

Lt Gen E F Norton, CB, DSO, MC

Profile of a Gentleman-Officer, a Gallant Soldier and an Iconic Mountaineer

BALJIT SINGH

A great Gentleman, a gallant Horseman, a true friend.

— Lt Gen A E Wardrop, 1912.

And the men who have pioneered the way (sic. to the summit of Everest) deserve in full measure the gratitude of their kind for the sacrifices they made.

— Col Sir Francis Younghusband, 1924.

The first statement was a description of Captain Edward Felix Norton, of “R” Battery, Royal Horse Artillery, as recorded by his Battery Commander, Maj (later Lt Gen) A E Wardrop in 1912, at Mathura Cantonment (U P). And the second quote was a tribute to Norton in 1924, from a man often called “*the last great imperial adventurer,*” Col Sir Francis Younghusband, CIE, KCSI. The occasion was the felicitation function especially organised by the Royal Geographic Society, London, to honour the members of the Second Everest Expedition and in particular the man who came within a whisker of summiting the “Third Pole”, partly in a solo bid.

The period between 1912-24, was essentially dominated by World War I from which E F Norton (henceforth EFN) had emerged a distinguished and combat-seasoned officer. Unfortunately, men of that calibre seldom write autobiographies and E F N was no exception to the rule. Luckily, there survives a reasonable amount of secondary source-material to help us recreate somewhat, the man and soldier that E F N was in body and soul, as it were.

For a start, we know for sure that he was born on February 21, 1884, in a luxurious, colonial mansion at San Isidro, about 22 km north of Buenos Aires. The family were in Argentina because the elder Norton was a Director of the Royal Mail and Union Castle shipping lines and besides, they had also set up a prosperous business venture, the "Estancia la Ventura." Most children born in the lap of luxury and, in particular, in Argentina of those days, were put astride a horse and they grew up bonding with equines, as a first love. Little wonder that the Argentinean polo teams were the world's lowest handicapped ever, minus nine at one time, and EFN, for the better part of his life, would keep horses within his sights. His indulgent parents would next enroll him at Charterhouse, a top of the rung public school in England where equestrian sports and most other outdoors pursuits were encouraged. It was natural, therefore, that EFN would set his sights on the Army as a profession and would compete for, and enter, the Royal Military Academy, Woolwich, rather than Sandhurst, as the former trained potential officers exclusively for the Royal Horse Artillery and the Corps of Engineers.

Well, if one half of EFN's family were equine-focussed, the dominant urges of the other half were positively inclined to mountain climbing. The maternal grandfather, Sir Alfred Wills, judge of the Queen's Bench Division, spent summers in his chalet, the Eagle's Nest, in the Swiss Alps where each door and window of the house opened on inviting snow-clad mountains and meandering glaciers. As Wills was also the founder of the Alpine Club and its third President, he would constantly expose, and encourage, EFN to become one with the mountains. And unwittingly, the old man Wills would so hone the climbing skills of the tall and lean youth that by the 1920s, the Alpine Club circles throughout Europe would admit that: "*Norton is really one of the best, and we have a splendid leader in him.... is really full of interest, easy yet dignified, or rather never losing dignity, and is a tremendous adventurer.*" These words coming from the legendry climber George Mallory (just days before he vanished forever, off the face of Everest on June 07, 1924), comprised high praise, indeed.

Be that as it may, when on graduation from Woolwich, EFN opted for the Royal Horse Artillery (RHA) and to serve in India, climbing for a while would take the back-seat. And the formative years from 1903 to 1913, were partly spent in the Northwest Frontier where artillery fire support was always desperately needed,

and in the process, EFN gained much professional merit. But that was also the era when young officers were encouraged to pursue outdoor sports. So EFN would spend at least one month of his annual leave each year, scouting for the elusive markhor, the ibex and the Himalayan tahr in the Hunza, Chitral and Kashmir valleys. And his collection of rare “trophy-heads”, would be considered matchless and the envy of his peers. But what gained him prominence the most, were his skills at mounted sports: polo, the point-to point chase and pigsticking; the latter often termed as the king of sports and the sport of kings! He was the most obvious choice, therefore, when the appointment of an aide-de-camp to the Viceroy, fell vacant. Paradoxically, he was denied the chance to compete for the coveted Hog Hunters trophy, that is, the “Kadir Cup” *per se*, because for six consecutive years, EFN was nominated the organising secretary of this annual, Blue-ribbon Meet of the horse-world. That encumbrance notwithstanding, he would savour the full flavor of the Kadir Hunt, as he drilled the field staff during the week-long preparatory stage. The Kadir Cup, constituted as an individual event in 1869, was contested up to 1930, with two brief interruptions: the first in 1879-80 occasioned by the Afghan War and again in 1915-18, on account of World War I. The maximum winners were the gentlemen officers from the Hussars, closely followed by the RHA. No one knows by whom, nor the reason why, but sadly in 1947, the Kadir Cup was dislocated from India and two decades later, traced to the Cavalry and Guards Club, London, and was once also seen at the Officers Mess, RMC, Sandhurst.

Now, in 1913, the “R” Battery RHA Team led by Lt EFN won the Muttra (Mathura) Cup, which was a befitting farewell not just to this gallant horseman but to this sport as well because post World War I, the sport withered away. No matter how long and often he was astride a horse or out on the field with a sporting gun and rifle, down and under, EFN remained a focussed and hardcore professional soldier. For, he would qualify for and enter, the Defence Services Staff College, Camberley, in the term of 1913-14. And from there, go on to serve the entire period of World War I from 1914 to 1919 in Belgium and France. To begin with, he would hold the coveted appointment of Brigade Major and then in the logistics branch at a Divisional Headquarters till 1917, also in France. His hour of martial glory was to follow when he assumed command of D Battery RHA, satisfying his hunger for direct involvement in combat action on the battlefield, over the next two years. And the *London Gazette* of July 26, 1918, cites the conferment of the DSO to EFN and also goes on to reveal that he had been Mentioned in Dispatches, thrice for gallantry and awarded the MC, as well!!! What a grand performance, judged by any yardstick. So it was a natural choice to post EFN to the Defence Services Staff College, Camberley, as an instructor from 1919 to 1921.

Some time in February-March 1922, EFN set sail for India once again but this time as a climbing member of the First British Everest Expedition, under the leadership of the veteran Gurkha officer, the Hon'ble Brig Gen CG Bruce. And on May 19, 1922, George Mallory and EFN reached 26,985 ft above sea level (ASL) (the highest that man had ascended so far) when bad weather forced a retreat from the mountain. Only too conscious that they had been pipped in the race both to the North and South Poles, the British were determined to be the first on the Third Pole, viz Everest. So, fortified with renewed vigour, they returned to Everest in 1924 and Lt Col EF Norton would assume leadership from the ailing Brig Gen Bruce. The second and most determined attempt by this expedition was launched from Camp VII, by EFN and Dr Somervell, on June 4, 1924. Unfortunately, Somervell's choking cough so incapacitated him, that placing him under the shelter of a rock-spur, EFN proceeded on an incredible solo climb thence forward to the summit of Everest, which is best described in his own words, thus:

Beyond the Coulior, the going got steadily worse.... It was not exactly difficult going but it was a dangerous place for a single, un-rope climber... the strain was beginning to tell and I was getting exhausted... In addition, I began to experience some trouble with my eyes. I was seeing double and in doubt where to put my foot... It was by now 01 PM and a brief calculation showed that I had no chance to climb the remaining 800 to 900 ft if I were to return in safety..... In an hour, I had gained under 100 ft in height and in distance perhaps 300 yards... at a point subsequently fixed by theodolite as 28,126 ft, I retraced my feet to rejoin Somervell.... We decided we must go down the mountain and own ourselves beaten in a fair fight...

This effort of EFN was not bettered till 1978 when the Australian Reinhold Messner made his incredible solo ascent from the North Col, descending over the South Col.

I have yet to come across a more noble, modest, or honest acknowledgement of defeat by any gentleman-officer, than the one reproduced above from EFN's book, *The Fight For Everest: 1924*. Today, the book rates as a classic of mountaineering literature in the world. EFN was elected to the Alpine Club but why he shied away from the offer of Presidentship of the club on two occasions in later years, is a mystery. EFN founded the Mountain Club of India and was the founder member of the Himalayan Club, as well. Although Everest would yield its summit to scores of people, post May 1953, EFN's record of getting to 28,126

ft ASL, without the use of oxygen, was bettered only in 1978, by the Austrian Reinhold Messner who, climbing without oxygen and solo from the North Col, up the “Norton’s *Coulior*” onto the summit, descended to the South Col, in one go!! That too was an exceptional feat but EFN’s pioneering effort will always be rated among the most phenomenal of sporting endeavours.

In between the two Everest expeditions, EFN did another brief stint as Brigade Major somewhere in Turkey but that may well have been only a paper posting for rest and recuperating. However, from 1926 to 1928, he had a longer tenure on the General Staff at the War Office, London. It was possibly in 1929 that EFN attended the Imperial Defence College before reverting to India once again but this time, as the senior instructor at the prestigious Staff College, Quetta, up to 1932. But once promoted to Brigadier, he shuttled back to the UK first as Commander Royal Artillery, 1 Division, and next as BGS of the Aldershot Command, 1934-38. Concurrently, he would serve as ADC to His Majesty King George VI. But the promotion to Major General would yet again bring him back to India in command of the Madras district. However, with the onset of World War II, EFN was first appointed the acting Governor of Hong Kong and then, Commander-in-Chief (C-in-C) Hong Kong. At the peak of his professional career, EFN now had a near fatal riding accident on the race-course, from which he never really recovered.

He was evacuated to India and was retired gracefully on health grounds in 1942, with the acting rank of Lieutenant General. Back in England, EFN would now oversee the affairs of his beloved RHA, as their Colonel Commandant from 1947 to 1951. Once the British revived their effort to summit Everest, Col John Hunt, the leader of the expedition would spend days with EFN, fine-tuning the climbing plan and later thank the veteran Everester for his “strategic advice”, leading to success at last.



E. F. Norton.

“IT MAY BE—”

We do not know when he was conferred the C B title but in all probability it was for his services at Hong Kong. Outside the Army Service, probably two of EFN's proudest recognitions were the Winter Olympics Gold Medal, and the Founder's Gold Medal of the Royal Geographical Society, both of which had the Everest link. At the personal level, perhaps the fondest of Everest fallouts was EFN's happy marriage on December 18, 1925, with Joyce, the daughter of William Pasteur, C B, C M G, a physician of note throughout Europe and a household name among Alpine climbers. Sadly, even though EFN was alive when Everest was summited in May 1953, we find him absent from the month long, "Coronation Everest" celebratory events in the UK. Another bewildering omission was of Lt Col F M Bailey but for whose personal equation and intervention with His Holiness the 13th Dalai Lama, the permission for the British to attempt Everest in the first place, may well not have been accorded. Such are the sordid games played out by men and mice.

The provocation for this mind-journey was partly provided by the random picking from a shelf of books (inherited from my father), *Modern Pig-Sticking* by Lt Gen Sir A E Wardrop (EFN's Battery Commander, at Mathura Cantonment, in 1912). In the Preface to the 1930 edition of the book, the General expresses his gratitude to EFN for "*much kindly and valuable criticism and for his paintings which are as accurate as they are charming.*" One thing led to another, till I chanced upon a remark by EFN's wife Joyce and son Bill at a dinner in 1991, that EFN had, in fact, filled two sketch books with water-colours of the Everest 1922 and 1924 expeditions. Some of those paintings such as of Chomolhari, Gaurishanker, Cho Uyo and, of course, several of Everest, to mention a few, will forever transport the viewer, whether any mortal or a gentleman-officer, to EFN's plausible reveries:

*He that has been in such a scene,
That scene shall ne'er forget.
In silent mood, in solitude
Its dreams shall haunt him yet.*

Of course, the story of this iconic gentleman-officer and distinguished mountaineer does not quite conclude here. If among the serving generations, someone were to trace out the citation-texts of EFN's gallantry decorations and civil awards, we will have a fuller vision of this soldier and the man *per se*. And if we could unearth the list of birds EFN had documented, particularly from the

Everest region and later, “*the music he preferred seated in front of a fire-place, with a smoking-pipe in hand and eyes shut*”, may be we could then bring the curtain down finally, in the spirit of the soulful notes of Auld Lang Syne.

*Should auld acquaintance be forgot
And never bro't to mind?*

.....

We'll take a cup of kindness yet,

.....

And here's a hand, my trusty friend,

.....

For Auld Lang Syne, my dear.

Lest the readers may have forgotten, Auld Lang Syne holds a special appeal to all gentlemen officers because it was composed in Corsica where it was played out and sung for the first time by a congregation of islanders when the body of one of their natives, Napoleon Bonaparte, was finally interned at Les Invalides, Paris.

Last of all, we of the Indian Army fraternity must never forget that the first recorded intent to climb Everest, by any *Homo Sapiens*, lies preserved in a letter by Lt F M Bailey of 32 Sikh Pioneers, to his mother in 1904, short of Lhasa, “*It must be climbed one day and I hope I will be one of the men to do it.*”

Lt Gen **Baljit Singh** (Retd) writes on contemporary issues.

References

1. *The Alpine Journal*, 1925.
2. Lt Gen Sir A E Wardrop, *Modern Pig-Sticking*.
3. T H Somervell, *After Everest* (Hodder & Stoughton, 1936).
4. C G Bruce, *The Assault on Everest: 1922* (Edward Arnold, 1923).
5. Lt Col E F Norton, DSO, *The Fight for Everest 1924* (Edward Arnold, 1925).