

## A SOLDIER NEVER DIES - HE FADES AWAY

By Late Lt Col Bhagwan Singh

This article is an extract from a larger one written by Lt Col Bhagwan Singh, a few years before his death, enumerating some of his major achievements during the Second World War, which though of great significance, and went on to create history, had not, he felt, received due attention of the present generation. Colonel Bhagwan Singh has only echoed the general feelings of all soldiers who, after the usual applause during the war, or perhaps a little after, get slowly, but surely, pushed into oblivion by the same society which they had served.

Once when I went to the Jammu Treasury for drawing my pension, the Treasury Officer asked me to produce a certificate of my identity. I was taken aback and asked “who if not the Treasury Officer, from whom I had been drawing pension for the last 40 years, would identify me?”. A gentleman sitting besides the Treasury Officer came to my rescue. “Don’t you know him” he asked. “He is Colonel Bhagwan Singh of Damascus and Cheren fame” My bill was then passed. Some old events then passed before my eyes. How the college students used to flock behind me,(after I returned from War), when I went to the market; how a magistrate in whose court I appeared as a witness, got up from his chair and after shaking hands with me introduced me to those present in the courtroom as the hero of World War II, who brought name and fame to the State and the Country. Many other such events quickly passed through my mind – the honours bestowed on me by the Ruler, Maharaja Hari Singh, the various social organisations in Jammu vying with each other to honour me in some way or the other and Sheikh Mohammad Abdullah, at Srinagar, literally running up to me, when he saw me for the first time after I returned from the Middle East, to shake my hand and congratulate me for the name I had made for myself and the State, (as he put it). (It is another matter that on heading the first popular government in the State he resumed my Jagir which had been granted to me by the Maharaja as a gallantry award for my performance during the War.) All this made me realise how fast a person, so well known earlier, can pass into oblivion. This is a poor reflection on writers, speakers and historians of our country who let this happen and also on the general public who do not take sufficient interest in reading whatever little that is written on such subjects from time to time.

I myself authored three books entitled War on Two Fronts, Political Conspiracies of Kashmir, and The Ailing Nation, that are lying in almost all the libraries untouched, as most other books are also. It is not that none at all has taken notice of these books. Mr Om Saraf, a noted journalist, who read my book War on Two Fronts published his impressions about my performance in War in The Kashmir Times, some time back under the heading “Of Deities, Heroes and Environs”, with my Photograph with the Maharaja, but, probably for want of time and space, he had touched only the tip of the iceberg. An American, who was writing a book on the Dogras, came to my house accompanied by Dr Sukhdev Singh Charak. He was looking for a valiant Dogra who had some achievement to his credit. He was very satisfied with his interview with me and was pleased to get a copy

of my book War on Two Fronts which, he thought, contained all that he needed but to his great frustration he found in the end that I was not the person he was looking for. He wanted somebody who was a Dogra first and Indian afterwards but I told him that I was just the reverse of it. He, however, took my photograph and promised to send me a copy of his book when published, but it never came. My name has found mention in Kashmiris Fight for Freedom published in Pakistan and also in Mulk Raj Saraf's Who is Who but one does not expect such mentions to be sufficiently detailed. Another write up on me appeared in The Kashmir Times dated 11<sup>th</sup> August 1991. This was by a too well known journalist, Mr BP Sharma, and was more detailed than all the previous ones, but it dealt with only a part of even the professional aspect of my performance. The other part dealing with my relentless fight against the institution of Special Service Officers (British officers attached with State Forces Units, with powers to remove the State Forces Commanding Officers from command at their discretion), and the British policy on powers of command of King's Commissioned, Indian Commissioned, and State Commissioned Officers, was left untouched.

It appears that those who fought imperialism from within its ranks are not receiving even as much attention as the "freedom fighters" who simply attended political meetings during the Country's freedom struggle. It is for the historians, journalists, and researchers, to dig the concerned record (the whole of which is available), go through it thoroughly and give even the devil his due, so that future generations are not kept ignorant of what contributions, big or small, their predecessors have made towards the good name of their Country. If this is not done a race for blowing ones own trumpet will start, which will not be in the interest of history.

I am writing this to put the record straight for the sake of history as my case is different, in all respects, from all others, whether of the Indian Army or the State Forces, who have participated in the War in one capacity or the other. I was not just an officer of the State Forces who went to war in command of a State Forces unit, received the usual pat on the back, and was given a hero's welcome on return to the State. I happen to be the FIRST INDIAN to command the first completely Indian unit in active operations in any world war, earning unprecedented name and fame for myself, my unit, the State and the Country, by setting an example to even the British forces, (as recorded by a General of a British Division under which my Battery served), even as I successfully fought British imperialism literally from within its ranks.

While it is true that all that I claim to have achieve would not have been possible had my unit, (the 1<sup>st</sup> J&K Mountain Battery, that I had the honour to command), not been much above the average standard of efficiency, it is also true that the unit too would not have achieved the distinction that it did had I not been in command. The British Special Service Officers (SSOs), (who I had got removed from my Battery before we moved into action), would have been there to steal the lime light and win some awards, as it had happened during the First World War.

Question may be asked, (especially by the younger generation), as to what is so great about being the first Indian to command. The answer is that the British never trusted the Indians for command of troops. Till 1940 at least, when I was allowed to command my unit, independent of British officers, even the King's Commissioned Indian Officers (KCIOs) of the Indian Army were being given staff and extra regimental appointments, and not independent command of units. If this was the treatment meted out to KCIOs, the Indian Commissioned and the State Commissioned officers could not have expected a better deal. It was my consistent fight against the SSOs, open defiance of their authority to remove me from command, and their ultimate removal as a result of my fight, that enabled me to become the FIRST INDIAN to command a unit in war. This, as might have been expected, subjected me to stricter scrutiny by prejudiced British minds, to whom a display of extraordinary competence by an Indian could hardly have been very pleasing. It should be a matter of great pride for the nation that the performance of our completely Indian unit, commanded by an Indian, was such that even the British were obliged to shower praises on us.

The news of our performance and my stand against the British policy spread all over the theatre of operations, creating so great a sense of pride among Indian troops that the Viceroy Commissioned Officers (present day Junior Commissioned Officers or JCOs) and all Indian Other Rank of a transit camp, through which we happened to pass, presented me a welcome address, approved in writing by their British Commanding Officer, in which, apart from paying us lavish tributes, they had, in their innocence, gone to the extent of comparing me to Napoleon – so high was their feeling of pride over my achievements.