

The Daily Star WEEKEND MAGAZINE

WHEN the 707th officer-student completed his 10-month long staff training course at the Defence Services Command and Staff College in Mirpur on January 30, 1992, the British Military Advisory Team (BMAT) in Bangladesh had good reasons to be pleased.

With the graduation of the 16th Army, 12th Airforce and 10th Navy courses, 544 Bangladeshi and 163 overseas military officers had completed staff courses by January, and another 104 officers including 20 from foreign countries began another course in April.

The BMAT, which arrived in Bangladesh in July, 1977, was instrumental in setting up Bangladesh's first and so far only military staff college. The team, led by Col (later Brig) T A Gibson, deployed the British military's vast knowledge and experience of how to organise and run a staff college, and the sort of curriculum to be followed in order to produce good, professional officers.

According to Royal Navy CAPTAIN TONY PETERS, the last of the BMAT's 24 instructors sent to Dhaka, officers from foreign countries, who came to Mirpur on invitation from the Bangladesh government, "contributed a vast amount to the staff college."

"The overseas officers form a very important part. There is nothing better in learning international affairs than talking to someone from overseas and looking at problems from their viewpoint," he said.

The BMAT, after 15 long years of association with the Mirpur DSCSC, which was inaugurated on Dec 30, 1977 by former President Maj Gen Ziaur Rahman, finally packed their bags at the end of last month, feeling their job to have been done, and done well.

In order to learn more about the background to how the BMAT came to set up the college and what their efforts in the past 15 years have produced, The Daily Star spoke to SIR COLIN IMRAY, British High Commissioner in Dhaka, COL GRAHAM LONGDON, the High Commissioner's Defence Adviser and Capt Peters of the BMAT.

DAILY STAR: When did the Bangladesh government approach Britain for military assistance?

SIR COLIN IMRAY (CI): Fifteen years ago, General Zia just before he became President Zia, thought about setting up a Staff College for the Bangladesh armed services and getting assistance from a friendly country to set it up. There was a great deal of discussion among his colleagues as to which country would be

best to approach. Britain emerged as a front-runner because of the traditions of the British army carrying on through the dominion of India and Pakistan, through to Bangladesh.

So, the Bangladesh army is a direct descendant of the British army. We were very happy to lend a hand to a newly-independent democracy, and do what we could to encourage the idea of good government and also to help



President Ziaur Rahman BU inaugurating the Mirpur Command and Staff College on December 30, 1977.

the learning of techniques on the services side.

It was very clear the beginning that the armed services would play a very important role in Bangladesh in providing a frame work for the country. Sometimes the framework has been rather more conspicuous than others, but in democratic times it has been a framework within which democracy can operate. And we would like to think that we helped to strengthen the framework and also suggest to senior officers how we see the ideas of good government which they might consider as appropriate for Bangladesh.

CAPT. TONY PETERS (TP): The first approaches were made in early 1976, and a memorandum of understanding between the two governments was signed on Feb. 2, 1977. The understanding was to assist in the establishment and operation of a command and staff college.

DS: There was a Labour

British Military Advisers End Long Innings Producing Good Soldiers for Good Democracy at Staff College

by Sabir Mustafa

CI: The British government is always concerned about helping the people, because while governments may come and go, the people are a permanent fixture.

Again, the ideal of good government is something we are always trying to encourage. And the time when you want to encourage it more is when there is a temporary retreat from democracy.

DS: Going on to BMAT, what did its work exactly involve?

COL. GRAHAM LONGDON (GL): In the first year a team of eight came over to Bangladesh, under the command of Colonel Gibson, who was in actual fact promoted to Brigadier while in Bangladesh. It wasn't a question of simply setting-up the college, but BMAT had to help in the day-to-day running of the place and that is why the assistance went on for so many years.

Initially, the BMAT team ran three short courses of just four months duration. This was because, the Bangladesh armed services have had no staff training since independence. So, you had people with the rank of Brigadier, Colonel etc. who have had no staff training.

It was deemed absolutely essential by the Bangladesh government to give those senior officers at least some sort of staff training. So the first three courses were short and very intense.

After that backlog of senior officer training was out of the way, the courses were lengthened to seven months and now they last for 10 months. The armed services started to have a selection procedure, so that officers sat examinations and were selected to go to staff college, which is very much along the line that we have in the United Kingdom.

Today, officers do not have an automatic right to go to staff college. It is very much a step up the career ladder for these officers.

Now, BMAT was there to guide the Bangladesh directing staff in the operations of the

staff college. That is, in the day-to-day running of it, the kind of instructions to be given, which were based on the staff colleges in the UK, and the approach to modern military approach to staff work.

DS: When you say staff training, what kind of instructions are you talking about?

GL: In the first term, officers are taught basic military procedures, such as how to organise a programme, how to write and reply to letters, how to organise visits etc. These are what we call staff procedure, so that everyone in the army is using the same method of planning and correspondence.

Then the other terms are used to look at various aspects of warfare and the policy that has to be generated for that warfare. We look into procurement of equipment so that we get a sensible procurement, rather than somebody seeing in a glossy magazine a particular jeep and saying 'That's what we want! You've got to justify the requirement — does the army really need that type of vehicle etc.'

And also, the training looks at all aspects of civil-military cooperation, such things as management of disaster response; how to look, in the modern way, at counter-insurgency, there are various ways of dealing with insurgent problems and those are studied.

TP: It is fair to say that, in addition to that sort of teaching, we are also trying to give education to the officers. We try to broaden their minds.

These are all young officers, aged between 30 and 35, and they have all passed an exam and they've been selected for the Staff College course because they've been the best among those who passed in each year. They are bright people.

We are trying to make them think logically, we are trying to make them think about national affairs, about what Bangladesh needs; about international affairs, and how Western powers and other lo-

The cost of maintaining the cemeteries is shared by the partner governments — those of Australia, Britain, Canada, India, New Zealand and South Africa — in proportions to the numbers of their own soldiers buried in these graves.

Recently, two headstones were found stolen from the cemeteries. But there is no provision for security in the area.

"We do not have such a policy for security. Because this is a sacred place where we need not supposed to have it", Longdon said, turning down the case for security politely.

There are one caretaker, and seven gardeners to maintain the cemetery.

Every year, some of the relatives of the dead come to Mainamati far from their own countries to pay their respect. November 11 is remembered as commemoration day.



Capt Peters (left) taking over charge of BMAT from Brig Wolverson.

cal powers impinge on Bangladesh and what that means for Bangladesh, and the part that Bangladesh and its forces can play on the world scene.

We place a lot of emphasis now on United Nations operations. I think I am right in saying that Bangladesh is one of the countries which supports all UN peace keeping operations. There are very large numbers of Bangladeshi soldiers in Cambodia.

The army course in particular is doing all that and teaching tactics. The navy and airforce courses don't specifically teach tactics but we try to teach strategy and the use of maritime and air power rather than get involved in too much detail.

Essentially, it is an education process, trying to make them think more broadly about their own service, their own country and the world in general.

The board of governors of the college includes academics such as the vice-chancellors of Dhaka and Jahangirnagar Universities, and discussions are going on at the moment to allow Staff College graduates to be awarded with a Master's Degree once they have finished the course at Mirpur. The degree could be awarded by Chittagong University, but this thing is still under consideration and not yet finalised.

The course has developed a lot since the early '80s and there is a fairly considerable amount of academic content to the course, and students write several papers and we look for a very high standard.

DS: How do you rate Bangladesh armed forces officers as professionals? How would they compare with those of Britain or other NATO countries?

TP: One can go back to the UN operations and say that so many Bangladeshi officers are involved in those operations because of their skills and capabilities, and their communication skills in English apart from anything else.

These are all funded by the Foreign and Commonwealth

I think officers who have gone to the Staff College are significantly better administrators than those who haven't been.

GL: I would say that the only area where Bangladesh officers do not, perhaps, come up to the same level as British officers is in the area of experience.

British officers have had and continue to have wide experiences throughout, the

office, and we have undertaken to continue this support in the future. That is the minimum.

In addition, the support that BMAT has given by way of publication and contact between the Staff College at Mirpur and the UK Staff Colleges, will continue, through the office of the Defence Adviser at the British High Commission.

So this link has not been broken just because the BMAT team has withdrawn. We also hope that an officer from the Bangladesh armed services will pick up, perhaps every other year, a vacancy at one of our staff colleges.

So this commitment of Britain to Mirpur is still there.

DS: Why is the BMAT being withdrawn?

GL: First of all, it has been 15 years, and there must come a time when their job can be seen to be done, when the local people are sufficiently trained and experienced to run the show themselves.

Secondly of course, we have the fact that the British armed services are reducing their size, their numbers, the British army by 22,000.

CI: Discussions have been going on with Bangladesh government since before I arrived here three years ago, about the timing of the withdrawal of the advisory team. The BMAT has stayed here two or three years longer than had been originally envisaged by either government.

This has given the Bangladesh services the opportunity to get in place a most experienced directing staff and a most experienced commandant. This means that when Capt Peters goes, his loss will not be felt as much as it might have been two or three years ago.

It is significant that the funding for this comes from the political office of the Foreign and Commonwealth office. We believe that a good army, navy and air force is an essential part of good government in any democratic country.

DS: Well, Capt Peters, your absence won't be missed, but what would you miss about Bangladesh?

TP: I'll miss a lot of friendships and a very rewarding teaching that I've enjoyed doing. I think, when one gets older and a bit senior in life, it becomes a great joy to have around you a number of young, clever, bright brains that have asked many questions and have made me and my predecessors think 'Why would we do things the way we do?' This has helped to keep my brain active for an extra few years.

It's not been a one-way service. I think the officers who've come here have certainly enjoyed their services here very much, but they've also gained professionally.

The Royal Navy does not operate in the Indian Ocean as much as it used to. I think this has been an opportunity, a way to keep that experience.

CI: We have the highest respect for the leaders of the Bangladesh army, navy and the air force, and for the political will which is represented in the president, the prime minister and the cabinet. We are very glad that we've been able to cooperate over this period, and in fact we have seen some of the fruits of our cooperation in the establishment of the democratic government that is now in power.

LOWERS, small perennials, trees and many shrubs grow in a setting of lush green lawn. It is a lawn with a difference, the luxuriant carpet of grass, enigmatic feeling — it makes one a little happy, a little sad and certainly surprised!

The architectural structure of the entire setting is like a dome, rounded off with rows of headstones.

This is the Commonwealth War Cemetery in Mainamati. The place seems enveloped in a quiet, sacred aura, it engulfs the casual visitor and compels him to bow in respect to these martyrs from far-off lands.

Happy, to see such a well pruned place in some remote area of Comilla. Sad, because who knew their last destination would be set in this soil of Bangladesh? These brave soldiers, who came from Britain, and other Commonwealth countries during the second World War, presumably did hope to die in their own land. But the wrath of war did not pay much heed to their hopes, rather it left them immortal here. And surprising to see that such a memorial service exist in Bangladesh.

In Bangladesh, there are two Commonwealth War Cemeteries, one in Mainamati, and the other in Chittagong.

In Mainamati, there are graves of 736 soldiers who were killed in World War II and buried here, of them 357 from the UK, 12 from Canada and Australia, 4 from New Zealand, one from South Africa, 178 from Undivided India and 146 from other Commonwealth countries.

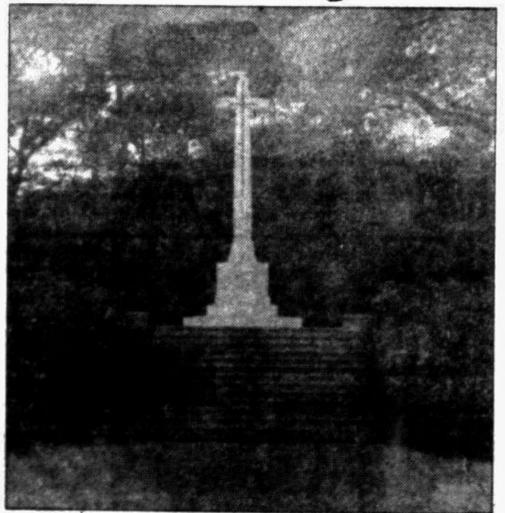
On the other hand 751 soldiers from different countries had their eternal address in Chittagong.

In Mainamati, 736 headstones stand in narrow borders.

Here, the dead are buried individually and commemorated by headstones on the grave. The headstones are uni-

Where the King's Men Lie Asleep

by Nazme Sabina



Commonwealth War Cemetery in Mainamati, Comilla

form for all the graves no matter to which country they belonged. The stones are two feet eight inches in height, and at the top of each is engraved the dead soldier's national emblem or the service or regimental badge followed by the rank, name, unit, date of death, age. Many of them were as young as sixteen. In most cases, there is also a religious emblem, and at the foot an inscription chosen by relatives.

Here all are uniform. No distinction is made on account of military or civil rank, race or creed.

The Commonwealth War Graves Commission looks after these graves. There are 140 countries where Commonwealth War graves and memorials exist.



Luxuriant carpet of grass, flowers, rounded off with rows of headstones

The Journey of Mr B

by Azfar Hussain

YES, the question was steaming inside, sweltering in fact. It had a visible sound as it were, the sound of a near-rumble at one point, and that of an unremittingly and restlessly flapping wing at another. The sound and the question, both in an excellent harmony, are now-a-days chasing Mr B, whose earlier spell of contemplation, for that matter, has been miserably hacked into shreds adumbrating a sort of spiritual crisis. It so happens that Mr B cannot sit cross-legged, even for a few minutes, elsewhere. That very spiritual bottleneck, namely, the shaking of legs, is assuming a monstrous proportion indicating that this is Mr B's destiny. Yes, the other day, Mr B was shaking legs and the question was boiling inside. But, what was the question, after all?

Not a very simple one, indeed. Perhaps he can say in the fashion of Eliot's Prufrock that it was an overwhelming one and that it could not be asked. However, despite difficulties, Mr B desired to ask the question. But how did the question, that very overwhelm-

ing one, generate at all? This was yet another question which was equally pressing. Should Mr B now stand up and explain himself? Yes, he should.

He rolled up his sleeves, took his seat in the easy chair capable of generating a kind of rhythm almost comparable to the Arabic metre called 'motagarib' which can accommodate space for beats having frequent swings, short ones. Then, he closed his eyes in an attempt to withdraw himself from the mad swirl and whirl of the scene and images that 'time present' gives.

It was a green morning in the grassy lawn. Mr B was sipping his morning tea and thinking. Mr B felt that he slept quite well; so sound a sleep it was that the nocturnal snoring of his wife even could not break it for a fraction of second.

Mr B's analytical self began to prick him like a pin: how come he could sleep so well and even defy the roaring, sorry snoring, of his wife

whose nose, Mr B observes now and then, is gifted with nostrils larger than usual, at least much larger than the ones he has? Mr B certainly found an answer and readily provided it to him. He was extremely tired; tired because he had been shaking legs all the day long, and such a jerk led to physical exhaustion resulting in all three phenomena — slumber, somnolence and sleep with all their possible semantic shades and shapes. Indeed, he was shaking legs in utter restlessness. Indeed, this restlessness was not anything self-generating. It stemmed from the very urge to ask that very overwhelming question. Looking into the mirror in a mood tellingly somber and sullen, Mr B discovered a Hamlet in him, a Hamlet bent on asking an essential question.

While sipping tea in the lawn and thinking about the political plight of Bangladesh, Mr B suddenly got that day's newspaper which was handed to him by his servant. A real 'report' indissolubly captured his attention and Mr B man-

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