

# “Thimayya of India : Without Doubt the Greatest”

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March 2006 marks the 100<sup>th</sup> birth anniversary of, perhaps the greatest soldier the Indian Army has produced. He is none other than “Thimayya of India” as this Officer and Gentleman is described by Geoffrey Evans. He was born in Coorg. A statue of General K S Thimayya, distinguished soldier statesman, stands proudly in the heart of Madigeri, Coorg.

This piece is by no means a mini biography or encyclopedic profile, but is penned by one who had the proud privilege of serving under him from 1945 onwards when the then Brigadier Thimayya had the distinction of being selected to command the all Indian 268 Indian Infantry Brigade designated to be part of the British Indian Division (BRINDIV) of the British Commonwealth Occupation Forces (BCOF) in Japan.

Being a war time Indian Emergency Commissioned Officer of the Maratha Light Infantry in the mid 1940s, I was proud to hear of the exploits of Lieutenant Colonel K S Thimayya, then commanding a battalion of the Hyderabad Regiment in the Burma Campaign and award of the Distinguished Service Order (DSO). The citation reads, *inter alia*, “Lieutenant Colonel Thimayya handled every situation with cool judgement and cheerful confidence” during the severe fighting at Maungdaw in the spring of 1944. He was then one of the three Indian Commanding Officers, the other two being Lieutenant Colonels Thorat and L P Sen, involved in the vital battle of Kangaw where his performance was described by Major General ‘Lakri’ Wood, GOC 26 Indian Infantry Division of the Fourteenth Army, as “outstanding”. Brigadier K S Thimayya, DSO, was the first Indian Commissioned Officer to command an operational brigade in Burma. Little did this writer dream that, he would be serving under this distinguished soldier at the end of World War II.

It was decided that the Indian Army would send an all Indian brigade as part of BRINDIV, to join the BCOF and oversee the demilitarisation of post-war Japan. As all the other Maratha Light Infantry battalions were deployed, in Trieste, and Java, the 1<sup>st</sup> never faced the Japanese, was selected to join this force in recognition of the contribution of the Maratha Light Infantry in World War II. The Indian Army representation in BRINDIV was drawn from all classes and communities.

Brigadier Thimayya had under him 5/1 Punjab under Lieutenant Colonel Maurice D'Apice, 1/5 Maratha Light Infantry under Lieutenant Colonel D W H Leeming, DSO, and the triple VC 2/5 Royal Gurkha Rifles commanded by Lieutenant Colonel E P Townsend, all British Officers. Both his principal Staff Officers were also British, viz Major James Heard of 6/13 Frontier Force Rifles, the Brigade Major, and Major Tom Corrigan of the Queens Regiment, the DAA&QMG. Brigadier Thimayya earned respect and was accepted by all as their Commander because of his cheerful disposition and judging his Officers on merit. He was proud of his own Regiment, the 19 Hyderabad, but he was never parochial in his dealings. The only representation of his Regiment in BRINDIV was the 19 Hyderabad Regimental Centre Brass Band. He could well have asked for his personal staff from his Regiment but did not do so. His staff was drawn from all classes and creeds; for instance Major Gonsalves and Lieutenant Colonel (later Major General) Yakub Munshi.

His Brigade HQ was located in the town of Matsue in Japan, the Prefectural Capital of Shimane Ken, Southern Hoshu. His popularity, among the Allied Troops including the Americans through their representatives in the American Military Government, and other Commonwealth Troops (AMGOT), was to be seen to be believed. His approach to the subjugated and defeated Japanese was humane, yet firm, so much so that when he was prematurely recalled to India for bigger things, there was universal regret among them. His dependability, tact and fair mindedness may be assessed from one incident. 2/5 Royal Gurkha Rifles, stationed at BRINDIV HQ Okayama, commanded exclusively by British Officers, more or less mutinied because of the differential treatment meted out to its men by British Military Police who, they justly felt, were unduly

targeting them for being friendly with Japanese. It was a serious matter. Major General Cowan, GOC BRINDIV was from the same Regiment. There would have been a major scandal. So HQ BCOF sought Brigadier Thimayya's intervention to resolve this ticklish issue. He went down to Okayama where the Battalion was located, first met the Gurkha Subedar Major, then the VCOs and finally some of the aggrieved men, and after a patient hearing he resolved the problem to the satisfaction of all concerned, but there was an aftermath. When India was granted independence in August 1947, the British Officers were quite certain that 2/5 Royal Gurkha Rifles, the pride of the 5<sup>th</sup> Royal Gurkhas (FF), would opt for His Majesty's Gurkhas. But to their utter shock and surprise, it decided to continue to serve in the new independent Indian Army. If personnel of this famous Battalion decided to do so, it was because of the humane intervention of Brigadier K S Thimayya.

In 1948, Major General K S Thimayya, DSO, was GOC 19 Infantry Division in Jammu and Kashmir responsible for security of the Valley. His exploits in the Kashmir Valley are well known. Suffice it to say that had Pandit Jawahar Lal Nehru listened to Major General Thimayya, who asked for just three more months to reach Muzaffarbad, we would not be facing the Kashmir problem. The author was tasked to provide a Guard of Honour at Srinagar Airfield for Panditji, accompanied by Sheikh Abdullah, Sir Girija Shankar Bajpai, the Foreign Secretary and Major General Thimayya, GOC 19 Infantry Division. It was a great honour to command this Guard of Honour on Panditji's first visit to the Valley after the 'invasion'. After Panditji and Sheikh Abdullah had moved off, Major General Thimayya, with a wink and a wave, said "I remember you". Small gestures like this exemplify the greatness of a born leader.

Major General Thimayya was visiting the Indo Pak border brigade commanded by Brigadier Sadanand Singh to update himself on the situation on this sensitive part of the border. The author was then the Brigade Major. Major General Thimaya must have been told by the Brigade Commander that his Brigade Major had been posted there after the Defence Services Staff College Course. When we met, he said words to this effect "Well, so you have come from the Staff College. I am sure you got through the entrance examination through a competitive vacancy by writing important points on your cuffs! Well done".

From there the author was posted to the UK. While there General Thimayya was selected to head the Neutral Nations Repatriation Commission (NNRC) in Korea. It was a tough assignment and to implement it, he was given an Indian Army force commanded by Major General S P P Thorat, his colleague in Burma. His experience in Japan helped him to face the odds with typical calm. So how does the writer fit into this situation? The Military Adviser's Office in London, was given the task of preparing the ship to carry the Indian Force to Korea and that task was entrusted to the author. Once again he was to have the privilege of being associated with "Thimayya of India". Two close friends were in that force as Observers; one Major Mark Valladares, Bengal Sappers, and the other Major (later Lieutenant General) Mathew Thomas, 2 PARA MARATHA who was with his battalion that was flown in. Also in the NNRC were some Indian Catholic Priests from Bombay known to the author who were inducted to look after the religious needs of both sides. They too spoke in the highest possible terms of General Thimayya and his masterful handling of the difficult task. It must have been this experience that led to his being nominated to handle yet another difficult international assignment on behalf of the United Nations; to head the UN Commission in Cyprus. It was on 19 December 1965 that "Thimayya of India" breathed his last after a heart attack. On 22 December 1965 a solemn farewell was accorded to him at Nicosia Airport as his body was flown to Bangalore in the presence of a large number of dignitaries.

The fitting tributes paid to him by the Cypriots and Turks say it all. Among those who paid tributes were: Mr Carlos Bernades, Representative of the UN Secretary General; Mr S Sen, High Commissioner; Colonel Arvind Jatar, MVC, Indian Contingent, United Nations Emergency Force (UNEF); Colonel J L Drewry, DSO, Deputy Chief of Staff and Brigadier A J Wilson, MBE, MC, Force COS. The pall bearers were from the Canadian Contingent and the Guard of Honour from the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion Canadian Guards. But this was not all. Lavish tributes were paid in the UN General Assembly as it stood in solemn silence for a minute after Secretary General U Thant announced the death of General Thimayya. The tributes were followed by many more; the representatives of Cyprus, Great Britain, Greece, Turkey and India. U Thant spoke of the General's "military ability, wisdom, his integrity and above all his

warm human qualities, a splendid example to those soldiers of peace".

A very low key last rites were held in Bangalore. Except for the Southern Army Commander, Lieutenant General Moti Sagar and local Officials, very few of the top brass from Delhi, not even the Chief of the Army were present. But the people who knew him and admired him were there to share the grief of Mrs Nina Thimayya and the family members.

Today, it is a matter of shame that except for people of Coorg and the handful who still survive, know of this great soldier. His regiment certainly does, and there is in Ranikhet, the home of Kumaon Regiment, a room specially dedicated to him where memorabilia of the General are displayed for all to see.

The memory of "Thimayya of India" remains firmly etched in the memories of those who came under his magnetic and benign influence. Like the Eternal Flame, he will be remembered for all times.