

## A Most Rewarding Second Innings

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(Retd)<sup>@</sup>**

**D**uring most of the period of just under four decades that I served in Indian Army uniform, I had vaguely heard of the United Service Institution (USI) of India, and occasionally perused the contents of its hallmark journal in one or other Service libraries. My first direct interaction with this unique Institution came only at the closing stages of my Service career. Soon after my return in mid-March 1993 from the one-year contracted assignment as the first Force Commander and Head of Mission of the United Nations (UN) peacekeeping forces in the former Yugoslavia and having declined an offer of extension, I was collared by the then Director of the USI, Major General Samir Sinha, and asked to speak to the members of the Institution about my experiences in the UN assignment. I clicked my heels and accepted the commitment. On finding out that I was not a member of the USI he got me to fill the application form, pay the entrance fee and life subscription in his office in Kashmir House, where the Institution was then housed. And, lo and behold, I was a member of the USI of India. And the rest, as they say, is history.

General Samir Sinha was among that breed of senior officers, who were mentors and role models for my generation in the Indian Army. Outstanding individuals who took great pride in the profession of arms, strove for excellence in that chosen field, and lived by the right values and principles. Some individuals like me were privileged to be taken by them under their wings, guided, tutored and encouraged as youngsters, no doubt in the hope that we would keep the flag flying high when our turn came around. As it happened, my association with General Samir Sinha went back a long way, to the time when he was Commanding Officer 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion the Parachute Regiment, because of the regimental connection: 2 PARA was formed by the conversion of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion, the Maratha Light Infantry; and I was then on the rolls of

the Maratha Light Infantry. We met each other a couple of times after that; the most notable occasion being on 17 December 1971 in Dacca (now Dhaka). As a rifle company commander in 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion the Maratha Light Infantry (Jangi Paltan), I had entered Dacca the previous afternoon (16 December) with the Commanding Officer, then Lieutenant Colonel KS (Bulbul) Brar, some elements of the Battalion Headquarters, and my company, and was patrolling the streets of Dacca, when a couple of my colleagues, and I, bumped into 'Brigadier' Samir Sinha, who had apparently come in that morning with a Civil Affairs team to liaise with the local authorities. I then served with him in 1979, albeit very briefly, when he was the Director Military Training at Army Headquarters.

This preamble was required because therein lay the origins of my odyssey with the USI. Soon after I had given the talk at the Institution in mid-1993, General Sinha became aware that given the age factor, I was not in the running for any greater assignments in the Service and was due for superannuation in August 1994. Since he had already done about eight or nine years as the Director of the Institution and getting on in age, he was apparently keen to step down. He, therefore, homed in on me and started moves towards getting me to take over the reins of the USI from him on my superannuation. With plans of settling down at an Army Welfare Housing Organisation (AWHO) flat in Bangalore, I was uncertain and non-committal in my response. But in the last six months before superannuation, for various reasons, we had decided to park ourselves in the National Capital Region. Having reconnoitered houses from Gurgaon, through South Delhi, to NOIDA, we finally bought a house in NOIDA in May 1994. I hung up my boots on 31 August 1994 and by early February 1995, we were ensconced in our new home; in which we remain 25 years on. No sooner was he aware of my plans, that General Samir Sinha got after me with greater vigour, and, in mid-1995, goaded me to get my name included in the list for the impending elections to the USI Council. To which, I was duly elected securing the second largest number of votes after Air Commodore Jasjit Singh. In early January 1996, at the very first meeting of the newly elected Council, that comprised three former Chiefs in Admiral RH Tahiliani, General VN Sharma and General SF Rodrigues,

together with the legendary Lieutenant General ZC Bakshi, and luminaries like Lieutenant General K Balaram, Lieutenant General S Menezes, Lieutenant General RK Jasbir Singh, Vice Admiral Subhash Chopra, Air Marshal Vir Narain, etc., General Samir Sinha expressed his desire to step down as the Director of the Institution and went on to suggest my name as his replacement. In a display of unanimity that embarrassed me no end, all the members endorsed the suggestion and literally issued me a command that I should assume charge of the USI of India with effect from 01 July 1996, on completion of its move from Kashmir House to the newly built premises in Vasant Vihar. As the junior most veteran member on the Council (though almost 60), I had no option but to meekly agree. Even so, I worked up the good sense to record one stipulation and make a couple of requests before expressing my agreement to take on the assignment. The stipulation was that, like General Samir Sinha, I would work in a totally honorary capacity, and would not draw any pay or allowances from the Institution; which remained the arrangement till mid-1999. The first request I made was that I be permitted to fulfil, at my discretion, the commitments, and invitations, for delivering talks and participation in international and national events that were coming my way in context of the exposure I had at the international level as the Head of the UN forces in the former Yugoslavia; needless to say, without any expenditure, whatsoever, to be incurred by the USI. The second request was that an appropriate arrangement be made for me to commute from my residence in NOIDA to the USI and back. The stipulation and the two requests were unanimously endorsed without any reservations whatsoever. That set the stage for me to assume charge as the Director USI of India on 01 July 1996 from my worthy predecessor, Major General Samir Sinha.

Notwithstanding the fact that the contribution made by General Samir Sinha will, no doubt, be appropriately recounted elsewhere in this publication, I would be failing in my duty if I did not record for posterity the fact that most of what was achieved by the USI under my stewardship, was possible due to the untiring efforts he had made towards securing land for a permanent home for the Institution, getting funding from the Prime Minister's Office, and having the premises built under the aegis of the Army Welfare

Housing Organisation. Though I am not personally privy to the fact, there is little doubt that a good deal of credit for the stature of the USI also goes to Colonel Pyara Lal, who ran the Institution for almost 30 years prior to General Samir Sinha's stint.

As things went, the USI completed the shifting of all its assets, in particular the precious library, to the new premises by the third week of June 1996. At Kashmir House, given the fact that the USI was housed in a couple of large sized rooms within a massive building that was the preserve of the Engineer-in-Chief's Branch of Army HQ, on closing down after the day's work, all that had to be done was to lock the sturdy front door and go home, leaving the security of the place in the tender care of the Defence Security Corps personnel who manned the place. At the new premises, we were immediately confronted with a major problem of security of the premises. Thanks to some quick thinking and action by General Sinha, the rapport he had with the Establishment, and the respect he still commanded, a guard comprising an NCO and a few other ranks from one of the local units was made available to the USI for a brief period till appropriate arrangements could be put in place. A contract with a security agency (fortunately run by one of our veterans) was entered into without delay, and put in place within a couple of days. This also brought home the fact that many more such arrangements would need to be put in place: conservancy and cleaning staff, maintenance staff for electricity and water, arboriculture, and so on. All this was going to cost money; a commodity in very short supply with the USI that was always run on a shoe-string budget based on membership subscriptions, and fees that accrued from running preparatory courses for officers appearing for promotion examinations and for entrance to the Defence Services Staff College.

At this stage, it is probably appropriate to record for posterity that the construction of the new premises, a dream of the redoubtable Colonel Pyara Lal, became a reality through the determined and untiring efforts made by General Samir Sinha; no doubt, with some assistance from the then Service Chiefs and their senior colleagues. Through those dogged efforts, a grant of Rupees Two Crores was made to the USI in the early 1990s by

the then Prime Minister Narasimha Rao from the Prime Minister's Relief Fund. As a result of which, I was able to take over as the Director from 01 July 1996, from General Samir Sinha, of an Institution housed in imposing and well-designed premises.

While the staff was setting up the Library, offices, and so on, together with General Sinha and a couple of senior members of the Executive Committee, I applied myself to the primary task of reworking the earlier plans for utilisation of the facilities, in order to generate finances, on a regular basis, to cover running costs. Hence, the grandiose plans of using the five-apartment block for accommodating the Director and senior staff, and the 30 single room block for research staff, were shelved, and with the concurrence of the Executive Committee and the Council, it was agreed that these premises would be re-appropriated for use on payment of rentals, and preferably run on a commercial basis, together with a restaurant facility in the main building, by someone who had the experience and competence to undertake such a venture. As it happened, a group of 1<sup>st</sup> Joint Services Wing (JSW) Course veterans (that included Lieutenant General Gurinder Singh, Major General MM Rai, Brigadier Rusty Dey, Colonel Virmani, and Vice Admiral Subhash Chopra), together with two of their civilian colleagues who had the requisite expertise and finances, got together and offered to run the venture on a commercial basis. The proposal they submitted was approved by the Executive Committee which had been authorised by the Council to take the decision. And, within a couple of months the venture was up and running. Thus, was born 'Residency Resorts'. A contract was drawn up between the USI and the group by which a mutually agreed percentage of the profits accruing from the venture were paid to the USI on a monthly basis. This income, together with that generated through member subscriptions and course fees, enabled us to meet the running costs of the Institution that included the pay and allowances of the staff, security, conservancy, and arboriculture contract obligations, electricity and water charges, etc. There was, however, a 'Damocles sword' still hanging over our heads in the form of an over-run of Rupees 60 lakhs beyond the budgetary allocation for construction of the premises. Here again, thanks to the continued efforts of General Sinha, together with those of Shri NN Vohra the

then Principal Secretary to the Prime Minister, and, I would like to believe, the soft corner that the then Prime Minister Shri Inder Gujral had for me personally, an amount of Rs 60 lakhs was released to the USI from the Prime Minister's Relief Fund. The Institution was, therefore, out of the woods in as much as we had no outstanding financial obligations, and had arrangements in place for meeting running costs. Thanks to the efforts of my great predecessor General Samir Sinha, the members of the Governing Council, and other well-wishers like Shri NN Vohra, as also the 'Residency Resorts' group, I was now able to focus on pursuing the activities of the Institution, to the benefit of our membership, in this wonderful set of premises.

In this endeavour, I was indeed not only fortunate to have the backing and support of the members of the Council and my worthy predecessor General Sinha, but to have the privilege of working with some truly wonderful individuals; three of them my seniors by many years. The Deputy Director and Editor (DD&E) was Air Commodore NB Singh; with a proven record as a professional, as an analyst, and most importantly as a person. I could not have asked for a better arrangement in terms of deftly guiding me through the initial months at the helm. The Chief Instructor (CI) was the redoubtable Brigadier Yash Pal Dev; 2<sup>nd</sup> Course IMA I think. Still sporting the handle bar moustache that I first saw in 1952 when, as a student in St Xavier's College Bombay, I was a member of 1<sup>st</sup> Bombay Battalion NCC, and he was Officer Commanding 1<sup>st</sup> Bombay Battery NCC. What a joy it was to not only see him again, but to be privileged to work with him. He took me under his wings quite unobtrusively and saw me through the process of 'learning the ropes' as it were. The Deputy Director Administration (DD Adm) was another senior person, Brigadier Sachdev, who had been with the Institution for some time and was familiar with much of its history; which he shared with me in the knowledge that it would assist me in running the Institution in the best interests of the membership. The Assistant Director Administration (AD Adm) was Colonel VK Singh, an indefatigable, totally trustworthy and quite outspoken individual who had served with the Institution for many years; initially while still in uniform, as the Directing Staff Coordination (DS Coord) in the Course section, and on superannuation was taken on as AD Adm. He was with me

throughout my tenure as the Director and was a source of great strength primarily for his integrity, frank expression of opinion, capacity for dedicated hard work, and intimate knowledge of almost everything about the Institution. He is second only to Colonel Pyara Lal in terms of the number of years with the USI. It is, probably, only appropriate to record here the fact that like me, both Air Commodore NB Singh and Brigadier YP Dev, worked in our respective appointments without taking any remuneration from the USI.

In due course, as they were getting on in years, both Air Commodore NB Singh and Brigadier Sachdev sought to be relieved from their duties. Accepting their requests, the Executive Committee approved the appointment of Major General YK Gera, selected from among a list of applicants, as the DD&E, and appointed Colonel VK Singh as DD Adm. In 1999, on his way back from a visit to his son in the USA, Brig YP Dev suffered a fatal heart attack, and was replaced by Brigadier MS Chowdhury as the CI through a process of selection by the Executive Committee. Brigadier Chowdhury not only pursued the activities of the Course section with renewed vigour, but also put in place well received 'contact programmes' of a fortnight duration each for those attending the preparatory courses for the Defence Services Staff College entrance examinations. After about five or six years as DD&E, Major General Gera was replaced by Major General PJS Sandhu, an old friend and colleague who had served as my Colonel (General Staff) when I was commanding the Mechanised Division. All these colleagues were outstanding in their commitment and dedication to the USI in their respective appointments, allowing me to devote attention towards exploiting the excellent facilities created at the new premises. Firstly, by organising the Library well for effective use by members, as also by visiting researchers and analysts. At one of the early meetings of the Council, it was unanimously decided that the Library would be named after Colonel Pyara Lal; a most appropriate recognition of his sterling contributions to the Institution. The spacious Auditorium (again very appropriately named after Major General Samir Sinha, after he had passed on) and seminar rooms provided most suitable venues for the conduct of USI sponsored events that were well received by members and other invitees.

These facilities were also made available to other organisations, institutes, publishing houses, etc. on payment of rates that were approved by the Executive Committee; providing some welcome funds for meeting running costs. The wealth of expertise and experience within the USI membership through the veterans, and its close association with the establishment by virtue of its large (and ever growing) numbers from the serving fraternity in the Armed Forces, as also the Ministry of Defence (MoD), Ministry of External Affairs (MEA), the Defence Research and Development Organisation (DRDO), and so on, was soon recognised not only by the strategic community within India but also internationally, as also by universities and academics, business houses, industry, and the local diplomatic community. The USI soon became a 'port of call' for visiting dignitaries, particularly those associated with the defence establishment, like Defence Ministers, Armed Forces Chiefs, internationally recognised analysts, etc. affording our members an opportunity to listen to and exchange views with them. As we increased our activities, almost all visiting defence delegations sought briefings and interaction with the USI; as also did heads of diplomatic missions on being posted to New Delhi.

A few words now on the increased activities. I turned my focus on pursuing a couple of 'visionary ideas' of my predecessors, Colonel Pyara Lal and Major General Samir Sinha. Firstly, providing a platform for interested members to undertake study and research on selected security related subjects. And secondly, setting up a programme for research work on the history of our Armed Forces. General Sinha, while at the helm, had already initiated action for setting up a Centre for Research but the process was stalled somewhat by the need to focus on construction of the new premises where provision had already been made in the main office block for a dozen rooms to enable the setting up of work stations for research scholars. Thanks to the understanding, magnanimity, and goodwill displayed by the then Service Chiefs, Admiral VS Shekawat, General Shankar Roy Choudhury, and Air Chief Marshal SK Sarin, all former colleagues (who had jointly inaugurated the new premises), in providing grants as corpus, we instituted three Chairs for Research at the USI, appropriately named after the first post-Independence Chiefs of the three Services. Thus was born the USI Centre for Research



to function under the oversight of the DD&E. In a short while, through the rapport we had with the DRDO and at the MEA, two more Chairs of Excellence were instituted with the corpus they provided, named the DS Kothari Chair and the MEA Chair. A few years later, on the basis of a suggestion submitted by me, the Council approved increasing the scope of activity of the Centre, its re-designation as the Centre for Strategic Studies and Simulation (USI CS3), and institution of a new post of Deputy Director as its head. Through a process of selection by a Sub Committee constituted for the process, Brigadier Arun Sehgal, who had recently retired from the Net Assessment Directorate at HQ Integrated Defence Staff, was appointed as the first Deputy Director of USI CS3. Arun had served as my Brigade Major in 1983 and it was a pleasure to have him join my team. As things went, we were able to achieve a fair bit, including initiation of the conduct of 'Net Assessment' exercises at institutions like the National Defence College, and compilation of a National Security Strategy paper for submission to the then National Security Adviser, MK Narayanan, an old friend and colleague from the days when he was Director Intelligence Bureau and I the Director General Military Operations.

The next area of focus was the setting up of a Centre for Armed Forces Historical Research. In this endeavour, in addition to the unqualified backing of the members of the Governing Council, I was privileged to have the support, advice, and assistance of senior USI members like Generals Samir Sinha, Stan Menezes, JFR Jacob, Mathew Thomas, VK Singh (my predecessor as DGMO), Ian Cardozo, and many others at various levels. With some persistent efforts, I was able to get the three Service Chiefs to issue directions for the allotment of grants amounting to Rupees 40 lakhs (of which the Army HQ contribution was 30 lakhs) as corpus to the USI for setting up a Centre for Armed Forces Historical Research (USI CAFHR). The funding aspect having been successfully resolved, I got Army HQ to depute a re-employed Colonel to help in setting up the Centre as its Secretary. A great dedicated individual was deputed, whose only knowledge about history was the spelling of the word. That notwithstanding, he set about the tasks I gave him and we soon had a couple of projects under way, under the watchful eyes of the

members of the USI CAFHR Board of Management headed by Lieutenant General Mathew Thomas, another great mentor and a person with a sense of history. In the meanwhile, it so happened that I caught up with Squadron Leader RTS Chhina when he came to the USI to receive the MacGregor Medal that had been awarded to him for a particularly commendable helicopter reconnaissance that he had carried out in the Northern Glaciers area. In my conversation with him, I determined that he was a military historian, having already done some work not only on Indian Air Force history but also on the wider range of Indian military history. I, therefore, coaxed, cajoled and finally got him to sign up as the Assistant Secretary at the USI CAFHR. With that arrangement, the CAFHR took off and began to establish itself as the fountainhead for research on the Indian Armed Forces and the repository of artefacts, documents, etc. on the Indian military. In due course, Rana Chhina assumed charge as the Secretary of the Centre and carried forward its activities with greater vigour. It is indeed a matter of tremendous satisfaction that, both the USI CS3 and the USI CAFHR have established themselves as recognised centres of excellence in their respective areas of expertise. Another aspect that gives one great satisfaction is that the various projects undertaken by the two centres have been published in book form by various publishing houses that were only too keen to do so, and have found wide circulation; besides, of course, complimentary copies having been sent to the Ministers of Defence and External Affairs, the Scientific Adviser to the Defence Minister, and the three Service Chiefs.

While doing all this, I also fulfilled the commitments that came my way of participating in United Nations peacekeeping events at UN HQ in New York, and various other international forums. In the process, I was motivated into initiating action on something that had been on my mind ever since I returned from my assignment in the former Yugoslavia. Namely, the imperative need for institutionalising the preparation and training of our contingents, and personnel, being deputed for the increasing number of peacekeeping missions being mounted by the UN. Notwithstanding the outstanding performance of Indian peacekeepers over the years in various parts of the globe, there

was little doubt that a couple of weeks training devoted to familiarising our personnel with UN procedures, the specific nuances of UN peacekeeping, dealing with other UN agencies in the field particularly United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), human rights aspects, role and function of some of the international non-governmental organisations (NGOs), dealing with the media and so on, would go a long way in enhancing their performance. Having consolidated my thoughts on the subject, I tested the validity, desirability and acceptability of the proposal by interacting with a sampling of serving colleagues at the working level, like the Staff Duties Directorate who were responsible for the deployment and oversight of our personnel on UN missions, former force commanders, military observers, staff officers and contingent commanders, as also some veterans who had been on missions. I was indeed overwhelmed by the unanimous and enthusiastic endorsement of the idea, and then thought it fit to run it past the Joint Secretary UN Division in the MEA. Here again I was completely overwhelmed by the enthusiastic support it received from Ambassador Dinkar Srivastava, who played a stellar role later in getting it through the maze within the MEA, particularly in terms of the funding aspect that was vital for the effective implementation of the project. I then ran the proposal past the USI Governing Council and secured unanimous endorsement. Thus buoyed, I set about putting together a formal proposal for setting up Centre for United Nations Peacekeeping under the aegis of the USI. With the USI providing the premises for housing the Centre, Army Headquarters providing the operating staff (of a colonel, a couple of lieutenant colonels, a couple of clerks and an office orderly or two), and the MEA providing the funds for the conduct of formal courses, particularly the ones in which it was intended that students from friendly foreign countries of the developing world be invited to attend. In order to get things moving without the usual bureaucratic hurdles, I decided to take the proposal to the very top. Since I had already established a reasonable working relationship with the then Defence Minister Shri George Fernandes, I called on him to make my submission, and not only found him receptive to the idea but quite enthusiastic about it. I then called on my old colleague and batch-mate from our days at

the Indian Military Academy, Jaswant Singh, who was the External Affairs Minister, and secured his unqualified endorsement. Armed with these endorsements, I worked on the Defence and Foreign Secretaries, both of whom I knew quite well, and the Chief of the Army Staff, General Ved Malik, an old friend and colleague, and in no time at all, had things moving towards establishment of the USI CUNPK as it came to be known. With the approval of the Council, the USI CUNPK was launched through an inaugural event in the form of an international seminar in collaboration with the Challenges Forum affiliated to the Stockholm based Folke Bernadotte Academy of whose International Advisory Board I had been nominated as a member. The seminar was well attended in terms of international participation, by USI members, personnel from the Service Headquarters and local units, and local diplomatic mission representatives. I look back with great pride and joy at the initiative as, besides continuing to run national courses and assist in the training of contingents deputed for UN missions, the CUNPK has gone on to become an internationally acclaimed Centre of Excellence that is increasingly being called upon to run events and courses on behalf of the UN Department of Peace Operations, as also in collaboration with many countries of the developed and developing world, and with organisations like the International Committee of the Red Cross. While with UN peacekeeping, I am happy to recall that one of the major events conducted at the USI, during my tenure, was a talk by my good friend and former colleague Kofi Annan, when he was on a formal visit to India in his capacity as the UN Secretary General, and graciously acceded to my request that he speak at the Institution. It was the only occasion in the twelve and a half years tenure as Director that I found the Major General Samir Sinha Auditorium not only filled to capacity, but overflowing.

As I close this rather long and rambling narrative on the occasion of the 150<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the founding of the United Service Institution of India, I cannot but express my joyful gratitude to the Almighty for granting me, after a successful first innings of just under four decades in Indian Army uniform, a most rewarding 'second innings' of twelve and a half years at the helm of this unique Institution. May it continue to thrive in the years ahead and serve its membership that comprises the Indian Armed Forces

fraternity of those in uniform and its veterans, and the wider strategic community in the country, in full measure!

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