

Field Marshal KM Cariappa

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Introduction

Belonging to the Kodava martial clan, Field Marshal KM Cariappa's Army career spanned three decades (1918-1953). A proud warrior, Cariappa was fiercely independent minded. Fond of reading, sports and music, he was a great success with children and had deep admiration for the apostle of non violence-Mahatma Gandhi. His illustrious career had many firsts; the first Kodava to join the first batch of Indian cadets at the Daly College, Indore; the first Indian officer to enter Staff College Quetta; the first Indian Brigadier to enter Imperial Defence College, UK; the first Indian Major General and of course, the first Indian Commander-in-Chief.

He retired from the Indian Army in 1953 and served as High Commissioner to Australia and New Zealand till 1956.

His love for the jawan and patriotism were legendary and won him respect and admiration from all ranks. For his epochal contribution to the ethos and culture of the Indian Army he was anointed, the Field Marshal in 1986. He died on 15 May 1993.

Early Career

Commissioned into the 2nd Battalion 88th Carnatic Regiment, he was transferred to 2nd/125 Napier's Rifles that was renamed the 5th Rajputana Rifles after Independence. He saw service in Mesopotamia (Iraq) before being transferred again to Prince of Wales' own 7th Dogra Regiment seeing service in the North West Frontier province quelling Pathan insurrection. It was here that he had his first baptism under fire fighting some notable actions against the formidable pathans.

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He was transferred again to 1st Battalion of the 7th Rajput Regiment. Cariappa's interactions with the British Officer and ladies grew. Nicknamed 'kipper' because the ladies could not pronounce his name, Cariappa was referred to by this nick name even by the Prime Minister, Nehru and subsequently by Indira Gandhi. He endeared himself with the British gently by playing cricket and hockey.

During his days at Staff College Quetta, Cariappa devised his own young officers' dos and don'ts; don't be conceited or snobbish; don't brag of what you can do at games or work, etc.

During his discharge of duties, Cariappa had the occasion to travel far and wide to foreign shores as a young officer in the British Indian Army.

He was thrice 'mentioned – in despatches' for his valour in the Second World War; he saw service in the 10th Indian Division in Iraq, Iran and Syria. He saw brief service with the famous 8th British army before serving in Burma to fight in the Arakans. After the second war he once again saw service in the North West Frontier service becoming the Bannu Brigade Commander.

While attending Imperial Staff College at London, Cariappa was known to have etched out his vision for the role of a united Indian Army, as a Keystone between the East and west. He believed that the Indian Army was destined to play a significant role in preserving the unity and integrity of the vast Indian nation.

He was incharge of Western Command which conducted the Kashmir operations. As Western Army Commander Cariappa had to kow tow to the cease fire ordered on 31 Dec 1948 when the Indian Army had its tails up and poised to recapture areas lost to the Pakistani *Kabalis* as also were on the verge of reinvesting Gilgit. On being harried as to why he listened to such orders, Cariappa replied, "that it was the Government who dictates and determines policy". He expressed his disappointment but brushed it aside by saying 'orders were orders'.

He retired from the Army on 14 January 1953 at the age of fifty four. He very reluctantly accepted a gift after great persuasion by his Staff Officers. But as was his wont he asked for a replica of a jawan mounted on a wooden base with the crests of the Army Headquarters and the three regional Army Commands. Perhaps, Lt Gen SPP Thorat who worked under the C-in-C best described Cariappa. "...what gave me greater satisfaction was the knowledge that I was working for a man whose personal integrity and integrity of purpose was a model for great men to envy and lesser men to copy. The impress of your dynamic yet understanding, driving yet kindly and great yet gentle personality, will... Last my life time...".

Commander-in-Chief

He took over as C-in-C on 15 January 1949. Known for his personal touches and easy ways with his command he believed in the necessity and power of personal communication addressing his troops frequently. He was immaculately dressed at all times and wore a flower in his button hole.

High Commissioner Down Under

Extremely fit, Cariappa had indicated his willingness to be of service to the nation in any appropriate capacity. Known for his grip on the problem in the North East, it was expected that Nehru would appoint him Governor in one of the Seven sister states. But it was not to be. Instead he was appointed ambassador Down under- Rumour has it that Nehru was overawed by Cariappa's immense popularity not only in the Army but amongst the countrymen and wished him to be in faraway lands from where he would be no 'threat' to Nehru.

Before departing to Australia, Cariappa officially expressed his strong views on rehabilitation of ex-servicemen...."the present discontent which prevents all among thousands and thousands of ex-serviceman rightly or wrongly must be put right soon in our national interest'. His work as High Commissioner was commended by Nehru. "...I should write to let you know how much we have appreciated your services as our representative in Australia and New Zealand in promoting closer relations between these countries and ours."

Later Retired Years

A proud man, he forsook any proffered hands to help him move around in his old age. He had a subtle sense of humour and a rich fund of jokes and anecdotes. He also had a quote for every occasion. He had a wonderful child like quality that never deserted him. The simplest of things gave him great pleasure.

When finally the Government belatedly decided to confer the Honorary rank of Field Marshal, there were many who did not want him to accept it. Even Cariappa believed that 'Either you are a Field Marshal or you are not,' as there was no such thing as 'Honorary Field Marshal.' But, perhaps, the disciplinarian in him compelled him to accept the Honorary Field Marshal rank in his very advanced old age, where, also he solicited no personal help to go through the investiture ceremony.

Field Marshal Cariappa was cremated on the grounds of his beloved Roshanara on 17 May 1993. His *samadhi* is a peaceful place, surrounded by trees and flowering shrubs. No cement or polished granite other than the headstone.

Visitors to it have asked, 'why such a simple place for such a great man.' 'This is how he would have liked it to be,' replied his daughter.

A virtuous, upright and simple man Field Marshal KM Cariappa set the tone for a unified, patriotic and apolitical Indian Army. This was his singular contribution. His personal charisma and ability to identify and resonate with the soldier at the lowest rung made him the supreme leader of men that he was.

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