Lieutenant General Dewan Prem Chand – Vignettes of His Life

Brigadier Chandra B Khanduri (Retd)

Lieutenant General Dewan Prem Chand, PVSM (Retd) served the country for over three decades in war and peace and devoted his valuable life to handling some of the most 'intractable' if not 'irrational knots' in international conflicts of 1960-1990 that the United Nations (UN) was asked to find solution to. Half a century of purposeful life, is afterall, the dream ambition of many of us. Prem, it seems, was destined to leave a niche to the cause of international peace – the raison de etre of the UN Peacekeeping and Peacemaking.

THE MAKING OF AN OFFICER AND A GENTLEMAN

Coming from a rich Dewan family of the former Punjab, Prem had his initial education at the Bishop Cotton School, Shimla and later at the Government College, Lahore. He was in the Indian Military Academy (IMA) by end 1934 and by 1937, an Indian Commissioned Officer with the 5th Battalion the 10th Baluch, one of the 16 Indianised units of the Indian Army, which was for some strange reason humoursly called the 'Red Bottom'.

At the IMA he had passed out as a Sergeant who did his First Class Physical Training (PT), played all the major games and did well in the academics. "A sincere cadet," his final report said, "who gained maximum through diligence and intelligent understanding of tactics and application of administration. A very popular figure of the course who should shape well."

For one year, like all the Indian Commissioned Officers (ICOs), he was on attachment with the First Battalion the Dorset Regiment, the 'yeomanry' of which Prem remembered, were the Welshmen from Western England. He would laughingly recall their favourite

---

Brigadier CB Khanduri (Retd) is a well known writer on issues concerning military history.

Journal of the United Service Institution of India, Vol. CXXXV, No. 561, July-September 2005.

marching song:

I was walking one morning, round the Lei-cester Square,
To see all the folks and sight that were there,
But to see all them ladies, dressed in their tights,
Oh, my misus don't allow me to look at such sights.

They sang, he said, hymns about death and like the Italians, read Bible whenever they found time. They were very religious, soft and their officers had an easy command in peace. To Prem they gave a good experience of seeing the 'Tommy' at close quarters.

The 5th Baluch gave him good experience in what went on in the North West Frontier Province (NWFP) – supply columns to the far flung pickets, the small sniping skirmishes with the tribesmen of Faqir of Ipi, the cantonment life at Fort Sandeman and the small ripples of Indianisation that began to test the trust of the British in the officers of the Indian Army. Partial Indianisation had brought in larger number of the Indian officers, both the King's Commissioned Indian Officers (KCIOs) and the ICOs and they often stood upto the British seniors in matter of institutionalised discrimination such as admission to clubs, unfair employment of the ICOs in appointments held by the Viceroy's Commissioned Officers (VCO).

One such man was Captain Mohamed Usman (a KCIO and later hero of Jhangar in 1947). He, however remembered Usman for his fearlessness even during those days. At Fort Sandeman, he recalled, a fear psychosis being created by some of the mischievous officers of the battalion. They spread the rumour that the Officers' Mess building was regularly visited at midnight through the chimney by the spirit of an officer who had died in mysterious circumstances and was out to harass the present lot of officers who lived in the bachelors quarters in the vicinity. Usman said he would sleep on the steps of chimney and in fact, one night he did put his camp cot there and waited for the arrival of the ghost. It turned out to be an officer in whites and masked to give the appearance of the so called apparition! He would narrate this folklore often as he thought it fitted into the regimental life scene of those days.

World War II broke out in August 1939 and two years later the bulk of the Indian Army was fighting the Japanese in Malaya and Singapore, and retreating to North East India through Burma. In the meanwhile Prem was posted to the Baluch Regimental Centre at Peshawar. His 'undoing' – as he called his total non-participation in the war – was a course in PT where he was awarded an Instructor's grading. Throughout the long war he was in the Centre and rejoined his unit only at the fag end of the war as part of the invasion armada for recapture of the Malayan Peninsula. The surrender of Japan following the dropping of two atomic bombs on the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in August 1945 saw the end of war and end of Prem's dream to be blooded in the war.

While war was missed he was happy in marrying a beautiful girl. Promila captivated him and he fell head-long for her. She would soon join the All India Radio as an announcer and become the heart-throb of many a listeners as 'Promila Prem Chand'. "Is she as beautiful as her voice is?" would be asked.

Partition saw the Indian officers move to important posts. Prem first became Military Assistant (MA) to Sir Rob Lockhart, the first post Independence British Commander-in-Chief of the Indian Army. However, soon Rob Lockhart resigned over differences he and the Defence Minister developed on 'certain strategic issues pertaining to the conduct of the war in Jammu and Kashmir (J and K). As he handed over to General Roy Bucher, Prem was moved to command the Regimental Centre of 1st Gorkhas then located at Dharamshala in Himachal.

Unlike the other Indian troops of the Raj, Gorkhas had remained the exclusive preserve of the British officers. That had both its positive and negative aspects. They were led well; they prospered and blossomed in this exclusivity. The history of their gallantry outdid that of everybody else. Exclusivity, however, resulted in their isolation and lack of competitiveness. Bigger was the damage to growth of one of the most vital qualities of soldiers – initiative. In addition, their academic development suffered and even a small degree of complex grew about their fallacious belief that the other Indian troops lacked love and sympathy for them. It was sad. Thimayya, while in command of the Brigade in Japan that had 2/5th Gorkhas saw them 'stultified' by the British

Commanding Officer that eventually led to a mutiny. Similar was the observation of others.

When Rob Lockhart bid farewell to his MA Prem, he told him that 'Red Bottoms' were different to the Gorkhas; that he would soon command and remain all his life, and he, therefore, should first 'thoroughly understand them before making up his judgement'. He also told him that the Gorkhas had got used to the British way of life and might, therefore, reject the Indians, which would turn his command a little more tricky, if not messier. That in any case was the general feeling among the departing British.

At the Centre, Prem found the Gorkhas a bit cocky but 'wonderfully friendly', disciplined and on the ball. But the senior Gorkhas had reservation about some of the officers, especially those who had been transferred from the State Forces. Prem assured the Gorkha VCOs while all officers without exception were good and his team would soon rise to their expectations, they too, he urged, should accept them so. That saw the much smoothening of the rough edges.

The Regiment itself was under demobilisation from war time strength of five battalions to two. And the amalgamation of the Centres of the 1st and the 4th Gorkhas appeared in the gossip circles at the General Headquarters (GHQ). Then came the Tripartite Agreement that saw the Gorkha Brigade reduce from 10 regiments to six –the four regiments of the 2nd, 6th, 7th and the 10th - having been given to the British. It was indeed a period of transformation, compounded further by the Partition and its accompanying chaos besides mayhem. It was then, as Prem told me, he, "presided over the demobilisation of the Regiment more than its growth". He did whatever he could to keep the two battalions 1st Gorkhas going.

Soon, as expected Prem moved to command a brigade in the south of Pir Panjal, in J and K. But prior to that there was something which he loved more dearly: a brief stint at the Infantry School at Saugor and more importantly, a two year posting at the newly established Defence Services Staff College (DSSC) at Wellington. Prem had done his Staff College Course at the fag end of the war in 1945 when it was still at Quetta (now in Pakistan) and had been awarded an Instructor's grading. Major General WDA Lentaigne,

DSO who commanded the DSSC, asked for and got Prem as one of his instructors. Those were the formative years which under Lentaigne were difficult as he literally flogged his teaching faculty. New terrain around Wellington, new concept, co-opting lessons of recent war, and another set of situation that Lentaigne clearly foresaw emerging in the sub-continent owing to what he perceived as the 'rape by the Chinese of Tibet' necessitated looking at training from a new angle. Ipso facto, it boiled down to reorienting the old Staff College teachings to a new plane. That meant excercises had to be prepared afresh and training materials rewritten. Prem was acutely aware of his lack of war experience but he knew larger strategic concepts. His knowledge and performance as an instructor proved as good as those of the best.

It was an enjoyable 'sojourn' as he called it. He got to know a large number of the 'bright boys' as the Directing Staff (DS) were called, and a larger cross section of young officers who attended the course as his students.

He gained from the width of Lentaigne's war experiences and vision especially what he called, 'nose to smell the rat'. The Chinese menace, Lentaigne had repeatedly said, is real and India ignored it at its own peril. Working under such a fine commandant was to help him. He was turning pragmatic and openly acknowledging the need for him to enlarge his own vision related to higher command and staff.

Prem commanded a brigade in J and K for two years and then moved to Headquarters Western Command, Shimla as Brigadier General Staff (BGS). Later he was promoted as Chief of Staff to eventually move to 7 Infantry Division as its General Officer Commanding (GOC). Those were the days of turmoil when politics seemed to have entered the Army. The division, he found, had been constructing military barracks and bashas rather than training itself for war – its primary responsibility. Within days he was told, a test exercise was being conducted for this ill trained division. He wanted more time which was not agreed to. Ultimately he was forced to tender his resignation.

While it was a testing time, somehow luck held on. There came an offer from Army Headquarters if he would want to take on an assignment with the United Nations (UN) in Katanga under

the Opérations des Nations Unies au Congo (ONUC), then still in turmoil. One of the lessons of the ONUC when India fielded a brigade group as part of the ONUC in 1961-62 under Brigadier KAS Raja was that the secessionist rich province of Katanga under its flamboyant yet enigmatic leader Moise Tsombe, was in need of greater degree of cohesion and sense of urgency among the UN troops if the Katangese secession was to be ended speedily. Inevitably, it needed an officer of higher rank under whose integrated command all the UN's international military forces available in the Congo could be grouped-and regrouped- as the tactical situations might demand; importantiy still, who could command it with effect and elan as required in an international environment.

Prem accepted the offer and although he called it a 'pandora's box', it turned out to be a 'jackpot'.

Appointed as Commander Katanga Area Command with headquarters at Elizabethville, Prem began to command all the UN troops in Katanga that comprised the Indian brigade (under Brigadier Reginald Noronha, MC), the Ethiopean brigade, the Swedish and the other Nordic contingents and a dozen more from Chile, Canada, Indonesia and Ireland. The Katangese also reorganised themselves by expanding their gendarmerie in all important towns such as Kipushi on the North Rhodesian border, Kamina, a former North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) base, Nyunzu and Manono in the north, Albertville on Lake Tanganyika, Bukavu and of course the capital. Equally important became their townships of Manono, Jadotville and Kolweizi.

A year long training, coordination, intelligence gathering and evaluation and planning saw the Katanga Command prepare for the opportunity that Moise Tsombe gave to Prem. When all parleys failed to reconcile the Katangese stand, and violence began to be meted on the Katanga Command, a fortnight long swift and well coordinated military operations, *Operation Unokat,* by the Katanga Command in December 1962 saw the end of the modern and well led Katangese Gendarmerie and with it the termination of four year long secession. But not that all went like a military operation as envisaged and planned. It could have left Katanga and Tsombe intact had Prem not decided to 'disobey' an order from the office of the UN Secretary General 'not to cross the Lufira bridge and

stop operations towards Jadotville'. While *Operation Unokat* had been approved by the Secretariat well before the December 1962 D-day, under pressure from powerful Western allies and well wishers of Tsombe, last minute efforts were made to terminate the military operations and save him from collapse. At the critical moment of war, Ralphe Bunche, UN Deputy Secretary General and negotiator was despatched post haste to intervene and stop Prem's command from storming the last vestige of Tsombe's bastion at Jadotville. It was intended to lend him another lease of life – the first one having been given a year earlier.

When Ralphe reached the Lufira, Noronha's 99 Indian Brigade Group was across the water obstacle poised to assault Jadotville; and he was asked if the operations could be suspended. He dithered. While he and Ralphe sat on the culvert of the destroyed Lufira bridge the airforce jets were strafing Jadotville and the heavy mortars were bracketing their targets – "The bullet is out of the barrel", he solemnly told the Deputy Secretary General. Ralphe looked at him and engaged him in conversation rather than hand over the order. "Perhaps", Prem reminisced "Ralphe too had sympathy with the ONUC and he did not make a serious case of it, as it turned out to be at the Secretariat where 'lesser souls' called my reticence as 'General's mutiny or revolt or such a trash' and when I explained the military imponderables, he understood."

Prem returned with a 'halo' from his UN mission in May 1963. He had been personally met by the UN Secretary General U Thant in his office and was congratulated. U Thant's appreciation had been formally conveyed to Prime Minister Jawahar Lal Nehru. The Government not only gave him another chance to command a division in Eastern Command (27 Mountain Division) but awarded him a Param Vishisht Seva Medal (PVSM). But in the Indian Army he knew, his was 'marking time'. After a brief command of the 27 Mountain Division in Kalimpong, he had a tenure as Chief of Staff Eastern Command at Fort William and he retired after 30 years of service in 1967, as Director General of National Cadet Corps. Soon he was seeking employment with a civilian organisation. Like all Service officers he was just in mid-50s and had 'a whole life' before him, as he would humourously say.

His life in uniform had been generally smooth but he knew that there were too many of his superiors in Service in higher

echelons who felt his 'peace profile' of World War II and the 1947-48 J and K War would come in his way to the highest rung of the Army. He too was acutely aware of this uncalled for deficiency. "I did not pull strings to avoid the wars," he would argue, but he held no malice against any one who criticised him. "Well," he would say shrugging his shoulders with a pleasant smile as would end by adding 'that's how life was'. That nonchalant attitude of his bordering virtually on deliberate philosophical equanimity was one of his great assets; he accused none and said never a word of censure or admonition behind someone's back; instead, there was always praise for anything good the individuals had. As we grew friendlier and intimate he would chuckle, "My definition of an officer and gentleman is that". He, in fact, was the custodian of that great tradition which added invincibility to the officers of the great Indian Army.

TURN OF FATE : FROM NATIONAL TO INTERNATIONAL ROLE

While in the Congo, the UN Secretary General and other key personnel like Ralphe Bunche, Brian Urquhart and other staff had found Prem affable, soft spoken but firm with a fine understanding of international cross-currents that the UN had to pass through, throughout the period of intense rivalry between (and among) the Cold War warriors and its effect on the UN. They found him an 'ideal UN personality'. Prem was found to be an expert in handling a multi-national force whom he controlled with great skill. In writing about his Congo assignment Urquhart said: "We had at last a magnificent military command in Katanga, the best I have encountered in the United Nations. He and his deputy Regie Noronha made a formidable team. I could have told Tsombe it was foolish to mess about with these two formidable professionals. However mess he did..."

An opportunity soon appeared in Cyprus where the UN sought his willingness to be appointed as Commander of the UN Forces in Cyprus (UNFICYP). The Cyprus situation that mandated the formation of the UNFICYP in 1964 continued to deteriorate. The Indian officers, Lieutenant PS Gyani and General KS Thimayya, DSO, had already been the two pioneers in Cyprus. General Thimayya, had, for example, especially contributed substantially to reconciliation and détente in this strife torn Island divided on communal grounds and which not only had foreign troops located

therein but ironically, had four additional flags flying of Turkey, Greece, the British and the UN. Unfortunately, Thimayya's premature demise deprived the Island of the promise of the lasting solution.

In justifying the appointment of Prem as Commander UNFICYP, the UN Secretary General, Kurt Waldheim had written in his report of 16 December 1969: "Major General D Prem Chand had a notable career in the armed forces of his own country and he had also served in ONUC as GOC Katanga Area from April 1962 to March 1963. It was during his command in the Congo that Katanga was freed, the mercenary activities ended...He will take over from General Martola from the Island on 20 December 1969." What he did not say was that the UN Secretary General was decidedly impressed with the fine personality of Prem, his *tour d'horizon* of the international situation, his savoir faire and dedication to the task in hand. And that, he was almost the ideal General for the task in hand.

The acid test came in July 1974. A cataclysmic situation developed in the Island following the *coup* by the Cypriot officers, which not only saw end of Archbishop Makarios's rule but 'invited' the invasion of the Island by the Turkish Armed Forces. The coup related turmoil and danger to the Turkish Cypriots became the *cacus belli* for the war.

The Turkish offensive had set three initial aims to be achieved in about 72 hours of the operations: to secure the port of Kyrenia; to effect a link up over the Kyrenia Pass with the main enclave and the Turkish quarter of Nicosia; and to capture the strategically important Nicosia international airport then lightly held by the Cypriot force. Somehow the Turkish Armed Forces failed to capture their third and most important objective.

Prem, taking advantage of the slow progress of the Turkish operations managed to insert the UNFICYP in good strength between the warring sides, besides requesting for the reinforcements from the UK. He also asked the Turkish Cypriots to vacate the airport and fully occupied it with the UNFICYP. Concurrently both the parties were informed of a ceasefire, approval for which the Secretary General managed to get 'in principle' through an emergency meeting of the UN Security Council. That was conveyed through the despatch of the UN Liaison Officers to all

concerned. Prem won his battle through quick reactions and wits. But there was more to it as the UN news bulletin issued immediately after the incident recorded: "...General Prem Chand sped from one end of the front to another. He succeeded in bringing about a cessation to hostility and interposed units of his force between the opposing front lines...UNFICYP under Prem often found it necessary to turn its own arms against the invaders. He proved a courageous pioneer of peace."

The deft handling of the July incident, which the whole world saw as a 'matter of heat' that could have otherwise seen bigger conflagration, highlighted Prem's ability to control difficult situations. He earned a lasting praise all over the world. He was seen as the saviour of the UN's 'highest standards of international service', 'one who has served the UN with great distinction, dedication and courage'. He continued to command the UNFICYP till 1976 when again there would come another 'assignment'-for what Secretary General Perez de Cuellar called, "an acknowledgement of debt of gratitude for successfully raising the prestige of the UN as the world organisation", besides, always being "fair and objective". Prem seemed to have become indispensable; he had created a niche.

The Secretary General was now looking for someone with fine understanding of the African politics who could pave the way for an eventual independence of Southern Rhodesia, then a British colony. The Security Council had already adopted its Resolution (Resolution 415 of 1977) to that effect. He picked on Prem with very guarded assignment of "entering into discussions with the British Resident Commissioner (Field Marshal Carver) and with all the parties, concerning the military and associated arrangements that are necessary to effect the transition to the majority rule in Southern Rhodesia". A very useful groundwork was done by Prem towards the eventual independence of the future Zimbabwe.

A decade later, at the age of 72 years, he was assigned to head the UN Transition Assistance Group (UNTAG) to prepare the new expectant nation of Namibia for independence from South Africa. The grateful Indian Government under Prime Minister Indira Gandhi on recommendation of the Secretary General, had earlier made him a Lieutenant General in 1974 – a rare but thoughtful gesture.

Namibia was the last African colony earmarked to gain independence after 104 years of German and South African rule for which the South West African People's Organisation (SWAPO) under Sam Nujomo had fought a guerilla war for over 20 years. Its independence had been agreed after four decades of contentious negotiations and sporadic guerilla warfare.

While the mobilisation of the UNTAG was afoot, the SWAPO guerillas, who were operating from Angola were getting restive and while the 7,900 strong UNTAG (4,400 military,1,500 police and the rest of civilians) assembled in Windhoek, Namibia for deployment and duties, they sprung a surprise and killed over 300 people in South Africa, thus endangering the fragile peace for which a road map had taken over seven years after adoption of the Security Council's Resolution 385 (1976). Prem came under criticism for it but everyone understood the predicament of the UNTAG owing to lack of force at the time.

UNTAG was assigned to set the electoral process for electing the representatives to a Namibian Constituent Assembly which would draw up a constitution of Namibia. There was to be an Administrator General for this task. As a prelude, all hostile acts were to be ceased. UNTAG was also to secure the withdrawal of the South African Forces from Namibia and restrict the SWAPO guerillas and other indigenous troops to their barracks besides arranging peaceful return to Namibia of the SWAPO guerillas from their outside sanctuaries. Included in the mandate for UNTAG was to also demobilise the citizen forces,commandos and ethnic forces and dismantle their infrastructures. A strict time table was given for the same. And finally during the elections UNTAG was to provide security. Namibia's transition from a de facto South African colony to an independent nation was, in fact, a triumph for UNTAG that worked superbly under Prem. UN Secretary General De Cuellar was the first one to congratulate Prem for "outstanding performance, exemplary efficiency and dedication of the force and fulfilment of the UNTAG's mandate".

It was a difficult and unique job that involved providing security and logistics for the elections besides instructing the Namibians how to vote. It was completed by 21 March 1990 when Namibia gained its independence from South Africa finally with Nujoma becoming its first President. The midnight ceremony was attended

by 70 nations with a large gathering of foreign dignitaries which included Shri VP Singh, the Indian Prime Minister, the UN Secretary General, South African President FW de Klerk, Nelson Mandela, (just out of his 27-years long imprisonment), besides Yasser Arafat.

Namibia was in a way like integrating Katanga with the Congo three decades back and Prem was destined to be actively associated with these historical events. Destiny was proving bigger than the man, indeed, but there was also the man Prem who was moulding this destiny. Praise came from all over the world for his role. No praise can, however, equal the one I heard for Prem from Theo-Ben-Gurirav, the Foreign Minister of Namibia and the then President of the UN General Assembly. Ben spoke during a lecture at the USI on 18 August 2000, paying rich tributes to Prem. Ben had been the Secretary General of the SWAPO when UNTAG was laying the foundation for the future Namibia. And in that capacity Ben was closely associated with Prem. He conveyed it eloquently: "We had been skeptical when we heard Prem was detailed as Commander UNTAG. But soon he won all of us over including hard guerillas like us, the diehard racist like Klerk and his negotiators. Namibia shall never forget General D Prem Chand."

CONCLUSION

Serving the UN for 13 years was as good as being a UN officer and is decidedly the longest any Indian officer has done so far. He had four missions and in all of them he did remarkably well. People sang songs for him as their commander. He left a legacy of charm, efficiency and sincerity wherever he served. Rightly too, the UN granted him a pension and the Indian Government a rank of Lieutenant General even after superannuation.

Prem was regarded as a matinee idol. An exceedingly handsome man, he had become an epitome of virtues and righteousness. There were few like him. He was wise, possessive of his children, his family, his beautiffully kept house at Mussorie and above all his way of life. He loved his regiment and friends and took great pains to produce and present a faultless image of an officer and a gentleman.

He was humane and generous. He would recall the last scene of Moise Tsombe before being deported for life to Spain. "He was

no more cocky and non-repentant," he said. "And he begged me to let him return to his palace to collect some of the family albums. That was violently opposed by the Secretary General. But I persuaded him to let his last wish be fulfilled." Tsombe wrote him long letters from his exile.

He was also witness to the last days of Makarios when his own National Guard saw to his end. He constantly repented at his (UNFICYP's) intelligence failure to detect the plot to kill President Makarios. He said he shared that dreadful load of pain with many others and can never forgive himself.

Prem led a very active and purposeful retired life. Having become an expert in UN affairs he was often in New York and Vienna to advise the UN functionaries where his views on 'Management and Functioning of UN Peace Keeping Forces' and 'Preventive Diplomacy as an Essential Instrument of UN Strategy' were always respected. He had a world-wide circle of friends. Inspite of his routine of spending the winter months in Delhi/NOIDA and summer in the fabled Queen of hill stations, he was still available to the Army Headquarters and his friends for the work they often assigned him. Lieutenant General Dewan Prem Chand died in November 2003. To us regimental and Service officers he will be remembered as a true guide and a role model of an officer and a gentleman.