

## Letters to the Editor

I

### TO HONOUR A PAST

Sir,

The two passages reproduced from the writings of Brigadier Sir John Smyth, VC, MC, by Lieutenant General M S Shergill in his rivetting article (April-June 2005 issue), involuntarily put my memory on the fast retrieval mode. For, I had read the Brigadier's autobiography titled *The Only Enemy* way back in 1960. What comes vividly to mind and which might interest the readers is, how the "Pagri" worn by the 15<sup>th</sup> Ludhiana Sikhs became instrumental in Captain John Smyth emerging as a gallant among gallants on the field of battle.

Lieutenant General M S Shergill has given the setting of the War in France in 1914. In one of the actions, one LMG gunner of the 15<sup>th</sup> Ludhiana Sikhs got isolated while the rest of the unit had pulled back. The Germans were quick to spot him and brought unrelenting fire on that trench. But every attempt to physically dislodge him was foiled by the jawan using his LMG ammunition judiciously at the crucial moment.

While the 15<sup>th</sup> Ludhiana Sikhs watched this uneven combat, they were in no position to retaliate with any tactical reposte. That is when the adjutant, Captain Smyth sent for two sealed boxes of LMG ammunition and two Pagris. One end of each Pagri was tied to each ammunition box and the other around each ankle of the adjutant. Thus harnessed, Captain Smyth commenced crawling towards their isolated commrade. The distance and time looked like eternity to the onlookers. No amount of snipping, flesh wounds and automatic fire by the Germans could deter Smyth. At last, Smyth gained the trench and together they stood their ground and once the night darkness descended, they crawled back to the safety of their unit.

Captain Smyth's brother too had won a VC somewhere in that phase of the War, and both brothers were together the guests of the Queen at the Buckingham Palace over tea.

But fortune does not always favour the brave. Major General John Smyth had raised the 19 Infantry Division but was then shifted to

17 Infantry Division under raising and earmarked for employment with the 8th Army in Egypt. However, the General and his Division were diverted from the high seas to land at Rangoon instead.

But that is another story. Suffice here to recall that he ordered the demolition of the only bridge over the River Sittang (with two of his Brigades on the far side) so as to delay Japanese contact with Rangoon, the capital of Burma. He was removed from Command and reverted to his substantive rank of Lieutenant Colonel (yes Lt Col). But like the Sphinx that arose from ashes, Smyth went on to become the best war correspondent of *The London Times*, the best War commentator for the BBC, an authority on umpiring at the Wimbledon Tennis, a Torry MP and Minister for War Pensions (?) and in due course was reinstated with the rank of a Brigadier. He remained the Chairman of the VC Committee for endless years.

What a life!

*Lieutenant General Baljit Singh, PVSM, AVSM (Retd)*

II

Sir,

Lieutenant General M S Shergill, PVSM, AVSM, VrC (Retd) deserves to be congratulated for his article "To Honour A Past", published in the April-June 2005 issue of the USIJ. It is one of the finest to grace the pages of the USI Journal in recent times.

The Lieutenant General reveals himself as an erudite scholar, an in-depth researcher, as well as very introspective, well-read, and having considerable intellectual acumen. His easy-going personal charm creeps in between the lines throughout the article, which is an excellent attempt to free-associate, inspired no doubt by the valour and guts of the sowars/gunners of yore. Every thing is in fine fettle except the following :

**Glory To The Dead.** While the author crafts a fine balance between the historical overtones and human behaviour, he loses out in his cribbing in paying homage to the dead. Lot many soldiers have died unsung and unacknowledged in France, but there are an equally large number of soldiers whose sacrifice and death in France is well-documented. One such example is the "Chatri" built by the British at a place called Brighton Downs—in the vicinity of Patchma—it is a splendid edifice in white marble and stone that captures the spirit of human sacrifice thousands of miles from the villages of Punjab and Rajasthan.

The design is reminiscent of the typical Rajput 'Chatris' dotting the Rajasthan landscape – the only difference being the classical Greek touch in its straight and simple lines and a starkly outlined gazebo. The Chatri has a timeless beauty and on moonlit nights its glow can be seen for miles around. There are inscriptions both in English and in Hindi. The Indian High Commission in the UK is responsible for its maintenance. Unfortunately it is so neglected.

### **Gunner's Pride**

The Field Batteries given a glowing account by the author have the distinction of being one of the oldest in the Royal and Indian Regiments of Artillery. An inscription from a memorial in the Lucknow Residency, where one of these—the Bengal Battery—took part in the 1857 Uprising – is still preserved there.

### **2nd Armoured Brigade—Formation Sign**

It makes for romantic reading – the "Fleur-de-Lis" being lovingly presented by grateful citizens as a token of their esteem for the gallant actions of the Brigade. In reality it is a chilling sign—the 'Fleur-de-Lis' or the flag-flower was the official emblem that was branded by hot irons on the limbs of criminals in France as late as the 17th century. For those familiar with the romantic adventures of Alexander Dumas' 'Three Musketeers', Countess DeWinter was one such criminal branded with a 'Fleur-de-Lis'.

Simply put, the article is beautifully packaged as a thinking soldier's tribute to comrades down the ages with visuals and style blending effortlessly into an engaging narrative. A pity it is not flaunted on the cover – where it rightfully belongs, instead of some of the dull and boring articles given better display.

Well done General. I really enjoyed reading "To Honour a Past". Thank you.

*Colonel Kanu Chatterjee (Retd)*