

# General K S Thimayya

## A Profile in Courage

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GEN K S Thimayya, a towering man of Bismarcian stature was a commander of professional intellectualism. A man of immense personal charm, he respected human values and rationality. He commanded, and even now after two decades of his death, continues to command the allegiance of people by his inspired qualities as man and leader. In his personality, it is often said, he combined oriental wisdom and Western flexibility. Endowed with talent, clarity of mind he was tough and flamboyant. Every job offered him a challenge to excel; to rise to the occasion.

Simple and modest, Timmy, as his friends and admirers called him, had developed remarkable traits of leadership and higher command. He was perhaps lucky too, to have been on the scene when 'time and space' factors suited his genius. The point in history that Timmy occupied (1906-65) would be recorded as one of strategic consequence to India. This period encompassed the final stages of our revolution for self-rule and the evolution of democracy. The Army leadership was assertive and influencing—not in politics but assisting the new nation militarily to survive and improve its image as a neutral peace-loving nation.

Fleeting as opportunities are, he picked on them to his use. And, by the time he moved out of stage, his was an image of a leader who could well have turned to be the envy of a Patton or a Mac Arthur—given, indeed suitable opportunities of command.

Timmy, like most renowned leaders of genius, was not an easy subordinate. His demand that he be treated as an officer with dignity, stemmed as much from his environmental growth as, to a small extent, from the prejudices of the white man; and later the compatibility gap between him and his political bosses. This basic issue of Timmy's life must be understood to perceive his repeated tenders of resignations from a subaltern to an Army Chief. To safeguard his rights as an officer, he was blunt and uncompromising.

## BORN IN A REVOLUTIONARY ENVIRONMENT

Born on 31 March 1906 in a rich Coorgie family, Timmy was educated in the best English schools available in the South before his entry into RIMC-preparatory joining the prestigious Sandhurst. He observed prejudices of the English against the Indians. In him these prejudices generated competitiveness to beat the British equals convincingly. "He saw" as his chief biographer Humphrey Evans said: "the British as they were and not superman". Timmy had seen them as lovers of democracy and to the Indians they should change. A sensitive nature, was nonetheless, a byproduct of this association.

By the time he earned his commission in 1926, he was a youth of grace and charm. Ingratiating, he was known to be cordial and friendly. During his one year attachment with 2 Highland Infantry a Scottish Unit—he observed it something like a club; untrained and unemployed. It also made him aware of the average ability of colonial officers, their moral degradation and the fundamental influence of the commanding officer. He did learn an important lesson : to be a good officer whom he led was less important than how he led.

Upon completing his attachment he joined 4/19 Hyderabad (later 4 Kumaon) at Baghdad. It is here that his regimental life began in earnestness understanding men and his profession.

By 1926, the national struggle for Swaraj—total independence had taken shape. Bhagat Singh had become a martyr; Gandhiji's cult of non-violence was posing mortal threat to the colonialists. Timmy and other young officers did not remain uninfluenced by this inevitable resurgence. During his tenure at Allahabad, which had become the hub of all national activities, he got acquainted to eminent Congress leaders—Motilal, Padmja Naidu, to mention a few. It is here that he realised and acknowledged the personal magnetism of Gandhiji. It is also here that his company was called out for internal security duties. Even as a junior officer, he was of firm conviction that troops should not be called for such 'unsoldierly' duties. He said : "If army is used to suppress minor civil disturbances, the general situation would not improve but people would hate army as well as the police. No soldier could be expected to fight well against his enemies if his own people hated him." The lessons of history are fresh to vindicate this observation : the conduct of Pakistani Army in the erstwhile East Pakistan; Shah of Iran's Army repression in and around Tehran in late 70s; and now in Afghanistan.

At Fort Sandeman and Quetta he became and remained the alter ego of his commanding officers. The service in NWFP then regarded

the training ground of the colonial army—gave him faith in his ability to outdo the better of the best officers in tactical handling of the troops. At Quetta, then married to Nina, they did great humanitarian service during the 1935 earthquake.

A brief ERE tenure at Madras made him see Britishers in their disgusting colonial shapes. They should be treated as equal if not inferior, he thought.

While the German Blitzkrieg was in progress in Europe and the British in India and elsewhere were at their nadir, Timmy's Battalion arrived in Malaya to be part of Gen. Percevel's garrison, which was without adequate defences or design to protect the peninsula.<sup>1</sup> His contribution as a junior officer then were : largely two: training his company in jungle warfare and; helping settle a mutinous<sup>2</sup> situation. As he left the Battalion they suffered the first outcome of their lack of preparation : capitulation before fighting broke out.

#### TACTICAL BRILLIANCE—ALL THE WAY FROM MAUNGAW TO ZOJILA

When he was given the command of his Battalion (4 Kumaon reraised) in Burma the Japanese superman bogey still haunted the British. Timmy was one of those few who paved the way—in a small yet distinct way—for success by launching, what may be called a 'private attack'. And this he did to retrieve his 'irrevocably damaged position' after a British battalion's failure to capture the objective. He employed novel tactics—in selection of approach, timing and technique. Then followed 'Poland'—a nicknamed Japanese position. The earlier success had given him faith in his unconventionality and a soldier's faith in his luck—which he regarded as single most important quality a soldier could have.

At Poland, his unconventionality was at the executional level. While two companies of his battalion infiltrated for attack, one resisted reinforcement and the fourth demonstrated a feint.

Of tactical innovativeness he would often agree with Picasso that 'every act of creation was first of all an act of destruction'. He was applying an artist's perception of the destruction—creation phenomenon to a destruction destruction-environment. This is where his greatness lay.

#### TACTICAL ELEGANCE ENHANCED

Timmy's employment of his Sridiv during the 1948 Summer Offensive speaks volume for his brilliance at both tactical and strategic levels. Faced with gnawing paucity of troops he decided

on a deception to lead the enemy believe that the main offensive against Dommel-Muzaffarabad was from the North. To achieve this Harbaksh's 163 Inf Bde captured the Tithwal Pass before LP Sen's 161 Inf Bde commenced its advance astride the Road axis. Although the desired results of drawing the enemy reserves were achieved, but the advantages were partly negated by slow advance of Sen's Bde. Timmy's victorious will was not to be balked. He asked Sen to threaten enemy garrison at Chakothe from the Pandu axis. The weather and logistics difficulties forced an abandonment of further<sup>3</sup> offensive towards Muzaffarabad. Nonetheless, a Southernly advance resulted in the capture of vital grounds of Pirkanth and Leddigali.

The threat to Leh had developed simultaneously with other sectors. The force level, logistics problems suggested to Timmy a strategy of containment in Leh till decisive results had been achieved in other sectors. Capture of Leh was only possible if the formidable Zojila was captured. An earlier attempt to capture this 10,000 feet pass in Sept 48 had failed. Timmy realised that unless surprise was sprung on the enemy, the outcome of any attack on Zojila would remain uncertain. The force de frappe so to say-became his squadron of Stuart tanks ferried across a 450 Kms distance most secretly. And then having forged the decisive weapon, it became a matter of time to Attal's 77 Para Bde (Chindits) to reduce the enemy defences at the pass and maintain the momentum of a relentless pursuit all the way to Leh. It gave us one of the history's firsts : the successful<sup>3A</sup> employment of tanks at high altitude.

The 1948 Operations added to the stature of Timmy. He proved to be a bold field commander—innovative, calculative, who could outwit his enemy and who was expected to have liberated the entire Kashmir if an ill timed cease-fire had not been agreed. He emerged as the finest tactician and strategist among his contemporaries. His personal bravery became legendary when he flew in Air Cder Mehar Singh's transporter to Leh on 24 May. Nothing he thought, should be spared to make an operation easy for a subordinate; but once an operation had been launched he demanded resolute execution.

#### A SOLDIER ENVOY—KOREA AND CYPRUS

A unique honour was given to Timmy when he was selected to be the Chairman of the Neutral Nations Repatriation Commission in Korea in May 1953. The task, by no mean easy, involved the repatriation of some 121,000 Chinese—North Korean and 359 UN POWs, 41,000 of whom were unwilling to be repatriated to their own countries. Under him came Gen Thorat's Custodian Force; Sweden,

Switzerland, Poland, Czechoslovakia and India became the members. To assist him were Haksar, Chakrabarty, Rao and IJ Bahadursingh.

"My job" Timmy said "became an attempt to reconcile two irreconcilable view points." The irreconcilable, in his views were, due primarily to the incongruity of ideological conflicts, mutual hatred, cynicism, misunderstanding, shrewdness and high idealism. The bedlam that followed the transfer ceremony of POWs on 10 Sep 53 brought him under sharp criticism. But by the time the repatriation was completed, it had added a glorious feather to Timmy's cap. Admiration of 'one of the most difficult and delicate jobs well done' came from Gen Eisenhower, the US President and the others.

His own conclusion of his unique mission was penetrative and futuristic. He opined that 'in any future war POWs should not be allowed to choose repatriation but the Geneva Convention should enlarge its functions to look after it'. "The success of my mission" He said "will be remembered as the first step towards a possible victory of mens' reason and courage over his emotions and fears", And he came back with firm convictions that the value of India's neutrality<sup>4</sup> as a constructive force in a world divided by ideological wars was considerably reduced.

He was an ardent believer in peace. "I am a soldier." He said "I believe that the functions I perform are necessary and honourable. But senseless and pointless fighting, to me, is a revolting spectacle".

Timmy's fame as an adroit international negotiator in Korea had already brought him in the world focus. Now in retirement, when in Jul 64 the UN Secretary General asked him to head the UN forces in Cyprus, he agreed.

Cyprus had been torn by deep schism of faith, mutual distrust and ideological differences between the Greek and Turkish Cypriots. It was feared that if the situation was not handled firmly it could lead to another Crusade. Timmy employed with effect the 6000 multi-national UN force till his death, on 18 Dec 65.

#### A SMALL ECLIPSE??

At 51 he was Chief of the Army Staff. His appointment, naturally was considered as a great occasion. He had an image of a splendid military leader, on whose loyalty and professionalism, to quote Lord Mountbatten, Mr Nehru could count. He had a mature soldier's views on politics. "My experience has taught me that the country's



armed services should be an instrument, but never an arbiter of national policy" He had said.

Strange as the world is, his image as a shrewd experienced Chief, unfortunately became a cause of suspicion of his political seniors. His Napoleonic faith in his luck appeared to be eclipsing. The rise to the power in Pakistan of Field Marshal Ayub Khan and fall of some political heads elsewhere, created imaginary albite deep apprehension among some. Politics crept into the Army. Not only strategic planning suffered at the highest level but also lack of rapport became overtly visible. The Chinese threat became menacingly large. Later he said : "We could never hope to match China in the foreseeable future. It must be left to the politicians and diplomats to ensure our security." (It was to be a strategic volta face in 1962!) This became a period of unhappiness and anxiety for him. His anxieties and crises of conscience arose due to Mr Krishna Menon's<sup>5</sup> callous disregard to defence and procedural matters. He offered to resign but on persuasion, withdrew it. The whole thing became a cause celebre for politicians. While in office he kept pointing to the Govt, the frightful imbalance that existed between political theorising and power equation. The Govt failure to respond to his strategic assessments eventually brought devastating humiliation to us a few years thence in 1962.

### MORE VIGNETTES OF QUALITIES OF THE GREAT MAN

#### COURAGE WAS HIS HALLMARK

Timmy was a varitable monument of courage. From this quality originated his creativity, unconventionality, competence, tactical innovativeness and strategic vision as well as his mastery of command. It gave him, in life and his command, his convictions and principles. He became a symbol of victorious will. He regarded physical courage as a necessary adjunct to maintaining virtue. Moral courage was however, a more noted and welcome characteristic of his personality. He feared no man when he saw, what he believed to be honourable or true, at stake. If he even compromised on this score it was due to his soldierly allegiance and devotion to duty as evidenced in his last act as Chief. Despite deep crises of conscience his staying in office was nothing but a fulfilment of a sworn in duty.

His unconventionality and risk taking calculous were indications of his courage in his earlier part of life.

### MORAL VS MATERIAL

He valued both the material and moral aspects of war. He admired as decisive the human factors in war—the man behind the weapon and the man scrambling up a slope to dislodge the enemy. But he regarded the material, and with it, the technological developments equally important. After the Zojila battle he was heard saying: materially the offensive was not practicable. Morally I was certain."

### MAGNANIMITY

Magnanimity was yet another character quality of Gen Thimayya. He regarded it an essential quality for higher command. To quote an example. In Jul 48 a company of a battalion had abandoned its position under pressure in the Tithwal Sector. The battalion came under clouds. Timmy in his magnanimity told its brigade commander: "I consider that the troops fought well under the circumstances and had been overwhelmed. These things do happen in war." He understood the fallibility of man. He would often quote Dr Johnsons 'a fallible being will fail somewhere' and forgive people.

He knew that despite the best of intentions things could go wrong and usually do. Those responsible for conduct of war, he had said later, must understand actualities of war and the responsibilities that go with command. "They must therefore have adequate courage to accept the errors of their good meaning subordinates". He had said.

### A MAN OF INTERNATIONAL UNDERSTANDING

The assignment with the NNRC gave Timmy broad spectrum of international relationship. He learned that all wars have been and would continue to be ideological which usually was a mask for some pragmatic objectives and were intended primarily to increase nations fighting spirit. The result of such wars developed 'schisms' and often a revitalisation of culture among the vanquished. The results of Crusade, the repression of Hindus by Muslims or the intransigence of Israel in West Asia today all vindicate his conclusions. And in his book 'Experiments in Neutrality' posthumously published he leaves a serious thought to ponder: Would future Generals need to be expert in dialectics as well as tactics? Plausibly yes.

We are assured that not only was Timmy's contribution to the world peace substantial but far reaching in its future applicability.

## CONCLUSION

When I wrote to Mrs Nina Thimayya for information on the General she, in her cautious sagacity noted that I had undertaken a difficult job. As I finish this analysis I agree with her. For, Gen Thimayya was a great man. And greatness is not an easy thing to define. Beside being a great commander, he had been, what may euphemistically be called, 'on the side of life'-loving it, meeting it gallantly, with a relish and with phenomenal creative courage. He, like other great commanders had the quality of mind and spirit which helped him perform his duties, as God gave him light to do.

"This is not to say, my life has been more difficult than of any other soldier". He said with humility "On the contrary I have been more fortunate than the most and the rewards and satisfaction have been great". Indeed, he had been lucky but it had been more the triumph of his indomitable will, a creative courage and pre-eminent ability over the palmists' belief in deep burrows in his palm.

Of all the eulogies for him I consider Gen Bhagat's the best : "A Gen Thimayya is not born in every generation. The like of him there will seldom be—a soldier, a general a man's man; the Army, his soul, his soul, the Army."

What struck me equally great about Gen Thimayya is his views on generalship, which he once wrote to a friend": Generalship is an intelligent and creative activity. Human inversion has no place in it". Great many lives like ours, I feel, would be influenced by this message of his life long wisdom.

## FOOTNOTES

1. The Garrison commander, it is often alleged did not prepare defences as it would have led to panic among the civil population.
2. In later years, his experience helped him defuse a mutiny by a battalion in Japan.
3. Owing to lack of desired superiority of force the offensive, to quote Gen Sen; 'remained on offensive without teeth'.
4. A shift in our policy of strict neutrality to positive neutrality came about after 1962.
5. Of Krishna Menon, Brig Dalvi said that he had sapped the morale of the higher echelon of the Armed Forces by his arrogance and near contempt of senior officers.
- 5A. This part of Kashmir has once again become important. The Karakoram Highway a Class 60 all weather road linking Sinkiang with Pakistan through the occupied Kashmir adds new strategic dimensions to this region.



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