

Mountbatten As I Saw Him

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Admiral of the Fleet Earl Mountbatten of Burma was one of the most colourful personalities of the Twentieth century. He was gifted with almost everything in life, blue blood, good looks, professional ability and good fortune, all of which he put to good use in his meteoric career, full of astounding achievements. His role as Viceroy and Governor General of India became controversial. I do not propose to go into that. I shall confine myself to recalling what little I saw of him, when I was a very junior officer.

I recall on a bright clear day on 12 February 1947, John Spittle and I watched a long cavalcade of cars racing up Raisina Hill from Vijay Chowk to the Viceroy's House (now Rashtrapati Bhavan). A black limousine flying the Union Jack was most prominent in the convoy. The incoming Viceroy, Mountbatten was travelling in that car. John was a Major and I was a Captain working together in the Operations Room of GHQ on the first floor of South Block. John was a few years older. We had become good friends. He quoted Queen Victoria's words inscribed on the arch of the entrance to North Block, "*Liberty will not descend upon a people. A people must raise themselves to liberty that must be earned before it can be enjoyed*". He said that Independence of India was in the air and it was in the fitness of things that the great grandson of that great Queen had come to grant Independence to India. I did not want to raise any acrimony by saying that Independence would be coming to us as a compulsion in a post World War era and not as an act of bounty. I reminded him that Churchill had said that he had not become the Prime Minister to preside over the liquidation of the British Empire. And now Mountbatten a protégé of Churchill who had appointed him Supreme

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Commander, had come to preside over the Empire's liquidation. John laughed and said no doubt Churchill had made Mountbatten Supreme Commander much out of turn. The Chiefs of the Army, the Navy and the Air Force in South East Asia were much senior but his royal connection would make him acceptable to them as also to the Americans. General Joe Stillwell, known as Vinegar Joe had to be appointed his Deputy. He was not an easy person to deal with. No Hollywood star in an Admiral's uniform could be as striking as Mountbatten. He shook hands with a dazzling smile and Vinegar Joe's resistance melted in the glow of his personality. John added that he had now been sent by Atlee to India to mesmerise Indians with his charm and overwhelm the feudal Princes by his royal lineage. Neither John nor I could then foresee that within six months India would be partitioned and Independence would come to the two dominions through a pool of blood and most horrendous suffering. Partition was announced on 3 June 1947. The next day we had a special calendar with two dates. 15 August and the date of the day with the number of days left for Partition. As we tore the pages of this calendar, it reminded us that Partition was getting closer. This calendar was put up in all Government offices.

I had served in Burma and Indonesia during the war when Mountbatten was the Supreme Commander. My first glimpse of him was in Singapore in March 1946. Jawaharlal Nehru was visiting Singapore at the invitation of the Indian community. He held no official position at that time. Thousands of Chinese and Indians had gone to Changi airport to receive him. I was one of them. I was surprised to see a number of Indian soldiers in Army vehicles with Congress flags at the airport. This had never happened before. I was now convinced that India's Independence was round the corner. I saw a British Colonel go to the tarmac at the airport and receive Nehru. I was told that he was the Military Secretary of Mountbatten. He saluted Nehru and took him in an Army staff car to the Government House, where Mountbatten was staying. Nehru was to lay the foundation stone of a new Indian National Army Memorial. The previous memorial had been dynamited by the British soldiers when Singapore was recaptured. Nehru was also to visit Indonesia at the invitation of Soekarno. Indian Army was fighting Soekarno's forces. We learnt that, Mountbatten switched on his charm on Nehru and persuaded him to give up both these

engagements. He told him that India would soon be independent and he should not do anything that would impair the discipline of the Indian Army. That was the first time the two had met and this was the beginning of their long friendship. The following day Nehru and Mountbatten visited the Army canteen for a cup of tea with the soldiers. There was tremendous enthusiasm among the soldiers on seeing them in their midst. That was the first time I got a glimpse of Mountbatten.

On the second occasion, I saw Mountbatten from close quarters. I was on duty in the Operations Room at the Corps Headquarters in Batavia, now Jakarta. Mountbatten walked into the Operations Room along with the Corps Commander, Sir Montagu Stopford. My boss, Colonel Stevens briefed him on the map. During the briefing Mountbatten said he wanted to talk to General Mansergh, commanding the division at Sourabaya. I was asked to put a call to him. I rang the Division's Operations Room at Sourabaya on the hotline. My counterpart was Bill Cunningham. I used to talk to him frequently. I told him that the Supremo would like to talk to his General. He said, 'OK' and after a pause when I heard a voice saying, 'yes' I said, "General Mansergh is on line Sir". Mountbatten took the telephone and said, "Mountbatten here, is that you Bob?" The voice at the other end replied, "If you are Mountbatten, I am Montgomery." Mountbatten did not take offence. He smiled and said, 'Would someone convince him that I am Mountbatten'? Cunningham had thought I was pulling his leg. The Colonel now took the telephone and sharply told Cunningham to get his GOC promptly on the line. Thereafter Mountbatten talked to Mansergh. After Mountbatten left the room, I was ticked off by my boss. I was told that I should have first spoken to General Mansergh before saying that he was on the line. Bill Cunningham also got away lightly. Later In the day Mountbatten addressed all officers in the station. Sitting next to me in the audience was Mohammad Nawaz also a Captain at our Headquarters. He later joined the Civil service and became Cabinet Secretary in Pakistan. Also present was Captain Niazi from the Rajput Regiment. He later became a Lieutenant General and surrendered to us with 90,000 soldiers at Dacca in 1971. I was in charge of all the prisoners and I met Niazi again a few times. We were all very impressed by Mountbatten's flamboyance and speech that day. He told us that soon after he took over as Supreme Commander,

he had gone to Cairo to present plans for the offensive in South East Asia to the Big Three, Churchill, Roosevelt and Stalin. The British Army Chief, Alanbrooke was also there. He remarked that it was dangerous to have Admirals on land, to which Mountbatten retorted, "*Not as dangerous as Generals at sea*". He was happy that his plans had succeeded and South East Asia had been liberated from the Japanese. He then told us that his Command both in territory and population far exceeded the commands of the other two Supreme Commanders, Eisenhower and MacArthur. Whereas the war was over elsewhere, in South East Asia Command we were still fighting in Indo-China and Indonesia, and this will determine the future of Asia. I wondered whether, while talking of Indo-China and Indonesia, he had India in mind in the new world order emerging in Asia.

Hukum Singh Yadav a dear friend of mine whom we called Kim, was appointed ADC to Mountbatten. I heard many interesting stories about the Mountbatten household from him. Mountbatten was very particular about his looks and his dress. No wonder he was referred to as "a glamour boy, a matinee idol with nice eye lashes." He had a brought a barber from Trumpers a gentleman's saloon near Piccadilly Circus in London, to give him hair cuts in India. After he dressed up whether in uniform or in civil clothes, the ADC was expected to examine his dress from different angles and make adjustments, if any. He would inquire, "How do I look?" The ADC would reply, "Excellent Your Excellency." Kim became friendly with Ann, the Secretary of Lady Mountbatten. The two got married and lived happily for the rest of their lives. Alas both are no more. Kim gave a reception at the swimming pool in the Viceroy's House. I attended the reception. The Mountbattens came for a short while for the reception. Mixed marriages were frowned upon in those days. By attending the reception, Mountbattens showed that they had no inhibitions on that score.

While Mountbatten was Viceroy, I had glimpses of him on occasions but no opportunity to interact with him. On Independence Day, I saw him going down Kingsway (now Rajpath) towards India Gate in a horse carriage with Nehru. There was tremendous enthusiasm in the crowd. The people were cheering them saying, '*Pandit Nehru ki Jai*' and '*Pandit Mountbatten ki Jai*'. As they arrived at the site of the parade, the crowd broke the cordon engulfing the

troops lined up for the parade. The band played the National Anthem and our new tricolour was unfurled. No parade could be held. Kim told me that Mountbatten had said that it was the best parade he had seen in his life. In the evening, Mountbatten held a reception at his palatial mansion now designated Governor General's House and later to be called Rashtrapati Bhavan. A Major in the Army still figured in the Warrant of Precedence and I along with several Majors was invited to that reception. There were about a thousand guests and the Mountbattens stood in their regalia shaking hands with each guest as he arrived. This was a tremendous display of their physical stamina. I also attended the farewell function held at Delhi Gymkhana Club for the departing British and Pakistani officers. Major General Cariappa promoted to that rank on Independence Day and Indian officers were the hosts. Admiral Sir Andrew Fraser Commander-in-Chief of the Eastern Fleet at Trincomalee and his wife were also present. As Mountbatten arrived, the National Anthem was played. While shaking hands with Mountbatten, Fraser stood to attention and bowed while Lady Fraser did a courtesy. This is done only for the Sovereign or his representative. Fraser was ten years senior to Mountbatten and a four star Admiral while Mountbatten was still in his two star substantive rank. In 1948 Mountbatten reverted to the Navy in his substantive rank, commanding the cruiser squadron in the Mediterranean, while Fraser was now the Chief of the Royal Navy, the First Sea Lord. It took a few years for Mountbatten to work his way up and become not only the First Sea Lord but also Admiral of the Fleet, counterpart of a Field Marshal. He was also appointed to the newly created appointment of Chief of Defence Staff in the UK, an appointment he held for six years.

In late August 1947 the law and order situation in Delhi and Northern India had become very critical. One afternoon we in Military Operations were told that an operations room had to be set up in the Governor General's House for Mountbatten by nine o' clock in the morning. Mountbatten who was in Simla was returning to Delhi the same evening for a Cabinet meeting the next day. Manekshaw had just become a full Colonel as our Deputy Director. He took me along with another officer and some draftsmen and clerks to the Governor General's House. He explained to us what all had to be done. After he saw us working for a while, he left us there saying that he would come the next morning to check

things. It was a Herculean task and we had to work throughout the night putting up maps showing troop locations and incidents of violence. Mountbatten's staff was very considerate. We were well looked after with several rounds of coffee, sandwiches and other refreshments. Manekshaw came in the morning and was satisfied with our work. At 9 AM, Mountbatten walked in to see how things were. He was quite satisfied with what we had done. He asked his Military Secretary, Colonel Douglas Currie "I hope these officers were not made to starve while they were working" Currie replied that we had been well looked after. He then turned round to us saying, "Well done." In 1972 Manekshaw was the Army Chief and I was a Major General on his staff. Larry Collins and Dominique Lapierre, came to Delhi to collect material for their book *Freedom at Midnight* which they were writing. Manekshaw asked me to brief them about what had happened and show them around the various sites in Delhi connected with events of 1947. I showed them the room in Rashtrapati Bhavan where we had worked through the night and had put up maps for emergency meeting of the Cabinet. In their book they wrote that Nehru and Patel asked Mountbatten to come over from Simla to help them manage the critical situation in the Country. They also wrote that Mountbatten took charge and used to preside over Cabinet meetings. A Governor General being a constitutional Head of State was not supposed to play an executive role. Cabinet meetings are required to be presided over by the Prime Minister who is the Head of the Government. This became a controversial issue when the book, '*Freedom at Midnight*' was published. I read in the papers that some people contradicted this saying that this had not happened.

In 1960, I was sent for a course at the Joint Services Staff College at Latimer near London, an Institution recently established at Mountbatten's initiative. It was a combined integrated staff course for the three Services. It was an intermediate staff course between the Service Staff Colleges in Britain and the Imperial Defence College. The latter is now called Royal College of Defence Studies and the former National Defence College. The students at Latimer were all from Britain and NATO countries except one from India and two from Pakistan. Mountbatten in his flamboyant style gave a most interesting talk to us. I shall mention some of its highlights. He stated that when he was a child he used to sit on his father's knees and ask his father Lord Brattenberg, who was then the First

Sea Lord, *'Dad what is the secret of the supremacy of the Royal Navy in the world?'* He told him, *'The Royal Navy should be twice as large as any other Navy in the world'*. Mountbatten said that his problem was that when he became the First Sea Lord, the Royal Navy had become half the size of other great navies of the world. Mountbatten and his father had been the only father son duo in the history of the Royal Navy to have held the appointment of First Sea Lord. His father had to step down from that appointment in the First World War because of his German name and connection. It was Mountbatten's ambition to redeem his father's honour. He not only attained that appointment but also became Admiral of the Fleet and Chief of Defence Staff (CDS). In this there was a similarity between him and another great war leader of that century. Douglas MacArthur was the son of Lieutenant General Arthur MacArthur, one of the distinguished Chiefs of the US Army who later became Governor General of the Philippines. Douglas also became the US Army Chief but outranked his father as a five star General and with a most impressive war record, as also in his appointment as Pro Consul of Japan. Mountbatten talked to us about the need for joint functioning of the three Services in modern war. Each Service had to give up its inhibitions. He found that in the name of tradition, the Navy quoted the Battle of Trafalgar, the Army the Battle of Waterloo and the Air Force not to be left out, the Battle of Britain. Given the fact that as Chief of Combined Operations in 1940, he used to attend meetings of Chiefs of Staff Committee, while the present Service Chiefs were going around with three stripes on their shoulder, he was able to make them fall in line and introduce a new working ethos. In India he had introduced a common cadet academy for the three Services, the first of its kind in the world as also a common staff college at one location for the three Services, with each Service having its separate course along with some common training programme. Before the war, the Army used to have a two years staff course, the Navy six months and the Air Force one year. He had heard that with one year course for all the three Services in India, the Army had no week-ends, the Air Force had all the week-ends and the Navy was on a permanent week-end. He also had a dig at all the staff courses in the UK. He told us that he knew that in the Service Staff Colleges at Greenwich, Camberley and Bracknell, the instructors asked questions and if the students did not know the answers, they bowled them out. At the Joint Services Staff College the instructors asked questions

and if the students did not know the answers, they did not mind. And at the Imperial Defence College they dare not ask any questions because they were sure that the students did not know the answers. After cracking this joke, he advised us not to go by that way of working. He wanted us to put in hard work and know the answers better than our instructors.

That evening there was a reception in his honour. Dinner jacket with black tie was the prescribed dress. I chose to wear my black *sherwani* and *churidar*. Apparently to identify himself with India, he came straight to me as I was the only Indian at the function. He said to me, "You look like Pandit Nehru". I knew he was referring to my dress rather than my appearance. I replied, "But Sir, I do not have a red rose." He replied, "In our country we had the war of roses before the Tudors came to power. Make sure that you do not have a war of roses in India." That was the last time I saw Mountbatten or interacted with him.

In 1979, I was a Lieutenant General holding the appointment of Adjutant General. I was the Army's chief of personnel and was also in charge of ceremonials. One day, the British Military Attache came to see me in my office. He told me that Mountbatten was upset that a letter he wrote to our Defence Minister over three months back had not been replied, nor even acknowledged. I inquired from him the subject matter of the letter. He said that Mountbatten was planning arrangements for his own funeral. It had been agreed that the function would take place in Westminster Abbey. I assured the Attache that I would look into the matter and get a reply sent to the Admiral. Normally such a letter would have come to me to draft a reply. I had not received any such letter. I checked up with the Defence Minister's Secretariat and they were not aware of that letter. I spoke to Jagjivan Ram, the then Defence Minister. He remembered that such a letter had come. A search was launched by his staff. The letter had been misplaced. It was located after a couple of days. Instead of sending it to me to put up a draft, Jagjivan Ram on his own, made out a tactful reply. He wrote to Mountbatten that he had received his letter some time back but he did not have the heart to send him a reply. In India it was a bad omen to discuss the funeral of a living person. He was so much loved in India that there was no question of the Armed Forces of India not suitably participating in his funeral.

However, he prayed that the occasion for that did not arise for many many years to come. I received this letter to be handed over to the British Military Attache for sending it on to Mountbatten.

It so happened that within a couple of months of this, Mountbatten while holidaying in Ireland died off the coast. The IRA had attached a bomb to his small boat which exploded at sea. India was represented at his funeral in Westminster Abbey by a suitable contingent of its three Services, led by the then Naval Chief, Admiral Pereira.

REQUIREMENT OF INSTRUCTORS

USI has been conducting contact programmes for DSSC aspirants. These have proved to be very useful and popular. This year we have planned to run five such programmes (from Jun to Aug 2010). Officers who wish to be instructors on such programmes may please contact Brigadier MS Chowdhury, VSM (Retd), Chief Instructor USI.