
Why a Nation Needs a Young Military

PK Gautam

Age Profile of Combat Leaders

Though in general, glorification of youth may be labelled a Western phenomenon, in combat, universally, young generals, commanding officers and soldiers have known to have performed better. In creative fields also, peak performance is at younger age, like that of Shakespeare, Mozart, Einstein and Srinivasa Ramanujan.¹ Lamenting on the aged profile of the hidebound and conservative British officer cadre, the revolutionary thinker and maverick General JFC Fuller in his classic work *Generalship: Its Diseases and Their Cure* showed that historically at least 75 per cent of great generals were under 45 years old.² In an appendix titled “The Age of 100 General,” Fuller listed the age of great military leaders at their peak performance: Alexander 25 years, Hannibal 33 years, Caesar 44 years, Jenghiz Khan 51 years, Napoleon 37 years, Clive 32 years, Wellington 43 years, Grant 41 years, Lee 57 years and Moltke, the oldest of the lot, 60 years in the year 1866.³

A modern example of superior combat generalship was displayed by the young Israeli generals during the 1967 and 1973 Wars. Most generals were in their late thirties or early forties. Our post-independence military operations also point to the importance of young generalship and command. Tables 1, 2 and 3 have some examples.⁴

1947-48 Operations in Jammu and Kashmir

Table 1: 1947-48 Operations in Jammu and Kashmir

Serial	Name	Year of Birth	Age During Operations
1.	Maj Gen KS Thimayya, Divisional Commander	1906	41 years

Colonel PK Gautam (Retd) is Research Fellow, Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses, New Delhi.

2.	Maj Gen Rajinder Singh (Sparrow), Divisional Commander	1911	36 years
3.	Maj Gen Kulwant Singh	1905	42 years
4.	Air Cmde Meher (Baba) Singh, Air Officer in Chief, Operational Command	Not Known	35 years (approximate)

Source: Compiled by the author.

On partition, there were not many senior Indian military officers. Promotions thereafter came rapidly. In one way, it facilitated a much younger higher military leadership which led from the front in operations in high altitude and mountainous terrain. Table 1 shows that youth and its natural gift of audacity was one vital factor for feats such as tanks crossing the Zojila Pass under Gen Sparrow (age 36 years). In May 1948, the landing on an unprepared strip at Leh at an altitude of 11,540 feet by a flight piloted by Baba Meher (age 35 years), with Thimayya (age 41) on board, was also a function of daring and risk taking associated with younger generalship.⁵ Baba Meher as an equivalent of a present day commander-in-chief of an air command also led the trial landing in a Harvard aircraft at the beleaguered garrison at Poonch under observed enemy fire. Post his trial landing, Dakotas's commenced landing.⁶

IV Corps: Liberation of Bangladesh in 1971

Table 2 shows the age profile of IV Corps which was the eastern pincer in erstwhile East Pakistan. The corps, for the first time in our military history, displayed a high level of operational art and superior combat performance. The corps commander was 52 years old, divisional commanders were an average 48 years and brigade commanders and commanding officers were in their 40s/ 30s, and company commanders averaged five years of service (below 30s) .

Table 2 - IV Corps: Liberation of Bangladesh 1971

Serial	Name, Appointment	Year of Birth	Age During Operations
1.	Lt Gen Sagat Singh, Corps Commander	1919	52 years
2.	Maj Gen KV Krishna Rao, Divisional Commander	1923	48 years

Serial	Name, Appointment	Year of Birth	Age During Operations
3.	Maj Gen B K Gonsalves, Divisional Commander	1921	49 years
4	Maj Gen RD Hira, Divisional Commander	1923	48 years
5.	Brigade Commanders/ Commanding Officers		40s/ 30s
6.	Company/Squadron/ Battery Commanders		Below 30s

Source: Compiled by the author.

The age profile of some senior officers of the Services is shown at Table 3. The youthfulness is evident and is an important factor for good military performance.

Table 3: Senior Leadership During 1971

Serial	Name, Appointment	Year of Birth	Age During Operations
1.	Gen SHFJ Manekshaw, Chief of the Army Staff	1914	57 years
2.	Air Chief Marshall PC Lal, Chief of the Air Staff	1916	55 years
3.	Lt Gen Jasjit Singh Arora, Eastern Army Commander	1917	54 years
4.	Lt Gen KP Candeth, Western Army Commander	1916	55 years
5.	Lt Gen ML Thapan, Corps Commander XXX Corps	1918	53 years
6.	Maj Gen JFR Jacob , Chief of Staff , Eastern Command	1921	50 years

Source: Compiled by the author.

The Problem of Longevity and Increase in Lifestyle Diseases

The longevity of an average Indian has improved considerably. The United Nations Human Development Report of 2006 shows life expectancy at birth for India at 63.6 years. At independence, it was around 40 years. Most of the infectious diseases have been controlled. However, lifestyle changes, lack of sustainable interest in outdoor

activities and games, and influence of corporate values have led to a disturbing increase in lifestyle related diseases such as obesity, high blood pressure, heart problems, and diabetes.

As will be shown later, due to historic reasons, the Indian military is already burdened with an aged profile of commanding officers and generals. Combined with inflictions due to environmental factors or lifestyle diseases, the drop in fitness standards has become an alarming trend and needs a relook from all aspects of health.⁷ The old age of commanding officers combined with the propensity of modern man falling prey to lifestyle disease is a “double whammy” and points to the need of a younger age profile. This also requires the military to devise health and medical procedures so that the young generation does not fall prey to these health problems. This would only result in an unproductive disease burden and excess of low medical category persons even before battle has been joined.

Present Situation of the Officer Cadre

Due to historic reasons, the Indian Army, for the last two decades or more, has been facing challenges in age and experience in higher ranks.

An officer must command his unit at 12-14 years,⁸ a brigade at 16-18 years and a division at 18 years of service. As a matter of comparison, the rank of a joint secretary (equivalent in monetary terms to a major general) in civil service is possible in about 18 years of service. Today (2008), officers of the 1970 batch are corps commanders at the ripe age of 56 /57 years and will retire having ‘lived’ in that rank for barely a couple of years. Thus, experience in general rank is limited and at the tail end of a career – for barely four to eight years. This is both unfair to the individual and an unprofessional dilemma for the nation. After all, experience in service does matter, and most senior officers stagnate at the level of brigadier and are not part of the loop on higher military matters as commanders. Thus, they do not get the correct environment or experience in higher level national security related conceptualisation, visualisation and translation of ideas/theories into practice. If war is thrust upon us, we will have divisional, corps and army commanders who will be still thinking like unit commanders or colonels as they have spent their most productive years as colonels and, at the most, as brigadiers.

Battalion Commanders, Company Commanders and Soldiers

The old age of the cutting edge unit commanders and unit officers is another “combat divider.” Table 4 gives the comparative data. The Indian Army has the reputation of having the most aged commanding officers. As a matter of fact,

in an age of visual media, the children of military officers have innocently been known to ask “why the police officer looks so young on the TV and his counterpart of the army so old and grey?”

Table 4: Comparative Average Age Profile of Countries

1. Battalion Commanders in Gulf War II(USA)	- mid-30s
2. People's Liberation Army star rank	- 50 years
3. Pakistan Army Commanding Officers	- 35 years
4. Indian Army Commanding Officers	- early 40
5. Indian Armed Forces in 1971 War	
a) Average age of military (troops)	- early 20s
b) Battalion Commanders	- early 30s

Note: Empirical studies suggest age of commanding officers between 33 to 35 years of age.

Source: Jasjit Singh, “Younger Fighting Force for Combat Effectiveness,” Indian Defence Review, vol.18, January-March 2003.

Unfortunately, these shocking old age profiles of officers are addressed either through the prism of Pay Commission dialogues and negotiations or committees. This nudges the military to seek only a comparative advantage versus the civil services by way of increase in pay and cadre upgradation. The age of fighting generals, brigadiers and colonels gets ignored. Combined with this is the sheer absence of sufficient numbers of young officers. Picking up the rank of a major now comes very early. But, paradoxically, there are not many sub-unit commanders posted in a unit to command companies. Company officers are conspicuous by the absence and most of the young officers in an infantry battalion are attached officers from the Services for short durations.

Age of Soldiers and Jawans

It is no secret that the youth, with their exuberance, have led nations and people in all historic revolutionary movements. Similarly, a youthful, trained and battle hardened soldiery performs military tasks better. It is in this context that an average jawan (soldier general duty) of the Indian Army who gets enrolled at the age of 17 to 21 with colour service of 17 years, has to retire in his mid-30s or early 40s.

Due to sizeable and protracted involvement of the army, police and paramilitary forces in counter-insurgency operations, there may emerge an

impression to compare the retiring age of the police with that of the army. A constable serves till the age of 60. Financial theoreticians and pundits may well argue on the following lines: “The tasks have changed—it’s now mostly low intensity warfare. If the paramilitary is doing its job with a higher age profile, why cannot the army do likewise.”⁹ At worst, they may approach these issues even as a well intentioned welfare measure. This argument then may result in having an army with jawans in their 40s and 50s in bulk. The lure of short-term financial gains in raising the age profile may satisfy the discipline of defence economics. However, as the final product of a military is victory, it is unlikely that an aged army would deliver victory. Rather, with an aged army, as war approaches, there will be a stream of soldiers heading to the hospital with toothaches, diabetes, hypertension, gout, eye problems, and afflictions which visit humans beyond middle age in any case. As war breaks out, the aged soldiers who get wounded, would take much more time and resources to recover from wounds and rejoin for combat duties.

Conclusion

A youthful profile for the armed forces is just not the concern of the Ministry of Defence and the three Services. It is a concern of the nation at large. Unfortunately, the shortage of young officers has grabbed the media and policy attention. It is unlikely that there would ever be a supply problem of senior officers. Thus, a youthful senior rank profile is not much in the public domain. The age profile of commanding officers and higher ranks has got caught in a vicious cycle of “institutionalisation” and comparison with other privileged civil services. The nation also deserves a youthful military with younger officers at senior levels. It also needs a full complement of young company, squadron and battery commanders, captains/lieutenants and other ranks. Rather than treating this as a turf issue of only the civil-military relations, solutions must be found to keep our military young at the national level. Fresh thinking needs to be done on this aspect.

Notes

1. There is reason to cheer. Recent research is showing that the old view of intellectual power peaking at 40 may no longer be true. See *Time*, 23 January 2006, pp. 44-53. Also notice the higher age profile of Nobel Laureates. But here we are dealing with the age of the military leadership, which also needs other attributes of youth like risk taking, physical fitness and sustained endurance in exhausting battle conditions.

2. Maj Gen JFC Fuller, *Generalship: Its Diseases and Their Cure* (London: Faber and Faber, 1936), p. 63. See Appendix, "The Age of Hundred Generals".
3. *Ibid.*
4. Tables 1, 2 and 3 are based on Army List/ information provided by the Centre for Armed Forces Historical Research, United Service Institution of India, New Delhi.
5. Squadron Leader RTS Chhina (Retd), *The Eagle Strikes: The Royal Indian Air Force 1932-1950* (New Delhi: Ambi Publishers, 2006), p. 267.
6. Interview of Squadron Leader, RTS Chhina (Retd), Secretary, Centre for Armed Forces Historical Research (CAFHR), United Service Institution of India, by the author on 28 July 2006.
7. The World Health Report 2002 points out the rapid increase in lifestyle diseases in developing countries, besides the existing burden of poverty induced unconquered infectious diseases. See http://www.who.int/whr/2002/en/Overview_E.pdf. Accessed on 22 June 2006.
8. Phase 1 of the Ajay Vikram Singh Committee, implemented in 2005, has in a limited way, allowed commanding officers of the infantry and artillery with 16½ to 17 years, and armoured corps with 17 to 18 years of service. As far as the lower ranks are concerned, an acting major needs to have two years of service and six years for substantive rank. Similarly, the length of service for a lieutenant colonel is 13 years. The report is not in the public domain. It is learnt that it has also mentioned the age profile of divisional commanders.
9. Today, erroneously, even personnel from the police and paramilitary forces are being referred to as "jawans". Also, one cannot ignore combat dress and military accretions being sported by non-military organisations.