

A Fine But Neglected Force

"JOE"

(There are at present roughly 200 Army officers from the rank of a Major General down to the rank of a Capt on deputation to the Force. Since the average tenure of deputation is 3 years, about 1000 officers would have served in the Force since it was thrown open to Indians after Independence. All the battalions of the Assam Rifles, except two, are under the operational control of the Army. All the battalions have been placed under the Army Act for discipline. All the officers in the Force, are either Army deputationists or are ex-Army officers. There are no Police officers in the Force. The Army, therefore, has a vital stake in the Force and Army officers should have great interest in the Force.)

THE PROBLEM

THE Assam Rifles is an old Force and traces its descent from the Cachar Levy raised in 1835. The preface to the Assam Rifles Manual states : "When the province of Assam was first constituted, in 1847, there existed no organised Military Police. Frontier defences was undertaken by the three India Regiments, stationed at Silchar, Dibrugarh and in the Naga Hills. In each district, however, part of the ordinary police force (known as the Frontier Police) was armed and performed not only the duties now carried out by the Armed Branch of the Civil Police, but also occupied a number of small out-posts, along the Inner Line—duties of a nature now performed by the Assam Rifles."

The Force has a proud heritage and rich traditions. Its men—Gorkhas, Garhwalis, Kumaonis and hill tribes of NE India—come from the same stock as their brethren in the Indian Army and they have distinguished themselves both in war and peace. In its long history, the Force has taken part in numerous trans-frontier expeditions, internal security duties, two world wars and the recent insurrections in Nagaland, Manipur and Mizoram.

In operations, its record for gallantry is impressive.

| 1891—1913 | World War I 1914—1918 | World War II 1939—1945 | Insurgency in Nagaland, Manipur, Mizoram |
|-----------|--------------------------|---------------------------|--|
| IOM 3 | IOM 7 | IOM 1 | AC 3 |
| IDS M 11 | IDS M 15 | MC 4 | KC 22 |
| KPM 7 | MSM 12 | IDS M 16 | VrC 5 |
| | | MM 10 | SC 65 |
| | | MBE 2 | SM 30 |
| | | BEM 6 | VSM 15 |

The Force is now bracketed with other paramilitary forces—BSF, ITBP, CRPF, CISF—under the Ministry of Home, but is it correct? A glance at its history will show that its functions, little realised by many and especially the Army, "is as much administrative as police and military".¹ In war, it has been closely associated with the Army. In peace, it has been the right hand of the Political and the left hand of the Military in the wild tribal areas where it has been located for over a century, carrying out watch and ward duties on the frontier and internal security duties in the tribal areas. The Assam Rifles is not, as is commonly presumed, a Civil Force under the Military but a Military Force under the Civil. It would therefore be more correct to call it a gendarmerie than to call it a paramilitary force. This is the only paramilitary force whose battalions are affiliated to Regiments of Infantry of the Army and the only paramilitary force which is modelled on the Army.

"The organisation is a military one but every man is enrolled as a police officer; their duties are primarily police rather than military".² No better tribute can be paid to the men of the Assam Rifles for their work in peace than paid by Dr Verrier Elwin who was a disciple of Mahatma Gandhi, friend of Pandit Nehru and for many years Adviser to the Governor of Assam on Tribal Affairs.

"Modestly and without fuss, they have faced every possible hardship and difficulty and thousands of villagers in the wildest areas think of them with affection and gratitude. May they long continue to provide the foundations of security and order in our border areas".³

1. Report on the Administration of the Assam Rifles 1958-59. Foreword by Shri N. K. Rustomji, ICS, Adviser to the Governor of Assam.
2. The Assam Rifles in Peace and War by Sir Robert Reid, KCSI, KCIE.
3. A Philosophy for NEFA by Dr Verrier Elwin.

A fine force has become a neglected force because of:

- (a) Diarchy
- (b) Faulty Employment.

Diarchy : Dual Control is bad in any organisation but it is worse in an armed force. This is the only armed force in the country where there is dual and parallel control by two agencies; the Army for operations, HQ IGAR for administration. The Force is under the Army's "Operational Control" and what that term means is not clear because it has not been defined in the Glossary of Military Terms or anywhere else. Taking advantage of this and the fact that in matters military, operations always take precedence over administration, the Army takes the maximum out of the Force and give back little in return. On the other hand, HQ IGAR which is responsible for administration of the Force and for the welfare and morale of its men, has to perform to play the secondary role. It can be said with a little bit of exaggeration and lot of truth that Army has authority but no responsibility and HQ IGAR has responsibility but no authority. If the problem could be put into mathematical terms then it would be something like this : Bifurcation of responsibilities+multiplication authorities=confusion of purpose+divided loyalties. The net result is that the rank and file are perplexed, junior commanders are critical and senior commanders are embarrassed.

This diarchy has repercussions all round with consequences which are sometimes disastrous, sometimes ridiculous and often both. Here are a few examples : The annual inspection of a battalion is done by the DIGAR but the annual confidential report of a battalion commander is initiated by the Army formation commander; leave of officers is sanctioned by the Assam Rifles authorities but approval is first given by the Army formation commander; operational tasks are given by the Army formation commander but the training to make the troops fit for these operational tasks is the responsibility of the Assam Rifles authorities; manpower planning is the responsibility of the Assam Rifles authorities whereas strength at various out-posts is laid down by the Army formation commanders ignoring the man-power situation; leave policy is laid down by the Army formation commanders but to ensure that all men get their due leave in time as per their entitlement is the responsibility of the Assam Rifles authorities; pay is as on the Army analogy but pension is as per civil rules; terms of enrolment entitle the rank and file to serve upto 58 years of age but operational

requirements of the Army compel HQ IGAR to send men on pension about 10—15 years earlier; major part of the Force is under Army Act 1950 but certain units of the Force are under The Assam Rifles Act of 1941; throughout their service men are under the Army Act but once they retire they are not treated as Ex-Servicemen; a battalion is inducted and located as per the desire of the Army authorities but acquisition of land and construction or provision of accommodation is the responsibility of HQ IGAR; re-deployment is ordered by the Army formation commanders but the mechanics involved in re-deployment such as transport, contracts, accommodation ("op works" is not authorised in Assam Rifles), is the responsibility of the Assam Rifles authorities; finally, expenditure for that which the Assam Rifles does, what strictly it is not supposed to do, is book debited to the Army and is about one-fourth of the total budget of the Assam Rifles.

Faulty Employment : The Assam Rifles is a territorial force and once inducted in an area, they stay put there for ever. 1 Assam Rifles, 2 Assam Rifles and 3 Assam Rifles have been in their respective areas for a century and 4 Assam Rifles in its area for just over fifty years. Each battalion is widely dispersed in out-posts and covers hundreds of square miles. For example : 1 Assam Rifles looked after Lushai Hills (Mizoram), 2 Assam Rifles looked after Balipara Hill Tracts (NEFA, now Arunachal Pradesh), 3 Assam Rifles looked after Naga Hills (Nagaland) and 4 Assam Rifles was stationed in Manipur. The territorial affiliation develops certain affinity and rapport between the locals and the Assam Rifles, especially as some of the men of the Assam Rifles settle down in these areas after retirement. All this helps in building up long term intelligence of great value which would be indispensable to the Army when it moves into these areas. This should be remembered by the Army.

A point not appreciated by the Army is that the Assam Rifles battalions are armed, organised, trained, equipped, staffed, administered, and deployed in such a way that they are not capable of carrying out the normal operations of war. In World War I (1914—1918) the Assam Rifles battalions as such did not take part in the war but supplied drafts to various Gorkha Regiments who fought with them in all theatres of war. They provided a total of 23 Indian officers and 3,174 other ranks as reinforcements. Out of this, 5 Indian officers and 237 other ranks were killed and 6 Indian officers and 247 other ranks were wounded. That these drafts proved their worth is shown by the fact that 11 Indian officers and 131 other

ranks received promotion in the field, while 7 officers and 69 other ranks were awarded various honours, including IOM, IDSM and MSM⁴. In fact, the Assam Rifles battalions are never concentrated as infantry battalions and never move out as battalions. All the tactics they learn or employ are platoon level tactics : ambush, road blocks, patrolling, columns, convoy duties, escorts, screens, raids, road opening and cordon and search. They are expert in jungle craft and jungle lore and excel as scouts, guides and interpreters. Even during World War II (1939—1945) when the Force was put under command of the Army, they were employed and deployed in this way. In the Lushai Hills, men of 1 Assam Rifles together with the men of Chin Levies provided a screen to the Lushai Brigade of three regular battalions "formed.....to take over watch and ward duties from the depleted Hasforce and Barforce,.....to guard the approaches to the Surma Valley through the Lushai and Chin Hills from Silchar southward"⁵. Again a detachment of 400 men of 2 Assam Rifles furnished a column as "eyes and ears" to guide a British brigade which made a flank attack from Mokokchung in Nagaland and subsequently advanced to Ukhrul in Manipur. In another sector, seven platoons of 3 Assam Rifles took part in the heroic defence of their "Home", Kohima, which was besieged by the crack Japanese 31 Division under Lt Gen Sato. Also a few platoons of 3 Assam Rifles and bulk of the platoons of 4 Assam Rifles provided the framework for the famous guerilla force known as the "V" Force, whose activities extended far beyond the border and even across the Chindwin. "Each (Zone) had a platoon of the Assam Rifles.....as a fighting element and upto 1000 local men enrolled but not formally enlisted. Its main task was the collection of information....."⁶.

The way the "V" Force whose backbone was the Assam Rifles, operated is best described in the book Eastern Epic :

"Patrols penetrated deep into enemy held territory to obtain information and harass the foe. These patrols could cover 30 miles a day with full pack ; they were masters of the surprise, they were able to lead army patrols on their first sorties into enemy territory ; they planned ambushes ; they provided guides and interpreters"⁷.

4. The Assam Rifles in Peace and War by Sir Robert Reid, KCSI, KCIE.
5. History of the Second World War : The War against Japan, Vol III by Maj Gen Kirby and others.
6. Ibid.
7. Eastern Epic by Compton Mackenzie.

Apart from the above mentioned operational roles, the Force provided a trained nucleus of 500 JCOs, NCOs and men to raise the newly formed Assam Regiment. It assisted in the evacuation of Burma refugees. It also furnished detachments to protect the observer posts stationed far out in the forward areas to cover the northern air fields, in which position they were completely cut off and supplied entirely by air.

Such has always been the employment and deployment in the past. *The Force was used as complimentary to and not supplementary to the Army* with mutual benefit to both. But not now. Without changing its basic structure (arms, equipment, organisation, recruitment, training) its battalions are used as mere additions to infantry battalions in brigades, a task for which they are eminently unsuited. Besides, although they carry out the tasks given by the Army and in the way the Army wants the tasks to be carried out, they are not "Under Command" but under "operational control" (whatever that undefined term means). Thus, the Army itself breaks its own fundamental principle that administration cannot be divorced from operations. Here it would be worth while to pause and ponder over the words of Mr. N.K. Rustomji, ICS, who was the first Indian to hold the post of Adviser to the Governor of Assam for Tribal Areas and who, in his 10 years of service in this appointment, came to know the Force and its problems intimately.

"It is important, however, to bear in mind the lessons of history, especially in relation to the Second World War. The distinction which the Force then achieved was in no small measure due to the insight of Military Commanders, who did not regard its battalions as a mere numerical accretion to the strength of the regular Army, but recognised its special traditions rooted in deep local knowledge of the terrain and population of the Frontier. They accordingly deployed its detachments under Army Command in the areas and in the manner in which they were best fitted to operate"⁸.

It is a pity that neither the Army which uses the Force for its own need, nor the Ministry of Home which is ultimately responsible for it, has studied and analysed this problem : Diarchy and Faulty Employment. It is also unfortunate that Generals of to-day had no opportunity to serve in the Force in their younger days and get practical knowledge of its working, because the Force was a preserve of British officers prior to Independence. Equally unfortunate it is,

8. Report on the Administration of the Assam Rifles 1958-59. Foreword by Shri N. K. Rustomji, ICS, Adviser to the Governor of Assam.

that the Force has gone under Ministry of Home since 1965. Ministry of Defence would have been able to better appreciate the problems of this premier paramilitary force as did the Ministry of External Affairs during the long period it looked after the interests of this Force both prior to Independence and after Independence.

And after the World War II, how did the Force operate ? It reverted to its traditional role. As Mr. K.L. Mehta, ICS who was the second Indian to hold the post of Adviser to the Governor of Assam for Tribal Areas puts it :

"It has been fully realised that the Assam Rifles is designed and fashioned for specific tasks Whereas it is but natural, even essential, to carry out necessary reforms and changes in its organisation structure There is no attempt to imitate the ways of the Army automatically. It is essential that this fine Force should be helped to develop along the lines of its own genius The important fact that the Assam Rifles is a Civil Force and functions as an integral part of Civil Administration, has been fully realised the men of the Assam Rifles have assisted the Agency Administration in several of the development activities, such as the building of tracks and roads, growing of vegetables, the enumeration of population and even the spreading of literacy amongst the people and all those who are privileged to have a hand in the shaping of their future development, will remember that their strength lies in the maintenance of their own special traditions, their own specialise way of training and will ensure that these and other essentials are not forgotten".

By all means make use of the Force but why misuse it ?

SUGGESTED SOLUTIONS

The problem has many solutions but before suggesting them two things must be accepted as axioms : Men are more important than money; economy at the expense of efficiency is not economy.

To arrive at a correct solution it is necessary to examine the role of the Force. Dr. Verrier Elvin put it very succinctly when he described it thus :

"The Custodians of law and order, the pioneers of every advance into the interior, the guardians of our borders, and above all, the friends of the hill people".

9. Report on the Administration of the Assam Rifles 1957-58. Foreword by Shri K. L. Mehta, ICS, Adviser to the Governor of Assam.
10. A Philosophy for NEFA by Dr Verrier Elwin.

The role as defined officially is :

- (a) Security of the North Eastern States on the International Border.
- (b) Maintenance of law and order in the tribal areas of Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Mizoram, Manipur and Tripura.
- (c) Internal security of other areas, only when local police are unable to cope with the situation.
- (d) Counter-Insurgency operations in Nagaland, Manipur and Mizoram.

The official role, except sub-paragraph (d) which was inserted at a later date when insurgencies broke out in the North Eastern States, was defined by a high powered committee known as the North and North Eastern Border Defence Committee which was set up by the Government of India in 1950. It is commonly known as the Himmat Sinhji's Committee as it was presided over by the then Deputy Defence Minister, Maj Gen Himmat Sinhji. Its members were the Chief of the General Staff, a Joint Secretary from the Ministry of External Affairs and the Director of Intelligence Bureau.

Broadly speaking the committee recommended that the Assam Rifles battalions which were hitherto organised on platoon basis should be re-organised on Wing and Sub-Wing basis as opposed to infantry battalions which are organised on Company basis. These battalions would have greater man-power than infantry battalions as they had to be deployed over vast and difficult areas, where once inducted, they would stay put for ever. The committee also recommended that only two of the three wings were to be deployed in Sub-Wing strength. A Sub-Wing was the smallest complete sub-unit capable of independent deployment as it had its "in-built" administrative paraphernalia. One would hold a Firm Base, one would carry out vigorous and extensive long range patrolling and the third platoon would train, rest, act as a reserve and rotate with the other platoons of the Sub-Wing. The sections were made up of ten men and there were four sections to a platoon. In a complete platoon, including platoon headquarters, there were about fifty men so that sufficient man-power was always available at isolated Firm Bases. A Sub-Wing had sufficient strength after catering for personnel who were on temporary duty, on "Command", in transit or sick. One Wing was always to be kept at battalion headquarters as a reserve in case of an emergency. This reserve wing was to be rotated once in every two years so that the forward wing could fall

back in reserve for the much needed rest, re-fitting, training and leave. No specialists platoons of mortars, MMG, pioneers and anti-tank, were authorised, as along the borders and in the tribal areas there was no major threat—Tibet was a buffer state, the border with Burma was placid and there was no insurgency in Nagaland, Manipur and Mizoram. The recommendations of the committee were accepted by the Government of India and implemented and this is how the Force functioned till the sudden eruption of various insurgencies. In Nagaland operational control was assumed by the Army in 1955, in Arunachal in 1962 and in Mizoram in 1965. This was inevitable at that time but not now when the situation has been stabilised in all these places and the Army has had enough time to assess the situation, mobilise the resources and move in the quantum of troops it requires.

The Force is not in a position to carry out the role given to it in 1950 because of the changed political and military situation in these areas. At that time there were no insurgencies, Burma was not in turmoil, Tibet was a buffer state, the Border Security Force did not exist and the North Eastern States—Arunachal Pradesh, Mizoram, Nagaland, Tripura—were only districts of Assam/Union Territory and not full-fledged states and hence did not have their own Armed Police Battalions. The role given to the Force is too diverse for the present circumstances. The organisation of the Force is adequate for Internal Security or Counter-Insurgency duties but not to secure the border, especially the border across which a powerful and militant China faces India. If the latter role is to be carried out effectively, then a complete overhaul of the structure of the Force is necessary.

Considering the above, one of the following needs to be done immediately :—

(a) The Force could be temporarily placed "Under Command" of the Army as was done during World War II. The Army then, when exercising authority, will also have to shoulder responsibility. This, it is at present avoiding, on the plea that the Force is only under "operational control" of the Army.

(b) The Force could be removed permanently from the Ministry of Home and placed under the Ministry of Defence. The Force would be a separate entity from the Army and retain its identity. The IGAR with a small HQ would be located in Delhi and act as a liaison officer between Ministry of Defence and Army HQ and also as an adviser to the Chief of the Army Staff on problems peculiar to the Force. He would also be

responsible for what may be termed as domestic administration of the Force. He would have no command responsibilities and only limited administrative functions. His rank could be that of a Major General. HQ IGAR as it now exists would disappear, so would the various Range HQs of the Assam Rifles as they would become redundant. Instead, there would be a team of liaison officers from Eastern Command down to the Corps and Division under whom the Assam Rifles battalions are deployed. There could be a Brigadier in Command HQ, a Colonel in Corps HQ and a Lt Col in those Divisions which have Assam Rifles battalions under them.

(c) The Force—since one of its role is the security of the border—could be amalgamated with BSF or the ITBP. The Force would then lose its identity and will also be lowered in status. From the Cachar Levy of 1835, to the Assam Military Police of 1890, to The East Bengal and Assam Military Police of 1905 and finally the crowning glory as the Assam Rifles of 1918 after taking part in World War I, then back to a Police Force ! Hardly a tribute to a gallant force.

(d) The Force could be concentrated in Arunachal Pradesh withdrawing it from other North Eastern States who now have their own Armed Police Battalions such as Nagaland Armed Police, Manipur Rifles etc. and who hence should not require the Assam Rifles for Internal Security duties. Arunachal is a huge area of about 30,000 square miles of rugged and wild country with poor communications. This State is just being “opened up” and its people are simple and unsophisticated. The Assam Rifles would fit in very well here as a sort of gendarmerie. As Dr. Verrier Elwin says :

“In NEFA we are fortunate in having the Assam Rifles, an ideal force,.....their approach and conduct is in refreshing contrast to that of the forces of law and order in other parts of tribal India,.....a tradition of highest consideration for the tribal people has been established by the Assam Rifles.....May they long continue to be the upholder of law in the NEFA mountains” ^[11]

11. Ibid.

* It is worth noting the difference in pay between a BSF Constable and a Rifleman of the Assam Rifles, both serving in Mizoram. Where the former gets a total emolument of Rs. 511.65 P (less Rs. 18.00 deducted for rations), the latter gets a total of Rs. 309.00. The difference is colossal, i.e. Rs. 184.65 P.

Vide Chapter XVII, para 2 of the Assam Rifles Manual, certain ration concessions—‘A’ Class, ‘B’ Class rations and Extra Half Ration on payment—were given to JCOs and men. These too have been withdrawn since 1971. It seems that when other paramilitary forces get additional benefits, the Assam Rifles personnel lose their benefits.

If this happens the Force comes under the Government of Arunachal Pradesh, at least 25% of recruitment should be from the tribals—Mompas, Dafflas, Mishmis, Akas, Wonchos etc. This would open up employment opportunities for the locals and later on, the percentage could be raised to 50%.

(e) The Force could be merged with the Army. The Gorkhas who form the vast majority would form additional battalions of various Gorkha Rifles. The Garhwalis and the Kumaonis who come next, could go to their respective regiments. A lot of pruning, mostly on account of age would of course be necessary before the Assam Rifles personnel are absorbed in the Army. The Army would benefit by having trained, disciplined and tough personnel for about fourteen infantry battalions, or in other words, infantry elements for a division plus. The technical personnel of the Force, signallers, mostly South Indians, would fit in very well in the Corps of Signals. The Force would lose its identity but most of its men would be well rehabilitated in the Army and many personnel of the Force seem to desire this.

(f) The ITBP could be merged with the Assam Rifles as the former is a much smaller force and of very recent origin. At present both these forces are deployed on different sectors of Indo-Tibetan Border. The combined force could be given an appropriate name. The long and vulnerable border of India will then be guarded by two major forces : BSF on Pakistan and Bangladesh border; this new force on Tibet and Burma border.

(g) Disband the Force before it disintegrates.*

An aspect on which a passing reference may be made is regarding the name of the Force. The present name is a misnomer. About 10 years ago an angry M.L.A. from Assam wanted to know :

(a) How many Assamese are serving in the Assam Rifles ?

(b) How many battalions of the Assam Rifles are stationed in Assam ?

The answer he got was startling. There were only about 5% Assamese in the Assam Rifles and not a single battalion of the Assam Rifles was stationed in Assam. The name of the Force needs changing and there are no financial implications for the proposal to get bogged down ! Appropriate names would be : North Eastern Frontier Rifles,

North Eastern Frontier Force, North Eastern Border Guards, North Eastern Rangers, North Eastern Scouts and Guides.

These are some of the suggested solutions. What the eventual decision will be, is anyone's guess. But whatever the future holds in store for this fine but neglected Force, it is hoped that the Force will live up to the sentiments expressed by Col L.W. Shakespear, CB, CIE, who writing about it in its history said :

"Assam Rifles will ever be ready when wanted and will ever maintain their traditions of faithful service, progress and efficiency"¹².

12. A History of the Assam Rifles by Col L.W. Shakespear, CB, CIE.