

Have A Large Beer

RAJ BIR CHOPRA

A CADET NO LONGER

Before the Second World War, it was the custom that cadets from the Indian Military Academy, Dehra Dun, after completing their two-and-a-half year period of training and being granted an officer's commission as Second-Lieutenants would spend their first year of service in one of the several British infantry battalions then stationed in India, commanding a platoon of some forty and odd British soldiers. The same rule applied, it should be added, to British Second-Lieutenants who, having completed their cadet training at Sandhurst in England, elected to serve in the Indian Army. One has never quite understood the rationale behind this procedure, unless it was felt that if the newly-commissioned officer was going to make a fool of himself, he had better be allowed to do so with some British troops who would have him commanding them for only a year, rather than with the Indian jawans whom he would have the honour to command for the rest of his career as a regimental officer.

So it was that, in July 1936, I found myself on my way to Kasauli in the Simla Hills, with orders to report for duty with the 1st Battalion of The Cheshire Regiment. I still recall vividly the wonderful feeling that filled one's whole being. The long stint as a cadet at Dehra Dun, which seemed as if it had lasted a life-time, was over at last; and the sense of trepidation at the thought of commanding British tommies - how was one going to tell one from the other, because they all looked alike under those enormous khaki helmets? - was not to invade one until the morrow.

THE FIRST NIGHT

I arrived in the afternoon by taxi from Kalka and was escorted by a Regimental guide to my living quarters - a bedroom - dressing room - bathroom suite in a bungalow which was shared by four bachelor officers. My bearer, whom I had employed a few days earlier in my home-town of Sialkot, was an old hand and knew all the ropes; being a raw young bachelor officer's valet was a piece of cake for him. It took him no time at all to find his bearings. Having brought my tea and toast from the Officers' Mess which was a hundred yards away, he unpacked my boxes and bedding and set out all my belongings in a matter of minutes, ordered the *bhisti* (water-carrier) to heat an old Kerosene-oil-tinful of water for my bath - a hot bath is welcome in Kasauli even in July - gave my mess-kit to the *dhobi* (washer-man) for ironing and got down to polishing my mess jacket buttons and Wellington boots, so that his Sahib would look every bit as smart as any other Sahib in the Mess that evening.

His Sahib was no less anxious on that count. I remember the glorious feeling when my bearer helped me slip into my blue mess jacket and I beheld in the mirror, for the first time, that shining solitary star on each shoulder that a second-lieutenant wears as his badges of rank. "Give them another go with brasso and elbowgrease" (little did I dream at the time that, one day, I would head the Company that makes Brasso!), I exhorted the bearer in the gentlest of tones, lest he should think that he was being admonished for not having those stars shining bright in the first instance.

Dinner was at eight-thirty but one didn't need to possess a watch to ensure punctuality. A Regimental bugler sounded the "first Mess call" a quarter of an hour earlier and that was sufficient warning. Many were the occasions, later, when one would hear that warning call whilst one was still in the Kasauli Club and, with the perfection that comes with practice, one would pelt down the winding footpath in pitch darkness, jump into the tin bath and out of it in a jiffy, scramble into mess dress and sprint up to the Mess - all within ten minutes. (For young officers, the Old Sergeant Major's formula "When Oi sez seven ho' clock, Oi means foive minutes to seven", held good on all occasions).

PADDY THE IRISHMAN

On that first night - of - nights, I entered the Mess ante-room at exactly twenty five minutes past eight, my feelings a mixture of self-conscious pride and nervousness. Virtually all the subalterns (lieutenants and second-lieutenants) were already there, headed by the senior subaltern, an Irishman named Paddy Wellwood.

In those days, promotion in the British Army took place only when there was a vacancy, with the result that the senior subaltern in a battalion could have as much as eighteen years service (Paddy had ten). In fact, one of the last pieces of advice we were given as cadets was that if, on entering the British battalion's Mess for the first time one found a balding gentleman sitting in the ante-room in civvies, doing the cross-word or whatever, one shouldn't automatically say "Sir" to him, as he may well be the senior subaltern! (You didn't say "Sir" to an officer senior to yourself off parade, unless he was a Major or above).

On entering, therefore, I said "Good evening". My brother - officers-to-be returned the greeting cordially and Paddy added, "What do we call you?". "I'm Chopra", I replied. "I know that" said Paddy, "but what shall we call you?". "I'm known as Raj Bir" I replied.

An Irishman to his finger tips, back came Paddy like a flash with the warm and welcome invitation, "Have a large beer, Raj Beer".

One couldn't have wished for a more delightful start to one's career.