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# MAJOR GENERAL R. G. EKIN

A concise biography of Major General Roger Gillies EKIN, C.I.E., an officer in the British Indian Army between 1914 and 1947. He served in Burma in the campaign of 1941, and later served as an Area Commander in India.

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**A Concise Biography of Major General R. G. EKIN**

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# Major General Roger Gillies EKIN, C.I.E.

## Introduction

Major General Roger Gillies EKIN, C.I.E. was an officer in the British Indian Army who saw service in the Great War. During the Second World War, he was a brigade commander during the Japanese invasion of Burma in 1942 and a brigade commander on the North West Frontier. His last appointment was as an Area Commander in India.

## Family and Early Life

Roger Gillies EKIN was born on 18 November 1895 in Kensington, London. He was the third child and second son of Tom Charles EKIN (1861 – 1944), a Civil Engineer, who was born in Newmarket, Suffolk, and his wife Emily Mary EKIN (nee PHILLIPS) (1865 – 1936), who was born in Bombay, India. They were married in 1899 in Somerset. Their three children were:

- Margaret Emily EKIN (1890 – 1963),
- Tom Alfred EKIN (1891 – 1912),
- Roger Gillies EKIN (1895 – 1990).

Roger was baptised in the Church of England at St. James's Church, Norlands, in Kensington on 4 January 1896. The family lived at 32, Ladbroke Square, Kensington, from at least 1895 until 1914, if not longer. In 1911, they employed two servants, a cook and a house-parlourmaid. Roger's elder brother, Tom, joined the Royal Navy as a Midshipman on 15 January 1909, but died in April 1912 at East Stonehouse, Plymouth. Now commonly called Stonehouse, this area of modern Plymouth is the home to several Royal Navy locations. One of those was, until recently, the Royal Naval Hospital, Stonehouse, and it is possible that Tom EKIN died in this hospital as a result of illness, disease, or from an injury sustained on duty. Tom was aged twenty-one-years at the time of his death, and his brother, Roger, was aged sixteen years.

Roger was educated at Westminster School in London, and at the Royal Military College, Sandhurst. After his two years at Sandhurst, he was commissioned on 1 October 1914 on the Unattached List for the Indian Army. In this period, the ability to join the British Indian Army was competitive and based upon your performance at Sandhurst. In some ways, membership of the British Indian Army was seen as superior and preferable for infantry officers, as opposed to joining the British Army. Costs were considerable to be a member of a British Army Regiment, particularly exclusive ones such as the Guards or Cavalry regiments, whereas it was cheaper to serve in India and there was a small enhancement in pay. For those young officers of restricted or independent means, service in the British Indian Army offered a reasonable cost of living, excitement, and the romance of life in India, under the British Raj.

## India and First World War

Nineteen-year-old Second Lieutenant Roger EKIN left London Dock on 21 November 1914 aboard the P. & O. Steam Navigation Company's ship the Caledonia. Also on-board were several other newly commissioned officers destined for the British Indian Army, including G. CARR-WHITE, G. A. L. FARWELL, and J. R. HENRY, who no doubt became friends on the journey out to Bombay, and were also destined to reach the rank of Brigadier during the Second World War.

On his arrival in India, EKIN joined the 55<sup>th</sup> Coke's Rifles (Frontier Force) on 16 December 1914 and served with them during the Great War. The 55<sup>th</sup> Coke's Rifles saw service on the North-West Frontier of India during the Great War, during which EKIN was promoted to the rank of Lieutenant in 1916.<sup>1</sup> Between 1 September and 16 December 1916, EKIN served as the Brigade Machine Gun Officer, being granted the rank of Temporary Captain during this period.

Although the 55<sup>th</sup> Coke's Rifles did not leave India during the First World War, it did send drafts of men to reinforce other battalions within the Frontier Force group of Regiments. EKIN was sent to serve with the Egyptian Expeditionary Force in Egypt and Palestine with effect from 3 June 1917. It is not known with which regiment or formation he served with. For his service in Egypt and Palestine, Lieutenant EKIN was Mentioned in Despatches on 30 May 1918 and again on 5 June 1919.

## Between the Wars

Just prior to the end of the war, EKIN was promoted to the rank of Captain with effect from 1 October 1918. Between 20 March 1919 and 20 March 1923, the usual four-year term for this role, he served as the Adjutant of his regiment on operations in Waziristan. On 12 June 1923, he was Mentioned in Despatches for his services in Waziristan. In 1922, with the reorganisation of the Indian Army, EKIN's regiment became the 5<sup>th</sup> (Coke's) Bn. 13<sup>th</sup> Frontier Force Rifles and his service number IA/486.

Captain EKIN held the appointment of a General Staff Officer 3<sup>rd</sup> Grade in the Rawalpindi District between 16 January 1925 and 28 February 1927. Between 1 March and 23 October 1927, he was appointed as the General Staff Officer 2<sup>nd</sup> Grade in the same district, but then reverted to the 3<sup>rd</sup> Grade on 24 October, until he relinquished this appointment on 7 February 1929. This means that EKIN spent the usual four-year term on the staff of a district in India, which bearing in mind he had not attended the Staff Course was a testament to his ability. His term of appointment would have involved planning operations against the Afghan tribesmen as the North-West Frontier was rarely completely quiet and peaceful.

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<sup>1</sup> On 17 August 1917, this promotion was ante-dated to 1 October 1916.

On 1 October 1932, EKIN was promoted to the rank of Major, and on 3 July 1936, he was promoted to the rank of Brevet Lieutenant Colonel. He attended the Senior Officers' School at Belgaum in 1935, but he did not attend the staff course. He was second-in-command of his battalion between 16 May 1933 and 15 May 1937, and EKIN rose to the command of his battalion on 16 May 1937 with promotion to the rank of Lieutenant Colonel. For most officers, this was the pinnacle of their career, and the opportunity to command their regiment was a source of pride and general respect within the British Indian Army.

## Second World War

The outbreak of the Second World War in Europe in September 1939 did not affect India much. The first effect was the request from the British Government for India to raise Army formations to deploy to the Middle East in order to enforce British interests in the region. In September 1939, the British Indian Army numbered about 205,000 men, but by the end of 1944, it had grown to become the largest volunteer army ever raised in history, with over 2,500,000 men under arms.

Lieutenant Colonel EKIN held a series of short-term appointments in the early stages of the Second World War, reflecting the massive expansion and change the Indian Army was then subject to. On 8 February 1940, EKIN was made the officiating commanding officer of the Kohat Brigade, in the rank of Lieutenant Colonel.<sup>2</sup> This was one of the brigades under command of the Kohat District within Northern Command, covering the North West Frontier between India and Afghanistan. He was not there long, leaving the Kohat Brigade on 28 May 1940. He was Mentioned in Despatches on 20 June 1941 for his distinguished services in Waziristan.

On 28 June 1940, EKIN was appointed to form and command the new Junior Commanders' School, taking command on 1 July 1940. The establishment of this school was felt necessary to train the large number of platoon and company commanders required by the expanding Indian Army. This school was separate to the Officer's Training School that trained newly commissioned officers. Lieutenant Colonel EKIN was probably chosen to form and command this school because of his experience in regimental service, meaning he had both knowledge and credibility for the role. EKIN had as his Assistant Commandant, Lieutenant Colonel Gerald Alexander Leith FARWELL, M.C., (who had sailed with him to India in 1914) and there were nine other instructors (all holding the rank of Captain or Lieutenant), and a Quarter-Master who held the rank of Lieutenant.<sup>3</sup> With the growth in the Indian Army, on 1 April 1941 the school was upgraded and renamed as the Tactical School, India. EKIN remained as Commandant, but he was promoted to the rank of Acting Brigadier with effect from the same date.

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<sup>2</sup> With the outbreak of war, the Senior Officer's School at Belgaum closed, and it appears this school was converted into the Junior Commanders' School as EKIN's personal record states he was based at Belgaum during this period.

<sup>3</sup> In July 1941, FARWELL was also promoted to the rank of Acting Brigadier to assume command of the 1<sup>st</sup> Burma Brigade in Burma.

EKIN's promotion to the rank of Colonel was published in the London Gazette on 7 October 1941, to have effect from 1 April 1941, but with seniority dating from July 1939. He received the new service number of 9021.

On 15 June 1941, Brigadier EKIN was appointed to raise and command the 46<sup>th</sup> Indian Infantry Brigade at Ahmednagar. This was designated to form part of the 17<sup>th</sup> Indian Division, and to prepare for deployment to the Middle East. The three battalions in the brigade, the 7<sup>th</sup> Bn. 10<sup>th</sup> Baluch Regiment, 5<sup>th</sup> Bn. 17<sup>th</sup> Dogra Regiment and 3<sup>rd</sup> Bn. 7<sup>th</sup> Gurkha Rifles were all war raised units, all part of the rapidly expanding Indian Army. As well as raising the brigade, EKIN was also the officiating General Officer Commanding (G.O.C.) 17<sup>th</sup> Indian Infantry Division with the rank of Acting Major General. The new G.O.C., Major General H. V. LEWIS arrived on 8 August 1941 to assume command of the division, and EKIN reverted to brigade commander. EKIN was promoted Temporary Brigadier on 1 October 1941.

On 8 December 1941, the United Kingdom found itself at war with Japan, as the Japanese Army invaded Malaya and Hong Kong. The Japanese invaded Burma shortly afterwards, leaving the British forces in south-east Asia stretched, being under-resourced in terms of experienced officers and soldiers, and under-equipped in terms of arms and ammunition. For example, few units had a working radio at this time, relying on runners and telephone numbers to send and receive messages. The 17<sup>th</sup> Indian Division had sent two brigades to Singapore, but EKIN's brigade was sent to Burma instead. It arrived in January 1942 and was deployed in Southern Burma. The Japanese advanced up through Tenasserim, driving back the 2<sup>nd</sup> Burma Brigade towards Moulmein. EKIN was ordered to go to Moulmein on 30 January to assume command of the Moulmein area from Brigadier John BOURKE, the commanding officer of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Burma Brigade. This situation was untenable, and the two brigadiers decided to work together instead. Moulmein was evacuated at 08.00 on 31 January, so EKIN returned to command his brigade.

On 9 February 1942, the Japanese 55<sup>th</sup> Division attacked the line held by the 46<sup>th</sup> Indian Brigade on the Salween River, and succeeded in forcing the inexperienced Indian units to withdraw. The brigade was withdrawn on 14 and 15 February to the Bilin River, and then again, it acted as a rearguard for the 17<sup>th</sup> Indian Division. On 22 February, the brigade was heavily attacked by the Japanese. The remains of the brigade were trapped on the wrong side of the Sittang River when the only bridge was blown by the retreating British forces. Only a few survivors managed to cross the river, with EKIN and only about three-hundred of his men escaping. The 46<sup>th</sup> Indian Infantry Brigade was officially broken up and disbanded on 24 February. This left EKIN without a command, but he remained in Burma for further deployment.

As the British forces withdrew through Burma, on 2 March 1942 EKIN was designated to become the Sub-Area Commander of the Shwegyin Lines of Communication, responsible for the evacuation of the remaining men of Burma Corps across the Chindwin River. This was achieved safely with the tired men of Burma Corps crossing back into India. He relinquished this post as the command disbanded on 7 June 1942. On 28 October 1942, EKIN was Mentioned in Dispatches for his services in Burma whilst a Temporary Brigadier.

EKIN returned to India, and was given command of the Nowshera Brigade on 15 June 1942. This was another brigade stationed on the North West Frontier. This was generally a quiet time on the frontier, although the necessity for internal security remained a high priority. EKIN remained in command of the Nowshera Brigade until 31 May 1945, when he was switched to command the Kohat (Independent) Brigade with effect from 1 June 1945.

## Post Second World War

EKIN left the Kohat Brigade on 11 February 1946. Promotion to the rank of Acting Major General took effect from 15 March 1946, and EKIN assumed command of the Bihar and Orissa Area.<sup>4</sup> This Area was located in Eastern Command, with its headquarters at Dinapore, having formerly been 101 Lines of Communication Area between 1942 and late 1945. On 13 June 1946, EKIN was made a Companion in the Most Eminent Order of the Indian Empire (C.I.E.) for his period in command of the Nowshera Brigade. He was promoted to the rank of Temporary Major General on 20 January 1947. EKIN relinquished the appointment as the General Officer Commanding the Bihar and Orissa Area on 18 February 1947 to travel to the United Kingdom on leave.<sup>5</sup> He was informed in writing that he was to be compulsorily retired as there was no further employment available to him.

EKIN was granted fifty-six days leave pending retirement, so retired from the Indian Army on the same day as India partitioned, namely 15 August 1947, with the substantive rank of Colonel (9201). He was fifty-one years of age when he retired. He was granted the rank of Honorary Major General on 2 September 1947.

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<sup>4</sup> Loyalty and Honour gives November 1946 as date of EKIN leaving the Kohat Brigade, but, the date of 15 March 1946 is the date of his promotion to the rank of Acting Major General, and him assuming command of the Area (London Gazette and L/MIL/14/1405).

<sup>5</sup> EKIN's personal record L/MIL/14/1405 contains two dates for him relinquishing command of the Area, 18 February and 20 February 1947. The first date has the addendum of him departing on leave to the U.K., and is taken to be the correct one.



## Retirement and Family Life

Roger EKIN's first marriage was on 15 May 1923, when he married Phyllis Marian CROKER (1898 – 1967) at St. Peter's Church, near Hanover Square, London. They had two daughters, Elizabeth Margaret (born 19 May 1924 in Murree) and Josephine Marian (born 9 October 1925 in Rawalpindi); and one son Tom Croker (born 19 August 1929 in London). EKIN's mother, Emily, died in December 1936 in Kensington, and his father went to live in a flat at Harrington Gardens, London. He died in London on 1 May 1944.

When he retired and returned to the U.K., EKIN, his wife and daughter Elizabeth went to live at a house called 'Cherrywood', in Nethern Court Road, Woldingham, Surrey. In 1963, the Foreign and Commonwealth Officer appointed Major General EKIN a Commissioner for the Indian Military Service Family Pension Fund for a four-year term. This was extended for a further four years in 1967, and again for the same period in 1971.

His sister died on 21 February 1963 at Cowes on the Isle of Wight, aged seventy-three years. Roger's wife, Phyllis on 9 April 1967, at Clifton Hampden, in Berkshire. In 1972, and at the age of seventy-seven years, Roger EKIN remarried Evelyn Mona De HAMEL, who was a widow, and they lived at Waverley Abbey House, Farnham in Surrey. Evelyn had become a widow in 1978, and she had two sons with her first husband. It appears that they ran a property company called Swale View House Limited, which was wound up by the High Court on 3 April 1978. Evelyn Mona EKIN died on 5 May 1979, at Eastbourne, Sussex. Major General Roger EKIN died on 6 March 1990, aged ninety-four years in Cheltenham, Gloucestershire.

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