Pushpak's Private Army

LIEUTENANT GENERAL S N SHARMA, PVSM, AVSM (RETD)

All Border Road Projects exist only because there are difficulties and dangers in their tasks which lie beyond the normal expected from civilian engineering agencies. And each Project has its peculiar characteristics which differ from the common denominator of hardship and death. Pushpak, in Mizoram, faced an insurgency quite different from other Projects. It had three unique characteristics, not found elsewhere to the same degree:

(a) it had its own civilian General Reserve Engineer Force (GREF),

(b) it developed unique relations with the Mizos, unmatched anywhere else,

(c) the nature of the soil and terrain imposed technical problems unique in Border Roads.

This is an account of the first two, which are linked, and which set the tone of not just the Project but of the whole association of this budding state with the rest of India.

THE ARMED FORCE

When Mizo insurgency burst out in February 1966, Border Roads had their share of casualties and work was severely disrupted. It was thought that there was no way of building roads except under armed protection, and this task was given to the Army and para-military forces. With the wide dispersion of road construction detachments throughout the then district and their split up into penny packets for fast and efficient achievement, it was obvious that the job was beyond the capabilities of the Army for detailed protection; they could and did, create an overall situation and environment where large scale insurgent capacity was eliminated; but they could not guarantee protection against small attacks aimed at isolated and widespread points.

It was therefore decided to raise an Armed but yet Civilian GREF element within the General Reserve Engineer Force whose basic rules described it as a "civilian organisation under the Army Act". How these two opposites were put together was puzzling even then, but under pressure it is always action first and thought later. Promptly 1800 Rifles, 60 light machine guns, 20 two inch mortars, grenades, Verey Pistols and all connected ammunition were delivered to the Project, and they were asked to get on with

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the job of setting up their very own private army for protection of camps as well as working areas of the road.

The then Chief Engineer built this force around ex-servicemen, some of whom he had; others were recruited very quickly by the GREF Centre. Nobody bothered about age, physical fitness or even whether the ex-serviceman was an ex-dhobi who did not know the tail end of a rifle - the task was to get the numbers, give the weapons and deploy them. No real thought was given to training or practice shooting until this motley group of armed men reached the ground where they were to perform. It was then discovered that as per Border Roads accounting, each individual round of ammunition was counted and had to be paid for against road construction; it could not be fired off for training which was not conceived or approved; however, there are ways of getting around and the easiest way was to report encounters with insurgents and firing in anger. So on paper this armed force suddenly became one which saw plenty of action, suffered no casualties, but started receiving a shabash for doing a job without either being organised or properly trained for it, or even doing it in reality.

In my first travel on the road, I was more terrified of the very fierce ex-soldier sitting behind me, a sten in his hand, than of any possible ambush by hostile Mizos. That first was the last; thereafter I quietly did what was already being done by many Sapper and GREF Officers - travel against orders without arms and escort; we felt there was more risk from our own trigger happy boys than from the insurgents. Very quickly we decided that taking a chance with rusty and untrained ex-soldier (but now civilian) pioneers was not going to create the confidence we wanted to instill throughout the project. So we developed a system of static strong points, built up as a guard room where these armed GREF were concentrated, carefully sited, guided, motivated and hopefully set to guard just that one point and nothing else. Explosives, rations, clothing and anything vital to insurgent were kept there or so close that they automatically got protected. Machines, vehicles, diesel fuel, and anything else of value elsewhere, but not to insurgents, were left unprotected; in fact such things were generally left overnight at work sites along the road without anybody at all, knowing that they were not of use to the hostiles and so were quite safe. Most camps were left unprotected, and Border Roads soon learnt to live wherever needed without an armed guard.

No patrolling was done. We tried this with some Army pioneers who were part of the project but gave it up as it was too risky considering the state of their training. It took a well-trained infantry soldier, loaded with skill and courage, to stand up in those dense jungles against the insurgents; no half baked group could substitute for that kind of performance.

Very soon Border Roads developed complete confidence of moving,

travelling, working and living without weapons near them. This became second nature as we improved relations with the local Mizos who lived around us; but it did not prevent insurgents attacking Border Roads on occasions. Nor did it prevent Border Roads from occasionally trying to kill themselves.

An incident at the village of Bilkawthlir was typical. Firing started at night from the police picket in the village and from the nearby Border Road camp, all merrily blazing away at the jungle between them and firing at random in all directions at no apparent target. Fortunately an old and hardened Madras Sapper, Subedar Major, with World War II experience, was with the construction unit. He described how he had to come out, go from trench to trench dodging stray bullets, and literally kicking the GREF boys to stop shooting or else he would thrash them personally. It took him half an hour to get the GREF side to stop, while the police continued till they more or less ran out of ammunition and sent an SOS to the GREF for more. Lurid and colourful reports came over the wireless, but a detailed search next day in the valley showed no trace of any insurgent and not even of a dead or wounded animal, which might have triggered off the first shot. The claims of having fought a large number of insurgents remained on paper and I think some of the constables even thought they deserved decoration; but all our boys got was a boot from the Subedar Major and the Officer got something similar (though verbal) from the Task Force Commander, who realised that encouraging enything like this would kill more of us when we least expected it.

There were other instances with more serious consequences. In February 1969 a mere handful of insurgents attacked a camp below the Kaifang Ridge. An ex-soldier, leading hand, Daler Singh, was shot dead as he struggled with a hostile. Some of the Armed GREF just sat there with their weapons till the Mizos came up and took them away, while others threw their weapons into the jungle. This got rid of the strong point, and the camp was set on fire after the hostiles looted whatever rations and clothing they could carry. No man was unduly hurt or beaten but a hundred plus were shooed away like cattle, and ran down to the bottom of the valley. S.P. Anand the Task Force Commander, was on the opposite ridge; as the news came he rushed down with his 2/1C and HQ Officers. Typically, they were unarmed, which set the example to the frightened GREF Pioneers. Promptly all the men turned about and set up a new camp in the valley itself, without arms, and got back to their jobs of road construction. Confidence was restored very fast, which reflects more on leadership and human nature than on the efficiency of weapons for protection.

The story did not end there. Those who carried weapons and ran were ordered for a possible court martial under the charge of "cowardice in the face of the enemy". This hukum came from the Army Commander and cer-

tainly not from Border Roads, since we knew the value of these men as soldiers did not extend to a combat situation where surprise attack kills the only worthwhile leader before anyone had time to gather his wits and react with a cool head. However, as ordered, we went through the legal procedure, only to find that the DJAG ruled that there was no legal case since the men were civilians; in an unarmed force, even under the Army Act, it was an illegal order to make civilians carry arms; This struck at the very roots of our own splendid army, and any such ruling publicised would sabotage the whole show. We therefore had to take the law into our own hands, and deal out summary punishment individually to every armed man who dropped his weapon and ran. This was essential to set an example to others who carried weapons and were doing their best with whatever they had. The Army Commander, Sam Maneckshaw, was too good a soldier not to cover us, and we survived this blatant breach of military law.

In another instance, a GREF leading hand, was shot dead just after nightfall when he approached the Guard Room and did not respond to the sentry's challenge; he was an oldish man and rather deaf. Here again, it was an untrained GREF sentry, anxious, on edge, and more frightened than aggressive.

We lost about 100 men who died over a period of 2 1/2 years; of these about three were definite casualties due to insurgency, the rest being due to accident, sickness and so on. Cold blooded statics say that this was a small price to pay for the gains of developing sufficient confidence in each man so that he would work without escort and without weapons, wherever and whenever necessary. High and effective morale was sustained, though based on misplaced confidence that strong points and firm bases would always offer a haven in case of serious shooting. No incident or loss could break this morale - we had won a battle of minds against the physical facts as they actually stood.

Armed combat is a deadly game; but yet only a game where success depends greatly in trying to guess what strengths the other side has and what they will do with them. The physical facts of weapons, terrain, time and space can all be calculated, but in the end it is the human who counts. Remembering that the common insurgent may be worked up and motivated for a time but normally is as frightened of us as we are of him, our civilian army was a bluff that paid off magnificently by presenting a strong and bold frontage with nothing behind. The end result is to be weighed up rather than the means; the lesson is that more often than not much can be won by mental rather than physical toughness.

RELATIONS WITH THE LOCAL MIZOS

In any insurgent situation it is a battle of hearts and minds rather than threats and bullets. In the past, Border Roads had lived very close to the villages, the common down to earth Mizos, sharing their environment happily, with occasional friction, but not real hostility. The insurgency in 1966 changed all this at a stroke. However, there were many Junior Officers and men with personal contacts who quickly used these to re-establish islands of communication and peace around them. Wisely, Unit Commanders and Task Force Commanders worked on this as a means of survival, even though fraternisation was frowned on by the army seniors who believed that force could totally win, and, in any case was needed before other means could be deployed. The GREF pioneer was altogether different to the soldier - at a consolidated pay of Rs. 90 per month, with monthly rations worth Rs. 30 and clothing which never seemed to arrive, he appeared in rags, even poorer than many of the Mizos; but his spirit was full of determination because he came from the poverty of India and simply had to earn something to keep himself and the family alive. A bond developed between the GREF and the Mizos, who looked upon them as equals bearing similar burdens of life. Very soon, the natural give and take of mutual support and advantage became a vital factor for our safety.

Sam Maneckshaw introduced a policy of fraternisation and allowed widespread employment of female labour on the road because sufficient male labour was not available (or willing) in the villages. Pushpak exploited this to the full, and became the means of communication between the common people and the authorities. Our contacts with Pastors, village councils, leaders of various groups, our share in schools, festivals, sad and happy occasions, soon became strong enough to develop into an organised system to give help wherever required most. Project policy was to strictly avoid playing 'charity', which we considered demeaning and insulting. We had resources and the purpose was further to help those who helped themselves. Soon we had a wide string of doctors, schools, churches, children's playgrounds, all along the road alignment; villages along future alignments keenly awaited our arrival with help in providing labour and information for the road. Get togethers and competitions were organised, both on Border Road celebrations and Mizo days, with singing, dancing and feasting to follow. Friends play and eat together - not enemies.

By late 1968 we felt confident enough to allow families of GREF Officers to move into Mizoram, slowly spreading to the remotest corners; there were doctors and teachers amongst them, who took over work badly neglected in difficult areas where civilian Government agencies had not dared to penetrate for years. Large sums of regimental money were spent on drugs

and medical instruments, and to make arrangements for local medical care to help villagers who otherwise went miles in great suffering. Though the policy was not to take risks, doctors would do so, and would later very boldly state that they would not accept restrictions from the Chief Enginer if they felt that something had to be done, irrespective of the risk. What began as a search for more safety to ourselves took off as an end in itself. It became a means of integration between us and the common people; the local Mizos looked upon their adjacent GREF Units as friends taking pride in their achievements. As roads developed and camps shifted, this pride of association continued, and helped us to feel we were part of this new state rather than interlopers and strangers, whom the insurgents were trying to eliminate.

Even troubled times end, and today the situation has greatly changed. Much of this achievement was due to our down to earth attitudes which were a practical way of removing the barriers which exist between people. Pushpak men and wives of that time look back with pleasure and pride to those days; those of us who return to Mizoram from time to time find a welcome with our tribal friends, which confirms our belief that perhaps this association did more to bring peace, progress and prosperity to the state than the weapons carried on both sides.

An army is designed and trained for combat; but in these confused times the clear cut limits of what combat used to mean have disappeared and we are faced with a variety which spreads from mindless terrorism to equally mindless nuclear weapons. Pushpak's private army, of two thousand men carrying arms and twenty two thousand more without arms, worked out its own local definitions at the grass roots level, and led its leaders with a kind of action which achieved not just the objectives set, but much more in the human and national context.