

Army Day
Lieutenant General SK Sinha, PVSM (Retd)*

The Indian Army celebrates 15 January as the Army Day. This is a landmark date in its history. It was raised as a colonial army nearly three centuries ago and became a national army on 15 August 1947. Yet till 14 January 1949, the top leadership of the Army was British and only on 15 January 1949, that for the first time an Indian became its Chief. This was the fulfillment of a demand for inducting Indians as officers in the Army, made by Ram Mohan Roy before a Select Committee of the House of Commons in 1833. The Uprising in 1857 had ruled out the acceptance of that demand. Starting with the second session of the Indian National Congress in 1886, this demand was revived repeatedly in the party's subsequent resolutions. The imperialists vehemently opposed this. Two well known Commanders-in-Chief of the Indian Army had strong views in the matter. Lord Roberts wrote, "Native officers cannot take the place of British officers. Eastern races, however brave and accustomed to war, do not possess the qualities that go to make good leaders of men." Lord Kitchener wrote about deep seated racial repugnance in the Army, "chiefly it is due to an honest belief - which is not altogether unfounded - that any substitution of Indians for British officers must be detrimental to the interests of the Army." It was only after the First World War that in recognition of the outstanding contribution of the Indian soldier, recognised the world over, that the British Government allowed a very small trickle of Indian officers in the Army. General, later Field Marshal, KM Cariappa was among the first batch of some half a dozen Indians, commissioned in 1919.

I was a student in Patna when I first heard of Cariappa. There was a news item with his picture in the national newspapers in 1942 saying that he was the first Indian to be promoted to the rank of Lieutenant Colonel. Not long after, I joined the Army. In 1944, when I was a subaltern, I learnt that he was the first Indian to be promoted to the rank of Brigadier. Little could I then imagine that I will have the great good fortune of working closely under him.

I first met Cariappa on 14 August 1947 at a farewell party given by Indian officers to departing British and Pakistan officers. Cariappa was the chief host and among the guests were Lord Mountbatten and Field Marshal Auchinleck. In his speech, he gave fulsome praise to British officers for building our wonderful Army. He was sentimental about officers going to Pakistan saying, "We have shared a common destiny for so long that our history is inseparable. We have been brothers. We shall always remain brothers." A silver trophy depicting a Indian and Pakistani soldier holding their rifles pointing towards a common foe, was presented to Brigadier Raza, the senior officer going to Pakistan. What an irony that in less than three months, Indian and Pakistan soldiers were shooting at each other on the battlefields in Kashmir.

On 15 August 1947, Cariappa was promoted to the rank of Major General and became the first Indian General Officer. On 20 January 1948 he took over as Western Army Commander in the rank of Lieutenant General, again the first Indian officer to hold that high rank. I was a Major at that headquarters as General Staff Officer (Operations). We were conducting operations in Kashmir. I had to brief him in the Operations Room about the operational situation in Jammu and Kashmir. He complimented me on my briefing and enquired about the most threatened place in the State. I replied that there were reports of heavy enemy build-up against Naushera and a major attack appeared imminent. He said that he would like to go there tomorrow. I accompanied him to Naushera. He went round the defences and then told Brigadier Usman that Kot feature overlooked our defences and must be secured. Two days later Usman mounted a successful attack against that feature. He named it Operation Kipper, the nick name of the General. A week later over 10,000 enemy attacked Naushera. With Kot held by us, our troops inflicted a crushing defeat on the enemy, who retreated leaving 963 dead. This was the biggest battle of the Kashmir war. Usman became a national hero.

On the lighter side, I may mention two amusing incidents arising out of his translating English sentences, too literally into Hindustani. Soon after the successful battle of Naushera on 6 February 1948, Cariappa decided to visit Naushera to congratulate the troops. Usman briefed the General about the battle and said that the troops were keen to advance to Jhangar from where we had to withdraw in late December 1947. Cariappa said that we would have to wait for a while for reinforcements and logistic build-up. Addressing the troops he spoke, "*50 Para Brigade ke officeran, Sardaran, Jawanan. Is waqt mulk muft, ap muft, hum muft hain. Apka Brigade Commander Saheb bola kih ap age jana mangta. Hum apko tasveer ke andar dalna mangta. Aap is waqt age jana sakta nahin, kionkih hamara bandobast ka dum bahut piche hai. Ap is waqt dushman ko ankh maro.*" After his lecture, Cariappa asked me to find out the reaction of the troops to his speech. I asked a Gorkha Subedar, "*Saheb apko General Saheb ka speech pasand aya?*" The Subedar replied, "*Sahib General Sahib ka speech bahut achcha tha magar General Saheb angrezi mein bola, ham kuch samjha nahin.*" On another occasion while addressing the families of soldiers at the Family Welfare Centre, he wanted to emphasise the need for family planning and having not more than two children. He spoke, "*Mataon aur Behnon, ham chahta kih ap do bachcha paida karo, ek apne lie aur ek mere lie.*" He meant one child for the family and the other for the Army.

Cariappa would spend some ten days every month on tour in Kashmir and I invariably accompanied him as his staff officer. I recall two instances of his personal courage. We were travelling in a jeep to Uri. The Brigade Commander suggested to him that the flag and star plate on the car be removed, as the area near Hemen Buniyar was under enemy observation and prone to sniping. Cariappa said that he wanted to see how accurate the enemy firing was. On another occasion, Cariappa stood on a hill top near Tithwal to survey enemy positions. The local commander told him that the enemy could observe us and we should view the area from inside a bunker. He ignored his advice. We all stood in the open for a few minutes. As we started coming down the hill, an enemy shell landed where we had been standing. Cariappa was a few years older than my father in age. I marvelled at his stamina and energy. I found it not easy to keep pace with him.

He was a staff officer's nightmare. No detail, no matter how small, escaped his eyes. I had to keep jotting down numerous points and prepare copious tour notes. I remember on one occasion, I had driven in a convoy of the tactical Headquarters to Amritsar while the General had flown in an aircraft to Amritsar. We were staying at the Circuit House. Our convoy arrived late at night. We were received by the Brigade Major at Amritsar who told us that the General had gone to sleep but had given instructions that hot food should be kept for us, no matter how late we fetched up. We were

touched by his concern for his staff officers. The following morning, the General was to travel in the staff car of the local GOC to Pathankot and thence in a jeep from Pathankot to Jammu. In those days the road condition between Pathankot and Jammu was too bad to permit travelling in a car and only jeeps and trucks were used from Pathankot to Jammu. There were no bridges on the Ravi, Basantar or Ujh. Vehicles had to be ferried across the Ravi and ford through Ujh and Basantar. As luck would have it, after Cariappa and the GOC got into the staff car, the car would not start. Cariappa came out of the car in a foul temper. He told the GOC that vehicle maintenance in his Division was poor. He asked me to get his jeep. The jeep had arrived at midnight with the convoy and had not been cleaned properly. I had asked the driver to top up petrol and be ready to move in the convoy to Pathankot in the morning. Cariappa saw dust on the mudguard, drew a line with his finger and told me, "Do you expect an Army Commander to travel in such a filthy vehicle? I expect better from my staff officer." I felt mortified at the rebuke which I no doubt deserved. It was a good lesson for me in the future. During tours in Kashmir at the end of the day, hot water would be laid for my bath in the evening. I would insist that the Army Commander's jeep be given a hot bath first!

One day as we returned from tour, we saw his two children coming out of his other staff car in his house. They had missed the school bus. The ADC had sent the staff car to fetch them. Cariappa was furious at the misuse of Government transport. He directed me to initiate disciplinary action against his ADC. Next morning he sent for me and enquired what action I had taken. I told him that I had issued a warning to him and he had assured me that he would not make that mistake again. He enquired, "What about the loss of petrol to the Government." I replied that we were depositing Rs 40 in the Treasury, at the prescribed normal non-amenity rate for the 8 miles, for which the staff car had been used. He directed that the amount be debited to his personal account.

Cariappa followed a strict dress code. He was always impeccably dressed whether in uniform or in civilian clothes. I remember seeing him in Regal Cinema at Connaught Place in Delhi in the Dress Circle, wearing a dinner jacket for a late night English movie. During one of his tours he visited a workshop company. He found everything spick and span. He even bent down to check that there was no overgrown grass under some of the vehicles which had been off road for some time. He complimented the Major commanding that company. A month later that Major was selected for a foreign course. He thought that he had been nominated for the course at the instance of the Army Commander. He sought an appointment with him to thank him. He went to meet Cariappa in his house one evening wearing a multi coloured bush shirt. He ticked him for his dress saying that an officer calling on a General should be wearing uniform or a lounge suit and not a horrible maternity jacket. The officer was taken off the foreign course for which he had been nominated.

General Sir Roy Bucher was the Commander-in-Chief while Cariappa was the Army Commander conducting operations in Kashmir. Bucher appeared to have his own agenda and would put brakes on Cariappa's plans. We often received letters signed by Bucher in red ink, addressed to Cariappa on minor issues. We on the staff would say that our Command was fighting on two fronts, against Pakistan in Kashmir and against Army Headquarters in Delhi! Cariappa wanted to break through Zojila and link-up with Leh. Unfortunatley our first attack against the enemy's Zojila defences had failed. Cariappa was keen on another attempt for which we made elaborate plans, bringing tanks from Jammu to Srinagar and thence to Baltal across rickety wooden bridges. The move of these tanks was kept a well guarded secret. The success of the plan depended on achieving complete surprise. Winter was fast approaching and time was at a premium. We had not only to break through Zojila but also complete winter stocking before the pass got closed due to snow. Bucher wanted the operation to be undertaken after the winter but Cariappa was insisting that it should be done before the winter. Bucher reluctantly agreed. I was told to be at Baltal, the base from which the attack was launched to keep the Army Commander informed of the progress. We successfully broke through Zojila, using tanks at that altitude for the first time in military history. It was an epic victory. Our further advance was held up at Matayan by the enemy holding a formidable mountain feature called Batkundi. Guns and ammunition had to be brought up to engage the Batkundi feature. The Sappers were feverishly constructing a road to Matayan. We were getting messages to speed up road construction and the attack on Batkundi. I was summoned to Delhi. I walked from Matayan to Baltal and drove through the night to Srinagar to catch the first flight to Delhi. Immediately after I arrived at Delhi, I briefed Cariappa of the latest situation. He asked me to accompany him to a high level meeting. I had no idea about where we were going till I found myself in front of a room in South Block with a name plate, Jawaharlal Nehru. The word Pandit was missing and so also his appointment. I was overawed and also quite nervous. I had never before attended such a high level meeting. The Prime Minister was sitting at his desk smoking a cigarette from a cigarette holder. I found him totally bald. I had seen Nehru on several occasions from a distance always wearing a Gandhi cap and of course never smoking. Cariappa briefed him and during the briefing said that the distance from Baltal to Matayan was 22 miles and road construction was taking time. Nehru interjected and said that the distance was only 12 miles. Cariappa said that my staff officer was here and he had walked that distance only yesterday. They turned towards me. I said that the distance along the foot track was a little over 12 miles but the road coming up was winding and was about 22 miles long. Both Nehru and Cariappa were satisfied with what I said. Later I learnt that in 1913, Nehru had spent his honeymoon at the Matayan rest house.

In January 1949, it was announced that Cariappa would be taking over as the Commander-in-Chief on 15 January 1949. He sent for me and asked me whether I would like to serve as his Military Assistant in his new assignment. I was delighted and enthusiastically accepted the offer. I told him that it would be a great honour for me to continue serving on his staff. A couple of days later, General Banerjee, the Military Secretary sent for me and told me that the Chief designate had expressed his regret that he could not have me as his Military Assistant, which was a Lt Col's appointment. He had told Cariappa that the rules required that an officer must have a minimum of six and a half years service to officiate as a Lt Col and I had only five years service. He had told him that he could waive the rules in my case, if he so desired. Cariappa said that he did not wish to set a bad precedent. This was typical of him. During the 1965 war his son Flight Lieutenant Nanda Cariappa (later Air Marshal) was shot down while on a fighter sortie over Lahore and taken a prisoner. Field Marshal Ayub Khan was the President of Pakistan. He was many years Cariappa's junior in the pre 1947 Indian Army and had served under him. He sent a personal message to Cariappa saying that his son was safe and he could be returned to India as a special case. Cariappa replied that he had several sons who were held prisoners in Pakistan. Nanda should be returned along with the others.

I had no occasion to meet Cariappa when he was the Chief. I remember that when as Vice Chief, I resigned from

the Army on my supersession, I received a telephone call from him to say that he was proud of me. I felt overwhelmed. I recall visiting him after his retirement at his house, Roshnara, in Mercara (now Medikeri) in Coorg. I had gone there from the Staff College at Wellington, to request him to write a foreword to my book, Operation Rescue, regarding the 1947-48 war in Kashmir. He readily agreed to do so and wrote a very generous foreword, which greatly added to the value of the book. I found him as always very correctly dressed and his old self, commanding great respect. He had a silver statuette of an Indian soldier on the mantle piece in his sitting room. He told me that every morning, he paid his homage to the Indian soldier because he owed so much in life to him. Years later, I called on him in Bangalore where he was staying, for proper medical attention. He was now approaching 90. He could not walk properly. He shuffled but he was immaculately dressed. He insisted on pouring a drink for me with his shaking hand. I realised that that was to be our last meeting. A little later he passed away.

When he was the Commander-in-Chief (this appointment was changed to Chief of Army Staff after his retirement), he was particular about upholding the dignity of the Army. After Independence, the civilian bureaucrats had got together to downgrade the status of the Service Chiefs below Defence Secretary. The then three Service Chiefs, who were all British, took up the matter with Lord Mountbatten. At the latter's intervention the protocol status of the Chiefs was kept higher than the Defence Secretary. On taking over as Chief, he maintained that he would deal directly with the Defence Minister and not through the Defence Secretary. His staff officers would deal with the Defence Secretary, who was a staff officer of the Minister. In this regard he was only following the practice in the Army when a commander dealt directly with his higher commander and not through the latter's staff officer. In 1949 an Indian delegation had to go to Karachi for a conference convened by the UN to delineate the Cease Fire Line. At the instance of Cariappa, Lieutenant General SM Shrinagesh the then GOC-in-C Western Command, was nominated the leader of the delegation with Shri HM Patel, Defence Secretary, Shri Vishnu Sahay Kashmir Affairs Secretary, Major General KS Thimayya and Brigadier SHFJ Manekshaw as members of the delegation. I was the Secretary of this delegation. Things have changed so much since then. There have been instances when a Defence Secretary has been the leader of the delegation with Service Chief as a member. However, the normal practice has now become that Vice Chiefs of the three Services are members of delegations led by the Defence Secretary. After 1962, the appointment of Cabinet Secretary was introduced and he was given a higher status than the Service Chiefs. The civil servants at last managed to have their way. In 1947 Sir Girja Shankar Bajpai had not been accorded a higher status than the Service Chiefs.

Apart from highest standard of personal integrity, Cariappa was a strict disciplinarian. He summarily sacked three serving Major Generals, one for being drunk at a function in Raj Bhavan at Mumbai, the second for being unduly friendly with a junior officer's wife and the third for misuse of regimental funds. He gave them the option to resign or face a court martial. He advised them to put in their papers so that the image of the Army did not get sullied. They resigned and their resignation was promptly accepted. 2010 has been a year of scams galore, in which the image of the Army has also got badly besmirched along with the judiciary, the bureaucracy, the media and of course the political leadership. The Army needs to recall the high standards set by Cariappa and endeavour to live up to them. This will be its best tribute on Army Day to the memory of Cariappa, who is rightly hailed as the Father of the modern Indian Army.

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