

SPEECH BY THE PRIME MINISTER AT THE REUNION WITH THIRD BATALION PARACHUTE REGIMENT (1ST KUMAON) AT AGRA (INDIA) ON 24TH JANUARY, 1979.

I never thought that I would live and get the opportunity of meeting former and new officers and men of my old regiment. I am very grateful for the great honour which is being given to me to-day. This is indeed a reunion ... a cherished and fond one to me. Being back again in Agra, even for a few hours, and meeting my former comrades in arms is extremely exciting; it brings back many happy memories of my young days as a junior officer in the Indian Army.

After passing out of the Indian Military Academy at Dehra Dun in early 1942, I decided to join the 19th Hyderabad Regiment. My Company Commander at the Academy, General Shrineghesh, a major then, was from the 19th Hyderabad. He was a good and fine commander, and I was very proud of him. There were three of us at the Academy from Malaya. The other two joined the 19th Hyderabad as well. One of them, Ibrahim Ismail eventually became a General and Chief of the Malaysian Armed Forces Staff, and had just retired. The other, Ahmad Abdul Rahman, became a Brigadier General and had also retired.

I am very proud to know that the Regiment has produced many very good officers, among them were General Shrineghesh, General K.S. Thimayya and General T.N. Raina. Reading the history of the Regiment, which since 1945 has been renamed as the 19th Kumaon Regiment, one cannot help but be proud of it. Its battle honours before, during and after the First World War, as well as during and after the Second World War, are clear testimonies of the high standard of training, discipline and courage of the officers and men of the Regiment. As you know, the 4th Battalion was in Malaya when Japan invaded the country. The whole of the battalion was captured.

Immediately on my commissioning, I was posted to the Regimental Training Centre here in Agra. So was General Ibrahim. I was attached to "C" Company under major Alexander. At that time things did not go well for the Allies either in the Far East or the middle East. The Training Centre in Agra was given the task of turning the raw jawans from the villages into fighting men. I was amazed that in only six months of intensive training, these raw jawans were turned into well-disciplined fighting men. General Raina was also here in Agra at that time.

What I am recounting to you happened 36 years ago. It is really a long time ago. I had just passed my 21st birthday. What I did during my off-duty hours, I obviously cannot disclose, because my wife is here with me. I am told that although a general can command his men, he cannot command his wife, and wives are worse generals. Further, you can never plan any operations with them because they will never agree.

At that time, Agra did not provide one with a gay life. Further, it was war-time and everyone was busy with the war. At times I was homesick. I could not write, nor could I receive news from home. I did not even know whether my parents were alive or dead. I took it all philosophically and carried on as best as I could. All in all, I never regretted my fate. On the contrary, it was a blessing. My army training and experience, and the discipline it has taught me, have a profound effect on my later life. It is rightly said that to be a good general, one must first be a good soldier ——— a bad soldier can never make a good general ——— one must first learn to obey before one can give commands. I have not made my grade and became a general. The most that I have been able to achieve is to become a Prime Minister.

It is very pleasant to reminisce about one's youth and about a place where one has very fond memories. Speaking about my life in Agra, I remember very vividly my bearer, an elderly, kind and gentle man, wise, paternal and efficient. I remember too my chowkedar, a man blind in one eye, and who woke me up every one or two hours in the night by his shouts that all was well and that he was awake and doing his rounds of my quarters. I also remember my water-carrier whose services has refreshed me with bath water. My quarters were only a few yards away from the officer's mess. I enjoyed the mess nights with the change of menu for the dinners, the formality and tradition, the bag pipers marching slowly around the dinner table, the regimental toast, the light-hearted conversations and afterwards adjourning outside drinking and conversing while the Regimental Band played soft and beautiful music. We worked hard during the day and relaxed with our brother officers in the mess in the evening. In winter it was a bit cold, in summer terribly hot and dusty. I remember that in summer we started training very early in the morning and had a break at about eleven, and started training again at about three-thirty or four in the afternoon until about six-thirty or seven. I cannot forget the summer heat ... Even in the room with the fan full on it was like the baker's oven. I had a khas-khas tati made an installed at the door of my room. How pleasant, cool and sweet-smelling the breeze was.

It is usually the case that when anything beautiful and historical is so near to you, you seldom or never visit it at all. You always say to yourself "I still have time, I'll visit it later." So it was with me with regard to the Taj Mahal and the Agra Fort. I think I visited the Taj Mahal only twice, and even then they were done very superficially and in great haste. I visited the Agra Fort only once and that was done superficially and in great haste too. I am glad that I get the opportunity of visiting the Taj and the Fort again. This time I have brought with me my wife and daughters.

From Agra I was posted to the First Battalion overseas. General Raina joined the Battalion and we were in the same company. I later returned to India and joined the Malayan Planning Unit at the G.H.D. in New Delhi, I was posted to the Malayan Police Training Centre at Mohan Camp in Rawalpindi. In October 1945, I returned to my country with the Liberation Forces. I think it was in early 1946 by chance I met General Raina again in last year when he visited Malaysia.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Such in brief is the history of my life with the Kumaon Regiment and the Indian Army. In General Raina who is the Regiment's Colonel-in-Chief, you have a fine man and a very able officer. I share your pride in having such a man. I have no doubt that the fine records and traditions of the Regiment will be maintained and enhanced. I am extremely proud to be given the honour of associating with the Regiment. I congratulate you all on the excellent parade and turn out which you gave just. Well done. Ram Ram, Jai Hind.