

On the Durand Line - 50 Years Ago

MAJ GENERAL PARATAP NARAIN (RETD) M.A. (CANTAB) FIE

Kumar Kochhar was one of the finest gentlemen I knew; we joined the Army together. He had been to the Royal Indian Military College at Dehra Dun and had a head start on me. His father Col. Kochhar, a distinguished army doctor, arranged for our training with the 8th Punjab and Probyns Horse at Lahore in drill square bashing and riding.

Of all the Indians, Chinese, Iraqis and other non-British who went to the Royal Military College, Sandhurst or the Royal Military Academy, Woolwich - (The shop); Kumar was the only Indian cadet who was selected to become an under-officer.

We got back to India after nearly five years - he went straight to join 15 Field Company - which had been selected of Indianisation, whilst I drove up my car from Bombay to spend a few days with my parents at Lahore.

One day the Local Civil and Military Gazette came out with the news of the Waziristan operations against the Faqir of IPI who was gathering his lashkars for a fight. Always envious of Kumar I couldn't face the prospects of not having taken part in this little war and thus depriving myself of a medal. So I wrote to the headquarters at Bangalore and got posting orders to also join 15 Field Company at Razmak.

It was good to get away from the head hunting fond mothers looking for suitable husbands for their daughters. I shall never forget one overpowering lady, who only wanted me to say yes; she would then call me to tea to meet her most beautiful daughter, whose main qualification was she didn't even know how to boil water!, a grim prospect for an old boy-scout!

Travelling to the frontier was an experience, from Lahore by the Frontier Mail to Rawalpindi and then by car past Kohat to Bannu, night at the mess and then by car which fortunately the CRE had arranged complete with two Khassadars.

There, I reported to my O.C. Major E.H.T Gayer. He was our instructor at the Royal Military Academy, Woolwich - a hand picked officer for commanding the first Indianised Field Company.

The same afternoon he told me to set up a water point for the new arrivals outside the perimeter. I calculated the number of men and materials required, as per the book I needed 20 men, but was told that the company was fully deployed. I should ask the subedar sahib - Munu-Swami to let me

have the sick and other stragglers in the lines for the job. The water troughs for the mules etc. were taken to the site to be connected up to the standpipe at the camp-site, the work party got down to work as explained. In spite of my precise planning I discovered that I had forgotten the ubiquitous white-tape for traffic control - I went back to the camp to draw it. On returning half an hour later, to my horror I found the sappers watching a football match. I was furious with the NCO - but he said that the work was finished (Ai Pocha!) to this day I remember the dedication to work of our Madras Sappers.

The tribal areas including Waziristan lie between the North West Province and the kingdom of Afghanistan. These inhospitable and bare hills are inhabited by a number of tribes - Afridis, Mahsuds, Wazirs, Baluchis etc. generally called Pathans. They have been independent from times immemorial and have only been marginally ruled from Kabul. It is perhaps not well known that even at the time of Akbar the great, whose kingdom extended from Afghanistan to the very South, he did not exercise actual control over the territory below Kabul down to the Indus for the first 28 years of his rule; as Humayun on his death-bed in 1556 had given the kingdom of Kabul to Hakim, a 3 year old son from his youngest wife.

This territory which has never been subjugated is inhabited by fierce highly proud tribesmen whose main ambition is to own a rifle and move about the hills seeking a prey on the highways. Lord Curzon had visited Kabul as an M.P.; on becoming the Viceroy, he initiated the forward policy; tribal areas administration was placed directly under the Central Government, instead of through the then Governor of Punjab. After the first Indo-Afghan war in 1919-21 Razmak, Wana and other Central points in Waziristan were occupied. The control of the tribal areas was exercised through the political department with political officers posted to various areas. They were backed by local retainers not in uniform but on regular payroll called Khas-sadars, who were in charge of keeping peace along the roads, providing work parties to the MES for maintenance of roads.

Next came the guides and scouts - para military forces - dressed in Mazri (gray) uniforms. Officerled by specially selected 'Pushto' speaking British officers. Battalions were organised in class companies of different tribes - Mahsuds, Wazirs, Afridis, etc. - each under subedars; jemadars, from their clans. The guides and scouts were well disciplined - they had regular stations with well guarded armouries - life was tense at times, when the weapons were stolen, they had to be recovered!! They were ultimately backed by the regular army.

The political officers had judicial powers and administered their areas through the Maliks (Headman) and occasionally held Jirgas (gathering of particular tribes) to deal with law and order problems. Justice was quick as

per special tribal laws.

Razmak, cantonment for a Brigade plus, under the command of General Norton of the Everest fame is located just short of the Durand line - the recognised border between India (now Pakistan) and Afghanistan. It is a bleak and cold place at a height of 6,500 feet. The accommodation was constructed of concrete block walls and corrugated, galvanised steel sheet roofs. The brigade headquarters was a double storey building on a wide tarred road. The camp had a double random stone perimeter wall, the watch towers and gates of stone work were continuously improved by the sappers. The camp was defended day and night by picquets on the hill tops and watch towers - a strictly male domain - I believe no woman had ever stepped in!

A kutchha airstrip lay on its East where our No. 1 squadron of the Indian Air force would sometime land their Wapitis, noisy propeller driven biplanes. The playing grounds were on the West. There was also a local civil head-quarter, office of the AGE Razmak and the transport lorries of Harichand Kapur & Sons - who ran the service from Bannu to Razmak.

King Commissioned Indian Officers were new entrants to the scene. The doctors had been in the Indian army since World War I, - Behari Kapur and Puri were at Razmak with the Field Ambulance cum Hospital before the influx of the infantry officers from Sandhurst/IMA to the Indianised 6/13 Frontier Force Rifles - the famous Piffers. This was followed by Sappers led by Asserappa. We got on very well together, the troops looked up to us, the British Officers watched us like hawks, the Viceroy's Commissioned Officers took time to get over suspicions.

Mohd. Musa who rose to become Chief of the Pakistan Army, Akbar "the General Tariq", who led the Pakistan tribes attack on Kashmir in 1947, Mohd. Yusuf whom I had met as a young scout at the world jamboree at Birkenhead in 1929; Pran Narang who unfortunately was killed in World War II, were excellent company. We had some excellent Desi Khanas in the 6/13th mess - the Sunday curry lunches were very popular with all. Another activity was bridge, we played auction bridge those days!

The daily regime was fairly hectic, we got up for early morning PT parade, ended in the evening with games, basket ball or volley ball inside the camp area, hockey and football matches on the grounds outside the perimeter. The Madras Sappers as usual did well at Hockey, we won a challenge trophy. There was even a golf course on the West round the airstrip.

The camp was well protected, tops of surrounding hills had picquet posts - round stone wall sangars held day and night by the men from the infantry battalions. One dark night, the tribesmen crawled upto a post held by the 1/9th gurkhas and managed to surprise the sentry and inflicted a gash across

his stomach. His sathis awoke took out their Khukris and let the invaders have it. The gorkhas, once their ire is on, and have taken out their khukris are formidable; by tradition a khukri is never sheathed till blood is drawn - even from one's own finger! They cut down the heads, arms whatever came in their way. The enemy fled taking away their wounded - next morning, the amount of blood around the post was to be seen to be believed. The sentry when he was brought to the field ambulance hospital had his intestines hanging out. Behari Kapoor performed an excellent operation, sewed him up and the Jawan was back hale and hearty soon after. I believe the gorkhas behaved in a similar exemplary way in the Falklands war, which came to an abrupt end soon after they had landed!

The brigade was entirely based on animal transport. Motor transport was allocated when required. The company equipment except for a petrol engine driven Warsop drill for boring holes for demolitions, a Petter engine for lighting was archaic. The picks and shovels were kept highly burnished under the watchful eyes of the British NCOs. We had horses and mules on our establishment - saddlery and special harness (Khajas) to carry the equipment on the mules.

It was bitterly cold - we would gather in the evening outside on the wall, wrapped up in Poshteens - have a whiskey mac - a concoction of whiskey and brandy developed by Capt. Lillie, our second in command before going to the 1/9th Gurkhas mess for dinner, just over our boundary wall. I was a confirmed beer drinker, I hated whiskey, when served on mess nights in the Chatham Mess I used to quietly pour it into the potted palms. I used to gulp the whiskey mac as a medicine - looking back it was like tossing Vodka.

Sappers had besides training and education - maintenance and road improvement tasks. We once had to build a high retaining wall which involved cutting a toe foundation, Jemadar Subbarayan was incharge; when he was ready to start building he showed it to me - a green horn engineer, I said it ought to be deeper. Within minutes of the additional excavation, the whole hillside started slipping - after that I never questioned his practical judgment!

Another interesting job was realignment of a hairpin bend - Greenwood's Corner - named after CRE. We always had half the section deployed for local defence. The sapper manpower was therefore limited, the local coolies when arranged by the department were a lazy lot, consisting of young boys and old men. Two men with one shovel between them - one holding the shovel and the other pulling it with a string - were less than half as effective as a sapper. The infantry working parties were effective. I shall never forget the 2nd/11th Sikhs - the famous Royal Ludhiana Sikhs, an excellent specimen of men, all six footers, well led by the British Officers who always worked alongside - they could shift the earth really fast. The first time they

worked for me - on the new road from Razmak to Razani - they finished the four hour task in less than two hours - I therefore increased it - inspite of protests by Capt. McCloed, the O/C detachment; they got down to it - with their war cry "Sat Siri Akal" and marched off well before time.

The faqir of IPI was a Tori Khel, by name Mirza Ali Khan; he came into prominence by championing the cause of ISLAM, starting with the case of Islam bibi a minor Hindu girl who eloped from Bannu with a young Muslim student. On the 26th February, he made a most inflammatory speech asking the Maliks and Khassadars to desert government service. We went out for various route marches called columns. The system of passing columns through ravines was the same as practised by Pollock in 1882 when he forced the khyber pass. The columns consisted of all arms, with conventional advanced guards, main force and the rear guard - except that we started with a large advanced guard and ended with a much larger rear guard. The advanced guard commander used to carry a double viewing stick, he would call up one of the officers and detail him to capture the Tekri (Hilltop) indicated, the detachment would double up the hillside to hold it till the rear guard had passed through the defile safely and then join the rear guard. The pace of the column was the regulation 3 mile an hour with ten minutes halt to the hour. As precaution against the snipers, Officers wore the same headdress as the troops, our sappers wore cardboard shakos; we had to wear pith helmets and presented conspicuous targets on our horses. I shall never forget the first shot which whizzed past my head. We had to be vigilant all the time. Excellent training under conditions approaching active service; with a system of regular reliefs the whole army benefited.

Most of the columns mounted by Razmak Brigade were for showing the flag - the show of efficacy of our mountain guns - 3.7 Pack Hows was very impressive. The guns were carried on specially selected mules; one carried two wheels, another the breach etc. The mountain gunners specially selected strongmen, could slap the guns together in minutes and fire a few rounds - open sites and just as quickly dismantle and swing up the parts on the mules.

The Pathans and Rajputs have a common heritage and code of conduct. They carry animosities for generations, shelter their guests whatever their status, are extremely hospitable, sometimes embarrassingly so, they insist on peeling the egg for your breakfast with their not so clean hands!

Their villages have - look-out towers - like the water towers in the West - sometimes two. We had the unpleasant task of destroying a village of the Tori Khels, who had refused to punish the culprits alleged to have shot one of our political officers. the ultimate step was taken after all other methods of persuasion and coercion including the holding a Jirja (meeting of the clans) failed. The villagers were warned to evacuate: to make sure pamphlets were

dropped by the airforce. IAF Army Cooperation and Fighter Bomber squadrons were used for bombing, strafing and air observation. The tribesmen could only shoot at low fliers with their rifles. Jumbo Mazumdar, Sub-roto and Awan of No 1 Squadron based at Miranshah, only a few minutes flying, flew overhead when we reached our target.

As usual we assembled outside the camp area in the dark, and started at dawn, going through the Sahor-Tangi (Defile) picketing the hills. The village lay in a valley - near a stream and consisted of twenty or so houses, mainly mud walls and thatched roofs. Only the house of the headman - Malik - who had more resources having worked with the MES was a bit more substantial with corrugated iron sheets for roofing. The watch tower was a square double storey structure.

The infantry surrounded the village which was deserted, sappers went in with their gun cotton and gelegnite charges and blew up the houses, this was possibly more a political show of strength - blowing up the houses with the consequent noise of explosions. Finally, the houses were set on fire and from our ridge we saw them burning well with the wind from the west rising, the tribesmen fired desultory shots at us from a long distance. With the high cost of ammunition, they don't like to waste it - these shots were a token expression of their resentment. A quick and orderly withdrawal - well executed followed, and we were back to the camp for dinner.

The ding-dong skirmishes went on for quite sometime, till IPI's men laid a siege round the camp, cut off our telephone lines and the road. There we were, stuck on top of Razmak hill with the next post at Dosalli on the Khaisora river about 35 miles down the hill - with only the occasional Wapiti dropping the mail.

The General decided that he had had enough and asked the sappers to reconnoiter and re-establish communications. Lillie and Kochhar were at Dosalli, Harkirat had been posted out, only Lawny Gayer, Aserappa and myself were at Razmak - I was detailed.

Starting at dawn with the usual commotion caused by mules kicking, we started down the hill - my escort, the Gurkhas the winners of the khud races - were extremely agile running down hill, took the shortcuts, whereas I had to walk along the road full 35 miles measuring gaps - of bridges and culverts blown, noting the telephone posts destroyed. On top of it, I was dressed in battle order, breeches and boots with map cases, binoculars, compass, camera to take photographs, haversack, water bottle festooned like a Christmas tree. By noon we got down the hills and stopped for a short break for lunch, then came the long haul from the foothills to Dosalli, the last ten miles or so - the sun beat mercilessly and the breeze died down with the

result that I still remember very vividly putting my hand in my haversack and finding the chocolate bar gooey and messy! The water bottle was long empty.

The sight of Dosalli on Khaisora river was good for the eyes - we were welcomed by the garrison; there was a permanent Tochi Scouts post, plenty of water, Capt. Lillie and Kochhar's detachment was building Braithwait tank towers. Kumar looked after me extremely well, we sat by a small swimming pool and regaled ourselves with tea.

The night as is usual in these parts came down suddenly and just as I was getting back on my feet - we got a signal from Waziristan District Headquarters calling for the report immediately. Believe it or not! - I was dead beat and was in no condition to sit down and write a report. Kumar came up with the solution - have a whiskey soda - I did as a medicine, the report was written and dispatched in time.