

## The Creation of a United Indian Army (Part I)

Major General DK Palit, VrC (Retd)

The best place at which to start my review would be at the turn of the 19th century – in the last few decades of which a new Indian Army was created by the amalgamation of the three Presidency armies and the smaller localised forces such as the Hyderabad Contingent, the Punjab Frontier Force (the “Piffers”) and the forces in Burma.

Despite extensive military reforms after the Indian Mutiny, the Second Afghan War of 1878 showed up many defects in the organisation and functioning of the military machine in India. Accordingly, Viceroy Lord Lytton set up an army commission to recommend ways in which its efficiency could be improved. The main recommendation of the commission was the abolition of the separate Presidency armies, but this met with so much opposition that the suggestion was dropped. It was not until 16 years later in 1895, that it was decided to amalgamate the Presidency and other armies to form a single Indian Army – under one Commander-in-Chief. Thereafter the Army was to be organised into four commands: the Punjab (including the North-West Frontier Province and the Piffers); Bengal; Madras, including Burma (then a part of the Indian Empire); and Bombay, including Sind, Baluchistan and Aden.<sup>1</sup> For the time being the Hyderabad Contingent (as well as a number of smaller corps such as the Malwa and Mewar Bhil Corps and others) would remain directly under the Government of India. It is interesting to note that though Field Marshal Lord Roberts had been appointed “C-in-C in India” as early as in 1885, like his predecessors he had been granted no authority over the Bombay and Madras armies. The office was of great antiquity, dating back to 1774, but the incumbent was merely *primus inter pares* – first among equals – and not really in overall command.

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Bengal Army had always been considered pre-eminent among the Presidency armies; this was because it was from Bengal that the Honourable East India Company's territorial expansion and the beginnings of Empire had been instituted under Robert Clive. It retained this acknowledged precedence even after the Mutiny (even though it was mainly the Bengal Army that had rebelled) because of its continued role in military operations in northern-western India and elsewhere. In comparison the Bombay Army had only its operations in Sind and Baluchistan to show; as for the Madras Army, it was considered a force on the decline because after its wars in the eighteenth century, it had not been engaged in any major operations.

The next big step in reform came in 1903, after Kitchener had taken over as Commander-in-Chief during Lord Curzon's viceregency. He enhanced the operational potential of the Army in India by organising it into field formations – on the Western pattern – and also by territorial locations. The Northern Army was organised into five Divisions and three Independent Brigades; the Southern Army into four Divisions plus a Burma Division and an Independent Aden Brigade – all under command of Army Headquarters in Simla. It was this major modernising reform that enabled the Army in India to despatch a division (the Lahore Division) to the Western Front within two months of the outbreak of World War I in Europe. HQ Indian Army Corps (under command of General Sir James Wilcocks, GOC-in-C Northern Command) arrived in Marseilles four days later – followed, within two weeks, by the Meerut Division. I might add here that it was the prompt arrival of the Indian Army Corps on the Western Front in France that helped prevent a breakthrough by the right wing of the German Army to the Channel ports – which would have driven much of the British Expeditionary Force into the sea.

I must include a brief explanation here to distinguish between the terms "The Army in India" and "The Indian Army". The terms were not synonymous (as many officers today seem to think). The Army in India comprised all the armed forces of the Crown serving in India – including regiments of the British Army (usually referred to as the British Service) and the Indian Army, including the Burma forces plus Imperial Service units of the Indian State



Forces stationed in British India. British Service units in India owed allegiance to the Army Department of the Government of India and not to the War Office of His Majesty's Government in London. (They might be described as being "on loan" to India). It was our government that fed, clothed, equipped and paid them – a good bargain for the British taxpayer as he was thus absolved from paying for about 40 per cent of the British Army! The personnel – officers and soldiers – were subject to the British Army Act but, at the same time, came under the purview of Army Instructions (India) and "Regulations for the Army in India" and not under their British counterparts.

It is more difficult to generalise about the composition of the Indian Army. Basically, it consisted of Indian soldiers subject to the Indian Army Act; but they were commanded mainly by British Officers subject to the (British) Army Act, though after the early 1920s there were a few King's Commissioned Indian Officers (who had been sent to the Royal Military Academy at Sandhurst for their training); but as these were also subject to the (British) Army Act and also served under the same terms and conditions of service as their British counterparts, they were usually referred to as "British Officers". Even after the policy of "Indianised battalions" was set in motion – whereby a small number of infantry battalions and cavalry regiments were chosen into which all Indian were herded after transfer from their old units – no distinction in status was made between British and Indian "British Officers".

That situation changed in 1935 when officers first began to be commissioned from the Indian Military Academy (IMA) at Dehra Dun. Although they also held commissions from the King, their parchments though still issued in the name of the King of England, were now prepared in India and countersigned by the Viceroy; such a commission did not grant them power of command over officers holding the King's commission, nor indeed over British soldiers of the British or Indian Army (an anomaly that was rectified only after the start of World War II. These officers from the IMA were not at first referred to as "British Officers" (again, not until World War II). At the same time they could not be referred to as "Indian Officers" because that term had for a hundred years or more been applied to Viceroy's Commissioned Officers (Jemadars,



Subedars and Subedar-Majors). They were, therefore, described as "Indian Commissioned Officers" (ICOs, as distinct from KCIOs from Sandhurst); and in the Army list they were given a special category – "Special List Indian Land Forces" – distinct from "Unattached List, India" which described the "British" Officers. As ICOs were made subject to the Indian Army and not the (British) Army Act, except that they were accorded a special dispensation during their attachment with their British regiments in India (a practice strictly followed for all officer entrants to the Indian Army, British or Indian before World War II).

To go back to the first phase of the history of the (amalgamated) Indian Army : the only Indians who served in the (King's Commissioned) other ranks were the Regimental Medical Officers (RMOs) belonging to the Indian Medical Service (IMS). In those days there were no Indian Military Hospitals (which were first raised in France during the Great War of 1914-18. Before that the only medical and surgical cover available to Indian soldiers in Cavalry and Infantry regiments were the RMOs. That is the reason why they were usually chosen from highly qualified surgeons; and they stayed with their regiments during their whole service. In any case there was no-where else they could go, except for a few chosen ones who were sent to the medical colleges in India as professors, or transferred to the provincial governments as Civil Surgeons and Superintendents of Civil Hospitals. (The whole of the medical cover for India in those days was placed in the hands of the Director of Medical Services in Army Headquarters, Shimla, a Major-General belonging either to the IMS, or the RAMC – the Royal Army Medical Corps, which served the British Army in India but had no civil responsibilities such as the IMS had).

My father, the late Colonel AN Palit, OBE, was one such officer. He was commissioned in 1910 from Aldershot, England, where he had received his military training (after being elected Fellow of the Royal College of Surgeons following a two-year course in surgery). After being commissioned Palit opted for a Cavalry regiment, mainly in order to pursue his passion for polo – which he had picked up at Aldershot. He sailed back for India in early 1911 and after a short stay at home in Bengal, he went up north to seek an Indian Army posting.



As a commentary on the informal and relaxed Indian Army culture of those days. I quote below an excerpt from my father's biography describing his visit to the Director of Medical Services:

I went to Army HQ in Simla and sent my card in to the General's office. When I was ushered in I saw him holding my card in his hand, "What can I do for you, Palit?" he asked. I replied that I would like to be appointed permanently to 35<sup>th</sup> Cavalry. He looked at me for a minute or so and then asked if I played polo. When I said "yes", he asked how many polo ponies I kept. Not a word about my professional qualification or experience. Apparently satisfied with my replies, he wrote on the back of my card : "Plays polo, keeps three ponies. Dam fine fellow. Wants cavalry posting, preferably 35<sup>th</sup> S. Horse". Then he said : "All right, Palit. We will see to it".

The General kept his word and my father found himself posted to the 35<sup>th</sup> Scinde Horse in Dera Ghazi Khan on the North West Frontier Province – in which regiment he would have served out his life but for the outbreak of the Great War in 1914. He went to France with the first batch of Indian troops; and when an IMH was raised at Boulogne for the treatment of sepoy wounded, Palit was transferred there as a surgical specialist.

To return to 1911 : While waiting for the serving RMO of Scinde Horse – a Lieutenant Colonel – to retire, Palit was posted to the 5<sup>th</sup> Gurkhas for a few months. He has some interesting comments on this phase of his service. I quote from my father's notes :

When I joined the 1<sup>st</sup> / 5<sup>th</sup> in November 1910, both battalions of the Regiment, though stationed in Abbotabad, happened to be out on manoeuvres. The 2<sup>nd</sup> / 5<sup>th</sup> were the nearest. When their commanding officer, Colonel Stuart (who was then an Honorary ADC to HM The King Emperor)<sup>2</sup> heard of my arrival, he very courteously came back from camp to greet me and to take me to the Battalion, so that I could be made to feel more at home. This was an extremely nice gesture, especially as I was RMO to the 1<sup>st</sup> and not the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion. However, from that day I was somehow adopted by both battalions, and since the RMO of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion was an elderly Lieutenant-Colonel, I became the *de facto* RMO of the whole Regiment (with little experience as yet of practicing either surgery or medicine!).



The Commandant of the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion was Lieutenant Colonel Boisragon, a very soldierly figure, who had won the Victoria Cross (in Gilgit, I think it was). The second-in-command was Major Bruce, who later became a brigadier-general and led an Everest expedition in the early twenties.

My main duties were : the medical care of troops, including all surgical operations; cleanliness of the lines; and families welfare. It might be interesting to recount the system of families organisation in the 5<sup>th</sup> in those days. I do not know if it was the same in other Gurkha Regiments, but in the 5<sup>th</sup> polyandry was regimentally approved – indeed encouraged. In order to keep down the size and number of family accommodation, a Gurkha wife was married to four men from the Regiment, each of whom spent three months of the year as her husband. If away on Frontier duty or other operational commitments, men's leaves for a stay in family lines in Abbotabad were so regulated that each husband got his period as 'husband-on-leave' in rotation. The allotment of parenthood after the birth of child was always meticulously calculated, and sometimes I as the RMO was the sole arbiter in deciding which father was to claim a child.

This system, peculiar to the Gurkhas of the hills where polyandry was common, seemed to work out all right. We often had cases of 'breaking bounds' by off-duty husbands but these escapades were dealt with easily – by Gurkha panchayats. I do not know if the men had other wives in Nepal – I presume the more well-to-do must have had, if only to continue the family tradition of sending a son into the Regiment. (For, on one point the British were most adamant and strict in those days – no 'line-boys' born in India were recruited into the better Regiments).....

..... In those days before the Great War, each Indian Army regiment or battalion had a RMO posted to it on a permanent basis. We were a part of the regiment, unlike RMOs of today, and were often expected to wear regimental insignia. RMOs stayed with their units till they reached retirement age in the rank of Lieutenant-Colonel. Furthermore, we had far more responsibility on our hands as regards the troops' surgical and medical care. In those days there were no military hospitals for Indian other ranks (they were not introduced until after the Great War). The RMOs were the beginning and the end of medical cover for Indian troops. Each battalion or regiment had



its own "hospital", which included a sub-assistant surgeon and a few ward orderlies. (There were no nurses, but for each seriously ill patient we would be given a sick attendant from among his friends in the unit). The sum total of medical equipment considered of No.1 and No.II Panniers (for carriage on mules). One contained drugs manufactured by B&W; and the other, items such as bandages, lint and simple instruments. Often two or three adjacent unit hospitals were grouped together to form one large hospital. For instance, in Abbotabad the 6th Gurkhas were grouped with us to form a common Gurkha hospital. The RMO was considered to be quite an important functionary in the unit. I remember having to perform major operation in my regimental "operation theatre" on a folding wooden trestle table, with but the simplest of surgical instruments. On one occasion in Abbotabad the Commanding Officer of one of the 6th Gurkha Battalions insisted on being operated upon regimentally by me for his appendicitis, because he wished to be given the same treatment as his men! It was only after great difficulty that I persuaded him to go the British Military Hospital (for the British Army) in Pindi where he, as an officer, was entitled to treatment and surgical attention.

Most Indian IMS officers received fair treatment from the British. Of course this depended mostly on the officer himself – his personality, smartness, professional ability, mental outlook and above all aptitude for games. I found that being a polo player I received a little more consideration from the British than others and was often drawn into their intimate circles in Mess. Sometimes this led to awkward moments, as for instance on the occasion when after dinner one night, as we sat the round the fire, the discussion turned to the then burning issue, the proposal for Indiansiation of the officer cadre. Most of the British present said that it was only right that Indians should officer their own army, but one of them, forgetting my presence, remarked: "Fancy serving under a black colonel"! Pin-drop silence for a moment – embarrassing for everybody.

Palit was surprisingly fair and objective about British-Indian relationship in the days before the Great War, when Indian officers were a rarity. He commented:

The British officers had their faults but also many sterling qualities..... some examples of most considerate behaviour



will perhaps not be out of place..... During my first Christmas with the Gurkhas ..... the CO of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion, Colonel Stuart, whose wife happened to be out of station, sat next to me at lunch on Christmas Day. (The two battalions shared the same Mess). In the course of our conversation he asked me where I was dining that night. I replied "In the Mess, Sir". He sent for the Goan butler to find out who else was dining in that night. On the butler replying that the Doctor Sahib would be the only one, the Colonel told him that in that case he too would dine in Mess. I began to protest but the Colonel was firm, insisting that as his wife was away he couldn't let me dine by myself on Christmas night. He mumbled something about "damned women, should have more sense....." He was about to place an order for champagne for dinner but I didn't let him. We settled for a bottle of Sauterne, which he duly ordered. To cancel his own Christmas dinner invitation in order to keep me company on Christmas night in Mess was indeed noble. Furthermore, when the Brigadier-General's wife heard about it the next day, she sent word to me to insist that I had Boxing Day lunch at their house.

Regimental messes maintained strict standards in those days; and they were (much more than today) the focus of regimental life – notwithstanding that they were an entirely male preserve. My father's comments:

During the day officers worked in mufti on most days and work routine was casual in a peace station – but Mess life was quite different. Every night one dressed in full Mess Kit (ie, stiff collars and ties, mess jackets and overalls, Wellington boots, except when out in camp, when we could wear Undress Uniform, ie, blue trousers, overalls and Wellingtons – a slight concession).

Now for a few words about Mess life. The RMO was usually roped in as the mess secretary, and in many of the regiments in which I served I did not escape this thankless job. However, it was not a hard life. Food and drink were plentiful and cheap, and economy was no consideration in chalking out the weekly menus. I remember that three-course breakfasts, four-course luncheons and six-course dinners were the rule; yet, including occasional table wines, our daily messing rate seldom exceeded two rupees, except when English hams were on the side-board in winter.



We bottled our own spirits, including whisky. I remember, as mess secretary, importing huge barrels of whisky and port from Scotland and Spain respectively, diluting the mother liquor and bottling it in Mess. I think whisky sold at two rupees a bottle, or a little over. One could certainly get enjoyably merry on a rupee's worth of whisky in those days. I am told that today even the empty bottle fetches nearly the same amount in some places in India!

After a year in Abbotabad Anath was posted as RMO to a cavalry regiment, the 1st Duke of York's Own Lancers, in Dera Ismail Khan (DIK). This was also a temporary posting because there still was no vacancy in Scinde Horse for a permanent RMO. Anath found the atmosphere in DIK "more congenial", mainly because British Officers' families were more friendly; and, of course, he could start playing regular polo again. He found himself being invited home by many of the married officers.

A description of the daily routine in a cavalry regiment :

Life in the Regiment began in the morning with parades and other exercises (instead of the tedious route marches in infantry units). After breakfast came the CO's Orderly Room which, in summer, used to be over by 11 O'clock: after that the day's work was finished (except for the Orderly Officers, who had to remain on duty). Medical Officers had even less work than others – and a cavalry MO least of all. As the 'hospitals' of Indian units were grouped together under the senior Medical Officer, the RMOs ..... needed to put in only about a half to one hour's work each day in their units – unless they were in charge of either the laboratory or the operation theatre. In one group of unit hospitals in DIK there was a Brigade Laboratory under the charge of Captain (later Major General Sir) RN Chopra and an operation theatre under my charge. As a cavalry MO I seldom had any patients, even at the height of the malaria season. While the 'hospitals' in the three infantry battalions in the station overflowed with 40 to 60 patients, I sometimes had none. The cavalry sowars were seldom sick: they seemed to be a hardier lot.

In the afternoon there was polo, or tennis or other games. Polo was a parade and unless one were ill-one had to play. The day ended with dinner in mess. (There was a large number of



bachelor officers in Indian Army units because marriage before attaining the rank of captain was frowned upon: and no marriage allowance or family accommodation was granted to officers under 30 years of age).

Life was pleasant in DIK. There was little hospital work, as I mentioned before, and most of one's duty hours were spent riding around in the riding school or the regimental lines or on the parade ground. Chasing (pathan) raiders was the only diversion and was quite good fun. I often volunteered to go out on these chases as out of the six medical officers in the station I was the only one who maintained his own stable.

It was probably when he was out in camp from DIK that the incident of the "dumba" (the fat-tailed sheep of the frontier) occurred as recorded by my step-mother :

The pathans would take every opportunity of sniping at the troops in camp, particularly the officers. Your father was never shot at, probably because he was an Indian and a doctor. One day, when the camp had been without meat for a long period, your father seeing some dumbas grazing some distance away, without thinking walked out of the camp perimeter to the grazier (who, as was normal, had a rifle slung over his shoulder). Your father asked him (using hand signs) to sell him one of the sheep. The man did not say yes or no. So your father put down on the ground a sum of money he thought was a fair price and coolly led one of the dumbas back to camp. When the Colonel heard of the escapade he was furious and told your father that he would be court-martialled because he had left the security of the camp without permission, and may have been captured by the Pathans or even shot. However, when the dumba was served at dinner that night the colonel relented and forgave him. "But" said the Colonel, "Palit, please don't do such a thing again. What would we do without our good doctor?"

Once while in DIK a large body of Mahsood tribesman, between two and three thousand strong, was reported to be active near Khajuri and Spinkai Kutch. They had looted several villages and even tried to invest a fort held by a šubedar and forty sepoy. A small composite force consisting of about 280 sepoy, half a squadron of cavalry and two mountain guns were ordered to proceed to the area. The evening before the



column was due to leave I went to see if my medical staff and equipment were complete. Everything was all right except for my Anglo-Indian sub-assistant surgeon. His Sam Browne belt refused to meet in front, and as he could not get any suitable piece of matching leather the *mochi* had sewn a whitish piece of sole leather. What a queer he looked! Wish I had taken a snap of him. He also refused to ride when he was offered a cavalry horse but wanted to ride in a tum-tum (one horsed trap).

The MO of the infantry unit should have gone but he didn't have a horse, so I volunteered to go. I was keen to have the experience. Once or twice, it is fun but not all the time; and the month was February, neither hot nor cold.

We covered 56 miles to the foothills in two forced marches and on the third day climbed into the hills. It was slow work because the heights overlooking the pathway had to be guarded (there is a special word for it).<sup>3</sup>

At three o'clock we reached the vicinity of the fort and established camp. The Mess was inside the fort but we all had to sleep outside. The Colonel gave me permission to sleep in the Mess inside the fort, but I declined. I felt that we should all stay together. The guns and as many horses as could fit in the courtyard of the fort were kept inside.

At night news came that the Mahsoods were collecting within two to three miles of our camp and an attack was expected. The colonel looked worried and I soon realised why: he said to me: "I wish I had not brought mostly recruits instead of seasoned sepoy". His bright idea had been to bring newly-joined recruits on the column to give them practical experience!

When the time came to turn in for the night, I moved away from the centre of the camp, which the Mahsoods would make for if they came, and spread my bedding roll near the sangar – a hurriedly constructed perimeter wall of boulders. I borrowed a rifle from a sick sepoy and lay down fully clothed with a loaded rifle on one side and a .450 revolver on the other.

Our luck was in, because nothing happened. During the night a storm broke over us and I was partly buried under an avalanche of pebbles which slid off the sangar on to my valise.



Palit seems to have fallen foul of his brigade commander in DIK at about this time. Although the ladies of this station had been more hospitable than those in Abbotabad and had often invited the young RMO of the DYO Lancers, there was one notable exception – the wife of Brigadier-General Sir George Younghusband, the brigade commander (Brigadiers were called brigadier-generals before the 1914-18 war):<sup>4</sup>

The Custom in those days was that one had to drop cards on the ladies at the beginning of each cold weather. In winter my third winter in DIK I went round dropping cards, but only at the homes of those who had previously invited me. In the process, I left out the General's lady because she had totally ignored me for more than two years. Major (later Lieutenant-General) Shea, the Brigade Major, came to me one day and said: 'Palit, I hear you have not called on the General'. "That is right" I replied, "and I don't intend to either. He has never asked me to his house". Shea said: "That is being very rude to your Commander. He may report you to Simla". "Let him", I replied. "He gets a sumptuary allowance to entertain us, it is his duty ..... etc, etc,". I stuck to my resolve and heard no more about it. But worse was to follow.

Later that cold weather there was a cross-country race on horseback, followed by a garden party in the General's house. Presumably either a round-robin or individual invitations had been issued for the garden party, but I had not received one. I took part in the chase and did my five miles hard riding; but after I passed the finishing post outside the gates of the General's house, I galloped away towards the club. That evening Shea came to my bungalow again, looking drawn and haggard. He said that I must apologise to the General because I had insulted him in front of the whole station by galloping away from his gate. I explained my reason; I had never been asked to the General's house before, nor had I been invited that day. I was not going to enter his house uninvited. When Shea pointed out that there might be dire consequences to my refusal, I replied: "I have got my explanation to Simla ready - and also my letter of resignation, if it comes to that". However, Younghusband never reported me ..... But his good lady refused to say good-evening to me at the polo ground for some days, though the General did continue gruffly to acknowledge my greetings.



Anath was lucky to get away with just gruff greetings. His posting order came soon thereafter and it was to the same station - as RMO to 38th Scinde Horse - so he must have been forgiven (full marks to the General!). He was also lucky in that from the very start he got on well in his new Regiment, particularly with his commanding officer Colonel (later General Sir) George S Barrow.

To continue with Anath's memoir :

Scinde Horse was an old and renowned Regiment. It consisted of one squadron of Sikhs, one of Pathans, one of PMs and one of Baluchis - and, by jove, these last were a wild, untamed, unkempt lot! It had a well set up 'hospital', except that it lacked one essential commodity. For days after I took over there was no patient in it. Nobody reported sick. In the end I had to resort to desperate measures to justify my existence, but my solution did not go unnoticed by the CO. He asked me one evening in Mess : "Palit, what is wrong with that fellow I see hanging about your hospital whenever I go there for a visit? When I asked him this morning, he told me that there was nothing wrong with him; but, he said, the Captain Sahib would not discharge him. Somewhat sheepishly I replied, "Colonel, actually he is perfectly fit, but to avoid having an empty hospital I have hung on to him till someone else reports sick. That way both I and my hospital justify our existence. How can I go on drawing my pay if I have no patients?" The Colonel had a good laugh, but told me not to inflict such *zulum* again. "Do let the poor fellow go tomorrow and give him two months sick leave as compensation. I will see that in future you always have at least one patient in your hospital". He was true to his word. A man reported on sick parade next morning, when I asked him what was wrong, he replied : "*Kuchh nahin, Sahib, Colonel Sahib ka hukum hai ke aspatal report karo aur wahan ek hafta raho*". Thereafter I had a new patient every Monday!

Palit records one last contretemps with his general before he left DIK :

One day at polo, Brigadier General Younghusband was playing at back on the opposite side. At one point in the game, as I galloped up along side him to push him off the line of the ball, he suddenly pulled up his pony. As I shot past him I must



have gone in front of his horse. The General shouted at me from behind: "Why the hell did you cross me?" I had not in fact noticed that it was the General, so over my shoulder I shouted back: "Why the hell did you pull up?" Then, as he drew along side, I saw the round, red face (Generals often used to be stoutish those days). I was too flustered to remember to apologise, but I kept away from him for the rest of the chukker (it was the last chukker).

In Mess that evening I related the incident to Colonel Barrow and asked his advice as to what I had better do about it. "Oh, nothing", he replied. "These things happen. But you should have apologised immediately".

The General was clearly a good sport. All Anath suffered was another gruff "Good Afternoon" next day on the polo field.

The Pathans of the North West Frontier Province (NWFP) were a proud and ferocious people, very conscious of their ancient (Middle Eastern) lineage. They had a strict code that governed their tribal societies. In the unadministered western parts of the Frontier Province, their own writ ran – and British laws were not applicable except perhaps along the roads constructed by the British. Palit records an interesting story about the Pathan's code :

The tribal code observed by the Pathans often dismayed those inured to the rule of law and an orderly culture, but it was understood and accepted by many British Officers.

Anath tells this story about his orderly's escapade :

One day my Pathan orderly asked me urgently for a month's leave. He said he had to settle a land dispute in his village. I left him go, but when he didn't reappear after about two months I wrote him off as a deserter.

Weeks later a gaunt, emaciated man came into my office unannounced, saluted and stood to attention in front of me. There was something familiar about the dark sunburnt features but I couldn't place him at once. It was only when he spoke that I realised he was my old orderly, come back as if from the dead. When I rebuked him for overstaying his leave, he



just stood in front of me, his head hanging down in contrition. Then he told me his story.

The person with whom he had had the land dispute was his own uncle, who would not come to a compromise or listen to tribal advice. There was nothing for it but to resort to personal settlement as recognised by tribal law. They took up their rifles, went out into the fields and each selected a small rocky outcrop as personal cover and settled down to a kill-or-be-killed finale.

They stayed behind their respective cover for weeks, dozing every now and then but on the alert most of the time. Their womenfolk were allowed to come to them once a day, at sundown, bringing food and water.

"How long did you stay behind your boulder?" I asked.

"Over a month, Sahib".

"What happened in the end"?

He looked down at the ground, shifted uncomfortably on his feet and replied: "My uncle was old, Sahib. He tired first and stood up!"

It was an extraordinary situation. The man was too simple and honest to tell a lie or try to conceal his crime. I thought his fate was sealed when I reported the matter to the Colonel. Imagine my surprise when the Colonel told me a few days later in Mess that he had given orders that the man – a self-confessed murderer – was to be promoted to NCO!

The man's committed no crime in British territory; and what he has done in his own tribal village is not recognised by his people as a crime. He is clearly upset about having had to kill his uncle but he displayed great fortitude, patience and grit in doing the job. I think he has all the makings of a good NCO!

On another occasion the danger from an Afridi's bullet was more substantial. An Afridi with a gun-shot wound in his leg was brought in to our small operation theatre. I found the bone



splintered and the wound turning gangrenous. To save the man's life I put him under chloroform and amputated his leg.

When the man came to and realised that I had cut off his leg his fury was unrestrained. He kept shouting for me and swearing vengeance; and when I went to see him, he yelled: "*Tum hamara tang liya hai, hum tumhara tang lenge*". His open threats were taken seriously by the hospital staff. A day or two later a young kinsman came to the hospital to take delivery of the amputated leg (which, by tribal custom, had to be placed in the grave marked for the owner, waiting for the day of his death). The Afridi and the young man spoke in a low voice in Pushtu and they both looked balefully at me. When the ADMS heard of the incident, he had the patient transferred out of DIK to some other hospital. Even so, for the rest of my stay in the station I was warned not to move about without an armed escort.

Sadly for him, Anath's service with the Scinde Horse came to an end soon thereafter, the permanent RMO having returned (and not yet transferred to the civilian cadre).

Although assured of permanent posting to Scinde Horse, Anath had to leave the Regiment (in 1912?) to wait for the vacancy to occur. As no billet could be found for him in a cavalry regiment just then, he was posted temporarily to the 62nd Punjabis (later renumbered 1/1 Punjab) at Sitapore, about 50 miles north of Lucknow. Luckily for him polo was available in the station and his new commanding officer was a keen player. Even more fortunate was his friendship with the adjutant of the battalion, Claude Auchinleck – an association that, in small measure, was inherited by Anath's son (the present author) – and, for a very brief interlude, by his grandson (the author's son).

Anath records the incident of his first meeting with Auchinleck :

I was met at Sitapore station by the adjutant, a tall, handsome officer with a friendly countenance.

"I'm Auchinleck", he introduced himself.

"I beg your pardon".



"It's all right", he smiled. "Most people have trouble catching my name. You'll get used to it. I'm the adjutant".

Claude (he had not yet come to be known as 'the Auk') had brought his horse and trap. He drove me to my bungalow and thence to the Mess. I got to like him immensely and we became good friends, in an era when Indo-British friendships were almost unknown. He was not married then and we were often in each other's company. I found him interested and knowledgeable about his men – their culture, village lore and, of course, their personal problems. He was genuinely empathic in his attitude to Indians. I am not surprised that later, when he rose to high rank, he was so sympathetic to Indian officers.

Claude Auchinleck was largely instrumental in breaking through the racial barrier at the local club. He had put up Anath's name for membership as a matter of routine, but the Committee rejected it (because Indians were disallowed as members) whereupon Auchinleck persuaded the Commanding Officer of the battalion to threaten to resign en bloc (that is, as a Mess). This would have put paid to club polo, because without the battalion's officers and, more pointedly, its horses, there would not be enough of either to support station polo. So the club reluctantly gave in. Anath had not been told about the contretemps and was signed on as a member. However, he soon realised that he was the lone Indian in the club. So he inquired from some of the local residents why they had not joined it. When he learned the reason, he told his Colonel that in the circumstances he could not continue as a club member and would have to resign. The Colonel again took up the cause, urged on by Auchinleck, and finally the committee was forced to alter the rules - though at first allowing Indians only as gymkhana (games) members.

*(to be concluded)*

## End Notes

1. Till 1921, the eastern half of the Arabian peninsula (Kuwait, Aden and so on) had been placed under the jurisdiction of the Government of India and not of the Home Government in Whitehall.



2. Lieutenant Colonel (later Brigadier General) WD Villiers-Stuart, CBE, DSO. (80 years later Anath Palit's son Monty happened to stay at the Villiers-Stuarts' family home Castlane in Carrig-on-Suir, County Kilkenny, Ireland).
3. Anath meant "picketed".
4. They wore no crowns or stars on their shoulders – only the crossed-sword-and-baton insignia.