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## Heading for Srinagar

As you approach Baramulla from Srinagar along the Jhelum Valley road, a little before you enter the outskirts of the town, there's an imposing modern war memorial—and as an unintended reminder that the war is not over, the memorial has an Indian military guard. Troops of the Rashtriya Rifles were on duty when I passed by, pleased to have a break from the monotony of looking after a monument that hardly anyone visits. The two Kashmiris I was travelling with didn't stir from the car—locals showing an interest in a public tribute to the Indian army might provoke too much interest in themselves. Beyond a brick-built arch, a black marble plaque listed India's war dead in its initial battles for Kashmir. With the amused encouragement of the army guards, I took some pictures, then made my way along a well-kept, flower-edged path up a steep incline. It led to an elegant cenotaph-style column set in the hillside. On the base was the inscription: 'In memory of the brave soldiers of the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion The Sikh Regiment who gave their lives so that Kashmiris may live in freedom. They were the first Indian troops to land at Srinagar on 27 Oct 47. On this fateful hill, was fought their first engagement.' This was the spot where Indian troops fired their first shots to repulse the forces from Pakistan. The initial skirmish did not augur well for the Indian army's operations in Kashmir.

The task of leading the First Sikh battalion on its landing in Kashmir fell to Lieutenant Colonel Dewan Ranjit Rai, who had been the commanding officer for only a matter of days. Within an hour of his plane touching down at Srinagar, he had received a briefing at the airstrip from the Kashmir state forces—who told him, incorrectly, that the raiders had not then entered Baramulla (a misapprehension quickly corrected by aerial reconnaissance)—and had assembled about 140 of his men who had flown in on the first flight of nine aircraft. He believed that this was an insufficient force to secure the airstrip, and even if it forestalled an attack there, it left the nearby city of Srinagar unprotected. So he headed



towards Baramulla, in the hope of delaying the raiders' advance by staging a fighting withdrawal.<sup>1</sup> And that's broadly how it worked. The Indian troops advanced to within a mile and a half of Baramulla, linking up with the remnants of a cavalry unit of the maharaja's forces, and from their slightly raised vantage point the Sikh soldiers could not only see the flames of buildings on fire in the town but could hear shouts and screams.

The Sikh troops seem to have been unaware that one of their officers, the recently appointed acting commandant of their regimental centre, Lt Colonel Tom Dykes, was trapped in Baramulla. The initial detachment took up position outside the town at almost exactly the moment the mission hospital was being overrun. Some of the echoes of the attack that reached the Indian troops would have been from the convent and hospital, which were on the side of town closest to their initial location. The Indian forces were clearly outnumbered, and did not seek to intervene.

The Sikh troops' first night at Baramulla was quiet. The first shots came the next morning, on 28 October. At about nine in the morning, there was an exchange of fire with raiders on the far side of the Jhelum river who appeared to be advancing towards the next sizeable town, Sopore. Shortly afterwards, armed men approached the Indian positions from along the Jhelum Valley road. More shots were fired and—according to the most detailed Indian account of the operations—by around midday, the lashkar had brought in machine guns and mortars to try to dislodge the troops blocking their advance. They eventually succeeded. In late afternoon, Colonel Rai decided to withdraw his outnumbered and outgunned troops.

There is an independent eyewitness account of the Indian army's initial exchanges in the contest for Kashmir—the first shots in a conflict that has rumbled on ever since. John Thompson was a British man who had served as an army major during the war and was working as the general manager of a timber firm in Baramulla. Thompson wanted to marry a Baramulla woman Leela Pasricha (they eventually spent more than forty years together), and her parents and siblings were among those taking refuge in the mission. He had travelled into Srinagar, apparently cycling the thirty-five miles, on 26 October—the day before both the attack on the hospital and the arrival of the first Indian troops. His aim was to try to secure the evacuation of the mission, or at least the most vulnerable among its residents. He also carried a letter from Colonel Dykes asking for a truck to be sent to take out his family and servant.

In Srinagar, Thompson, accompanied by Sydney Smith of the *Daily Express*—who was no doubt scenting a route to the scene of the action—



enlisted the assistance of Major W.P. Cranston. He had been sent to Srinagar by the British High Commission in New Delhi both to provide an on-the-spot assessment of the political situation and to help with the evacuation of British nationals. The major's presence in the Kashmir capital has attracted a lot of comment, at the time and subsequently. Some Indian historians have assumed, though without any firm evidence, that he was working for British intelligence. His preoccupation was trying to get the elderly and settled-in-their-ways British community in Srinagar, up to 400 in number, to move out by air or road. But his reports back to Delhi covered more than simply the welfare of British nationals, and are a valuable source of information about the nature, progress and retreat of the tribal forces. It may well have been word of Cranston's presence in Srinagar that prompted misgivings in Pakistan about Britain's attitude to the conflict. A despatch from the senior British diplomat in Lahore mentioned reports circulating that 'there is a British Brigadier [in Kashmir], which is taken very much amiss by people of all sorts here'.<sup>2</sup>

The three British men—Major Cranston, John Thompson and Sydney Smith—called on the Kashmir army headquarters on the Tuesday morning, 28 October. 'Mr Thompson wished to take a lorry to Baramulla in order to evacuate Colonel and Mrs Dykes and their family. The Military authorities would not, however, permit this on account of military operations then taking place to recapture Baramulla. I then offered,' Major Cranston wrote in a diplomatic memo, 'to go along in a lorry, wearing uniform and flying the Union Jack in order to get through the tribesmen and bring out Colonel and Mrs Dykes. Again however, the Military authorities would not permit me to do so.'<sup>3</sup>

John Thompson and Sydney Smith managed to persuade the newly arrived Indian army to take them to the front as observers. Both had military experience, and Thompson knew the lie of the land, so they were potentially valuable allies. They travelled by jeep towards the front line, with Colonel Rai alongside, to find a company of Sikh troops holding the ridge outside Baramulla, which Thompson estimated was about two miles on the Srinagar side of the town. 'A fight ensued but the SIKHS were finally driven off the ridge by Mortar fire suffering casualties which I could not assess, but they must have been considerable as the Tribesmen also attacked from the rear . . . . In the ensuing muddle I [and Sydney Smith] . . . were left behind and took cover in the nullah [ditch], as bullets were coming at us from both sides and 3" Mortar Bombs were bursting unpleasantly near . . . . We were eventually discovered by the Tribesmen



who fired a few shots at us but luckily missed. When they got near and saw that we were Europeans they stopped firing and came up to us. They roughly handled us knocking us down and robbing us of all our possessions, taking R[upee]s. 1500/- off me which I had just got from SRINAGAR for payments for timber. . . . The Tribesmen started squabbling over the division of the money they had got from me and Mr. SYDNEY SMITH.<sup>4</sup> John Thompson and Sydney Smith became separated. While Thompson managed to make his way to the convent, Smith was captured by the tribesmen.

Towards the close of the afternoon, Colonel Rai, the officer commanding the Sikh troops, became one of the first Indian casualties in Kashmir. He was shot through the head while retreating with his men, and apparently died instantly. His fellow soldiers were not able to carry the body with them, so it was hidden in the fields. Dewan Ranjit Rai was posthumously awarded one of India's most distinguished awards for gallantry, the Maha Vir Chakra. The initial Indian military action had succeeded in delaying the raiders' advance, perhaps by a full day. It had bought time for more troops to be flown in to the Srinagar airstrip. But it had not pinned the lashkar at Baramulla, and the loss of the Sikhs' commanding officer on the second day of the airlift was a heavy blow to the Indian forces. Whatever view Indian officers might have held of the tribesmen before fighting was joined, it was now clear that the Indian army was facing an experienced and well-equipped adversary.

The next defensive point that the Indian troops sought to secure was the elevated ground near the town of Pattan, which is roughly equidistant from Srinagar and Baramulla and on the main road between the Valley's two principal towns. Through two days of intermittent clashes, the Sikh troops succeeded in holding the raiders. Indian air power was brought to bear, and greatly restricted the movement of the tribal forces. The lashkar had entered Kashmir, in the judgement of a Pakistani military historian, imagining that it would be fighting against a modest adversary, the Kashmir state forces, only to find itself up against the much more formidable Indian army, backed up by strafing and bombing attacks from the air and, eventually, armoured cars.<sup>5</sup> Initially, military aircraft based at the Royal Indian Air Force training station at Ambala, more than 200 miles south of the Kashmir Valley, flew sorties against the advancing tribesmen. In spite of the absence of servicing and maintenance facilities at the Srinagar airstrip, the air force managed to base a handful of Spitfires and Harvards there, while Tempests flying from Ambala and Amritsar



provided further support. Flying Officer J.J. Bouche flew in a Spitfire from Ambala on October 28 but initially could not locate his intended target. He took a spur of the moment decision to land on the grass strip at Srinagar:

We found a lot of baggage and army equipment lying close to the strip. We taxied carefully avoiding these obstacles and parked in the area we thought was the best for us. On landing, we were approached by an army officer who briefed us on the location of targets. Since there were no ground crews, we carried out pilot turn around servicing and got airborne and found the enemy concentration in another location near Baramula which we strafed successfully. The raiders ran helter-skelter and tried to take shelter wherever they could. In a few minutes, the position had been cleared with quite a few casualties. After the attack, we landed back at Srinagar. Our ground crews and ground equipment had not still arrived and there were no refuelling facilities at Srinagar. We decanted some fuel in cans from Dakota aircraft and, thus, fuelled the aircraft. The question of rearming the aircraft did not arise, as neither the gun ammunition nor the tools were available.<sup>6</sup>



The Indian air force enjoyed the enormous advantage of having the skies to themselves. Group Captain Arjan Singh was commanding the Ambala flying school at the time, and flew several times to Kashmir. 'It was very easy—because there was no opposition. Pakistan air force never came in. Even with a small number of aircraft, had they come in it would have made our operations quite difficult. Because the whole of Kashmir is nearer the Pakistan border than Ambala or backward bases.' The threat of attack from the air made it difficult for the raiders' trucks to move by daylight. It tipped the military balance strongly in India's favour. But it didn't prevent the tribal forces from advancing by foot through the countryside, rather than along the Jhelum Valley road, and outflanking the Indian positions.

Official announcements talked of successes against the raiders, and Indian forces advancing down the Valley. Reports in the Indian papers spoke of the tribesmen being 'routed' as the airlift gathered momentum. Certainly, the strength of the Indian armed forces was increasing by several hundred troops every day while the insurgents were getting little material support from local residents. The lashkar's advance had not sparked off an uprising. But the military situation remained much more





precarious than the Indian communiqués and military-inspired news stories indicated. Pilots engaged in evacuating foreigners from Srinagar gave a sense of the continuing threat posed by the tribal forces. ‘Royal Air Force observers say that armed Pathan Moslems, swarming into the princely state of Kashmir, are advancing in such strength as to threaten the capital of Srinagar itself,’ a news agency reported on 1 November. ‘One RAF informant said, after flying in last night, that truckloads of Indian reinforcements are being rushed to the front, less than twenty miles west of Srinagar. Srinagar’s small dust-covered airport has taken on the aspect of an advanced base of operations.’ At one point, stores hastily unloaded from arriving planes and stacked haphazardly at the side of the runway were getting in the way. And so too were the abandoned vehicles of the wealthy and well-connected seeking an air passage out of Srinagar.<sup>7</sup>

When Lieutenant Colonel Harbakhsh Singh of the Indian army flew into Srinagar on 1 November, the military situation was so fluid he did not know whether his plane would be able to land. As the aircraft approached the Srinagar airstrip, he saw villages ablaze. ‘Smoke was coming from all directions, and I was not sure whether the airfield was in our hands or not. I was told to make sure before landing whether the airfield was in our hands or in the enemy hands. I said [to the pilot] first of all do a dummy run, don’t land. So we went—one man appeared from the hut—he just waved at us, didn’t fire. So I said now we can land.’ Harbakhsh Singh had been in hospital in Ambala when he heard of the death of his colleague Colonel Rai, and, as the next most senior officer in the First Sikh battalion, requested an immediate flight to Kashmir. On arriving at the Srinagar airstrip, one of the first people he met was his nephew, an officer in the Patiala state forces, a Sikh-ruled princely state that had acceded to India. Singh requisitioned the Patiala troops’ gun battery, fired a few rounds towards raiders in the vicinity of the airfield, and then set off in search of the troops he was to command.

A day or two earlier, an Indian journalist, Ajit Bhattacharjea, had managed to get a seat as the only passenger in a supply plane flying in to Srinagar—and found himself uncomfortably close to the military action. ‘I was a young reporter on the *Hindustan Times*. A friend of mine was a pilot on one of the planes that was carrying supplies—oil and petrol—into the Valley. So he asked me if I’d like to come along, so I did. As we approached the Valley—a fantastic sight, really imprinted on my memory, because we flew very low. It was a Dakota DC3, and just cleared the Banihal [pass] with the load we were carrying. It was so beautiful, the Valley—until we approached Srinagar, when we could see wisps of smoke on the



horizon and came down to land.’ He remembered a line of people ferrying supplies to the front line with the raiders. Newly landed troops were being sent directly to the front, which he was told was just five miles away.

Srinagar was a beleaguered city. Its power supply was cut, the established system of governance had fallen apart, food and other essential supplies had been interrupted, travel out of the city was almost impossible, and there was no press, no proper information network, and no means of communication. A marauding army of tribesmen was at the gates of the city, and the Indian troops who were coming to the city’s defence were an outside army making its first foray into Kashmir. The issue of Kashmir’s future status—which had been uncomfortably stalled for months—had been resolved, at least for the moment, by a princely ruler who had promptly fled his capital, and by force of Indian arms. Kashmiris had been given little opportunity to express their opinion. Sheikh Abdullah, the commanding Kashmir politician of the moment, had stepped into the political vacuum, and had also endorsed accession to India. For the people of Srinagar, he was a familiar and trusted face, and his presence at the helm suggested that Kashmiris had gained at least some control of their destiny.

Ajit Bhattacharjea spent only a few hours in Srinagar during his brief visit at the end of October. ‘The city was open. Mind you—the police, the maharaja and his administration had fled. There was no sign of them. Yet it was functioning. Not because troops were there—there were very few of them. But the entire city was being handled by the National Conference volunteers—90% of them were Muslims. They were guarding the bridges, the shops—most of the shops were open.’ Sheikh Abdullah and his supporters had filled the vacuum left by the departure of the maharaja and his court. He had been given the official title of ‘emergency administrator’ and M.C. Mahajan initially remained the prime minister. But there was no mistaking who was in charge.

On 31 October, Sheikh Abdullah was sworn in as “head of the administration” . . . invested with “full powers to meet the present emergency”. *The Times* correspondent in Srinagar described the city as ‘gay with banners and bunting and filled with processions of marching men as Sheikh Abdullah went to the old palace on the bank of the Jhelum River to take the oath of office’. Later in the day he addressed a rally ‘the like of which Srinagar has never before seen. His popularity in the city and its environs is undoubted, and although one meets occasional sympathizers with the Muslim League they are lying low and biding their time, hoping for the raiders and rebels to enter the city.’<sup>8</sup> Five weeks



earlier, the ‘Lion of Kashmir’ was the maharaja’s prisoner, now he was the unrivalled political master of his native city. Few of Abdullah’s colleagues were aware, however, that the man who had condemned the maharaja and many of his officials for deserting Srinagar at its hour of need had quietly arranged, on the second day of the Indian military airlift, for the evacuation of members of his family. They flew to Delhi, where they stayed initially as Nehru’s guests.<sup>9</sup>

The volunteer force which patrolled, and in some ways controlled, Srinagar after the collapse of the maharaja’s authority was a remarkable innovation. The Kashmir Valley had no tradition of politically aligned militia. The National Conference force had been some weeks in the making. Sheikh Abdullah, addressing a public meeting some ten days after his release from detention, appealed for 10,000 volunteers to form what he called a ‘peace brigade’. ‘Sheikh Abdullah said that reports were reaching Srinagar from the State borders which necessitated the formation of a volunteer corps to maintain peace and protect “our hearth and homes”, irrespective of creed or community.’<sup>10</sup> Sheikh Abdullah’s critics complained loudly that he was now part of the court party, and had thrown in his political lot with the maharaja. But the clique of courtiers can hardly have been happy that such a commanding political figure was recruiting a quasi-military force.

As the crisis intensified in late October, the National Conference volunteers transformed into a popular militia. Even before it became known that the maharaja had fled, militia members had been deployed in Srinagar. The collapse of much of the civil administration, and of the maharaja’s security forces, gave urgency to their mission. On the day the first Indian troops landed in Kashmir, Nehru wrote in a private letter of the need for what he later called a ‘home guard’ loyal to Sheikh Abdullah. ‘Chosen young men, Muslim, Hindu and Sikh, should be given rifles and if possible given some simple training,’ he told an Indian army officer who had been sent to Srinagar as his personal emissary. ‘We must do all this on a non-communal basis inviting everyone to joining in defence but taking care of one major factor—to trust none who might give trouble. . . . These armed volunteers can well undertake the defence of, and the duty of keeping order in Srinagar and other towns in the Valley.’<sup>11</sup>

By the following day, 28 October, ‘hundreds of “National Conference” volunteers’ were in the streets, which—according to *The Times*—‘combined to keep the peace and helped to restore confidence’. Two days later, ‘several scores of them appeared armed for the first time with standard .303 rifles which a spokesman said they had obtained





from “friendly sources”, reported *The Times* from the Kashmir capital, hinting broadly that the Indian army was supplying the militia. ‘The city remains quiet and without communal clashes,’ *The Times* stated, ‘but the outward stream of Hindu and Sikh refugees has not ceased, and the civil transport aircraft that bring in reinforcements for the Indian Army depart full of men, women, and children and their pitiful belongings.’<sup>12</sup> The militia were on guard, patrolling the streets (in Srinagar at least, they appear to have been much less visible elsewhere) and had been deployed on the approaches to the city. Remarkable photographs have survived of young National Conference volunteers—members of the children’s Bal Sena, rather than of the militia—mustering for drilling outside the party’s newly acquired headquarters, a cinema in the heart of Srinagar. All were wearing caps with the National Conference insignia, a white plough against a red background, and were holding wooden rifles.

Other photographs show the women’s brigade of the militia—a striking innovation in conservative and Muslim Kashmir—shouldering real weapons during an inspection by Jawaharlal Nehru. Several hundred women in Srinagar joined the militia, and had basic weapons training. Krishna Misri (then Krishna Zardoo) was a thirteen-year-old Pandit girl in Srinagar at that time. She recalled the impact of the tales of atrocities committed by the raiders. ‘My mother was horrified because she had four daughters. Two were married and two were not married. So she didn’t know what to do with two of us—the ones that were unmarried. Since this organisation was known as women’s self-defence crops, they said that they would be training us in firearms so that we can defend ourselves. That was a great motivation for all of us to join this militia at that time. Perhaps to defend my honour, my self-respect, I thought that I must have this training and I should be able to defend myself.’ She was trained by a former soldier on how to use a rifle—‘when my instructor shot the first fire, we were so scared we ran away’—and the women volunteers, among them her eleven-year-old sister, conducted regular drills and parades. The women’s militia appears not to have fought—their intended role was to defend themselves and their homes should Srinagar be attacked. The volunteers’ main work was in helping the refugees from the fighting—mainly, in Krishna Zardoo’s memory, near-destitute Sikh women and children—who clustered into temporary camps in schools and government buildings in Srinagar.

Communists who were closely aligned with the National Conference appear to have been prominent in the ranks of the armed volunteers. Pran Nath Jalali, then an eighteen-year-old communist student leader in Srinagar, told me that he had been one of the organisers of the militia and its political



commander. He recalled that many, perhaps most, of the militia's initial leaders were Communist Party sympathisers. The volunteers' military potential was never properly put to the test. But they were armed and many saw active service, often accompanying Indian army detachments and providing information about terrain and serving as a channel of communication with Kashmiri-speaking villagers and townspeople. Several members of the militia were killed. The militia's very visible presence in Srinagar was powerful confirmation that the old princely order had gone. As well as providing local intelligence and assistance to the Indian forces, they gave support to a skeleton civil administration without which the Kashmir capital would have ground to a halt.

One of the tasks taken on by some of the Sikh troops on the first day of the airlift was to stage a flag march through Srinagar to seek to reassure the city's deeply alarmed population. Sheikh Abdullah's son and political heir Farooq Abdullah, then about ten years old, has keen memories of the troops' arrival. 'I had never seen Sikhs in the Indian army, and for me it was a surprising thing to see these aircraft come. There were a number of aircraft coming in and going out. People used to get on to the housetops and see these Spitfires or something like that go up and down. I was taken to the airport one day, and there I saw these ferocious Sikhs, over six feet tall. They had rings of copper around their turbans. Ferocious looking people.'

Another of the initial duties of the Indian army, it seems, was to disperse a march through Srinagar of supporters of the pro-Pakistan Muslim Conference.<sup>13</sup> Sheikh Abdullah's support in Srinagar was strong, but it was not universal. Some of his rivals and critics were still in jail while others had made their way to Pakistan. But many of their supporters were still around. There were persistent press reports of saboteurs or enemy agents amid the local population. Jinnah's private secretary, a Kashmiri, was detained in Srinagar—an episode widely reported in the Indian press as evidence of Pakistan's attempts to incite the local population. The *Hindustan Times* also recorded that an 'all-out drive against "fifth columnists" which has been in progress of for the past many days was intensified by the volunteers of the "Bachao Fauj" [Protection Force]'. A few days later, the *Statesman's* correspondent, travelling around by jeep, found that 'every inlet to the city had its posse of volunteers, some of whom were armed with guns, others with swords and sticks'. As an additional precaution, the Muslim Conference stronghold around Srinagar's main mosque had been 'put under a curfew, leniently administered'.<sup>14</sup>

By most accounts, the Kashmir capital was largely free of communal tension. That's certainly the recollection of Harshi Anand, then a teenage



schoolgirl in Srinagar. She recalled the excitement generated by the volunteers. Most of the local youngsters had joined the National Conference's militia, including her elder sister and brother. Her family, Punjabi Hindus by origin, greatly respected Sheikh Abdullah. She also had keen memories of the anxiety about shortage of food and supplies. 'There was no sugar, no salt, and there was absolute darkness because they had captured [the power station at] Mahura. We were eating honey. And eating the best of apples, because previously apples used to be exported. I've never eaten such nice apples.'

A sense of the growing alarm in the Kashmir capital occasioned both by the proximity of the fighting and the growing food and power crisis was captured by a British woman writing to friends or relatives in England. Gwen Burton was staying at Nedou's hotel, by far the smartest hotel in Srinagar and a focal point for the expatriate community and the local elite. It was also where the foreign pilots gathered. Her letter home appears to have been written during the first week of November, and gives a sense of the apprehension and excited rumour in the city:

Here we still are + in 'the thick of it'! . . . The Raiders are in great numbers + lots have split up with small gangs + looting + throwing the villages around. A large force tried to take the Aerodrome on Tuesday, but were beaten off by our troops . . . The road is evidently blocked with troops coming up from India. 16 Armoured Cars arrived yesterday. All have got the wind up more than ever today, as there was heavy firing + bombing last night. We are the only people in the place who has a Wet Battery Wireless set: and are bombarded with people coming in + listening to the News of Kashmir. The raiders cut of[f] the Electricity about 10 days ago, burnt the Power House + so we've been in darkness ever since + only have candles to see by, which is very depressing. Now they are frightened of their cutting the water supply . . . There is no daily bul[l]etin issued + hence rumours go around + one does not know what to believe . . . They say there are Pakastan [sic] Army Officers among the Raiders + that this attack on Kashmir has been instigated by Pakastan, as the Raiders are well armed + there must be a lot of old soldiers among them. We never thought we would be in the siege of Srinagar! Not at all pleasant + very nerve racking. Food is beginning to get scarce[,] no butter in the hotel now + flour very scarce . . . We have had lovely weather here so far + only hope it goes on.<sup>15</sup>



Adding to Gwen Burton's concern was the advent of the foreign press. 'A lot of newspaper correspondents have flown up here + are in the Hotel. The Times, Reuters[,], Daily Telegraph[,], New York Herald etc—it's all very disturbing.'

During Ajit Bhattacharjea's brief foray into Srinagar, he found a huddle of journalists in familiar and distinctly undisturbing form. 'At the old Nedou's Hotel, a group of correspondents was gathered on the lawn, drinking beer under the mild autumn afternoon sun, recovering from writing about a war being fought not ten miles away.'<sup>16</sup> Quite by chance, foreign correspondents were better placed to report the initial stages of the crisis than the local papers and news agencies. The summer of 1947 had been gruelling, with the reporting not only of the rush towards independence and the creation of the new nation of Pakistan, but also of the intense bloodletting and communal tension amid which the Raj had ended. By mid-October, with the killing fields of Punjab a little calmer and other international stories—notably the Middle East—competing for space, several foreign correspondents had decided they needed a break. It was just the right time of year to head for Kashmir, which had developed a reputation as the Europeans' preferred holiday destination, and had the hotels, house boats, clubs and restaurants to cater to foreign tastes.

Margaret Parton of the *Herald Tribune* had chosen Kashmir not only for a rest, but for 'an illicit vacation' on a houseboat with her new lover and future husband Eric Britter. He was the correspondent of the *Times* of London, India-born and an Urdu speaker. Neither had ever visited Kashmir. 'We are living on a houseboat, as everyone must do when they come to Kashmir,' Parton enthused in a letter to her mother. 'It is a fantastic, heavenly, scrolled and carved houseboat, complete with living room, dining room, and (I might emphasize) three bedrooms.' They discovered that Sydney Smith of the *Daily Express* (known to his colleagues as Bill Sydney-Smith) and his wife Pat were in a neighbouring houseboat. These parallel trysts were soon disturbed by the tribesmen's invasion. When Parton and Britter sought to leave Kashmir as scheduled, by bus to Rawalpindi, they were told that the previous day's bus had been turned back by invading tribesmen. While Sydney Smith made for the front line, Margaret Parton and her partner moved into Nedou's hotel and got to work.

At first we didn't realize what a story we had on our hands, and actually made arrangements to leave with the R.A.F, when it evacuated



all the British to Rawalpindi. Once again we packed our bags, and early in the morning of the 27<sup>th</sup> rode out to the airport where we were scheduled to take the first plane out. But what should we find but Indian Army troops pouring in, and among them some friends of Eric's who tipped us off to the news that the tribesmen were only 17 miles from Srinagar, and might very well capture the city. So feeling very brave and noble (at least I did) we pulled our baggage out of the plane and set up a miniature press room among the bedding rolls and suitcases—much to the amusement of passing pilots and army officers, who took pictures of us and obligingly gave us news of burning villages and other matters of interest. We stayed on the field all day, lunching on Indian army food provided by a generous soldier, which we ate with our fingers—and late in the afternoon sent off our stories by a friendly pilot who promised to deliver them to Delhi, from where they could be cabled.

She recalled 'chortling with pleasure that aside from Alan Moor[e]head (who wasn't competition) and Bill Sydney-Smith (who was, but who soon managed to get himself captured by the tribesmen) we were the only foreign correspondents in Kashmir'.<sup>17</sup>

The *Daily Express's* Sydney Smith got the best exclusives of the Kashmir crisis. But once captured by the tribesmen, he could only file his insider's account of the invading forces and of the besieged mission at Baramulla when the heat of the crisis had passed. The others had not only time, but need, to drink beer at Nedou's, because the hotel bar was where they found the couriers for their news copy. Margaret Parton wrote to her mother from Nedou's hotel on 3 November to tell her: 'This has really been a wonderful news break for Eric and me—particularly if they're playing our stories as I think they must be. Here we are—the only foreign correspondents in Kashmir, and 150 newsmen in Delhi panting to get here and completely frustrated!' But the exclusive was coming to an end, for just a couple of paragraphs on she reported: 'Later—Well, it couldn't last forever—two other correspondents have just blown in. Much excitement and noise here in the hotel garden, with people crouching over maps and trying to figure out just what is happening. All very confusing.' This was perhaps the sort of scene which prompted a correspondent for the *Hindustan Times* to remark, waspishly: 'It is quite impossible for a correspondent based on Nedou's hotel at Srinagar to know, by establishing his own facts, the truth about the raiders.'<sup>18</sup>

Kashmir's own newspapers were not well placed to report the crisis enveloping them. The local media was still in its infancy. Some newspapers—including the English language *Kashmir Times*—had been shut down for being too critical of the maharaja and his administration. One of Pakistan's main newspapers *Dawn* complained that any Kashmir publications which referred to the prospect of accession to Pakistan faced censorship and closure.<sup>19</sup> Most Indian newspapers had little or no reporting presence in Kashmir. Not a lot happened there in normal times. The first military test of independent India, the conflict that set the tone of its relations with Pakistan for two generations and beyond, was initially largely beyond the scrutiny of the Indian press. While Sydney Smith had managed to report from the front line as early as 26 October, little battlefield reporting appeared in the main Indian newspapers for another week.

There was an opportunity here for aspiring Kashmiri journalists. Sat Paul Sahni, a Kashmir-born, Kashmiri-speaking Punjabi, made the most of it. He was well connected in Srinagar, and had already spent some months the previous year on what you might now call work experience with *The Times* in London. When the first contingent of Indian correspondents from Delhi managed to reach Srinagar he was able to make himself useful. He was co-opted by Mohammed Subhan, correspondent with the Bombay-based *Times of India* and its Delhi sister paper, the *News Chronicle*. When Subhan returned to Delhi after a few days, Sahni became—in effect—the *News Chronicle's* reporter in Kashmir. Within a week or two, he had received accreditation from the Indian defence ministry. A rookie reporter had become a fully fledged war correspondent.<sup>20</sup> But as the Indian army settled in Srinagar, military bureaucracy entrenched itself with the troops, and eventually the only way to file was through the army's public relations officer or, if particularly urgent, by morse code through army signals. 'All the reports had to be handed over to the PRO,' Sahni recalled. 'We had no means to file directly. And they scrutinised every report at the Armed Forces Information Office in New Delhi, at the defence ministry. It was virtual censorship.'

Right from the start of the crisis, there was a chorus of complaints from the press that they weren't being allowed into Kashmir, and once there couldn't report as they wished. The only journalists who could travel to Srinagar were those who made the journey with the Indian army, or at least with its blessing. The *Herald Tribune*, which was in the fortunate position of having Margaret Parton already in place in Kashmir, carried



a news agency report dated 1 November reporting that the ‘government of India barred entry of all newspaper correspondents into Kashmir today a move regarded as tantamount to censorship of the fighting’. Some British journalists complained that their cabled reports of the crisis were either suppressed or delayed.<sup>21</sup> An American, Jim Michaels, was the correspondent in Delhi for the United Press news agency, and once the fighting started he was determined to get to Kashmir. ‘As soon as the Indian army intervention began,’ he recalled, ‘I tried my damndest to get to Srinagar. All the reporters . . . were clamoring in vain to be allowed to fly in. The Indians wanted no witnesses to what might turn out to be their first debacle. A drinking buddy, a British charter pilot, offered to smuggle me on his plane which had been requisitioned along with anything that could carry troops. I went to Willingdon [airfield] . . . . At a signal from my pilot buddy I sprinted across the tarmac, but just as I was about to climb on board the [military police] grabbed me. Good try!’<sup>22</sup> The restrictions eventually eased, but it was not until 5 November that Robert Trumbull of the *New York Times*, one of the most prominent Delhi-based foreign correspondents, managed to file with a Srinagar dateline.

The Indian press corps was somewhat more successful in finding a way into Srinagar. By the time battle was joined for the Kashmir capital, reporters had mustered sufficient force to give a vivid if partisan sense of the unfolding drama. The initial tussles with the Indian army, which was rapidly reinforcing—on busier days up to 500 Indian troops were disembarking at the Srinagar airstrip—and India’s use of fighter planes to strafe the raiders’ trucks forced the tribesmen to operate increasingly as a guerrilla force. Their command was splintered, communications were haphazard, and there was little obvious sense of strategy. Nevertheless, armed contingents of the lashkar got close to some of the key points around the Kashmir capital.

The Sandhurst graduate who was one of the architects of the invasion, Akbar Khan—adopting the nom de guerre of the eighth century General Tariq, the man who led an Islamic army into Spain then burnt his own boats to rule out the option of retreat—was not part of the initial wave, but followed on a week later. He caught up with tribal reinforcements heading to the front:

The lorries were full to the brim, carrying forty, fifty and some as many as seventy. Men were packed inside, lying on the roofs, sitting on the engines and hanging on to the mudguards. They were men of all ages from grey beards to teenagers. Few were well-dressed—



many had torn clothes, and some were even without shoes. But they were good to look at—handsome and awe-inspiring.

Their weapons were a varied assortment—British, French, German and Frontier made rifles—long and short barrelled pistols and even shot guns. Some had no fire arms at all, they were going to take them from the enemy. For the present they carry only daggers.

Their transport was equally heterogeneous—ranging from road worthy buses to anything on four wheels capable of crawling . . . They were in high spirits. Above the rumble and din could be heard a chorus of war songs and an occasional drum beat. The air was charged with enthusiasm.<sup>23</sup>

By Akbar Khan's own account, he advanced during the night through Baramulla and on to within a few miles of the centre of Srinagar, where in the early hours of 30 October he witnessed Mohmand tribesmen trying and failing to overrun an Indian military post. The next morning, *Dawn* bore the banner headline 'Liberation Army Advance Guards Enter Srinagar'—though it also made space for a fanciful account that 400 Indian paratroops had been killed while landing, and made the dubious assertion that the 'local population has now completely identified itself with the Liberation Army'.<sup>24</sup>

Whether or not this and similar accounts are exaggerated, it is clear that in the early days of November both Srinagar and its airfield were imperilled. Brigadier L.P. 'Bogey' Sen flew up to Srinagar on 2 November, and recalled that evening seeing a vista of destruction. 'The sky was lit up by a red glow of burning huts and houses, the flames licking their way up to the skies. It was obvious that the raiders had moved out of Baramulla in large numbers and were announcing their entry into the Valley by setting fire to village after village.' On the same day, Max Desfor, a photographer with the Associated Press news agency, managed to get an aerial view of the devastation. He was drinking buddies with some American pilots who, after war service, had started working for the fledgling Indian airlines. His friends received orders to fly Indian troops into Srinagar, and obligingly signed Max up as a flight engineer so he could make the journey. 'We picked up troops and supplies and I made their photos in the plane and then in formation on the tarmac in Srinagar. Heading back . . . the pilot flew at a low altitude over the combat area, which enabled me, in the co-pilot's seat, to shoot the smoking villages and other scenes. I believe they were the first "action" photos to come out of Kashmir.' He spotted more than twenty villages in flames, extending to within about twenty





miles of the Kashmir capital.<sup>25</sup> The raiders still had a clear numerical advantage. Some were managing to advance through cover of darkness, others were outflanking the Indian positions along the Baramulla road. A substantial number were, it seems, approaching by another route, through the skiing resort of Gulmarg.

By 3 November, up to 1,000 raiders had congregated at the village of Badgam, about ten miles south-west of Srinagar and within five miles of the airfield. They were initially mistaken for Kashmiri refugees from the fighting. Their attack on an Indian patrol was the closest the conflict had then come to a battle. 'Standing on a hillock I saw Indian troops engage and repulse invaders north of Badgam,' reported the *Statesman's* correspondent. 'The invaders, who mustered about 700, outnumbered the Indian patrol party by at least six to one.' The fighting went on from mid-afternoon until dusk, with the invaders using mortar fire, while Indian troops were assisted by aerial attacks on the raiders. 'At present,' the *Statesman* reported, 'the tribesmen, who are the core of the invaders' forces, are spread over the Valley and are extremely mobile.'<sup>26</sup>

By the end of several hours of bitter fighting, the Indian army had lost an officer, Major Somnath Sharma, and fourteen other men, with a further twenty-six wounded. While the raiders had, at least by Indian accounts, suffered considerably heavy casualties, they had not been repulsed, indeed they had gained an advantage. If their goal had been to get to the airstrip, that was now within reach. Brigadier Bogey Sen of the Indian army later argued that the lashkar, by failing to exploit its success at Badgam, 'missed the chance of a lifetime. Why [the enemy] failed to move towards the airfield is unfathomable. Just three miles from Badgam lay features from which he could have commanded the airstrip, which, if denied to us, would have swung the balance to a marked degree in his favour. Just one aircraft hit and damaged on the airstrip, or hit in the air and forced to crash-land, would have made it unusable.'<sup>27</sup> It seems, to judge by the testimony of Khurshid Anwar, the veteran of the Muslim League National Guard who had led the lashkar in triumph into Baramulla a week earlier, that the raiders did seek to advance on the airfield. In his account of what appears to be the same action—recounted in an interview to the Muslim League newspaper *Dawn* several weeks later—Anwar said that he and about twenty others got to within a mile of the airstrip, knocking out several Indian army pickets, but lacked the strength to press home the attack.<sup>28</sup>

India's official history of the conflict records that news of the fighting 'so near the Srinagar airfield and the heavy casualties sustained



in that battle brought home to everybody the gravity of the situation in Kashmir.' The next morning, India's deputy prime minister Sardar Patel flew to Srinagar, accompanied by the defence minister Baldev Singh and a British officer Lt Colonel Billy Short (apparently working on the defence minister's staff but clearly in breach of the supreme commander's order to all British officers to keep out of Kashmir). They spent a few hours talking to the key Indian military commanders. It's not clear whether they were trying to stiffen morale and provide reassurance that reinforcements were on their way, or to sense whether India would hold on to the Valley, or to improvise a new military strategy. The Indian forces clearly faced a problem—over the first couple of weeks of the airlift, there was a succession of different officers in command on the ground in Kashmir. If later memoirs are an accurate guide, the two key Indian officers in and around Srinagar, Harbakhsh Singh and Bogey Sen, had little respect for each other. The feud was still being fought almost sixty years later by retired army officers loyal to the memory of one or the other. Sen claimed credit for reversing the military tide and gaining the upper hand against the invaders. Singh, perhaps a touch more convincingly, insisted that although he was outranked, the devising and implementing of the military plan rested with him.

Harbakhsh Singh decided that given the intense fighting close to the Kashmir capital, those soldiers of the First Sikh battalion deployed further out near Pattan should be pulled back to defend Srinagar and its airstrip. It was their second strategic retreat in little more than a week. The execution of this order has entered Indian army legend. Harbakhsh Singh dropped the withdrawal instruction on the First Sikhs' position from a low-flying military aircraft. This was, he insisted later, to avoid wireless intercept—though it also reflected the hazards of movement across the Kashmir Valley, and the acute difficulties in communication and coordination. The Sikh troops had no vehicles to use in their redeployment, and were obliged to carry equipment and ammunition in horse-drawn tongas which, as there were no horses available either, they are reputed to have pulled themselves.<sup>29</sup> Bogey Sen suggested that this pulling back of the Sikh battalion was part of a plan to lure the raiders into an attack on Srinagar. While that may have been the effect, the intention was simply to buttress the still shaky Indian defence of Kashmir's premier city, for which Indian troops were obliged to commandeer wall maps from Nedou's hotel and the Srinagar Club to plan deployments.<sup>30</sup>

In the early hours of 6 November, Srinagar suffered its closest exposure to war. It was the high watermark of the tribal army's advance.



The *Times of India* reported that throughout the night, ‘the city reverberated to the sound of machine-guns and mortar firing. About 1 a.m. the invaders made a daring attempt to enter the city about 4<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> miles west.’

About 300 strong, the invaders’ column bumped into a road block laid by Indian troops.

The engagement lasted till dawn, when the invaders broke off and dispersed . . .

The invaders are now trying to infiltrate into the city disguised in Kashmiri dress, and passing for ‘locals’. But the State National Militia are effectively operating against them. Lorry-loads of fifth columnists are rounded up every day.<sup>31</sup>

It was more of a skirmish than an outright assault on the city. The Indian army by this stage had flown more than 3,000 troops into the Kashmir Valley, and every day the military pendulum was swinging more emphatically against the raiders. The attackers were well aware of this. By this stage in the operation, it is probable that more tribesmen were leaving the Valley for home than were entering it to support the jihad. For the residents of Srinagar, though, the sound of automatic weapons and artillery, and the bombing raids mounted by the Indian air force, added to the sense of anxiety. ‘Within the city,’ reported Margaret Parton, ‘the absence of regular news channels has turned each bazaar into a dangerous rumor factory, where ideas woven out of panic and ignorance are carried to adjacent bazaars with the punctuation of near-by gunfire.’<sup>32</sup>

Having tried and failed to fight their way into Srinagar, the raiders seem to have come to the conclusion that the city had become impregnable. They gathered in large numbers at Shalateng, just outside the city to the north-west, perhaps with the intention of making a more determined advance, though possibly with a view to regrouping and heading out of the Valley. Early on 7 November there were sharp clashes with Indian troops. Newly arrived armoured cars were deployed by the Indian army—and according to some accounts, the raiders, who had been waiting eagerly for the Pakistan army to supply them with armoured vehicles, mistook the contingent as their own and cheered their arrival enthusiastically, only to be mown down. The Indian air force also hit the tribesmen’s ground positions. In a well-executed manoeuvre, Indian army units took up positions partly encircling the raiders. ‘I gave the word GO,’ recounted Brigadier Sen, ‘and hell broke loose . . . There was complete confusion

in the enemy positions. The defectors of 4 J & K Infantry, the Mahsuds, Wazirs, Afridis and Mohmands, in trying to escape the fire that was hitting them from three sides, and seeing the bayonet charge descending on them, rushed in all directions and, crashing into one another, turned and fled westwards.<sup>33</sup> Bogey Sen claimed the credit for planning and commanding what came to be known as the Battle of Shalateng, and securing the emphatic defeat of the raiders within twenty minutes. His detractors insist he had little hand in the preparations, and only turned up at the battlefield as the fighting was subsiding. What's beyond dispute is that the clash at Shalateng prompted a fast and furious retreat by the raiders. The Indian account talks of 472 enemy dead on the battlefield, with a further 146 bodies recovered between Shalateng and Baramulla as the retreating forces were harried from the air and on the ground. The raiders left behind 138 buses and trucks. Their field ambulances were overrun, as was their command position. There were hardly any Indian casualties.

'The Liberation Forces three-pronged advance on Srinagar continued unabated in spite of strong opposition,' *Dawn* reported the next morning, citing the provisional government of Azad Kashmir. But it wasn't true. Khurshid Anwar told the same newspaper several weeks later how India's use of armoured cars and intensifying air attacks forced the raiders' retreat. 'The tribesmen suffered casualties and they could not even pick up their dead.'<sup>34</sup> Akbar Khan put a different gloss on the withdrawal. Casualties at Shalateng were modest, he insisted—because most of the tribesmen had already pulled out. 'The withdrawal of the tribesmen had not been a step by step falling back, but a breaking away and a total disappearance,' he claimed. 'One moment they were there and the next moment they were gone.' His political ally, Ibrahim Khan, echoed this account of a force which evaporated with extraordinary rapidity. The tribesmen were attacked from behind at Shalateng, he asserted, and fearing 'that their line of communication back to their base may be cut off from behind, they lost heart . . . they disintegrated into smaller groups and vanished.' A semi-official Pakistani account of the fighting recorded that tribesmen had started to leave the Kashmir Valley and head home from the evening of 31 October, but that Shalateng 'precipitated a general withdrawal'.<sup>35</sup> Whether it was a retreat or a rout, and it was probably both, the laskhar never recovered from the encounter at Shalateng. And the collapse of the armed attempt to seize the Kashmir Valley for Pakistan caused, and continues to excite, acrimony and recrimination within Pakistan's military. 'The abandonment of the conduct of war to tribesmen with bolt action rifles, while the Indians attacked them with Spitfires,



Tempests, Harvards and Daimler/Humber/GMC Armoured cars,' wrote a retired major in the Pakistan army, Agha Humayun Amin, 'was without any doubt one of the most disgraceful acts in Pakistani military history.'<sup>36</sup>

It was not the end of the fighting. There were pockets of resistance in the Valley—some of them well entrenched. Azad Kashmir forces were still active and effective in Poonch and adjoining areas of Jammu province, where the fighting continued for another year. They also continued to control the section of the princely state west of the Valley. But Indian forces, in their first active deployment, has secured the vale of Kashmir and seen off an acute military threat. Brigadier Sen and his soldiers advanced in the wake of the retreating lashkar, with hardly a shot fired. On the evening of 7 November, Sikh soldiers occupied Pattan. The following day Indian troops entered Baramulla. Four days later, Uri came under Indian army control, and the Kashmir Valley had been cleared of attackers.

A day or two after Indian troops entered Baramulla, Francis Rath made his way out of the town to Srinagar. He passed close to Shalateng and saw the aftermath of the battle. There were tribesmen's corpses in profusion—most, apparently, the victim of Indian air strikes rather than ground attacks. 'Dogs and vultures were eating the bodies,' he told me. 'I saw it myself.' The *Herald Tribune's* Margaret Parton, heading in the opposite direction in the wake of the Indian army, encountered one of the most haunting images of her years as a reporter in India: 'the look of a particular, huge, red-bearded tribesman lying dead in a ditch by the highway to Baramullah, his hill-made rifle still clutched in his hand.'<sup>37</sup> By the standards of modern warfare, the number of casualties incurred during the tribal invasion of the Kashmir Valley was modest. It's impossible to offer a figure with any confidence, but when civilian deaths are included, it's likely that the total number of those killed in the Kashmir Valley in late October and early November 1947 was in the low thousands. But the political wounds to Kashmir's body politic suffered during those weeks of upheaval have never fully healed.