

Late Major General Samir Chandra Sinha, PVSM: A Biographical Sketch

Brigadier Deepak Sinha (Retd)[@]

Introduction

Charles Dickens once wrote, “Whatever I have tried to do in life, I have tried with all my heart to do it well; whatever I have devoted myself to, I have devoted myself completely; in great aims and in small I have always thoroughly been in earnest”. For those who knew the late General Samir Chandra Sinha intimately, he wholly exemplified Dickens belief in the way he led his own life. A stalwart soldier, paratrooper, scholar and visionary, the late General was born to Shri Kumar Dhiresh Chandra Sinha and Smt Swarna Lata Sinha on 28 January 1926 in Kolkata. He was the grandson of Raja Shib Krishna Sinha, the youngest brother of the Maharaja of Sushong Durgapur, now in Bangladesh, one of the pre-eminent *zamindari* families of undivided Bengal.

At the young age of seven he tragically lost his mother, to whom he was very deeply attached. He spent his early years at his maternal grandparents’ residence at Lansdowne Road, Kolkata, till he was admitted into the Prince of Wales Military College (now the Rashtriya Indian Military College) in August 1937, one of only eleven selected to join the 32nd Course. He was academically in the top half of his class, an excellent boxer who had made his name against Doon School in the Inter School Boxing Tournament in 1941, and excelling in Physical Training and Gymnastics. It is here that he made steadfast friends, some of whom later joined the Pakistan Army, relationships that he maintained and enriched, especially after his retirement, till his unexpected demise on 26 January 2002, just short of his 76th birthday.

First Innings - Army Service

Samir Sinha completed his Senior Cambridge in December 1942 and applied for a commission in the army. Towards the latter half of 1943, he passed the Services Selection Board and was instructed to report to B Company, Officers Training School at Belgaum in March 1944. His course mates included later Chief of Army Staff, General AS Vaidya and Lieutenant General SK Sinha who retired as Vice Chief of Army Staff and subsequently served as Governor of Assam and Jammu & Kashmir. The latter has this to say of his course mate:

“I admired my friend Samir Sinha who was a wizard on the horse, doing scissors, back roll etc. with great aplomb.... I considered his performance as a cadet outstanding. At the end of our training at Belgaum, much to my surprise I heard the announcement that I had been declared the best cadet of our batch and was to be awarded the Commandant’s Baton at the passing out parade. That was the war time equivalent of the Sword of Honour. I felt that I did not deserve this distinction which more appropriately should have gone to Samir Sinha. Samir, on the other hand, was emphatic in saying that I fully deserved this distinction. Possibly this was because we were such good friends....”¹

Pre-independence. He was commissioned into the 15th Battalion of the 5th Maratha Light Infantry Regiment on 10 December 1944, a month and a half shy of his 19th birthday, but volunteered for parachute duties while still attached to the Maratha Light Infantry Regimental Centre. Therein, too, is a story that gives us some insight into his character. While attached to the Centre, he became aware that a team from the Indian Parachute Regiment was visiting the station to motivate personnel to volunteer for parachute duties. He immediately requested that he be allowed to volunteer, an act thoroughly disapproved of by the Centre Commandant. Not soon after, just before the team arrived, he found himself at the Regimental Jungle Training Camp, approximately 20 km away from Belgaum, undergoing ‘orientation’ training. He did not let this small matter stop him and as soon as the team arrived, trekked across at night to meet them to submit

his volunteer papers. He was back in camp by the morning without any suspicions being raised. One can imagine the surprise and consternation of the Commandant when he was informed that Army Headquarters had issued transfer orders for the young officer to report forthwith to the 1st Battalion, the Indian Parachute Regiment, at Quetta to undergo probation.

In March 1945, after having passed probation, he successfully qualified as a paratrooper at the Parachute Training School, Chaklala. In 1946, on the disbandment of the Indian Parachute Regiment, because his parent unit was the Maratha LI, he was posted to its 3rd Battalion that was on its way to Quetta for conversion to parachute duties, as a part of 2nd Indian Airborne Division. Much to the consternation of the Military Engineering Services, they found themselves dealing with an officer responsible both for handing over assets on behalf of his disbanded unit and then taking them over on behalf of his new unit. It ensured that the barrack damages recovered from his previous unit were properly utilised for that very purpose! In May 1947, he was given Permanent Commission, news that he received with mixed emotion as all service prior to his 21st birthday no longer counted for seniority, allowing his juniors to be promoted ahead of him as Company Commanders.

Post-independence. In November 1947, the unit moved to Amritsar where it was placed under the Military Evacuation Organisation that had been established to escort minorities from West Pakistan to India and vice-versa. One can only imagine the pressures he faced, and the sacrifices required of him as he was completely unaware of the whereabouts of his own family, which had been forced to flee East Pakistan due to the disturbed conditions at the time. The task of escorting refugees was extremely heart-wrenching and difficult, given the scale of violence that had occurred.

On one occasion, he was detailed to accompany the sister of late Lieutenant Colonel Dewan Ranjit Rai, MVC, of 1st SIKH, who had just been killed in Jammu and Kashmir, to bring back her belongings from their house in Lahore. In his own words:

“When we reached her house in Model Town, we found it occupied by her once friendly neighbours. They very politely, but reluctantly, helped me load all her belongings including a refrigerator. We then went to the Lahore University to recover the books belonging to her father who had been the Head of Department there and had been murdered in his office during the recent riots. A Professor very superciliously reminded me that it was a place of learning and that there was no need to bring in an armed escort. When I pointed to the blood stains on the office floor and asked him whether these were the signs of learning, he did not know where to look. Later, when I reached the Wagah Border, the Pakistan Post halted my vehicle and told me I had a refrigerator, which was machinery, and could not be taken out of Pakistan — obviously our friendly neighbours had not been so friendly after all and had informed the Post to intercept the refrigerator. Fortunately for me, just then a JCO with a whole platoon of 2 Maratha LI, stationed at Lahore, returned from some escort duty. The JCO, seeing my Maratha Hackle, came to find out why I had been halted. Seeing the sudden change in numbers, the Pakistani Post Commander realised that discretion was the better part of valour, and waived all his objections to machinery being taken out of Pakistan and waved me on.”²

In December 1947, the battalion was ordered to join 50 Para Brigade at Naushera. By the time the battalion joined the Brigade, Jhangar had fallen and Naushera was under siege where the battalion saw tough fighting in its defence. He recalled that:

“Enemy shelling was a regular occurrence at Jhangar and for a while we did not have guns to respond. The usual reflex response was to dive into a trench even if asleep, to wake up in the trench in due course. One day as they woke up in the trench to the whistle of artillery shells above, everyone started laughing as realisation dawned that our guns had been brought up and they had all dived into the trench at the sound of our own shelling for the first time in the sector.”

Subsequently, during the attack to recapture Jhangar, he was sent by the CO to regain contact with 'C' Company that was pinned down on the forward slopes of Pir Thil Naka. Upon arrival, he found that the Company Commander had been killed while his Radio Operator lay critically wounded. After giving first aid to the Operator, he assumed command and was able to withdraw the company, along with the casualties, to the reverse slope despite their being under effective fire. Following this, he was made Company Commander and led the battalion advance to Jhangar, after the heights of Pir Thil Naka had been captured in the second attempt.

A few days later, after occupying the dominating heights ahead of Jhangar, ironically, he was injured by artillery fire, refusing to take cover while laying mines ahead of his company defences resulting in his evacuation to Delhi. On his return, he was posted out as the Brigade Intelligence Officer of 50 Parachute Brigade, at that time commanded by Brigadier Mohammed Usman, MVC (Posthumous). As a matter of fact, he was only a few steps away from the Brigadier, sheltering behind a rock, at the time of his tragic death due to artillery shelling.

In December 1951, he married Ms Krishna Bagchi, the daughter of noted Indologist Dr Prabodh Chandra Bagchi, the then Vice Chancellor of Vishwa Bharati University at Santiniketan. He was, at that time, posted as Brigade Major to 50 (Independent) Parachute, after which he was posted to 2nd Battalion of the Assam Regiment for a short stint. In 1954, he proceeded to Wellington for the Staff College course and as his wife once related that when she went to join him, he received her at the railhead. While travelling up to Wellington, in the cold hill air, he brought out a thermos but rather than hot tea, it had ice-cold water. He offered her a cup, explaining that it was from their first refrigerator which he had just purchased. Incidentally, that refrigerator, a Philips, was finally sold in full working order in 2019. Upon completion of the course, he was posted back to 50 Para Brigade as the Deputy Assistant Adjutant and Quarter Master General (DAA&QMG). He was then nominated to attend a course at the School of Land/Air Warfare in the United Kingdom, on completion of which he was posted to the newly established

School of Land and Air Warfare (now College of Air Warfare) in Hyderabad as an instructor.

He finally returned to his battalion in 1960 as the Second in Command and participated in Operation Vijay, the Liberation of Goa in 1961. In February 1963, he was promoted to the rank of Lieutenant Colonel and given the task of raising 6 PARA in Agra. In 1964, he was nominated for the Command and Staff College Course at Fort Leavenworth, in the United States of America, from where he graduated at the second position in the course. During the Indo-Pak war of 1965, he was in the Military Operations Directorate at Army Headquarters and in 1966, went on promotion as a Brigadier to command 51 (Independent) Parachute Brigade. His first command, in Sugar Sector, ended abruptly as he was seriously injured in a road accident when the road suddenly gave way and his vehicle rolled down into the Sutlej River below. After his recovery, he was given command of 81 Mountain Brigade in Arunachal Pradesh and subsequently, 47 Infantry Brigade in Hyderabad.

In March 1970, he was posted as Director Combat Development at Army Headquarters for a year before being posted to Mhow as the first Commander of the Higher Command Wing in the newly established College of Combat (now Army War College). During Operation Cactus Lily, the Liberation of Bangladesh in 1971, he was attached with Headquarter Eastern Command as the Deputy Director of Civil Administration for Bangladesh and was responsible for assisting the Bangladesh Government in Exile in establishing itself in all liberated areas. It gave him an opportunity to visit his ancestral place and connect with those who stayed behind. In January 1972, he proceeded on promotion as General Officer Commanding (GOC) 19 Infantry Division in Kashmir. Lieutenant General KK Nanda (Retd), one of his former Brigade Commanders, has this to say:

“Samir Sinha, as he was popularly known, proved himself to be a very fine GOC in a very short time... a bold paratrooper and a very fine infantryman, he was a thorough gentleman. Sinha was very sound in both operations and administration. He was frank, blunt and straightforward and

called a spade a spade. He was fair, firm and friendly to all and did not differentiate among the officers, particularly the Brigade Commanders, irrespective of the lanyard they wore. He proved to be a very popular and effective GOC.”³

He subsequently went on to hold other important appointments such as the Chief of Staff of Northern Command and Commandant, Indian Military Academy, though his tenure as Commandant was cut short due to a major colorectal surgery for cancer, an experience he used to boost the morale of others, around him, suffering from this debilitating disease. Upon recovery, he was posted as Director Military Training and then, as Chief of Staff Central Command before being seconded to the Cabinet Secretariat as Inspector General Special Frontier Force, an appointment from where he finally retired after a long and distinguished service on 31 January 1984. In addition, he also held the appointment of the Colonel of the Parachute Regiment from 1977 to November 1983. He was awarded the Param Vishist Seva Medal (PVSM) by the President, in 1981, for distinguished service.

Final Innings with the United Service Institution (USI) of India

After retirement, he voluntarily assisted Colonel Pyara Lal, the then Director of the USI of India, the only think tank of the defence forces at that time, till the latter's death in harness. He was then appointed as Director, a post he accepted without any remuneration, and held till he voluntarily resigned six months after moving the USI to its new and imposing premises on Rao Tula Ram Marg, New Delhi, in June 1996. Colonel VK Singh (Retd) writes this of his tenure, “He played a major part in getting the land allotted and arranging funds for the new building, and left the Institution in a healthy financial position, large membership and facilities for growth”.

On his untimely demise on 26 January 2002, he was remembered for his immense contribution to the development of the USI with the naming of the USI Auditorium in his honour, and the institution of an Annual Memorial Lecture in his name. He was survived by his wife of over 50 years, Smt Krishna Sinha, his two

sons, Deepak and Ashok, both of whom joined the military, the elder in his father's regiment and the younger as a paratrooper doctor, their wives Rima and Anita, and four grandchildren.

Endnotes

¹ SK Sinha, *A Soldier Recalls* (New Delhi, 1992), p. 45.

² M Thomas (Retd), *Glory and the Price: A History of 2nd Battalion The Parachute Regiment (MARATHA)* (Meerut, 2002), pp. 288-289.

³ KK Nanda, *War with No Gains: Operation Cactus Lily Indo-Pak War 1971* (New Delhi, 2013), p. 256.

⁴ VK Singh (Retd), *United Service Institution of India: History 1870-2008*, New Delhi: USI, 2008, p. 30.

@Brigadier Deepak Sinha (Retd) is a second generation paratrooper with over three decades of service in the army. He held the Field Marshal Cariappa Chair of Excellence at the United Services Institution of India, New Delhi, in 2003-04 and is the author of the book "Beyond the Bayonet: Indian Special Operations Forces in the 21st Century". Presently he is a Consultant with the Observer Research Foundation.

Journal of the United Service Institution of India, Vol. CL, No. 622, October-December 2020.