

Letters to the Editor

I

THE IMPERIAL SERVICE TROOPS AND INDIAN STATE FORCES

Sir,

This has reference to the articles "The Imperial Service Troops and Indian State Forces – Parts I and II" written by Mr AN McClenaghan (October-December 2003 and January-March 2004 issues). At the very outset, the author deserves our fulsome praise in bringing to focus the apathy and shabby treatment meted out to the States Forces by both the government and the Indian Army. Not only were they broken up but their assets were also taken over without even a thank you. Whilst it is too late to make amends, time is still available to at least chronicle their history. The author brings home the point many a time, of the scant availability of research material for a historian to delve into the achievements of the States Forces. Trivia is available and the same makes delightful reading.

A passing mention is made of the Bhopal Infantry. The 9th Bhopal Infantry, as they were designated, went to France in 1914, among the first Indian units to do so. They fought an extremely gallant action at Neuve Chapelle in October that same year, still wearing their summer uniforms. For three days without food and water, the 'Bo-Peeps' as they were affectionately known; held the line at the cost of 11 officers and 262 men. Another 200 men were lost in a stupendous bayonet fight at Festubert a few days later. Despite these terrible losses, the battalion remained in France until the spring of 1915, helping to restore the British line after the first German gas attacks. The battalion then left to take their place in Mesopotamia.

On 13 February 1916, Sepoy Chatta Singh who hailed from village Tilsanda in Kanpur district; observed his officer commanding lying wounded in full view of the enemy. He rushed to his aid and lay beside him on the exposed side and tended to his wounds. He stayed thus for five hours till nightfall, when he rushed back to get aid to bring this officer back to their own lines. He was awarded the Victoria Cross (this award has not been mentioned by the author in the summary of awards in Part II).

Of the original 'Bo-Peeps' who set out from India in 1914, only 15 returned with the unit to see their homeland. In 1922, the 9th Bhopal Infantry became the 4th Battalion of the 16th Punjab Regiment who are now in Pakistan.

There is a passing reference to the Imperial Service Brigade which saw service in East Africa from 1915 to 1918. They remained engaged in bringing to battle the sole undefeated German General of the First World War – Von Lettow Vorbeck. They played a major role in the battle of Beho-Beho of which, few would have heard about today.

Historians state that both the Greek and Roman Empires, from the time of their apogee; took nearly 200 years to crumble and fade away. In the case of the British Empire, the death was dramatic. With the fall of Hong Kong and then Singapore, all that was left to complete the disaster; was the destruction of the Sittang bridge in Burma in 1942. It can safely be said, that the curtain fell on the stage of the Empire in just five years thereafter. Who would know today, that the plunger to set off the Sittang bridge was pressed by Lieutenant Bashir Ahmed of the Malerkotla Field Company.

There must be a host of such incidents involving the State Forces but the sands of time are now running out if we do not, in true earnest, get to collate their many activities. Let us not, therefore, relegate a part of our heritage to a footnote or, worse, dump the same in the dustbin of history.

Could one suggest the formation of a historical research Chair or Endowment for the compilation of an authentic history of our State Forces? That remains the sole purpose of this letter.*

Lieutenant General MS Shergill, PVSM, AVSM, VrC (Retd)

***Editor's Note**

Acting on this suggestion, the USI Centre for Armed Forces Historical Research (CAFHR) is instituting a study on the Indian State Forces (ISF).

The CAFHR has pointed out that the author of the letter has erroneously referred to the 9th Bhopal Infantry (Bo-Peeps) as an ISF unit. However, this battalion was not a state unit, in that it did not form part of the army of any princely state, but was a regular army battalion. The battalion had its origin as the Bhopal Levy raised in 1859, for local service in Central India, by welding together the loyal remnants of the disaffected Bhopal, Gwalior and Malwa Contingents, which had mutinied. It remained as a local corps in Central India, on the lines of the Central

India Horse, till it was merged into the Indian Army as a regiment of the line in 1903. At the time of the 1903 reorganisation the unit was titled the Bhopal Battalion. As General Shergill rightly points out, it became the 4/16 Punjab Regiment in 1922 and was allotted to Pakistan in 1947. It is now 17th Battalion, The Punjab Regiment of the Pakistan Army. Naik Chatta Singh's Victoria Cross has, therefore, rightly been omitted by Mr McClenaghan from the summary of awards listed in Part II of his article.

II

PRATAP SINGH OF THE INDIAN LEGION

Sir,

Apropos of the article by Lt Cdr Neeraj Malhotra, in *USI Journal* (April-June 2004), readers would be happy to know that Pratap Singh has eventually got a "Freedom Fighter's" pension, from the Central Government, in March 2004 ("Swatantra Sainik Samman Pension" at Rs. 3,000/- pm plus DA). The Lieutenant Governor of Andaman and Nicobar Islands met him recently and Pratap Singh was a guest in the Rashtrapati Bhawan for four days in August 2004, when President of India presented him a commemorative gold medal. The Government has also promised him some more benefits. He is 84 years old now, and it has taken 58 years for him to get these benefits; but better late than never.

I met Pratap Singh in Port Blair, in 2002. The saga of his pension is an amazing commentary on our systems and how they work – but least said, the better, now! A senior bureaucrat commented that "Pratap Singh is very lucky – usually, it is only the widow who gets the 'Freedom Fighters' Pension"! Anyway, the credit goes to the Indian Navy and the Chief of the Naval Staff (CNS), for imparting the necessary "push".

This gallant old man also told me that he drove Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose, in Berlin, for three months, in 1942. Pratap Singh served in the German Wehrmacht in "14 PAK (anti-gun company)", of the "(Indian) Infantry Regiment 950", in Netherlands, Belgium and then, in France (Bay of Biscay), manning the "Atlantic Wall", in 1942-1944. He had enrolled in the British Indian Army, in 3rd Battalion, 2nd Punjab Regiment, in June 1940, when he was 20 years old. He was discharged from the Indian Army, in February 1946, on repatriation to India, with classification "grey".

The Sign of the Tiger by Rudolf-Hartog (Rupa, New Delhi, 2002, Rs 150.00) is an interesting account of the little known "Indian Legion" in Germany. Hartog was an interpreter with the Indians, and provides some rare photographs and documents in his book.

As to the issues raised by Lt Cdr Malhotra, about recognition of the services of the "Indian Legion" (and the better known Indian National Army), some complex questions arise, about military ethos, loyalty, honour vis-à-vis broader issue of country's freedom and well-being. Perhaps these issues are best left alone, now!

Major General Rajendra Prakash, VSM (Retd)

III

CAREER ASPIRATIONS AND EXPECTATIONS OF YOUNG OFFICERS

Sir,

The thought provoking article "The Armed Forces: Career Aspirations and Expectations of Young Officers" in the April-June 2004 issue of the *USI Journal* makes an interesting reading. Based on personal experience of the author, the account is lucid, objective and forthright. The writer has dispassionately unmasked the shortcomings in the present system and candidly highlighted the problems faced by the junior officers. All possible factors responsible for lowering the quintessential image or "izzat" of the armed forces (who in the past used to pride themselves for "attracting even the royalty and nobility") have been included and discussed comprehensively.

The *raison d'être* for reluctance of the present day youth to join the armed forces have been well-deduced. These have been listed thus: unattractive pay-packages, lack of respect in the society, ACR oriented work-culture, servility among officers, stagnation for promotion, harsh working and living conditions, no-mistake syndrome et al. Today the *creme de la creme* of the youth are no longer enamoured by the glorious past and the traditional charisma of the armed forces. The brightest among them make a bee-line for the more lucrative, hugely prestigious and exciting career-options in the corporate world or the civil services. The adventurous types make it to the multifarious job-markets abroad. The majority – those who are left behind, find it extremely cumbersome to qualify in the entrance examination to the defence services and hence, give up.

Resultantly, it is only a meagre number who finally join the armed forces, where shortages of officers have steadily been growing for the last couple of decades. Of late, such shortages have assumed alarming proportions. Army alone is short of some 13,000 officers. This paradoxically, in a country with a population of over one billion people and ever-increasing ranks of the educated unemployed youth! Such an anomalous phenomenon, by itself, should have served as a wake-up call to our comatose authorities!

It is time the higher military commanders themselves synergised their own efforts to resuscitate the sagging image of the armed forces. It will be futile and unfair to expect the political leadership or the obdurate bureaucratic combine to set things right. The youth will come forward to join the armed forces only when they are convinced that their aspirations and expectations will be met fully. Their chauvinism can no longer be taken for granted. The ball is, thus, clearly in the court of the armed forces.

Brigadier Govind Singh Khimta (Retd)

IV

THE KARGIL DELAY – NEED FOR A CHIEF OF DEFENCE STAFF (CDS)

Sir,

Regarding the Kargil air delay, despite the Army seeking deployment of air power from 8 May 1999, the Cabinet Committee on Security (CCS), gave its approval only on 25 May 1999, after a lapse of over two weeks. The Government felt that, using the option (air strikes) would lead to a war. The question is, if Kargil was not already a war, then what was it? The very fact that, war gallantry awards like the PVCs and Vrcs were given, indicates that this was recognised as a war.

The pertinent question to be answered is, why was it at all necessary for the Air Chief, to refer the matter to the government? If the Army felt that an air strike was necessary, and the Air Chief had agreed with it, he should have gone ahead and given the Army the help they needed immediately. This once again brings to a sharp focus the dire need for the creation of a Chief of Defence Staff (CDS), who would have the authority to coordinate the Army's and the Air Force's military requirement to achieve a tactical objective, on which the CCS would not have the knowledge of the ground, to give a tactical decision. Time was the vital factor, it could have shortened the war by a couple of weeks.

In its defence of not having a CDS, the Government keeps on harping on the enmity between the Army and the Air Force on this issue. Even if it is true that, previously the Air Force had some apprehension of the Army dominating the CDS position, I am sure that, if the post is sanctioned, both Services will put the interest of the country first, before the parochial interest of their individual Service.

Brigadier NB Grant, AVSM (Retd)