

# **‘Nil Nisi Bonum’ — Of the Dead say Nothing but Good**

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## **Abstract**

*This article is both, a eulogy to late General TN Raina, the Chief of the Army Staff (COAS) of the Indian Army from 01 June 1975 to 31 May 1978; and an advice to not speak ill of someone after he has passed away. With first-hand experience of the man and the events of his times, the author brings out little known/forgotten facts about a man who died more than 40 years ago after a long and distinguished career.*

## **Introduction**

A few days back, an old internet untruth was recirculated on Army WhatsApp groups criticising ‘Gen Raina’, one of Indian Army’s former Chiefs, who had passed away in October 1980. The Latin phrase *De mortuis nihil nisi bonum*, “Of the dead, [say] nothing but Good”, abbreviated as *Nil nisi bonum*, is a mortuary aphorism indicating that it is socially inappropriate to speak ill of the dead as they are unable to justify themselves. Attributed to Chilon of Sparta, one of the seven sages of Greece in the 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE, it is eternally relevant. This short article reaches out to a military audience to say that please do remember that on WhatsApp or other social media you are not in a ‘one to one conversation’, but on a ‘public platform’ of the kind from which any one can resort to forwarding your comments to one or many other groups, or individuals, including in civilian forums without any qualm, check, or hindrance. This causes a good amount of damage to anyone about whom unverified facts are being circulated. In this case, the internet untruth harmed the late Army Chief’s and officer’s dignity and honour. Concurrently, since such media is in public

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domain, it also irreparably hurts not only the ex COAS’s respect and standing in society but does some damage to the army and the armed forces in the eyes of civilian and readers from younger generations. I may also add that these are my personal first-hand views from the service and close interaction I had with him for many years.

### **The General Tapishwar Narain ‘Tappy’ Raina I Knew**

On commissioning in December 1956, I joined the 14 Kumaon (Gwalior) which is now 5 Mechanised Infantry. Later I served in the 12<sup>th</sup> battalion of the Kumaon Regiment. In 1957, Indian commissioned officers started getting commissioned into the Jammu and Kashmir Rifles (from 1948 till 1957 no young officers had been commissioned into this regiment which till that time was a State Force which was not amalgamated into the Indian Army). The result of no commissioning for almost nine years was that by 1962, there was a big deficiency in the middle order officer cadre. Consequently, a number of officers from other infantry regiments in the ranks of Major and Senior Captains were selected for transfer to the Jammu and Kashmir Rifles. I was one of them.

While in the Kumaon Regiment, I was in the same battalion as General Raina — a battalion which he later commanded — and, hence, had served under him for a long period and known him very well. He was a gentleman and an honourable officer, leave alone his being counted as one of our ‘Outstanding Chiefs’ — in some reckonings — at a rather critical juncture (during the period of the Emergency) in our nation’s history. I call General Raina my ‘First Commanding Officer (CO)’ because my meaningful service started under him. After commissioning, I joined the battalion in January 1957. After a couple of months, I proceeded on the Officers Physical Training (PT) Course, my first army course. After the PT course at Pune when I returned, my first CO, Lieutenant Colonel MMS Mathur, had been posted out and Lieutenant Colonel TN Raina had taken over the battalion. I served under Lieutenant Colonel Raina as his ‘Battalion Intelligence Officer’ for the entire two years of his Battalion Command and hence came to know him very well. I had also interacted with him on numerous other occasions during my service, picking up some great ethical and value-based learning/lessons which have guided me, as also served me, well by making me whatever I am.

To give a brief measure of the man and the soldier he was, it was during his time as the Chief of the Army Staff that two major operational initiatives were born and executed. Firstly, moving the Regimental Centres to stations far away from the Indo-Pakistan border and moving fighting formations to those closer locations vacated by the Centres. The aim, as is obvious, was the very desired 'quick operational build up' which was then badly needed. Fighting formations located in the interior of the country was a British era legacy when troops were required to maintain internal order and there were few or no threats on the borders of British India. This move was done against tremendous opposition and pressure from both, some politicians and some very senior retired Generals who did not want their respective centres to lose the huge immovable assets created by them. But General Raina stood like a rock and fully executed the plan in the interests of our country's operational readiness.

Secondly, he became the only Chief to set up an 'Expert Committee' under Lieutenant General Krishna Rao, with Lieutenant Generals Sundarji and BC Nanda as members, to prepare a relatively long term and futuristic '25 years Perspective Plan' for our army, something not done by any other Chief till then.

Thirdly, on the welfare side, the biggest step was getting our men their first pension authorisation by prevailing over the government to agree to enhancing 'Colour Service' from 'seven years' to 'pensionable service'. Also, on the pure welfare side, the 'Army Group Insurance (AGI)' and the 'Army Welfare Housing Organisation (AWHO)' were his innovations and creations, which were, subsequently, copied by many others, after liaising with our set ups.

### **General TN Raina's Stated Negatives**

It has been said that General Raina hid his ailments in order to protect his promotions. As I know it, General Raina never ever hid any ailment of his from anyone, at any time in his life. I know it for sure because when he was a Lieutenant Colonel and we were on a 'Training Exercise' at Ferozepur, he was suddenly taken ill by way of experiencing 'chest pain' on the left side, which the Battalion Regimental Medical Officer immediately diagnosed as likely 'Heart Attack'. In my presence, all the senior Company Commanders strongly advised then Lieutenant Colonel Raina, to

go for 'no reporting' and to resort to 'outside private treatment' with the aim of not taking the risk of becoming a Low Medical Category (LMC) to safeguard his further promotions. He totally ignored their advice and, without batting an eyelid, reported his problem officially to the Divisional Headquarters at Jalandhar and immediately got himself evacuated by road to the best hospital at Amritsar, which after seven days stay, and full check-up, cleared him and sent him back to the Battalion. I don't know which other ailment the posts refer to. Some people used to talk of his one eye, the other having been lost — as I recall — due to an accident as a Captain at a firing range. The fact was that he could see a lot more with his one eye than we could do with our two.

There is also criticism that he went after LMC officers while safeguarding his own ailment/disability. Let me clarify that the LMC case was also a decision taken by him in the best interests of the army and the country. The decision was based on his analysis of those cases wherein it was found that some people 'managed' to become LMC soon after promotion to get a good and comfortable posting based on their 'LMC Status' and then again get 'upgraded' before the next board so as not to miss the next promotion. They had developed this into a very fine art. All that he did was, he made all such people to go to postings which were as difficult as were permissible within the 'medical classification'. Just this and no more, and yet there was cribbing and noise resulting in loose talk.

Some people are also critical of the award of *Maha Vir Chakra* (MVC) to him after the 1962 war. About the award of MVC to him in 1962, let us face the fact that 1962 was — except for a few exceptions — overall a shameful chapter in the history of the Indian Army. If anywhere we did conduct ourselves with some acceptable dignity and honour, it was either his Brigade in Ladakh or, possibly, a couple of Battalions in the East in 2 Mountain Division. So, this MVC, strictly speaking, was not a 'bravery award' in the traditional sense but an award for leading the Brigade in a competent and honourable manner. This explanation is my own and its validity, or otherwise, would need to be checked with what was written in the citation for MVC. As an aside, I would like to share that I do recall that post 1962, when General Raina was on leave at Delhi and I met him at the Sangli Hostel, I asked him, "Sir, do tell us the story of your MVC". He, very nonchalantly, told

me in Punjabi, addressing me as 'Chotu' (little one) which was my battalion nickname, "*Chotu, Main ki keeta, Kuch Nahin. Oye, 'Banda kare Kawalian, te Rab kare Swalia'*", which roughly means, "Chotu, I did nothing, we only foul up, God sorts out". He never claimed anything big for himself and was always very humble. Therefore, it was the army and the government which conferred this award on him for whatever reasons.

### Conclusion

I have written this brief to enable those who have not lived in General Raina's time, and are unaware of him, to have an insight into the man and his character. The article is also to make us all reflect whether it is right to cast judgement on anyone's actions decades after his demise? While I am for freedom in speech and the written word, we should be sure whether we are using this 'right' to so called 'free speech' with due balance and responsibility or are we going overboard. I have had the great privilege of enjoying some bit of beneficial guidance and imbibed great learning from many senior officers. The four that stand on the top in my consciousness are Generals KS Thimayya, Sam Manekshaw, TN Raina, and Kashmir Singh Katoch. If I may say, I do think that General Raina, in his own right, was as good and as accomplished as the others. His strongest belief was in the Chetwode adage that "The Country Comes First, Always and Every Time". Therefore, his every decision, and the promptness with which it was taken, was influenced and dictated by just this consideration.

Finally, I will end by saying, that, if someone is in disagreement with my line of thinking, I would say that they are welcome to their thoughts. They should only air them in case they have first-hand/ personal knowledge and not only on hearsay, and, thus, uphold the adage '*Nil Nisi Bonum*'.