

## **Brigadier Sir John Smyth, Bt, VC, MC, MP - His Life and Times\***

### **Lieutenant General Baljit Singh, AVSM, VSM (Retd)\*\***

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Somewhere in the middle of the long list of Secretaries/Directors of the USI of India, there figures the name of Major William Slim (21 May 1930 - 16 March 1931) and a few spaces above, that of Captain John Smyth, VC, MC (1 April 1926 - 31 March 1929). They were to maintain the same inter-se standing in the Army, even while being Indian Army instructors at the Staff College, Camberley between the two wars, till the fateful months of February-March 1942 when Major General John Smyth (hereafter JS) GOC, 17 Infantry Division was 'sacked' from command at Rangoon and Lieutenant General William Slim assumed command of Burma Corps (I7 Division and 1 Burma Division). From that moment, while Slim would go on to be counted among the Great Warlords of Military History, JS would emerge with those qualities which had made the Sphinx arise from the ashes. Regrettably for JS, even though he would continue to reap honour and glory, but it would be without the pomp of the military ceremonial which Field Marshal Viscount Slim of Yarralumla, KG, GCB, GCMG, GCVO, GBE, DSO, MC would retain for life. Nevertheless, destiny's discarded military commanders such as JS have paradoxically always lived very varied, charmed and fanciful lives, as it hopefully will emerge from the narrative which follows.

JS came from a family of Country Esquires of modest property holdings, but adequate to meet the needs of essential domestic luxuries. The fourth John Smyth of Heath was born in 1748 and lived to the age of 63. He was first of the Smyths to enter public life, and was a Member of Parliament for 25 years. He became a Privy Councillor and was successively a Lord of the Admiralty, a Lord of the Treasury, Master of the Mint and a Member of the Government during the American War of Independence. It was his grandson, John Fitzroy Smyth whose remark at the age of ninety-four was to provide JS with a philosophy of life: "You must expect a little toothache, my boy, when you are over ninety, but that's no reason for going to the dentist". So, JS learnt early to take adversity in his stride without bellyaching, to accept mortal, personal losses in quiet mourning and welcome success without fanfare.

JS's grandfather Henry was the first of the clan to enter the Army and rose to be a Lieutenant General in 1876. His father, William John Smythe, a brilliant scholar with a double first at Balliol, entered the coveted ICS 'only to spend his whole life in the jungles of Burma.' But what a tragic recompense that Burma would extinguish the brilliant army career of his first-born (JS) and two years plus two months later, also incarcerate the mortal, heroic remains of JS's first born, Captain John Junior Smyth at the Kohima War cemetery.

It was a legacy of the British ICS couples that their progeny schooled in England and charted their future without parental nudging. JS had set his heart on the Indian Army and entered the Royal Military College (RMC), Sandhurst, 18th in merit among 250 in the class of 1911. But he would need to move up in the final merit to be certain of joining the Indian Army. Indeed, he ended the final term in Aug 1912, with the coveted Military History prize, four Blues in sports and ninth in the overall merit!

By the end of September 1912 he was attached to 'The Green Howards' (19th Foot, the First Yorkshire Regiment), for one year preparatory training, before joining the Indian Army at Sialkot Cantonment in the Punjab. Shortly, thereafter, he was invited to the Regimental Guest night in the Officers' Mess and, "When asked by the Colonel what I would like to drink - the usual choice being champagne or whisky and soda - I replied, quite unconscious of the sensation it was going to cause, 'lemon squash, please, Sir'. You could have heard a pin drop in the Mess. The CO, without a tremor, gave the order to the astonished waiter, which I thought was true hospitality."

Evidently, JS was a most likeable Gentleman-Officer so that even the hard-drinking Green Howards began wooing him. "The all-important decision which faced the Indian Army attached officers was to choose, or be chosen for, the Indian unit in which they would spend their regimental lives." Jack Turner, a term senior to JS, had been accepted by the 15th Ludhiana Sikhs and was full of their paeans but they had no vacancy. Just then, one of the two 15th Sikh officers doing a two-years course at the Quetta Staff College passed away and JS joined the battalion of his dreams, the 15th Ludhiana Sikhs at Loralai in Baluchistan.

JS was quick to win their trust and they were to follow him blindly. This bond of martial brotherhood was put to the ultimate test on 18 May 1915 (WW I) in France, when a detachment of the 15th Sikhs holding a segment of the trenches named "Glory Hole", faced imminent disaster as they had run out of ammunition. When one officer and 20 men of the Highland Infantry on the flank attempted replenishment, they were shot down to the last man. Two further attempts by the 15th Sikhs fared no better.

This was the stage when Lieutenant JS was ordered to pick up ten volunteers and make a final attempt. When he asked ten men to come forward, every Sikh present stepped out, including the fresh draft which had that day arrived from India! JS confessed that "This is what cured me of Blue Funk". Using six spare turbans they crawled, dragging three boxes of mortar bombs and three of machine gun bullets, under withering German shelling and automatic fire, in the mid-day sun for about 25 minutes.

Nine soldiers perished as they crawled, dragged and pushed the munitions boxes tied to turbans. The tenth was struck dead on reaching the beleaguered bunker. The shell-shocked eleventh stood up but a Sikh from inside the bunker reflexively reached out and pulled Lieutenant JS down. He emerged the sole survivor of the heroic mission, delivering just one box of mortar bombs. Two months later, JS was awarded the Victoria Cross (VC) and the Indian Distinguished Service Medal (IDSM) (posthumous) to the gallant ten volunteers. When Sir Winston Churchill narrated the action, the House of Commons stood up in salute. And the Czar spontaneously conferred the Order of St George on JS for conspicuous bravery.

The action was chronicled in the book 'Deeds that Thrill the Empire' which stated, "There are no finer fighting men in our Indian Army than the Sikhs....And there are no finer officers in the world than the men who lead them...and we

may be very certain that never will their glory fade....”.

JS was sanctioned special leave for the investiture at the Buckingham Palace. He was perplexed when the King after pinning the Cross, handed him a plain card board box. “But the King was charming and put me at once at my ease. He explained that the reason the VC was presented in such a plain box was in order that the actual value of the Cross and box together should not amount to more than one penny, so that our highest decoration of all should have no intrinsic value, whatever.” Of course it was a different matter when all his medals got stolen one year later, and JS had to reclaim a replica of the VC from the War Office. He remembered the Kings words, “somewhat wryly”, when the War Office charged him £ 1.11s.6d! That was his first brush with the bureaucracy.

JS was given a few days leave before they were to embark for Egypt. As he prepared to take the return train, he was accosted by the wives of two newly wed officers of the 15th Sikhs. They were deaf to his reasoning and were seated in his compartment as the train pulled out of Victoria station. Never mind the squabbles with the military police, the railways etc but he gallantly arrived with his charges at Marseilles. After exchanging greetings with the CO, he said “I have a confession to make, sir”. The CO raved and ranted for five minutes and then relented. “But tell me this. Just how the bloody hell does a subaltern – even a subaltern of the 15th Sikhs manage to bring two women right across France in the middle of a World War?”

Within months of the termination of WW I, the battalion was back at Peshawar in the North West Frontier Province (NWFP), embroiled in the Tirah campaign in Waziristan. JS was part of the Tochi column whose first task was to clear the Shinki Pass of the Mahsud snipers. JS had learnt early to respect the Mahsuds as “the most formidable fighting men of them all in the NW, in fact more than the Germans, Japanese, Arabs, Senussi, Wazirs and Mohmands that he had fought against.” Just when it appeared that the Pass had been cleared, the last Mahsud sniper picked him up, but from 900 yards it was not an easy shot. Nevertheless, JS had a bullet through one hand but without serious damage. His men pinned the Mahsud down till JS closed up and picked him clean! Though recommended for a Bar to his VC by Major General Gwyn-Thomas, he was awarded the Military Cross (MC) in January 1919, just a few months after the fourth anniversary of the VC.

General Gwyn-Thomas had carried a bottle of best champagne to quietly celebrate the end of the war but a year later, he thought otherwise. As JS records “I had been out on the mountain side all day in filthy weather. I felt too tired to eat and was preparing to get straight into bed when the General’s servant entered the tent with a tray on which stood a very large tankard full of that precious bottle of Bollinger, all poured out so that I could’nt refuse to drink it. Truly greater love hath no man than this.”

JS got his first break after WW I from the NW Frontier operations in 1920, when he was posted as GSO 3 (Intelligence), Army Headquarters. With just eight year service he was a seasoned, junior commander and among the most highly decorated for gallantry. So, he now deliberately applied his mind to the military academia and qualified for the Staff College, Quetta. Being high in merit, the Commander-in-Chief Lord Rawlinson nominated him to Staff College, Camberley for the 1923-24 course. Yet again, he passed high in merit-list and returned to Army Headquarters as GSO 2 (Training). For the first time since school and Sandhurst, he had time for sports and became Master of the Delhi Foxhounds besides playing Polo, Tennis and Hockey for the Army and narrowly missing playing for India and England. He was unlucky to miss the Kadar Cup, the blue-riband of Pig sticking!

Like a bad habit, he returned to 15th Sikhs in the NW Frontier as company commander after two years of instructorship at Camberley. But it broke his heart, when on 17 Jul 1936, he was given command of 45 Rattrays Sikhs (a sister battalion) even though this too was to become an umbilical affair. He had the unique experience of commanding a mixed force at Chitral, which included his own battalion also, for two years (1936-38) before it moved to a peace station, Allahabad. When the command ended in July 1939 and JS boarded the aircraft, the aerodrome at Allahabad resounded with the deep-throated chants of :

*“Wah guru ji ka Khalsa  
Siri wah guru ji ki fateh!”*

JS was on leave in the UK when WW II commenced and the War Office were quick to snaffle him with the command of 127 Brigade in France. Though the British and French Armies suffered a crushing defeat but, from all accounts, it emerges that 127 Brigade were among the very few who put up a gallant resistance; “beaten but not defeated”, Major Jones the BM and Wright (batman of JS) winning the Military Cross and the Distinguished Conduct Medal (DCM) respectively. They had learnt to handle the Bazooka and knocked out at least two tanks when a Panzer detachment threatened the Brigade Headquarters.

On returning to India in Apr 1941, he had a minor surgery which unfortunately went awry. So, when he assumed command of the 18 Indian Division on 02 Oct 1941 (under raising at Secunderabad) JS was in fact still on sick leave. On 02 Dec 41, the designation of the 18th was changed to 19th. Its famous Dagger sign was in fact designed by Frances, wife of JS! But lo and behold, on 04 Dec 1941, JS was shifted to command 17 Infantry Division, also under raising, but at Pune. So JS in fact commanded three divisions in one week! May be this was fate’s hidden card to hand out several commands in succession and hastily before the destined downfall of a brilliant army career.

17 Infantry Division were equipped and trained for the War in Egypt and one of it’s brigade was on the high seas; when on 20 Dec 1941, they were assigned to Burma. JS disembarked post-haste at Rangoon with the leading elements on 28 Dec 1941. And soon, the 17th would join battle with the Japanese who had won every battle since Pearl Harbour. Two brigades of the 17th and two of the Burma Division (ill equipped and worse trained), fought several brave and brilliant encounters but they could not stem the winning streak of the Japanese offensive. On 23 Feb 1942, JS was faced with the dilemma (a) either withdraw his two brigades in contact or (b) blow up the only bridge over River Sittang and accept major losses in men and materials but, in so doing impede the Japanese advance and fall of Burma. He chose the latter.

In the event, 17 Infantry Division were reduced to one effective brigade, then on 02 Mar 1942 JS was “sacked” from Command! Every military history account leaves a clear impression that (a) Lieutenant General Hutton, the Burma Corps Commander was deaf to tactical ground realities visualised by JS (b) Field Marshall Wavell, the Supreme Commander having suffered a series of defeats (Al-Alamein, Mesopotamia and Crete) was desperate for victory and therefore, injudicious in assigning missions to field commanders and (c) Hutton and Wavell, and above all Sir Winston Churchill, blundered by collectively disregarding the better tactical judgment of JS, ‘to hold the line of River Sittang as the first defensive position in Burma’. Ironically, some ten years after WW II, Wavell was to admit his mistake and make sincere efforts with the Prime Minister, Winston Churchill to restore the rank and pension of a Major General to JS but to no avail. For, the day he was ‘sacked’ JS was a substantive colonel, temporary brigadier and an acting major general! Repent as they may, but all they could do was to give JS the honorary rank of a brigadier!

JS was neither given to self-pity, nor resentment nor indeed recrimination against his superiors. So he was quick to make a fresh start in life barely six months after he was ‘compulsorily retired from Service’. In fact, the twenty year span post retirement, which JS has covered in his autobiography, is packed with so much active and varied life that any man, in any walk of life, would be proud and envious of.

As we know, with hindsight of history, the war in Burma was to last another three years. And, was better qualified to comment on the Allied plans, prospects and conduct per se both in Europe and South Asia than JS, who had (a) fought in and traversed the battle-fields of Europe in WW I and again the opening phase of WW II and (b) trained and fought against the Japanese in defending Burma. So, his friend and instructor from Camberley, Major General ‘Boney’ Fuller (Retd), encouraged and facilitated his entry as a military correspondent to the Sunday Times and Daily Sketch etc. and broadcaster with the BBC (1943-48). Thereafter, JS never looked back and was soon counted among the best full time journalists in the Fleet Street.

But Frances and JS were to suffer a grievous personal tragedy when on 07 May 1944, their first born, John (Junior) got killed leading his company of the Queen’s Royal Regiment in the Battle of Kohima Ridge in Burma. Also a product of RMC, Sandhurst, he surpassed JS in possessing irrepressible, reckless courage on the battlefield. Assuming command of the company (as they stalled), when the company commander fell, he led the assault and they captured the Jail Hill Ridge at Kohima. Unmindful of his own safety, he moved about to care for the wounded, and it was then that a sniper’s bullet went clean through his heart. His grandfather and father had already bled for Burma and now, the son gave his life in Burma too. No wonder that the kin of the war dead from the UK, continue to visit war cemeteries such as at Kohima, even seventy years thenceforth, because the military deeds of courage and honour are imperishable in their human psyche; though sadly not so among us Indians.

JS was soon visited by good fortune. He was elected an MP on the Conservative ticket in 1946 and remained so for two terms. Sir Winston Churchill inducted him in his Cabinet (1951-55) as the Minister for War Pensions. Needless to say, this was a job after his heart as he headed several leagues/committees dealing exclusively with relief and rehabilitation of WW I and II ex-Servicemen. A year earlier, a Baronetcy had been conferred on JS, bringing the family history full circle, a hundred years down the timeline.

May be, the happiest, relaxed and most enjoyable of preoccupations which fell in the lap of JS was his iconic rise in the world of Lawn Tennis from 1946 to 59. Hamilton Price the well known referee and the Lawn Tennis correspondent for the Sunday Times before the war passed away, just about when the first post war Wimbledon, Davis Cup and Wightman Cup were to be revived after the war. During the morning conference the Sunday Times Editor-in-Chief, holding JS in his gaze said: “John, I believe no one in the Indian Army can hope to command and lead a Division in battle unless he had been an outstanding sportsman in his subaltern days. As you have had both attributes would you report for us on Wimbledon also, henceforth.”

The first article ‘By a Correspondent’ appeared on 03 Feb 1947, followed by two more. As they were well received, the next comprehensive article in The Sunday Times on 14th April 1947 appeared in JS’s own name. And Sunday Times Lawn Tennis writer had arrived! One thing led to another. When the Centre Court chair umpire fell ill, JS was asked to deputise. So he did, and became a permanent presence in this department also!

In 1948, JS was invited to write all articles and the photo captions for the Wimbledon Programme which became so popular that 1,00,000 copies sold each year. The organisers of the Davis and Wightman Cups also contracted him and fared just as well. JS was to suggest a modification to the prevalent ‘foot fault rule’ which was disliked by the players and difficult to impose by the umpires. It was put to test and accepted both in the UK and the USA and remains operative today! He authored two books on the History of Lawn Tennis which became classics.

His proudest moment came when he was nominated to be the founder Chairman of the Victoria Cross Committee by the Patron, Her Majesty the Queen. It would be interesting if the computer savvy, among the readers of the Journal today, were to surf the net, get in touch with the grand and great-grand children of JS to complete the tale of the last years of this grand, Gentleman-Officer.

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**\*\*Lieutenant General Baljit Singh, AVSM, VSM (Retd)**, was commissioned into the Regiment of Artillery on 03 June 1956. He retired as Chief of Staff, Central Command on 31 July 1992. He is an active promoter of nature and wild life conservation, particularly within and by the Armed Forces. He is also a keen military historian.

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