

Air Force Memories of Pre-Partition Pakistan

Photo not available

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*Editor's note: This article is reproduced from [Sainik Samachar, Vol. 48, No. 19, 1-15 October 2001](#).
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I was in the Royal Indian Air Force station, Kohat in 1945, situated 70 km southwest of Peshawar and 90 km east of erstwhile Indo-Afghanistan border. During my stay in Kohat, my visit to the nearby tribal territory was a unique experience. The tribal territory spread over in an area of about 400sq km was 20 km from our unit and a part of North West Frontier Province touching the Afghanistan border. Although it belonged to the Britishers, the latter had no administrative control on the territory and the tribal territory was like a no man's land within the British Empire.

The British government followed a conciliatory policy towards the tribal people but the latter did not reciprocate the same. They used to kidnap and kill the British subjects especially military personnel. So, in retaliation, the British aeroplanes dropped heavy bombs on the tribal territory from time to time for several years killing many tribal people and destroying their houses. That practice was stopped in 1945 at the intervention of Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru when he was nominated as a member of the interim government formed at the Centre.

The idea of visiting the tribal territory was given to us by one of our Pathan colleagues who belonged to Kohat and had a thorough knowledge about the tribal territory. So, when fifteen Air Force personnel including me approached our Commanding Officer for permission to visit the tribal territory, he granted permission and said that the visit would be at our own risk and provided a 3-ton truck for the trip. Our Pathan colleague was our guide.

On the festival day of Id, 1946 we entered the tribal territory. On the way, we noticed farmers working in their fields carrying guns with them. Our guide told us that there were many clans among the tribal people who used to fight among themselves even for flimsy reasons in which guns were freely used. So, whenever a person went out of his house, he carried a gun for self-defence.

When we visited a gun factory which was the main attraction in the territory, a tall and hefty person cordially received us. After knowing about the purpose of our visit, he took us around the factory. There were about 500 newly assembled and 200 reparable guns and a huge quantity of ammunition in a big room. In another room, there were 50 rifles and 10 pistols confiscated from the military personnel. The guns were sold not only within the tribal territory but also in the entire North West Frontier Province. We were served with light

refreshments. He asked us to go round a *mela* organised on the occasion of Id on a big playground, not far from there.

When we arrived at the *mela*, the chief organiser of the *mela* cordially received and treated us as special guests. He invited us to watch a wrestling competition, group dance and dine with them in a community feast arranged on the occasion of Id. Two special dishes, a chicken curry and chicken kebab were specially prepared for us which we relished with great satisfaction. After lunch, we enjoyed other programmes especially the group dance performed by about 50 male dancers. We returned to our unit in the evening carrying with us the sweet memories of one of the most pleasant and delightful days of our lives.

When India got Independence on August 15, 1947, due to the disruption of train services and want of Air Force planes, we Air Force personnel were held up at Kohat till August 26, 1947. On August 25th the first train from Kohat to Rawalpindi was resumed but due to the shortage of seats in the train, only 30 Air Force personnel were despatched by the unit authorities. The second batch of 30 people including me was to go on the next day. But the Unit Commander received a bad news in the evening that 30 AF personnel were killed by the Pakistani savages. The news was a great shock to us and we the remaining 30 AF personnel had a sleepless night.

Our British Commanding Officer was prompt enough to send us to Peshawar by two 3-ton trucks escorted by 10 armed Pakistan Air Force personnel next day. That decision was taken by him in consultation with his counterpart in AF station, Peshawar who took the responsibility to send us from Peshawar to Rawalpindi by road to reach Rawalpindi before August 29, 1947 so that we could travel by the special train leaving Rawalpindi for Amritsar, carrying more than two thousand civilians to India.

On our arrival at Peshawar, we were housed in Khaibar barracks for two days and during that time, a large number of Pathans, who came to know about our presence, gathered in batch after batch near the barracks to kill us. Our old Pakistani colleagues sternly warned them through loudspeaker that any one trying to cross the barrack boundary would be shot dead. After two days, we left Peshawar and reached Rawalpindi in the morning of August 29, 1947.

The first special train from Pakistan to India arrived at Amritsar on August 30 where hundreds of people were waiting for us. When I got down from the train and stepped on the Indian soil, I was fully convinced that I was alive and not dead.❖

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