India’s First Field Marshal, the man who created Bangladesh – SFHJ Manekshaw – Unsung Hero of the Indian Army

Field Marshal. India’s first Field Marshal. Sam Hormusji Framji Jamshedji Manekshaw or ‘Sam Manekshaw’.

This is the inspiring story of the first Indian Army officer to be promoted to the rank of Field Marshal Sam Hormusji Framji Jamshedji Manekshaw. SFHJ Manekshaw or ‘Sam Manekshaw’ or ‘Sam Bahadur’ was the Chief of Army Staff of the Indian Army during the 1971 India-Pakistan war. A quintessential soldier who would go on to serve as the Chief of the Army Staff, he is best remembered as the man who masterminded India’s victory in the Indo-Pakistan war of 1971 – that led to the liberation of Bangladesh.

From Medicine to the Indian Army!

Sam completed his education from Nainital’s Sherwood College with distinction. A good student, he wanted to go to London to pursue medicine like his gynaecologist father. But his father refused, saying that Sam was too young to stay abroad on his own.

In an act of rebellion, an angry Sam appeared for the British Indian Military Academy entrance examination. He got through, and on October 1, 1932, became a part of the first batch of 40 cadets to be selected for the Indian Military Academy, Dehradun.
The journey of the legend begins

In 1932, Manekshaw joined the British Indian Army as the first batch of cadets and was posted at the 2nd Battalion, Royal Scots, stationed at Lahore but was later commissioned into the 4th Battalion, 12th Frontier Force Regiment, stationed in Burma.

In his military career spanning four decades, he witnessed five wars, beginning with service in the British Indian Army in World War II.

Shot at nine times!

Nearly a decade later, the outbreak of World War II saw Japanese forces invading Burma – which was a British colony in those days. In February 1942, Manekshaw saw action in the battle of Sittang bridge. During a counter-offensive, he was hit nine times in the stomach by machine-gun fire – but continued to lead his soldiers. His exemplary leadership ultimately clinched the crucial Sittang bridge for the Allies. When the Divisional Commander, David Tennent Cowan, heard of Manekshaw’s bravery, he rushed to the battle site, whipped off his own Military Cross ribbon and pinned it on the wounded officer’s chest, saying: “A dead person cannot be awarded a Military Cross”. He was honoured with the Military Cross for showing exemplary courage and bravery in the face of stiff resistance during World War II.

Lt. Colonel to Major and ever-progressing!

It was during the fighting around Pagoda Hill, that Manekshaw led his company in a counter-attack against the invading Imperial Japanese Army. And despite 50% casualties in his company, they managed to achieve their objective. But Manekshaw was badly wounded after he was hit by machine gun fire. Later, after receiving medical treatment, he somehow managed to recover from his near fatal wounds.

Later, he was appointed to supervise the demilitarisation of thousands of Japanese prisoners of war. His handling of the situation was near perfect. No cases of indiscipline or escape attempts were reported under his supervision. Because of this, he was promoted to acting Lieutenant Colonel in 1946, and then to the substantive rank of Major in 1947.
In 1947, after India-Pakistan partition, Manekshaw's unit, the 4th Battalion, 12th Frontier Force Regiment, became part of the Pakistan Army, so he was reassigned to the 8th Gorkha Rifles. On the Kashmir issue, in a briefing to Lord Mountbatten and the Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, it was Manekshaw who suggested immediate deployments of troops to prevent Kashmir from being captured. On October 27, before Pakistani forces reached the city, Indian troops were sent to Kashmir, and Srinagar was occupied. As a consequence, Manekshaw was posted to the MO Directorate. In the following years, Manekshaw, on the basis of his skills and valour was subsequently posted and promoted from one rank to another.

**Lt. General to Field Marshal**

In 1962, Manekshaw was promoted to acting lieutenant general and appointed GOC of IV Corps at Tezpur after a court case that nearly ended his career was closed and he exonerated. Later, in the 1971 India-Pakistan War, Manekshaw showed exceptional military planning skills and on December 9, 11 and 15, he addressed the Pakistani troops by radio broadcast and assured them that if they surrendered, since India had occupied most strategic positions and isolated Pakistan, they would receive honourable treatment from the Indian troops. Pakistan surrendered on December 16, 1971. In 1972 Manekshaw was awarded Padma Vibhushan.

In 1973, "in recognition of outstanding services to the Armed Forces and the nation", Manekshaw was promoted to the rank of Field Marshal. He was formally conferred with the rank in a ceremony January 3.

Field Marshal Sam Manekshaw was an extraordinary soldier whose first-class military leadership uplifted the Indian Army to insurmountable levels.

We wish that India produces more ‘Sam Manekshaws’!

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