

SAM MANEKSHAW- A LEGEND

The recent media reports of illness of field marshal SAM manekshaw, MC the most famous, charismatic, flamboyant and successful soldier the Indian Army has produced, caused anxiety to all concerned. The field marshal is well into 90s. We all hope and pray that the living legend crosses century and continues to be an icon for all serving and retired soldiers.

It will not be out of place here to highlight some interesting anecdotes and facets of his personality. Sam was a Lt Col in Military Operations Directorate during partition, was promoted to the rank of Col at that time and thereafter promoted as Brigadier in March 1948. He never commanded a battalion in his career! ¹

Pupul Jaykar has described an interesting anecdote about the then Prime Minister Mrs. Indira Gandhi's interactions with COAS Sam Manekshaw.²

"Indira's intelligence agencies reported the possibility of the Army staging a coup. Gossip was rampant in Bombay, Delhi and Calcutta that such a coup was imminent. General SHFJ Manekshaw, then Commander in Chief of the Indian Army commented that everywhere he went, he was being asked, "When are you taking over?" Among those asking the question were some of Indira Gandhi's ministers. One afternoon General Manekshaw got a telephone call. It was the Prime Minister on the line, "Sam, are you busy?" He was a friend and joked with her on the telephone. She asked him to go over and he did. "I had known her for a long time", he said, "She was a supreme actress. I could see that she had assumed a role to meet me. She was sitting at her kidney – shaped table, with her hand supporting her head. I asked, "What is the problem, Prime Minister, you look very harassed?" "I have so many problems," she replied. "What are your problems?" I asked "Why don't you cry on my shoulder and tell me?" She looked straight into my eyes. "You are my problem." "Oh" I said, "Now what I have done?" "Are you trying to take over from me?" That shook Manekshaw for some seconds. Recovering he walked across and faced her. "What do you think", he asked. "You can't," she said. "Do you think I am so incompetent?" "No Sam, But you won't," She replied. Manekshaw then said : "You know I have no political ambition. My job is to command my army and see that it is kept as a first rate instrument. Your job is to look after the country." "My ministers are saying that a military coup will take place." "You appointed ministers. Get rid of them. You must have trust in me. If not, find someone else. I am not here to be bullied." "Who bullies you?" she asked. "No one does, but..."

Former Foreign Secretary J N Dixit recounts another interesting incident.³ One incident reflects the spirit of quite confidence and humour that characterised the Indian military high command at the beginning of the conflict. I have mentioned Mrs. Gandhi going to the Operation Room for a military briefing at midnight on 3 December. I was told by some colleagues who were in attendance that as she entered the Operation Room, she noticed a bottle of scotch and a couple of bottles on the table. Fastidious as always, there was a frown on her face and she directed an enquiring look at General Manekshaw. The story went that General Manekshaw said to Mrs Gandhi:

“Madam, the brand name of that whisky is Black Dog. It’s the whisky that Yahya Khan drinks. I am quite sure that I shall outdrink him and outfight him; so please do not be angry.”

The Field Marshal was magnanimous in victory. He carried out a dispassionate analysis of strength of opposing forces in the then East Pakistan and told Maj K C Pravel in an interview the following:⁴ -

“We did well. We had to do well. What did the Pakistanis have? A demoralized force surrounded by all sides by India couldn’t get out. I had put in almost four times their strength, a four to one superiority. In some things it was ten to one ... I won’t say that the campaign went badly. In fact, it went very well. I give one hundred percent marks to General Aurora and his commanders.

But to say that it was something like what Rommel did would be ridiculous. It had to happen. The result was foregone conclusion. I agree that we went quickly. Again, that’s what we wanted. That’s how it should have gone. The troops were well trained, the troops were motivated and the Pakistanis put up a reasonable fight. They couldn’t have fought any better. I think the outstanding thing was the planning before the campaign, and the manner in which all the commanders from the Army Commander down to the brigade commanders and the battalion commanders carried out orders.”

71 war was our finest hour. Starting from the Prime Minister down the line the country had the right persons at the right places. By some quirk of fate Air Chief Marshal PC Lal also was at the receiving end of Krishna Menon’s wrath. Like Sam he got his due, kind courtesy 62 debacle at the hands of Chinese. The nation was singularly lucky in having such a great airman and visionary in Air Chief Marshal P C Lal at the helm of Indian Air Force during the 71 war. A strong personality himself, Air Chief Marshal PC Lal had some interesting observations on Field Marshal Manekshaw as COAS and Chairman, Chiefs of staff committee.⁵

“from the way manekshaw carried on 1971 and in the publicity that was showered on him during the war and after, the impression was created that he was, in fact, operating as a de facto chief of defence staff even though he was at the time chairman of the chiefs of staff committee (cosc) in which capacity he was one of the three equal partners. in our daily meetings his behaviour and conduct was friendly and cooperative, though he tended to ask for more information about the other two services than he gave out about the activities of the army and he often made demands upon the air force without offering full justification for the diversion of efforts from one target system to another, giving the impression that he was more concerned with using the other services to his own ends rather than collaborating with them. but both nanda (the navy chief) and i recognized the demands made upon the army and the stress and strain through which manekshaw was passing. so we did not object to the way he did his work. thus our questions about the progress, or lack of it, on the western front, in the punjab sector, brought forth little useful information, nor could we elicit any alternate plans that the army might have had to break the deadlock. at times it seemed that the army could do as it wished and the navy and the air force could just have to help as best they could. that we did, in full measure, for personal feelings were not allowed to interfere with the conduct of the war; the

army's commitments were our commitments and we accepted them and acted upon them to the best of our abilities. manekshaw's mannerisms, as we took them to be, were not to be allowed to interfere with the work in hand.

Manekshaw carried a somewhat heavier burden than Nanda or I during the War, for as Chairman of COSC he not only presided at the daily meetings of that committee, but also represented the Chiefs at meetings of the Foreign Policy Planning Committee headed by DP Dhar. He also took it upon himself to be the COSC spokesman, a task that naturally brought him into the limelight. But apart from the publicity that it gave him, these additional duties did not, and could not, change the nature of the COSC and the manner in which the three services worked. For the service that he rendered to the military establishment and the nation he fully deserved the recognition given to him by his appointment as a Field Marshal. If ever a military officer deserved such rank it is he, for he combines a quick intelligence and ready wit with a remarkable capacity for hard work and the ability to quickly grasp the ramifications of a situation." No wonder that official history of 71 war states," It is interesting to learn from him (Sam) that he received total cooperation from one service chief and not from the other".

In fact some feel Sam contributed a little bit towards today's inter arms/services rivalry. Lt Gen SK Sinha, PVSM writes , "The entire army looks up to the Chief as its leader and it will be most unfortunate if the Chief is seen to be partial to any one regiment or corps of the Army. That would be most detrimental to the morale and discipline of the Army. The old tradition of the Army was that on becoming a substantive Colonel , one dropped all regimental or corps affiliations in one's uniform except the lanyard. Officers from rifle regiments who wear black badges of rank had to change over to the standard brass badges of rank. Field Marshal Manekshaw introduced a change in this. He continued to wear black badges of rank and even regimental belts and caps, after he attended senior rank. Contrary to past tradition, he choose to wear black badges of rank even as a Field Marshal. The practice of senior officers writing IA against their name to signify that they belonged to the Indian Army as a whole rather than any regiment or corps ,had generally stopped".⁶

With eight years of service as Captain Sam Manekshaw won a Military Cross at Burma. Lt Gen M.Atiquir Rahman, a respected Pakistani General whose book on Surprise and Deception is available in almost all military libraries, was the Adjutant of Sam's battalion during the incident. Lt Gen M Atiquir Rahman has mentioned about this gallant deed, though not in any great details, in his autobiography. A copy of the same has been donated by Sam to Defence Services Staff College library. Can anybody dig out the exact citation of Sam's MC winning gallantry act?

Though Sam never served with Gorkhas, never commanded an infantry battalion, he was made Colonel of the Eight Gorkha Rifles, an appointment which he held with great aplomb. It would be interesting to learn how from his previous experience of company commander of Sikh troops he could successfully be so famously popular with Gorkha troops.

Sam, after his gallant performance in Burma, never took any active part in independent India's operations starting form 48 Kashmir operations, Hyderabad

action, Sino Indian war of 62 and Indo Pak war of 65. That did not deter him from brilliantly orchestrating the Indo Pak war of 71. The government manipulated by giving extension to Sam as Eastern Army Commander and made him the Chief on the sound advice of general J N Chaudhury. Though Sam took no nonsense from any body. However, the same government a couple of years later took the same method of extending the tenure of the Chief to deny the post of COAS to one of the finest soldiers Indians Army has produced – Lt Gen Prem Singh Bhagat, PVSM, VC.⁶ By a remarkable coincidence Lt Gen Bhagat won the Victoria Cross, the highest gallantry award of British Army, took no active part in all the operations of independent India, had excelled in all his appointments, became Colonel of the Sikh Light Infantry Regiment being a sapper and did yeoman's service to the Sikh Light Infantry Regiment. The rumours at that time were that Lt Gen Bhagat was too strong for the liking of the government.

Today Maj Gens who are being promoted are all commissioned after 1971. For all of us commissioned after 1971, Sam is an icon. His brilliant orchestration of the lightning campaign has made him a legend in his lifetime and he is part of the folklore. It was indeed our finest hour.

On behalf of all post 71 commissioned officers one would like to request the Field Marshal for writing his memoirs. There are number of issues which merit further discussions. Large number of senior officers who took part in 71 war have written about the war. However, there is no better person than the Field Marshal to give the overall view as obviously the others were not privy to the complete overall picture. Some of the issues which immediately come to mind are :-

- ❖ What happened in Chhamb, where history repeated itself? 20,000 hectares of fertile agricultural land was lost permanently. Was the communication through the chain of command lacking? What was the role of Brig. Mathur, a LO, specially sent for giving a direct feedback to the Chief?
- ❖ Performance of our Strike Corps. I Corps had traversed seven miles in 21 days in 65 war. They did marginally better in 14 days war of 71. They moved eight miles. Was it too much decentralisation?⁷
- ❖ “After the 71 conflict when time came for appointment, two Corps commanders who had lost vital territories of Chhamb and the Hussainiwala enclave and a third with nothing to show in his favour were elevated as Army Commanders, while the best field Corps Commander and the man mainly responsible for the fall of Dacca was sidetracked in promotion and finally retired.”⁸ Unfortunately very less has been written about our best field Corps Commander Lt Gen Sagat Singh who has expired. Were you too lenient to your formation commanders even if they faulted badly?
- ❖ 2 Corps was most suitably poised for Dacca yet it missed the bus, went towards Khulna and Chalna ports whereas adequate river transport was available and lined up in Farakka for a riverine dash towards Dacca. What was the problem?

The brilliant and mercurial Chief of Staff of Headquarters Eastern Command the then Maj Gen JFR Jacob whom SAM himself picked up for the most difficult job of 71 operations writes⁹ “We had won a decisive victory in the marshes and rice paddies of Bangladesh. We had taken some 93,000 prisoners. Yet, at the negotiating table at Simla we were unable to obtain a permanent settlement of outstanding issues with Pakistan. The advantages gained on the battlefield were fritted away at the Simla Conference. Unfortunately, Manekshaw had no say in the negotiations at Simla where it appears the decisions were determined by political expediency.

Army Headquarter’s aim and presumably the aim given by the Government was to liberate as much territory as possible to set up a Provisional Bangladesh Government. The importance of Dacca, the final objective, was not even considered by the Chiefs of Staff at Delhi. They were more concerned with the capture of towns and territory. Manekshaw’s strategy, endorsed by Aurora, however, was designed to capture maximum territory to include what he termed the ‘entry’ ports of Khulna and Chittagong. Dacca was still not included in this list. Perhaps Manekshaw felt that we should take as many towns as possible in case the Security Council imposed a cease fire.

Air Chief Marshal PC Lal in My years with IAF writes: Here I must clarify one doubt that has existed in my mind and also in the minds of others as to what the objectives of the 1971 war were. As defined by the Chiefs of staff and by each respective service Chief, it was to gain as much ground as possible in the East to neutralize the Pakistani forces there to the extent we could and to establish a base as it were for a possible state in Bangladesh. The possibility that Pakistani Forces in East Pakistan would collapse altogether as they did and that Dacca would fall and that the whole would be available to the leaders of the freedom movement in East Pakistan was not considered something that was likely to happen.”

In Bangladesh, initially the aim was not Dacca, but to reach riverline and establish an independent Bangladesh government. With the advantage of hindsight and knowing fully well that Dacca was the Centre of Gravity was it possible to put the aim as liberation of Dacca at the initial stage itself?

More than 34 years have passed since the 71 war. This is time for retrospection and taking a dispassionate view. One is sure that the Field Marshal would prove Lidded Hart wrong, when he decides to wield his pen as Liddel Hart said, “Great commanders have mostly been dull writers. Besides lacking literary skills in describing their actions, they have tended to be cloudy about the way their minds worked. In relating what they did, they have told posterity little about how and why?”

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