

A Glimpse of USI: 1870-2020

Colonel VK Singh, VSM (Retd)[@]

Introduction

The United Service Institution (USI) of India was established in

Simla (now Shimla) in Apr/May 1870 through the efforts of a far-sighted scholar-soldier Colonel (later Major-General) Charles Metcalfe MacGregor. The USI was registered as a society under The Societies Registration Act, 1860 on 02 Jan 1874 in Lahore, present-day Pakistan. The object was 'the promotion of Naval and Military Art, Science and Literature'. After independence it was changed twice, to finally read: 'for the furtherance of interest and knowledge in the Art, Science and Literature of National Security in general and Defence Services, in particular'.

The initial 'Regulations', now called 'Rules and Bye Laws', were drawn up with such foresight that they are still broadly applicable, albeit with minor modifications which were made due to changed circumstances. The USI had a modest beginning with a membership of 215 in the first year, and was housed in a portion of General Headquarters (GHQ) India building. It went through many a difficult time, mainly due to financial constraints. Today, it has come a long way, has a home of its own and is self-sustaining. It has expanded its activities, particularly after moving into its new premises in June 1996. Presently, it has a membership of over 13000. It has established a venerable reputation in the country, and abroad, through its quality programmes. Throughout its history, it has flagged important developments in the defence field and kept the country well-informed of their implications. It has the largest pool of military wisdom and experience. It functions like a well-oiled machine to accomplish various activities effortlessly and efficiently.

Governance and Ups & Downs

The initial Regulations laid down its activities as delivery of lectures at any station, debates on military subjects and

publication of a journal. For this purpose, the governance was vested in a Council. Initially, the Council had way more ex-officio members than elected ones. In 1877, Colonel MacGregor felt that the Institution had lost its vitality. In 1895, Lieutenant Colonel AB Stopford expressed dissatisfaction on many counts. After wide consultations, a number of measures were taken and number of Council members made equal from both sides. Senior members used to preside over the Council meetings.

In 1912, the Chief of the General Staff (CGS) was nominated as the permanent President. Presently, the Council has 10 ex-officio and 14 elected members. Every three years elections are held through posted ballots. In July 1947, it was decided that the Institution will now be known as 'The United Service Institution of India and Pakistan'. Four issues of the Journal, as such, were published in 1948 with flags of both the countries on the cover. However, Pakistan did not accept this arrangement and the USI reverted to its original form in 1949.

In Dec 1994, the Council decided that the Director will be a member of the Council, not merely its Secretary, and further clarified in Feb 1996 that he has full voting rights. In 2004, a 'Vision 2020' document was prepared and approved. It endorsed the centrality of the laid down objectives which had stood the test of time. It emphasised on research quality/expansion while retaining the Armed Forces orientation. Traditional autonomy was to be maintained even while working closely with the Services Headquarters.

To conduct the ordinary business of the Institution, a three-member Executive Committee was appointed by the Council on an annual basis. The first Indian to be appointed to it was Mr Ram Chandra, ICS (1933-35). Presently, the Executive Committee comprises the DCIDS (DOT) as Chairman, DGMT/DNT/ACAS (Ops) as Service representatives, apart from the seven elected members nominated by the Council and the Director. From the inception of the Institution, the Viceroy/Governor General/President of India were the Patrons till 25 July 2002, when Dr APJ Abdul Kalam declined the proposal as he did not wish to be associated with any non-government bodies. The position has not been filled since.

Vice Patrons

Starting with four Vice Patrons, the number kept on increasing; reaching 23 in 1990 as Governors/Raj Pramukhs and some others had also been invited. From Oct 1990, only the three Service Chiefs have been Vice Patrons. It may be noted that this is not an ex-officio position as Vice Patrons have to be invited to be so.

Secretaries / Directors

The USI could not afford to have a full-time paid Secretary for nearly ninety years. The army used to provide a part-time officer to act as one. Till 1948, there were only two who had three-year tenure, two had four-year tenure and one had five-year tenure. Commander KV Cherian was Secretary from Sep 1948 to Dec 1956. His contribution needs to be given more recognition as it was during his tenure that the USI moved from Simla to Delhi. The building at Simla, near Combermere post office, was disposed of and events/meetings were being held both at Simla and Delhi.

Major (later Colonel) Pyara Lal was Secretary from Jan 1957 to Nov 1987, till the time he passed away. He stabilised the USI and increased its activities. The Council recognised his contribution by naming the USI library after him in the new premises. His brother, Shri SL Agarwal, contributed Rs 1,25,000/- to institute a lecture in his memory, which the Council accepted.

Major General SC Sinha was the Director (designation changed) from 24 Nov 1987 to 30 Jun 1996. It was largely through his efforts that the present land was allotted and funds obtained from the PMO. The building came up in his time and the USI moved into it. The Council recognised his contribution by naming the USI Auditorium after him. Mrs Krishna Sinha contributed Rs 2 lakhs to institute a lecture in his memory, which was approved by the Council.

Lieutenant General Satish Nambiar served as Director from 01 Jul 1996 to 31 Dec 2008. During his tenure, USI Centre for Armed Forces Historical Research and USI Centre for UN Peacekeeping were established, and the USI Centre for Research was expanded to become USI Centre for Strategic Studies and Simulation (CS3).

Lieutenant General PK Singh headed the Institution from 01 Jan 2009 to 31 Dec 2019. During his tenure, the annual seminar was upgraded to international level, foreign cooperation was enhanced with many countries and USI contributed significantly to UN Peacekeeping at the policy level. From 01 Jan 2020, Major General BK Sharma started his tenure as Director. His tenure, though severely challenging due to the Covid-19 pandemic restrictions, has seen a great push towards use of digital and electronic social media.

Membership

Starting with 215 members in 1870, today the membership is over 13000. Initially, only a one-year ordinary membership was offered for Rs 10/-. Life membership was initiated in 1879 at Rs 55/-. From 2004, ordinary membership was allowed for three years. Associate membership without voting rights, for academics/journalists, was started in 1992, the number being limited to 100. Corporate membership was started in 1925 but was not popular. In 1950, officers of Senior Division NCC were made eligible and in 1989, cadets of NDA/IMA but only for ordinary membership. A course membership was started in Oct 2015 for one year and one course. A special Civilian membership of 10 years for a fee of Rs 25,000/- was started in 2019 for those interested in defence studies but not otherwise eligible; adult children of Life members were also made eligible for this at a fee of Rs 20,000/-.

In Jul 1899, Honorary membership by invitation of the Council was started for diplomats, foreign military officers, eminent persons and benefactors of the Institution. As per available records, the Japanese Defence Attaché was an Honorary member in 1925. In 1935, Field Marshal Sir Philip Chetwode was made an Honorary member after his retirement due to the support he provided while in service. The last was Major Robert Hammond (1989) of Norfolk Regiment as he wrote a book on the MacGregor Medal.

Presently, only officers of the Armed Forces, Class-1 gazetted officers of Group 'A' Central Services and cadets of Service academies are eligible for regular Life/Ordinary

membership. Some of the early Life members were Lieutenant Colonel Nawab MA Beg (1903) who was at that time ADC to the Nizam of Hyderabad and rose to be Commander of the Hyderabad State Forces, Major DD Khambata (1912) of cricket fame, Major GR Rajwada (later Major General and Commander Gwalior State Forces), Captain AJ Sen Gupta (1921), Lieutenant KM Cariappa (1923) later Field Marshal and C-in-C Indian Army, and Maharaja Hari Singh of J&K (1943). Shri C Rajagopalachari was an Ordinary member in 1946.

The Journal

The USI Journal has been the flagship of the Institution. Its actual designation is 'The Journal of the Proceedings of the United Service Institution of India'. Besides articles and text of papers presented, it earlier contained minutes of the Council and Executive Committee meetings, Secretary's Notes and other information. The Journal is published under the authority of the Council, but the views published in the articles are of the individual authors and not the Institution's. The Journal has always flagged all developments concerning the Armed Forces strategic, tactical, weapons, technology, logistics, leadership, international affairs, etc. During *Pax Britannica*, its publication was keenly awaited across the world.

Initially, it was priced at Re 1. Today, the cost stands at Rs 300/-. It could be subscribed by military units, etc., and members received a free copy till Dec 2016; now it is posted on the website. The maximum number printed was 14,250 in Mar 2012; now about a thousand copies are printed.

The Library

The Library is the heart of the USI. It now boasts of over 69,000 books, including a large number of rare books over 300 years old, on a variety of subjects though emphasis remains on defence issues. Many researchers from across the world have made use of its rich collection. It is spread over 12330 sq ft and has a pleasing ambience. While non-members may be granted permission to use the reading room, books can be drawn only by the members.

It has a large collection of historical Army Lists and a few Navy and Air Force Lists. Many members have presented their books to the library; notable amongst them, Field Marshal KM Cariappa, Mrs Vijay Lakshmi Pandit (200) and Major General DK Palit (500). In the year 2003, 10,009 books received from the Defence Library were accessioned. It also has a precious collection of over 400 medals, duly catalogued by Squadron Leader Rana Chhina (Retd) and Prof Ed Haynes. The library was fully digitised by 2011, converting over 7.5 lakh pages into digital format. For the first 45 years or so, there was only a part-time Librarian, usually a sergeant from GHQ. Ms Susanne was the first full-time Librarian who worked from 1915 to 1925. The present Librarian is Mrs Anita Midha who has been looking after the Library since Feb 2012.

Lectures

Lectures were listed as the first activity of USI in the Regulations of 1871. The emphasis continues. Many a time, the Viceroy and the C-in-C have presided over the lecture or have attended it. Till the USI got its building in 1910, lectures were held in the Town Hall or Gaiety Theatre at Simla. In Delhi, use of the central hall 129-D under the dome of South Block was permitted to be used. In 1895, Colonel Maitland raised the case of a young officer who had delivered a lecture and was criticised by the C-in-C, who disagreed with the former's view. Colonel Maitland felt that this is injurious to the Institution as it puts a curb on individual views. The practice then evolved that the Chair will only introduce the Speaker and only summarise in the end, keeping his views low key. By and large, the practice is still followed. The USI also gives complete freedom to junior officers to express their views during the question/answer session following a lecture.

The first lecture by an Indian, Sir Tej Bahadur Sapru, was delivered in 1931. Slides started being used from 1913. An optical lantern and a magic lantern procured before 1934 are displayed in the library. Numerous lectures, and sometimes seminars, have been organised by the USI at other stations. The first such lecture was held on 30 Jan 1871 at Gwalior. In subsequent years, they

have been held in most important military stations in pre and post partition India.

Essay Competitions

The Gold Medal Essay Competition. The medal was initially instated by Mr Mortimer Durand and came to be known after him. The first medal was won in 1872 by Lieutenant Colonel FS Roberts (later C-in-C). It continued for three years and then no entry was considered suitable for the next four years. In 1979, the USI instituted its own medal, deciding subjects in advance and laying down a maximum length of 32 pages. The essays were to be submitted anonymously under a motto and were to be examined by a panel of three expert officers. The practice still continues, by and large. Sometimes, a silver medal was also awarded.

In 1969, the Council decided that from the centenary year, 1970, another medal be instituted for Captains/Majors below 10 years of service, called Group 'B'. The original competition open to all was now called Group 'A'. The practice of awarding cash prizes, in addition to the medal or without medal, was started in 1926. Starting with Rs 50/-, it is now Rs 15000/- since 2010. From 1989, the officer standing second was also given a cash prize of Rs 1000/-, revised to Rs 10000/- from 2010. The first Indian to win the competition was Lieutenant Colonel DK Palit (1948 and 1957). Brigadier BS Bhagat won it four times (1950, 1951, 1952 and 1958).

Lieutenant General SL Menezes Memorial Essay Competition. Lt Gen Menezes had a long and close association with the USI. After he expired in 2012, his family donated Rs 1,40,000/- to start a memorial essay competition, which the Council approved. The competition started in 2015. The subject generally pertains to military history. A certificate and cash prize of Rs 10,000/- is awarded to the best essay.

MacGregor Memorial Medal

Major General Sir Charles Metcalfe MacGregor, KCB CSI CIE, Quarter-Master General (QMG) of India and Head of Intelligence

passed away on 05 Feb 1887 at an age of less than 47. A Memorial Committee was formed and the USI nominated its administrators. A sum of Rs 12,600/- were collected by Jul 1888. As reconnaissance and exploration were very dear to Major General MacGregor, it was decided to institute a medal in his memory, to be awarded for significant military reconnaissance. A silver medal of standard size was to be given to officers and viceroy's commissioned officer (VCOs) and a reduced size silver medal with gratuity of Rs 100/- to soldiers. For specially valuable work, a gold medal could be awarded. More details are covered in the article titled 'The MacGregor Memorial Medal' by Squadron Leader Rana TS Chhina, MBE (Retd).

Educational Activities under the Courses Section

Though not listed in the Bye Laws as an objective till 1989, professional advancement of officers has always been an important activity of the USI. In 1880, military war games were started and lasted for some years. In 1903, the USI helped officers preparing for examinations in the areas of tactical fitness and command/promotion. This also continued for some years. From 1910 till WW-II, the USI assisted candidates for Staff College Examination. Colonel Pyara Lal made courses as one of the areas of his core efforts. He started 'Revision Courses' for Staff College, Part 'D' and Part 'B' promotion examinations in 1958 and 1962 respectively. Classes were conducted in the afternoon. Thereafter, 'Correspondence Courses' were started as numbers increased due to expansion of the Army. These started in 1968 for Staff College (Army); Part 'D', Part 'B' and Defence Services Staff College (DSSC) (Air) in 1969; and DSSC (Navy) in 1989. From 1972 to 1980, the USI also conducted courses for promotion examinations for the Air Force. The 'Contact Programme' for DSSC (Army) started in 1998, with over 200 officers joining every year.

In 2012, over 3500 officers joined USI courses. But thereafter, the Army HQ started supplying Part 'B' and 'D' précis to candidates free of cost. USI enrolment fell below 1500 from 2014 onwards. However, USI candidates' performance in Staff College entrance examination could not be matched by any one and here

the enrolment continued as it was. In this examination, the USI students have always secured over 90 percent of competitive vacancies and formed a significant proportion of the nominated category. The credit for this must go to the Chief Instructors, Brigadier YP Dev (Dec 1996-2000), Brigadier MS Chowdhury (Sep 2000-Mar 2015) and Major General SB Asthana since Mar 2015. Further details are covered in the article by Major General SB Asthana, SM, VSM (Retd) titled 'USI of India: An Epitome of Professional Learning of Indian Military for Last 150 Years'.

Centenary

National Security Lecture and National Security Seminar were commenced as annual public events. An additional essay competition was started for junior officers. A special 'Centenary Issue' of the Journal was brought out. A commemorative USI Shield bearing the USI crest was fabricated. An exhibition of rare books was held. The government provided a grant of Rs 29,000/-.

However, certain projects which were initially planned could not be implemented – a commemorative stamp, a History of USI by Prof Adrian Preston of Canada (who was recommended by General JN Chaudhuri), a commemorative volume of selected articles from USI Journal. The Council also noted that the USI was no longer a sinking ship.

USI Digest

As it was difficult for the units and formations to get foreign periodicals on defence matters, the USI accepted an offer from the Army HQ to bring out the 'USI Digest', containing relevant articles from foreign periodicals after acquiring due permission for reproduction. A one-time grant of Rs 75,000/- was given. The Digest came out twice a year from 1999 to 2013. Service Headquarters used to buy 2000 copies at concessional rates for further distribution to the units. In due course, it became financially unviable and as the internet became widely available, its publication was stopped.

Interaction with Foreign Institutions

Distinguished foreign dignitaries and experts have been visiting the USI for talks/discussions since many decades. Formal interaction at delegation level started in 1992, when a USI team visited China Institute of International Strategic Studies (CISS), China. Such interactions increased significantly in the new premises. Memorandums of understanding (MOUs) were signed with many foreign and Indian institutions. The USI has been formally interacting with countries such as Egypt, Germany, China, USA, Japan, Russia, Taiwan, Vietnam, International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), Cambodia, South Korea, UK, Afghanistan, Uzbekistan, Norway, Sweden, Kyrgyzstan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Nigeria to name a few. The USI also gets invited to a large number of seminars in various countries. Experts from staff, scholars and members are sent to these seminars to present papers. National Defence College (NDC) and Staff College students from various countries have been visiting the USI for day-long interaction on Indian strategic perspective. The USI Centre for Strategic Studies and Simulation (CS3) is the nodal centre for such interactions.

USI Centre for Strategic Studies and Simulation (CS3)

The forebear of the CS3, the USI Centre for Research (USI-CR) came into being in Nov 1995. Its funding was initially received from the three Services, Defence Research and Development Organisation (DRDO) and Ministry of External Affairs (MEA). Five Chairs of Excellence were instituted and named Field Marshal KM Cariappa Chair, Vice Admiral RD Katari Chair, Air Marshal Subroto Mukherjee Chair, Prof DS Kothari Chair and MEA Chair.

To widen the scope of research and related activities, it was decided to merge the USI-CR into USI CS3 from 01 Jan 2005. The article titled 'The Centre for Strategic Studies and Simulation (CS3): The Journey to its Quadranscentennial' by Major General RPS Bhadauria, VSM (Retd) elaborates further details.

USI Centre for Armed Forces Historical Research (CAFHR)

In 1996, Army HQ forwarded a proposal to establish an Armed Forces Historical Society. USI asked the Army HQ to re-cast the proposal if it was to be under its aegis. The USI-CAFHR finally

came into being on 01 Dec 2000. A Board of Management was nominated by the Council. The objectives laid down were – to study history of Indian Armed Forces with objectivity, covering different facets like strategy, tactics, logistics, organisations, and socio-economic aspects. Priority was given to the post-independence period followed by 1900-1947, 1750-1900 and prior to 1750. Historical flaws were to be studied and military historical archives built. The Centre established two Chairs of Excellence – Chhatrapati Shivaji Chair and Maharana Pratap Chair. The Centre has awarded 21 Chairs so far, most resulting in publication of relevant books. A vision document was prepared in Dec 2003. The first projects to be completed were Editorial Reviews of the official history of 1962 and 1971 wars, outsourced by the Ministry of Defence (MoD).

CAFHR has played a major national role in highlighting the contributions of the Indian Armed Forces in the Great War (1914-18), which many in India were not aware of and which were hitherto remained formally unrecognised abroad. Towards this, a number of events were organised in India and many other countries. In recognition of his work in this field, Squadron Leader Rana TS Chhina, Secretary CAFHR, was awarded the Member of the Order of the British Empire (MBE) by the Queen of England and Order of the Leopold by the King of Belgium. CAFHR has contributed to many other projects. Squadron Leader Rana TS Chhina, MBE (Retd) has covered further details in the article titled 'The USI Centre for Armed Forces Historical Research 2000-2020'.

General Palit Military Studies Trust

Major General DK Palit had established a Trust in 1988 with branches in Delhi and London. The management and funds of these were transferred to the CAFHR in 2002. The London branch was closed. General Palit's idea was to re-examine India's military history as most of it was written by Britishers, and as many archives of former princely states were now available. A number of projects have been awarded by CAFHR under the Trust and as a result, relevant books have been published.

USI Centre for United Nations (UN) Peacekeeping (CUNPK)

As India has been at the forefront of UN Peacekeeping activities, a need was felt to create a training facility for our personnel. A proposal was floated by the MEA and Service Headquarters to initially start such a centre under the aegis of USI in view of the expertise and facilities available. The Centre came into being in Dec 2000. The MEA provided funds, on event-by-event basis, for international courses as did the Army for their officer's courses. The Centre functioned under the USI till 14 Aug 2014 when it moved out to be directly under the Army HQ.

CUNPK soon became a member of International Association of Peacekeeping Training Centres (IAPTC), a body recognised by the UN. It also provided the secretariat of IAPTC for ten years from Oct 2005. CUNPK also became a partner in the Standard Training Module Project of UN Department of Peacekeeping Operations (UNDPKO). Its courses were recognised by the UN Institute for Training and Research (UNITAR). As per its charter, it conducted courses of two to three week duration, including for foreign officers. These were UN Contingent Junior Officers Course, UN Military Officers and Staff Officers Course, UN Civil Police Officers Course, UN National Course for Indian Officers, Assam Rifles Course and capsules for all ranks of the Air Force and 86 such courses were conducted. A total of 263 Indian and 638 foreign officers were trained. 19 capsules were conducted for the Air Force and 3483 personnel were trained. A number of seminars were also conducted. A major command post exercise was held over two weeks in Feb 2003, jointly with the US Pacific Command, in which 35 Indian and 110 foreign officers from 14 countries participated. Notwithstanding the delinking of CUNPK from USI in Aug 2014, USI continued its efforts to provide policy-level inputs on UN Peacekeeping.

USI Buildings

For the initial 40 years, USI functioned from a portion of GHQ as it could not raise funds for its own building. In 1895, Colonel MJ King-Harman offered to contribute Rs 500/- towards the cost of building if ten other members residing in Simla will each give a similar amount. The Council enlarged the scope of donation but sufficient funds could not be collected. In 1908, the United

Services (US) Club, Simla, generously agreed to lease a portion of its premises for 25 years on lease rent of Rs 300/- pa.

The building, near Combermere post office, was completed in 1910, built at a cost of Rs 16,000/-. The USI used this building for 43 years. As GHQ shifted to Delhi, the Council felt the necessity of shifting to Delhi. No suitable accommodation could be found in Delhi. The Army HQ offered a Lahore shed at Red Fort but the offer was not accepted. Finally, Major General CH Williams, the then E-in-C, offered to accommodate the USI in a portion of Kashmir House. Hence, the USI moved into it in 1953 for the next 43 years. The USI building at Simla remained vacant till it was sold for Rs 18,000/- in 1956.

After a gap of many years, 5.2 acres land was allotted on Ridge Road near Army Public School (APS). The USI spent Rs 88,963/- on an architect and project manager for this which had to be written off as Urban Art Commission refused to give clearance for a building on South Ridge. Ultimately, 2.984 acres was allotted on 26 Oct 1990 at the present location, subsequently increased to 3.26 acres. A 30-year renewable lease was signed at an annual ground rent of Rs 300/-.

A design competition was held. M/s Dulal Mukherjee and Associates were selected. Army Welfare Housing Organisation (AWHO) was chosen to execute the project. The foundation was laid by the three Service Chiefs on 26 Apr 1993 and the building completed on 26 Apr 1996. The USI moved to the new premises on 17 June 1996, though it was formally inaugurated on 20 Sep 1996 by the then three Service Chiefs.

From 1963, the USI had started creating a building fund from its savings. In 1980, each Service gave Rs 5 lakh as an interest free loan, later converted to grant. Former Prime Ministers Shri Rajeev Gandhi and Shri PV Narasimha Rao gave Rs 1.2 crore in Sep 1986 and Rs 1.3 crore in July 1992 respectively from the National Defence Fund (NDF). To meet the escalation on completion, Army HQ gave Rs 30 lakhs, Naval HQ Rs 5 lakhs and Air HQ Rs 4.5 lakhs. However, the final AWHO bill was higher than the amount collected. As Service HQs were not willing to meet this cost, the then Director, Lieutenant General Satish

Nambiar wrote directly to the Prime Minister Shri IK Gujral, who was magnanimous to give Rs 60 lakhs from the NDF. The net final cost was Rs 5.11 crore. The result is a self-contained pleasing premises/building.

Some Financial and Administrative Trivia

The USI bankers were Alliance Bank (53 years), Lloyds Ltd (27 years), Grindlays (33 years), and currently is Syndicate Bank since 1983. There were six British auditors from 1870 to 1926. From 1926 to 1956, M/s PN Aiyer served as the Auditors. From 1956 to 1982, M/s Bhargava and Co was the Auditors. Since then, M/s Luthra and Luthra are the Auditors.

USI got a grant from Canteen Stores Department (CSD) trade surplus from 1975-76 to 2000-01, starting with Rs 25,000/-, reaching Rs 5 lakhs and ending with Rs 1 lakh.

Conclusion

Not many institutions last 150 years. None can match the activities of the USI in terms of numbers, scope, reach and expertise. It has built a venerable reputation and is continuously improving. Though working closely with the Services, it has managed to retain its traditional autonomy. It follows its ethos and traditions, and its rules and regulations. This has been possible due to the support of the Services and the dedication of its Secretaries/Directors, duly assisted by the staff. Those interested in more details may like to read the 'History of the USI' written by the author.

@Colonel VK Singh, VSM (Retd) was commissioned in the Corps of Signals in June 1963. On superannuation, he joined USI of India in November 1991 as DS (Coord) in Course Section. Subsequently, he served as DD (Adm) from January 1997 till August 2015. He has authored a book titled 'A Brief History of the United Service Institution of India (USI)', published in 2020.

Journal of the United Service Institution of India, Vol. CL, No. 622, October-December 2020.