

DURBAR Volume 10, No.4, Winter 1993

THE SERVICES OF THE BENI ISRAEL OF INDIA IN THE BOMBAY ARMY

A.N. Pamm

According to the legend, almost two thousand years ago seven men and seven women were cast ashore at Navgoan, near Alibag, India, the sole survivors of a wrecked ship carrying refugees fleeing the persecutions of foreign occupiers in the Holy Land.

Their descendants preserved some of the religious beliefs and customs of Israel whilst following the occupations of oil-presser and farmer, and remaining settled in villages in the region of the Konkan coastal strip, a minuscule minority group amongst the teeming hundreds of millions of India's population. Some are known to have followed military careers in the armies and navies of native rulers (the Abyssinian rulers of Janjira, the Angna and the Peshwas) in relatively modern times.

When Bombay came under British control and the H.E.I.C. Government pursued a policy of religious toleration and freedom of conscience, many of the Bene Israel began to settle there and, from about 1750 onwards, many of their young men entered military service in the ranks of the H.E.I.C's Bombay Army. They soon secured for themselves, by their bravery, ability and fidelity, many of the senior positions that were open to native Indians.

During a period ranging from circa 1750 to the early 1890s, approximately nineteen per cent (according to one source) of the Bene Israel menfolk served either in the Bombay Army regiments or in the Indian Subordinate Medical Department. Their achievements were out of all proportion to their numbers in both the general population and in the army itself. The entire Bene Israel population was probably in the region of 5000 in 1800 and amounted to no more than just over 10,000 (men, women and children) according to the 1891 census, yet they provided a substantial proportion of those securing staff appointments and reaching native officer rank (Jemadar, Subedar, Subedar-Major) in the Bombay Native Army.

Incomplete research has produced a listing of approximately 35 Subedar-Majors (Native Commandants), 115 Subedars and 17 Jemadars. These figures relate only to the army regiments and do not include those serving in the I.S.M.D. They were not members of a privileged class who might enjoy easy access to senior positions. They started at the very bottom as recruits and boys and worked their way through various increments of rank to the top during careers spanning, on average, over thirty years.

In 1892 there were in total only 413 Jews (Bene Israel) and Christians (Goanese) in the 22 Bombay regiments. This was the time of the death knell for careers opportunities for the Bene Israel in the Bombay Army for, in the early 1890s, a caste/class system was introduced into the army in terms of which regiments were to be officered by men of the same caste as the non-commissioned ranks who were also to be organised in caste/class companies, squadrons and regiments. The small Bene Israel population could obviously not produce enough recruits to form a separate Bene Israel regiment, nor could Bene Israel native officers now be promoted into command positions in regiments made up of men of a different caste.

Those in service at the time served out the remainder of their careers (some as Subedar-Majors and Subedars in the 122nd Rajputana Infantry and in Military Police battalions). When the First World War broke out there were very few left in service and these were mainly in the I.S.M.D. Of the three noted, one received an OBI and one an IDSM for the First World War. The community provided a new manpower contribution during, and for the duration of, the war. A few with medical qualifications held King's Commissions (now available to Indians) in the Indian Medical Service and a few more held Commissions in the Indian Army. The majority served in non-commissioned ranks of the Indian Defence Corps (Bombay and Sindh Battalions, Poona Rifles etc.). There was also a wartime contribution from the St John's Ambulance Brigade, Bombay (Jewish Division).

Still later on, a number of Bene Israel are recorded as having reached senior commissioned rank during the Second World War and after the independence of India in 1947. At the time of independence the community numbered around 30,000. Of these, approximately two thirds migrated to Israel subsequent to the founding of the Jewish State in 1948.

Reverting to the period 1750-1890, the heyday of the involvement of the Bene Israel with the Bombay Army, the following facts and anecdotes are worthy of record.

Whilst not as extensively employed as the larger Bengal Army, the Bombay Army saw its fair share of campaign service, not all of which was rewarded by the grant of service medals as is evident from the biographies of some of the Bene Israel officers which mention many campaigns and actions (some of a policing nature), which were not rewarded with medals. Besides the award of campaign service medals, a number of Bene Israel native officers were admitted into the Order of British India - at least 13 awards of the First Class with title "Sardar Bahadur", and at least 21 awards of the Second Class with the title "Bahadur". Membership was limited to 100 in each class and of these only 16 First Class and 17 Second Class were allocated to the Bombay Army.

In 1830 Subedar Daniel Khurrilkar received one of the rarely awarded special gold medals of the Indian Government for "his gallant conduct when in command of a detachment on the 1st April 1830 in protecting valuable public property from being plundered by a gang of Bheels."

At the other end of the scale, Subedar-Major Haeem Benjamin Mazgaonkar was made a Khan Sahib in 1914.

Between these dates there were awards of the Indian Order of Merit and probably other awards but statistics are not presented here as research into these is not yet complete. The fact that the two Orders for the Indian Native Army were only instituted in 1837 meant that Bene Israel officers who served in earlier times did not receive the distinctions that their successors did.

One of the most notable of the early Bene Israel native officers was Samuel Ezekial Divekar, one of eight sons of a farmer, all of whom served in the Bombay Army (six of these were killed in action, only Samuel and Isaac, both Subedar Commandants, surviving military service). In 1783 Samuel, who had joined the army in 1750, was captured along with others by Tipu Sultan who executed the European prisoners. The native prisoners were faced with the usual choice of conversion to Islam or death. However, the bearing and deportment of Samuel and the other Bene Israel captives, and an intercession for mercy on their behalf by Tipu's mother, Fakhrunnissa, caused Tipu to commute the death sentence to imprisonment.

Later they were released after conclusion of a peace treaty in 1784. Samuel had vowed that, should he survive this captivity unhurt, he would build a synagogue for the Bene Israel community at his own expense. In 1796, four years after Samuel's retirement from military service, the "Gates of Mercy" Synagogue was established by him. This is the oldest synagogue in Bombay.

Besides the eight Divekar brothers there are a number of instances of brothers (and fathers and sons) reaching senior native officer rank. Worthy of mention are the brothers Mallekar, both Sardar Bahadurs and, in succession, Subedar Major of the 12th Regiment. The same distinctions were received by the brothers Zavlikar, successively Subedar Major of the 3rd Regiment. Again, it should be emphasised that these positions were achieved by ability alone, not by birth or influence.

Fortunately for those interested in their history, biographical details and, in some cases, portrait photographs of a limited number of the Bene Israel native officers have survived, especially thanks to the labours of Hayeem Samuel Kehimkar. The photographs show them in uniform wearing their medals and, in many cases, the neck ribbon and badge of the Order of British India. Many have impressive beards which remind one of a descriptive phrase used in a recent letter by a descendant, himself a Lieutenant Colonel of the Indian Army; "The old bearded heroes".

Many of the biographies include testimonials from the British officers of the regiment. In some cases it is recorded that, after the death of a Bene Israel native officer, the British officers erected a monument or established a memorial fund in his memory at their own expense. Some biographies mention specific acts of gallantry, distinguished service or loyalty. Campaigns most frequently mentioned are Scinde, Punjab, Indian Mutiny (where the Bene Israel were loyal to a man), Persia, Abyssinia 1868 and Afghanistan 1878-80.

The variety of service is wide. One biography states, "He has done what few can boast of having done - marched up and down both banks of the Indus from Karachee to Cabul and Attock in different campaigns". Not all survived military service. Some were killed in action or died of disease whilst on service. Others lost limbs. The desire to serve the State did not cease with retirement from military service. Some went on to become senior police officers, and at least one was appointed a Justice of the Peace, whilst another was appointed Chairman of the Poona Municipality.

Sources other than the military biographies record religious commitment and communal service. Subedar-Major Moses David Koletkar organised services for the Bene Israel soldiers in the army and was closely connected with "Shaar Hashamaim" Synagogue in Thane. Subedar-Major Moses Bappuji Malekar was Honorary Treasurer of the "Gates of Mercy" Synagogue, Bombay, from 1888 until his death in 1896. Subedar-Major Samuel Isaac Zaulikar was Treasurer of the Thana synagogue. Retired army doctor Samuel Satkel Varulkar was attached to the Kasturba/Arthur Road Hospital, which he saved from being burnt by an angry mob, and was also Honorary Treasurer of the "Tiphereth Israel" Synagogue for a number of years. Subedar Ezekial Solomon Penkar, Bahadur, is recorded as having been "a great communal worker".

Whilst space considerations do not permit a listing of all those who attained native officer rank, it is thought appropriate to list in the appendix to this article the names of those who

either achieved the highest native officer rank of Subedar-Major, or were admitted into the Order of British India - though the listing is not to be regarded as complete.

BENE ISRAEL NATIVE OFFICERS WHO REACHED THE RANK OF SUBEDAR-MAJOR AND/OR WERE ADMITTED TO THE ORDER OF BRITISH INDIA (1750-1918)

Rank & name	OBI	Regt.	Service
Subdr-Maj Reuben Dhondjee Ashtamkar	1st	8th	1839-
Subdr-Maj Sillamanjee Ashtamkar			
Subdr-Maj Aaron Samuel Ashtamkar			
Subdr-Maj Jacob Moses Awaskar			
Subdr-Maj Ballajee Bhonkar			
Subdr-Maj Samajee Bapujee Bhorupkar	2nd	4th	1811-1840s
Subdr-Maj Reuben Moosajee Churrikar	1st		
Subdr-Comdt Samuel Ezekial Divekar		6th	1750-92
Subdr-Comdt Issaji Hassaji Divekar		13th	1760-
Subdr-Comdt Sillamon Hassaji Divekar		6th	1760-
Subdr-Maj Hassaji Dawoodjee Divekar		Pioneers	1795-1829
Subdr-Maj Solomon Daniel Ghosalkar (Sillimanjee Israel)	1st	25th	c.1820-69
Subdr-Maj David Aaron Ghosalkar			
Subdr-Maj Haskeljee Israel			c.1860s-80s
Subdr-Maj Yessoobjee Israel	2nd		c.1880s
Subdr Daniel Israel	2nd	21st	c.1840s
Subdr-Maj Solomon Ballajee Jahiratkar	1st	14th/21st	1818-62
Subdr-Maj (?) Daniel Bapujee Kamerlekar	2nd		
Subdr-Maj Essoobjee Daniel Khurrilkar	2nd	16th	c.1840s-70s
Subdr-Maj Samson Samuel Killakar	1st		c.1850s
Subdr-Maj Moosajee (Moses) David Koletkar	1st	8/27/12/17	1842

Subdr-Maj Haskel Bapujee Malekar	1st	12th	1834-78
Subdr-Maj Moses Bapujee Malekar	1st	12th	1851-
Subdr-Maj Haeem Benjamin Mazgaonkar (Khan Sahib 1914)		22nd	late 19 th /early20 th
Subdr-Maj Benjamin Shalom Nagawkar		25th	
Subdr-Maj Moosajee Ballajee Oomerdekar	1st	19th	c.1818-
Subdr-Maj Shalom Moses Penkar		15th	c.1841-c.1880s
Subdr Ezekial Solomon Penkar (Haskelji Israel)	2nd	20th	to 1890s
Subdr-Maj Ezekial Haeem Talkar (Haskelji Israel)			1864-93
Subdr-Maj Bhowjee Tulkar		15th	1796-
Subdr-Maj Daniel Tulkar	2nd	4th	1842
Subdr-Maj Solomon Elijah Wakrulkar	1st	19th	1838-78
Subdr-Maj Sillamon Abajee Waskar	1st	3rd	1809
Subdr-Maj Ellojee Dawoodjee Warolkar			early 19th
Subdr-Maj Haskeljee Issajee Zavlikar	1st	3rd	c.1826-68
Subdr-Maj Samuelji Issaji Zavlikar	1st	3rd	1840-
Subdr-Maj Solomon Daniel	2nd	8th	c.1850s-80s
2nd Class Hospital Assistant Elijah Abraham	2nd (WW1)	ISMD	late 19th/early 20th
Subdr-Maj Samuel Moses		12th	late 19th
Subdr-Maj Issuji Israel	2nd	24th	late 19th
Jemdr Dawoodjee Israel	2nd	2nd	c.1840s
Subdr-Maj Sumsenjee Israel	2nd	24th	c.1850s

NOTES:

(1) This listing is not regarded as complete

(2) One or two names might be duplicated due to different versions appearing in different sources (i.e. one source using the correct surname and another the generic "Israel" surname)

Copyright of this article rests with the author.

PLAYING A HUNCH

Christopher Peterson

I know it sounds strange but I have this habit of checking Medals Lists for the 3rd Afghan War against MID lists in the hopes of a match.

Well, as it turns out, I didn't have any luck, but a name stuck in my mind from the MID list, a Havildar Budh Singh, I.D.S.M. of the 35th Sikhs. I'm not sure why but I then looked him up in Hayward's *Honours and Awards of the Indian Army 1914-1921*. He was duly listed as having earned his I.D.S.M. for Mesopotamia as a Sepoy with the same regimental number. I also noted that only 9 awards of the I.D.S.M. were awarded to the regiment. I thought at that time that the 35th Sikhs probably stayed in India and supplied drafts for other units, given the small and varied I.D.S.M. entitlement. Certainly not very stirring stuff.

I still had the feeling that I had seen this name and regiment before. So with nothing better to do, I pulled my medal lists from a couple of months back and looked. Sure enough, I found an I.D.S.M. to No 3788 Budh Singh, 35th Sikhs, listed. Unfortunately, I felt that the price was a bit high, but I decided to treat myself. I called and the medal was still available great, please send it on.

My hunch of course was that a Sepoy who earned an I.D.S.M. in Mesopotamia and then turned around and was Mentioned in a subsequent campaign as a Havildar was heading places. I checked Jackson's *India's Army* and somewhat disappointedly noted that the 35th became the training battalion for the 11th Sikhs in 1922. I then thought that surely an NCO of such promising ability would not have been relegated to the 10th Battalion with no promise of active service. I then checked all the Battalions of the 11th Sikhs in the 1924 List searching for a Jemadar Budh Singh, I.D.S.M. with no luck.

My illness must have numbed my mental faculties, for it was not until I was back at work that I realized that I had not checked the I.D.S.M. recipient list in the 1924 SUPPLEMENT. As soon as I got home the next day I ran up to my library and there it was ...1/11th Sikh R...Budh Singh, Sepoy, 3788...18 Nov. 16..A.D. Notfn. 1386, 18 Nov. 16. My next step was a quick check of Perkins' *Regiments of the Empire* which showed that indeed the 35th Sikhs had not left India during the Great War, but had supplied drafts to the 47th Sikhs. I also noted that the 47th did have a published history with an Honours & Awards section, something to check later. Perkins also listed *The Sikh Regiment* by Lt Col P.G. Bamford, D.S.O. as a source that should be checked.

Armed with all this information I set off for the Library of Congress to check the Gazette of India, the Indian Army List 1939, War Services and Bamford's work (if it was in the L of C collection). The day started well. I fairly ran to the computer catalogue and tried Bamford ...Hooray they have it. I quickly filled out my slips for this book and the 1939 List, turned

them in and dashed off to the Law Library across the street to submit a slip for the Gazette of India.

One hour later the tale was told. My hunch had paid off far beyond my expectations. The 1939 List Regimental entry showed a Budh Singh, I.D.S.M. under Subedars with all the pertinent dates of promotion beginning with his enlistment on 1st June 1914 and a curious note that he was required to forfeit 3 yrs. seniority in rank as a Jemadar. War Services entry as below:

Budh Singh -

- The War of 1914-21- France, 10 May 15 to 16 Dec 15. Iraq, 8 Jan 16 to 26 July 16. Wounded. I.D.S.M.& M.S.M.
- Afghanistan, N.W.F., 1919
- Kurdistan, 1923
- N.W. Frontier of India, 1930
- North-West Frontier, 1937

The Sikh Regiment first mentions Subedar-Major Budh Singh as returning to the battalion on 1st August 1942 having recovered from serious wounds received in the first few days of the Burma campaign. He is next mentioned in Malaya 1946 after the surrender. The entry is worth quoting:

"On the 8th of May the Sikhs held a special ceremonial parade, when Japanese swords captured in action by the Battalion were presented to Lt. General Savory, His Highness the Rajah of Faridkot, Honorary Lt. and Subedar-Major Budh Singh and Hav. Nand Singh, V.C. On the 8th of May Honorary Lieutenant Budh Singh left to go on pension. He had been a Subedar-Major for four years and was with the Battalion throughout all the battles in Burma except for a short period when he was wounded in 1942. He had completed thirty-two years' service and won the Indian Distinguished Service Medal as a Sepoy with the 47th Sikhs in France in the First World War. He had a very fine record and always worked hard for the good name of the Regiment. He was given a great send-off in traditional style and flew back to India."

Honours & Awards Appendices show Hon. Lieut. Budh Singh, Sardar Bahadur, O.B.I., I.D.S.M. as having been awarded the M.B.E. for gallant and distinguished service in the field in Burma, May, 1945. He is also shown as being twice MID ... North-West Frontier 1940 and Burma 1944.

The Gazette of India for Mesopotamia showed him under 35th Sikhs attached to 47th Sikhs. On returning home I found his MSM entry under 35th Sikhs in Hayward's *Honours* as a Havildar for North-West Frontier.

I later received a copy of the Honours & Awards page from the 47th Sikhs History with matching regimental number but misspelled name, with proper date for Mesopotamia, noting his 35th Sikhs affiliation. Two points of interest with regard to reference Sources:

- The failure of the listing of his MID for the Third Afghan War in his War Services entry.
- The error regarding the place of his I.D.S.M. award as noted in Bamford's work.

I think you will agree that this is certainly a career of note. This soldier was entitled to fourteen decorations/medals by my count, not to mention 3 times MID and being wounded in both world wars.

Bamford's *The Sikh Regiment* includes a very poor photograph of the sword presentation ceremony which, although there is no specific caption, includes a glimpse of Subedar-Major Budh Singh. I have written to the Imperial War Museum in hopes that this event may have been covered by an official photographer and that there may be a better photograph of this soldier.

Any suggestions for more research or corrections to that which I have done would be most appreciated. I have thoroughly enjoyed researching this soldier and only wish I could find more specifics regarding his M.B.E. and I.D.S.M.

Editor's Note. In submitting the following article Alan Harfield explained to me his own background in connection with telegraphs in India. I think it worth sharing.

Prior to partitioning the military telegraph and telephone system was transferred from the military to the Indian Posts and Telegraphs department. In order to achieve this all installations had to be listed, which included switchboards, telephones, telegraph equipment and also the line, i.e. ...miles of wire between (say) Rawalpindi and Kohat, with ... telegraph poles.

In order to carry out this task teams were set up in various command headquarters under the command of the Chief Signal Officer. I was posted to the team in HQ North Western Army and dealt with the lines and stations in the North West Frontier area and Baluchistan.

As I was then with the Indian Signal Corps I worked under the command of a Sikh major and the remainder of the team were Indian NCOs. It was a most interesting project and not without its pitfalls. My team and I were supposed to visit all stations and then submit a detailed bill for costing for the transfer. We did take some short cuts and I was caught out on one. As the transfer was rejected as inaccurate by the Indian P&T HQ the 'rocket' arrived on the table of the Brigadier - he passed it to the SO I (Lt Col) who shot it down to the SO III (Tels) (Major) who then passed it to the WO I and of course it then ended up on my shoulders! I could not pass it on to the Indian NCOs so was charged with negligence etc. Result - reduced from the rank of Sergeant to Corporal. But as they had no one to take my place I had to carry on with the job. However, after two months I got my 'third' back again - as I was only 20 at the time I guess I was very lucky, but on reflection it was probably one of the best jobs I had during my 37 years in the army. So I am quite familiar with the pre-1947 telegraph and telephone system on India.

MILITARY FIELD TELEGRAPH IN INDIA

IN THE 19th CENTURY

Alan Harfield

The earliest record of military telegraph being used in India is in June 1869 when the 9th Company, Bengal Sappers and Miners was employed on telegraph construction work at Roorkee. In the following year No 5 Company, Bengal Sappers and Miners constructed a telegraph line from Rawalpindi to Kohat, and No 6 Company erected a line from Dera Ismail Khan to Bannu.

Prior to this date a civil telegraph system had been constructed in India and a Telegraph Map dated 1855 shows that a single line system ran from Ootacamund in the south, through Bangalore, where a line branched to Madras, northwards via Bombay to Agra. At Agra the line from Calcutta joined the system and the line then continued north via Meerut, Delhi and on to Peshawar.

Dr William B. O'Shaughnessy, who had formerly been an Assistant Surgeon in the Hon. East India Company, was appointed Chief Superintendent of Telegraphs in 1852. He proceeded to implement the planned telegraph system which would cover a total of 3,000 miles and to set up a series of telegraph offices.

The task was a formidable one and to help set up this vast system Dr O'Shaughnessy departed for England and set about procuring the immense amount of material that was required and also secured the services of sixty enlisted artificers of the Royal Engineers Depot Battalion. The men were transferred to the newly formed Indian Telegraph Department, which was part of the Indian Public Works Department. The Telegraph Department remained within the PWD organisation until 1905.

During the absence of O'Shaughnessy abroad the work was continued in India under the direction of Lieutenant P. Stewart of the Bengal Engineers who was then appointed Superintendent of Electric Telegraphs. The line was started at Calcutta and set out towards Agra on 1 November 1853. As the construction proceeded Telegraph stations were established at Burdwan, Shergathi, Benares, Allahabad and Calcutta, a distance of 800 miles. The wire was in coils of four feet diameter containing approximately a quarter of a mile to each coil. The coil was mounted vertically on a laying trolley, one end of the wire having been secured to a stout post with the wire being run out through rollers of hard steel. This dispenser was operated by a team of four or five men and could play-out about ten miles of straightened-out wire each day. As each roll was unwound it was jointed with a zinc joint to the next coil. When about five miles of wire had been laid out the team would then return to the middle of the run and commence mounting the wire onto the poles, thus automatically equalising the tension without any particular need of bracing or straining power.

The working party generally consisted of the British sergeant and fifteen workmen from the Indian Telegraph Department, with the sergeant being wholly responsible for the day's work, which included the testing of the line back to base. Later, other teams would follow and transfer the line from the temporary posts to permanent posts which had a cross arm with insulators, and at this time the second wire (still making a single telegraph line) was installed. The 'air line' system was used as far as possible, although the wires were placed underground when passing through towns and market places etc. River crossing was, where possible, by air line with special stout poles being used, but when larger rivers were encountered a submarine cable was jointed into the line.

A brief quotation from an account of the project reveals just how onerous the task taken on by Dr O'Shaughnessy had been:

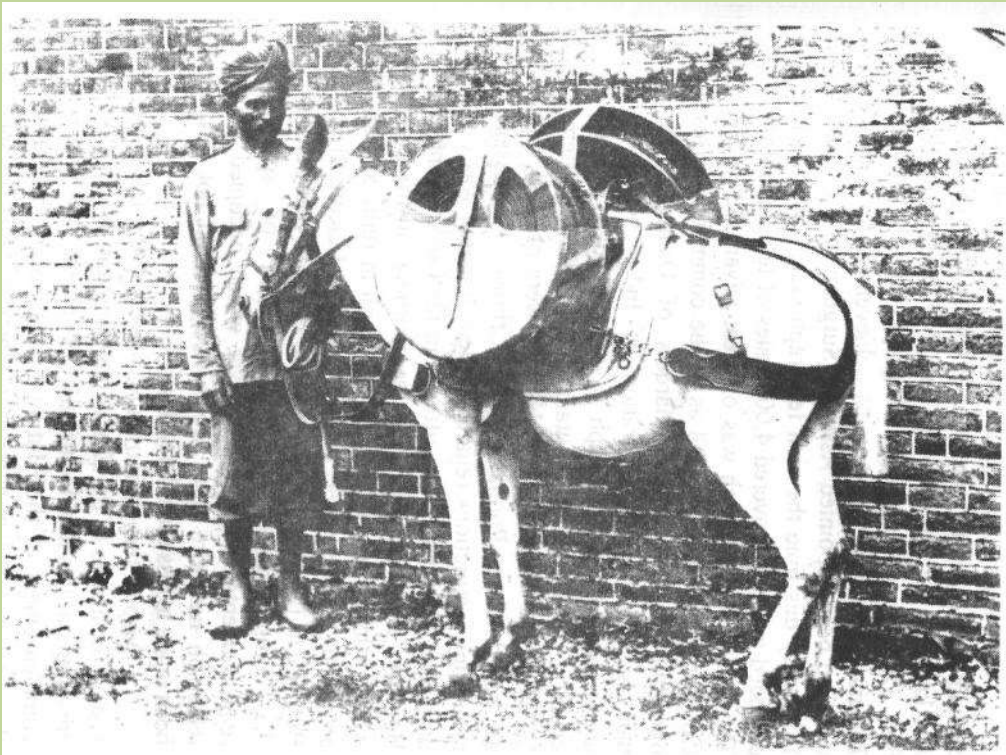
"...from Calcutta to Peshawar and Calcutta to Ootacamund about seventy principal rivers were crossed, some by cables, others by wires extended between masts. The cable across the River Sone measured 15,840 feet and the crossing of the Tungabhadra was two miles in length. These were grand achievements compared with any country in the world at that time..."

By 1 February 1855, only fifteen months from the commencement of the work, all the lines from Calcutta to Agra were opened, as were the lines from Agra to Bombay and Madras, and were operating for public use. These lines included forty-one telegraph offices and a number of storage depots where the maintenance stores were held. There was a constant need for spare telegraph poles, insulators and wire as damage to the line was inevitable. A report giving some idea of the problems encountered reads:

"....posts had to pass through jungles where wild beasts used them as scratching posts ... (others were) stolen for firewood and rafters for huts. Inquisitive monkeys spoiled the work by dragging lines into festoons, or dangling an ill-conducting tail from wire to wire. Crows, kites and fish eagles made roosting places on the lines in numbers so great as to bring them to the ground. The white ants nibbled galleries in the posts and the porcupine and bandicoot burrowed under them..."



Telegraph wire in 40lb coils, with leather wrapping carried on an adapted mule-pack



Telegraph wire carried in dispenser packs, with pack mule harness

By 1856 the line from Calcutta to Peshawar was completed and in the same year William O'Shaughnessy was knighted for his services. In 1857 he became the first Director General of Telegraphs of the Indian Telegraph Department. A great achievement for a man who had been appointed Assistant Surgeon on 8 August 1833. By this time the civil telegraph system had been extended and now covered 4,000 miles of telegraph line. The use of the telegraph was of great advantage to the Government of India as well as to the commercial firms operating in India. The Marquis of Dalhousie, on handing over his administration of India, noted the importance of the telegraph system in such a large country. His minute contained the following item;

"...When Her Majesty's 10th Hussars were ordered with all speed from Poona to the Crimea, a message requesting instructions regarding their despatch was one day received by me at Calcutta, from the Government of Bombay, about 9 o'clock in the morning; instructions were forthwith sent off by the telegraph in reply and an answer to that reply was again received at Calcutta from Bombay in the evening of the same day. A year before the communication for the despatch of speedy reinforcements to the seat of war which occupied the telegraph no more than twelve hours, could not have been made in less than thirty days..."

Despite the obvious advantages of the telegraph system the armies of the East India Company did not take advantage of this new technical development. With the commencement of the Mutiny by the troops in Meerut the army was put in a position whereby it had to send vital messages over the only available telegraph system which was that operated by the Indian Telegraph department. The first major outbreak took place at Meerut during Sunday 10 May 1857. Later reports were to show that the telegraph line between Meerut and Delhi was out of action for the two hours before the start of the mutiny. Despite the obvious confusion in the town the Meerut postmaster managed to despatch, at about midnight, the following private

telegram which, considering the situation, belies the actual devastation and loss of life. The telegram, despatched to his aunt in Agra, read:

"...Cavalry have risen setting fire to houses having killed or wounded all Europeans they could find. If aunt intends starting tomorrow please detain her..."

Fortunately the telegram was shown to the civil authorities in Agra who immediately telegraphed the news to the Governor-General at Calcutta. The mutineers having succeeded at Meerut marched towards Delhi and entered that city on Monday 11 May. An emergency telegraph office was set up near Hindu Rao's house and two telegraphists, Messrs Brendish and Pilkington, tapped out a message to Ambala on their own initiative as their Superintendent who had gone out to repair the line to Meerut was presumed to have been killed; his death was later confirmed. The often quoted message read:

"...We must leave office. All the bungalows have been burnt down by the sepoy of Meerut. They came in this morning. We are off. Don't call today. Mr C. Todd is dead, we think. He went out this morning and has not returned yet. We heard that nine Europeans were killed. Goodbye..."

On receipt of this message the telegraph operator at Ambala repeated it to all stations on the telegraph line to Peshawar, particularly to Lahore and Rawalpindi. Following this message the telegraph was then used for a whole series of messages alerting the numerous military stations and commanders of the outbreak.

Despite the obvious advantage of communication by telegraph the Indian Army did not introduce a field telegraph section into service until it became involved in the Abyssinian Campaign of 1867-69. Within India the military telegraphy commenced from 1869 as mentioned at the beginning of this article.

Measures were then taken for the establishment of a military telegraph train for use within India. The 'train' was to consist of officers and soldiers trained in telegraphy and line construction, wagons and animals, and sufficient line stores and telegraph instruments for the construction of semi-permanent line and the setting up and operation of a fixed number of telegraph offices.

Courses in telegraphy were started at Simla in about 1870 (the actual date of the first course is uncertain) and the subject was then included in the syllabus of the Schools of Army Signalling at Kirkee, Bangalore and Roorkee. There were further delays, as is inevitable when attempting to introduce a new system into the service, and it was not until the Commandant of the Bengal Sappers and Miners experimented with a trial organisation for field telegraph during the camps of exercise held at Delhi (1871), Hassan Abdal (1872), Roorkee (1873), Delhi (1875) and at the Imperial Assemblage at Delhi in 1876 that any progress was made. It had the full support of Lord Napier, the Commander-in-Chief and also his Quartermaster General, Sir Frederick Roberts, and as the trials were successful it was agreed that there was a definite need and that a Field Telegraph section was feasible.

Two officers were appointed, these being Lieutenant G.R.R. Savage RE, Instructor of Telegraphy at the Army Signalling School at Roorkee, and Captain Bindon Blood, Superintendent of the Sapper Park. Under their guidance suitable British soldiers were trained in the civil telegraph offices. Unfortunately at this time no field experience was gained as the

Indian Telegraph Department carried out message handling during the numerous small frontier wars. With the full backing of the Governments of Bombay and Madras and, of course, Bengal, the Government of India approved the formation of a Telegraph Train but the implementation was delayed through 1876 and 1877 and it was not until September 1878, on the eve of the war with Afghanistan, that the final sanction was given for the establishment of this new military service.

The original intention was for the train to provide two ground cable detachments, but with advances being made in other countries the requirement was increased so as to be capable of providing a light air line, consisting of iron wire of 150 pounds per mile, to be strung on bamboo poles. Most of the stores were manufactured at Roorkee, in anticipation of the approval being given, which was a very wise move as, when the Afghanistan campaign commenced, the Sappers Field Telegraph train was ready to join the expedition. Light transport was allocated for the carriage of the light poles and other material and No 6 Company of the Bengal Sappers and Miners began regular training in the working of a field telegraph train.

The train consisted of the following stores and animals:

- 2 officers and 6 miles of cable carried on mules.
- 2 officers and 12 miles of cable carried on carts.
- 2 officers and 12 miles of wire with poles carried on camels.

The train was therefore designed to provide 6 field telegraph officers and 30 miles of telegraph line, either cable or air line.

During the Second Afghan War (1878-1880) the train was worked by No 6 Company, Bombay Sappers and Miners, under the command of Lieutenant M.F.H. Stafford RE and accompanied the Peshawar Field Force. During the early part of the campaign the civil line was advanced and dealt with service message handling so that the military field telegraph train was not utilised. When the 1st Division of the Force arrived at Jalalabad, it was found that the civil line would take some time to arrive and then the train was brought into action. A military line was constructed to the rear from Jalalabad towards Dakka, about 40 miles away, to meet the civil line coming from Peshawar.

Ground cable was initially used as there had been a delay in the transportation of the aerial line stores. However as this was an excessive length to run a ground cable, the air line on bamboo poles was then constructed to supplement the ground cable. The ground line worked from 25 January to 10 February 1879 and the air line from 10 February to 10 March during which time over 3,300 messages were passed. The civil telegraph office was opened at Jalalabad on 10 March and the military line from Dakka to Jalalabad was recovered ready for farther use in future operations. (End of Part 1)

The photographs at pages 20 and 21 (two mules shown above) are reproduced courtesy of the Royal Signals Museum. All other source references and acknowledgements will be listed at the conclusion of Part II. **Web site note** - the original photographs were returned in 1993 so reproductions here are not as good as we would have wished.

MOHMAND EXPEDITION 1854 - A FRONTIER AFFAIR

Cyril Walters

Among an accumulation of pre-Indian Mutiny letters, part of my collection of militaria on India, is a letter of 1854 written by Stuart Beatson from Lucknow dated 10th September. The addressee is:

Charles Brownlow Esq.

Adj. 1st Seik Local Infantry

Michnee¹

Punjab

The letter (we show the envelope - front and back - and a second envelope of 17th September with 'Stuart Beatson' scripted on the top left corner) mentions that the Lahore Chronicle Extra published the first account of the "Moosa Khagl" affair. Beatson quotes that Brownlow was "seriously wounded" and Beatson was "most anxious about you my dear Charley". Reference is also made to the anxiety of all at home "when they see the newspaper report".

The affair may be of some interest. In 1854, the Michni Mohmands, who occupied the frontier immediately opposite the posts of Shabkaddar², Michni and Abazai, had been giving trouble. Two years' revenue was due from them and, instead of paying it, Rahimdad, their chief, fled from his village. It was therefore determined to seize all Mohmand cattle found within British territory and to destroy the only three hostile villages near the frontier - Sadin, Dab and Shah Musa Khel.

The force was under the command of Colonel S.J. Cotton and left Fort Michni on August 31st, 1854. No opposition was met with at either Sadin or Dab. At Shah Musa Khel the column was met with matchlock fire from the towers, walls and houses of the village. The troops, which included 1st Sikh Infantry, immediately stormed the village and drove the enemy to the heights beyond it. In order to permit of the place being destroyed, it was necessary to dislodge the Mohmands from these heights. Lt Brownlow was ordered to drive the enemy from the hills to the north-west while Major Gordon with the rest of the regiment ascended those to the north-east. It was during this engagement that Brownlow was shot through the lungs. The force returned to camp Shabkaddar on September 4th. Brownlow was second-in-command of the regiment (officiating). He was promoted to the official title on November 12th, 1854, and on December 2nd was granted leave on medical certificate on account of the wounds he received.

Notes:

1. Michnee, Michni, Mitchnee - fort built by Sikhs (Seik, Seikh)
2. Shabkaddar, Shabqadar - fort built by Sikhs
3. extract from "*Forty-One Years in India*" by Field Marshal Earl Roberts VC, KG

"Lt BROWNLOW was, in 1863, a Major in 20th Punjab Infantry and was in the Ambela Expedition (Umbeyla Expedition). Brownlow's defence of the Eagle's Nest on 26th October and of the Crag Piquet on 12th November spoke volumes for his coolness and pluck and for the implicit faith reposed in him by the men of the 20th Punjab Infantry, the regiment he had raised in 1857, when but a Subaltern. In his official report the General remarked that "to Major Brownlow's determination and personal example" he attributed the preservation of the Crag Piquet. Keyes's recapture of the same piquet was described by Sir Neville as a "most brilliant exploit, stamping Major Keyes as an officer possessing some of the highest military qualifications". Brownlow and Keyes were both recommended for the Victoria Cross.

In 1871, during the Lushai Expedition, as a Brigadier General of the Chittagong Column, Brownlow (now a C.B.) was in command of half of the Peshawar Mountain Battery, the 27th Punjab Infantry and the 2nd and 4th Gurkhas. Each regiment was 500 strong and each Column was accompanied by 100 armed police."

4. Stuart Beatson was Assistant Adjutant-General to Sir Henry Havelock of Indian Mutiny fame. Quoting from "*The Indian Mutiny of 1857*" by Colonel G.B. Malleon CSI:

"Amongst those who passed away was Stuart Beatson, the Adjutant-General of the Force, a daring and most accomplished officer, who fell a victim to cholera. Knowing his end approaching, he had yet insisted on following, on a tumbril, Barrow's Cavalry into action. So keen was his soldierly perception that, despite his agony, he had pointed out to Barrow, at a critical phase of the action, an opportunity for a cavalry charge. That officer had promptly availed himself of the hint. In the very presence of the destroyer, whose clutch he knew to be upon him, Beatson could yet devote all his energies to the interests of his country. Such men are priceless. But the campaigns of the Crimea and Indian Mutiny proved that Great Britain had a store of them".

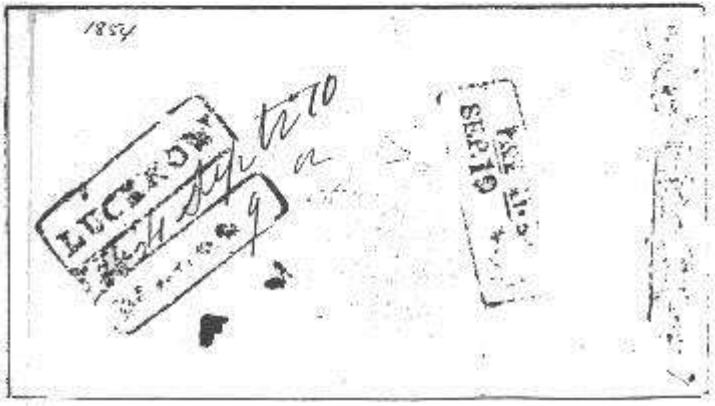
The above quote concerns Havelock's entrance into Kanhpur (Cawnpore).

Acknowledgement: I wish to record my thanks to Gerald Sattin, F.R.P.S.L., for his help in the compilation of this article.

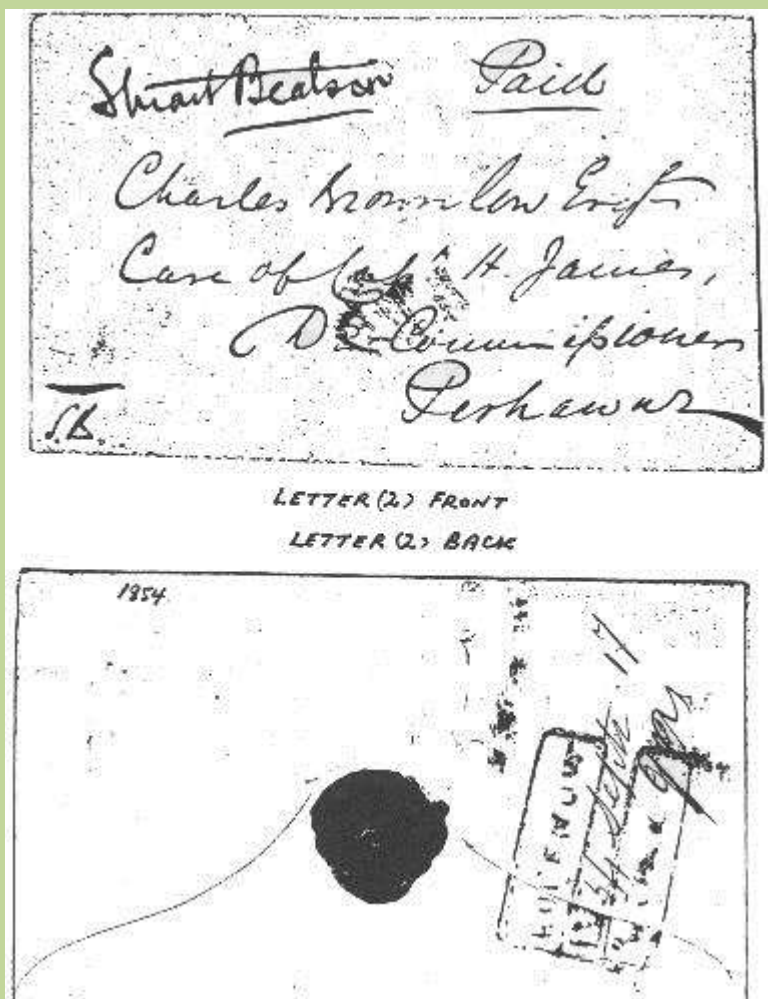
1854
Bearing
Charles Brownlow Esq.
28th Regt Foot
Miehnnee
Punjab

LETTER (1) FRONT.

LETTER (1) BACK.



Letter 1: front and back



LETTER (2) FRONT
LETTER (2) BACK

Letter 2: front and back

JAIPUR

Editor's Note: In my article on the Regimental Colours of the Jaipur State Forces (Vol. 10, No. 3) I mentioned (p 32) that 1st Jaipur Infantry had been raised on 1 December 1923 and that it was first commanded by Captain Bhim Singh Thapa, MC IOM, a former Subedar Major of 2/3 Q.A.O. Gurkhas. This prompted a response through the good offices of our Vice President, Lt Col Tony Mains, of an article by Lieutenant Colonel T.M. Lowe, Honorary Secretary of the Regimental Association of 3rd QAO Gurkha Rifles. The article first appeared in the 3GR Association Journal of 1977 and we acknowledge with gratitude the permission of the Association, and Colonel Lowe, to reproduce it here.

THE THAPAS OF ALMORA

Today it is possible for a Gurkha to enter Sandhurst and obtain a commission in the British Army in a regiment of the Brigade of Gurkhas. Indeed, elsewhere in this Journal there is mention of a young Gurkha who was awarded the Sword of Honour at the Royal Military

Academy in 1981. In the pre-1948 Indian Army there was a long tradition of son following father, a tradition which, in fact, went back to the days of the East India Company. Many of the descendants of those who served in the armed forces of "John Company" (and later in those of the Raj) were granted full commissioned rank. The Thapas of Almora were not Indians, but Gurkhas, and as such were ineligible for a Queen's (or King's) commission in the old Indian Army. In any case the Gurkha regiments were officered exclusively by the British. What, then, is interesting about these Thapas?

After the Nepal War of 1814-15 in which the British defeated the Gurkhas and captured Almora it was decided that the Gurkhas should be enlisted as provincial troops for service in the hills of Kumaon. The unit, which was raised in April 1815, was known as the Kumaon Battalion and the Commandant was a baronet, Sir Robert Colquhoun.

Amongst the Gurkhas who accepted service under the British was a certain Jai Sing Thapa who had held the rank of Subedar in the Nepalese army, which had been defeated. Jai Sing was permitted to retain his rank when he joined the Kumaon Battalion. Jai Sing had a son, Jiwan Sing who, in due course, joined the Kumaon Battalion, which in 1826 had changed its title to the 7th (Kumaon) Local Battalion. Jiwan Sing married the daughter of a Gurkha who had served with his father.

The military traditions of those Thapas from Almora gathered momentum, for Jiwan Sing saw service in 1857 in the Mutiny at Delhi, Bhutan in 1866/67, in the Afghan War of 1878/80 and finally in the Burma War of 1886/87. The battalion, which his father joined in 1815, had undergone several changes of its title in the meantime and, when Jiwan Sing retired, it was known as the 3rd Gurkha Regiment.

In 1876 Jiwan Sing's wife gave birth to a son. He was named Bhim Sing and he enlisted as a recruit boy. On attaining the age of 16 he became a rifleman in the 1st Battalion of the 3rd Gurkha (Rifle) Regiment. He had been educated in the regimental school and, since he was clearly of above average intelligence, employment in the adjutant's office, as a clerk, was obviously the right place for him.

The British officers, as always, had a great affection for Gurkhas and Bhim Sing was so well liked that it is said he was included in the officers' cricket team as a bowler! Early in 1914 Bhim Sing was promoted to Jemadar. In the autumn of that year he was sent to France with a draft from 1/3 G.R. to reinforce 2/8 G.R. which had suffered very heavy casualties. In the event some 100 G.O.R.'s from that draft, together with Jemadar Bhim Sing, joined 2/3 G.R. The battle of Neuve Chapelle was one in which the Garhwal Brigade was heavily engaged and the 2/3rd was in the van of any attack. An entry in the "*Indian Corps in France*", page 233, tells us that "Subedar Bhim Sing Thapa performed repeated acts of pluck, especially distinguishing himself by his coolness in leading his men, thus gaining the Indian Order of Merit, 2nd Class". The I.O.M., it should be noted, was originated for conspicuous bravery in action.

The Battle of Loos in 1915 in which Rifleman Kulbir Thapa of the 2/3rd gained his V.C. was also one in which Bhim Sing yet again distinguished himself.

From time to time a soldier stands out head and shoulders above his contemporaries. One such undoubtedly was Bhim Sing, a Thapa of Almora. He rose from Jemadar to Subedar-Major in less than two years and was S.M. of the 2/3rd from 1915 to 1919 during which time

he served in France, Egypt and Palestine. His services were recognised by the award of the M.C., the I.O.M., the Serbian Order of the White Eagle with Swords, a Mention in Despatches four times and a special grant of land. He didn't escape scot free in action for he was severely wounded in Palestine. For a short time Bhim Sing was appointed adjutant of the 2/3rd when a shortage of British Officers also resulted in G.O.s commanding all rifle companies.

Bhim Sing's military record is one of which any family could well be proud, but now something happened which set the seal on his splendid achievements. The Indianisation of the King's commissioned officer cadre of the Indian Army had not at that stage (1919) begun. Following the First World War nine Indian Other Ranks were granted King's Commissions. Bhim Sing was not an Indian, but at the request of his regiment (the 3rd Gurkhas) a special case was made for Bhim Sing to be granted a commission. This was approved, despite the fact that, as already mentioned above, British officers were only permitted to serve in Gurkha regiments.

After he had been commissioned Bhim Sing served in the 2/3rd, as a subaltern, until he retired in 1925. In a short space of time he was invited to raise the 1st Jaipur Infantry, a States Forces unit which he commanded until he finally retired in 1936 to live in Almora. Lieutenant Colonel Bhim Sing died in 1960 at the age of 84. The greatest of a long line of Thapas or just a case of *primus inter pares*?

So much for the soldier, but what of the man? Despite all that he had achieved in his years as a soldier, Bhim Sing was a man of simple habits who didn't drink or smoke and, unusually for a Gurkha soldier, held strong religious beliefs.

Like his forbears, Bhim Sing was married - in 1899. His wife came from a distinguished Gurkha family the descendants of which today include a lieutenant-general in the army of India. Every successful man, they say, has behind him a woman who makes sure he knows the way to the top. Saraswati, Bhim Sing's wife, was no exception. The marriage, we are told, was very happy, for she was generous, gracious, dignified and an ideal housewife. The sons of this marriage were four in number. For a Gurkha the profession of arms is second to none. And so it was that Son No 1, Mahiman Sing, was given a direct commission as a V.C.O. in the 3rd Gurkhas. Mahiman Sing was Subedar-Major of the 4/3rd from 1941-46 and later A.D.C. to General Sir Douglas Gracey, G.O.C. 1st Indian Corps, a former C.O of the 2/3rd. Mahiman, alas, died in 1947. The Regimental History records that his services

"to the 2/3rd and 4/3rd were outstanding. Had he lived, he would no doubt have risen to high commissioned rank in the reconstituted Indian Army".

Son No 2, Puran Sing, graduated from the Indian Military Academy and joined the 1st Jaipur Infantry. Puran Sing served with his regiment in the Italian campaign and his company was the first to cross the River Po in 1945. He was awarded the M.C. for consistent leadership of a high standard. In 1960 he retired as a lieutenant-colonel and has two sons in the army.

Son No 3, Padam Sing, was commissioned from the Indian Military Academy in 1942 and saw much active service with the Mahratta Light Infantry in Burma. He won an immediate M.C. in 1944 in action against the Japanese, having been wounded in action earlier that year. After Independence, Padam eventually commanded battalions of the 5th Gurkhas before he retired, when he became a Deputy Inspector General of Police.

Son No 4, Hariom, was a subaltern in the Royal Garhwal Rifles from 1943 till he joined his father's old battalion (the 2/3rd), which in due course he commanded from 1961-64.

But what of the fifth generation of these Thapas of Almora? Jayant, son of Hariom, was serving in the 2/3rd as a captain in 1980 when he was awarded the "Shauraya Chakra".

This should be considered as the first instalment of the story of the Thapas of Almora. It will, doubtless, be told as long as this family is prepared to serve in the Armed Forces of India. We hope that service in the 3rd Gorkha Rifles will continue to attract the Thapas of Almora.

In preparing this account I must acknowledge my indebtedness to Son No 2, Lt Col Puran Sing Thapa, and Brigadier Narain Sing Rawat. T.M.L.

LETTERS AND QUERIES

● Tony Mains writes:

SURVEY OF INDIA

General Staff Overprinted F.O.V.O. Maps

These maps were produced by the Survey to the order of the General Staff at Army Headquarters for various particular purposes, i.e. to give special information of such things as tribal boundaries and areas on the North West Frontier etc. They were basic Survey sheets overprinted as required by the General Staff. The distribution of these maps was controlled by the General Staff and many (especially in the inter war years) were not routinely sent to the India Office. Dr Andrew Cook, the Map Archivist at the India Office Library and Records, is trying to assemble, for military historians, as full a collection of these maps as possible.

If anyone has in his possession, or knows of, any of these maps, Dr Cook would be pleased to hear from him (Tel: 071 412 7828 - direct line).

The maps can be identified by:-

- "FOR OFFICIAL USE ONLY" at top right hand comer.
- "GENERAL STAFF INDIA" at bottom right hand corner.

Lack of publication data, i.e. "Published under the direction of xxxxxxxx Surveyor General of India" - grid and other references etc.
