

Colonel Pyara Lal: A Soldier and Scholar

(15 August 1916 - 23 November 1987)

Major General YK Gera (Retd)[®]

Colonel Pyara Lal was born on 15 August 1916 at Lahore, now

in Pakistan. After graduation from Punjab University in 1938, he went to England for higher education at Oxford. He did law at the Inner Temple in 1943 and was called to the bar in 1947. During the Second World War, he was commissioned as 2nd Lieutenant in the 2nd Battalion Worcestershire Regiment in 1943. In the same year, he got transferred to 4/5 MARATHA Light Infantry in India. He served as Public Relations Officer (PRO) (Army) in Imphal during the Burma Campaign (1943-44) and with British Commonwealth Occupation Forces for Japan (BCOF), after World War II, in Kure, Hiroshima Prefecture. He left Japan in 1947 and later served as PRO in Jammu and Kashmir Operations of 1948, Hyderabad Police Action in 1948, Sino-Indian Conflict of 1962 and India-Pakistan Conflicts of 1965 and 1971.

During 1948-49, he was Military Advisor, Development Board, Ministry of Relief and Rehabilitation. In this capacity, he was responsible for planning and development of the Defence Colony in New Delhi.

He also had a tenure as Deputy Assistant Military Secretary in Military Secretary's branch and in his spare time, he looked after the USI as its honorary Secretary. On 01 January 1957, he was appointed Secretary USI. During the period 1960 to 1972, he worked as Colonel General Staff (Training) at the National Defence College (NDC), New Delhi. Concurrently, he looked after the USI as well. He contributed a lot during formative years of the NDC and helped to lay strong foundations on which the NDC firmly rests. In the history of the NDC, he was their longest serving staff member. His task was to locate and get eminent speakers for the NDC lectures. Colonel Pyara Lal has described this period as

among his most intellectually satisfying and stated that, “I was like a Hollywood Scout in those early days [of the NDC] but instead of looking for [handsome men] and beautiful women I was looking for eminent people to talk to the students”.

On retirement from Service, Colonel Pyara Lal was able to devote full time to the USI though even earlier he devoted a lot of time. One special task which was closest to his heart was that of looking after the USI and the USI Journal. He continued to perform it till the last.

There was a time when USI faced lack of funds and its closure appeared likely. It was due to Colonel Pyara Lal's efforts that financial stability was brought about. He was also the Founder Director, correspondence courses run by the USI for the benefit of Armed Forces officers for promotion examinations as well as entrance examination to Defence Services Staff College. He consulted some of the serving officers who had done metropolitan correspondence course from England and decided to structure a similar course for wider utility. The USI courses became the main source of income of the USI. A large number of officers join these courses yearly and the high percentage of successful results has been greatly appreciated by the Services Headquarters. Colonel Pyara Lal made tremendous efforts to build a corpus for the USI by being thrifty and getting maximum mileage out of every rupee spent by the Institution. He raised a fund of nearly rupees 1.2 crores for the USI building complex besides getting an allotment of five acres of land for the present USI building.

In 1970, Colonel Pyara Lal was awarded Ati Vishisht Seva Medal (AVSM) for his distinguished service to the Armed Forces of India. In the same year, Colonel Pyara Lal organised centenary celebrations of the USI, with a special centenary issue of the USI Journal and an exhibition of rare books from the USI library, including photographs on military subjects, which was inaugurated by the then President Dr Zakir Hussain.

From 23 October 1986, the designation of Secretary USI was changed to Director and Editor. Colonel Pyara Lal continued to hold the appointment till his demise, in harness, on 23 November 1987. Colonel Pyara Lal was Secretary and later Director and Editor USI for over three decades. During his tenure, he

husbanded the resources of the USI extremely well. He worked devotedly to bring up one of the oldest autonomous defence institutions in Asia to a level which is praiseworthy.

Colonel Pyara Lal was sought after by many of our universities to help in setting up their departments of defence studies. He had vast experience in public relations and was very popular with our press. He was helpful by nature. Many Service officers, spanning more than three generations, who came in contact with him can never forget his helpful attitude and useful guidance, and encouragement, which they received from him in their early literary efforts. He advised and encouraged officers to read and also attempt writing articles, and monographs, to disseminate knowledge so acquired.

Colonel Pyara Lal's contribution was well recognised by USI members, and the USI Council decided to name the USI library after him when the new USI building came up in 1996. A number of articles also appeared in the USI Journal in recognition of his contribution. The annual 'Colonel Pyara Lal Memorial Lecture' was instituted from a grant given by his brother, Shri Sardari Lal Agarwal, from the Colonel Pyara Lal Welfare and Education Trust. The first memorial lecture was held on 19 September 1997. Every year, the memorial lecture is programmed generally in September. In the year 2020, due to the restrictions posed by the Covid-19 pandemic, for the first time the lecture was held as a Webinar discussion online. USI members continue to fondly remember the tremendous contribution made by Colonel Pyara Lal as a soldier, scholar and a helpful human being.

®Major General YK Gera (Retd) superannuated as Chief Signal Officer Central Command Lucknow. He has done the Defence Services Staff College, Long Defence Management Course and also the National Security Management Course from the National Defence University, Washington (USA). He is an alumnus of National Defence College, New Delhi. He has been the Deputy Director & Editor, the Head Centre of Strategic Studies & Simulation and Head Editorial Team at the USI.

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