

India's Contribution in the UN Peacekeeping Mission in Korea: Role of 60 Parachute (Para) Field Ambulance

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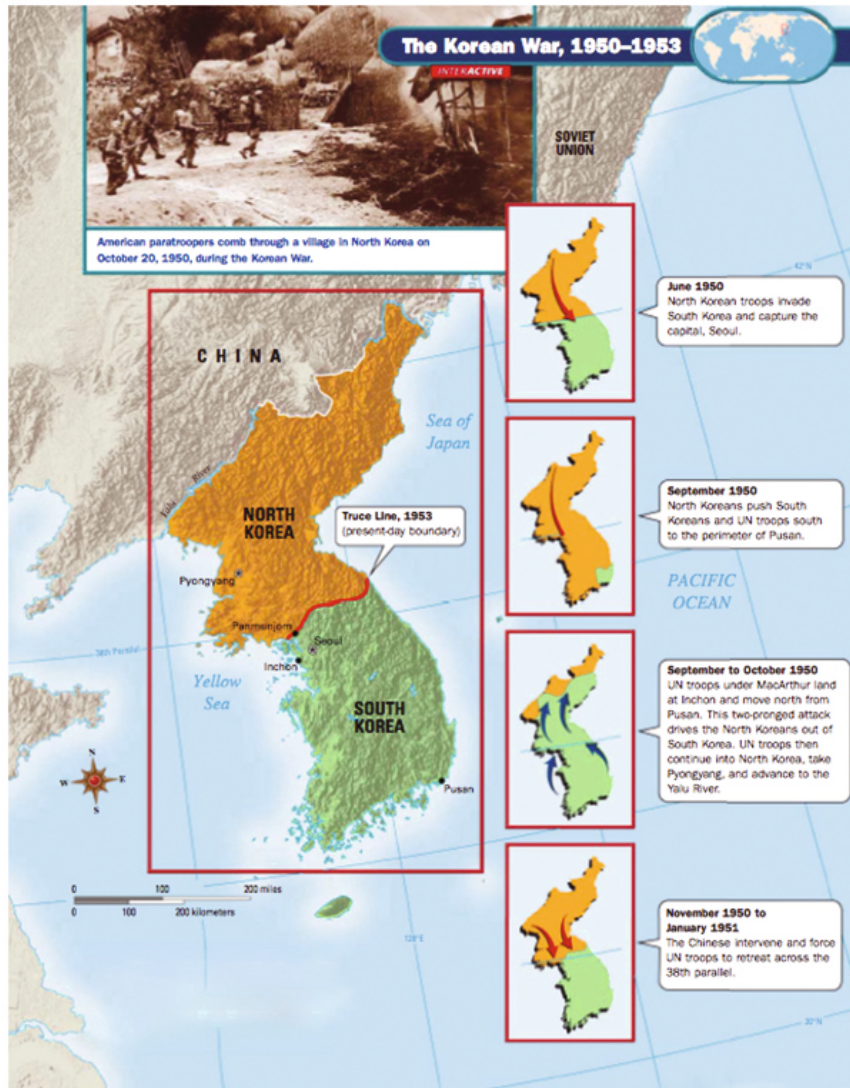
Abstract

The history of UN peacekeeping with armed contingents began with United Nations Emergency Force (UNEF) in Gaza in 1956. But the history of India's participation in peacekeeping predates UNEF. Generally not spoken much, India contributed three different elements to Korea: 60 Para Field Ambulance in 1950; the Chairman of the Neutral Nations Repatriation Commission (NNRC) in 1952; and the Indian Custodian Force (a brigade-size force) in 1953. In the service of humanity, the contribution of the 60 Para Field Ambulance was par excellence and needs a special mention. The unit received several commendations from the UN and other countries, and a number of gallantry awards from India. Being a review-based article, it uses many anecdotes and incidents from various recorded notes and veterans' own narrations.

Introduction

Our proud history of UN peacekeeping dates back to India's first UN peacekeeping mission to Korea. When the Korean War started in June 1950, India was not prepared to get involved but supported the UN Security Council Resolutions of 25 and 27 June 1950 in naming North Korea as the aggressor. Although India did not want to send combat units to Korea, it still wanted to be an active player in promoting peace in the region. India

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worked behind the scenes at the UN HQ as well as in Beijing and Korea to bring sanity into the upcoming war. As Robert Barnes noted that the US State Department sent and received more correspondence to New Delhi than to any other diplomatic outpost during the Korean War. The author has written¹ about the personal role of the then Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru to find a compromise solution during different phases of the conflict. The United States remained the dominant voice at the UN throughout the Korean War though at certain times India was able to play a constraining role. This impact was felt most notably during the

crisis following Chinese intervention in November 1950 and with the passage of the Indian resolution in the autumn of 1952 that ultimately brought the conflict to an end. Sardar KM Panikkar, Indian Ambassador in Beijing, played a crucial role in conveying the views of Chinese Government to the UN through the Indian mission as China was then not a member of the UN.

India was initially reluctant on the UN coalition force as it firmly wished for negotiations and believed that a peaceful settlement should have been attempted.² However, under provisions of the Security Council Resolution of 07 July 1950, India agreed to despatch a field ambulance with an attached surgical unit to Korea as a part of the coalition force. The unit chosen for this assignment was 60 Para Field Ambulance, which was raised in August 1942. The unit had combat experience in Burma during the World War II and Jammu and Kashmir operations of 1948-49. This was independent India's first overseas mission.

60 Parachute Field Ambulance

60 Para Field Ambulance was the first Indian unit to take part in the UN Multinational Force (MNF) under General Macarthur. The unit under the command of Lieutenant Colonel AG Rangaraj, with a total strength of 346, consisting of 17 officers and 329 other ranks (ORs) including lady medical officers and nursing officers, set its feet on Korean soil at Pusan on 20 November 1950³.



Lieutenant Colonel AG Rangaraj, MVC
(Source: Book – For the Honour of India:
A History of Indian Peacekeeping, USI)

Early Days

From the very outset, the Field Ambulance was split in two parts and remained so till the end of the war. One component was assigned the task to attend to sick and wounded UN fighting force in the battlefield; while the other component was tasked to provide medical assistance to the local Korean hospitals in the rear area.⁴ The main component of the 60 Para Field Ambulance, under Lieutenant Colonel AG Rangaraj, was assigned to 27 Commonwealth Brigade, with whom they remained attached throughout the campaign, and served the Commonwealth troops in the battle zone.

The unit landed in Pusan, which was the only enclave at that time under the UN force as rest of the country had been captured by the North Korean troops. After reorganisation in two groups, the main component joined its assigned 27 Commonwealth Brigade. The remainder of the unit, under Major NB Banerjee, was deployed at the South Korean field hospitals, in the strategic town of Taegu, to manage a 40 bedded hospital for British patients. A surgical team of the unit was attached to a Korean Military Hospital, to operate on patients and train the Korean surgeons, anaesthetists, and nursing assistants.

The main group serving with the Commonwealth Brigade advanced with the rest of the MNF, capturing most of the lost territories. The Brigade with the Para Field Ambulance reached Pyongyang, on 29 November 1950, after braving chilly winds and stormy winter. This was the stage when Chinese forces entered the battle on behalf of the North Korean forces and by early December 1950, the combined Chinese-North Korean forces launched an offensive. Consequently, all the MNF were ordered to withdraw from Pyongyang area to Seoul, on their own, with no additional transport provided. The MNF fell back to Seoul, a city which was captured and recaptured four times during the war.⁵ 60 Para Field Ambulance was also ordered to withdraw to Seoul after leaving their medical equipment in Pyongyang.

The Bucket Brigade

An interesting story revolves around the evacuation orders as Chinese forces overwhelmed the UN forces in the northern parts of Korea. 60 Para Field Ambulance had no transport, but the unit was unwilling to abandon its medical equipment and supplies. They found an unused train with its engine and a few bogies. Unit

formed a human chain with buckets from the river to fill the boilers of the steam engine, thus, earning the nickname 'The Bucket Brigade'. The Indian paratroopers also managed as much firewood as was possible and some coal from the yard. On 05 December 1950, two soldiers of the unit with previous railway experience, along with a Korean driver rode this small train with all its equipment, stores, and vehicles at the nick of time to cross the Han River Bridge to Seoul; barely hours before it was demolished by the Communist forces.⁶ Colonel Rangaraj later said, "We would have been of little use without [our equipment] and could not afford to lose it as soon as we arrived".⁷ It would indeed be difficult to imagine a better example of improvisation. Further improvisation was yet needed to survive the cold; men had to keep a routine of spot running and jumping to avoid being frozen to death as there were no arrangements for heating. Finally, wind proof winter clothing was procured from the American Forces and issued to Indian troops.

On 01 January 1951, the enemy pressure increased and 27 Commonwealth Brigade was tasked to provide cover for the withdrawal of XI Corps. To conform to this operational plan, a section of Advance Dressing Station (ADS) of 60 Para Field Ambulance had to be operationalised and closed three times, at three different places, within a span of three days. Besides this, the withdrawal entailed a fair number of casualties. Since rearward evacuation was not feasible, the casualties had to be treated, held and carried along with the ADS, wherever it moved.⁸ On 04 January 1951, finally, the casualties could be evacuated to US Army clearing station at Suwoh. During this Operation, Lieutenant Colonel AG Rangaraj, the Commanding Officer of 60 Para Field Ambulance, showed amazing power of endurance and utter disregard for personal safety. He personally rendered medical aid to the casualties and saved many lives, even in the face of enemy shelling and firing. His personal courage, determination, devotion to duty, and selflessness became a source of inspiration to the rest of the team. For these, and other acts of gallantry, Lieutenant Colonel AG Rangaraj was awarded the Mahavir Chakra.⁹

Operation Tomahawk

In March 1951, the UN Command carried out an airborne assault (*Operation Tomahawk*), against communist positions north-west of Seoul (along with 60 Para Field Ambulance). A surgical team

under Lieutenant Colonel AG Rangaraj parachuted and landed in the rice fields near Munsan, together with some 4000 troops of the US 187 Battalion, the Airborne Regiment. The aim of this specific military operation was to disrupt the enemy's lines of communication, throw them in disarray, and subsequently neutralise and decimate them with the ground link up which was expected on 25 March 1951. However, the link up never came as planned and on the contrary, resistance increased. There was no alternative but to dig trenches to hold the casualties along with stretcher cases.

Para Filed Ambulance again improvised with some retrieved parachutes to ward off the chilly winds and snow of Purunli. The desperately awaited, and much delayed, link up force finally arrived on 27 March evening. During this operation, the team treated over 400 casualties and performed many lifesaving surgeries.¹⁰ The men worked relentlessly, some thriving only on biscuits and tea.¹¹ General Matthew Ridgeway, the Supreme Commander of the Allied Forces and the Commander-in-Chief of the US Forces in the Far East, commended the unit for the splendid job it performed in providing medical cover in the front lines.¹² Lieutenant General Richard Gale, the Commander of the MNF, had later mentioned, '*I was immensely struck by their [...] efficiency. That small unit, adapted for an airborne role, carried out 103 operations, which is quite outstanding. More than fifty of those operated owed their lives to these men*'. There were several occasions when the Indian unit functioned as a combat unit rather than as a medical outfit.

Other Operational Activities

On 31 March 1951, the Unit was again in action with 27 Commonwealth Brigade in securing Kancua line. On 03 April the enemy launched a full scale offensive resulting in heavy casualties. Two sections of ADS were joined to cope up with an average of 115 casualties per day. On 30 April, the Main Dressing Station (MDS) moved to Yong-Pong. By this time, the detachment at Taegu opened a dispensary for civilian patients and had an average footfall of 200-300 per day. In July 1951, 1 Commonwealth Division was formed and the 27 Commonwealth Brigade with 60 Para Field Ambulance came under its command. At this time, peace negotiations also began at Kaesong.

On 11 August 1951, the US Army cited 60 Para Field Ambulance for 'Meritorious Unit Commendation' award for its

splendid work in Korea. In the second week of September 1951, *Operation Commando* was launched, a limited attack designed to complement diplomatic pressure by first weakening Chinese forces' offensive potential and then dominating routes across the 38th Parallel. During this operation, the unit treated a total of 348 casualties in six days fighting. Captain Ashok Banerjee saved many lives despite casualty clearing post in Marvag San being often under fire. On 06 October 1951, he provided medical treatment as well as evacuated more than 150 casualties in a single day. Captain Banerjee was awarded the Vir Chakra for his outstanding performance and bravery in this operation.¹³

On 04 November 1951, a numerically superior enemy attacked and overran forward positions. One Regimental Aid Post (RAP) had to be reinforced with one Medical Officer and stretcher-bearer squads from 60 Para Field Ambulance. Casualties were evacuated from RAP to ADS under heavy enemy shelling. The attack lasted till evening of 05 November and there were 101 casualties. It followed with yet another heavy attack on 17 November 1951 in which Allied Forces suffered heavy casualties and Indian medical teams treated and held casualties in the frontlines before they were evacuated to the rear. For their performance beyond the call of duty in these operations and display of bravery, Naik Nag Sen Singh and Lance Naik Budh Singh of the unit were awarded the Vir Chakra.¹⁴ By the end of December 1951, the forward elements of 60 Para Field Ambulance withdrew to rest and recoup but the elements at Taegu continued to work untiringly treating casualties of the UN multinational force and civilians.

On 17 March 1952, Lady Edwina Mountbatten accompanied by Major General AJH Castles, the Division Commander, visited the MDS. The meritorious record of service of 60 Para Field Ambulance impressed Lady Mountbatten and she conveyed her feelings in a cablegram to the then Prime Minister of India, Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru.

The period from June 1952 onward was difficult for the unit due to adverse weather conditions, continued attacks, and indiscriminate firing by enemy, resulting in a lot of casualties. The MDS came under heavy shelling on 13 September 1952, when more than 70 shells landed on it and six personnel suffered injuries. Despite these adversities, the unit performed exceptionally and it was rewarded. Naik Umrao Singh, who risked his life on several

occasions to evacuate casualties during the period December 1950 to 1952, was awarded the Vir Chakra.¹⁵

Responsibility at Taegu

While the main component of the unit was constantly on the move, providing medical treatment to casualties and, saving lives under heavy shelling, the remainder unit along with a surgical section was deployed in a static role at Taegu under Major NB Banerjee. They established a 40 bedded base hospital for British patients and provided a surgical team to a Korean Military Hospital, and were also tasked to run the Taegu civil hospital.

Personnel of the sub-unit worked round the clock to gear up the dilapidated civil hospital, opened a dispensary for civilian patients, and treated on an average 200-300 patients per day. Even when the main component of 60 Para Field Ambulance had withdrawn for rest and recoup, the sub-unit at Taegu continued providing medical treatment to casualties of the UN multinational force and local civilians for two years.

Joining the Custodian Force

After two years of stalemate, brinkmanship, and intensive negotiations, an Armistice Agreement was signed by the Commander-in-Chief of the UN Command, the Korean People's Army, and the Chinese People's Volunteers, on 27 July 1953 at Panmunjom, a small village on the 38th Parallel.¹⁶ The war had resulted in the capture of a large number of prisoners, many of whom refused repatriation to their own countries. For this purpose, the UN set up a Neutral Nations Repatriation Commission (NNRC). With signing of the Armistice, 60 Para Field Ambulance's association with the Commonwealth Division came to an end. However, it continued in Korea for yet another challenging role. On 23 August 1953, the unit joined the Custodian Forces at the Demobilisation Zone and opened treatment wings in North and South Camps, only to face new problems. Most of the Prisoners of War (POWs) suffered psychologically due to indoctrination, and mass hysteria was rampant. Officers and men were also engaged in guard and escort duties in POW Camps.

Return to India

On 09 February 1954, the glorious chapter in the history of 60 Para Field Ambulance in Korea finally came to a close. Among

the 20,000 men from 16 countries that made up the Commonwealth Division in Korea, one small unit of the Indian Army viz. 60 Para Field Ambulance carved out a unique name for itself in the military archives of UN Peacekeeping Operations. The unit treated about 195,000 cases, performed 2,324 field surgeries¹⁷, attended to more than 1800 battle casualties and some 9000 sick and injured during its eventful tenure of three years. That was in addition to treating civilian casualties, and Chinese and North Korean POWs. This would earn them several nicknames including Maroon Angels, Airborne Angels, Cherry Troopers. They served and endured in the far-off lands to bring cheer and hope to the victims of violence, with their unstinted devotion to duty amidst toil, sweat and blood.

60 Para Field Ambulance also earned numerous commendations from the UN Command military authorities including the US Bronze Star¹⁸, a Unit Citation from General Douglas MacArthur¹⁹ and the 'Chungmu' Distinguished Service Medal from Government of South Korea.²⁰ Britain's Minister for War paid a tribute to the Unit and its Commanding Officer in the 'House of Commons'.²¹ Unit personnel also received a number of Indian gallantry awards - Two Mahavir Chakras including one for Colonel Rangaraj, One Bar to Vir Chakra, six Vir Chakras, and 20 plus Mentions-in-Despatches.²² However, they were not permitted to accept the UN medal for Korea, presumably as it was deemed to be a 'foreign award'. Instead, Indian service with the Multinational Force was marked by the clasp 'Overseas Korea 1950-53' to the General Service Medal 1947.²³ On their return, the then Indian President, Dr Rajendra Prasad travelled to Agra on 10 March 1955, to present the Presidential Trophy to the Unit for their exemplary actions.

Conclusion

As an 'original' founder-member, India never hesitated to respond to the calls of the UN. India's deepening engagement with the UN is based on its steadfast commitment to multilateralism and dialogue as the key for achieving shared goals and addressing common challenges. Till date, India has taken part in 49 out of 72 UN Peacekeeping Missions with a total contribution exceeding 2,55,000 troops and a significant number of police personnel²⁴, various experts including electoral officials and the UN volunteers (UNV). But, India's longstanding service to UN has come at a tremendous cost. 178²⁵ Indian Peacekeepers have made the

supremme sacrifice while serving with the UN. In fact, India has lost more peacekeepers than any other member state.

While writing about the Commonwealth's record of two years' service in Korea, the weekly journal of the Indian Armed Forces noted: *There is not a Commonwealth unit that has not helped in some way, but one stands out above the rest for its great humanitarian work – the 60th Indian Field Ambulance. They have given skilled medical attention to thousands, trained hundreds of doctors and specialists for the Korean Army and civil hospitals, fed and sheltered countless weary, half-starved refugees on their long trek to freedom from Communist oppression.*²⁶ Many of the jawans of this unit did longer tours of duty in Korea than most other personnel, and never even took leave of absence. Their initiative, discipline, efficiency and commitment to duty in handling any situation that came their way was noteworthy.

Over the years, the peace operations landscape has evolved dramatically and sustaining peace has arguably become more dangerous as the conflicts became more intra-state. On the other hand, the UN continues to grapple with the gap in the policies and implementations of its core mandates. There is no doubt that due to prevailing geo-politics and its impact on international relations, UN and regional collective endeavour in peacekeeping will continue to face the challenges. But India and Indian peacekeepers never had any doubt about what to do then and do not have any doubt now. Indian medical units have worked in many UN Peacekeeping Missions as full-fledged units, starting with United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC), United Nations Operation in Somalia II (UNOSOM-II), United Nations Mission in Sierra Leone (UNAMSIL). The medical units continue to render yeoman service in United Nations Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS) and United Nations Organisation Stabilisation Mission in the Democratic Republic of Congo (MONUSCO), where India has fielded two level III hospitals.

The 60 Para Field Hospital (earlier known as 60 Para Field Ambulance) was again in news in Feb 2023, when it was airlifted to Turkey for humanitarian assistance in the aftermath of the devastating earthquake, under 'Operation Dost'. It established hospital in Iskenderun in Turkey and started functioning with medical, surgical and emergency wards, X-Ray lab and medical store on 09 Feb 2023.



A commemorative postage stamp on the 50th anniversary of the 60 Parachute Field Ambulance issued on 10 Aug 1992 (Source - <https://istampgallery.com/60-para-field-ambulance/>)



A 500 won (KRW) stamp issued by the Korean Government in 1951, to honour India's participation in the Korean War (Source - <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:1951korea-india-sheet500won.jpg>)



Author at Demilitarisation Zone (DMZ)



**Author with damaged railway engine, presumably used by
60 Para Field Ambulance**

Endnotes

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⁴ *ibid*, pp. 534-35.

⁵ Devine, Robert A.; Breen, T.H.; Frederickson, George M.; Williams, R. Hal; Gross, Adriela J.; Brands, H.W. (2007). *America Past and Present*. Vol. II: Since 1865 (8th ed.). Pearson Longman. pp. 819–21.

⁶ *The History of the United Nations Forces in the Korean War*, Vol. VI, p. 535. Spantech and Lancer, 'The Indian Army, 'United Nations Peacekeeping Operations', p.12

⁷ 'Soldiers with Red Hats', *Sainik Samachar*, 1-15 January 2004, p. 14.

⁸ USI archive - USI/CAFHR/UNPKO/Folder no. 1/ (8), Report of 60 Para Field Ambulance, 'Contribution of Sixty Para Field Ambulance as part of Neutral Nations Repatriation Commission in Korea', p. 2.

⁹ Gazette Notification: 38 Pres,51,20.8.51

¹⁰ USI archive - USI/CAFHR/UNPKO/Folder no. 1/ (8), Report of 60 Para Field Ambulance, 'Contribution of Sixty Para Field Ambulance as part of Neutral Nations Repatriation Commission in Korea', p. 3.

¹¹ In this operation, two Officers, Maj V Rangaswamy and Capt NC Das and one Operating Room Assistant, Naik Rattan Singh received VIR CHAKRA (VrC), the third highest award for gallantry of the Indian Army and Maj NB Banerjee, was awarded MVC.

¹² 'Soldiers with Red Hats', *Sainik Samachar*, 1-15 January 2004, p. 13.

¹³ *ibid*, p. 14.

¹⁴ USI archive - USI/CAFHR/UNPKO/Folder no. 1/ (8), Report of 60 Para Field Ambulance, 'Contribution of Sixty Para Field Ambulance as part of Neutral Nations Repatriation Commission in Korea', p. 5.

¹⁵ *ibid*, p. 6.

¹⁶ S. N. Prasad, History of the Custodian Force (India) in Korea 1953-54 p. 9.

¹⁷ The History of the United Nations Forces in the Korean War, Vol. VI, p. 538.

¹⁸ *ibid*, p. 537.

¹⁹ 'Soldiers with Red Hats', Sainik Samachar, 1-15 January 2004, p. 14.

²⁰ The History of the United Nations Forces in the Korean War, Vol. VI, p. 537.

²¹ <https://hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/1951-07-24/debates/8fe9f249-9fab-4161-91f2-b1f0a652eb1f/IndianFieldAmbulanceKorea> (Accessed on 23 July 2022)

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²⁵ <https://peacekeeping.un.org/en/fatalities> (Total 4207 fatalities as in April 2022)

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