

The Profile of a Commanding Officer

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It was sometimes in June 1960 when I saw him as my Commanding Officer with bristling moustaches, a receded hairline, a large spectacles, brisk in walk and talk, continuously smoking his cigarettes, half of which he would throw away in quick succession. As a subaltern I was watching him, as indeed, he was.

I was to see more of S S Maitra, my first CO in peace, and throughout the actions that we fought in the Congo (Zaire). In fact, during this period, he and I got to know each other from close quarters, more closer than any one else could. I saw him drive his huge UN car through weird myriad situations, dangerous enough to keep men of his rank move either with big convoy of armoured cars, or have least exposures - as indeed, some of them did.

SS had come to raise and command 3/1 GR from his old Battalion and in the bargain had inherited a hard bunch of the 'toughies' of the then twenty three Gorkha Battalions. He set about raising not only the Battalion, its structure but its spirits: the spirit of the 'bravest of the braves' the indomitable Johnny spirit. The 'unwanted' prospered and made the backbone of this Battalion through thick and thin, trials and tribulations which were to come soon.

Double Nine as 99 Mtn Bde Gp was known, was to fly to the Civil War tormented, strife torn Belgian Congo in March 1961. Being a new battalion which was yet to complete its raisings, Army Headquarters had planned to replace 3/1 GR by an older battalion. SS got to know of it and dashed to seek an interview with the CIGS. Well, we were allowed to move with the Double Nine in April 1961, spearheading the fly-in and later advance of the Brigade in all its activities in the Congo.

A BRUSH WITH FM AYUB KHAN

The flyers in those American Globe Masters gave us a halt at Karachi, Aden and Khartoum before we landed at Leopoldville (Kinshasha). Having taken off from Palam, Delhi around 1030 that morning of April 1961 two hours later when we hit the tarmac at Karachi it was fairly hot. The Embassy Staff had laid on cold drinks and snacks for us. As we marched towards the lounge I was to see a memorable thing happen. Field Marshal Ayub Khan had just arrived at the VIP lounge and having seen the Gorkhas of Indian Army happily looking at ease in his Pakistan, the old soldier's feeling stirred. An aide-de-camp came running towards us asking for the senior most

amongst us. SS was busy talking with our Attache. But before any thing could happen, we found the Field Marshal move about, shake hands with some of us. SS had arrived by now. He embraced SS, 'for old times sake'. "Good hunting and a God bless", said the impressive Field Marshal as he shook hands with SS. I understand SS and Ayub Khan remained great friends thereafter.

INTO TSHOMBE'S LAND

After a brief rest and refit at Leopoldville we moved to Kamina, a one time NATO Base, but a Gendarmerie stronghold, which, before the aircraft took off, we were told would be blocked by them (the Gendarmerie). Moise Tshombe, the rich secessionist leader's orders were not to let the Indians land in Katanga. SS moved in the first aircraft, had some machineguns mounted on the doors; just in case a forced landing became necessary. Fortunately, the Katangaans were kept at bay by the Tunisians and the Irish who were then manning the airfield defences.

(At Kamina, I recall we had HC Sarin, the Defence Secretary and Gen Wadalia, the DCOAS, come over to us.)

THE BLOOD BROTHER AND MERCENARIES

A local tribal Chief Kawanga was keen to call on the Battalion, the Gorkhas, as he was calling us. In a great demonstration of blood brotherliness and fraternity, SS not only gave him a guard of honour but a blood smeared khukri, the blood having been freshly cut from his own palm of the left hand. The tribal chief was moved and he conveyed his deep appreciation to the blood brothers - the Gorkhas, the Indians.

We were soon moving into the ferociously tribal area of Menono where the tribal warfare had stopped the functioning of the steel and copper mines.

Mercenaries made up Tshombe's 'force de frappe', the 'Group Mobile' who were prepared to fight till the end. Having been demobilised from the French Foreign Legions, the US OAS, the British colonial armies, the Cubans, Italians and every man who was prepared to fight for a chubby sum were part of the mercenaries who trained and led Moise Tshombe's Gendarmerie. A fine force by all reckonings, well motivated, equipped with the NATO weapons, mobile and hard hitting. Some time in our lighter moods after a few Simbas (the Congolese beer) we all thought of joining them.

The Indian troops particularly the Gorkhas, with their khukris, poker faces, and the highest rate of accidents on the high speed roads of Congo, were also the target of Tshombe's psy war being branded as 'Mercenaries'.

Posts sprung up all around Manono, Albertville (on lake Tanganyika);

we escorted trains to Kivu, the land of dwarf Congolese and of massive bananas each weighing more than 2 to 3 kgs. "Op Scramble Eggs" was planned to round up the mercenaries all over Katanga. The evening before SS took us out in games dress on the plea of having a match with the mercenaries where we had a cup of tea and a few glasses of Simba in the mess. And then finally at 0400 hours, the Hotel Hour, the following morning we swooped around and nabbed them. Having interrogated them, we put them on planes to be deported. Alas, that they returned soon is a different story.

THE FATALIST

By the beginning of September 1961, we were in Elisabethville having detached a company group under Thapa for Manono. In just two weeks Tshombe decided to strike in retaliation at the UN effort to control his communication centres: the palace, Post Office, radio station. It is at this time SS was most mobile, coming under fire, often returning in his bulletholed vehicles. Mission was always the same; to meet the boys; help the civilians; help anyone including Gendarmerie, if they asked for it. One afternoon in the UN HQ building known as Castle, a pair of Dorniers (which made the entire Katangese Air Force) decided to catch everybody in the same basket when an operational conference was in progress. While all the brass left the conference most unceremoniously and dashed headlong into nearby trenches already full with men including Katangese women, he just stood outside with his cigarette in his mouth and a hand at his pistol grip. When the bombs had been discharged, fortunately in the rear of the building and the perspiring seniority limped back to their tables, SS was seen looking at his right palm. "There is no chance whatsoever for the Katangese blokes to get me..... No chance.....". He was heard saying. The others couldn't look him in the face thereafter.

As days passed and a cease fire came about at the request of the UN, where Katangese Gendarmerie had definitely won hands down, it appeared a second and bigger war was round the corner. It came about in December 1961.

BATTLE AND MORE THAN THAT

On 5 December 61, the fateful day when the Gendarmerie had blocked all roads leading to the UN Headquarters in an attempt to stifle us into submission and force UN forces' final abandonment of Katanga, we marched with Govind Sharma's company to clear the road block and Salaria's adhoc platoon from the Swedish Refugee Camp came to clear yet another road block from the airport. Salaria made his famous surge of the Gorkha platoon and laid his life in supreme sacrifice while Govind Sharma with a troop of

Irish Armoured Cars stormed the road block. Both succeeded. SS was there, I with him as his I.O. Both of us lobbed more grenades than any one else had done in the operation. The operations continued on and on.

The battle carried on for almost 15 days. During this period, I remember a company Commander telling him on radio that the road his company was to move, was being shelled by the Gendarmerie. "What do you expect the enemy to do?" He retorted and snubbed him further "give you 'laddos'.... Make a move....you have just 30 minutes to reach this location....". On another occasion in September 1961 when Mangla's Company suffered cataclysmic consequences in its aborted effort to link up with the Irish garrison at Jadotville surrounded by the Gendarmerie, he had shown his sympathy and understanding. The heroic and valiant actions of the boys who sacrificed their lives or who performed exceedingly well, nevertheless, could not go unrewarded.

As the Gendarmerie were routed, their strongholds captured by the UN Forces, and they retreated into North Rhodesia and even Angola, it was certain that Tshombe would come around for a cease fire and reconciliation. But the whole lot of humanity, the Congolese and the Whites and the troops of the peace keeping force suffered. It was time for SS to embark upon an unparallel programme of reconciliation and of rapprochement. No better eulogy could have been rendered to him than what I read through.

OTHERS WHO SAW HIM AT CLOSE QUARTERS

Arthur Bryant, the famous historian and Novelist writing in the Illustrated London News of 20 January 62: ".....And then out of the tragedy and destruction of what seemed an unnecessary war, came the episode of Col Maitra and the spectacle of a good man, trained in great tradition, can effect. In the first stage of the Katanga war last September the Gorkhas - those superb and battle ruthless fighting men -were said to be hated of all the United Nations' - troops in the province. In the second stage of war in December they became the least hated and most trusted. And this, we are told, on first hand authority, due to efforts of Col Maitra.

"A tough professional soldier looking like the traditional Col Blimp with bristling moustache and a buff manner, he set out single handed to alter the Gorkha image here, and succeeded. On the first day of December fighting he went in with his men to clear a Katangan strong point with bayonets and Khukris. And after that he acted more like a Red Cross man than a soldier.

"During driving his car under fire from both sides, he continually toured civilian areas, rescuing non-combatants, guiding them to safety and even returning them, at the risk of his own life, to save their treasured possessions.

I suspect that Col Maitra by his courage and human conduct has done more to make the ideals of the UN honoured and accepted in Katanga than all the resolutions of the General Assembly or the paper directives of its administrators. For, he has shown that those ideals rest, as all ideals to be acceptable, must rest, on the basis of human virtue - in this case the virtue of soldier, who has learnt the lesson that, tough soldier's duty is, at the risk of his own life, "to improve the way of peace and also to spare the subjected and battledown the proud".

Maj Gen S Collins Powell, Chief of Staff Irish Army had this to Say: "I note with satisfaction the laudatory reference to your own activities during the recent crisis in Elisabethville".

Mr Brain Urqhart, UN Representative in the Congo, the man who carried the whole political responsibility of establishing peace in that young nation had opined:

"Lt Col SS Maitra had become a household name. During the fighting, the Battalion showed highest discipline and courage. But even during the fighting the Battalion began to show another quality which is of capital importance in UN Operation... The Gorkhas under leadership of their Colonel rescued and helped very many civilians, resultantly the Gorkhas have become well known and admired even by those who were bitterly opposed to the UN".

And again:

"When the UN was compelled to fight the Gorkhas amply demonstrated the Justness of their reputation as the "bravest of the brave"... The Battalion under Maitra's leadership gave an example of military virtue and discipline, tempered with mercy and imagination which will long be remembered in the UN as well as by those who opposed it in Katanga".

SS found admirers outside too. King Gustaf received him in Stockholm in February 62, when he went on holiday, to Europe. Likewise, he was met by Gen Lemnitzer, Chief of the NATO, the Irish PM and several other friends and admirers on the Continent of Europe.

Col Maitra was invited to deliver a lecture in the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, New York in March 62. Unfortunately, it did not become possible.

ZENITH

The Congo tenure was tremendous, tumultuous, a high morale raiser and a high water mark of achievement for Col Maitra. We were to fly back

via Elisabethville-Dar-e-Salam. On the last day of April 1962 on one afternoon as the plane loads were being further moved into the holds of the ship "USS Blatchford" and there was nothing more than to read a good book, he put aside Liddell Hart's copy of the "Reputations" and told me how he longed to have a quiet time in a small hut in the Garhwal Himalayas, read and write, rather 'waste a life's time'. And then he hoped the boys from the Battalion would join him in his retreat, as also his friends from all over the world. Laughing when he said that included Moise Tshombe from Katanga, I knew it was far from true. He was a man of action, of combat, a soldier of fortune, a 'Karmyogi' and to expect from this man what distinctly was a 'somnolent reprieve' was not in accord with his psyche. I just smiled as a good subordinate.

Back home in India he was on staff, later as Commandant of the Jungle Warfare School, and then Commanding a Brigade in Sikkim. 'Posture of India's Defence' appeared in the 'Life Magazine', during his time.

Then came the promotion and another opportunity to raise, this time, a Division: the 'Bison' Division. Good opportunity for a soldier! In his Battalion while raising he had learnt to eat from Mess tins but left it as one of the richest battalions. That was to happen to his Division too, though on a smaller scale. What, however, happened on an unprecedented scale was the fortification of soldierly professionalism, and building up of solid foundation through professional-oriented activities. The 'Bison' learnt to watch carefully before charging at its objective.

THE SHORT SHRIFT

The untimely death of Maj Gen SS Maitra as Chief of Staff of a Corps in 1969 came as a great shock and an irreparable loss to his family, friends and the Gorkhas all over the world. The tragedy struck the family too harsh. His only son died a few years later; and his wife is almost paralysed. She accepts this as an actuality of life, bravely, most heroically than most people I have come across. Still handsome she has braved the tragedy with fortitude and dignity. She has a frail frame now but her spirits are of tungsten.

THE INEVITABLE IMPRESSIONS

When I told her some months back that I wanted to write on the late General, she thanked me and said at the same time that SS was not an ordinary man and whether I would be able to do justice to his life and his time. I said I would attempt but the definitives of his biography, nonetheless, would be only those parts which I saw and knew of him.

SS was known as 'Gurung' in his previous Regiment for his total absorp-

tion with and blending in the Gorkha attributes. Having had some experience with some of the Indian troops during World War II, he could see Gorkha and the soldiery as a total amalgam of a man with a noble profession, the profession of Arms. Not that he pampered them in anyway but he did develop that solidly soft corner for them as expected of a regimental officer. He hated, if anything, what he called the 'sand model eloquence without relevance to ground situation or reality', the 'hip-swinging Gentleman', a phrase which had cost him his job more than once - and, the 'scallywags' who fail in their duties. That apart, magnanimity remained his hallmark.

One of the most hardworking officers, I saw him leave his bed even during transit at the British Transit Camp Aden at 4 AM (when we had slept at One in the morning), clear his official and private mail before reveille. There was nothing called 'pending' in his dictionary. He took quick decisions and then stuck to them, however, harsh the response or the criticism may have been. There was, I remember, a case of some ammunition accounting, which I had drawn from an Ordnance Depot for the Brigade Group in Congo. The ASC officer who took over ammunition from me had a noose round my neck by refusing to sign the receipts. The result: I was to explain for Rs 32.5 crores worth of ammunition or face an enquiry. SS came to my rescue when he wrote to the authorities giving me a clean chit.

SS was a man of strong likes and dislikes, though he did not allow it to influence his judgements or decisions. He could be sentimental, if he wanted to mix it with his method of command as an instrument of command.

He was a man of great understanding of the United Nations role and goals. There were few in the UN who compared with him, at least in the military field or, who combined military virtues with diplomatic or psychological operations so dextrously as he did. There are just a few SSs - a handful only, who under the cross fire could have rescued civilians, whose attitude was anything but friendly, and yet 'moral obligations' as he called them, motivated him to undertake mercy missions with missionary zeal. So, when Arthur Bryant felt that SS's 'courage and human conduct had done more honour to UN than any other efforts', he was totally right.

His unfortunate and untimely death, has been a traumatic experience for all of us who had come to acknowledge his leadership and psychic superiority. Perhaps, he knew his death was to be premature and his suspicion in 'grooves and cuts' on his palms was, I thought, obsessive. He often told me of the 'trap in his early fifties', which, if he crossed, would mean a 'rebirth'. Like Shankar, the great Indian philosopher or Vivekanand, he appeared sure of an early departure. He exposures in the proximity of the Dornier bombs in the

Castle in Elizabethville on that afternoon and then later those prophetic words were perhaps a truism.

In his life's crusade, SS's main weapons remained: his convictions; his courage to strive till the end of the Globe; and, his compassion which was ever pervading. In retrospect, he made a bee-line for these and achieved almost the ultimate goals set for himself.

To Our Members

The Annual Subscription for membership of the USI falls due in January each year. And therefore, this is to remind all our members to send their Membership subscriptions for 1989 so as to reach us by 15th February, 1989. This would ensure the despatch of the first issue of the USI Journal for 1989.

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