

### AA Rudra

Agit Anil Rudra, or 'Jick' to his friends, was born in Delhi, India in 1896. Rudra came from an Indian and Ceylonese (Sri Lankan) family of Christian converts. His mother died four months after he was born. His father, the first Indian to be appointed Principal of Delhi's celebrated St. Stephen's College, was a friend of Mahatma Gandhi, who often used the Rudra family home as his base of operations in Delhi.

In 1915, Rudra travelled to Cambridge, he was disappointed to find it '*unbusy, empty and dull*'. The students had all gone to the front – worst of all, there was no cricket in the city's '*drab, wartime existence*'.

### To War

Rudra joined the Universities and Public Schools Brigade, a part of Lord Kitchener's Army. These volunteers from more privileged backgrounds held expectations of becoming officers within three months – Rudra would later find this not to be true for Indians.

The recruiting officer, on spotting the 6 foot -tall Rudra wearing his turban, informed him that Indians were illegible for service. Rudra craftily enlisted the next day with his Ceylonese passport.

### To France

Rudra's regiment arrived to the trenches in red double-decker buses. Rudra recalled going on 48-hour gas duty:

*"We found the dead and dying strewn all over the place."  
"The area was contaminated so badly that if one stood in an affected place too long, the gas ate through the soles of one's boots."*

Family folklore demonstrates Rudra's selfless bravery during bloody battle . . .

*"[Rudra] carried this friend on his shoulders and took him to the infirmary . . . he was carrying a wounded man, but he wasn't sure if he wouldn't get shot by the British military police [who thought] that he was trying to run away from the battle."  
Tarun Maninal, Rudra's grandson*

### The Somme

*"I remember that it was a beautiful summer's day, sunny with a clear blue sky above; and I lay there wondering how that lovely day would end."*

Rudra described the Battle of the Somme in 1916 as '*a pipe-dream victory of the generals and their staffs, fighting that battle at one remove from the front.*'

*“We found that the ground in front of us was a devastation of deep craters and churned up earth, with barbed wire lying in heaped entanglements. The generals had got it all wrong. We gazed at all this with fear and wonder.”*

*“There was an almighty explosion. A great cloud of dust and debris rose hundreds of feet above. We saw our officers leap up and unsheathe their swords, shouting ‘Come on chaps, let’s up and at em!’ If I felt a thrill at this old-fashioned ritual, it did not last long.”*

*“As soon as we had scrambled up and begun our charge, we began to be mown down by enemy machine-gun fire. Men fell on all sides, some as they tried to climb over the wire obstacles, some even as they crouched on the ground. I saw officers fall while still brandishing their swords.”*

### To Rest in Scotland

Rudra’s suffered from trench foot; his feet ‘swollen, puffy and angry-red’ after three months without washing. He was sent to a Red Cross hospital in Dundee.

*“In those northern regions they had probably never seen a brown-skinned man. There was a lot of well-meant ‘oobing’ and ‘aabing’ from the nurses: ‘Oh look, here’s a darkie!’”*

For his birthday, he was given gifts of knitted gloves, handkerchiefs, cigarettes, chocolates and a tea party.

*“I have never forgotten the kindness and generosity of the Scottish people . . .”*

Once healed, Rudra rejoined the Middlesex Regiment at the front.

*“I had lots of buddies in the Middlesex, I was happy enough.”*

### Victory

Rudra was one of the first Indians to be commissioned in the Indian Army. He travelled straight to the War Office, scraping the Flanders mud off his uniform to conduct his interview.

*“The officer’s mess wouldn’t have us, saying that we were cadets and not officers. The sergeants told us: “we don’t want a couple of niggers!”*

Tarun Maninal, Rudra’s grandson

*“All Victory Day were treated to free bus rides, free food. A uniform was the passport to all amenities. There was a long table offering a buffet meal, attended by a number of girls, pretty and otherwise, who first hugged and kissed us and then helped us to goodies.”*

### Major-General Rudra

Rudra saw through two World Wars and became a general of the independent Indian Army.

*“Once, Uncle ‘Jick’ lost his patience [with a persistent German salesman] and he said ‘I had three Germans at the end of my bayonet in the First World War and you’ll be the fourth!’*

Krishen Khanna, Rudra’s relative

His family recall his fury at embassy staff for being refused a visa to travel to France to funeral for a British general of the First World War.

*“He stood up to his full height and said: ‘you probably are too young to know that there was such a thing as the Great War. I was one of the soldiers of the Great War. To fight for you and your family. And I think I’ve left quite a bit of my blood in the soil of France!’”*

Tarun Maninal, Rudra’s grandson

*“He was a very strong man, but very gentle inside. He was really a tremendous character, honest as they come.”*

Krishen Khanna, Rudra’s relative

### **Freedom On A Platter**

Serving the Indian Army after the war potentially meant turning on those Indians fighting for independence.

*“However enthusiastic I was about the Army, I had begun to wonder what I would do if I were given an order to shoot down Indians.”*

Rudra sought moral advice from his father’s old friend.

*“Cool down, Ajit. How we can ever hope to rid ourselves of the British by force of arms? We are a poor, uneducated, unarmed people. But I do not despair. I know the Englishman. He will deal with us honourably. He will give us our freedom on a platter. And then, when we are a free country, we shall have to have an army.”*

Mahatma Gandhi