

Regimental Soldiering: Changing Values

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Abstract

The article looks at the Regimental system of the Indian army, especially in the Infantry. It recounts its advantages and values and gives the reader a feel of the functioning of the system in war and peace. The author embellishes the article with glimpses of Regimental life as he saw and experienced it. He states that the Regimental values like discipline, obedience of orders, comradeship and harmonious officer-men relationship required to be reset in view of social changes were taking place.

Soldiering may be defined as the activity of a person engaged in military service. Regimental soldiering in the context of this essay implies service in the regiment of infantry, armour and artillery, but mainly infantry and armour. But regimental soldiering has a wider meaning that encompasses not only professional life in the regiment but the entire gamut of relationships between soldiers and their officers — professional, personal, emotional, cultural and at times beyond the pale of all the above. Regimental soldiering is the *raison d'être* of life in infantry.

For officers and men, the battalion/ regiment becomes his second home; in fact, young officers and men spend more years in the regiment than with family at home. It is in the regiment that ties of friendship are formed that last a lifetime. Officers and men of the battalion/regiment go through the hardships of training to prepare them for the test in battle. And when time comes, they go to war together not knowing who will die and who may survive, but each deriving strength from the closeness of the other, keeping the memory of the dead alive in some corner of their heart, grieving silently, but getting along with life amongst the survivors, the regimental bond now becoming stronger than before.

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Battalions become much like a family, held together by intangibles — leadership, camaraderie, tradition, and kinship. In this sense, a rifle platoon, the lowest fighting sub-unit is the closest microcosm of the idea of family; it is the sub-unit where the relationship between the led and the leader is “immediate, continuous and real.” There is no place for make-believe, excuses, or explanations. In a platoon everything is transparent; there is no place to hide.

Regimental life among many other things is the product of the regimental system; a system wherein a soldier once enlisted in the regiment and then posted to one of the battalions of the regiment after receiving basic training at the regimental Centre remains on the battalion roll till the end of his service. He may go out on extra-regimental employment or instructional appointment for short periods but will return to his parent battalion or regiment. This means that troops of the combat arms (mainly infantry and armour) serve through their military career in the same battalion or the regiment. This applies equally to officers, who are trained at military academies to be a commissioned officer in the Indian Army. Once an officer cadet, after his pre-commissioning training, is allotted his arm or service and in the case of infantry and armour his regiment as well, the officer becomes an inseparable part of the regiment.

The regimental system as it is understood today was created by the British in 1922 when the infantry was re-organised in regimental groups. At that time class composition was an important component of the regimental system. The regimental system still operates in the Indian Army, but many changes have been introduced in tune with the ‘Republican’ constitution of India. The legacy of ill-conceived ‘martial races’ has been abandoned. In some of the older regiments, recruits are still drawn from specified classes, but new regiments draw their recruits on either regional or ‘All India’ basis.

The Indian Army was modeled on the pre-independence British Indian Army and many attributes of regimental soldiering have been imbibed from that time. But the practices of the past have evolved with the changing times; the evolution, however, has been gradual for any abrupt change or break from the past had the risk of upsetting the balance. During the period between the two World

Wars, the officers in the regiments of the Indian Army were overwhelmingly British with a sprinkling of King Commissioned Indian Officers (KCIOs). Here is a description of a regimental officer's routine that existed before the Second World War:

"His day started before dawn when his bearer brought him a cup of tea. Soon after dawn he would be on parade for PT, riding school, range duty, weapon training, dummy thrusting, bayonet practice, close order drill or whatever. Then to the mess for breakfast, and after breakfast more parade, stables, office work, until luncheon. The two hours after luncheon would be spent working with 'Munshi' for a language exam, or a promotion exam, or studying for the staff college (which during hot weather was also a euphemism for Persian PT or afternoon kip.) Then after a cup of tea some sort of exercise: polo or schooling polo ponies, tennis or golf or squash at the club, hockey or football or tent pegging with the men."

*"Bachelor officers normally dined formally in mess resplendent in mess kit; married officers generally dined in the mess only on the weekly guest-night when a toast was drunk to the King Emperor. After dinner there might be a visit to the cinema, or perhaps a hop to the club, for which one did not wear mess-kit but a dinner jacket. The latest joined subaltern was probably made the Mess Secretary. This was the routine in military stations, five days in a week. (Sundays and Thursdays were holidays). The orderly officer of the day would have other duties like making rounds of sentries, turning out the guard and walking round the horse lines at unexpected times. The hot weather was given over to leave and individual training. Collective training started in early autumn, first at troop/platoon level, then the squadron/company level working up to brigade and perhaps divisional training by February."*²

In 1930s hardly anyone expected that there will soon be another world war. Hopes for active service were limited to the Frontier for which the Indian Army was well trained, but it was neither equipped nor trained for the World War. The Second World War changed the easy flow of life in the regiments; the focus of soldiering also changed to training for war but the regimental compact between officers and men remained unbroken that helped

to adjust to vagaries of the World War. But on occasions when communication between officers and men broke down, the result was tragic as in Singapore in 1942.

The routine in the battalions in peace stations did not change much after independence from what it was in the period between the two world wars. When I joined the battalion of a Gorkha regiment (3/9 GR) in July 1960 at Jabalpur, the routine was much the same. The commanding officer, the second in command and the company commanders except one, were commissioned during the war or soon after. There was only one company commander who had graduated from the Indian Military Academy (IMA) at Dehradun.³ Junior officers, below the rank of field officer (Major), were commissioned through the IMA. There were a number of decorated JCOs and NCOs who had taken part in the 'Chindit' operation or had taken part in operations in J&K against Pakistani invaders in 1947-48.

On joining the unit, I was given the command of a rifle platoon. I trained, played and for one month dined with my platoon. Young officers (YOs) had to learn and pass regimental language examination (Gurkhali); it was mandatory. The ability to converse in regimental language was important to connect with the troops. I was expected to read the two volumes of regimental history (pre-independence), but there was hardly any guidance from senior officers; this was because prior to independence Indian officers could not serve in Gorkha regiments; they were transferred to Gorkha regiments on the eve of independence mostly from regiments that went to Pakistan on partition. Senior JCOs filled the void in educating the customs and traditions of the Battalion. YOs had to know all men of their platoon by name. (The above practices were followed in other regiments as well with variations in conformity with customs and practices in those regiments)

Newly commissioned officers had to pass 'Retention Examination' within two years of joining the regiment. The syllabus included knowledge of regimental history, working knowledge of regimental language, customs and practices and practical test in fieldcraft and section/platoon drills. This was a good grounding for young officers. I cannot recall why this excellent practice of grounding a newly commissioned officer in the regiments went out practice sometime after the disastrous 1962 war.

Games and adventure sports have always been intrinsic to soldiering in the regiments. Sporting culture has, however, evolved with changing times. In the cavalry regiments polo was popular and between the world wars many indulged in pigsticking, which was dangerous and exciting but cruel. An offshoot of pigsticking was tent pegging, which is still a popular sport in the cavalry⁴. A subaltern in the infantry who did not go out shooting — *shikar* or *blood sport* — was considered lacking in military virtues. It was emphasized that the sport inculcated ‘killer’ instinct, fieldcraft and stealth. Unfortunately, as *shikar* became popular and fashionable, it also became unregulated and played havoc with wildlife. The tiger population began to disappear, and many species of birds and animals became extinct. The situation became so critical that there was a world-wide movement against wanton killing of wildlife; fortunately, regimental priorities changed with the times and unregulated *shikar* became taboo. Today, officers have become enthusiastic wildlife conservationists and protectors of wild life. They still shoot but with their cameras.

Games are inseparable from regimental life. Units found time for games even during collective training and exercises. It was a sight to see the whole battalion out on playing fields, dressed in company color shirts, kicking, hitting, dribbling, or throwing a ball. Games period was like being on parade. Before the debacle in 1962, I remember senior officers placing games in two categories — troop games and officers’ games — football and hockey (games that were popular amongst troops) were troop games and squash, tennis, golf etc. were officers’ games. The differentiation, which I think was a legacy from our colonial past, was intriguing. This invidious view of games is no longer prevalent but the culture of sports that celebrates creating gladiators at the cost of mass participation has done more harm than good for the future of sports and more importantly for building esprit-de-corps.

Paradoxically, passion for sports can manifest in extreme ways. The one recurring complaint of infantry battalions in the last few decades has been that sub-unit commanders seldom get their men together for training for war; one of the reasons often listed is organising formation level sports. I recall when I was commanding a brigade (1986-88), my three battalions did nothing for nearly three months in two consecutive years other than making the decrepit polo ground fit for Northern Command Athletics and then

organising and conducting the meet. Interestingly, it is not a new phenomenon. This is what Lt GW Lathbury wrote in 1936:

“Despite the fact that an officer’s spare time has been considerably reduced, only a small proportion of the extra period spent with his regiment is devoted to the essential side of soldiering, which is training for war. One might say that the time is divided in the following proportion: one-third training for war; one-third barrack soldiering or interior economy; while the remaining time is not infrequently taken up in maintaining the Army in what it tends to become, a glorified sports organization.”⁵

There are other aspects of regimental soldiering that have changed. When I joined the Battalion in 1960, officers were expected to be physically robust, force march 50 km in field service marching order (FSMO) and shoot straight. Young officers were expected to call on married officers, organize mess functions, familiarize with spirituous and fermented beverages and how they were served. Life had a pattern and there was bond of a family. Aspirations were limited; all that an officer aspired professionally was to be able to command the battalion. This regimen was considered adequate for the type of warfare envisaged then or in near future. Intellectual pursuits were not discouraged but there was no guidance or encouragement either. Officers had not heard of perspective planning or thoughts on the changing nature of war although the army had been fighting insurgency in Naga Hills since 1956.

The pattern changed after 1962. Traumatized by the defeat by the Chinese, the army developed professional ethos. There was not much time for social and mess functions, regular dinner nights or dressing up in ceremonials. New weapons and equipment were introduced and innovative ways to fight with them were evolved. I remember repugnant practices like the use of ‘thunder boxes’ by officers as dry latrines in field were discarded in the wake of experiences in 1962. The use of words like ‘sweeper’ and ‘mehtar’ (person who cleared night soil) went out of the vocabulary. The professionalism of regiments improved; professional competence was built upon the foundation of regimental pride, one complementing the other.

The victory in 1971 War was a watershed event in the annals of Indian military history. There was newfound confidence and

professionalism in the Indian Armed Forces. Regimental officers were exposed to new trends in warfare and the impact of technology and new weapons on the conduct of war. While the professional horizon of regimental officers expanded, the training curriculum was crowded and took away a large chunk of their time away from their unit and sub-units, which adversely affected practical training and officers-men relationship.

Then, without much warning, a set of circumstances developed in the decade of 1980s, which provided an impetus to Pakistan to wrest Kashmir from India. The proxy war started by Pakistan in 1989 had entered a dangerous phase that engulfed the valley in violent uprising not seen before. The nature of threat and the way to fight had changed and the burden of fighting and winning the proxy war fell primarily upon infantry.

The army had battle tested operating procedures for conventional war but the 'no war no peace' scenario that it faced in Kashmir where a violent insurrection had broken out, posed an altogether different set of challenges. The army has come a long way from the early days of counter-insurgency operations in Naga and Mizo Hills when the battalions were groping with the manner of fighting the insurgents to the present, when the counter-insurgency doctrine is hinged on the amorphous 'winning the hearts and minds' (WHAM) of the populace. Insurgent wars had passed through many phases — guerilla war, low intensity conflict, proxy war and terrorism and yet no clear and unambiguous rules of engagement have been laid down. Human rights organizations have added to the woes of soldiers by their biased reporting, which are invariably loaded against them, painting them as trigger happy and rapists. Such an image has adverse psychological effect on soldiers. Infantry battalions have borne the maximum brunt and casualties. The unceasing deployments of infantry battalions in counter-insurgency operations, unambiguous rules of engagement, focus on results measured by number of terrorists eliminated and 'no mistake' syndrome have together led to the situation where neither officers nor men are enthusiastic about regimental soldiering.

As decades passed, regimental values began to change. Regimental values like discipline, obedience of orders, comradeship and harmonious officer-men relationship required to be reset in

view of social changes were taking place. I recall my interview with the commanding officer for the first time in June 1960 after commissioning; it was short and lasted only a few minutes. After exchange of pleasantries, I was advised, "work hard; the army has people that look after your three Ps - pay, posting and promotion - so don't let these bother you." There is a generational change from that advice to the concerns of regimental officers today when even junior officers worry about their postings and transfers. There was a time when regimental officers were reluctant to be posted out from the battalion and many petitioned the Colonel of the Regiment to get them back to the battalion. The situation has reversed; motivation to serve with troops is on the wane.

The relationship between soldiers and officers is an important component of life in a regiment; it may be called the regimental compact or covenant that obliges the officer to look after the welfare of men under his command in all its dimensions — training, pay and allowances, leave, medical care, career progression, family welfare and spiritual fulfillment. In return the men give unconditional loyalty to the officer and do his bidding, confident that the officer will put their interest and the interest of the regiment before his own. The underlying sentiments that inform the regimental compact are formed over a period. I recall as company commanders in the unit, we kept record of every aspect of individual's personal and professional details. Officers ensured that casualties⁶ (that affected an individual's pay and allowances were correctly and promptly published. If an individual had a problem at home, say, some land dispute or harassment of the family, the commanding officer took it up with the district administration. As time passed, the response of civil administration became lackadaisical and finally a stage was reached when the complaint was not even acknowledged. The broader compact between the soldier and the civil administration that obliges the latter to mitigate the grievances of soldiers has no place in its charter. This has had an unintended consequence; the soldier has come to believe that regimental officers have no influence on the government. He therefore hobnobs with the local administration and political class for redress of personal problems; in many cases with criminals who wield greater influence than elected leaders. Such a situation is hardly conducive to strengthening trust between regimental officers and men.

The challenges for the regimental officers, particularly the commanding officers of infantry battalions, are becoming perilous. The complexity of their job in the army that is officially at peace but forever in war as described by one of its former chief, Gen Shankar Roychowdhury, has no parallel in any other profession. Regimental officers are under increasing pressure; on one hand they must honor the regimental compact and on the other to faithfully carry out orders of the top brass, one quite often in conflict with the other. The commanding officer and his officers are always 'in line of fire.'

Endnotes

¹ Charles Chenevix, *The Indian Army: And the King's Enemies 1900-1947*, (Thames and Hudson, London, 1988), p118

² Ibid, 119

³ Before independence, Gorkha Regiments were officered exclusively by British officers. Other regiments had both British and Indian officers.

⁴ Byron Farwell, a renowned military historian, has written a fascinating account on the subject of polo playing, tiger hunting and pig sticking in his book titled 'Armies of the Raj'.

⁵ Lathbury GW, 'Wasted Time in Regimental Soldiering' Journal of the RUSI, Vol xxxi, Feb-Nov 1936

⁶ Formal publication of occurrences in service which directly or indirectly affect pay and allowances.