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Letter from Kashmir

S.W. Thomson

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Colonel S.W. "Syd" Thomson, D.S.O., M.C., C.D., joined the Rocky Mountain Rangers in the 1930s transferring to the Seaforth Highlanders at the outbreak of war. Wounded in Sicily, he returned to serve as Company Commander, Second-in-Command and Commanding Officer of the Battalion.

In October 1944 he was promoted to Acting Colonel and sent to England to command an infantry training unit at Aldershot.

In April 1945 he reverted to Lieut.-Colonel to take command of the Black Watch.

Colonel Thomson volunteered for the Pacific Force and remained in the Army until 1946. He rejoined the forces to serve with the United Nations Military Observers Group in Pakistan. This letter to "Big" Jim Stone (Lieut.-Colonel Jim Stone D.S.O., M.C., C.D.) is one of several colourful accounts of his service in Kashmir. Colonel Thomson's letters will be a regular feature in CMH.

Letter from Kashmir

U.N.M.O.G.I.P. 19 June 1954

Dear Jim,

There is time on my hands to-day and I thought that a letter from an old partner might come as a relief from the pressure of soldiering. For the past six months I have been roaming the valleys and foothills of the Himalayas. We use jeeps in the lower levels, ponies and mules higher up and finish on foot to the higher stations.

Just now I am sitting on the roof of Wazir villa, the U.N. H.Q. in Jamu, The Winter capital of Jamu and Kashmir State. I am on the roof to enjoy the early morning sun. I am in Jamu because the General made me his rep. on the Indian Side while he winters in Pakistan. A case of misplaced confidence but a break for me. I need only to look to the North to see the Pier Punjal mountains, now softened with a blue-white turban of snow, to appreciate my good fortune. Most of the chaps are sitting up there in mud bunkers or trekking along the cease fire line from one army formation to another. This is tough in Winter but necessary. There are constant killings along the line with almost certain retaliation. Everything seems to start with a small incident, and if the observer doesn't get there quickly to assess the violation, the incident may grow to a major clash as tempers rise. These two armies, Indian and Pakistan, under tough physical conditions, have been facing one another for five long years. Daily they sharpen their knives, clean their weapons and scowl across the line. The war was to determine who was to have Jamu and Kashmir State. But the cause of its terrible violence was, and still is, the time old hate of two religions for each other. It is estimated that between two and three million people were slaughtered during the rioting at the time of partition. Hindus killing whole trainloads of Muslim civilians as they were attempting to get to Pakistan. The Muslims were equally savage. I have spoken with an Englishman who swears the Sikhs went through an entire train killing all Muslims. It may be the U.N. is of some value here.

Up here on the roof I can see in all directions yet feel some privacy from the constant drone of dense humanity that covers all India. Across the road that runs in front of our villa is a canal that brings life to the fertile plains around Jamu. The banks of the canal are never still, day or night. It is the drinking water for the people, the community laundry, a place to wash cattle and cool the buffalo, and a bathing place for all the family. We are typical of most soldiers and, on hearing a

whisper from one of the boys, reach for our binoculars, for some shapely maiden is bathing her amber body.

Early this morning we had a message over the air, "Firing heard at 0830 hrs. map ref ____ Investigate." Now sigs has just come up with another, "Dead body, map ref ____ have Sialkot team meet us map ref ____ 1600 hrs to-day". So an observer team from both Pakistan and India will meet later today at the scene of the crime to become detectives, jurists and finally a panel of judges to award a cease-fire-violation to either Pakistan or India. This type of thing is common and unpleasant, it seems that no witness ever tells the truth. It is a breach of the agreement for anyone, except U.N personnel, to cross the cease-fire-line. It is a favourite trick for a soldier to shoot some lone person across the line, then move the body to his side of the line and claim he shot a spy suspect. It is almost impossible for the Observer to correctly determine what actually did happen.

Things got a little busy and I never did finish this letter before moving up to Srinagar in Kashmir. It is a beautiful day, and like most natives of this land, I am rich in time and decided to drive down to Dal Gate and hire a *Chikari*, similar to a Gondola but much more comfortable, for the staggering sum of 12 anas per hour (14 cents). I can spend a delightful day on the lakes and canals with my three pleasant paddlers. So off we glide over Dal lake, past many small islands of Lombardy Poplar, huge, soft shady Chenar (exaggerated maples) and languid Willows. Here and there are four storied houses top heavy for the small islands on which they perch. All along the shores are moored the gaily decorated houseboats, all with striking names. I find the *Princess with modern plumbing* and the *Wicked Uncle* amusing. We pass the famous Shalimar Gardens, built in 1690 for an emperor's wife. There is a wonderful fragrance filling the whole valley, for this is the season of the Saffron flower. No where else in the world does the saffron grow so rich and plentiful. We leave the lake and enter a maze of narrow canals and snake about through this garden of eternal Spring. The water is choked with floral growth, ducks are everywhere. Boats going and coming in a steady stream. One sight of simple beauty is the flower *wallah* with his small *donga* (canoe) completely hidden by an overflowing splendour of colour. Truly the vale is all a garden. The Gods must have been full of love when they fashioned this Shangri-la. We silently cut around a sharp curve in the canal and I receive the sensation of having opened the wrong door. There is a girl washing her hair in the willows. She is not quick enough with her veil and I catch a glimpse of that beauty for which this valley is renowned throughout the East.

After I have become completely lost I notice a familiar houseboat, the *New Majestic*. So I go aboard to have tea with my friend and advisor the merchant Samad Shah. His family guest book has many famous names, of which he is justly proud. There are princes, an English viceroy and several well known generals. Before leaving I find that my friend has persuaded me to purchase a beautifully embroidered Kashmir Stole. How he does it I do not know, but my wallet is much slimmer on taking my leave. However I am much richer for having spent an hour with this wily merchant. We start out again and soon arrive at a lock where we are let through into the Jellum river that flows through the heart of Srinagar forming its busiest thoroughfare. Now we understand what is meant by teeming India. Have you ever been in a large stock exchange during a sharp change of the market? It's a peaceful haven compared to the banks of the Jellum all the way down under the seven bridges. At the third bridge I stopped to visit the merchant Ramsana who is making a necklace for my wife. I am aware that he will charge me three times its value here in Kashmir, but I also know I will get it for a third its price in Canada, if available at all. I find its getting a little late so I pull in at the seventh bridge and take a *Tonga* back to Dal Gate and my jeep. A *tonga* is a two wheeled carriage usually pulled by an energetic pony. We pass through about two miles of narrow streets, all of them swarming like a department store on bargain day. My *Tonga wallah* is most pleased to receive one rupee (22 cents) for his fare.

It is difficult to convey the simple charm of this valley, but I doubt that the "pipe smokers" see anything to compare.

Syd