

An Interesting Meeting with a World War-II Veteran

It was in November, 2019, that my family and I had the fortune of meeting a World War II veteran, Captain Rattan Dyal Singh, at his residence in Panchkula, Haryana, India. This momentous meeting left a profound impression on me and I would like to share an account of how this came about so that you, the reader, can also be a part of my delightful journey.



Captain Rattan Dyal Singh



A Picture of Captain Dyal, my elder brother (Ayan) and me (Aarav) – I am the boy in blue.

Foreword

One evening, the month before, we were watching a series called 'World War 2 in Colour'. It was an amazing series that showed many facets of the war in Technicolour. After it ended, I wondered about the involvement of Indians in the war and if any of them was still around. I spoke about it with my elder brother and mum, and they were intrigued by the idea too.

We decided to find out if there were any living Indian World War 2 veterans we could meet and talk to for a firsthand account of the war.

Our initial online searches didn't bear fruit. A few of my father's friends are in the Indian Army and we asked them to help out. Someone suggested that we check out the Amritsar War

Memorial records but that didn't work out. Meanwhile, we kept searching online for army veterans where upon we came across an organization called 'Directorate of Indian Army Veterans'. Thinking we had nothing to lose, we called them up and were put through to a gentleman named Colonel Mundalia, who asked us to meet him in office for further discussion.

During our meeting, he mentioned that coincidentally he had quite recently come across two WW2 veterans and could help us out in meeting them. Since one of them, Captain Rattan Singh Dyal, lived comparatively closer to our house (5-hour drive away), we requested for his details. Colonel Mundalia gave us his landline number and asked us to arrange a meeting over the phone and plan accordingly.

The next morning, my mum called the number, and, to her surprise, it was not a caretaker or a family member who picked up the phone, but the 99-year-old gentleman himself. He spoke impeccable English, albeit with a heavy Punjabi accent. A date for the meeting was decided on, and we set off a week later. I had not felt the same level of excitement for months, and was jittery throughout the journey. We started at five in the early morning, the air cold and dense with fog. We reached Captain Dyal's residence after a somewhat tiring journey of five hours and finally got to meet him – a stately man dressed in an old silk kurta, wearing thick woolen gloves and a black cap.

The Interview

Post the exchange of pleasantries, I started off with my questions.

Aarav: Sir, please tell us about your early life.

Captain Rattan Singh Dyal: I was born on the 30th of July, 1920, in Una. I received my primary education in the village, and then studied in Jalandhar and Poona too. This was because my father was in the army and, whenever he got transferred, the entire family had to move along with him, once as far as Burma. My education was greatly hindered due to this aspect.

To complete my Metric (*Grade 10*) education, in 1937, I attended the High School in Bajwada, near Hoshiarpur. I was finally reunited with my family in Deolali, Maharashtra. Once my school education was complete, I was confused about what to do next. I thought I would join the Roorkee Engineering College, but as my father was a Veterinary Doctor, it was decided that I too would follow in his footsteps and graduate in Veterinary Sciences.

Aarav: Which college did you join?

Captain Rattan Singh Dyal: I went to the Veterinary College, Lahore, to pursue studies in Veterinary Science. It was one of the only four vet colleges in the India at the moment. I graduated in 1941 and joined the Civil Veterinary Department, Punjab, as a doctor, and was posted to Punhana [*Punhana is a town in Punhana sub-division in the Nuh district in the Indian state of Haryana*], Mewat [*Nuh district, formerly known as Mewat district*].

There was an acute shortage of army vets, and I joined the army on 8th June, 1942, at Ambala.

After training, I was sent to Razmak (*Razmak is one of the three subdivisions of North Waziristan*

District in Pakistan). The army was sent there to put down the Pathan Rebellion in the North West Frontier Province (*The North-West Frontier Province was a province of British India and later of Pakistan*). It was a mountainous area and mule companies were sent since mechanized brigades could not be utilized there.

Aarav: What post did you hold in the army?

Captain Rattan Singh Dyal: I was a Viceroy's Commissioned Officer [*A Viceroy's Commissioned Officer (VCO) was a senior Indian member of the British Indian Army*]. My rank was of Jemadar [*Jemadar or Jamadar is a title used for various military and other officials in the Indian subcontinent*].

Aarav: What was the role of the army vet, sir?

Captain Rattan Singh Dyal: Initially responsible for providing care to the animals, the role of army vets kept expanding in the war, due to the extensive use of mules and horses for transporting essentials, like food and ammunitions.

A special notice was given in the Ambala Cantonment in December 1942 to alert the soldiers about their imminent posting in Europe and the Middle East to replace the casualties. All kinds of army personnel were drafted to serve the ever-growing war machine.

Aarav: What happened then?

Captain Rattan Singh Dyal: We started off from Ambala. Our ship landed near the Suez Canal in Egypt. The army was sent to several different places in North Africa. There was heavy fighting in

North Africa but the Allies, in our case, the British, Canadian and Australian forces (*Captain Dyal doesn't mention the USA or the USSR*) pushed back the Germans.

We moved on and the ship then landed in Sicily, Italy, where the intense rain and marshy soil prevented us from advancing forward.

General Bernard Montgomery commanded the British 8th Army during the Allied invasion of Sicily. He did not appreciate the use of mules but the inclement weather conditions allowed only the mules to carry the operations forward. General Montgomery ordered all mules, from wherever the Allied forces were, to be brought to Sicily.

Each mule company was commanded by one major and had around 1000 mules and several sepoy to take care of the animals' health, fodder, etc. There were many such mule companies, such as 13 Sikh, 34 Muslim, and others.

I was in charge as Vet of the 13th Indian Mule Company (Indian Army Veterinary Corps). There were five Viceroy Commission Officers in our unit. Because of compulsory conscription in Britain and several other countries, my unit had officers from varied backgrounds. Our Commanding Officer, Major F.J. Francis, was a Professor in Nottingham. Then we had Captain Mansfield, who was the brother of a famous actress of that time. There was also Captain Jeff Sartori, the son of a very influential ship builder. I had fostered good friendships with all the officers of the unit.

Aarav: So what happened in Sicily?

Captain Rattan Singh Dyal: We were pushing the Germans from Sicily to the north. In the middle of Italy, near River Moro, we fought in the famous Moro River Campaign. On one side of the river were the Germans; while on the other were the Allies.

First, the Allied Forces pushed the Germans back, but then the German Forces attacked and pushed us back and captured some of the territory occupied by us. In this, about a dozen of our mules, which were tied to some olive trees, came under German occupied territory. Since there was a shortage of mules, it was decided to bring back these mules before launching a full attack on the German Forces.

My Commanding Officer, Major Francis, was tasked with getting these mules back from the enemy lines. He asked, "Doc, will you accompany me?" and I replied promptly, "Yes."

In the afternoon of December 9th 1943, we went to the river front where the Allied forces had dug trenches and informed the regiment there that we were going behind the enemy line to get the mules back. They were 400 yards in front of our Forward Defense Lines and about 50 yards from the enemy occupied houses.

We went into No Man's Land and were spotted. We were so close to the Germans that we could see them and they could see us too, but no firing was exchanged! We freed the live animals, five in number, and got them back to our side. That night, the Allied forces attacked the Germans, and the German forces retreated.

The next day, on December 10th, out of curiosity, I went to check on the enemies who had occupied a large house. I saw six dead Germans soldiers lying dead there. The others had retreated after our attack the previous night.

I was awarded the 'Indian Distinguished Service Medal' (IDSM) Gallantry Award for my bravery in entering the enemy territory and getting the mules back.



A Photo of Captain Dyal, His Medals and an Account of His Bravery

Aarav: Wow! What happened after that?

Captain Rattan Singh Dyal: The 8th Indian Division attacked and, by the end of the year 1943, River Moro was captured. We kept chasing the German forces out of Italy, and finally the war

ended. After that, the animals were needed in Greece as the Germans had destroyed the entire infrastructure while retreating. I spent around a month in peacetime Greece, and finally returned to India towards the end of 1946.

Upon returning, all the veterinary doctors were given the King's Commission instead of the Viceroy's Commission. I was commissioned as Lieutenant, and, with time, was promoted to Captain.

While I was posted in Jullandhar, the Punjab Government started the recruitment drive for Veterinary Doctors for the Government Veterinary Department. 2 seats were reserved for the Army Vets. 24 Army Vets appeared for these 2 seats and I was selected for one seat.

Once I left the Army, I worked as District Animal Husbandry Officer at Hissar (*a city in state of Haryana*). Upon the bifurcation of the state of Punjab (*into Punjab and Haryana*) on November 1, 1966, I was transferred to Haryana. I rose through the ranks steadily. Being the senior-most officer of (*Animal*) Husbandry in Haryana, I was appointed as Director Animal Husbandry, Haryana, and later became the Milk Commissioner of Haryana.

Aarav: When did you retire from this post?

Captain Rattan Singh Dyal: If I remember correctly, in July 1978.

Aarav: Did you encounter any racial discrimination in the army?

Captain Rattan Singh Dyal: No, I didn't experience the same discrimination in the army as we did at home. There were separate messes for the Indian troops and British Officers, but the supply of food was plentiful and we were served Indian Food.

On my promotion, my mess was changed to the British Officers' Mess. I got a feeling of dignity there, and the British Officers were accommodating. Even if they had any racial bias, they did not show it openly.

Aarav: What did you do in your spare time once the war ended?

Captain Rattan Singh Dyal: In the spare time, we really didn't do any leisurely activity as such since we were sent on assignments here and there. However, on occasional sightseeing trips, we did visit the Vatican, Florence, Naples, Venice, and other Italian cities. The Germans had left the Vatican untouched. I saw the Leaning Tower of Pisa, the ancient temples of Greece, et cetera. On one occasion, a unit member and I went as far as France. The American army stationed informed us that there was no full peace and they would not be liable for any flare-ups. However, we went to Nice and got special 24-hour protection by the United States as a favor.

Aarav: Sir, is there any specific memory you have about the war that you cherish?

Captain Rattan Singh Dyal: Oh yes! I remember that in Florence, when we went to Benito Mussolini's retreat house, we found various animals. There was a Chestnut Thoroughbred Gelding, named Littoria, which was supposedly Mussolini's favorite horse. She was the most beautiful animal I had ever seen. I rode it back to the base to take care of it. Whenever we went riding on the horse, the Italian ladies used to admire it and throw flowers at it.

Aarav: Sir, may I ask if you are married?

Captain Rattan Singh Dyal: Oh yes. I was married at an early age. As was the practice back then, the match was decided by my parents. My wife passed away in the year 1991. She was suffering from Rheumatic Arthritis.



A Photo of Captain Dyal and His Wife

Aarav: Was anybody else from your family in the Army too?

Captain Rattan Singh Dyal: My father, Sardar Bahadur Risaldar Ram Singh Dyal, served the Indian Army and was decorated with **The Order of British India** for his service.

We were four brothers and all of us were in the Army. During the Second World War, my eldest brother was taken as Prisoner of War. He used to write letters to me from the POW camps,

which were heavily censored. Subsequent to his release and retirement from the Army, he joined our father in farming at our farmlands near the city of Pehowa, Haryana.

The brother younger to me, Lt. General (Late) Ranjit Singh Dayal, post his retirement, served as the Lt. Governor of Puducherry and Andaman and Nicobar Islands. He was instrumental in executing 'Operation Blue Star', in which the Indian Army was used to evict Khalistani militants from the Golden Temple, Amritsar.

My youngest brother, Kehar Singh Dayal, too served the Indian Army and retired as Lt. Colonel.



A Picture of Captain Dyal, His Parents and Brothers

Aarav: Operation Blue Star! Please tell us more.

Captain Rattan Singh Dyal: As you know, because of Operation Blue Star, many Sikhs were furious with the Government for entering the Golden Temple, the holiest shrine of the Sikhs.

Because of the role played by my brother in the execution of Operation Blue Star, we were called traitors and several attempts were made to assassinate us. I can recall at least 5-6 attempts that were made on our ancestral home near Pehowa.

By the grace of the Almighty, no one got hurt in these attacks and our family remained safe.

Even as late as 2005-2006, the Chandigarh police arrested militants planning to kill my younger brother, Ranjit Singh, in retaliation for Operation Blue Star.

Afterword

And with that, we came to the end of the interview as he appeared a bit tired with all that reminiscing. Not wanting to trouble him further, we thanked him for his graciousness in giving us so much time.

Captain Dyal then took all of us on a short tour of his home and showed us several pictures of his childhood and family (*which I have taken the liberty of attaching where I saw fit*). He asked us to stay for lunch, but we had to regretfully say no as we wanted to get back home before nightfall.

He saw all of us to the front gate and bid us a warm goodbye.

While I did hope to meet him again on his 100th birthday, it doesn't seem possible now in this period of the Covid pandemic.

It was really nice to meet him and listen to all his anecdotes. He is an extremely charming personality with so much to offer still, even when he is almost a century old. They really don't make them like that anymore!



Captain Dyal and I

I have attached a few links for extra reading. I hope you had as much fun reading about him as I did on meeting and speaking with him. I have also added the photos of a couple of special letters he received.

References:

1. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ranjit_Singh_Dyal#cite_note-6

2. <https://www.indiatoday.in/fyi/story/1984-operation-blue-star-amritsar-1251681-2018-06-06>
3. <https://www.telegraphindia.com/india/bluestar-general-on-hit-list/cid/867979>
4. <https://www.nytimes.com/1984/06/15/world/temple-raid-army-s-order-was-restraint.html>
5. <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/Lt-Gen-Ranjit-Singh-Dyal/articleshow/11741091.cms?>

V-653 Jem Rattan Singh Dyal IAVC attd. 13 Ind. Mule Coy. RIASC,
Hq 8 Ind Div.

An immediate award of the IDSM has been made to you by General Officer
Commanding-in-chief, Allied Forces in Italy.

My heartiest congratulations.

27th Jan 1944. SM/- X X Maj. Gen.
Commander 8 Ind. Div.

AFW- 3121

Date recommendation passed forward

Brigade 8th Ind Div 5th Corps IAVC attached no. 13 Ind. Mule Coy RIASC.

Schedule No. _____ Brigade _____

(to be left blank) Division _____

Army No. & Rank. V-653 Jem. Corps _____

Name. Rattan Singh Dyal. Army _____

(Christian Name must be stated)

Action for which commended (Date & Place of action must be stated.)	Recommended By	Honour Award	To be left blank
9th December 43, Moro River near Gasone owing to enemy activity some mules had been left, tied to trees, without food or water for two days. They were 400 yards in front of our P.D.Ls. & within Fifty Yards of enemy occupied houses. With one companion only and in day light he recovered 5 of the mules & quantity of saddlery & obtained useful information. The mules were difficult to handle as they had been badly frightened by the firing & were restless from lack of food & water. Both animals & Saddlery would almost certainly have been destroyed that evening by our own barrage.	Maj. F. J. FRANQIS O.C. 13 Ind. Mule Coy.	I, B. S. M. Immediate	

C

Lt. Col. A.D. MacDonald, M.V.C.,
Genl. HQ., Eighth Army.
11th Feb. 1944.

Dear Risaldar Sahib,

I have just seen the publication of your decoration and am writing to offer to you my very sincere congratulations.

As far as I know, this is the first decoration which has been awarded to anyone in the I.A.V.C. during this war and you, as well as I, must feel justly proud that it has been awarded to you while serving with the Eighth Army.

I am grateful to you for all the work you have done which has brought to you this due recognition of your services to the unit with which you are serving.

Yours sincerely,

Risaldar Rattan Singh Dyal,
I.D.S.M.
Indian Army Vety Corps,
13 Indian Mule Coy, RIASC.

A. D. MacDonald