

Commemorating Our War Dead

The author recalls his correspondence with the Army authorities in which he had made a plea for a suitable memorial for the unknown Indian soldier.

by MANOHAR SINGH GILL

I COME from a family of soldiers. An ancestor served in the army of Maharaja Ranjit Singh and possibly fought at the battle of Subraon. My father, Col Partap Singh Gill, a cavalry officer, fought in the Second World War and in the 1965 operations. His old regiment, Hodson Horse, is now commanded by my brother. So the tradition continues.

Letter To Gen Manekshaw

At the end of 1969, while I was a Joint Secretary to the Government of Punjab, it occurred to me that the Indian Army, one of the most magnificent body of men in the world, did not have a memorial to its war dead. So, one December morning of 1969, I wrote a letter to General S. H. F. J. Manekshaw, then Chief of the Army Staff.

Chandigarh
December 3, 1969

Dear General,

Most countries in the world have a memorial to the unknown warrior in their capital cities. The memorial commemorates all the soldiers who have fallen in defence of the freedom of their country. Such a memorial keeps alive the memory of these gallant men and serves as a constant reminder of their services to their country. The Cenotaph in London is well known to all of us. I have seen similar memorials in Paris and Athens.

It is odd that we in this country have not so far thought of having such a memorial. It is all the more surprising when one considers that a memorial, in the shape of India Gate, already exists. The Gate may have been built in memory of the Indian soldiers who died in the First World War, but to my mind it is essentially a memorial to the Indian war dead. While the Cenotaph in London is an insignificant concrete pillar in the middle of a busy road, India Gate is perhaps the most impressive memorial anywhere to fallen warriors. In order to convert it into a living memorial, all that is required is to put on it flags of the Services (as is the case in London), an honour guard and to inculcate the habit of laying wreaths at this memorial in memory of the brave men who are no more. We too should start the practice of inviting existing dignitaries to visit this shrine and pay their respect to our fallen soldiers.

I am making this suggestion direct to you in the hope that, if you agree, the idea will be put through with speed. It is not really my business to worry about this, but



INDIRA GANDHI laying a wreath at Amar Jawan, India Gate, on January 26, 1977. The author contends that the memorial erected here in 1972 was done in a hurry and that it is "ill designed".

the idea has been in my mind for many years and it is best to get rid of it.

Polite Rejection

I got a reply on January 28, 1970, from the Adjutant-General, Army Headquarters, Lt Gen Har Parsad. He wrote: My dear Mr Gill,

I have been directed to acknowledge receipt of your letter dated December 3, 1969, addressed to General S. H. F. J. Manekshaw, MC, Chief of the Army Staff.

The question of a soldier's war memorial, in remembrance of the soldiers who laid down their lives for the defence of their country, has been under consideration from some time. You will agree with me that it should be of a permanent nature, not only for those who are dead, but also to

inspire the future generations to make the same sacrifice when the need arises. After considerable thought, it was felt that it should take the shape of a memorial-cum-museum in Delhi. In view of this, it will be unnecessary to have a separate memorial or tomb for the "Unknown Soldier". The Government has promised to allot land for a National War Memorial in Delhi, and also some funds, and I hope, in due course, work on this project will be started.

Thank you very much, all the same, for taking such a keen interest and it is most encouraging for the soldier to know that people like you feel so deeply about the armed forces.

I was a little surprised at the rejection of my suggestion. With my knowledge of

the bureaucracy, I was quite sure that it would take them years to process the idea on file. There would be a long delay before funds were sanctioned and, finally, the CPWD would come up with some horribly vulgar structure, quite a few of which have been added to the Delhi skyline since Independence.

Accordingly, on February 4, 1970, I wrote back to Lt Gen Har Parsad.

Dear Lt Gen,

Thank you very much for your letter of January 28, 1970.

There is no doubt that there is a crying need for an army museum in Delhi and I am glad that steps are being taken to set up one. However, without meaning to intrude, I would submit that the combination of a museum and a memorial may not be the very best of things. As you have indicated, this combined project is still to be sanctioned and the funds found. It will probably take a long time to build it. In any case, I personally feel that this will be located in some unimportant corner of the capital and the CPWD will perpetrate another architectural horror on the Capital.

On the other hand, India Gate is so located that it forms the heart of the capital and visitors cannot help but note its presence. There is also the advantage of being able to convert it into a living memorial immediately. I would, therefore, suggest that, while the museum should be set up in due course, India Gate should be the war memorial, as it was always meant to be.

I hope you will understand the spirit in which I have made the above suggestion.

"Annoying Persistence"

Perhaps my persistence was found slightly annoying and I noted that I was being passed steadily down the line of hierarchy. While my first letter to the Chief had been answered by Gen Har Parsad, I now received a letter (dated March 13, 1970) from Col Teg Bahadur Kapur who politely but firmly knocked me down:

Dear Shri Gill,

It is agreed that India Gate is the most suitable and most glorious monument to soldiers. This aspect had already been examined by us in 1960. The Commonwealth War Graves Commission, who are responsible for India Gate, did not agree to the proposal on the ground that the Delhi Arch is essentially a First World War Memorial and the Government of India had assured the Commission that nothing would be done to alter the contents and meaning of the inscriptions.

However, as already mentioned in a letter of the Adjutant-General, a suitable memorial in Delhi to commemorate our dead soldiers is already under consideration by the Government. Therefore, a separate memorial or tomb for the unknown soldier is not considered necessary.

Last Fling

I could see that Army Headquarters had had enough of me and my next letter was bound to go unanswered. But I could not resist one last fling. I, therefore, wrote

back to Col Kapur. I pressed them to again consider having India Gate and pointed out that, even though it might have been built for the dead of the First World War, there could be no harm in now making it a memorial for all the war dead of the Indian Army. Somewhat sarcastically, I pointed out that, as far as I could see, the dead of the First World War would have no objection to sharing their memorial with the dead of subsequent wars. With this letter, I closed my little effort and left the idea to chance.

Great was my surprise, therefore, when I found the Government suddenly, on the eve of Republic Day in 1972, rushing to put up a memorial at India Gate so that it could be inaugurated on Republic Day.

Today the flags, the flame, the wreaths, the honour guard are all there and the monument has become a Delhi landmark. Visiting dignitaries, as well as the common people of India, come in large numbers to pay their homage to the Indian war dead. India Gate has become a living memorial from a dead arch and I rejoice at the transformation.

Rush Job

However, as one who had something to do with the idea, I might, without being misunderstood, be permitted some criticism. The memorial was erected in a great hurry on January 24-25, 1972. The architects, therefore, did not get enough time to plan the suitable integration of the new memorial into the arch. It seems to me an ill-designed and hastily planned platform. The symbol of a helmet on an inverted gun is hackneyed and also not "neutral" to all the communities that serve in the Armed Forces of our country.

An almost identical memorial, which perhaps provided the original inspiration for the India Gate arch, exists in the shape of the Arc de Triomphe in Paris. Underneath that arch at ground level is buried an unknown soldier of France. Over his head, shaped like a sun made by placing swords in a circle with hilts lying inwards, burns an eternal flame. In Moscow, too, there is a bronze platform with bas-relief battle scenes on the sides and a flame in one corner.

We, too, could perhaps redesign the memorial and provide for a platform with a single flame on it. Frankly, even the four flames that we have are so ugly that they look into kerosene cookers. The three Service Flags also do not seem to fit into the overall design, placed as they are on three simple flagpoles in front of the arch. One possibility could be to have angled brass flagmasts leaning inwards from the sides of the arch. A mass of flags of Indian Regiments and battle formations should hang over the sacred flame from these masts. This will make the memorial colourful and attractive. At the Cenotaph in London, flags of many historical battle formations of the British Army are hung.

Why Not Re-Do It?

As is our habit once a memorial is put up and inaugurated, everybody forgot about it. One should have thought that later someone at leisure would look to the aesthetics of its design and re-do it in order to make it a truly beautiful memorial. It might be still worth doing.

As for the Army Museum, I wonder what happened to it!

