

MIKE'S WAR YEARS

Prior to September 1939 I had always been an ardent pacifist. However, with Hitler's invasion of Poland my sentiments rapidly changed. Therefore on September 4th (a Monday) I hitailed it to the District Recruiting Office in Allahabad and there reported to the O.C. who informed me that this little alarm in Europe would be a distant dream within six months time. However, he did take a note of my name, but advised me to return home to my carpet factory in Mirzapur and forget this petty little European skirmish. He gave me a sheaf of papers to fill in, and this was my introduction to the perversity of Government departments. For my choice of Service I elected for the Navy - and so I was eventually selected for the Military. In six months time, and on a holiday, I received an EXPRESS telegram from Army Headquarters, Delhi, telling me to report to the Officers Training School, in Belgaum in exactly five weeks time!

I joined the special train in Bombay along with a whole crowd of potential officers with similar ideas to my own.

On arrival in Belgaum we were ordered to report next morning in the Assembly Hall for a briefing and lecture, and to be indoctrinated into the customs and habits of the Indian Army. We sat quietly with keen expectation awaiting a speech of welcome. In strode the Camp Commandant - a shortish man with a severe military bearing. He took up his stance at the lectern. All was dead silence; the Brigadier cleared his throat; "Gentlemen - or perhaps I should say TEMPORARY gentlemen... as I Fully realize that the majority of you are here to escape paying your civilian debts...well, for a start you had better realize that you will not get away with those tactics HERE!" and he thumped the lectern with his fist. For a few seconds there was an ominous hush. Then, as a body, the whole of our class arose and walked out of the hall. That afternoon a very different Brigadier greeted us full of smiles and apologies. as we were only the second flight of E.C.O.'s to attend this two month training course for Emergency Officers for the Indian Army, the regulars had quite a few lessons themselves to learn. I seem to recall my number was EC 133 and so we were real beginners!

This was the first of such run-in's with military authority which I encountered during my six years in the army. The second was with this same Brigadier who had decided he only wanted to have white faces in HIS army and so no Anglo-Indians of mixed blood need apply. He therefore started an "awkward squad". As soon as a few of us heard of this cruel plan we went in a body to the commandant and requested to join this squad. Among we "trouble-makers" was Eric Shipton of Everest fame, and who was just returning from an expedition of the Karakorum Range. The Brig., blew his top. "Any more of the Round Robins and I shall have you put on a Mutiny charge"! However, the awkward squad was dissolved and many of the Anglo Indians became distinguished officers.

After receiving my Commission I became a PIFFER (in that I was enlisted in a battalion of the Frontier Force Rifles in Kohat on the N.W. Frontier). We had the odd skirmish up in those craggy mountains and could expect attacks from the Tribesmen at any time. I was issued with SIX bullets for my revolver, with which I am sure I would have been a great danger to all if ever I had been called to use it. (In Assam and Burma I always carried a service rifle and bayonet in which I had perfect confidence).

When I had been in the army for about a year the war was starting to heat up. Danger sounds were being heard from "peaceful" Japan. I was now beginning to feel more at ease in the army and I was selected to help raise one of the new Battalions in the now rapidly expanding Indian Army. Although I was designated Quartermaster for the new battalion I was also Transport Officer, acting adjutant, weapon training officer, and general scrounger of equipment and tools authorized for a new unit. Among many tasks was the hiring of civilian lorries (for the training of every man) and the acquiring of several hundred bicycles for the training of over 700 men. The signed contract stated that the merchant would keep the bikes in good running order at all times! The poor man I had signed the deal with nearly wept when he received his twisted bits of bike frames back. He said it was the worst deal he had ever made! However, every single man from the Colonel to the most humble sweeper was able to ride a cycle and "drive" a truck by the time we left for Ceylon. Here real war training and jungle warfare really began.

Ceylon was the first place that we were bombed in anger by the Nippon air force. At the same time, about 70% of the Battalion was infected with malaria. However, we learned our lesson the hard way and were fully trained in anti-malarial precautions by the time our fighting began in Assam and Burma. It was in Ceylon that I was promoted to Major and second-in-command of the Battalion. I was always considered a good trainer, but an embarrassment to the regular officers who thought I was too "matey" with the troops, whom I considered to be my friends and brothers and who on many occasions saved my life. The Indian soldier was a great fellow and made the army worth while.

Imphal, Manipur, Assam is where we carried out the first part of our serious fighting. Despite this, it must be some of the most beautiful country in the world. Not only that but the wild-life, flowers, people and general atmosphere were charming. However, it had its drawbacks and discomforts. One night, asleep in my slit-trench to avoid the spasmodic Japanese shelling and sniper bullets. I narrowly escaped being drowned during a monsoon deluge.

With our thrust down the Kabaw Valley before entering the plains of Burma, we encountered a hidden hazard. It was the deadly Typhus. We all had to treat our own jungle battle dress (down the seams) with liquid DDT. We would smooth this oily liquid on with our bare hands. Every man and officer had to carry out this task for his own protection.

This trek was one of the most eerie of our "walks". Several times one would come across rusty bodies of cars which had been abandoned by the poor souls retreating after the fall of Rangoon. Thousands never made it. On one occasion I came across the skeleton of a man/woman with a tiny skeleton in its arms. The small car in which they rested was overgrown with vegetation. What a harrowing story lay here in the bush.

Our crossing of the Irrawaddy River was a master-piece of deception with hardly a shot being fired. However, down-stream the simulated explosions of battle would have made the battle-fields of France sound like a Sunday-outing. It was this unique demonstration of battle-noise deception which held off enemy attack for about twelve hours. The "fun" then really began in earnest and lasted several days and particularly nights. It was brutal and terrifying. During this time our battalion won much distinction including one V.C. (posthumous). Several months later I had the honour of introducing the widow and son of this fine Dogra officer to the Viceroy, Lord Wavell, at a parade in Delhi.

With the end of the war I now had to await for my de-mob number to come up. Impatiently I counted off the days when I would be called. Would it never come?! However, I was finally ordered to go to Karachi Airport and await a flight to England. However, it was not to be as easy as falling off a log. When we arrived in El Adam in North Africa we were told that we could not be air-born until a spare part was flown out from England. At this time there was trouble in the R.A.F. due to the change in de-mob regs, so we could be stranded in this bleak desert outpost indefinitely. After about seven days a Dakota training flight landed. I was talking to the young skipper (who came from my home town), and he said "Why not come with us? We will be home quicker than you as we are flying straight to England". Great! I got into the Dakota, we taxied down to the end of the runway and were just about to take off when a jeep came speeding down the runway. "Major Norbury; please get off that plane; the spare part has arrived from England and if you take off it will confuse the manifests"! And so I bid farewell to my training crew pals. We took off next day. It was a bumpy flight. One could just see the white cliffs of dear old England which had stood so completely alone for so long. I must have shed a quiet tear as I thought of all which had happened during the eight years I had been away.

Fate is a queer thing. A few days after getting home I thought I would look up the family of the young training flight Captain. They never made it. It had crashed in the Alps in one of the worst storms in memory. No survivors.