

EXTRAORDINARY EXPERIENCES OF AN ARMY OFFICER



MAJOR MATHEWS

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Most Memorable Lunch With Field Marshal Sam Manekshaw

(July 1983)



Field Marshal SHFJ Manekshaw

I consider it as one of my greatest privileges in life when I got the opportunity to have a very lively and private conversation and even got to share a sumptuous lunch with Field Marshal Sam Manekshaw, the greatest of modern day Military Leaders that India can boast about. It happened in March 1984. I thank Brig KS Kahlon SM and Gen. JFR Jacob for this Great Bonanza!

It happened for me when I had gone to New Delhi for some personal work to be done at the Army Headquarters. I needed to submit an application requesting for grant of Ante Date Seniority, at the time of being conferred

my permanent commission. My claim was due to my being exempted from appearing for the 'D' certificate examinations of OTU by the Training Directorate of Indian Army in June 1973 as at that time, I was already approved for admission to the IMA by virtue of my second consecutive selection at the SSBs. Since at that time I was unable to join the IMA before the stipulated date, my selection was transferred to the OTS Madras, and I had subsequently got my Commission as a Short Service Officer.

Later in 1976 the Government decided to accord all 'C' certificate holding SSRC officers, 6 months of additional Ante Date seniority and 'D' certificate holders 12 months of seniority. I, therefore, applied for being considered for 'D' certificate seniority based on the exemption granted to me by the Training Directorate in June 1973. My Regiment CO at the time of my application was Col. KS Kahlon SM, who had served under Gen. JFR Jacob. Col. Kahlon very kindly wrote a very convincing and strongly worded letter in my favour to the General and handed it over to me, and asked me to meet Gen. Jacob who was in New Delhi those days.

The day following my arrival in Delhi, I called up Gen. Jacob's residence on telephone and spoke to him, and sought an appointment with him. He immediately told me that if I came within the next hour, I could meet Field Marshal Sam Manekshaw himself. I immediately rushed to Gen. Jacob's place with the gift items that Col. Kahlon had asked me to present to him on his behalf. I arrived at Gen. Jacob's place with two Jawans (Soldiers) from the Delhi Cantonment who helped me with carrying a huge Painted Portrait (4' x 6') of the 'Surrender Ceremony' where Gen. Niazi of the Pakistan Army was signing the Surrender documents in the presence of Lt. Gen. Jagjit Singh Aurora 'GOC in C' of India's Eastern Army with Gen. Jacob looking on, in the picture. In addition, I had two bags of walnuts and other dry fruits all from Kashmir, as gifts from Col. Kahlon for him. When I arrived at his apartment, Gen. Jacob introduced me to the Great Field Marshal himself. I immediately I knew why all the Officers, JCOs and all the Troops of the Indian Army, wherever I have heard the mention of FM Manekshaw; were always singing praises of this Great Soldier.

He was a towering and most awe-inspiring personality, far above the stature of any other Officer I had ever met. His graceful countenance and presence was so strong that one felt totally shrunken; but he made me feel so much at ease and spoke to me in a simple and friendly manner. This was his way with the junior-most soldier too, so that anyone meeting him would soon feel as if he is like a good old friend.

When I presented my application to Gen. Jacob, he told me that I was fortunate that the Field Marshal was there so I had better explain my problems to him. After I explained my Seniority issue to the Field Marshal, he told me to relax. He asked Gen. Jacob to offer me a drink, as they both were having one. When Gen. Jacob asked me what my poison was, I humbly suggested to him, that I would take a soft drink. He laughed it off and told me that they were both having Gin, so would I also like a Gimlet? I happily responded that it happened to be my favourite drink too. So Gen. Jacob offered me a Gimlet and I joined my two super seniors to a toast with cheers to my being granted my Ante Date seniority. After two drinks we had our Lunch during which the Field Marshal kept us captivated with his mesmerizing stories. He kept the conversation alive without breaks, and I could make out why he was so popular among not only the Officers and Soldiers but also the general population of the country who had become great fans of this great man.

After lunch, General Jacob handed over my application to the Field Marshal and requested him to write his personal recommendation, so that the Army HQs would surely honour it. I remember some of the words he used in his remarks on my application. It went something like this: “I have met the Officer and spoken to him. He exudes the perfect personality and bearing of an ideal military officer’. ‘From whatever I know of his character and attitude, he should be someone the Indian Army should not lose due to the lacunae of our system’. ‘I strongly recommend that his request for Ante Date seniority be accepted’”.

I thanked the Field Marshal and Gen. Jacob profusely for the opportunity to meet both of them, and seeking Blessings and leave I went straight to the Army HQs and proudly submitted my application. I still regret that I never even thought to take a photocopy of this letter, which would have been a lifetime trophy for me. After that I went back to the Delhi

cantonment Officers mess. Even today, the couple of hours that I spent in the electrifying presence of the Great warrior still inspires me to always behave in a humble manner with my juniors and those who are subordinate to me.

After two years of this meeting, when I had already left the Army and was with the State Bank of India in Bombay, I happened to be at the Santacruz Domestic Airport Terminal. An Army Ambassador Car pulled up near the Departure gate, while it was raining very heavily, and I saw through the heavy rain, that Field Marshal Sam Bahadur was in it. I ran to him, with my Umbrella as he was stepping out. I shielded him with my umbrella and escorted him into the terminal. I was surprised that there was no Liaison Officer with him that day. Not surprising, as the ungrateful Govt of India had earlier withdrawn all his special perks for Life, for having passed a very frivolous comment on TV. Since I had good Liaison with the Airport Staff, I got them to open the VIP Lounge and escorted the Field Marshal inside, and asked the staff to send some Coffee and Snacks for him. The First Question he asked me when he sat down, was ‘How are you here Mathews?’ I was Shell Shocked and totally surprised that he still remembered my name! I told him that I had left the Army and was now with the State Bank of India. Immediately he asked me, “Why? What happened to your seniority adjustment? I told him that I did not get any reply from the AHQ, so I left Service on the due date. He then told me “Don’t Worry, Do the Best You Can Wherever You Are”.

Thereafter, I had managed to get the Field Marshall to come and address the SBI Head Office Staff Members on two occasions on ‘Motivation & Leadership Qualities’, for which he was famous all over the Nation. Whenever he came, I always received him at the Airport and was with him, till he departed. We had thus become very close. In fact I had shared some of my Extraordinary Experiences with him too, and he had told me that I should write a Book, but at that time I never got the inclination to spare time for writing.

The memories of my First Meeting with the Great Field Marshal has always remained with me ever since, and his Personality and Conduct has always inspired me in almost all walks of life ever since.

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