

## Against All Odds

### The Forgotten Tales of Independent India's Tryst with Peacekeeping

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*There is a part of history that many in India are not familiar with today. This article is an account of Independent India's first overseas mission under the UN – The unique role that the Indian military played in the Korean conflict.*

#### BACKGROUND

India became one of the founding members of the United Nations on 24 October 1945. Established to ensure world peace after a ruinous World War, the UN has had a mixed track record. One of its successes, however, was the bringing of the Korean War to a close.

The Korean War began on 25 June 1950 and raged for three long years between the Western alliance led by the US under a United Nations resolution called the UN Command and a Socialist Alliance of North Korea and China (known as the Korean People's Army (KPA) and the Chinese People's Volunteers (CPV) supported by the Soviet Union. The two sides reached a military stalemate by mid-1953 and agreed on the

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terms of a ceasefire. That war was interestingly the first commitment by independent India and Indian Army to a UN assignment. India played a unique role in bringing the conflict to a speedy conclusion by advocating against a policy being debated at the UN which could have led to prolonging or further escalation of the war.

#### INDIAN ROLE

India played a laudatory role by supporting the UN Security Council Resolutions of June 25th and 27th, 1950, which named North Korea as the aggressor. This localized the conflict and later, led to peace in the war-torn Peninsula. India's approach to the Korean issue was to recognize that the aggression undertaken by North Korea was a wrong act; that in so far as possible, the war should not spread beyond the Korean Peninsula; and that no other questions should be linked with the Korean struggle. India also felt that the future of Korea must be decided entirely by the Koreans themselves. The Secretary General of the United Nations, under the provisions of Security Council Resolution of July 7th, 1950, requested UN member states to furnish military assistance to repel the aggressor. Under this agreement, it was decided that India would provide a medical contingent, the country's first overseas mission after independence. India contributed three different elements to Korea namely the 60th Parachute Field Ambulance, the Chairman of the Neutral Nations Repatriation Commission (NNRC); and the Custodian Force India (CFI), which was a brigade size force.

#### 60TH PARACHUTE FIELD AMBULANCE

Many may recall the popular 90s TV Series featuring a field hospital in Korea, called MASH (Mobile Army Surgical Hospital). The 60th Parachute Field Ambulance was India's MASH and was led by Lieutenant Colonel AG Rangaraj. They arrived in Korea in November 1950 with about 300 men and with orders to move out from Korea only after the CFI had completed its mission; this would make it India's longest overseas mission.

The 60th was blooded in as soon as they landed, taking part in US 8th Army's withdrawal from North Korea. The Inchon Landings of September 1950 were led by the US and were a major counter-offensive in support of South Korea. The Communist forces then counter-attacked in November 1950. Within hours of their arrival, the Indian Medical Mission provided medical cover to the 27th British Commonwealth

Brigade with whom they remained attached throughout the Campaign. An interesting anecdote revolves around the evacuation, which was ordered as Chinese forces swarmed through UN held lines. The 60th had no transport allocated for their hasty withdrawal and were reluctant to abandon their first-class medical equipment and supplies. Colonel Rangaraj would later say, "We would have been of little use without [our equipment] and could not afford to lose it as soon as we arrived." They found an unused train with its engine and formed a 'Human Bucket Brigade' from the river, getting the steam engine running in time to cross the Han River Bridge to Seoul, before it was blown up by communist forces.

Throughout their Campaign the Indian medics marched in lockstep with the troops they were supporting, earning the respect of the UN troops by refusing to abandon the wounded and setting up and dismantling as many times as was required. During *Operation TOMAHAWK* in March 1951, the second biggest airborne operation of the war, led by the 187th Airborne Infantry Regiment, Colonel Rangaraj landed with his detachment, all of whom adapted for an airborne role. There were many American casualties during that bloody landing and the small medical unit carried out 103 operations and saved 50 lives with utmost commitment and professionalism.

The aim of this specific military operation was to disrupt enemy's lines of communication, throw them into disarray and subsequently neutralize and decimate them with the ground link-up, which was expected on 25th March, 1951. However, the expected link-up never came on the day of reckoning. On the contrary, resistance increased. There was no alternative but to dig trenches and hold casualties in them along with stretcher cases; the chilly winds and snow of Purunli were warded off with little more than the fine fabric of retrieved parachutes. The 60th worked relentlessly during this operation, many living on biscuits and tea. The desperately awaited link-up finally arrived on the evening of 27th March. During Operation Commando in the second week of September, 1951, the unit treated a total of 348 casualties during six days of fighting. In June of 1952, there were six casualties among the 60th Para Field Ambulance unit due to adverse weather conditions and continuing enemy attacks and indiscriminate firing.

In the meantime, both sides accepted a UN resolution sponsored by India, and a ceasefire was declared on 27th July, 1953. The War had resulted in the capture of a large number of prisoners, many of whom

refused repatriation to their countries of origin. For this purpose, the UN set up an NNRC. The 60th treated more than just the UN forces; a detachment at Taegu continued to work untiringly, treating North Korea's Army and civilian casualties. In addition to the military detachments they manned, they also ran three hospitals; the British Hospital, the Presbyterian Mission Hospital, and Taegu Civil Hospital, popularly known earlier as 'Death Hospital'. The Indian Medical Team worked day and night and changed the Hospital's status to 'Life Hospital'. They also ran the First Republic of Korea Army Hospital and trained local Korean doctors and nurses.

At the end of their tenure 60th Parachute Field Ambulance had treated about 195,000 cases, and had performed nearly 2,300 field surgeries. They endured in far-off lands to bring cheer and hope to victims of violence, serving with an unstinted devotion to duty amidst toil, sweat and blood. Tasks performed by the 60th Parachute Field Ambulance in Korea have gone down in the annals of the Indian Army, serving as an inspiration for future generations of soldier medics. It is to the credit of the South Koreans that they have not forgotten the sacrifices and contributions of India. The Korean Ministry of Patriots and Veterans Affairs named Lieutenant Colonel A G Rangaraj, the Commanding Officer of 60th Parachute Field Ambulance of the Indian Army, as the Korean War Hero for the month of July 2020.

#### NEUTRAL NATIONS REPATRIATION COMMITTEE (NNRC)

The NNRC, including the CFI, were responsible for manning and gathering non-repatriated prisoners into camps within the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ), and explaining their rights and privileges to them. Prisoners were offered the option of choosing where they would like to return to; one of the two, Korea or China. There were many among the nearly 170,000 prisoners held by the UN forces who didn't want to return to China or North Korea. China demanded all soldiers be returned, whereas the UN was against forceful repatriation. Those who did not want to be repatriated to their home country had to be retained for 90 days in order to give them time to change their minds.

In retrospect, the Korean War would have come to an end in 1952 if the peace talks held at Panmunjom on 25 October 1951 had decided on the issue of 'prisoner swaps'. The fate of the remaining 20,000 PsOW and their repatriation was called the *BIG SWITCH*; it followed Operation *LITTLE SWITCH* that saw the exchange of wounded and sick soldiers

held by either side between April and May of 1952. The NNRC, headed by India, was to provide the middle ground; prisoners were handed over to them instead. Led by General KS Thimayya as Chairman and Ambassador BN Chakravarty, as the alternate Chairman, the NNRC had Czechoslovakia and Poland from the Eastern Bloc and Sweden and Switzerland from the West. An Indian contingent of nearly 6,000 troops called CFI was to take over physical custody of prisoners. The mission of NNRC in Korea was a task that many did not think India would either be able to handle because of its layered complexities and intrigue.

Ultimately India did find the elusive solution to the prisoner of war question, allowing for the signing of the Korean Armistice Agreement on July 27, 1953. The agreement stipulated that a NNRC would be established with two countries from each bloc and headed by India, given our Nation's reputation as a neutral country. It was an unenviable task and in the end, less than 100 prisoners, who wished not be repatriated to either North or South Korea or China, came back to India after winding up of the NNRC and CFI. A few Koreans chose India to resettle while others were repatriated to Brazil.

#### CUSTODIAN FORCE INDIA

The CFI was sent to Korea at the specific request of the UN Command, the Korean People's Army and the Chinese Peoples Volunteers Command. The task of the Indian troops was not to guard a ceasefire line or to fight an enemy, but to hold custody of 22,959 PsOW of various nationalities and facilitate their repatriation or disposal otherwise. President Rhee of the Republic of Korea had taken a very unreasonable and anti-Indian attitude, saying if Indian troops attempted to land on South Korean soil, he would oppose their entry by armed forces. The United Nations Command was therefore forced to transport the CFI to the DMZ without the Force touching South Korean soil. Despite difficulties faced by the Indian troops, their task was ably accomplished, raising the stature of India in international fora.

Some PsOW at times resorted to violence, due to political pressure placed on them. India, with its brigade-sized contingent, provided security to the PsOW camps. The 6,000 soldiers who formed the CFI were headed by Major General SPP Thorat, a seasoned veteran of World War, who later rose to be an Army Commander. Officials of Ministry of Defence and Ministry of External Affairs, who were language experts and interpreters, also accompanied the CFI.

The prisoners often revolted due to various pressures and even detained Major General Thorat in an incident. The General refused permission to use force, instead joking with the prisoners that he had looked after them when he was in charge and now, he expected a hot cup of tea, a cigarette and a pack of cards for recreation. After this and a few other episodes, the Communist prisoners wrote an apology, stating that *'The whole thing is now clear to us and we are sorry for holding demonstrations under some misunderstanding. We hope you will kindly excuse us. We shall co-operate with you to the end'*.

In his final message, General Hull, the Commander-in-Chief (C-in-C), UN Command, said of the CFI, "The Custodian Force of India, including officers and all other ranks have earned the respect and admiration of my Command for its outstanding performance while exercising custody over these personnel". No military force could earn higher praise as was bestowed to the Indian Army.