

Rendezvous Reunion 2019 and the Baal Mithai!

By

Col NN Bhatia (Retd)

Nothing thrills me more than visiting the Kumaon Hills! But within the Kumaon Hills, Ranikhet has special attachment for every Kumaoni and Naga soldier and officer as it is abode of their Regimental Centre imparting basic military training to recruits to become top class soldiers. As customary in the Regiment, Regimental Reunion is held once in four years and Ranikhet starts buzzing with the activities and preparations for the gala event. The 16th Reunion of the Kumaon Regiment and the 10th one for the Naga Regiment was held from 19 October to 22 October 2019 preceding with the Biennial Battalion Commander's Conference. Reunion holds a special significance for any regiment, where veterans of the regiment get together to invigorate their ties with the regiment along with serving officers, JCOs and other ranks posted in the Regimental Centre. Also, present during the Reunion were some gallantry awardees, personnel with outstanding performance in various fields and some of our 'Veer Naris'. The Biennial Conference held once every two year coincides with the Reunion every fourth year providing a platform where the Commanding Officers of all the Battalions of the Regiment have an opportunity to interact with each other and high and mighty of the Regiment, review recruits' training and resolve issues of their men under command with the Records Office. The Conference was chaired by the Colonel of the Regiment popularly called COR and some senior serving officers of the Regiment attended the meet. The agenda of the conference includes introspection of the policies and orders in vogue and their effect and based on that policy decisions regarding professional enhancement, social and personal welfare of the troops, their families, widows and the 'Veer Naris'.

The veterans like me only attend the Reunion and as per the programme sent by the Kumaon Regimental Centre (KRC), we were required to reach Kathgodam by 19 October. Since Col & Mrs AC Talwar, residing in Noida, were also attending the Reunion, we got our tickets booked online courtesy their daughter by morning 6.20 am New Delhi-Kathgodam Shatabdi. While we were contemplating hiring UBER taxi, our son Gaurav and granddaughter Ariaana arriving late in the midnight from Chennai the previous night, assured me not to worry and to drop us at New Delhi Railway Station the next day morning. At the Railway Station only the Reunion bonhomie commenced meeting so many couples including my nephew Arvind & his wife Gunjan (Maj Gen & Mrs Arvind Bhatia), Khannas, Datts, Bhuiyans travelling in the same compartment. Chit chatting and sumptuous breakfast offered in Shatabdi culminated our journey to Kathgodam at 11.40 am where each one of us was received by our Liaison Officer (LO) and escorted to Kumaon Regiment's Rest Camp located close by on the road to Nainital-Ranikhet –Almora and beyond in the exotic Kumaon Hills.

Incidentally, Kathgodam literally means timber depot. Till 1901, it was a small village with a population of 375. However, the importance of this place grew rapidly after it was brought on the Railway map of British India in 1909 and ever since is the railhead en route to picturesque Dev Bhoomi –the Kumaon Himalayas! Kathgodam witnesses tourists in large numbers, most of who are usually heading to hill stations like Nainital and beyond. However, there are a quite a few interesting places in and around Kathgodam that are worth visiting.

Many more veteran officers and their graceful better halves had arrived at Kathgodam -many traveling by the same Shatabdi but some came by earlier trains, taxis and own cars. After wash, hot tea and light lunch provided at the Rest Camp, vehicles were provided to all invitees ferrying them to different locations where they were to be lodged in and around Ranikhet. I along Maj Gens & Mrs Tej kaul, Kakkar and Sohi drove in a 9 seater traveler to Windsor Lodge located ahead of Golf Course, Ranikhet.

We passed through Jeolikot and stopped for tea at clean and well maintained Kainchi Mandir. Jeolikot is an ideal heavenly place to spend the summer holidays in a calm, secluded and cool environment, for nature lovers and those visitors interested in butter fly watching, floriculture and idling in star-lit wintry nights with natural earthly comforts as stress busters. The Kainchi Mandir founded by Neem Karoli Baba in 1962 has famous Hanuman Temple visited and fed by over one lakh people on 15 June Bhandara every year. The Baba attained Nirvana in 1973. The place is called Kainchi for two sharp hairpin bends on the motorable road and has nothing synonymous with the scissors. One can experience the amazing powers of meditation in Jeolikot and Kainchi Mandir by joining experts on meditation and yoga, in these tiny, calm villages ideal for solitude and healing.



Kainchi Mandir



Welcome Heritage Windsor Lodge, Ranikhet

By 4 pm we reached Welcome Heritage Windsor Lodge. The room given to me was comfortable and cosy and except to little climb, had a clear view of the snow clad Trishul, Nanda Devi and other peaks. Evening of 19 Oct was kept free for all the regimental veterans to rendezvous (RV) at Ranikhet staying in various locations. I had to cancel plans to visit veteran friends Lt Gen Mohan Bhandari, Brig Jasbir Singh or visit bazaar to say hello to old acquaintances due to pooled mini bus. I also could not visit Jhula Devi, Kalika Mandir, Chaubatia and Tarikhet for the same reason!

A word about Ranikhet

As we all know, Ranikhet is the home for the Kumaon and Naga Regiments. It is located at an altitude of 6000 feet above the sea level, within sight of the western Himalayan peaks of Trishul, Nanda Devi and many more peaks of tremendous Hindu mythological significance. Ranikhet, which means *Queen's meadow* in Hindi, gets its name from a local legend, that Raja Sudhardev won the heart of his queen, Rani Padmini, who subsequently chose to live here

giving it the name, Ranikhet which was first established as a cantonment town by the British Raj in 1869 and is the only cantonment in India to enjoy heritage status. The vestiges of the colonial era are still clearly apparent in this neat and tidy cantonment with various heritage hotels from that period and old churches, including a couple that are no longer in service but have been rightly converted into tweed and shawl factories by the KRC and run by the Veer Naris and ex-servicemen's families.



Panoramic view from Ranikhet

Welcome Windsor Lodge

The original Windsor Lodge was a hunting lodge built in 1909 amongst the thick and untamed forests of the region that were then teeming with wildlife and a prime favourite with the British and Indian upper strata of society till 1948, when a devastating fire reduced it to ruins. After half a century of neglect, renovation began on the Lodge in 1999 to restore it to its original architecture and hauteur. It is owned by Balbir Punj and has commanding view of snow-capped mountains, thick pine and cedar forests along the sweep of the Ranikhet Golf Course.

20 Oct 2019

The reunion commenced with wreath laying ceremony by paying homage to the martyrs at War Memorial. Thereafter we all assembled at Diwan Singh Hall for the Special Reunion Sainik Sammelan chaired and addressed by Lt Gen BS Sahrawat, AVSM, SM, and Colonel of the Regiment (COR) while the ladies attended Family Welfare Meet at Bhukant Mishra Hall. While ladies were advised by Mrs Sahrawat to become self reliant, pick up some vocation and support their husbands in the Welfare Centre and felicitated the widows and the 'Veer Naris', while the COR highlighted our regimental achievements and exhorted all ranks to strive hard for the good name of our Regiment. Besides, recruits, training and administrative staff and large numbers of veterans including over a dozen three star & two star generals attended the Sainik Sammelan. I was so happy to meet atleast 5 former CORs and as many perhaps former Centre Commandants! After the Sammelan Diwan Singh Hall reverberated with thundering sounds of

Kumaon aur Naga Regiments Ki Jai, Kalkia Mata Ki Jai, Dada Krishan Ki Jai and we dispersed for Barakhana after photo sessions with the COR.

The Barakhana was organised as traditionally in the Shaitan Singh Ground. Large numbers of ex-servicemen and their families along with recruits, Training and Administrative Battalions' staff and Veer Naris attended the Barakhana. Good amount of beer and alcohol went down the throats of bone-homing former colleagues with the newer generation recruits, Jawans, NCOs and JCOs. There was traditional Naga dance, cultural programme, an odd Ragini and too much dancing over rhythmic Bedu Pako Bara Massa, O Bhina Kaske Janu Dwarhatta and Chenna Billori Jandiya Bajo though most of were out of steps due to age and over drinking beer /alcohol. The Barakhana gave veterans an opportunity to re-establish their connects with the rank and file of the Regiment and the Battalions they had served. The Barakhana carried beyond its schedule time 3 pm and all 13 Kumaon veterans and serving staff in the KRC met for the battalion get-together near the Regimental Canteen complex. It had added attraction since Lt Gen BS Sahrawat, AVSM, SM, the COR who was commissioned and commanded the Battalion graced the occasion with his presence. However, the presence was little thin perhaps due to commitments of the troops for organising various functions and Ahirs preferring postings around their home towns Kosli, Mahendargarh, Rewari and Etah and Etawah in the NCC rather than cooler hills of Ranikhet.



Naga dance by Naga recruits in Barakhana is always a BIG attraction!



Recruits and staff of 6 Kumaon's Walong Company in Barakhana



Dancing on Bedu Pako Bara Massa; while recruits are in steps most of us are not after few drinks!!

In the evening we all collected at Som Nath Ground for Son-et Lumiere –the light and sound show on the history of our great Regiment nostalgically going through various phases of changes and reorganisations over 250 years of Nizam’s Hyderabad Regiment culminating in our present designation on 27 October 1945 as the Kumaon Regiment. Not an eye was left dry hearing and watching the battles of Badgam and Rezang La and the bravery and sacrifices of late Majors Som Nath Sharma (winner of the first PVC of the Country in 1947 operations) and Shaitan Singh on the frozen heights of Rezang La on 18 November 1962 and awarded Regiment’s second PVC. Our Regiment has distinction of being awarded 4 Ashok Chakras posthumously- Major B Mishra, Naik N Singh and Naik RS Tomar all from 15 Kumaon and Subedar Sujjan Singh of 13 Kumaon and both these Battalions have the rare honour of being declared as ‘The Bravest of the Brave’! We all must know and salute those battalions of the Indian Army that have earned minimum two highest gallantry awards i.e. 2 Param Vir Chakras (PVCs) or 2 Ashok Chakras (ACs) or 1 PVC and 1 AC and distinguishly called ‘The Bravest of Braves’. Our two Battalions 13 and 15 Kumaon (Indore) joined the galaxy of the few bestowed with this great, unique and rare honour that will inspire posterity forever. The Son-et Lumiere show was excellent conceptually and with little editing and reducing pre- 1947 history and adding onto our post independence operational achievements in 1948, 1962, 1965, 1971, Sri Lanka, counter insurgency and sports and adventure legends like Col Narender Kumar ‘Bull’ make it exceedingly motivating light and sound show.

In the evening we all gathered in the Ranikhet Club for the social evening. There was song and dance show with plenty to eat, chat and drink. Most of us hit beds tired physically but not regimentally humming haunting Kumaoni songs Bedu Pako Bara Massa, O Bhina Kaske Janu Dwarhatta and Chenna Billori Jandiya Bajo and reminiscing past associations with our comrades both in peace and field tenures. I was happy to meet many officers and ladies and shared nostalgic anecdotes of the past.

21 October 2019

There was Mandir parade (prayer meeting colloquially called in the Army) in Regimental Mandir but not compulsory to attend for the veterans. Since old veteran friend Lt Gen Mohan Bhandari (7 GARHRIF) lives near the State Bank of India adjacent to Ranikhet Bazaar located in the vicinity of the regimental 'Mankameshwar Mandir', I made use of it to visit Gen Bhandari over a quick cup of tea and bagful of memories, and meet Uma- who as a small 6-7 years old girl used to sell vegetables near the patrol pump when I was posted in Ranikhet (my family continued stayed in Ranikhet during 1973-78). She though school dropout was exceptionally sharp in calculations and seeing me after over four decades was emotionally so much overjoyed that had tears in her eyes and I used to teasingly call her computer.



Around Kalika Mandir



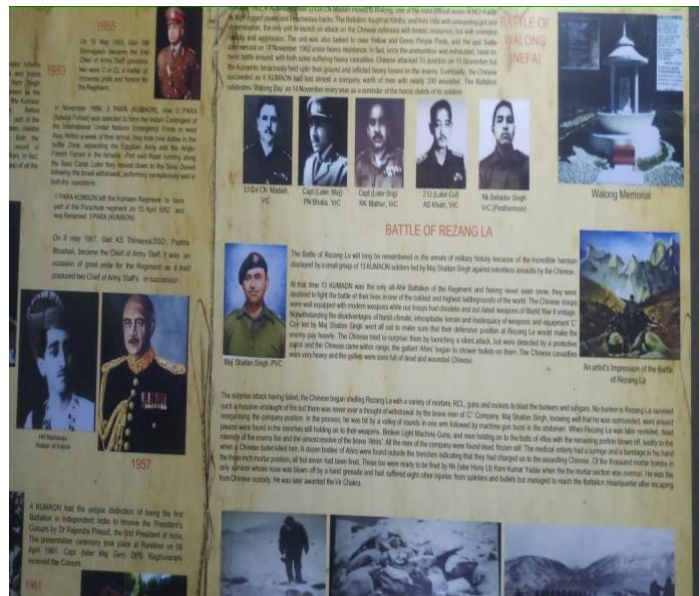
Jhula Devi Mandir



Regimental Mankameshwar Mandir



Regimental Mankameshwar Mandir



Regimental Museum



In this cottage late Maj BC Sarma, (6 Kumaon, SRO stayed during Lt Col Ram Singh (Retd) as the Commandant



Uma the computer



Baal Mithai both versions

And Baal Mithai!

I rushed quickly to Pandey Sweet House for purchasing ‘Baal Mithai’- the blend of roasted khoya, jaggery and childhood memories whose influence and taste lingers in my family. My daughter in law living in Chennai wanted a kg of it for Diwali in both versions- the chocolate and the other rolled in small sugary balls. Though, I retired from the Army in 1995, our daughter Neerja son Gaurav, wherever they served look for the Baal Mithai from anyone coming from the KUMAON Hills! Nothing thrills them more than a big bite of ubiquitous Baal Mithai. It is indeed a major logistic nightmare for me now to keep regular supply of the Baal Mithai to my kids and grand kids especially when professionally they are on globetrotting spree and I no more reside in the KUMAON Hills..!!

Incidentally, for many known and unknown reasons over a century back, Joga Shah in Almora was the only one who made the best Baal Mithai with the famous creamy milk brought from the village Phalsima near Almora. He was a genius who invented sausage shaped dark brown Mithai wrapped in sugar dipped khas khas seeds. Later, commercialization and competition led to cutting the cost and sweet shops started covering it with sugary homeopathic pills. After Joga, Routela brothers - khem Singh and Mohan Singh made fortune selling Baal Mithai. The story goes that Joga Shah was actually a Christian called Joga Isai who became Hindu after invention and popularity of the Baal Mithai and made fortunes selling it after retiring as a cook from the British Indian Army.

There was 15 Kumaon (Indore) get-together organised in the Regimental Family Welfare Centre appropriately named to honour martyr Maj Bhukant Misra, Ashok Chakra of the Battalion. I was specially requested by Col Tajinder Singh to attend as I had desired to present copy of the Coffee Table Book 'Untold Battlefield Tales' published by the Fauji Foundation that carries my article ' Malharis Battle of Gadra City, 1971'. I was impressed by the Malharis strength present for the get-together vis-a-vis others! I interacted with all, especially the Veer Nari Manju Ji whose husband Ashok was martyred, assuring her all help. Mrs Tajinder Singh distributed gifts to the veterans, widows and Veer Nari.

Upat Golf Course Lunch

As it was getting rather late, for the afternoon lunch in the Golf Course, I rushed to Upat where everybody was in a picnic mood. The focus shifted towards the picturesque Golf Course, covered with lush green hills in the background. It was picnic time for officers, their families including children and veterans like me. Many serving officers, ladies and veterans clubbed the game while others like me reconnected with serving and retired officers of the Regiment. I was humbly amused that though many I had not met, some had read my articles, books or watched a few TV shows on POWs and matters military in which I had appeared. There was liberal flow of drinks and snacks and after distribution of gifts, golf caps and trophies and presents to the winners of various golfing events, we had sumptuous lunch and while others rushed back to their dwellings for some much needed rest, the Beraris assembled at Shaitan Singh Ground for the Battalion get-together that was well organised by the Battalion with sizeable gathering of the serving and retired Officers, JCOs, Jawans and their families. Col Alok Mishra, CO 2 Kumaon (Berar) gave symbolic reunion gift to everyone and we parted quickly for the evening Officers' Mess function.



Beraris- the Oldest link to the Kumaon Regiment who believe in the motto 'Once a Berari is always a Berari'

The Grand Finale- Reunion Dinner

Since Lt Gen BS Sahrawat, AVSM, SM, the COR was to retire on 31 Oct 2019, he desired all 13 Kumaon serving and veteran officers and ladies to meet them in the Kumaon Villa located within Officers' Mess premises for a parting drink. He had invited the Centre Commandant and some of his course mates also. Quickly after the event, we moved to Officers' Mess as Lt Gen PC Thimmaiah, PVSM, VSM GOC-in-C, ARTRAC; the chief guest was soon to arrive. The Officers' Mess was well decorated and pleasantly much renovated and modified. The Archives Section created recently was a great hit with the visitors. Many of us signed Visitors' Book and saw Archives Section in the Officers' Mess There was a large gathering of Regimental serving and veterans and Officers from Chaubatia Brigade famously also called the Congo Brigade. The ladies looked glamorous decked in their sensuous chiffon and silk sarees wearing expensive French perfumes likes of Chanel, Layton Eau-de Parfum, Christian Dior and the gentlemen not far behind with Bentley and Dunhill! The Regimental brass and string band, perhaps best in the Armed forces, played and sang enchanting Kumaoni, English and Hindi songs. Mrs Marwah, the former first lady of the Regiment enthralled audience with the scintillating Kumaoni numbers and we all danced rhythmically. The Biennial and the Reunion culminated with the Reunion dinner. It was during the dinner that Reunion Trophy was unveiled by Lt Gen BS Sahrawat, AVSM, SM, the COR. The trophy has been dedicated to the Kumaon Regiment to commemorate the Reunion 2019. It is here the outgoing COR formally announced that on his superannuation on 31 October 2019, the new COR will be Lt Gen RP Kalita, AVSM, SM, VSM, (9 Kumaon) presently Chief of Staff, HQ Eastern Command who was also gracing the Reunion and was greeted with thunderous applause. I am firm in my belief the Regiment will achieve further glory and laurels under his outstanding dynamic leadership. Both the Army Commander ARTRAC and the Chief of Staff HQ Eastern Command promised me that they would come to Delhi on Rezang La Day and release of my Coffee Table Book 'Reminiscing Rezang La' on 18 November 2019 – The Rezang La Day! They say, 'All good things must come to an end' and so did the Reunion 2019 with the grand finale Reunion Dinner. The Army is not a service but a way life, the Regimental Centre is not just garrison of troops to train recruits but 'Home' for the serving and the veteran soldiers and no other event, but, the Reunion at KRC showcased it better.



Man eaters of Kumaon caged in KRC Officers' Mess

22 October 2019



The KRC Tigers & the Visitors' Book

During Reunion dinner the previous evening, Brig and Jasbir dwelled on me for morning breakfast at their beautiful 'Valley View Villa' across Majkhali. They sent their car to pick me up and I had quick sumptuous breakfast and yearning chat before saying 'au revoir' to Brig & Mrs Jasbir Singh and their unbelievable 14 beautiful pooches!



This one is just one of the 14 beauties

Bidding good bye along with small gifts to Sepoy Ankit Kumar (Sahayak from 13 Kumaon) and Naik Thakur Singh (LO from 15 Kumaon), I along with others boarded our Traveler Mini bus to Kathgodam where we had hot tea, and lunch and boarded 3.30 pm Shatabdi back to Delhi.