

WHERE THE SANDS OF THE DESERT TOUCH THE SKY

When we returned to Edinburgh it was time for a bit of action. Annie insisted that the first thing to do was to sort out all the old tapes in my study and to see if we could make something of them. After all, we convinced ourselves, a professional recording would not capture the spirit of our friends performing *live* on the road! To hear them singing in diverse places along the Asian Highway would be like listening to *TSOCIS* first hand by the storytellers themselves, and in a way that professionals could not hope to match. We ignored the fact that our friends were singing under adverse conditions: often hungry and tired, giving a performance in Baghdad, Kabul or Quetta with an antiquated microphone thrust under their noses. No, the truth was that getting a few professionals to do the job, however well disposed, would cost serious money, and they might not necessarily like the sort of things we were singing about. Judith, who had painstakingly put together the lyrics and music in a little booklet with a foreword by the *singing* President, Kenneth Kaunda, agreed and made her way to Edinburgh to lend a helping hand.

In the event we managed to assemble about twenty songs. Not bad! But not so good either. A favourite, to which the reader has already been introduced, *Tabla Wallah*, sung so beautifully on many occasions by dear Brenda Stevens, suffered in the recorded version from a lack of co-ordination in the verses between tabla player and singer. An attempt was made to resolve this by my speaking the words where appropriate over Brenda's singing; a cunning device but one unlikely to slip past listeners well practiced in tactics of this kind who expect, nay demand, the real thing - without the baggage of sentiment! Still, it was worth a try, and where else but in the studios of Malcolm Macgregor in the *honest town* of Musselburgh. Overworked and tired, Malcolm was hooked on the idea and tolerated our presence with good-natured forbearance.

In a small cabin behind a vast array of computers there was a microphone. I was locked in and warned to remember my lines (reminiscent of the Benedictine monk, similarly incarcerated in a cellar, and heard singing during vespers to signal that he had remembered the recipe for the now famous liqueur – as instructed by the abbot) and to speak at a given signal. My throat was a bit hoarse and a mild squeak was noticeable,

upsetting the otherwise refined resonance of a voice ready to offer its services to Queen and Commonwealth. A discreet cough would have done the trick and assuaged my vanity. The producers however were past caring about such niceties and the recording went ahead squeak and all. When *Together Unafraid*, sung by 900 children of The Chase High School in Malvern, was put up the sound was great, even fearless, although the school band accompanying the singing did occasionally march off on its own leaving the singers to find their own way. But they did meet at intervals - while belting out *To-gether, Un-afraid* - before the band drifted away again provoking the choir to lift its game a decibel or two in retaliation. So, there it was!

Judith thought we might try the same trick of speaking the verses and using the best chorus repeated as often as necessary. Sadly, it didn't work, but we did manage to dredge up enough material to fill a CD and send copies to our closer friends - those who would not be put off by the *bum notes* - for Christmas. It had a picture of the Syrian Desert between Damascus and Baghdad on the cover with the evocative title *Distant Echoes*. At the bottom TSOCIS (in full) was inserted: a bit if wishful thinking perhaps, but in a storm will any old port not do? .

What was the point of it all one might well ask! Well, I have lived long enough to know that if you stick at something that is inherently worthwhile for long enough, without allowing pessimism or despondency to interfere, the mind (or better still the good Lord) usually turns up trumps and ideas begin to flow. We eventually came to the conclusion, encouraged by some very kind and thoughtful comments on *Distant Echoes*, that it might be worth looking again at the times, places, people and events that led to *The Green Pennant Awards*, and inspired the songs in the first place. Events in Afghanistan and Iraq, where Comex had spent a lot of time, might even turn the wheel of public interest in our direction. *TSOCIS* certainly warranted professional treatment if it was to attract the support of people unfamiliar with Comex.

It could be argued, and often was, that there is today very little interest in the Commonwealth. But whose fault is that? The Queen's view is crystal clear; Prince Philip's a close second. Our confidence was sustained by such thoughts and we stood firm. As the doers, we insisted that the Commonwealth belongs to people and not governments; and for that reason alone justified launching Comex into *restoring old friendships eroded by time*

and neglect. That it should grow into an award acknowledging the greatest single challenge of our times was a bonus, and an adventure entirely suited to *the young and the young in heart.* If this trumpet blows too loud it still makes a good sound and could have no better stage than *'those ancient land-routes that made us what we are before the aeroplane came'* - hence *Together Unafraid.* To refresh my memory therefore, I have to retrace the path I once trod over thirty years ago.

Picked out by camels and donkeys long ago, the Asian Highway starts at the border town of Bazagan on the Iranian side of the Turkish-Iranian frontier, within sight of Mount Ararat. This ancient highway serves over fifteen hundred million people and was once known as the silk route (more recently dubbed the long dusty road) operating between Venice and Hanchow. It was also the *stage* on which Comex was to perform before that largest audience in the world. Wise men, holy men, conquerors and rogues have pursued their ambitions from one end to the other, war has disrupted progress, frontiers have been moved. Engineers with bulldozers and gangs of labourers with picks and shovels have had to make way for the more pressing needs of tanks and soldiers with guns.

Travelling alone on the Asian Highway can be a salutary experience, concentrating the mind and focusing attention on ordinary, everyday values: words, gestures and actions - all prayers in themselves - that uplift the spirits and kindle afresh love and respect for one's fellow human beings. I was destined to travel this road many times and to experience the kindness and hospitality of people whose lives are inextricably bound up with it. The stories they have to tell would fill many volumes, and in some instances they already have. But my aim is simple: to draw attention to some of the men I was privileged to meet; men whose enthusiasm fired my own and made possible the Commonwealth Expeditions (Comex) that were to follow. And although I have recounted these experiences elsewhere, it helps to refresh the memory here.

In eastern Turkey for example, the driver of a snow-plough, Hassan by name, helped me over the snow-covered mountain of Kop despite considerable inconvenience to himself. Those who know that part of the world would know that there is no way up or down Kop when the snow falls. *'If there is to be peace in the world'*, Hassan said, as we talked for a while before he encouraged me to be on my way before conditions got worse, *'man must learn to call his friend brother. And to find our brothers we must return to the ancient*

landroutes that made us what we are before the aeroplane came' - hence the quote earlier! As a token of appreciation, I gave him a multicoloured balaclava - one I used to wear when serving with junior leaders - which he immediately put to use, replacing the woollen scarf wrapped round his head. My last sight of him was through the driving mirror, dancing in the snow and waving me on with a broad smile of farewell.

Driving in the opposite direction a few months later, I had passed Ararat and was heading for the Tahir Pass with chains clanking heavily about my wheels when a peasant signalled me to stop and asked for a lift. He settled down comfortably and looked round the car but didn't touch anything. We had travelled for some time and were approaching a village when my friend indicated he would like to be set down. I stopped and got out to go through the formalities of leave taking. One can thumb a lift in Turkey much the same as anywhere else, but there is a difference: in Turkey a driver will always stop, and it is customary to pay for a lift. So when I declined his offer of payment he indicated that I should wait, ran down to the village and returned accompanied by an older man who may have been his father. A small boy followed carrying a brass tray with glasses of tea. Together they set to work on my snow chains and when they had been fixed to their satisfaction, we drank tea together. '*Tamam!*' said the older man with the friendliest of smiles as he bowed towards me with his hand on his chest, while at the same time placing the small rug he had been carrying on his shoulder on the passenger seat. He was repaying a small kindness, as honour demanded, and one that had to be accepted.

When it snows in Turkey it is more than likely to be snowing in Iran. My inclination was to travel from Tabriz to Tehran by night; but at the time the road was little more than a dirt track, over four hundred miles of it, and would now be covered with snow all the way. So I pulled into the nearest hotel for a night's shelter and there met Touradj Kenani. He spoke excellent English, had recently completed a degree course at Tehran University and was now apprenticed to the Iranian National Tourist Organisation. I suggested light-heartedly that he was welcome to practise on me! Touradj had come to Tabriz in an INTO car so we arranged to travel to Tehran in convoy, which was just as well because without his help, and willing hands to give us a push when all other means of progress failed, we would not have made it. The journey took three days and remains in my memory wedded to Iranian Reisling No 12, a local wine to which I was introduced as a suitable accompaniment to chello kabab.

In Tehran he insisted I stay with his family because his parents would not approve of a friend staying in a hotel - I had only known him three days - and besides, his wife was a good cook. In fact we did become firm friends and by a stroke of good fortune he was made responsible for the safe passage of all eight Commonwealth Expeditions hosted en route by the Government of Iran. As a parting gift he gave me a beautifully bound volume of *'The Philosophy Behind the Revolution'* by the late Shah. It has been overtaken by events, but is still of interest as a prelude to the upheavals that followed.

A journey from Tehran to Shah Pasand is normally a day's drive; and although Damavand - the Ben Nevis of Iran and father of the Elburz mountains - towers above the main road from the capital to the Caspian, the road itself is beautifully engineered and makes motoring effortless. It was at the foot of Damavand that I encountered Mohamad (pronounced Mo'mad). He is one of many Mo'mads in this world who play a key role in a variety of activities. I was looking apprehensively at the road with snow piled high on either side when a whistle drew my attention to a figure pointing excitedly at the wheels of my car. I stopped immediately. The beard about his chin was the result of freezing mornings and a natural disinclination to shave. He was well built and wore a multicoloured sweater. The top of his head was graced with a black and white fur cap. His eyes were bright and danced with merriment. There were chains strapped around his waist and pieces of string around his neck. Mo'mad captured his customers by alerting them to a danger they could not immediately comprehend. It had to be done near Ab Ali, the town at the foot of the hill, because once stopped it was difficult to get going again without chains.

I looked anxiously out of the window. *'You want chains?'* he grinned, beginning to unfasten a pair from his belt. I had a pair of my own and told him so. He examined them critically and shook his head. They were too big; but he assured me that he could fix it, and the work began. In a few minutes the chains were fitted. The tension was increased with bits of string on the outside, and he stood back to admire his handiwork. *'Take chaiye?'* he inquired. Yes I would, and we made our way to a small teashop nearby. He paid for the tea leaving me with the problem of how much to pay him without hurting his feelings. Indicating that I would have to leave, I offered him the choice of a handful of coins or a large packet of cigarettes - part of a supply I had on board for such occasions. The choice was up to him, he could have one or the other or both. The smile disappeared. I had turned

the tables on him. Honour would not allow him to take both, so he opted for the cigarettes. The coins he ignored and it would have upset him had I added them to the cigarettes. We shook hands and I was on my way.

Near the border with Afghanistan, at Fariman, I was driving through the town. and had stopped to buy some grapes when I met Dr Fereydoun Chameli. He was on his way home from the hospital and, out of curiosity I suppose, asked if he could help me in any way. I was in no need of any help but thought it particularly gracious of him to take an interest in a stranger. He had visited Britain and was pleased to welcome me to Iran with an invitation to lunch with his family. I was sent on my way with a supply of grapes and melons way beyond my most extravagant needs.

At the time it was a relatively short, but rough, journey from Fariman to the border post with Afghanistan - Tobat-e Jam on the Iranian side and Herat on the Afghan. The actual crossing was at Eslam Qalah, a bleak wilderness at the lowest point between two deserts and a thousand miles from the Khyber Pass. Here I met a young police officer, Zahir al Haq, working in the passport section. He liked the look of my car and thought he might ride with me to Herat. I did not bargain on the trunk that followed him into the car; but in this part of the world so long as there is physical room there is space for passengers and luggage.

Initially he was going as far as Herat, but he enjoyed my company *too much* and decided to accompany me all the way to Kabul. About thirty kilometres from Kandahar the car ran out of fuel; but I had, or thought I had, a spare tin of Super Shell bought in Austria. What I had failed to notice was the words *motor oil* in small black letters. Too late, my policeman friend had tipped the lot into the tank, and when I explained what had happened, he roared with laughter. *'Now I will put on my hat and use my power to help you. The first lorry will do everything for us.'* It was a clear night, the silence of the desert enveloped us and a million stars shone brightly in a black sky. It was the night before the new moon, the eve of Eid, and cold too. To pass the time my friend began teaching me an Aghan dance, but we had not progressed far before the first truck arrived and the sight of Zahir's hat brought it to a halt. The driver was informed that we would like the tank drained and refuelled with a gallon of petrol.

'Did you attempt to start the car?' he asked immediately. Reassured on that point, the driver crawled under the car and the draining began. To help matters along the driver's mate removed the petrol cap and blew into the tank, the full force of this initiative finding its target and bringing forth a great roar from the unfortunate man trapped underneath. I fully expected him to be very angry, even to assault his co-driver when he emerged covered in oil. But not a bit of it; he joined in the laughter as though it was a huge joke, and, depositing a heavy slap on his mate's back proceeded to clear the oil from his eyes and mouth. The tank was duly drained and flushed, a gallon of petrol added, and we were ready to go. When I raised the question of some kind of remuneration for services rendered, Zahir shook his head. *'No, they are happy to help you, and I have told them to take the oil in exchange for the petrol.'*

We drove on to the old rest house in Kandahar. Zahir had been fasting since sunrise and had been nursing his appetite with promises of a large helping of pilau but, alas, it was too late; the cooking pots were cold and the kitchen empty. He sat on the bed next to mine with a disconsolate expression drained of its earlier enthusiasm. I produced a camp stove, a jar of ovaltine, a tin of bully beef and a packet of biscuits. Zahir was fascinated. *'We are friends,'* he cried, setting to with morale completely restored, and pronounced the coffee good. I didn't bother to explain. When I awoke, shortly before five o'clock, Zahir was already inspecting a breakfast of omelette and tea, which he had organised. I enjoyed his company all the way to Kabul.

Returning just before Christmas, I ran into heavy snow a few miles beyond Herat. In fact the countryside was white as far as the eye could see leaving a line of telephone poles as the sole means of orientation. As if from nowhere a donkey appeared, staggering under the weight of a rider twice its size. *'Follow me'* he said, *'Don't be afraid, the donkey will keep to the centre of the road.'* For more than an hour I followed that donkey through the snow, and it was as sure footed as though it had a built-in compass. The scene was almost biblical, nothing else moved. Gradually the road rose above the surrounding snow and I was able to make my way without further help.

At Eslam Qalah, Zahir was waiting and when I told him about the donkey he was delighted. *'In Afghanistan, donkey is a very special animal;'* there was a significant pause followed by: *'like good Afghan it also helps you.'* And not only in Afghanistan, all over the

Middle East there are donkeys everywhere, and while one associates camels with deserts, donkeys are to be found where the camel tracks end, their status rising all the way to the Holy Land.

I was heading in that general direction and stopped for a night in a hotel called Baron, in Aleppo, run by an Armenian called Coco and his Scottish wife. Syria had just extricated itself from the United Arab Republic, and an Egyptian diplomat absconding from his embassy had alarmed the authorities sufficiently to cut Aleppo off from Damascus. Only one man had the influence to secure an exit permit for anyone wishing to leave Aleppo, and that man was Coco. How he did it one would never know, but I got my permit and left with some good advice. If I wanted to cross the Syrian Desert, the best course would be to drive south to a place called Duma (or Douma), just north of Damascus, then turn east and set my compass for Baghdad.

Baghdad was then General Kassim's capital. The bridge across the Tigris was shining new and the largest poster I had ever seen in my life informed me that this was *the cradle of civilisation*. However, it was not until I met Hashim Abdullah Taha, head of many organisations in Iraq, including the equivalent of the AA in Britain, that I got a closer look at that cradle. He promised me that if a Commonwealth Expedition were to include Iraq in its itinerary, whether it approached from Turkey, Syria or Iran, and no matter what the state of relations with those countries, there would be a warm welcome in Baghdad. He was true to his word.

The southern route through the Great Sand Desert of Iran comes out at Quetta, in Baluchistan, the most western province of Pakistan. Near Quetta, my radiator sprung a leak and I was in desperate need of a small quantity of water to keep the engine topped up for the rest of the journey. It was after sunset and dark. Out of the gloom a tall figure appeared dressed in those flowing garments that help to keep the body cool and healthy, and he wore a beard. I spoke Urdu tolerably well and explained my predicament. Without a word he withdrew to his house, a mud hut standing alone in that vast expanse of desert, and returned with a bucket full of water. It was more than generous, considering the limited supply he received once a week from what must be the loneliest outpost in the world, Nokundi, about twenty miles away. I thanked him profusely and asked if there was any way in which I

could help him. *'How can you help me,'* he smiled, *'when God has already blessed me with the opportunity of helping you.'*

Anyone who knows Quetta knows St Francis School; not so much the school perhaps as the man who built it in the thirties out of the rubble of an earthquake, and thereafter masterminded its progress. The late Joshua Sterk was a Franciscan priest who embodied all the characteristics of his order: goodness, humility, humour, and consideration for others. Perhaps I should add courage too! Once, when I credited him with some of these qualities, he laughed out loud and assured me that I was wrong on every count. I first met him when I came out of the desert one evening and drove into his school. I was a stranger and needed a little information on the road ahead, and the difficulties I was likely to encounter. Over the years many others have needed a lot more information and got it from Joshua as he helped many of them on their way to the top of their professions.

Perhaps I should add a brief postscript here. Joshua was transferred to a poor parish, St Joseph's, in Karachi, and it was there that a *Green Pennant* was presented to him - for all his help and kindness over many years - through the good offices of the Government of Pakistan. This extract from his letter may be of interest:

'I have been in hospital with a massive infection in my leg and have to be very careful, and do a lot of resting. Things were rather low but, in the gloom, whence did a little ray of sunshine come? From the good old Commonwealth Expedition. How well I recall the first expedition nosing into the Grammar School. Do I get the honour of a Green Pennant for having you as our guests? For an honour it is, and I am proud of it, and show it off to anyone stepping into my room. Thank you once more. I am not a very good thanker, but what can a man say more?'

Not a great deal has been written about the exploits of the old British-Indian armies in the tribal territory through which invaders descended into the Indus valley. The points of entry - the Bolan Pass near Quetta and the Khyber Pass between Peshawar and Jalalabad - rightly have a special place in Vincent Smith's History of India. As I approached the Bolan Pass, night had already fallen and the air was filled with a great noise. It had range and depth, a great chorus of noises, similar yet different. A bright moon touched the surface of the road winding its way into the valleys beyond, and it was alive with sheep moving to

summer pastures. It was two o'clock in the morning when I finally bade farewell to the sheep and pulled into a small clearing before a tea shop, or *dhaba*. It was built of bamboo with a thatched roof, and erected on a brick platform painted white to ward off ants. All was quiet within, but the faintest chink of light from a hurricane lamp encouraged me to knock on the door.

'Who's that?' Came the sleepy voice.

I asked if hot tea and some food might be available. *Why not?* The wick was turned up, a few quick orders brought two others to their feet as the door was thrown open. It was made of wood, perhaps for better protection. Conversation followed the usual pattern about health and fortune, and the purpose of my journey. When I mentioned the Commonwealth Expedition there was instant enthusiasm and extravagant promises. In this lonely wilderness, it seemed my host was prepared to welcome a few hundred people. That sort of enthusiasm is common in this part of the world, and one of its most endearing qualities.

One of the tasks I had set myself was to explore the cross country route through the Sulaiman Range from Quetta to Multan via Loralai and Dera Ghazi Khan. It was a dirt road through tribal territory; but in Lorelai (once the home of famous British regiments) I found an excellent rest house near a deserted barracks. Naik (Corporal) Mohammad Umar, late of the Baluch Regiment, was in charge. His son - assistant caretaker - together with the sweeper, whose main interest was football, and the night watchman introduced as the captain, who turned out to be captain of the Loralai football team, had been watching a British Information film of an English cup final and wanted to talk about it. It was a splendid way to spend an hour with men more interested in us than our interest in them merits. At dawn they were all present to see me off.

I had an appointment to keep in Rawalpindi, one time capital of Pakistan, and on arrival treated myself to a night in Flashman's Hotel on the Mall. As I approached my room in the annexe, a Kashmiri salesman cornered me. He was pushing a bicycle with a heavy load strapped on the carrier. *'Please buy something.'* he pleaded. I had little time, didn't want anything, and told him so. *'Just look sir,'* he went on, *'what good to make things if people don't see?'* He had me there so I invited him to come in and show me his things while I changed, repeating firmly that I did not want anything.

'Ok, ok, sir.' In a trice the floor was covered in shawls. To my eye they were all beautiful. *'Which one you like best sir?'* he asked. It was a question that could not be ignored, so I pointed to a black shawl with pretty patterns in silver thread.

'Take it,' he cried. *'This is present from me'.* He knew of course that I would not accept such a present without paying for it.

'How much?' I asked.

'Two hundred rupees sir, but no need to pay. It is present sir.' I gave him the money and he gazed at it for a while.

'You are good gentleman sir. Please sir, you come and take tea with my family tomorrow.' And I did, before departing for Lahore and India.

Lahore has not forgotten Kipling. The seat he used when editor of the *'Civil and Military Gazette'* is carefully preserved in its old offices on the Mall Road where Kim's gun still occupies a place of honour. But my meeting was with Mohammad Saleem, owner and principal mechanic of a small garage off the Mall Road. His father, Mohammad Hussain, an ex soldier had set up shop after the Second World War. Following his death, the elder brother Aslam moved on leaving Saleem in charge and in his house there was always a bed for me. Only once did I dare stay at the Intercontinental and when Saleem heard of this he came hot foot to tell me there would be a revolution in the house if I failed to change my abode.

Jawaharlal Nehru once reminded me that it takes a lifetime to learn all there is to known about India. It has taken Britain more than two centuries and the lesson is by no means over. My own learning process began with the people I met, whose opinions I learnt to value and on whose friendship I came to rely. I once asked a bullock-cart driver if he would stop while I took a photograph. He was moving at about three miles an hour on the Grand Trunk Road about fifteen miles from Delhi, and had been singing happily to himself until I spoke when, with a broad grin, he informed me that he would be late getting to

Delhi. *Would five rupees serve as adequate compensation? 'O yes,'* he said cheerfully, and reined in his bulls. He then proceeded to adjust a disorganised turban, and adopt a more striking pose. Any thoughts about delay in getting to Delhi were forgotten as he told me about his daily travels from one village to another. *'Sahib,'* he said, *'if you are thinking to send copy of photograph, it is better to send two, one to each place, so that at least one will fall into right hands.'*

The little shops of India could give the rest of the world a few lessons in enthusiasm, courtesy and salesmanship. But the technique that lies at the heart of a centuries-old culture is not easily transplanted, nor does it always thrive in foreign soil. Noting my interest in the bales of coloured cottons stacked high in his tiny shop in Janpath - the nearest thing to a high street in New Delhi - a shopkeeper invited me *to take a cup of tea*, making room on the wooden platform on which he squatted. His arm and shoulder, resting on a bolster, were moved into an upright posture so that I could join him. He was critical of the government complaining that they only knew how to take money from people like himself. When I responded by talking about the goodwill and hospitality I had encountered he seemed pleased. And the more he criticised his country's shortcomings, the more I reminded him of its achievements - including for good measure that the new Commonwealth was born in India.

'That is no doubt true,' he acknowledged, *'so we must do something.'* That something was not meant to be anything in particular so I didn't press the matter, pointing instead to the limitless beauty and good humour that attracted visitors to India; emphasising that it was up to Indians themselves to deal with the ugly and the bad. *'O yes, we must do like this'* and promptly switched the subject: *'How is Her Majesty?'* It was a question to which he neither expected nor wanted an answer, and after a while announced that *'she is very nice lady.'* It was now my turn to change the subject so I asked him about his business and the economy in general. *'O, now you are asking; it is so damn sir, it nearly bloody! But I am so happy you come to our India. You are like my own family member.'*

Two days later, attempting to cross the Narmada river near Nagpur, I twice came to a dead end: a lot of water but no bridge. And the third time was not lucky either; there was a bridge right enough, concrete and complete but for a single span. The impulse in such circumstances is to toy with the possibility of revving up and having a go at flying over, but

wiser counsels usually prevail. In my case that counsel came in the form of one Balram. He was a little man, very dark, dressed in loin cloth and turban, which is not merely a coloured form of headdress, worn to stave off the adverse effects of the sun; it is frequently used as duster, towel, bed sheet, towing rope and carrier bag and is stored on the head for convenience. Balram informed me that the bridge had been like this for two years. When I asked why, he replied that the river didn't want a bridge there. Had he told the authorities. *'No, no, if I tell them they will catch me by the ear'* (the inference being some form of punishment) *'but they cannot catch the river by the ear because it hasn't got one,'* he laughed.

For a few rupees per head, a dozen volunteers were recruited to construct a raft and ferry me across. Ferrying meant that they got into the water and propelled the raft, and although Balram had instructed me to sit in the car, I decided to join him instead. That gesture must have forged a bond between us because on reaching the far bank he asked if he might accompany me as far as Nagpur, to visit his brother who owned a tea-shop there. I later discovered that the Narmada (for some reason, autosuggestion perhaps, I used to call it Nabada) is no ordinary river. According to Hindu mythology, it was born of Shiva's sweat when he performed his *cosmic dance*; and legend claims that, every year, the polluted Ganges comes in the guise of a dark woman to take a purifying dip in the Narmada. The river rises in the Amarkantak Plateau and flows westwards for 775 miles across the states of Madhya Pradesh and Gujarat before entering the Arabian Sea.

Heading for Bangalore, the *garden city* slap in the middle of southern India - where my scholarly brother once had the pleasure of teaching at St Joseph's College - I was acutely aware of moving along the ramparts of history with brief glimpses into some of its more spectacular events; and in that context my thoughts turned to Tipu Sultan. Described as *restless and erratic, but brilliant in tactics and fertile in expedients*, Tipu kept the south in continuous alarm and precipitated war in 1789 by attacking Travancore. Reacting to this Lord Cornwallis, in command of the East India Company's forces, took Bangalore and arrived within sight of Seringapatnam, Tipu's capital. But Tipu cut off supplies and forced a treaty. Another advance and this time Cornwallis was able to dictate terms: one half of Tipu's lands, indemnity of over three million pounds, all prisoners released, and two of Tipu's sons handed over as hostages.

Peace continued for five years. But the final curtain for power was rung down by the Marquis of Wellesley, then a Colonel and later Duke of Wellington. Since 1793 Britain had been at war with France and as Wellesley set sail for India Bonaparte was preparing his expedition to Egypt. Searching for allies, Tipu sent agents to the French occupied island of Mauritius. The Governor promptly proclaimed an alliance with Mysore producing instant and drastic action from Wellesley. He launched a double attack from Bombay and Madras, and within two months Seringapatnam was besieged. Tipu refused to pay indemnity of two million pounds, the city was stormed and on the 6 May, 1799 *the prince of them all* was killed. The Hindu royal family was restored.

People still walk along the banks of the Cauvery musing about those times. Tipu's wooden summer palace is still there and among the endless scenes of battle painted on the walls is that of his two sons being handed over as hostages. It is difficult to comprehend a period when the makers of the rules also fought the battles. Certainly there was cruelty and intrigue; but there was also a primitive kind of chivalry. On 1 February 1974 the Government of India renamed the state of Mysore, as Karnataka, and moved its capital to Bangalore.

I had appointments to keep at the universities of Madras and Bombay, the National Defence Academy at Karakwasla, the University of Delhi, and Tagore's famous open-air university at Santiniketan, near Calcutta. In all a trek of some two thousand miles; but en route I simply had to call on my Mahratta friend, Colonel Vasant Deshpande at Kolhapur, in the state of Maharashtra; and at Mhow, an equally dear friend, General Siri Korla, one time commander of the 3rd Gurkha Rifles and now commanding the School of Infantry. Vasant and I had once spent some happy days in Simla while he was still serving: looking out towards the Himalayas, reviewing the past and contemplating the future - in particular where my travels would eventually take me.

Siri and I had practised the arts of war together at the School of Infantry in Warminster, and emerged from the experience unscathed. He took me on a guided tour of the famous Mandu Fort in Indore overlooking the Narmada with a panoramic view in every direction. The fort is famous, he explained, for being the largest and most effective single structure, enclosed in a 45 kilometre parapet of walls, for the defence of the South against invasion from the North (1554). But there was also the romantic legend of a beautiful

princess, *Rootami*, whose lover, *Baz Bahadur* (*perhaps he had been a young officer in the School of Infantry of that time! but he certainly was a prince*) shared his love of poetry and music with her; and she, with a beautiful voice, would sing for her lover from her own private corner of the fort at sunset. It was the only spot from which her singing could find its way to him. This delightful story was not precise, nor was the outcome of their romance. Siri's purpose however, was more down to earth: to draw my attention to India's military heritage, touching only briefly on her romantic soul. To complete the task he ordered me to join him on a night exercise - the first time I had attended such a function dressed in a blazer and flannels. These are occasions to savour when thinking about India, the long dusty road and more widely, the Commonwealth.

In Calcutta I made the obligatory pilgrimage to the headquarters of Mother Teresa bravely established in the poorest quarter of the city. Confronted with absolute humility and holiness, there is very little one can say. This amazing little nun had a presence quite unique in my experience. She seemed perpetually cheerful, and blissfully oblivious to anything unusual happening around her. In such a situation only one question comes to mind: '*How do you manage all this?*' '*Love!*' she replied. (*In 1979 the Commonwealth Express, Comex 9, was routed to Calcutta to visit her and her Missionaries of Charity.*)

Having picked up the intelligence that the road over the Tribhuvan Pass into Nepal (also part of the Asian Highway) had been completed on the Indian side, I decided to make a quick visit to Kathmandu. I had always harboured the hope that Nepal might one day be invited to join the Commonwealth; wishful thinking perhaps, but why not? Gurkhas had served alongside the armies of every Commonwealth country with distinction, and their country would similarly honour the Commonwealth. Anyway, many of the men I had soldiered with lived there and we shared memories that last a lifetime, some of which are recorded for posterity in *Journey of a Lifetime*. One of these was Purnaram Gurung. He had been my orderly and on retirement built himself a house on a hill in the village of Mesina, in Western Nepal; there was no electricity or indoor sanitation, water was collected from the valley below, and he had a large family. When I asked if there was anything I could do for him, he replied: '*hoina hazur, Bagwan ko kirpale sab kura chha*' (no sir, with God's blessing I have everything).

(More recently, while he was enjoying an evening glass of *raksi*, he was disturbed by two Maoists armed with grenades and demanding money. 'Go ahead and kill me,' he said 'But you will die too.' They considered that proposition and withdrew leaving Purnaram to return to his *raksi*. Of such are the friends our country is blest.

At Pokhara airport it was good to see His late Majesty King Mahendra wearing the same style of Gurkha hat that helped crush the contents of my cranium when I served with Gurkhas. My brother and I had met King Mahendra when he was crown prince, at a party given by the British Ambassador. I mention the matter because having just learnt Gurkhali I felt bold enough when presented to his father (King Tribhuvan) to mention the fact adding that I would not know how to address him in the language. His response was to send me to a corner of the room in the company of the crown prince for a brief tutorial. How could I not take a picture of my former tutor!

On the road to Kathmandu, I had first to make my way to Patna, on the road leading to Dum Dum airport. It was here that I had a full and lasting view of the rickshaw wallah, or *rickshaw man*, as I prefer to call him, in action, and I make no apology for recording the event as it impressed itself on me.



The morning crowd flowed over the pavements, spilled into the road and covered it. A narrow tramline glistened as it snaked its way through the crowd. The red beret of a policeman appeared above the mass of humanity, arms outstretched in the manner of a conductor. Buses, cars and lorries heaved and rattled through the crowd like waves impatient to be done and die on a rocky shore. Trams lurched along their right of way, brushing aside protest. Bullock carts, tongas, trishaws and cyclists laced themselves about the heavier vehicles, scrambling for space, deaf to the exhortations of the policeman's

whistle. Amber, red and green lights flashed dutifully. In the midst of all this, a rickshaw man tapped a small bell against the shaft of his rickshaw, crying a warning as he trotted along. His thoughts, his feelings and the risks he encountered, belonged to him; but the onlooker could only hope that the rickshaw as a mode of transport - however essential in its time for those otherwise unable to get about - would soon be retired forever. And when the great call comes, and the rest of humanity jostle and scramble to negotiate their way into Heaven, the Rickshaw man may well be called forward to enter without hindrance.

Pull your rickshaw, pull it quickly,
Stretch your limbs and bow your head.
Pull your rickshaw, pull it quickly,
Tap your bell until you're dead.

Pull your rickshaw, pull it quickly,
Halloa loud the warning cry.
Pull your rickshaw, pull it quickly,
Pull it till you die.

Pull your rickshaw, pull it quickly,
Cross the tramlines, pass the bus.
Pull your rickshaw, pull it quickly,
Dare you groan or make a fuss.

Pull your rickshaw, pull it quickly,
As the cross-roads come in sight.
Pull your rickshaw, pull it quickly,
Faster, faster, with your might.

Pull your rickshaw, pull it quickly,
Use your feet to make it stop.
Pull your rickshaw, pull it quickly,
Keep on running till you drop.

Pull your rickshaw, pull it quickly,

Never mind your burning feet.
Pull your rickshaw, pull it quickly,
Hurry, hurry down the street.

Pull your rickshaw, pull it quickly,
While you hunger, while you thirst.
Pull your rickshaw, pull it quickly,
Till your heart cries out to burst.

Pull your rickshaw, pull it quickly,
With the hope that God has given.
Pull your rickshaw, pull it quickly,
Till you set it down in Heaven.

At Patna I embarked on the river steamer *Chetla* for the journey to Mazaffarpur where the muddy waters of the Ganges flow through a flat, barren landscape. I sat on a bench on the upper deck; an elderly gentleman who had been the librarian of the government library at Patna sat beside me. *'Will you join me?'* he asked, offering some grapes from a piece of newspaper. Inevitably we began talking about the Commonwealth. *'You must come and speak in Patna,'* he said. *'We have a very big field there; at least a hundred and twenty thousand people can be accommodated.'* When I assured him I had no such ambitions, he replied: *'Why not? Other people must go and find out about the moon, but we should concentrate on making this planet a better place.'* He reflected on that statement for a moment, as the steamer chugged along slowly up stream. I said nothing. Then, and maybe with those thousands in mind, he raised his voice a little: *'The Head of the Commonwealth is a beautiful lady, and she is in London. But the heart of the Commonwealth is here, no other place'* he declared, embracing the whole of India in a sweeping gesture.

The journey from Muzaffarpur to Raxual on the Indian-Nepalese border is not the jolliest of adventures. From the rough and ready landing stage the fifty odd miles to the border is best forgotten, but beyond that the hills beckon, and the experience is adequately remembered – and I pray will not give offence - in the *Road to Kathmandu*.

On the Road to Kathmandu; the curly-wurly, topsy-turvy* -
call of destiny, maybe - road to Kathmandu:

Winds blow cold, traffic's light, no revolution in sight;
but there's a petrol station on the road to Kathmandu!

From Raxaul to the mountains is an eerie-scary journey,
and anything can happen on the road to Kathmandu.

Beyond the Tribhuvan Pass the air's full of peasant voices,
and terraced gardens grace the hills, on the road to Kathmandu.

Faithful friends will greet you, with drums, and songs and dances;
and sounds of life surround you, on the road to Kathmandu.

There was a time when porters, traditional transporters,
carried cars and grand pianos, on the road to Kathmandu.

Now cars, and trucks, and buses ply the road across the passes;
and travellers seek nirvana on the road to Kathmandu.

It all seems so exciting; no place is more inviting;
but nothing really happens: On the road to Kathmandu

* 'ultā-pultā' in Gurkhali

These and other events led me to the office of Jawaharlal Nehru on 19 October 1962. The news at the time was bad; the Indian army had suffered severe reverses against the Chinese the day before and as Prime Minister he would be preoccupied with their consequences. In spite of this my appointment was not cancelled but advanced from 10.30 to 9.30 a.m. As I sat in the office of this remarkable man, wondering at his simple humanity, I had to remind myself that he was the leader of the largest democracy in the world, and that it was in his country that the new Commonwealth was born. He talked about the situation along the North-East Agency with great feeling, the expression on his face changing

constantly, and when I suggested that it had at least removed regional barriers within India, he remarked quietly that this would not stop the casualties. It was hardly the time to launch into an enthusiastic account of what I had seen in the country, or my personal views on the future of the Commonwealth. However, I did very briefly outline the purpose of my visit and expressed the hope that I might come and see him again.

Making my way back via Risalpur, in Pakistan, I called on Group Captain Chowdhury. It was a brief visit and during lunch I expressed a wish to see the valley of Swat and Malakand. *'There's a quicker way than going by road,'* he said. It was not the best time to be diving from twenty-two thousand feet in a jet trainer piloted by a young officer anxious to impress his chief, but it was done. We swept close into the valley and saw Malakand sideways on, and then did it again to get the opposite view - but not at my insistence. However, it was a brilliant finish to visiting India and Pakistan.

Passing through Jalalabad, between the Khyber and Kabul, my thoughts turned to the Somerset Light Infantry whose cap badge bears the name Jalalabad (spelt Jellalabad). In this beautiful valley one of the most famous battles of the first Afghan War was fought to a finish on 7 April 1842. In Kabul my old friend, Abdullah Afghan Zade, showed me around Qarga Dam (the site later occupied by Russian tanks on a quite different mission) about fifteen kilometres out of Kabul as the ideal place to camp. It could accommodate up to three hundred and, if necessary, a further three hundred near the old gateway into Kabul - between the hills Sher Dawaza (*the Tiger's Door*) and Azamai (*the Sky*).

Passing though Herat, I called on a man who was to do much in promoting the popularity of Comex in Afghanistan, Hamidullah Enayastusseradje. He was then governor of Herat and assured me that there would be no problem over accommodation there either. I next met him outside the Waitrose supermarket on the Gloucester Road in London. I had just emerged with a carrier bag full of groceries and was weighing up the prospect of taking a taxi when a Rolls Royce flying the Afghan flag drew up. *'Hullo, how are you my friend?'* cried the voice of the Afghan ambassador - Hamidullah Enayastusseradje. He very kindly drove me home, and before leaving urged me to keep in touch.

On my return to Britain I had asked to see the Duke of Edinburgh, hoping that he might agree to be patron of the first expedition, should we be able to mount one. I could

think of no one who would better understand the project, or be prepared to be identified with it. His Private Secretary wrote to say that *His Royal Highness would be pleased to see me at 10 a.m. on Wednesday the 26 June 1963.*

I went to the Privy Purse door. Inside it was surprisingly quiet and orderly and far from overpowering. I signed in and walked along a red carpet, turned left up a few steps and along a corridor to the Private Secretary's office. A brief exchange on the intercom and I was led upstairs to a small lounge. Precisely at 10 a.m. HRH walked in. This was my first meeting with him and, whatever the outcome of Comex, I will always be grateful for his patience and his encouragement. He listened without interruption giving me time to say everything I had carefully rehearsed. His questions were precise and to the point, and I came away with the impression that he liked the idea.

In November I returned to India along the northern route of the Asian Highway, to join a working group under the chairmanship of Shri R. K. Kapur, Joint Education Adviser to the Ministry of Education. Other members at this first planning session were: P.K. Kathpalia, Deputy Secretary, Ministry of Education; R.L. Anand, Under Secretary; G.D. Sondhi, Indian Olympics Representative; H. Singh, Bharat Scouts and Guides; A.K. Singh, College of Physical Education; Captain N. Kumar, Indian Everest Expedition; and N.N. Dutta, Assistant Education Officer. Had the early enthusiasm they exhibited been maintained, Comex would have made effective progress more quickly.

I called on the Prime Minister on his birthday and told him how matters were developing. His daughter, Indira Gandhi, was present during the meeting. At his behest I was invited to attend the Indian Universities' Festival in New Delhi, an annual event started by Nehru in 1955. It was on this that a much larger Commonwealth programme was to be modelled.

At the time we were blissfully unaware of a catastrophic event that was about to burst over our heads. On the morning of 23 November 1963, I had set out on my usual walk along Shanti Path (Avenue of Peace). It was early, but that alone could not account for the lack of activity everywhere. There was an ominous silence in the air and the flags of all foreign missions on either side of the road drooped sadly at half mast. I wheeled right into the British High Commission, opposite the American Embassy, to ask what had happened.

'President Kennedy has been assassinated,' I was told. As I continued my journey along Shanti Path, nursing a confusion of thoughts, I could see the President's personal standard high above the dome of his palace. It was like a sign of reassurance in a world gone mad. John Kennedy had been a good and generous friend to India as the Prime Minister acknowledged in eloquent and moving terms to a silent Lok Sabha. In a spontaneous reaction I expressed my thoughts in verse for the *Hindustan Times*, and although no part of this story I include it here - perhaps because I was thinking about *the little green flags*:

Within history's memory there have always been flags -
Glittering gold banners and worn tattered rags -
To proclaim the great victory, to acknowledge defeat,
At the crossroads where triumph and tragedy meet.

Of what use is greatness, or wealth, or of power,
What purpose a lifetime, a day, or an hour
Stripped of the heritage man might possess:
Of peace, of love, of hope and happiness?

The rich and the poor, how tell them apart,
Where does one end and the other one start?
All are equal at the portals of sorrow,
United today, divided tomorrow,

Time passes quickly, the memory short,
Our hearts wear the scars their anguish has bought;
But the memory remembered can lessen the pain
When our flags ascend proud to their masthead again.

The working group started its first session on 10 December 1963, and throughout I kept in mind the note I had received from the Chairman of the Royal Commonwealth Society before leaving London. The Society was prepared to back any initiative from India and liked the idea of Comex. It considered that 'an invitation would of itself be the most marvellous springboard for money, publicity and everything else. Any premature assumption *that India would say yes, would do nothing but harm and be discourteous to*

India. At the conclusion of our deliberations, Kapur produced a plan for organizing a Commonwealth Youth Festival in India. The aim and purpose read as follows:

'The Commonwealth is a rather loosely knit organisation sprawling across the whole world and has few, if any, institutions that definitely try to cement it. The result is that, while there is plenty of goodwill in each Commonwealth country for the other members of the Commonwealth, there is not always enough knowledge about what is happening in different parts of the Commonwealth, nor is there any established agency to foster the Commonwealth spirit among the nations that make up its entity. Quite often, the fund of goodwill that exists in the Commonwealth for the other members of the group gets dissipated because it does not have appropriate goals to pursue.' (A Commonwealth Secretariat was proposed by Nkrumah of Ghana in 1964.)

'And yet the fact is that common ideas and aspirations and a common set of political and moral values, to say nothing of the strong link furnished by the use of the English language, bind the Commonwealth together more subtly and more strongly than any other nations in the world. To organise a new consciousness in the Commonwealth, by bringing together selected groups of young men and women to participate in intellectual and cultural activities as well as in common adventure, it is proposed to organize a Commonwealth Youth Festival in India in 1964.'

The paper went on to express the hope that there would be 2,000 participants, including an overland expedition of 200 from Britain, and outlined a programme of cultural and intellectual activities and trekking in the mountains. It concluded: *'Depending on the success of the programme, and the need to establish an administrative agency for the purpose of organising, among other things, such festivals in future, and to foster the spirit of the Commonwealth community, there may be established in India a Commonwealth college. It is perhaps too early to spell out in any detail the aims of such a college or how exactly it will be run. It is not unlikely that in the course of time, the programme at the college may develop into a Commonwealth Youth Service, somewhat on the lines of Voluntary Service Overseas but with the difference that unlike VSO the CYS will encourage a two-way traffic of voluntary service.'*

It was typical of my Indian friends that I should be nominated to deliver the paper to the Prime Minister. I saw him in the Lok Sabha and he was in excellent form. He promised to read the paper carefully and to do all he could to help. A year later I learned that the Vice-Regal Lodge in Simla was considered at the time a suitable centre for the project, had it developed according to plan. At the foot of Kapur's paper was a note by its first recipient: *'This is a good idea.'* J. Nehru

I made a full report to the Royal Commonwealth Society and to the Commonwealth Relations Office. I was anxious that a little interest and encouragement should be expressed by the *big players* in the field of Commonwealth relations to coax the project along. I outlined with enthusiasm - a little above average perhaps - the route and timetable that Comex would follow, convinced that Richard Hornby, Minister of State at the Commonwealth Relations Office, shared my enthusiasm. One of his aides asked about lavatories on the way for so many people. He no doubt pictured a queue of 200 outside a *single seater* on the Asian Highway; but these facilities were rapidly improving, and the whole of Comex was unlikely to stop in the vastness of the deserts and mountains at the same place and time for the same purpose.

On 30 January 1964, I got a letter from Richard Hornby. I quote it here in full because it formed the basis for immediate action and left me in no doubt about the Government's attitude:

'I will write to our High Commissioner in Delhi suggesting he should write to the Minister of Education in the Government of India, asking for the Minister's formal confirmation that the Indian Government propose to ask other Commonwealth countries to take part in their annual Inter-University Students' Festival. I will ask the High Commissioner to express appreciation of the Government of India's interest in this type of Commonwealth link, to request specific confirmation that we are invited to the festival, and to suggest that when inviting other Commonwealth governments to take part, they might care to bear in mind those people in certain countries with whom you have already discussed this project.'

'The High Commissioner will also be authorized to tell the Indian Government that, once we hear that they have taken formal steps to invite other countries to take part, and

after we have made sure that there is sufficient interest in this country to provide an adequate delegation, we would be prepared to ask our High Commissioners in other Commonwealth countries to tell the governments in those countries that we warmly support the Indian project.

'In the meantime you will be contacting student bodies in this country to ascertain the extent of support there is likely to be for participation in this festival and you will also be considering how best to organise the expedition from this country, and to finance it; perhaps under the auspices of the Royal Commonwealth Society.

'Once we have a satisfactory reply from our High Commissioner in Delhi, and when we have heard from you that the arrangements in this country are proceeding well, we can then decide whether we can support this venture and whether we feel able to recommend it to other Commonwealth countries.'

(It might be helpful to add here that the first student body I faced was at Cambridge University. There were about 200 present. When I had finished outlining the details of a possible Comex, and the reasons for it, I was asked how individuals could volunteer. I pointed to the exercise book I had placed on a table at the back and invited them to enter their names. The response was unanimous.)

In February, I returned to India in one of the new Triumph 2000's to come out of Standard-Triumph in Coventry (Comex Reconnaissance Unit 2). In Delhi I was invited to stay with Prithi Singh of the External Affairs Ministry. Not only was his advice invaluable at that time and afterwards, but his wonderful mother taught me a great deal about the use of spices; and it was her sound guidance that led to the concoction known in Comex circles as Colonel Gregory's Hot Favourites - to which cure for all ills members of Comex would be obliged to turn in the days ahead.

On 17 April I received a telephone call from the Prime Minister's Secretariat that the Government of India had decided to organise a Commonwealth Youth Festival in India and that about £100,000 had been voted to meet the host country's expenses. I had been warned not to be over-optimistic about India taking any initiative, but here in the short space of sixteen months since my first meeting with Nehru, India had taken a considerable initiative,

at the highest level, in the best interests of the Commonwealth. A copy of the draft statement, to be issued simultaneously by the Indian and British Governments the following week, was handed to me. It read:

'The Government of India has decided to organise a Commonwealth Youth Festival in India during September 1964. All Commonwealth countries are being invited to participate in this festival by sending young men and women, mainly from their universities. India being the host country will depute about five hundred students. It is hoped that the remaining Commonwealth countries will send about eight hundred participants including a sizable contingent from the United Kingdom.'

'The duration of the Festival will be two weeks and the programme will include cultural activities, debates and discussions, and trekking in the hills. The British Government welcomes this proposal.'

True to his word, Nehru had done what he could to help. I returned to London as fast as I could, confident that things would now start to happen in earnest. Unfortunately the press statement was never released. The British Government had advised that soundings should first be taken among all the other Commonwealth countries before announcing the intention to hold a Commonwealth Youth Festival in India.

In May Nehru died. I telephoned my condolences to Kapur. On 2 June, he wrote me a very sad letter saying that up to date there had been no reply from the British Government. Replies from most other Commonwealth countries were still pending. In the circumstances, the Government of India had decided to postpone the festival to 1965. Meanwhile a steering committee of the various Commonwealth missions in New Delhi would be set up to decide the major details relating to the holding of a festival. He would like me to attend.

The British Government responded on 18 June to the decision to postpone the festival in the following words:

'The British High Commission has noted the Government of India's decision to postpone the Festival until 1965 and takes this opportunity to assure the Government of India that the Festival has the enthusiastic support of the British Government.'

Although this communication concerned the Education Ministry dealing directly with the project, they knew nothing of it. It remained filed away in the External Affairs Ministry until sometime in November when I asked Kapur to refer to it. I again drove out to India to attend the first meeting of the steering committee on 1 December 1964. Also present were representatives from Australia, Canada, Ceylon, New Zealand, Nigeria, Tanzania and the United Kingdom. For India, Mohamad Yunus, Joint Secretary of the Ministry of External Affairs and Chief of Protocol, and R.L. Anand, Under Secretary at the Ministry of Education, attended. S.P. Naik, Joint Secretary, Ministry of Education, was in the Chair. Cyprus, Kenya, Jamaica, Sierra Leone, Trinidad and Tobago, Malawi and Malta, having no missions in Delhi at that time could not be represented. Zambia sent an observer. The representative from the British High Commission was David Connelly, and a better man could not have been found for the job. We got along splendidly.

The Chairman welcomed the various Commonwealth countries present and informed them that the Government of India proposed to organise a Commonwealth Youth Festival in India in 1965. He said that a final decision would be taken after a majority of Commonwealth countries had agreed to participate in the Festival. He requested representatives to let the Government of India know the reaction of their governments to the proposal, during the meeting itself if possible. If this was not possible, it was imperative that their replies came within the next three or four weeks, so as to leave sufficient time for the Government of India to make the necessary arrangements.

David Connelly spoke first, saying that he deeply appreciated the keen interest of the Government of India and my own efforts with regard to the proposal. He went on to say that the British Government enthusiastically supported it. The size of the contingent from the United Kingdom would depend on funds raised from the public and according to me was likely to consist of about 200 men and women. (*It was in the event 210.*) He strongly stressed the need for an early public announcement by the host country. This, of course, was exactly what the Indian Government had tried to do in April 1964.

The representative from Tanzania wanted a few weeks' respite for his government to make a decision about participating. The New Zealand representative said it might be possible for his country to make a decision after he had conveyed the views of other countries present at the meeting to his government. He hoped to be in a position to give the decision of his government in three weeks' time. The Canadian representative suggested that the Government of India should first make an announcement about the Festival, as this would help his country in taking an early and favourable decision. He also pointed out that there was no central agency in his country responsible for education and it would help his government in dealing with the organisations concerned if an announcement were made immediately. The representative from Ceylon said his government supported the proposal in principle, but wanted to know the financial implications inherent in it. The chairman drew his attention to the notes already circulated - in which paragraph eleven stated:

'Expenditure on the movement of contingents to the base camp in the host country and within it will be the responsibility of participating countries. India would consider allowing rail concessions but expenditure on catering may be shared by participating countries. The host country would be responsible for providing camp sites, supply lines, secretariat and ancillary services and the expenditure under these heads would be their charge.'

The Australian representative regretted his inability to make any commitment even in principle at this stage and the same applied to the Nigerian representative. It was an uninspiring meeting, scarcely to be described as a club of friends planning an exciting event. There was a marked absence of any enthusiasm or humour. It seemed to me that if this was the Commonwealth in action, it was presiding over its own demise.

The next meeting was held on 14 January. In between I went to Malaysia and Singapore to explain the proceedings in Delhi, and from there I wrote to Lord Casey in Australia asking for his help. He replied at once saying he had passed the material to Sir Arthur Tague, Secretary, External Affairs. *'You certainly seem to have made progress,'* he added, *'and I congratulate you.'* He later took the view that the proposal seemed too ambitious and impracticable, but he would do what he could.

My old friend Kapur was back in the chair and announced that since the last meeting, the United Kingdom, Tanzania, Ceylon and Uganda had agreed to participate in the Festival while Nigeria had intimated that it could not. There was still no definite reply from Australia and Canada, although the representative of the former was able to say that his government would be pleased to help the Indian Government make a success of the proposed Commonwealth Youth Festival. His government was still examining the question of Australian participation, as they had a practical difficulty in that Australian examinations are held towards the end of the year. However, his government considered that the Commonwealth Youth Festival would play a valuable role in fostering friendly relations between youth organisations in the Commonwealth and had brought the Festival to the attention of student bodies in Australia. All this was grudging progress, like dragging a dead elephant uphill.

I returned to London less happy than I had been the previous year: what was potentially a good idea was hurtling into oblivion. My insatiable enthusiasm for the project must have been a nuisance, even an annoyance to many people. There seemed to me, in moments of dejection, that nothing could be done to arouse enthusiasm for the Commonwealth. Opinions were readily available and quickly expressed when there was something to criticise, or unpleasant to say about each other, but working together as friends, to strengthen friendship, went beyond the limit of our commitment to the Commonwealth - dramatically demonstrated when India and Pakistan went to war in 1965.

I looked to the men and women who would be participating in the first expedition from Britain for reassurance, and it came in abundance. I wrote to all the Commonwealth High Commissioners in London and to the Commonwealth Relations Office. It was a spirited letter and I quoted the passage from the Queen's Christmas message underlining its reference to the spirit of adventure and '*to the young in heart no matter how old they may be*'. I hoped to make them feel something of the vigour that distinguished the activities of those selected for Comex 1. The spirit generated among them made sense to me, and I felt it could not fail to inspire those in high places as well.

On 26 February, Kapur wrote to me urgently. He had been trying every possible device to save the Festival and felt that if it could happen once, it would happen again - developing its own momentum: '*I am rushing to reply to your letter dated 23 February*

which I have just received. While I fully appreciate the efforts you are making to get the consent of the Commonwealth countries which are, as it were, teetering on the line in so far as our Festival is concerned, I hope you do realise that for the purposes of the Government of India, what it required is the concurrence on the part of the country concerned to join the Festival. Thus, for instance, while what we need from Canada and New Zealand is their concurrence in principle to participate, it will not matter greatly to us if the Governments concerned decide to send students who are studying in the United Kingdom. So long as we have their Government's sponsorship our purpose will be served.' A simple enough solution, but one that the countries concerned were not happy to accept.

On 23 March, the Commonwealth Relations Office wrote: *'As you know, it has always been our intention that, if the Government of India decide to have a Commonwealth Youth Festival, the Royal Commonwealth Society should provide the organisation and finance for the British party. Now that we have heard from the Royal Commonwealth Society that they can no longer undertake this commitment for this year, we have had no choice but to inform the Indian Government, through our High Commissioner in New Delhi, that we are no longer in a position to provide a contingent for a Youth Festival in India, if it is held this year. If the Government of India decides, at this late stage, to hold a Youth Festival this year, we will have to consider what our attitude towards it should be, but I am bound to say that we are in absolute agreement with the Royal Commonwealth Society's judgement that the time is now too short to finance and organize an adequate British contribution to the Festival.'*

Kapur was taken ill and admitted to hospital and K.C.S. Acharya of the India Administrative Service was now handling the Festival project. On 13 April he wrote in reply to my letter addressed to the Education Minister in India, urging the latter to go ahead with the Festival, as follows:

'With reference to your letter dated 31 March to the Education Minister, I am directed to say that in view of the poor response from the Commonwealth countries to participate in the proposed Youth Festival, a decision has regretfully been taken not to hold this Festival. It may, however, be of some interest to you to know that just at the time the Education Minister was inclined to take the participation of seven Commonwealth

countries as sufficient to hold this Festival, a letter from the British High Commission almost sealed the fate of this proposal.

'The High Commission informed us that the Royal Commonwealth Society is of the opinion that time is now too short to finance and organize a British contingent for a Commonwealth Youth Festival in India during the current year and that it can no longer hold itself responsible for attempting to do so. This leaves the British Government no choice but to withdraw their undertaking to provide such a contingent. You will thus see that the withdrawal by the United Kingdom has knocked out the base of the proposal and there seems hardly any sense in pursuing it.'

A formal note was sent to the High Commission of the United Kingdom in India on 13 May 1965. I quote the soulless official jargon in full:

'The Ministry of Education presents its compliments to the High Commission of the United Kingdom in India and have the honour to refer to the Government of India's proposal to organise a Commonwealth Youth Festival in India this year and to state with regret that in view of the poor response from the Commonwealth countries, in general, to the proposal, it has been decided to give up the idea of holding this Festival. The Ministry avails itself of this opportunity to renew to the High Commission the assurance of its highest consideration.'

I received a very kind letter from David Connelly, my official partner at the meetings and an unfailing ally throughout - would there had been more like him. He ended with this concise summing up of the situation:

'I am very sorry that your great idea should have been lost in this welter of governmental inertia and indecision. I hope that some day, in some way, it will be possible to carry it to a conclusion.'

He will be pleased to know that it has been carried to a conclusion with *The Green Pennant Awards* 'identifying the spirit of adventure with crossing the barriers that divide people,' as readers of this summary of events - whether members of Comex or the thousands who supported them - will have noted in *An Historic Event Remembered*

marking the 40th anniversary of Comex 1 (2005). They may also understand why singing about the Commonwealth could be more persuasive than talking about it. *The Green Pennant Awards* were inaugurated, endorsed and presented. *The Story of Comex in Song* is intended to keep that achievement alive.

The men I had met on the road - and I have mentioned only a few - were like living milestones *on a very long dusty road*. But there were thousands more, of all ages, who rose to the challenge of the Commonwealth Expedition, and wanted to be part of it whether their countries happened to be members of the Commonwealth or not. *What's wrong with friends of the Commonwealth?* I was to hear time and again. Nothing of course, its history had touched the lives of people all over the world and those friendships needed to be preserved, not just by governments but by people. Comex did its best but our resources were limited. We continued to keep in touch with our friends and, *God willing*, plan to send as many of them as possible a copy of *TSOCIS – If and when it is successfully recorded*.

(A unique example is Colonel Frank Kimborough, the commander of the American Air Force Base in Frankfurt that looked after the five hundred strong Comex 3 on its way out, and on the way home - instructing its outpost at Trabzon, on the Black Sea, to do likewise. It would be hard to better that.)

Restoring old friendships may not at first sight commend itself as a subject for adventurous treatment. But a little experience can quickly alter that view, as Kenneth Kaunda put it after twenty-eight years as President of Zambia: *'The greatest adventure of all still lies between man and man.'* And the truth of that was brought home to me in the old Yugoslavia at the turbulent crossroads between east and west, where I met the Croatian lawyer Nedjelko Ivancevic, then studying in the Law Faculty of Zagreb University, and Nikola Vrbos, a postman. Regardless of political circumstances, and any inconvenience to themselves, these two men became totally involved with Comex passing through Yugoslavia (then a Communist country). So much so that the former came to Cambridge (working in the kitchen at St John's College washing dishes as a convenient way of paying for his English lessons) to help with the preparation and training of the Cambridge contingent. While the latter encouraged his daughter to switch allegiance from the

University of Zagreb to the University of Cambridge so that she could apply to become a member of the Cambridge contingent.

Not very much has been written about the ancient landroutes that link east and west. I have heard it said - particularly when talking about the Commonwealth - that we must look ahead, move forward into the future: modern, young and dynamic, and be ready for the challenges of the 21st century. My only comment is that in the course of travelling alone over sixty thousand miles I often slept under the stars and it never occurred to me that I would wake up to find my car gone - or would not wake up at all! Only once was I accosted on the Great Sand Desert in Iran. I had parked the car, placed my sleeping bag on the golden sand and slept soundly. I awoke to the sight of two friendly faces watching over me from a distance of a few feet. There was no one else around. They welcomed me into the new day with a smile and asked whether I could give them a little water. I did better than that. We had breakfast together: strong black coffee, oatcakes and honey. Progress into the 21st century has removed brotherly contact of that kind - perhaps forever.

These were the ancient land routes Comex would follow - with the blessing of the United Nations Asian Highway Commission based in Bangkok - accompanied by a theme song dedicated to the Asian Highway, and to all who welcomed Comex and saluted *The Green Pennant*:

TOGETHER UNAFRAID:

Where the sands of the desert touch the sky,
And the mountains rise to heaven from the sea,
Where the wild green earth, with its rivers and its streams,
Speaks for freedom, and for liberty.

Chorus: Together Unafraid,
Over land in the air and on the sea,
Together let us march hand in hand my friend,
And ring the bells of victory.
Together Unafraid,
For a hundred nights, a hundred days,

Together let us go where the Green Pennant flies,
And friendship's banner raise,
Together Unafraid.

Where the rhythmic beat of drums evokes the tune,
And every village dance a story tells,**
Where the hills echo sounds of laughter and song
And sunset falls on temple bells.

Chorus:

Where the saddest sadness lives and hope is gone,
And dreams may never see the light of day,
Where poverty's forgotten and wealth survives,
And the future seems so far away.

Chorus.

To help us get started on the right foot, The Coldstream Guards played Together Unafraid as a march at the Changing of the Guard outside Buckingham Palace, the home of the Head of the Commonwealth.

** *The only original Comex dance was a jig called Gregory's frolic!*