

The MASH Heroes You've Never Heard Of

By: Henry Champ, CBC

Is there anyone, anywhere who hasn't heard of MASH?

When its TV run ended in 1983, the final show was the most-watched television episode in history.

But there's a remarkable MASH unit hardly anyone here knows of. What a pity. Their raw courage is right out of the most harrowing war movie.

Except that the heroes in this real-life saga never came within a million miles of Hollywood. They were Indians ... as in, India.

They were members of the *60th Para Field Ambulance* ... medics who were also parachutists, who jumped into combat alongside the fighting infantry. These MASH men of the 60th were not the boozy, skirt-chasing, wise-cracking cynics of the TV show.

When the Korean War broke out, recently-independent India opted not to send combat forces, but instead would contribute a crack medical team ... the 60th Para, which had served in Burma against the Japanese, It was commanded by a veteran, Lieut-Col A.G. Rangaraj, reputedly the first member of the Indian army to earn his parachutists wings, earlier in World War 2. (The photos below are from India's official account of the 60th's Korean War experiences).



60th Para CO, Lt-Col A.G. Rangaraj

The 60th Para arrived in Korea in Nov, 1950, composed of 346 men, including four combat surgeons, two anaesthesiologists and a dentist.

When the Chinese swarmed through UN lines in November 1950, the 60th had to evacuate its position. But they had no transport and were reluctant to abandon their medical equipment. They stumbled across an ancient steam locomotive, formed bucket brigades to fill the boilers with water, and loaded up the train. Two soldiers (with zero previous train experience), got it all running and chugged across the last bridge south before it was blown. They don't teach that in medical school or army staff colleges..

Colonel Rangaraj's logic was: they were specifically trained for mountain operations such as they found in Korea, and had first class equipment for such work. It would have been a great pity to leave it all behind. "We would have been of little use without it," he said later, " and could not afford to lose it."

The Indian medics stuck with the troops they were treating during the horrific rearguard fighting that winter. Three times in three days they set up and then closed down their dressing stations as they tried to find safety, refusing to abandon the wounded..

Later, in March '51, in the second biggest airborne operation in the war, *Operation Tomahawk*, a dozen medics of the 60th parachuted in behind the lines with 4,000 US troops. Rangaraj was among them.

Casualties were heavy. A U.S.commander said: "I was immediately struck by the (Indians') efficiency. That small unit, adapted for an airborne role, has carried out 103 operations. which is quite outstanding for that type of unit ... probably 50 of those operated (on) owed their lives to those men."



60th Para behind enemy lines, with US troops and POWs, Operation Tomahawk

The freezing wounded were lying in the open. The Indian medics dug trenches to shelter them and covered them with parachute silk to keep them warm.

It was typical 60th Para valour. In September, 1951, while attached to Commonwealth troops, they treated 448 casualties in six days of fighting. A month later they evacuated (under fire) another 150 wounded. In many other clashes later they were still in the thick of it. The Indians saved hundreds of wounded.



US helicopter picks up casualty treated by the 60th Para

In all, they treated about 200,000 wounded. ... which included 2,300 field medical operations ... and in the meantime, also trained local Korean doctors and nurses.

The 60th Para received many decorations from their own country, and from South Korea, the UN, a US Bronze Star, and a unit citation from Douglas MacArthur. India also issued a postage stamp in tribute to their heroism. (Has Canada ever made such a gesture specifically honouring any of our army's Korean feats?)



The 60th served in Korea for three and a half years, until February 1954, the longest single tenure of any unit in the entire war.

It is quite an outfit with quite the history. Wounded Canadian Korean vets, some from Kapyong, have told me of their great admiration for the Indian medical teams who helped save their lives. It says something about the myopic way we teach history that this unit's thrilling story is so little known.

While I'm at it, there's some disconnect here. Why do so many trained Indian doctors who move to Canada, find it such a tough task getting their expertise recognized? Just asking.