

## Memoirs of Col. H Bhuban Singh, 1960-62, at the RMCS, Shrivenham, England

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In August 1960, I got selected to undergo Technical Staff Officers' Course at Royal Military College of Science, Shrivenham, the United Kingdom. I took my wife and daughter and sailed from Bombay Harbour in one late afternoon. We reached Karachi early morning and Indians were not allowed to set our feet on Pakistani soil. After about six hours of halt at Karachi, we sailed for Aden by early afternoon.

Food served on the deck of the ocean liner was plenty, from the points of view of types and kinds and quantity like Continental (English), Indian / Pakistani (rice, chappati, dal etc.) and even with Chinese green tea or coffee, cheese and biscuits, pudding etc. Wines were served at the bar on payment at the Main Deck

Post Office, kiosk (shop where toothpaste, tooth brush, bath soap etc were sold, were available on board the ship. Say for example, my letter to home dropped after leaving Karachi, would be dropped at Aden, the next port of call and it would then be sent to Manipur.

At Aden, while the ship was unloading and loading cargoes and passengers were allowed to see the city. The Arab peoples were using perhaps old Mercedes Benz cars as taxis. Food served in hotels and restaurants were like Indian tandoori big size roti and dal and potato curry. Men folk dress up like Arabs. Women wore 'burkha'.

Then our ship entered Red Sea, which was very calm. We could see the shorelines. The water of Red Sea was not blue like the open sea; it was brownish blue. While passing through Red Sea, we could see landmass on either side or on one side at least.

On the sixth day we reached Suez, which was about one hundred miles from Cairo. Since the levels of sea water on the Red Sea and on the Black Sea were the same, our ship passed through the Suez Canal as per arrangements made by the harbour authorities and we joined our ship at Cairo in the evening or late afternoon. Through conducted tours by bus, we saw the Pyramid, the Sphinx, a well-known mosque, Egyptian Museum, the Mummies, Cairo bazar, the Nile River and took Egyptian food in a riverside restaurant and joined our ship in the evening.

On the other hand, in the Panama Canal since the level of the Pacific Ocean and the Atlantic Ocean are different, Canal Officers are to make use of sluice gates to impound water and make ships to pass in phases.

Our ship then touched the British Naval base of Malta and Gibraltar in the Mediterranean Sea but no one except British officials were allowed to disembark. So, no one did sightseeing. Gibraltar is a treeless, shrub less and rocky small port. The sea was absolutely calm and climate nice as the Mediterranean Sea was clam and also since we were in Europe. We then sailed through Bay of Biscay of the Atlantic Ocean and the sea was very rough. Many passengers were left cabin-bound and most passengers were seasick. But my daughter did not seem to feel anything. Perhaps, children are less affected by se-sickness.

When we entered Irish Sea, our ship got blocked by the landmass of Ireland and we all heaved a sigh of relief. We landed at the seaport of Liverpool. We were received by one Captain Baruah of the Military Attaché to Indian High Commissioner in London. He took us to a hotel where we were to spend one night. On the next day we were taken to London and listened to the pep-talks delivered by the Military Attaché (Brigadier at that time) at London till we were escorted by Captain Baruah and deposited at the Royal Military College of Science, Shrivenham.

Residential quarters were already allotted and we just moved in. Our quarters had twenty four hours a day cooking gas pipe connection with a gas cooker with automatic flint burner, twenty four hours a day electric connection and free water connection which never failed, with all the requirements of a house like beds, mattresses, towels, window screens, utensils, crockery, knives and fork and everything required in a house were provided.

During our two-year stay at RMCS, electricity never failed, except for a few seconds, not even minutes. During our stay, I paid my electric and gas bills through cheques of Grindlay's Bank and never knew the exact location of the electric or Gas Company. Receipts for my electric and gas bill always came by post.

At that time, the UK had just introduced black and white TV. There was no satellite transmission. When Colonel Yuri Gagarin of USSR went into orbit and landed safely on Earth, the TV interview of Col. Gagarin was done through cables laid from Moscow to Warsaw then to Berlin, Paris and onto London.

The Commandant of RMCS was Major General Eubank of the Royal Engineers. It was a big military college like CME, Kirkee and conducted TSO course and engineering degree courses for officers of the Royal Engineers, of Signals and of Electrical and Mechanical Engineers. The college did basic research work and many professors were members or consultants to R&D projects of the British Government.

In the afternoon of our arrival, we were welcomed by one Scottish Professor and he told us that we all must be brilliant officers from different Commonwealth countries but howsoever brilliant each one of us might be, one student officer would stand first and another last. That was unavoidable. Therefore, the crux of the matter should be that the knowledge gap between the first ranker and tail ender must be VERY NARROW, indeed. He extolled us to work hard and advised us to acquire knowledge to the maximum of what the college could offer. This reminds of para 4, last sentence wherein, I related that Presidency College Hockey team was beaten by nearly half a dozen goals. Indeed, we are to play any game in true sportsman-spirit regardless of margin of defeat or win.

Faringdon Road in Shrivenham was where we used to stay. The village had a small market, a post office and above all a barber's shop. I needed some overseas mail letters, postage stamps and above all, a haircut. My last haircut was in the ship while passing through Red Sea.

The Post Office was a shop-cum-post-office type. It was a one-man show. The Post Master did all post-office works in addition to looking after his shop. Perhaps the workload on the post office did not entitle it to employ one person as Post Master permanently. It was like a one-man band-party, where a single individual blew the clarinet with his mouth, the elbows beat side-drums, the toes of the legs, through metallic linkages stomp on Tom-Tom percussion instruments, the knees do something else. After completing my work at the post office, I went to the barbershop.

The barber asked my name. I told him. Then, he pulled out his diary of appointments and announced that my name was not found in his engagements. I told him that I did not make any appointment with him, but requested to cut my hair after he finished all his pre-engaged clients. He flatly refused saying that he had some other work to do and could not spare even a single minute. I realized that any more pleadings and arguments would be simply a waster of time. So I put down my name for haircut on one particular date and time convenient to both of us. This was how the British behaved in matters concerning time.

Later on, the barber and I became friends. While cutting my hair, we used to chat and he would tell me his wartime stories in the Royal Navy. Whenever he finished his work on one client, he would collect all the hair clippings by a rubber dust pusher and put these inside a dustbin. The shop was immaculately clean. The barbershop had one single rotating and height-adjustable chair, also the barber worked according to timings put-up in the notice board of his shop.

During our stay at the UK, my second child, a son named Pritam Singh was born. I went to register the birth of my son, to the Birth and Death registration office. The County official asked for the name of my son. I told the lady official that we had not named our son. But, the lady insisted on a name. I was accompanied by one 2/Lt. Pritam Singh of Malaysia and I just told the lady official that let my son's name be called Pritam Singh. That was done.

While we were studying at RMCS, Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth of the United Kingdom invited all officers of all Commonwealth Countries for a garden party at Buckingham Palace in one afternoon. The invitation is worded exactly as under:

British Royal Emblem (Roaring Lion)  
The Lord Chamberlain  
has been commanded  
by  
HER MAJESTY THE QUEEN AND HRH THE DUKE OF EDINBURGH  
to invite  
Captain & Mrs. H Bhuban Singh of the Indian Army  
to tea a 4 pm on ..... September 1961  
on the lawns of Buckhimgham Palace  
RSVP: The Lord Chamberlain

Now, I do not know how invitation cards for the wedding of Miss Kate Middleton to Prince William, second in line to the British throne will be worded. Anyway, Prince William has categorically denied the rumour of bypassing his father, the Duke of Wales, who is first in line to the British throne.

We were advised by the officials of the Indian High Commission on do's and don'ts. We were advised not to grin or laugh, but smile with respect while meeting Her Majesty or His Royal Highness, we were told to bow down a bit, in Japanese style and say 'Good afternoon or good evening, Your Majesty or Your Royal Highness' as appropriate. We were warned not to stick out our hands in anticipation of a handshake. We were permitted to shake hands only if the Royals desired to do so.

We were also informed that if the Royals initiated a conversation with us like asking questions, such as 'Where are you from?' or 'How do you like England?' we might reply in short sentences. We were warned not to attempt a long conversation and bore the Royals. The Queen came out in silver coloured frock and matching coat, hands gloved and legs stockinged. She was graceful. The Duke of Edinburgh was in a wheel chair pushed by a servant, since he was injured in a recent fall from his horse while playing polo.

That was about half a century ago (2011-1961). With the recent incident (Dec 2010) when Prince Charles, the Duke of Wales with his royal consort being attacked by hooligans, I do think the British Royalty has lost its shine to some extent. Or, it may be that the British public wanted to take revenge on Prince Charles for the manner in which he treated Princess Diana the Duchess of Wales, his first wife, who got killed in a car accident. But King Faruq of Egypt, when ousted from his throne in Cairo by Lt. Col. Gamal Abdul Nasser predicted that there would be five kings only in this world and the Kings were, the King of the United Kingdom, King of spades, King of hearts, King of diamonds and King of clubs of a pack of playing cards. All said and forecasted, the Mikado of Japan, the King of Thailand, the King of Spain restored after the dictatorial rule of Gen. Franco ended due to the General's death etc. exist even now.

During our summer holidays in June 1961-Aug 1961, my wife and I toured the continent. We went to Belgium, Holland, France (Paris) and saw the Eiffel Tower, the Louvre, the Seine river, Germany (West Germany only because unification of East & West Germanies had not taken place) and we had seen the infamous 'Berlin Wall' built by USSR, and above all, the beautiful Switzerland with its train service in hill areas like our own midget train service to Kalimpong and Darjeeling.

We never saw a beggar in the UK. Unemployed British youths used to come to our house for chimney cleaning or windowpane cleaning on payment. When I was attending classes or playing hockey, representing RMCS, an old lady came to our house and rang our house bell. When my wife opened the door, an old English lady told my wife to buy her home-made small bouquet of paper flowers for five farthings. At that time, England had pound, shilling, farthing and pence. My wife told the old English lady that she could have the five farthing coin she had paid and told her to take away the bouquet to sell to someone else. The old English lady refused to take the money and wanted her paper flowers back. In other words, the old English lady conveyed that she was not a beggar and simply wanted the price of her wares.

On the other hand, when we crossed the Seine River on foot we saw French beggars sitting on pavements of the big bridge with inverted hats begging for money. French bread is long and hard like our Indian Railways' Rajdhani stick breads of four inches, which are to be taken with soup. French stick-breads are at least one foot long.

As our two-year course was coming to an end, we were lectured upon by eminent military personalities. Field Marshal Lord Montgomery (see para 24 please) came to speak to us at the RMCS auditorium in one afternoon. We all officer students assembled in the indoor auditorium. He arrived on the dot of time with our Commandant, Major Gen. Eubank in uniform, but Monty was in civvies.

We all stood up. Both climbed the stage. General Eubank requested the Field Marshal to sit down on a special cushioned chair laid out for him. Notwithstanding the request, the FM grumpily refused saying "A soldier never sits down". He remained standing as erect as his age would permit. But our Commandant sat down on a less significant chair.

Our Commandant gave a brief introductory speech of less than two minutes and then appealed to the great 'Monty' to speak. FM Montgomery gave an egocentric speech of what he did at the crucial Battle of El Alamein and a pen-picture of the Second World War. Monty was a Major General commanding a Division at the commencement of the war. He also told us how the other day, he taught manners and politics in the House of Lords. He considered that most of the British Lords were very rich, dull and brainless. Of course, he must have excluded himself from the dull and brainless Lords.

To the credit of Monty, it must be admitted that he made a lively and thought provoking speech. He was applauded well. Question time came. After several interactions with British officers, a Canadian Captain got up and asked Monty a question on NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organisation) strategy in his heavily accented American English. Instead of replying to the question asked, Monty remarked jokingly "It is nice to know that you speak English". The Canadian officer replied immediately "No Sir, I speak American". The whole lot of us burst into laughter. That was the famous Field Marshal Montgomery, flamboyant and advertising.

During the North African campaign, while inspecting British troops, he remarked that the cap-badge of that Regiment was nice and he desired to have that particular cap-badge worn by one particular BOR. When that was promptly complied, he put that cap-badge on his beret cap. So, Monty was famous for wearing twin-cap badges, which was accepted by the British Army and the British Government.

After the successful campaign in North Africa and surrender of Germany on 7th May 1945, FM Montgomery, the war hero in Sam Brown and sword was to be presented to His Majesty King George VI. Monty wore a

sweater as undergarment, which was visible below his tunic coat. The topsy-turvy Monty refused to hide the protruding sweater, perhaps grumbling that it was the General who won the war, rather than the undergarment of a damned sweater. Perhaps, His Majesty the King ignored the wrongdoing by F M Montgomery and chose to ignore an insignificant sweater.

The English language is profound in many ways. When a British monarch dies, the public will sing “The King is dead, God save the King”. The meaning is that King Edward is dead, but God be prayed to save the institution of Kingship. While tailoring a three-piece suit at Mark and Spencer, I was asked by the tailor ‘If I dress right or left’. I was dumb-founded. Then, the tailor told me if I keep my male organ on the right or the left of the trouser legs. The Brits were so particular.

In addition to FM Montgomery, Admiral of the Fleet, Lord Louis Mountbatten of Burma addressed us, now at the College Cinema hall. He also showed traits of British peculiarity. He firstly announced that he would speak sitting and secondly, he would not use microphone as the damn thing sometimes make unwanted humming noise. He added that his voice was loud enough to be heard without a mike. When the tall Admiral in uniform sat down in a reclining chair, his knees protruded upwards almost level with his shoulders. It was a ghastly sight. Unlike Monty whose voice was shrill, Dick Mountbatten spoke with deep voice and everyone could hear him. He treated us like school children and answered our questions still sitting.

While we were in RMCS, Shrivenham, I heard a televised official discussion between Harold MacMillan, the British Prime Minister and President DeGaulle of France. Both of them spoke in their mother tongues through interpreters. Harold MacMillan did his schooling in Paris and knew French very well. General DeGaulle spent around six years in London as Head of Republic of Free France while he was sheltered in the UK. Obviously, DeGaulle could speak English well, very well indeed.

My guess is that both MacMillan and DeGaulle were honour bound to speak in their mother tongues as matters of national prestige and more importantly, if there were any wrong interpretations, they could lay the blame to their interpreters and possibly deny any of the commitments made by them. Anyway it was my wild guess.

I received my posting to Research and Development Establishment, Dighee, Kirkee on promotion to Major in Aug 1962. While I was at Dighee, my last son, H Khogen Singh was born in April 1963 at Military Hospital, Poona. That completed my family. After about three years in Dighee, I was sent as Officer Commanding of 19 Field Company at Zakhama. We were doing construction work for KLP (Key Location Plan) of HQ of a Mountain Division. Major General K P Candeth, a KCIO (King’s Commissioned India Officer) of 1937 seniority was the first GOC (General Officer Commanding) of that Mountain Division. General Candeth came to Zakhama to see his pet project. Since Lt. Col. O. Laloo, Comdr. Engrs. was on short leave to his home town of Shilling, I officiated as Comdr. Engrs. General Candeth became my life-long friend.

In the next TSO Course, one Captain T S Anand belonging to Corps of Signals came with his family, then consisting of his wife and a daughter. When that baby daughter played in the snow, Capt. Tejinder Singh Anand used to shout “Maneka come inside. Don’t play with snow, you will get chill blain”. Ultimately, when Maneka Anand grew up, she got married to Sanjay Gandhi, the second son of Indira Gandhi.