

## Those Were the Days

Dr Ranjana Malik\*

On a cold, wintery day on 22 Jan 1968 I was transported from an all-girls institute, the Lady Hardinge Medical College in Delhi to the Army Medical Centre and School at Lucknow.

There were three of us from our college who had applied for the interview and medical tests. Unfortunately, Nirmal, who was the keenest of us all, was declared medically unfit due to weak eye sight. My friend, Chand and I were seen off at the Delhi Railway station by a very large number of our friends and colleagues. It was an emotional send off since we had spent five and a half years with these friends, who were by now, more like family.

At Lucknow we were received by a soft spoken, amiable Havildar, who bundled us, along with a number of other young Doctors into a 3-ton truck. In the twinkling of an eye we were transformed from Doctor Sahib to "Sir" since that was the way we were addressed by army jawans then. It took some time to get used to this form of address.

I had always been in awe of the Army – the glamour of the uniform, the discipline and the inbuilt value system. All these had always impressed me and I was thrilled to be finally in the Army, ready to attend the Basic Medical Officer's course. Unlike the present day, when Doctors are first posted to Military Hospitals and are later sent for the Basic Medical Officer's Course, we were all straight out of our Medical Colleges. Those who came as interns, before having done their internship, were commissioned as Lieutenants while, those of us who had completed our internship were commissioned as Captains. Even now I joke that out of the 3 parchments that we have in our house signed by the President of India, two are for commissioning of Second Lieutenants, and, only mine, is for a Captain. The parchment for Captain Ranjana Khorana has been signed by the President, VV Giri!

The excitement of being commissioned as officers (although we were only called by our chest numbers), the measurement and fittings for our PT Kit, uniforms, Mess Dress, the wearing of our badges of rank (3 stars!) balancing our berets precariously on our heads, cycling madly for PT, rushing for classes, then games and then dinner was all a big blur of frenzied activity. I did not mind the PT, drill and still more drill, weapon training or the games but the aching calves and thighs made us groan at night. One of our coursemate, wife of a Colonel and mother of two children, had to learn to cycle from scratch. She had many falls and bruised her knees and elbows and sustained other injuries. She found the going rather tough besides the fact that many unkind remarks were tossed at her.

The weapon training sessions were exciting and I fared fairly well with the 303 Rifle shooting. My room mate was able to fire five shots on a playing card with the pistol and she had displayed this card, signed by the instructor, prominently in our room. When her prospective mother-in-law came to our room she was quite alarmed to see that her daughter-in-law is a sharpshooter!

The outdoor training camp was hard work, but it was also a lot of fun. I have wonderful memories of the 12 mile route march, pitching of our tents, outdoor exercises, weapon training, the fun and laughter, the singing and dancing sessions and the campfire in the end. All these memories remain indelibly etched in my mind.

Another unforgettable thing that happened while I was at Lucknow was my steady exchange of letters with Ved, who I had met just before I came here. My letters gave all the hilarious details of my stay there and his letters, safely kept till now, are treasures which helped us to get to know each other so well. My romance with the uniform blossomed into romance with the man in uniform, the one I got married to!

After 6 weeks of Military Training and 10 weeks of Clinical training at the Command Hospital, I left for Military Hospital, Dehradun, my first posting. It was a beautiful hospital, very picturesque and spread over a vast area. I stayed in the Military Hospital Officer's Mess, since it took me some time to acquire a scooter for myself. Ved came to see me often at Dehradun. After we decided to get married, he transferred his new scooter to me.

The Military Hospital was a good place to work in and extremely satisfying. The Commanding Officer, Colonel Lobo and all other senior officers, Colonel Bharat Singh, Colonel Kanwar, Major Das were kind, very encouraging and extremely appreciative of the work I did. Colonel Bharat Singh, Advisor in Surgery, was an excellent teacher and guide and a wonderful human being. This was a busy hospital and all my colleagues loved to work day and night. Whenever an Emergency case came at night, all of us rushed to the Operation Theatre to get the chance to assist Colonel Bharat Singh in the Operation Theatre. The companionship that we all shared was complete. Even today, after 45 years, I am in touch with some of these colleagues.

The experience of being Duty Medical Officer of a busy hospital can be quite challenging. The shouldering of all responsibilities in the hospital on your own is quite an experience. After my first duty, when I wrote out my report, I was called by the Registrar who showed me the Commanding Officer's comment praising my report.

On two particular occasions, I faced a major crisis. On a bright sunny, Sunday afternoon, I got a call that a 3-Ton truck carrying families from 39 Gorkha Training Centre, who were out on a picnic in Mussoorie, had rolled down a hill. There were many casualties amongst the picnickers – some had died, a large number were seriously wounded and there were two infants who had survived while both parents succumbed to their injuries. I rang up the Commandant of the Hospital, Commandant, 39 Gorkha Training Centre, sent ambulances to Mussoorie, alerted the Wards, Intensive Care Unit, the blood bank and the surgical teams. It was a major exercise tending to the wounded besides getting people from the Centre to take care of the grieving relatives.

A similar incident happened once again when I was on duty. A truck carrying the Football team of a unit toppled over near Mohand, in the hilly area short of Dehradun. After alerting my Commanding Officer, Adviser Surgery and staff of the Intensive Care Unit and Blood Bank, and briefing the Internee Medical Officer at the Military Hospital, I went along with the ambulances and stretcher bearers to collect the soldiers. It was a major exercise getting all the

wounded back to the Hospital. When I arrived late in the evening, Colonel Lobo said that I needn't have gone myself and should have sent my younger male colleague.

While I was posted at Dehradun, I got married to Major Malik in September 1968. He was posted in the Military Operations Directorate at Army Headquarters. For a year and a half we stayed separately. Meanwhile, I got a posting order, first, to Tezpur and then to Military Hospital, Nasik. These postings were got cancelled with great difficulty. When my husband approached the Medical Directorate, they said categorically that they are not in favour of posting husband and wife together! Such a statement truly defies logic! Finally, it was in December 1969 that I got posted to Military Hospital, Jabalpur and, Ved, my husband, was posted back to his battalion, 3 Sikh Light Infantry, which was then in Jabalpur.

The bliss of setting up our first home, the joy of seeing our first born child made this move memorable. Unfortunately, our stay together was rather short lived. In January, he moved out for collective training and in May he went to Dehradun on temporary duty to conduct the Pre-Staff Course and before you could say Jack Robinson, in September 1970, he was posted out to another battalion which was in some trouble in Mizoram. So, out of a total of nine months, we were together for barely four months.

I stayed on in Military Hospital, Jabalpur for an uninterrupted tenure of three years. It was a good hospital and I enjoyed my work thoroughly. I was a fiercely independent officer who took all my duties seriously and managed the home and office fronts efficiently. I was fortunate to have good help at home to care for my little son, even when I was on night duty. With friendly, cooperative colleagues in the office and friends in the battalion and brigade, I had no problems whatsoever. The only difficulty was the lack of communication with Ved. Letters were the only means of communication and while we wrote to each other every single day, each letter took almost 25 days to reach him and by the time I got a reply, a month and a half had passed. Through this daily communication, I made sure that he did not miss out on a single day of our son's growing up.

One day, I got a summons from a Dehradun Court asking me to come to Dehradun as an expert medical witness in a criminal case. An officer from the Madhya Pradesh, Bihar and Orissa Area sent a letter saying that officer cannot be spared due to exigencies of service. Promptly a letter arrived that "Soldier's Litigation Act no 1925 - cannot be applied in a criminal case". Another date was fixed for this testimony of mine. Unfortunately my son fell ill and had to be hospitalised, so I was also admitted to the Hospital and the court was informed that my probable stay in hospital would be 10 days. The court set another date. By this time another officer got posted to the Area HQ and since he was unaware of the earlier correspondence, he again sent a letter that officer cannot be spared. Promptly came a letter addressed to me, my Commanding Officer and the Area HQ saying that, "A warrant of arrest for the Officer is being issued". NOW, there was total commotion in the station and I was positively terrified, having night mares of being hauled away in handcuffs!! I was pushed out of Jabalpur as fast as possible along with my infant son and his maid.

When I reached the court in Dehradun (in uniform) very apprehensive, the Court was still being cleaned and swept. Some people who saw me, rushed to tell me "Thank God you have come—there has been a lot of discussion about why Army Officers cannot be charged with Contempt of Court!!" Since I had reached early, I was able to get hold of the relevant files. The case pertained to a brutal attack on a Senior Supervisor of the Ordnance Factory by workers who had attacked him with knives and sharp implements and left him almost dead. This had happened almost three years earlier. As Duty Medical Officer I had examined him, had stitched him up in the Operation Theatre along with our senior colleagues and had also submitted the report to the Police. Going through these files helped me to recall all details. This supervisor had continued to be admitted in the Surgical Ward where I was Medical Officer Incharge. When the District Magistrate met me before the hearing, he asked me why I had taken so long to come. I explained to him that, for me, a trip to Dehradun meant coming 'home' but I couldn't travel unless the higher headquarters gave me permission to move. The case hearing went through satisfactorily and I was able to answer all questions as an Expert Medical witness very confidently (having read scores of Perry Mason Courtroom Dramas). Finally, the order about the Arrest Warrant was cancelled and I was able to breathe!!

Another incident, (rather embarrassing) cannot be forgotten. During my first Annual Leave I came from Dehradun to Delhi and was issued a Military Railway Warrant (IAFT 1752) which was exchanged for a Check Soldier's Ticket (CST). Along with the ticket, the counterfoil of the Warrant was also returned to me. At Delhi I was received, with much excitement, by Ved and we merrily proceeded home. Two months passed in sheer bliss and then, I was ready to return to my place of posting.

On our way to the Railway Station, Ved asked, "I hope that you are carrying your ticket". TICKET! What ticket? I have nothing, just the counterfoil of my Warrant" I exclaimed. "But, where is your Check Soldier's Ticket", he asked. I then recalled that I had handed it over to the Ticket collector, two whole months ago. How was I to know that it was to be retained for my return journey? What was done could not be undone. To my great relief, my berth was reserved and the warrant and ticket numbers were indicated on the chart. The ticket checker came, tallied the numbers with my counterfoil and moved on. My heart took some time to stop jumping and then I slept peacefully without any premonition of impending doom!!

Next morning, at Raiwala, just short of my final destination, there was a surprise check and within minutes a whole team of Ticket Checkers appeared. Again, I pulled out my warrant. But this time there was no luck. "You'll have to see the District Magistrate since there is a Mobile Court on the platform", the officer said sternly. I gulped, my legs were trembling but with outwardly supreme, unassailable confidence I marched to the District Magistrate, pulled out my identity card and my Warrant and told him that I was travelling on a free Warrant but had accidentally misplaced my ticket. Without taking a second he said, "Please carry on, sorry for the trouble". That was the happy end to my encounter with the Mobile Railway Court! Even now I think of it as one of my most agonising experiences.

After completion of my tenure at Jabalpur I did ask if I could be posted to Wellington where my husband had now been posted after two years in Mizoram. But this was not agreed to. So after completing five happy years in the army, I asked to be released, rather regrettfully.

Even now, 41 years later, I can say emphatically that I thoroughly enjoyed my stay as a Short Service Commissioned Officer in the Army Medical Corps. I was given full respect, given credit for my work and the working environment was conducive to giving one's best to the organisation. As I look back, I would place most of my senior officers on a pedestal. There was so much to learn from them. My colleagues were friendly, courteous and helpful. I am in touch with some of them even now.

The only problem that one faced was not being posted to the same station as my husband. One can understand when the spouse is in an operational area; but to be denied a posting together when it is possible, is difficult to comprehend. Fortunately, today there are considerations such as 'spouse posting' which make things easier to some extent.

\* **Dr Ranjana Malik** was commissioned into the Army Medical Corps (AMC) on 22 Jan 1968 and served in AMC till 21 Jan 1973. She got married to Major (later General) Ved Malik, former Chief of Army Staff, in Sep 1968. At present, she is one of the founder members of the 'Society for Meritorious Students' which funds the education of almost 1000 needy children. She is also an executive member of Retired Defence Officers' Wives' Association and keeps in touch with martyred soldiers' families.

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