

India and The Great War

Lieutenant General Baljit Singh, AVSM, VSM (Retd)

If the introductory Brochure is a sample, of the myriad illustrated booklets intended to be published, I can scarcely wait to have one complete set! I would equally give anything to know a bit about the gentleman who conceived and executed the “OUTWHISKERED” caricature.

I am sure that each of the sketches/images in the brochure brings a flood of memories/anecdotes to the viewer. Among the Coffee Table Books planned, there is a pencil portrait of Sikh soldiers (four kneeling and two standing behind) which is signed not just by the artist but sort of also authenticated by none else than the Commanding Officer (CO). Now that CO is JOHNNY HILL which matches with the signature and was indeed in command of the 15 Ludhiana Sikhs, throughout the War. Obviously, it must have been executed during the two weeks that they were pulled back for rest and recuperation as is evident from their smart turbans, beards etc. A fortnight later Lieutenant John Smyth would lead ten volunteers from his Battalion on a death-riddled mission from which he alone survived. Smyth won the VC, the other ten IDSMS posthumously and the following valediction:

“There are no finer fighting men in our Indian Army than the Sikhs, the descendents of those fierce long-haired warriors who fought so stubbornly against us at Ferozshah and Chillianwalla,.....And there are no finer officers than the men who lead them, for no youngster stands a chance of being gazetted to a Sikh regiment who has not shown that he possesses in a marked degree all the qualities which are likely to ensure the confidence and devotion of those whom he hopes to command.....”

Now some 34 years later, I had a strange but an unforgettable encounter with, by then Brigadier Sir John Smyth, VC, MC1 and the Brass Bands of Rattray’s and 15 Sikh at the huge fore-compound inside the Edinburgh Castle, in September 1959. I had completed three years Service and was eligible for two months furlough with two months annual leave. When I explained to my CO that I intended to hitch-hike through most of Europe and the UK, he readily sanctioned leave-cum-furlough. My father happily paid sea passage to and fro; 1st Class outwards in P&O Carthage and Tourist on the return on P&O’s Iberia. Leave and furlough totalled up to Rs 450 into 3 = Rs 1350 which at Rs 16 to a Pound was a mere £ 85, further reduced to £ 75 because of conversion of currency through a travel agent. Most of it I had to hide in my socks etc because the Reserve Bank of India allowed £ 10 only! My Troop JCO had relatives in South Hall and they would give me another 50 £ once I got there. I sat with Thomas Cooks in Bombay and bought train tickets for my Europe jaunt, always on night trains, to take care of night-lodgings. Where the stay was overnight, I checked into Youth Hostels.

When in Edinburgh, I saw a poster of a Torch-Light Military Tattoo, followed by a Military Band Display by an Indian Army Band contingent. I dug into my reserves and bought a seat in the front row. The audience simply went wild with the music and the swagger of the Rattray’s Sikh Brass Band. At the end of it, a JCO in full dress uniform smartly marched up to a gentleman in a tweed jacket, medals above breast-pocket and a smart Red turban! Once the be-turbaned Englishman walked up to the Band, they lifted their CO Sahib Bahadur on their shoulders to a thunderous applause of a mammoth audience. At some stage, Brigadier Smyth’s gaze turned upon me, also in a striking Maroon turban and after a nod from him, the JCO now walked up to me and ushered me amongst them. And once my army credentials became known, I too was joyously feted! That experience was and remains a great memory from my travels. But it was not till 1973-4 that out on an exercise around Suratgarh-Bikaner (I was BM, 43 Mechanised Brigade) that along with my Commander we landed for a meal with a BSF Battalion. As the BSF Commandant was an ex-CO of Rattray’s, the Mess staff and the Band were turned out in Rattray’s kit. The Band played all through the meal and someone then showed us a Long Playing (LP) Gramophone Record, inside a 12 by 12 inch laminated slip-in cover having the Rattray’s Brass Band in colour, commemorative of their Band performance at Edinburgh!

The memory flashback goes on and to a most unusual but true anecdote. When 15 Sikh were manning the trenches on the Western Front, they received a message that an Indian Maharaja (of Tikari) was visiting them for the night. And shortly before Roll- Call, “He rolled up in a smart uniform and beautifully polished boots with an orderly carrying his kit. He was given a dug-out and retired to sleep. Early next morning, clad in a pair of blue silk pyjamas, he came and asked if he could have a place to snipe from. I (Sic. Smyth, Adjutant) gave him a little cul-de-sac where he would be in no one’s way, told him to be careful as the German trench was only forty yards.....I heard some dull clangs followed by roars of rage from the German trench. I peeped over the top and saw that six of their steel loop-holes had been knocked out.....I suddenly thought of the Maharaja and went looking for him. There he was in his lovely pyjamas with a 500 Express Elephant Rifle, chortling with joy and methodically knocking out every Boche loophole within range.....”

As expected, the Germans responded with all the MMG and Mortars and guns at their disposal but happily there were no casualties. I had read this book in the 1960s but could not discover who the Maharaja was. Now in the 1990s, one of our frequent visitors was from the Kapurthala family and she traced out the hero of the story, from that most lethal battlefield, as SHYAM SARAN SINGH of TIKARI. But where is TIKARI? Again by chance, I had acquired the latest Oxford School Atlas in 2003 and lo and behold, TIKARI showed up (in Bihar), at last. But why had the man sought out 15 Ludhiana Sikhs on the Western Front, exclusively? Well, suffice to say that the trail led me to the creation of the “Tikari Jagir” by Nawab Mir Kasim Ali Khan of Bengal (Battle of Buxar 1763) and given to this Gentleman’s ancestor for loyal services rendered on the battlefield against the East India Company’s Army! As for the TIKARI family’s propensity for shikar, again a chance gift by Squadron Leader RTS Chhina of the book “SAGA OF AN INDIAN I.M.S. OFFICER”, by Major General DK Palit, Vrc (Retd)² revealed that secret, as well.

Do 15 Sikh and Rattray’s Sikhs know and reminiscence about these harmless, timeless and intrinsic legends? I doubt. That is the tragedy of our times, of “fast-forward”.

Endnotes

1. For details of his life and times, refer page 553 to 561 of USI Journal, Vol CXL, October December, 2010.
2. Saga of An Indian I.M.S. Officer : The Life and Times of Lieutenant Colonel Ananth, Palit OBE (1883-1972) by Major General DK Palit, VrC (Retd), published by Centre for Armed Forces Historical Research, United Service Institution of India, 2006, refer page 154.

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