

# Lieutenant General J F R Jacob, PVSM, As I Knew the Good Man and Gifted Soldier

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**BALJIT SINGH**

“How come so early..... have you had a spat with your Chief Instructor?” asked my wife. Now, that was the most natural enquiry sensing my look of discomfiture and the fact that I had arrived home almost an hour before the routine break for lunch. But before I could regain my composure, we heard the tread of foot steps on our verandah and without so much as by your leave, in walked Brig Jacob. And totally ignoring my presence in our living room, he kind of began pleading his case with my wife, concluding ultimately that “Baljit is sulking ..... I am staying on for lunch, so come with me to your kitchen and let me make a savoury cheese omelette to add to your lunch fare .....!”

He had arrived from Leh in early 1965, to assume command of the Gunners' *alma mater*, the School of Artillery at Deolali (Maharashtra) but his reputation of impeccable professional accomplishments and goodness of heart, as also by way of tongue-in-cheek kind of advice “but beware of the momentary dark moods, fellows”, had preceded him well in advance. Now, over that impromptu lunch of savoury omelette, etc, he was the perfect knight-in-armor to his hostess, full of amiable conversation and fancy anecdotes from his days as an instructor at Deolali, in the fading years of the decade of the 1940s.

He had known that my wife and I rode horses every afternoon and so over lunch, he enthusiastically recounted one gleeful horsey episode. He narrated that in the normal routine, Brig P P Kumaramangalam, the Commandant (later the Army Chief) had stopped by the classroom where Maj Jacob was imparting instructions. While he confabulated with the Commandant, the latter's horse had pushed his neck through the shutters of the window of the classroom, picked up the bunch of papers lying on a table and chewed them up. They were, in fact, the question papers for the semester test scheduled for that hour itself and the class had a big laugh when their instructor turned his briefcase inside out to look for them; ultimately, the test was postponed on account of "unnatural circumstances"!

It was in that moment of hilarity that we arose from the lunch table and he turned to me in the spirit of one Red Indian Chief to another after having smoked together the pipe-of-peace, to say "Baljit, you can ride my Charger 'Kohat' every day, henceforth!" And those who have known the ways of the Mountain and Horse Artillery would understand how significant and gracious that concession was.

But what had provoked that mid-morning's discomfiture remains a mystery. I had conducted the pre-induction performance trials on the final prototype of the first, indigenously designed and manufactured Indian Field Artillery Gun (IFG), made by the Gun Carriage Factory (GCF), Jabalpur. There was a mandatory format to be followed for such user evaluation and after a month-long rigorous practice, we declared the gun suitable for induction into Army service but subject to removal of about eighty shortcomings. Brig Jacob was going through the draft report I had compiled when a solid, glass paperweight was hurled at me across his office table. Taken unawares, it had hit me smack in the chest and that is when I had walked out of his office and gone straight home!

The following morning, the report was back on my table, approved without a single change. A week later, it had reached the Army Headquarters and Brig Jacob was summoned for a discussion. It was a stormy meeting where the Director of Artillery, Maj Gen A S Naravane maintained that the defects were of minor nature and demanded that (a) the gun must be recommended for immediate induction into service, notwithstanding the shortfalls in ballistics, design and metallurgy pointed out because the GCF Jabalpur were duty-bound to rectify them; and (b) "Maj Baljit Singh will not be entrusted with evaluation trials of weapons in the future". Brig Jacob would neither be dictated to against his considered professional conclusion nor brook any interference in his command

responsibility and reacted angrily in loud voice “You get the defects removed to my satisfaction and we shall approve the IFG’s induction, but not until then” and walked out of the meeting, caught the flight to Bombay and was back to business as usual the next morning.

In hindsight, Brig Jacob’s principled stand was vindicated because the GCF, Jabalpur, took three years to rectify the glitches pointed out. And the IFG ultimately entered our arsenal post in a symbolic drive down the Jan Path in the Republic Day Parade in, 1968. In the meanwhile, I went on to evaluate the suitability for acquisition of the Swedish 120 mm Brandt heavy mortar, the Vickers Armstrong 105 mm self-propelled gun, the 130 mm Russian medium gun, the American battlefield surveillance radar AN TPQ-4 all of which, barring the last, served the Army very well. I did not know that the IFG episode was of much significance, yet it takes up more than one page in his autobiography, including the precise number of defects “pointed out by Baljit” and he made it a point to let me know about it through an email; in fact, the last email before age related illnesses took hold of him.

His sense of loyalty to his friends and subordinates was so absolute and compelling that in the process he could hurt the sensitivities of others, at times most embarrassingly. He had assumed command of 12 Infantry Division whose mandate was to operate in the Thar Desert and Maj Gen JFR Jacob let it be known in his command that he intended to roll up the international Indo-Pak border to the south bank of the river Indus, at the first opportunity and his division affectionately christened him “our Moshe Dayan”! So he was invited to the Defence Services Staff College, Wellington, in 1969, to give a talk on his concept of desert warfare. I was a student on that course and he was gracious enough to join us at cocktails one evening at the Wellington Gymkhana.

As always, he was the spirit of the party and at once set to charm our other guests [Brigadier (Retd) & Mrs Chukerbutty, Maj (UK Army) & Mrs Leslie Busk—Jenny Busk was a dear horse-riding buddy of my wife and our friend Maj Balwant Sandhu (the first Indian to step on the summit of Nanda Devi)], in a wide ranging, animated conversation. Just then, Lt Col Trevor (Tom) Morlin who had commanded 17 Sikh under Gen Jacob and was at the time an instructor at the college, happened to enter the cocktails-lounge. And in a trice, Gen Jacob kind of “pounced” on him, saying aloud every one’s hearing “.... have you come to make your ‘number’ (Sikh troops slang to cosy-up) with me? ..... Do you know Baljit? ..... Make sure that Baljit is graded first in merit on this course, will you .....” That sudden dark mood apart, let me hasten to add that it was my good fortune

to witness Brig Morlin lead from the front, his brigade to great heights of glory on the Chhamb battlefield in December 1971, when the chips were down; he first stabilised the battle front and then snatched the initiative back from the enemy at the most critical moment in that fiercely contested battle. Gen Jacob would have applauded him, I am sure.

Not many soldiers get the opportunity to be in the vanguard of *ab initio* conceptualisation of a war, staging forward the combat elements, building the logistics infrastructure for the perceived duration of the conflict, signalling the commencement of war at the point (s) and time of choosing and following it through with a historic defeat on the adversary. Well, Maj Gen Jacob was in just such an enviable post during the 1971 War, on our Eastern Front. Perhaps his biggest contribution as Chief of Staff of the Eastern Army was to set up harmonious communication at the personal level with the three Corps Commanders, and ensuring that everyone remained focussed on a single agenda. This was the greater winning card which would later ensure a resounding victory for the Indian Army. If the Indian Army's conduct in the 1965 War had helped remove the stain of defeat left over from the 1962 War, its comprehensive victory in 1971 had signalled the rejuvenation of the old spirit of "victory-in-combat, always", in full measure. At the political level, the credit belonged exclusively to Prime Minister Indira Gandhi and militarily, largely to Field Mshl SHF Maneckshaw, PVSM, MC, but in the second tier of leaders, the contribution of Lt Gen KP Candeth in the West and that of Maj Gen Jacob in the East shall never be forgotten.

His natural progression to GOC-in-C of the Eastern Army was a great boon both for the Army and the northeast (NE) Region of India, as a whole. Despite minor streaks of acerbic behaviour that he was born with, the Army Commander always deployed his winning leadership qualities in creating trust with all Chief Ministers and Governors of the NE states (West Bengal included) as also with the insurgent leadership. He was the architect of the unspoken policy of "silent reconciliation" encouraged within, and by, the NE states, ushering in a ten-year period of uninterrupted tranquillity, in the entire NE Region.

As the Eastern Army Commander, Gen Jacob had crafted a very far-sighted document on the strategic significance of the Andaman and Nicobar Archipelago for India's long-term economic and national security needs. He had argued that India must rapidly build a strong military presence, west of the Malacca Strait failing which, China would spread its presence either by proxy or by seeking naval bases in this vacuum to our disadvantage and enlarging Chinese hegemony among the Southeast Asian nations. In the Military Operations Directorate of

the Army Headquarters, we found great merit in Gen Jacob's prognosis and in due course, the idea of creating a Tri-Service Command for the archipelago was accepted by the government. However, the specifics of force structure and timelines for implementations were at that stage in the realm of generalisations and Gen Jacob was not pleased by those lacunae, to say the least. He made a vigorous presentation of his strategic vision during the Army Commander's Conference but failing to get any firm commitments, he walked out of the conference much to Gen Raina's discomfiture. Maj Gen ML Chibber, the DGMO and I quickly caught up with him but try as we may, he would not return to the conference.

Back at Fort William, he harnessed his energies to give a much needed face-lift to its vast, heritage sprawl inside the ramparts. His sense of history was deep-rooted and so, rather than tinker with the heritage architecture, he instead set about restoring the extensive damage of past neglect. Of the several restoration initiatives he had set in motion, may be his best effort lay in reviving the exterior architectural visual of St Peter's Church, located in the heart of Fort William, because Gen Jacob considered it the finest Gothic structure among all, in India. As the church had long ceased to be a house of worship, he had it deconsecrated first with due ceremony organised by the Church of India, then had all architectural damage restored to match the original facade shown in paintings of 1835 when the genius of William Princep had erected this edifice. And being a voracious reader, he then chose to install the Command Library under its lofty, vaulted roof!

In the process, it was discovered that there was a wall painting above the altar-table but no details could be made out as layers of fungus over the years had veiled it completely. Gen Jacob took up the challenge and searched the archives in the National Library and the National Museum till he established that the painting was a depiction of The Last Supper but the artist remained unknown. That is when he superannuated from the Service. About a decade later, when I reached Fort William, he put me wise about the significance of that art heritage and urged me to take up the restoration of the painting. Fortunately, by that time, the INTACH had brought the Army heritage within its ambit and after a painstaking, slow effort, spread over a year, the restoration was carried to logical conclusion.

Returning to Gen Jacob's fixation on the genius of William Princep, much of his creation (by way of statues) was at that time lying in neglect in the scrap yards of the National Museum. The passionate antiquarian that Gen Jacob was, he spent much time among the knocked down heap from the Raj era art and

retrieved among other works, an exceptional piece of statuary, a pair of the Asiatic Lions and had them installed at the entrance to the Command Officers Mess, on eternal guard duty as it were! Once the Mess was ready for usage, the Gen gifted a banqueting dining table together with chairs to seat forty people one of his family heirlooms.

And there was in the scrap heap, a life size equestrian statue of exceptional brilliance, of Gen Roberts the Commander-in-Chief, astride his horse Vonolel, in black marble which simply mesmerised him. Now Gen Roberts besides being a VC decorated soldier was a blue-blooded “gunner” and to Gen Jacob's generation he was fondly known as “Bobs of Kandahar”. With that historical baggage, it was natural that the statue was installed at the entrance to the Artillery Centre, Nasik Road. Gen Roberts had named his Arab charger after the chief of the Lushai tribe he had fought against and it had carried the Commander-in-Chief on that epic ride of 300 miles in twelve days, from Kabul to Kandahar to raise the siege and avenge the bruising defeat suffered at Maiwand. When Lord Roberts retired and went home to the UK, Vonolel too went with him and this horse was personally decorated by Queen Victoria with the Afghan Medal and the Kandahar Star and ultimately buried with full military honours, in a corner of the Military Hospital!

Gen Jacob spent much time in the scrap heaps of the Cossipore Gun Factory as well, retrieved splendid heritage cannons and arranged them in a permanent artistic display outside the foyer of the Command Headquarters building. Several pieces were installed at other Army establishments such as the United Service Institution of India, at New Delhi.

My next significant engagement with him dates to 1998/99 when Goa was placed under a spell of President's Rule and Gen Jacob, the Governor, became the *de jure* Head of State. For some years, many naturalists had known that the entire surviving population of about 40 Wroughton's free-tailed bats (glossy dark brown creatures with short velvety hair and perhaps the tiniest of its species) was confined to the Barapeda Cave, smack on the Goa-Karnataka boundary. This faunal rarity needed to be saved, at any cost. My good friend and one of India's most knowledgeable nature scientists, the late JC Daniel of the Bombay Natural History Society had requested me to facilitate his meeting with the Governor.

The Barapeda Cave is just about 40 m deep, 25 m wide and 6 to 7 m high but has permanent patches of water which help breed adequate insect-life to meet the food needs of this insectivorous population. However, as may be imagined from the dimensions of the cave, it is no bigger than a boulder and it was a matter of speculation whether it lay in Goa or Karnataka. So it occurred to me to prime

JC Daniel to muster his persuasive skills such that the Governor would be back in his General's skin and "go for the kill"! The need for decisive, urgent executive action became paramount as the meeting between the two took place on the last day, before Gen Jacob's departure to assume the same appointment in Punjab.

Once JC Daniel concluded his case, the Governor sent for a map of Goa, showing its wildlife sanctuaries. Noticing that the Barpeda Cave is almost contiguous to the Mahadei Sanctuary, the Governor had a notification prepared to include the cave within the boundary of the sanctuary, as he was empowered to do so under The Wildlife (Protection) Act 1972, signed it and handed one copy to JC Daniel.

May be, we have a perfect case to memorialise the General by giving this bat a compound name "*Otomops wroughtoni Jacobi*".

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