

## Reminiscence of a Soldier

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**I**t was a far cry from the afternoon of 1st November, 1947, when a civil airlines Dakota landed me at the kutch airstrip of the Srinagar airfield, to the 6th of September, 1965, when we opened up against Pakistan in a full fledged war.

Soon after crossing the Banihal Pass, the captain of the aircraft invited me into the cockpit to assess the ground situation at the airfield before we landed, as he had been instructed at Delhi to land the aircraft only if he found the airfield still in our hands. I had also been similarly briefed by the representative of the D.E.P. (Delhi and East Punjab) Command, who was in-charge of despatching aircraft from Safdarjang airport. He had been specially directed by the General Staff Operation DEP Command to inform me before I took off that the commander of our forces in Kashmir at the time, Brigadier Janak Katoch, (not to be confused with Kashmir Katoch) to whom I was going as Deputy, had been wounded near Srinagar and evacuated to Delhi and that I was to take over the forces in the Valley till his relief arrived.

As the aircraft neared the airfield, a pall of smoke could be seen over every village around the plateau of the airstrip, an unmistakable sign of arson and destruction by the Pakistani raiders. Therefore, in order to make sure that the airfield was in friendly hands, I asked the pilot to make a trial run over the landing strip without touching down, and watch for hostile reaction from the ground and land only on the second attempt. And this was done without any untoward incident.

The first Indian Army Officer to meet me at the airfield was Lt Col Pritam Singh (later, of well-deserved Punch fame) and he told me that a battle was going on at the time on the edge of the airfield where some 200 raiders, having looted and burnt village of Ilgam, were being engaged by a platoon-strength of his Battalion, a mere 30 riflemen. (He had at that time only one Company defending the airfield). As he was briefing me, I saw a part of a mountain gun (3.7 in) being off loaded by some Sikh troops from one of the aircraft that had followed mine and had just landed. I walked up to the young Sikh officer, supervising the unloading of the equipment, and recognised him as 2nd Lieutenant Jabar Jang Singh of the Patiala State Forces - my own nephew! He informed me that his instructions were to deliver those two mountain guns, which were the property of the Indian Army but had been on loan to the Patiala State Forces for the duration of the Second World War, at the airfield and return to Patiala with his gun-crew. He had strict orders not to participate in the fighting in Kashmir as Patiala State had

not yet decided to merge with India and did not wish in any way to interfere with the "internal affairs" of a sister state, i.e. Jammu and Kashmir. I told him of the fighting near the airfield and on a filial net asked him to order his crew to assemble the guns and pull them behind the only jeep that had come to meet me, on to the edge of the airfield where a mere platoon of infantry was gallantly facing a much larger force of raiders. Jabar Jang Singh pulled out from his pocket a written order, signed by the Commander-in-Chief of the Patiala State Forces which clearly said that these men were under no circumstances to take part in the fighting in Srinagar. I read the order, folded the paper carefully and put it in my pocket. and while so doing, I pleaded with the Officer once again, by drawing his attention to the critical situation near the airfield and hinting that if the raiders should manage to gain a foothold on the edge of the airfield even his own flying back to Patiala would be in jeopardy. He desired to consult his men, and watching them, from where I was, I saw that they did not seem to be interested in embroiling themselves in the fighting. At this juncture I had a brainwave. Walking up to the men stiffly and calling them to "Attention", I shouted: "As Senior Commander in the field area I order you to assemble your guns and follow me'." As for the written orders from their Commander-in-Chief, I drew their attention to the well-known Field Service Regulations which enjoin that an order given by a Superior Officer could be disobeyed, or altered, by a field commander on the spot provided he was fully satisfied in his mind and could justify it later and that in the changed circumstances, if the originator of the order were himself present, he would also have taken similar action. Pointing my finger at the young Officer I said : "Should you disobey my order, I will have you summarily court-martialled, here and now and have you shot, for show of cowardice in the face of the enemy, under the powers I enjoyed as a Force Commander in battle". The Havildar with the gun-detachment thereupon quickly countered that they were ready to carry out the order, but unfortunately the guns they had brought from Patiala were without their gun-sights and could not be used. The answer to this was quite simple. The range to the target, where the raiders were assembled, from the edge of the airfield, was so short that they would be required to fire "direct", through open sights! The detachment had no choice but to obey my orders and once they saw the jumbled enemy and the havoc their shots were causing among the fleeing raiders, it was difficult to stop them from firing! From my point of view the gamble had worked. The raiders who had every intention of attacking the airfield were not only dispersed, helter skelter, but also convinced that with the appearance of artillery on the airfield, that objective now was out of their reach; and no serious attempt was made by them, thereafter to threaten the airfield and our much needed reinforcements of manpower and equipment arrived by air undisturbed.

Colonel Pritam Singh had already moved the Brigade Headquarters

from the airfield to a double-storeyed house half a mile north of it, and I arrived there just before it was dark. There I met the Headquarters Staff and was given a briefing by the Brigade Major, Major Dilbagh Singh, on the latest situation; 1 Sikh which was the first battalion to arrive and had lost its commanding officer, Lt Col Ranjit Rai, in an encounter near Baramula, had been compelled by the raiders to pull back and they had "firmed in" on the high ground outside Pattan, about 10 miles from Srinagar on the road to Baramula, it was soon surrounded by nearly 2000 tribesmen (raiders) who were pressing against them from all sides. The Battalion's contact with the Brigade Headquarters, by road, had been severed by the enemy. Three more battalions - 1 Kumaon, 4 Kumaon and 2 Punjab - were being inducted into the valley by air in dribbles over the past three days and no sooner had their detachments arrived they were deployed for the defence of the airfield and for blocking approaches to the city of Srinagar, in that order of priority. The only reserve available in the hands of the Brigade Commander was a platoon of 2 Punjab deployed at the time for the security of the Brigade Headquarters.

Very soon the Officiating Commander of 1 Sikh, Major Sampuran Bachan Singh, at Pattan, was on the wireless calling for me. He pleaded with me for reinforcements and supply of ammunition. I promised the ammunition, even if it had to be "free dropped" on his position from the air, but as for reinforcements, there were none! I, however, suddenly remembered the Brigade Major having told me only a moment ago that one of the infantry companies with 1 Sikh was made up of gunners recently evacuated from Pakistan, and since we had no crew to man the mountain guns, received from Patiala, I offered these guns to him provided he could 'open' the road half-way towards Srinagar from his end and escort them to his position. He was thrilled with the news of the guns and readily agreed to receive them halfway. I then told Pritam, who had been listening to my conversation with Sampuran, to tie the guns behind jeeps and escort them with his own personnel, whatever he could gather, upto the point where he met the Sikhs. This was to be done the first thing the next morning.

I kept awake for long that night, thinking about the current situation and future developments. I must have hardly gone off to sleep when I was woken up by Dilbagh who said that Colonel Kashmir Katoch, Chief of Staff Jammu and Kashmir Forces, had come with Bakshi Gulam Mohammed and D.P. Dhar (both civil Liaison Officers, helping the Army) and had some very serious developments to report. I came down the steps in my pyjamas and met the visitors. Kashmir Katoch narrated that at dusk that evening one of his mounted cavalry patrols (from Maharaja's Bodyguard) were fired at by some hostiles as they approached Gandarbal from the direction of Srinagar and when another patrol was sent to establish and maintain contact with the enemy, it was engaged by small-arms fire, at about midnight, only four miles

outside the city! At that rate, he felt, the hostile Pakistanis could enter the city before first light. Did I have any troops to spare to block their further advance from that direction? I deliberately kept absolutely silent in answer to Kashmir's query as I did not want to tell him in the presence of Bakshi and Dhar, absolute strangers to me, that I did not have a "sou" to give him. I was sure Kashmir would understand the meaning of my silence, but Bakshi, mistaking it for professional diffidence and lack of local knowledge, volunteered to suggest that if I made available three battalions (a word obviously picked up by him since he had been C.L.O.) of troops he would himself lead them to where he thought were suitable positions on the three roads leading into the city from the North. Three Battalions! We did not have the best part of even one battalion at the time in the whole Valley. I thanked him for his suggestion and assured him that I was fully seized of the situation and that the needful would be done forthwith. I bade them good night and good sleep! After they had left, I instructed the Brigade Major to have 2 Punjab platoon, defending the Brigade Headquarters mounted in civilian buses (the only mode of transport available at the time) after the morning 'Stand-To', and that I would accompany them to investigate about the shooting incident on Gandarbal road. It was past 2 O'clock on my watch by now and I resolved to have a good three hours' sleep before the morning.

I left my Headquarters with the platoon of 2 Punjab, Commanded by a young Lieutenant (I forget his name), in two buses. Men were sitting, some inside and some on top of the buses, and while I sat with the driver of the leading bus, the platoon commander was in the front seat of the bus following. Now, although Bakhshi was, quite naturally, doubtful about my knowledge of the city of Srinagar, he had no way of knowing that I had roamed through the streets of Srinagar and studied the road-map of the Valley quite extensively during the two summers I had spent in Kashmir trekking the Valley as a young officer before the Second World War. So the way through the city, to the Nagin Lake and Gandarbal was quite well known to me, and I led the buses on the route through the town without any hitch. There was quite a stream of refugees, laden with their personal belongings, on the road from Gandarbal, but they were as scared of us as of Pakistanis. No sooner they would notice soldiers sitting in the buses than they would rush off the road and hide. It was past Nagin Lake that I met a local who told me that some Pakistanis in uniform were occupying a solitary house in the field, away from the road, nearly half a mile beyond. I asked him to sit beside me in the bus and show me the house from the road. This he did from behind tall trees and I ordered the Platoon to dismount and move towards the house in an assault formation. As we were about 250 yards from the house I could clearly see that the building was manned by riflemen who had their rifles pointed at us from the roof, through the windows and over the compound wall. I thereupon ordered the Platoon to go to ground, and was thinking of

making an encircling move when a man got up on the roof of the house and waved a white flag at us. I signalled him to come. He understood the signal and with an escort of two armed soldiers, one on either side of him, made his way towards us.

As the party came nearer I noticed that they were wearing Jammu and Kashmir Forces' uniform and looked like Gurkhas. The man with the white flag was a Subedar. He came up to me, saluted and said that they were the Gurkha Garrison Company of the state Forces posted at Bandipur. Two days earlier they had been dislodged from their position by Pakistani raiders and had taken up a new position at Gandarbal. There were rumours that Srinagar had already fallen to the Pakistanis. The evening before, a mounted patrol had arrived right from the direction of Srinagar and taking them to be Pakistanis they had opened fire at them. Since their own position had been revealed to the suspected enemy, they decided to quit their post at Gandarbal and occupy this house away from the road. However, they had hardly settled in the house when another mounted patrol of the enemy approached the house in an attempt to encircle them and they were again compelled to open fire at them. That morning they were expecting an attack by the Pakistanis and had made all preparation to meet it. They were at first quite sure in their minds that we were Pakistanis who had come to destroy them, and if it were not for the fact that I happened to be a Sikh amongst the Punjabi troops they would have opened fire at us! The Subedar admitted that it took quite a bit of argument amongst them to come to the conclusion that a Sikh could not be commanding Pakistani troops! How well the story tied up with the narrative of Col Katoch. And it goes to show the nebulous state of affairs prevailing in the Valley at the time.

Meanwhile, the Gurkhas had abandoned their 'fortress' and there was quite a reunion between the Punjabis and the Gurkhas. I took the Subedar with me in the bus and showed him a place known as Malshai Bagh, a vantage point on the road to Gandarbal, as his next defensive position against the Pakistanis.

Such was the 'shoe-string' and 'tooth-pick' manipulation with which the new Indian Army after Partition fought its campaign in Kashmir. On first November 1947, as a force Commander in Kashmir, I stood over the only two First-World-War vintage guns and supervised their firing at the range of 500 yards through 'opens sights'. Nearly 18 years later, on the morning of 6th September, 1965, when we assaulted across the International Border in Punjab against Pakistan, not less than one thousand guns- heavy, medium and field-boomed simultaneously under my orders, and the targets given by me extended up to 15 miles inside Pakistan territory- a far cry, indeed, from those early days!