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## **IMPERIALISM FOUGHT FROM WITHIN ITS RANKS – I**

**By Lt Col (Retd) Bhagwan Singh**

Many eminent writers have, from time to time, written about my achievements in the World War II but almost all of them have highlighted only the professional side of my performance, making no mention of my more hazardous activities requiring better guts, which almost amounted to fighting imperialism from within its ranks. Even veteran journalist GP Sharma who described me as “a legend in his life time” in one of his articles in the Kashmir Times depended exclusively on the record of my professional performance which was eulogised by the British Generals and therefore widely published while my other performance was too unpalatable for the British to eulogise and its record was not easily available. As an incomplete description is worse than no description, I have felt compelled to complete it myself for the sake of history.

Professional performance, however outstanding, is not unexpected of a soldier, but to fight, as I did against the authority of all powerful British Special Service Officers (SSOs) and humiliating British policy of discrimination against the Indians, particularly the State Forces Officers in the matter of powers of command was something in which a soldier was not expected to indulge. While no one else ventured even to protest against this national disgrace, I staked my all to uphold national pride without caring for the results.

Soon after the declaration of World War II in 1939 several units of the Indian Army and the Indian State Forces proceeded overseas to participate in it, in the Middle East theatre. While the Indian Army units had British Commanding Officers, the State Forces units had their own Indian Commanding Officers but their command was practically taken over by British SSOs who were always appointed for the purpose when such units moved for duty outside their State. These SSOs had powers to remove the state Commanding Officers (COs) from command if necessary and take over the command themselves, which served as a deterrent for the COs to ever defy them. I was appointed as Officer Commanding 1<sup>st</sup> J&K Mountain Battery which had already moved to Secunderabad to form part of the 5<sup>th</sup> Indian Division earmarked for proceeding overseas. Two British SSOs were already there. One was Major Morley, equal to me in rank but much older and experienced veteran of World War I and the other Captain Corbett a young but intelligent officer. The third Lieutenant Oliver was yet to arrive.

Things in the Battery at the time were as shocking as in other State Forces (SF) units outside their states. The SSOs were firmly in the saddle. They looked after the office work, training and administration, attended telephone calls from higher offices, conferences and so on. While other SF units seemed unconcerned with such a state of affairs I took strong exception to it and decided to put the SSOs in their proper place and began working for the revival of the COs authority. Within a few weeks I deprived the SSOs of all the duties they had unnecessarily taken upon themselves and confined their activities to mere offering of advice, which was for me to accept or reject. The SSOs were not happy with their new position but accepted it reluctantly hoping for better days to come when I, with no experience of war, or even of working with large armies, on being confronted with insurmountable problems would be compelled to beg for their advice. Little did they realise that such a situation would never arise. At about this time the senior SSO got posted out. Captain Corbett took his place as acting Major and Captain Oliver joined as the second SSO.

The 5<sup>th</sup> Indian Division left for the Middle East leaving us behind to follow when a suitable ship for carrying the Battery with its animals was available. We left Secunderabad for Bombay about a month later

and sailed for our destination on 25<sup>th</sup> September 1940. The other troops on board the ship were a detachment of the Indian Army commanded by a British Officer and five other British Officers posted to different units in the Middle East theatre. I secured the position of OC troops on board the ship by snatching the concerned papers from the Captain of ship and signing them even as he had pushed these papers towards the SSO for his signatures. I issued necessary ship orders in that capacity and carried out necessary inspections for which every body including the SSOs and other British Officers had to fall in at boat stations at uncertain hours. For the British officers to fall in for the inspection of an Indian and that too of the Indian State Forces was something unheard of till then. Eye brows were raised and the SSOs cut a sorry figure when other British Officers asked them what they were there for. They, therefore, looked for an excuse for using their powers and soon found one. During a complete black-out a Junior Commissioned Officer, (JCO), had not recognised one of the British Officers and, allegedly, "not spoken to him respectfully" but on getting the officer's identity the JCO had apologised, which the SSO thought was not enough. I was asked by the senior SSO to put the JCO under arrest and to try him by Court Martial, which I refused to do as there was no justification for it. A few hours later the senior SSO came to my cabin and asked me to summon all officers for an important meeting, which I did. When all took their seats the SSO got up and quoting the relevant authority from the "Mobilisation Regulations for the Indian State Forces" made a declaration removing me from command of the Battery and taking it over himself. When he finished I stood up and declared that he was nobody to remove me from command and that I would continue to be in command and the matter ended there for the time being.

On reaching Khasala in Eritrea the senior SSO and I were taken before the General Officer Commanding (GOC) 5<sup>th</sup> Indian Division by the Brigadier Royal Artillery (BRA). The General gave a bit of his mind over the issue and the matter was hushed up.

Soon the operations started in Eritrea and the Battery was required to send a section to one of the forward companies of a battalion (5 Maratha) which we were supporting. The SSO objected to the arrangements we made for the move of the section and even went to the extent of calling me unfit for command which I resented and wrote the following letter to the Commander Royal Artillery (ARA) protesting against the SSO's behaviour :-

"Since our last talk on the subject and the Div. Commander's interview, I had made it a point to work in such a way that the existing impression that I had been lacking in cooperation no longer exists, even if by so doing my position as Bty Commander was slightly degraded. On the other hand Major Corbett also tried to refrain from interfering in my duties and limited his activities to helping and advising and all went on very well. But he seems to be fed up with his present position now, and wants some more authority and command in the name of advice. His point of view, as I have been able to understand it is that I should do everything with his permission and always do everything as he wishes. He has started again to find faults with me in changing his position from a helper and advisor to that of critic, examiner and commander. After having tried 'lack of cooperation and discipline' last time against me, he is now thinking of trying 'lack of power of organisation'. I know it is not difficult for a whole time critic to collect some points to prove anything against any body, but my power of organisation will not prove so bad as to lead to a disaster. If allowed to do so I can and will produce an answer to every problem in all circumstances, like others, and if I cannot, I have the SSOs to assist me. In any case I would do it much better with the assistance of the SSOs provided assistance does not mean taking over of command.

"I know Major Corbett is an efficient officer and I have great regard for his views but this does not mean that he is never wrong. I am certain that if he had been in a regular battery, most of his methods and plans which he now thinks are the only correct ones would have been rejected by his Battery Commander.

"As regards myself I feel no hesitation in confessing that as compared with other Commanding Officers of the Indian Mountain Batteries, I may be much below the average but even the last in the order of merit commands. I would like to point out that although I belong to the State Forces, I have had the chance of spending sometime in the Indian Army and in addition to my attachments with two mountain batteries and one Infantry Battalion of the Indian Army I have attended Indian and British Officers courses at Kakul and Army Signal School Poona and Senior Officers School Indian State Forces (ISF) all with excellent results. In some of the British Officers courses I was considered above the average.

"According to the Military Adviser-in-Chief's annual reports I am one of the few Commanding Officers of the Indian State Forces units who are considered 'fit to command in war'.

"On my transfer to this Bty I asked the Military Adviser about the position of the SSOs and he said that with me they would have little to do and that I would command and they work in purely advisory capacity. He also wrote a letter to Major Morley (the senior SSO with the Battery then) to that effect, and so did Brigadier Scott Chief of the Staff J&K State Forces. And all existing instructions and letters etc, convey the same sense. In fact if the letter of the Political Department showing the necessity of detailing the SSOs with ISF Units is taken literally, there should be no necessity of detailing any SSOs with this Battery at all but I am not aiming at that as I consider myself fortunate in having two extra officers up my sleeves whom I can consult but they should not usurp my rights or degrade my position as Commanding Officer. This becomes more important when the SSOs are much junior ranks than those required under rules. The authorities concerned had already realized these difficulties and have therefore definitely laid down that if no officer of the rank of a Major is available a Lieutenant Colonel should be appointed as the Senior SSO.

"The other day when we sent our Mechanised section to the forward position, and when the section was about to start from the right bank of the river, Major Corbett got excited and said to me 'will you tell your officers that I am very much displeased with their today's work and if they did not improve at ABUDERRISA, they better come back straightway'. This came as a surprise to me and pained me much, as everything had gone on well according to plan. However, not to disregard his feeling, I said some words to my officers. Later on during the course of talk, he told me that I was not fit to command a section. Needless to say that I did not like those remarks specially when they were made by an officer who has not yet completed his eleventh year of service and who has not commanded a section for long himself, while I am in the fourth year of my command of a Battery and am considered fit for promotion by the concerned authorities. I am sure that in due course of time my present superior commanders, even if not form a similar opinion about me, would at least not find me as untrustworthy and lacking every thing as has been depicted.

"The whole trouble arose over the question of sending animals to enable the Mechanised (motorised) section to get across the river. When a section is mechanised, it should be able to

function without animals under all circumstances. There is a flying bridge over the river, on which lorries can be carried partly loaded. There should have, therefore, been no difficulty in getting the section across. This section was sent quite independent of animals and they went across according to plan. The SSO expected that the guns, ammunition, rations and other stores would be brought on mules as he thought we had decided on this. I, however, had no idea of having decided anything like that, otherwise having decided it, it would not have been difficult to carry it out.

“I do not know whether sending things on animals would have saved time as Major Corbett had thought, as empty lorries would have taken the same amount of time to be carried across as loaded but time was not of primary importance. On the other hand it would have given us no idea of the limitations of mechanised (motorised) section and no real estimate of how much time this mechanised section would take to get across if it had to do where the animal section was not available for assistance. In addition there was a likelihood of ammunition and rations getting wet, even if the drivers’ boots, putties and shorts did not matter. I think even if the SSO had disagreed with my plan it was not such as would have resulted in a disaster. It was only a question of difference of opinion and no two persons produce the same answer to a problem and as long as a commander does produce an answer it is advisable for an adviser or even a superior commander not interfere with a commander and curb his initiative.

“Before I conclude I must confess that Major Corbett has shown good deal of broadmindedness since his appointment as the senior SSO and his behaviour on the whole is extremely nice and except for a few cases, which had unfortunately been rather serious, there has been very little interference on his part. On the other hand my attitude towards the SSOs has always been very friendly and although my position when I first took over the command of this Battery was ridiculous, I never approached higher authorities, but improved by friendly discussions with SSOs and with their cooperation. It is unfortunate that occasionally some incident takes place due to some sort of misunderstanding about our positions.

“I have a great desire to fulfil the object for which we have come here, in a most praiseworthy manner and to avoid anything which is going to effect adversely the fulfilment of that object.

“May I, therefore, request you to kindly go through all the letters etc. issued from time to time by the concerned authorities regarding our positions and show us some rough lines on which to work. I only wish that the SSO could help and advise me instead of criticising and examining and could refrain from passing disrespectful remarks.

“I am not writing this as a complaint against Major Corbett but only to get your advice in order to stop unhappy occurrences as these in future which, however negligible, tend to affect the efficiency of the unit. We are, however, working with some harmony as we were before and I hope will continue to do so.”

Sd Bhagwan Singh

This letter proved to be the death knell of an old British policy. The Senior SSO was immediately removed from the Battery telephonically by the concerned authorities on receipt of this letter and later the following letter was received in reply from the CRA 5 Indian Division : -

“With reference to your letter no 2/conf dated 25<sup>th</sup> November’40, I was exceedingly to hear that in spite of all my efforts to smooth matters over between yourself and Major Corbett the friction was still occurring.

“It has been decided that more harm than good is being done by Major Corbett remaining as a SSO in your battery.

“I am, therefore, issuing orders for his posting elsewhere. I cannot tell you at the moment whether or not another Officer will be posted to you in his place, but it is unlikely. In any case no posting can take place for some considerable time. I hope you will thoroughly appreciate that the withdrawal of Major Corbett will throw the entire responsibility for the running of your Battery on to your shoulders”.

The other SSO was also soon removed. This served as a prelude to the subsequent removal of SSOs (in 1942) from all the units of all the State Forces for ever.

**On removal of the SSOs from my Battery in 1940 I became the first Indian to command a completely Indian unit, the only unit of its kind, in active operation in war – first in Eritrea against the Italians and then in Syria against the French. Being thus the only unit deserving to represent India in the real sense in the whole of the Middle East Force.** We remained thoroughly conscious of our added responsibility to uphold the gallant traditions of our great country and acquitted ourselves with great distinction amply recognised by the concerned commanders under whom we served.

I added another first to my credit when against all existing orders debarring State Force Officers from taking command of troops of the Indian or the allied armies I held officiating command of the 26<sup>th</sup> Indian Mountain Regiment consisting of four batteries, three of which were commanded by British Officers. I also had under my command on different occasions personnel from British, French, Australian, South African and Sudanese Armies. To achieve such a position I had to put up a harder fight than I did for the removal of the SSOs. To what extent I put my future in jeopardy in doing so will be described in part II of this article.

**To be continued**

## **IMPERIALISM FOUGHT FROM WITHIN ITS RANKS – II**

**By Lt Col Bhagwan Singh (Retd)**

With the removal of the British SSOs from my unit, some problems of powers of command came to the fore, as according to the orders received from the GHQ India, Indian State Forces had no powers of command over the British Indian and the allied armies and if that was not enough any State Force Officer, however senior, could be placed under the command of any British Officer, however junior.

While no other State Forces Commanding Officer took any notice of such a derogatory position, I decided not to accept it and face the consequences. **The orders with regard to powers of command were as follows: -**

**“The following instructions are issued in order to clarify the position regarding the powers of command of the Indian States Forces when these troops are serving with His Majesty’s regular forces....**

**2. powers of command in His Majesty’s Forces are the prerogative of His Majesty the King Emperor. The situation is as follows: -**

**(a) Powers of command over British troops can be exercised by the King’s Commission British and Indian Officers and, where specifically ordered, in special circumstances by Indian Commissioned Officers, although the last named have no powers of punishment.....**

**(d) If a regular Indian unit and a unit of the Indian States forces are together the senior King’s Commissioned Officer will always take command over the two units irrespective of his rank....**

I, however, never let that happen in my case, whether it was the command of a special train, of troops on board the ship, command of a Mountain Regiment, or command of a Military Station, before or after receipt of these orders, which, however, came in the way of my getting command of the Mountain Regiment the second time and put me to the hardest test of my life. My letter written to the State Chief of the Staff earlier immediately on receipt of these orders brought me no succour but I decided not to yield and intensified my struggle. My whole correspondence on the subject is reproduced below: -

1. My letter to the State Chief of Military Staff No Conf/K/2 dated 10 June 1941.

“In sending herewith a copy of AHQ India letter No B/62518/1 (AGB dated 26<sup>th</sup> October, 1940) marked E, I beg to point out that in spite of Govt of India’s decision to consider the Officers of the Indian State Forces as I.C.Os (vide letter A attached) and the units of the Indian State Forces as Indian Army in all respects (vide letter B attached) the position of the Officers of the Indian State Forces has been made ridiculous. These instructions are so much behind time that I fear these would prove as impracticable as the “Mobilization regulations for the ISF” have proved to be. These instructions although issued in October, 1940 were received by me in March 1941 in the middle of the Battle of Cheren at my OP when we were plastering Mount Sanchil – the most formidable of the

Cheren enemy positions where something more encouraging should have been received. It was after five months of our arrival overseas during which some sort of system regarding the position of the Indian State Forces Officers was automatically taking shape and out of experience, kindness and courtesy the Regular Army had started to treat us on equal footing, that this letter was received.

“During the period before the receipt of this letter, four cases had arisen in which the question of powers of command came in and I was put in command. The first occasion was on board the ship where I was appointed OC troops when there were seven King’s Commissioned (British) Officers, including the SSOs, on board. The other occasion was at Gedaref where I was appointed commander of one of the areas of Passive Air Defence when other troops in my area were a company of Sappers and Miners commanded by a British Major. The third occasion was at Om Hagar when all other troops, except this Battery and a company of Sudan Defence Force (SDF) left the area. The company of the SDF was commanded by a British “Bimbashi” equivalent to a subaltern of the Regular Army. The outgoing OC troops appointed a senior “Kaimkam” (SDF rank equivalent to a Lieut Colonel) as OC troops by a written order although he was at some other station and in his absence the Bimbashi automatically considered himself as the OC troops Om Hagar but on my having a talk with him on the subject he apologised and recognised me as OC troops. The fourth occasion was rather a disgusting one, and although first of its kind so far would become normal after the new instructions are enforced.....

“It appears that it has been assumed that there would always be SSOs with the ISF units but in certain cases the Officers of the ISF have proved too good to need any extra Officers to assist them and are running their show completely by themselves. How would it be possible then to prevent the Officer Commanding such units to take command of certain ranks of not only the regular British and Indian but also of Allied armies who are working together in field.

“It will not be possible to keep the units of the Indian State Forces (ISF) the regular British and Indian Army and the Allied Forces in watertight compartments and occasions will often arise when individuals or detachments of the latter would be required to be attached to the units of the ISF and in order to ensure the smooth running of things, not only Officers of such ISF units should have powers to command over the attached Regular Army personnel but also the powers of punishment....

“The object of the Government in not letting the Officers of ISF powers of command over the Regular troops, whether reasonable or not, can be understood to some extent but why this cannot be fulfilled without degrading the position of the State Forces Officers is difficult to understand. If the command is necessarily to go to the King’s Commissioned Officers of the Regular Forces, let it go to an officer of or above the rank of the Senior State Forces Officer involved. This will not be difficult to do without any inconvenience expect, perhaps, in one percent cases....I am certain that in practice King’s Commissioned Officers will rarely be made to command State Forces Officers senior to them in rank in spite of these instructions, but these instructions will remain a source of discontentment for the Officers of the ISF.

“In war the State Forces Officers have not only to deal with the Officers of the Regular British and Indian Armies, but also of the Allied Forces. It is just possible that a squadron of French Forces commanded by a Major may have to be stationed at one place, who would be the OC troops at the

Station would have to be decided and unless the position of the State Forces is definitely described such questions cannot be settled.

“When the State Forces Officers have not only to deal with the officers of the regular British and Indian Armies are working in the same capacity as the King’s Commissioned Officers and are fulfilling the same responsibilities satisfactorily and now when the officers are being trained in the Indian Military Academy(IMA) in the same way as the Indian Commissioned Officers (ICOs) and when the Government of India is prepared to give the same concessions to the State Forces Officers as to the regular Officers of the same rank and to view the State Forces as ICOs and ISF units as the Indian Army, why should there be the slightest difference between the State Forces Officers and the ICOs. There must be some technical difficulties in recognising the State Forces as ICOs and without knowing these difficulties it is not possible to say how these can be removed but the positions that the State Forces Officers are holding and the responsibilities they are undertaking demand that the officers of the ISF should be recognised as ICOs without distinction and the question of giving powers of command to the Officers of the State Forces should be left to the local commanders as in the case of ICOs. A straight interpretation of the letters A&B attached leads to the same conclusion. If there is any good reason for not giving them powers of command over the units of the Regular Army, but at the same time they should not be put under command of regular Officers junior to them in rank. It would, however, be difficult to avoid ISF officers taking over command of detachments and individuals of the Regular Army attached to the ISF units for obvious reasons.

“This is a question for higher State authorities to take up, and I being the Commanding Officers of the units affected and not knowing whether some other units of the ISF have come overseas or not, I think I would be failing in my duty if I do not invite the attention of the authorities concerned to the subject so that the situation may be reconsidered and some modifications affected.

“I am not sure if the HQ troops in Sudan letter marked ‘B’ attached cancels the Army HQ letter marked ‘E’ attached, as far as its applicability to the ISF Units serving in the Middle East is concerned.”

2. Letter No 1376/MW dated 16.8. '41 from the State Chief of the Army Staff in reply to my above letter

“The ruling in respect of the powers of command of Indian State Forces Officers, in AHQ India Letter No B/62518/1 AGS dated the 26 October 1940, have been accepted by His Highness. It is incumbent on all His Highness’s Officers, therefore, to accept them and operate them loyally and effectively.

“This question of power of command is one that always arises when allied troops are required to work in close cooperation and that calls for, from all, the highest qualities of loyalty, good will and tact if it is not to lead to serious friction and damage to the cause. Further more it is upon the Officers of the junior of the allies that the heaviest burden in this respect falls.

“The difficulties of your position and that of your Officers are fully and sympathetically realised, but His Highness is confident that you and your Officers will rise to the occasion in the field of battle.

“By refusing to take offence at the tactless and often boorish exercise of authority by Officers and others of the senior partner, by never failing good manners, by a cheerful acceptance of the rough with the smooth, you and your Officers will not only remove the sting from the position but also will



contribute very materially towards successful cooperation and so to the success of the operations in which you may be engaged and honour of your Ruler and the State.

“It may be taken for certain also that whether in general or in any particular case, a good tempered and moderate representation of your difficulties to your immediate superiors (preferably by word of mouth on a well chosen occasion) will result in securing their help and cooperation.

“The letters marked A&B as enclosed in your letter under reply cannot be taken to over rule the provisions of AHQ India letter no B/62518/1/AG dated 26 October 1940. The former deals with local administration while the later is an authoritative ruling by a very high authority”.

3. Not satisfied with this reply I wrote back as follows: -

“The above letter leaves no room for further arguments on the subject but the sympathies expressed by you have encouraged me to express my views more fully.

“I know that the ruling is based on high constitutional law and that there is no reason to doubt its reasonability, and can very well understand the reason for not giving State Officers powers of command over the Regular Army but how that law is violated if a senior State Forces Officer is not put under a junior Kings Commissioned Officer, is difficult to understand. If the ruling in question be literally taken it is illegal to attach personnel or detachments of Regular Army with the units of the State Forces not commanded by King’s or Indian Commissioned Officers but this is absolutely impracticable in war for so many reasons and the State Forces Officers will have to actually command individuals or detachments of the British, Indian or other allied armies without having any powers of command. It, therefore, remains to be decided whether the law would be honoured more by making it practicable after necessary modifications and working it or by leaving it as it is and working contrary to it.

**“No doubt it is incumbent on all His Highness’ Officers to accept the ruling and the loyalty which the State Officers have towards their Ruler, will prevent them from departing from the policy accepted by His Highness but whether they can put their hearts into work when their position is degraded and all prestige lost, will depend on the type of officers involved.** On the other hand if the State Officers who are as keen on doing all what they can for the common cause as any body else, are made to feel by word and deed that in the eyes of the senior partner they are not inferior in any way but have exactly the same position as that of their other brother officers fulfilling the same responsibilities, they would certainly do much better than for which their duty binds them.

“From the way our superiors under whom we have worked so far have treated us, I doubt if occasion will ever arise when our feeling will be injured but there is no reason why the superior commanders here should not be guided by the decision of the authorities higher than them. I simply wish that the unfortunate occasion does not arise.

**“One of the possible solutions is to confer on the State Officers temporary King’s or Indian Commission, when they leave their states.** The former will be a complete and the latter only a partial solution of the problem but will go a long way to remove the discontentment created by the ruling in question. Some other suitable solutions may be found out but the State Officers may not be allowed to feel that in spite of their sincerity, loyalty, efficiency and keenness they can never be treated as equals.

“To show what others think of the prevailing conditions regarding the position of the State Forces I would like to quote a sentence from the editorial notes of the ISF Annual 1941 page 3 paragraph one which reads as follows: -

“Provided the prejudice and false sense of dignity are flung aside and realities faced, the ISF need not fear comparison with the rest of the Imperial Forces.”

In the next paragraph it says: -

“Whatever the future may have in store, there can be but one final result if whole hearted mutual cooperation and trust are accepted as guiding principles.”

“The above expressions leave nothing more to be written on the subject and suggest a definite change in the policy, which I hope will be effected before long if a proper representation is made to the concerned authorities, already known for fairness.

“If, however, the decision has to stand, then the States can avoid good deal of discontentment by inculcating in the State Officers a sense of inferiority from the very beginning by keeping their standard of training as low as that of the officers equivalent of whom they are likely to be considered when working outside their state, ie Officers below the rank of 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenants, or in other words, a Subedar, because even a junior State Officer, commissioned and trained on modern lines, would not like to be commanded by an officer just junior to him in rank, possessing more or less the same qualifications. To expect senior State Officers with some experience, to be willing to serve under the command of a very junior officer is quite a different matter. It is pointed out that all the correspondence on this subject is being done with goodwill and with the idea of accelerating the efforts for achieving the desired end.”

No reply to this letter was received.

Meanwhile the Maharaja paid a visit to the Middle East where, apart from many Indian Army units, he visited us too and stayed with us for two days, during which he inspected us and was pleased at our performance. He was particularly happy for our outstanding achievements in War after getting rid of the British SSOs. Before returning to Cairo he asked me if I had any difficulty in which he could help. I brought to his notice the problem of our powers of command. The Maharaja said that that was not the time to raise such questions as he had willingly offered the services of his troops to His Majesty's Government and it was for us not to create such hitches. He said that he would take up these matters at the proper time after the war. I submitted that I would try to create no hitches but we would fight the enemy with redoubled effort if we were given parity of status with others and it was during the war and not after it that these problems could be solved. **I begged of the Maharaja to leave me to fight the issue.** The Maharaja then offered a couple of solutions to the problem including my recall to the State which were not acceptable to me. “You will undo what you have done so far” he said and left. He was invited by General Sir Claud Ackinleck to dinner the same evening where they discussed this problem but no solution came out of it.

On completion of his visit the Maharaja returned to India. I also saw him off at the Cairo Airport. On reaching Srinagar/Kashmir the Maharaja was gracious enough to write to me a personal letter informing me about his arrival there and the action taken by him on certain matters discussed by us. He also sent me copies of the welcome address presented to him by the people of Kashmir and his reply there of.

In his reply, among other things, the Maharaja had said: -

“You have alluded to the part played in the war, so far, by our 1<sup>st</sup> Mountain Battery under the command of that efficient and capable officer, Lt Col Bhagwan Singh. You will be glad to know that wherever I went and which ever officer of high military rank I met , no one of them could say enough about the gallantry and professional skill of this unit so much so that even in the Sea Plane yesterday there were congratulations offered on the splendid service which our battery has done”.

**To be concluded**

## IMPERIALISM FOUGHT FROM WITHIN ITS RANKS – III

By Lt Col Bhagwan Singh (Retd)

The commander of the regiment we were going to form part of paid us a surprise visit a day before we returned to Al-Lajjun to join the Regiment. He told me that he was going to be away at Cairo for ten days. I asked him whether I would get the officiating command of the Regiment in his absence. He expressed his regret and quoted the rules but I told him that these rules had become redundant and had already been violated in many cases with which I was concerned and that it would create a very unpleasant situation if an officer junior to me in rank commanded the Regiment when I was there. He expressed his inability to go against rules, but after a long discussion he yielded to my pressure and I was appointed as the officiating Regimental Commander. None of the British Officers of the other three batteries raised the slightest objection or showed any resentment.

When the Regimental Commander returned from Cairo, he handed over to me a copy of the same ruling of the AHQ India against which I had protested and told me that the HQ Middle East forces wanted those instructions to be strictly followed. He also said that he was not in favour of the disparities but was helpless in face of the ruling.

About a couple of months later the Regimental Commander called me in his office and said that he was again going out of station for a week or so but for obvious reasons he would not be able to hand over command to me. I told him that I was not as fond of getting command as I was to avoid being put under the command of a junior officer. I applied for ten days leave and asked him to put up my case again to the HQ Middle East Force (MEF) for reconsideration. My leave was sanctioned and the command was handed over to a British Major.

I wrote to the following letter to HQ 26 Mtn. Regt. IA. Dated 2<sup>nd</sup> December: -

“It appears that in spite of being as good a part of the 26<sup>th</sup> Mtn Regt as other Batteries of the Indian Army, our officers and NCOs have no power of command over any personnel of the Regiment. We have simply to fulfil the same responsibilities as the other equivalent ranks of the Indian Army do and are to be prepared to lose our lives like the Indian Army, of course in the common cause, but in spite of our loyalty, sincerity, keenness and fitness we are not likely to enjoy the same position in the Indian Army, not even the Regt we form part of, as other Officers do.

“According to the decision of the GHQ India, not only the Officers of this Battery cannot have powers of command over the personnel of the Regiment but also the senior most officer of this Battery (in the present case a Lieut. Col.) can be under the command of a 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieut. In other words in spite of my up to date training and experience and in spite of the excellent services the Battery has rendered under my command, I may find myself under the command of Regt Commander of a very junior rank with limited experience and the same applies to the other officers of the Battery who are equally well trained and experienced.

“Fairness demands that there should be no distinction of any sort, between the Officers, NCOs and men of units forming equal parts of a formation or Army, but if this distinction must continue then at

least putting senior Officers of this Battery under junior Officers should be avoided, even if it necessitates some extra arrangement.

“A thorough comparison between the GHQ INDIA letters Nos B/62518/1 (AG8) dated 16 Oct, 1940 and B/62518/2(AG8) dated 10 May 1941 will show that these letters are absolutely identical except that the words “irrespective of his rank” have been omitted from the letter where it is said that a King’s Commissioned Officer will take the command. Although the omission of the words does not change the position, it does indicate that the GHQ INDIA do not favour the policy of putting ISF Officers under the command of King’s Commissioned Officers, irrespective of their ranks.

“It is not out of place to mention that in spite of the decision of the GHQ INDIA that the State Forces Officers will have no power of command over the personnel of the Indian Army. I often had under my command Indian Viceroy Commissioned Officers (VCOs) and Other Rank, up to fifteen in number, attached to the Bty for duty for long periods and in addition on one or two occasions had command over mixed troops. For instance when we sailed from India, I was appointed the OC troops, when there were five King’s Commissioned Officers on board the ship, in addition to a detachment from the Indian Army. I had not only the power of command over them but also powers given of convening a District Court Martial on board the ship. This means that the decisions of the higher authorities are applied by the concerned authorities consistent with practicability.

“I hope efforts will be made by all concerned to let the Officers of this Battery enjoy the same position as others and to avoid situations which tend to destroy their prestige and disgrace them.

“If, however, it is desired to take the AHQ letter strictly literally and apply it as such, as had actually been done, **I very much regret to have to state that I am finding it difficult to persuade my conscience to agree to serve under an officer junior to me in rank and in spite of my willingness to do my utmost in the War for the common and just cause, I do not find myself in a position to put my heart into my work. Could steps therefore be taken to replace me”.**

In one of my private letters to Sir KN Haksar, to whom I occasionally wrote since his visit to us on Maharaja’s staff I made a mention of this new development and also sent him a copy of my letter to the Regt Commander which he showed to the Maharaja who wrote to me the following letter: -

My Dear Bhagwan Singh

I have seen your letter of 4<sup>th</sup> December to Sir Kailas as well as the copy of your representation enclosed there with.

It is a great satisfaction to me, as it should be to you, that the concerned authorities there maintain a fair and reasonable attitude and that when you wrote, there was hope of the matter being settled according to the principle to which you have throughout, courageously stuck.

You have pointed out the difficulty of importation of political considerations into the Army at a time when the Army is doing its duty by fighting the enemy with zeal and without counting the cost. That difficulty is a legacy from an old tradition. At the same time it would interest you, and indeed, reconcile you to the position of embarrassment in which you have been placed once already and may possibly be again

placed to know that the point you raised interested me so much and so deepened my own keenness for a satisfactory solution of the problem that I immediately started investigation of facts.

The result of my enquiries relating specially to the War of 1914-18, is that the situation that you are called upon to face was faced by British (ie King's Commission European) Officers themselves.

In this letter I would like to confine myself to the case of Brigadier Scott himself.

In 1914-18 he served with a new Army Division. Most of the time he, as a regular Major of 16-17 years of service, served under War Commission Officers of from 2 to 3 years service and on two occasions under acting Lieut Colonels who had been serving under himself a couple or so months earlier.

**In laying stress upon a point of principle you have done what every officer wearing the badges of my Army should do. You have shown self respect worthy of being an officer of my Army. But in having talked the way you appear to have done, and written as frankly and pointedly as I see from the copy of your representation, you have already done your part. Having acquitted yourself so nobly, you must not take the extreme step. The threat towards the end of your representation is of a piece in line you have consistently maintained ever since you went to Secunderabad. You know that your effort has brought substantial gain to the Officers and units of other States also and your manly conduct will not in the end prove unavailing. But you must not over-look the exigencies of war."**

Yours sincerely

sd

20<sup>th</sup> December

1941

When the Regimental commander went out of station next time he handed over command to a Major. Now when what I had refused to accept had actually happened I thought the time had come for me to act, without caring for the result and even took the extreme step which the Maharaja had asked me in his letter not to do. I at once wrote to the Regimental HQ the following letter: -

No conf/K/2 dated 25 December, 1941.

Ref: Your Regt. Order No. 324 of 24 December 1941.

"Considering that the 1<sup>st</sup> J&K Mtn Bty KA forms a part of the 26<sup>th</sup> Mtn Regt Royal Artillery, I think the regiment cannot function properly if Officers and Non-Commissioned Officers of this Battery do not have powers of command over Officers NCOs and Other Rank of the rest of the Regiment and vice versa.

"I have already made my position clear in this respect, in my letter No Conf/K-18 dated 2 December 1941, and I consider that the assumption of officiating command of the Regt by an Officer holding the rank of Major is a great blow to my prestige as a Commanding Officer of one of the batteries of the Regt holding the rank of Lieut Colonel.

"This has happened now for the second time in spite of difficulties having been realised and assurance having been given that such thing will not happen in the Regiment.

“The GHQ India letter No B/ 62518(2) (AGS) dated 20 May 1941 cannot be rigidly applied in this case as it does not deal with the units of the Indian States Forces forming part of the units of the Indian Army. It only deals with the units stationed at the same place.

“It appears that the intention is to follow this policy of putting Officers of the Indian States forces under the command of King’s Commissioned Officers irrespective of their ranks in spite of the omission of these words from the official letters which contained them.

**“Under the circumstances when an Officer holding a rank lower than that of mine, assumes the command of the Regiment I would consider myself justified in not considering myself under his command.”**

Copies of the letter were sent to all concerned.

This letter created a stir in higher circles. I was visited by high ranking officers, who while expressing full sympathy with my point of view, talked of Constitutional difficulties involved in the matter but promised to try their level best to have the policy modified. The Regimental Commander returned to the station but again with no solution to end the crisis.

About this time I received two messages, one from the GHQ Middle East and the other from the 5<sup>th</sup> Army saying that HH the Maharaja of Kashmir has requested my return to India to command the Artillery Training Centre in Kashmir and asking me to report to Meena Camp for onward journey to India.

I was both sorry and happy. Sorry because I was leaving the unit I had begun to love and happy because of my fight against the humiliating discrimination between the British and other Officers. Although I had not yet met with complete success in the matter of removing existing disparities as I had in the removal of the SSOs, I had prepared the ground for it and had set the ball rolling with considerable force. I was sure that in due course a decision would come in our favour, and in 1943 a decision did come which did away with most of the disparities. **It was decided to grant superimposed short service Regular Commission to all the State Forces Officers when employed outside their states, as was proposed in one of my letters and my stand against another unfair British policy was vindicated.**

It was also a matter of great satisfaction to me that the war in this area had also ended and I was not leaving the unit in their hour of need. The Battery also returned to India two months later.

I returned to Jammu via Trincomalee, Colombo and Madras. The Ship “City of Paris” which brought us to Trincomalee was torpedoed by the enemy on her return journey and sunk.

On my return to the State I was given a Hero’s welcome at Jammu Cantt Railway Station and was taken in a procession to my brother Colonel (later Brigadier), Krishna Singh’s house. Several people from all walks of life kept coming to me for days to congratulate me including Ch Ghulam Abbas President of the State Muslim Conference. Lala Hans Raj Dogra, President of the Dogra Sabha wanted to take me in a procession through the town. Later, when I went to Srinagar, Sheikh Mohammad Abdullah, then President of the National Conference, at a chance meeting, warmly congratulated me for “glorifying” the name of the country, though years later, as the first “popular” Prime Minister of the State, he displayed his regard for me by resuming my gallantry award of a Jagir granted by the Maharaja.

Strange things always happen when undeserving persons suddenly rise to power by sheer force of circumstances but if gallantry awards granted by one government are resumed by another on a change of government, then in a democratic set up where change of government is a regular occurrence the Army can hardly have any confidence in the government of the day. Such a tendency needs to be checked and even resumed grants restored by the powers that be. It is for the Central Government to see that field service awards are not so contemptuously treated.

While I was riding the crest of a wave, Brigadier HL Scott, the State Chief of the Army Staff was feeling uneasy. He demanded my explanation for writing a certain letter to the HQ 26 Mtn Regt "last paragraph of which, he considered, was subversive of discipline and written in disregard" of one of his letters. My reply to the Chief of Staff's letter took the line I had consistently taken ever since I joined the 5<sup>th</sup> Indian Division. Needless to say that Brigadier Scott did not like my explanation and his attitude towards me became revengeful. Fed up with such a situation I applied for premature retirement. The Maharaja, however, did not sanction it. This was a great blow to the Chief of Staff's prestige which he tried to redeem by becoming more revengeful. I continued to insist on my retirement and was finally "permitted to retire". **The letter to which the Chief of Staff had taken exception was a part of my correspondence which challenged the discriminative British policy of powers of command based on the prerogative of the King Emperor.** This correspondence had impressed the Maharaja so much that he mentioned it to Sir Tej Bahadur Sapru and Dr Jyakar during their visits to Srinagar and asked me to show it to them which I did.

I was recalled to duty by the Maharaja himself a month before the invasion of the State by Pakistan in 1947, when in command of Jammu Brigade I successfully conducted an independent operation to liberate Budil and the surrounding area captured by Pakistan, which I hope to describe in a separate article.

**Concluded**