

Pratap Singh of the Indian Legion

Lieutenant Commander Neeraj Malhotra

“God and Soldier, both remembered,
In times of danger not before;
When danger passes,
God is forgotten and the Soldier slighted.”

Lord Byron

It was just by chance, that I happened to meet this tall, wiry, old yet energetic man - Shri Pratap Singh. Despite being over 80 years old and life having been harsh (as I learnt later), age seems to rest lightly on his shoulders. The fire in his tired eyes and the pride in his voice, which is kindled when he talks about times gone by and of the exploits of the Indian Legion, is as if he is magically transformed into the young sepoy who gave up everything to fight the yoke of thralldom under which his motherland toiled. But, then I am rushing ahead, and if ever there was a tale, which needed telling, then this is that one.

Pratap Singh was born in Hoshiarpur district of Punjab in 1920. Being an active, well built and as he fondly remembers – hot-blooded young man looking for adventure joining the Army was only natural. Thus begins the saga of this young lad who volunteered for and enrolled in the British Indian Army on 25 June 1940 at Meerut and joined 3/2 Punjab Regiment. On completion of his initial training, he embarked at Mumbai on 22 May 1941 and disembarked at Port Sudan on 25 May 1941 entering Egypt and the thick of the World War II on 8 June 1941, where the British were reeling under the Blitzkrieg of the Germans. Here he was deployed as part of his Regiment at Misr and Tobruk. In the famous battle of Tobruk he was captured by the Germans, from where he was transported to Hamburg in Germany in 1942, as a prisoner of war.

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The Indian prisoners were addressed by Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose at Hamburg who exhorted the soldiers to join the Indian Legion and fight for the freedom of India. The reason, as told by Shri Pratap Singh for volunteering for the Indian Legion, despite all odds and risks, was a desire to see India free. There German officers and men trained them for a period of three months which included a daily dose of German language for two hours. They were given training in weapons and arms, which was at par with the Germans. Living conditions and the behaviour of the German soldiers towards Indian soldiers bore no discrimination.

On completion of training his unit was moved to Normandy in France. Here the unit enhanced fortification of the German defence by digging in their gun placements and carrying out patrolling. The quality of life of soldiers was good as variety and quantity of rations was the same as that supplied to regular German soldiers. The only complaint, however, was that for the period of five years of service in Africa and Europe he was unable to get what he really desired – a simple *roti*. What Shri Pratap Singh recalls, with a great sense of pride, is the destruction of three Churchill tanks, even while the German retreat from Normandy was in progress.

Momentous events overtook the flight of the Germans against the Allied onslaught and the Indian Legion surrendered to the American forces in 1945. These prisoners were kept in internment in Italy for one month and thereafter shipped to Mumbai. From Mumbai these troops or rather prisoners were distributed to jails throughout the length and breadth of India.

Shri Pratap Singh was kept in Multan for three months and thereafter transferred to the Central Jail at Delhi. The prisoners were interrogated by the Criminal Investigation Department (CID), and soldiers who had during the process of war, either destroyed British property or killed British soldiers were segregated and they were never heard or seen again. This team used to generally arrive at 1800 hrs during the evening Roll Call and pull out such soldiers and take them to Red Fort – from where nobody returned. For destruction of three tanks, Shri Pratap Singh's number came and he too was transferred to the Red Fort. But fortunately for him,

the news of atrocities on these soldiers had become public and the Red Fort was surrounded by over one lakh Indians demanding their release. In addition, their case was taken up by Jawaharlal Nehru and Bhulabhai Desai. All 500 soldiers who were interned at the Red Fort at that time were released and transferred to their training centres.

However, before these soldiers reached their training centres, they were handed over their discharge slips stating that their services were no longer required being ex-Indian National Army (INA), alongwith a measly sum of Rs. 210/- with no pension, pay or allowances. This was done with a view to disperse these traitors (as branded by the Britishers), for the Indian Legion posed a threat to the very bedrock of the British Empire – the loyalty of the British Indian Army, which at that point in time was one of the largest volunteer armies of the world and upon whose unquestioned loyalty stood this edifice. Such tremors as the Indian Legion were to be nipped in the bud, by the Britishers, before they could consume this colony in a whirlwind of freedom. The irony of the situation is that those soldiers who were content to remain as prisoners of the Germans and did not fight against the British were retained in the British Indian Army and continued to draw all pay and allowances and post-retirement pension. While the men who had forsaken everything were left to fend for themselves – conveniently forgotten by the British and unknowingly not only by our Government and people but time and history, as well.

In 1973 pension for the INA soldiers was commenced. However, Shri Pratap Singh, who had been hunting for jobs to keep his body and soul together, was so caught up in his fight for daily survival, that he never even came to know of this. From Nasik, where he was working as a mechanic in a garage, he moved to Port Blair in 1980 with a hope of a better job and life.

Unfortunately this is not a fairy tale and a man who had fought for this country is now left forgotten, without any land to his name, homeless and penniless. This tale needs telling for there must be many more such Pratap Singhs, valiant sons of India, who obscured by time and forgotten by history are trying to eke out an existence,

with only their failing memories to give them a sense of honour, whom we seem to have not only forgotten but forsaken. If we have to remain as a nation, it is essential that we should remember the sacrifices of these valiant men and ensure that now, in their time of need we should come together as one to help them. For the freedom that we enjoy today is the direct result of the efforts of such men.

But do we recognise the efforts of such men and women as a nation? The answer would be an emphatic *NO!* If the issue of or rather what seems in our country the non-issue of construction of a National War Memorial is anything to go by. It is indeed a sad state of affairs, that as a nation, even after elapse of more than half a century post Independence, we have not been able to spare the time, effort and money to build a commemorative symbol to honour the brave men who laid down their lives in Wars to safeguard us. In this context, it is worthwhile to mention that the British have built a new war memorial right in the heart of London, to honour those brave Indian soldiers who went down fighting in both the World Wars.

What really amazes one is the fact that when asked, if given an opportunity to go back in time and change history, which path would he take and why, Shri Pratap Singh without a moment's hesitation said that he had taken a vow to fight for India and whether it was the British or the Pakistanis, or any other nation he would do so with all his body and mind!

ADDRESS UPDATE

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