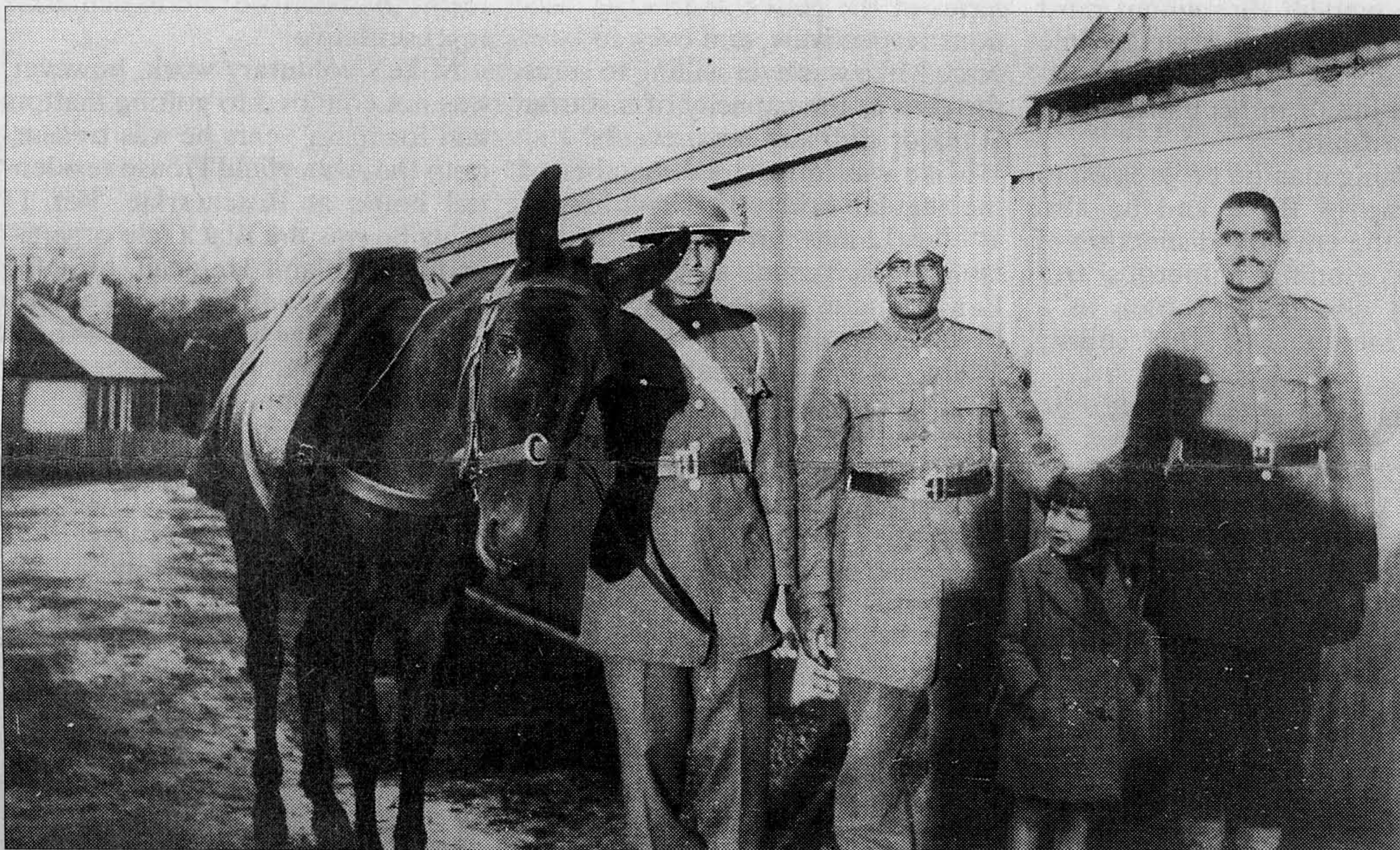
"My search for further information continues here in Wales and Scotland and to date I am aware of twenty War Graves of the RIASC men, all from the areas of Pakistan and Kashmir previously mentioned. If any reader has any information of a former RIASC (AT) soldier who was based in Britain during World War II, I should be interested to hear from him or her."

In 1943 there were demands from India for the return of the Force K-6 as AT Companies were urgently needed in the Burma theatre. A draft consisting of 813 men was first repatriated in May that year and the entire Force sailed for India in January 1944.

The graves of Ghulam Nabi and Abdul Rakhman in Proncynain Cemetery are marked by headstones provided by the Commonwealth War Graves Commission.

Between them lies the grave of commercial traveller Ram Bhopal marked by a small inscribed stone which has now broken into two pieces. Ram died on 11th July 1960 in Culduthel Hospital, Inverness, aged 62 years. It is hoped that one day a more acceptable gravestone will be erected to commemorate this well known character.

With thanks to Jean S Macleod, Joan Leed and Margaret Hudson for their contributions



Joan Leed of Lairg pictured with three members of 25 Mule Company stationed in the village during the last war.