

My Korean Adventures: The Foundations



From the nostalgic echoes of a Bangalore childhood to the hallowed legacies of Generals Thimayya and Thorat, this evocative journey traces India's forgotten humanitarian vanguard in the Korean War. A poignant tribute to the 'airborne healers' and custodian forces who defined independent India's global ethos, proving that our first overseas mission was one of healing, honour, and enduring connection

by Col DKP Pillay (Retd)

I had never imagined that I would one day find myself in Korea. The possibility did not even exist in my mind until I was selected for a Korea Foundation Fellowship—a remarkably generous programme that enables scholars to pursue research on subjects of their choice in Korea, supported by a substantial grant and a fully funded stay. I chose to study India's role in the Korean War (1950–1953) because I knew that India had played a significant, yet often overlooked, role in that conflict.

That awareness had deep roots. Growing up as an Army child in India in the 1970s, memories of the Korean War and the Second World War were still vivid within military families. For our parents and grandparents, these were not distant historical events but lived experiences. They had served in far-off theatres, endured captivity, and returned home with stories of survival and loss. For many of our classmates, such places were merely names on a map; for us, they were part of family history—locations where our own blood had been shed.

Our elders had fought the Japanese, the Germans, and the Italians. Most importantly, they spoke of how the aura of "white invincibility" had been shattered. These stories were told quietly and matter-of-factly, yet they possessed an authenticity that made them deeply compelling.

I had once heard of a distant relative who was killed in Korea in the early days of the war. I had all but forgotten him until, in a remarkable turn of fate, I met his daughter during a solemn ceremony marking the 75th anniversary of the war at Suseong-gu, the place where he had fallen.

He was Colonel Unni Nayar. Meeting his daughter transformed a fragment of family lore into a living thread linking past and present.

In 1979, my father was posted to the ASC Centre in Bangalore. At the Bangalore Club, one occasionally encountered figures whose names belonged as much to history as to living memory. On a few occasions, we met the daughter of General KS Thimayya. Through these encounters, I became aware of his distinguished service in Korea and the poignant circumstances of his death while serving as Commander of the UN forces in Cyprus. General Thimayya remains one of the finest Chiefs the Indian Army has produced—a leader known for standing firmly by his soldiers and his principles, regardless of the cost.

Gen KS Thimayya, Indian Army's 3rd COAS at the time of Korean War (left) and Lt Gen SPS Thorat, Eastern Army Commander known for his critical peacekeeping role in the Korean War (right)



I also recall one occasion when my parents were invited to the legendary Sunday breakfast at the Madras Engineer Group (MEG) Centre by Major General C. Venugopal, himself a Maha Vir Chakra awardee and a distinguished soldier. The special guest that day was Lieutenant General SPP Thorat,

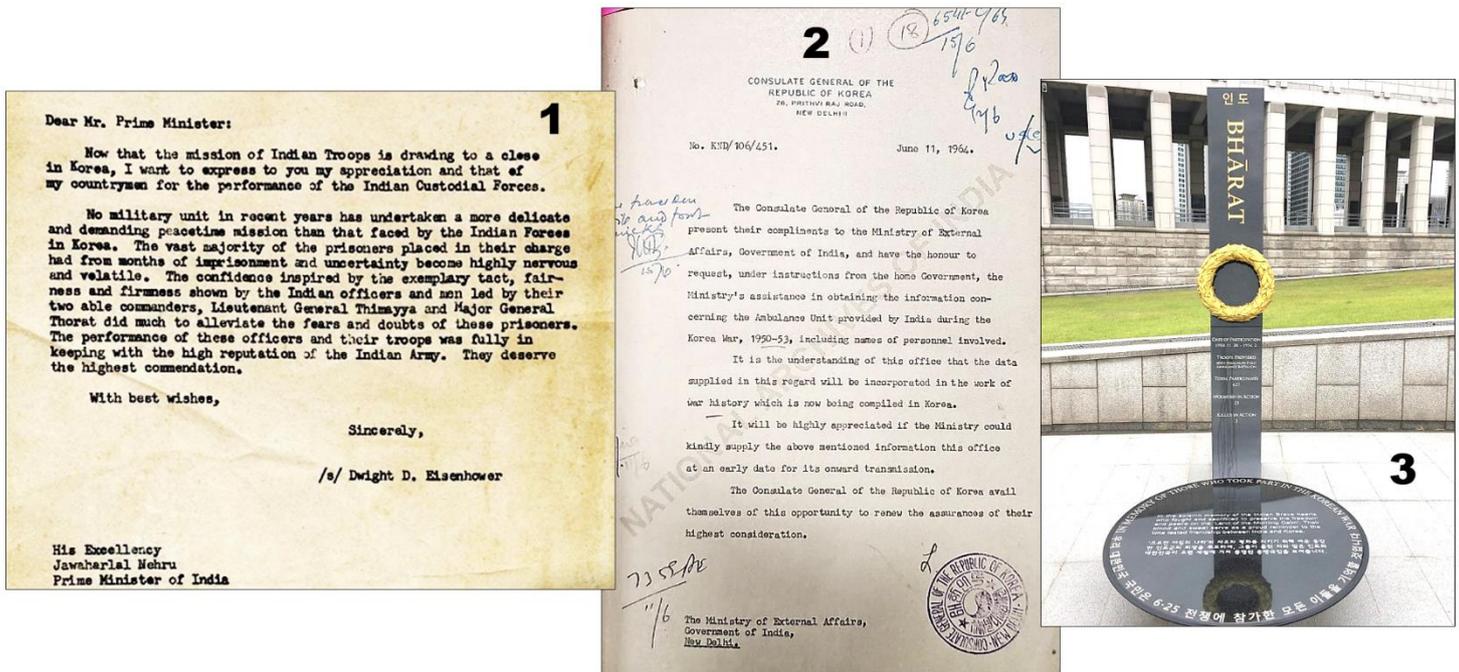
one of the senior commanders associated with India's role in Korea. Meeting him gave tangible form to stories that had previously existed only as fragments. To a young boy, even the small discovery that we shared the same birthday felt momentous; to an adult, what endures is the sense of having briefly encountered living history.

General Thorat had commanded the Custodian Force of India in Korea, the large Indian contingent tasked with supervising prisoners of war under the Neutral Nations Repatriation Commission. In conversations with officers of his generation, Korea ceased to be merely a distant conflict and emerged as a defining episode of independent India's early international role—an operation marked by discipline, neutrality, and humanitarian responsibility.

Widely seen as General Thimayya's preferred successor, he commanded deep professional respect across the service. He was among the very few senior officers who had observed Chinese forces in action during the Korean War and studied their tactics at close quarters. Lieutenant General BM Kaul, who had served under General Thimayya in Korea, was the other senior officer with comparable exposure, though their subsequent approaches to the emerging Chinese challenge differed markedly.

As Eastern Army Commander, General Thorat warned of the Chinese threat and urged caution regarding both Beijing's intentions and India's military preparedness. These concerns, however, did not receive the attention they warranted within the political and defence establishment of the time. It was often said that Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru placed greater personal trust in Kaul which ended in the fiasco we faced. Gen Thorat's professional judgement was later vindicated, and his honour was restored when Nehru himself invited him to serve on a proposed National Defence Council to advise the government on defence matters.

At the ASC mess, I often ran into Field Marshal (then General) KM Cariappa. We were told never to disturb him, which, of course, is exactly what a boy wants to do. I used to stroll nearby in my khaki military school shorts and stockings, and he once "ticked me off" for my sloppy turnout. I later gave him a copy of *Just William*, in which the protagonist dresses exactly as I did. He told me, "Oh, you should join the Guards"—which I eventually did.



1. Appreciation Letter by the then USA Prez to Indian PM dated, February 19, 1954; 2. Letter of compliments by the Consulate General of Korea in India to Min of External Affairs dated, June 11, 1954; 3. The Indian monument at the War Memorial of Korea in Seoul was erected in 2015. It was installed in the memorial's Peace Plaza as part of a larger project to mark the 70th anniversary of the United Nations

My father had served in 2 GUARDS in the Naga Hills in 1958, specifically in Longdi Pabram village. Years later, in 1994, I faced a near-fatal encounter in that very same village. Though wounded, I found profound healing and acceptance among the villagers of Tamenglong. Their embrace and love made me one of their own, forging a bond that defines who I am today.

Korea resurfaced unexpectedly in the 1990s with the arrival of satellite television. MASH* on Star TV resonated deeply in our household. My father would speak of India's medical units (60 Para Field Ambulance) that had served there. Among the most distinguished Indian formations in the Korean War was the 60 Parachute Field Ambulance, commanded by the legendary Lieutenant Colonel AG Rangaraj, Maha Vir Chakra—India's first qualified paratrooper.

Operating under extremely harsh conditions near the front lines in Korea, the unit earned an extraordinary reputation for courage, professionalism, and compassion, treating thousands of wounded soldiers and civilians alike in their hospital at Daegu. Under Col Rangaraj's leadership, who was also India's first paratrooper, they exemplified India's humanitarian role in the conflict, serving not as combatants but as healers in the midst of war, and leaving behind a legacy that remains one of the proudest chapters in the history of the Indian Army.

Years later, after my retirement and my tenure with the ICRC in Iraq, a phone call from Lieutenant General Satish Nambiar changed everything. His invitation to a Korean War anniversary event being hosted by the Indian Council for World Affairs rekindled long-dormant memories. General Nambiar holds a special place in my life; at a critical moment early in my

career, his intervention had a profound impact on my circumstances, and his guidance continued to shape my journey thereafter. Returning from the intense environment of Iraq to the quieter world of research, this invitation rekindled long-dormant memories. Suddenly, the heroes of Korea were part of a narrative that felt familial. Many people helped rekindle and sustain this journey of rediscovery. Among them was Colonel Pankaj of the Army Medical Corps, who treated old wounds and shared his own experiences of visiting Korea. Gradually, what began as scattered memories, family stories, and chance encounters evolved into a purposeful quest.

A subsequent conversation with Dr Jojin John, who actually coordinated the ICWA conference and had spent many years in Korea and was closely associated with the anniversary event, deepened this engagement. It was he who strongly encouraged me to apply for the Korea Foundation Fellowship, for which I was subsequently selected. My chosen area of research was India's role in the Korean War. Thus, decades after first hearing the name in childhood conversations, I finally found myself in Korea.

I spent three months there as part of this fellowship, during which I had the honour of being appointed by the Korean War Memorial Organisation as their International Research Advisor and Goodwill Ambassador. I was entrusted with compiling and presenting documentary evidence of India's role in the conflict. With generous support from the Indian Army, the 60 Parachute Field Ambulance unit, the National Archives of India, the Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, and the families of Generals Thorat and Thimayya—including the Thimayya Museum in Coorg—I assembled a substantial body of material, submitting over 3,000 pieces of documentary evidence.

One aspect of the Korean War remains strikingly absent from popular memory today: India's crucial role in facilitating negotiations, managing prisoners of war, and helping bring the conflict toward closure. Fresh from the trauma of Partition, India was deeply sensitive to the human cost of division and determined that Korea should not suffer a similar fate. Its actions were guided less by geopolitical ambition than by a sincere desire to end suffering.

I feel a deep sense of satisfaction in having been able to provide the Korean War Memorial with information and documentation they had been seeking since the 1960s. It speaks volumes about the Korean people that they have, from the very beginning, meticulously preserved the memory of India's contribution and sought to express their gratitude with sincerity and respect.

When the Neutral Nations Repatriation Commission and the Custodian Force of India find their rightful place in the Korean War Memorial, it will be more than a historical acknowledgment. It will be a long-overdue recognition of the diplomats and soldiers who travelled from a distant land to defend a country they had never seen and protect a people they had never known—not for territory or power, but for peace.

That recognition, when it comes, will stand as a quiet tribute to duty, compassion, and sacrifice—and as a bond of gratitude between nations, forged in war but sustained in memory.



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