



THE PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-SECRETARY OF
STATE FOR DEFENCE FOR THE ROYAL NAVY

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PRIME MINISTER

PAKISTANI CONTRACTORS IN NORTHERN IRELAND

When I dined with you in the House on 29 July I mentioned that I had missed your censure debate speech as I had been visiting 41 Commando Royal Marines in Ulster and that whilst there I had met a Pakistani contractor, known colloquially as a Char Wallah or Sutler.

... You expressed interest in these gentlemen and I have therefore prepared the attached note for your information.

29 August 1980

Ireland

for Print

Weekend Box

Prime Minister

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NOTE ON PAKISTANI CONTRACTORS IN NORTHERN IRELAND

1. Although NAAFI operates in the main Northern Ireland Base Areas such as Lisburn, Holywood and Londonderry there are many places where they cannot get staff to serve and this gap is filled by Pakistani contractors (or 'Char Wallahs' as they are commonly known).

2. There are at present about 13 firms of Pakistani contractors serving 23 main, and numerous smaller, locations. Most of them come from the Birmingham area and seem to be related to one another, but this kinship does not stop them competing with each other for regimental contracts in the most recriminatory manner. A contract can be worth at least £5000 depending on the location and this money is paid into each Regimental Institute Fund. In return, the contractor supplies a hot meal/hot drink service 24 hours a day (another reason why NAAFI cannot compete), as well as selling a large selection of goods and reading material. In some locations the contractor also provides a barber. The contract is drawn up between the contractor and the unit and is approved by HQ, Northern Ireland. The system works well and everybody is satisfied.

3. Unfortunately they have also had their share of trouble. On 26 June 1973 a Pakistani contractor, Noon Bass Khan, was wounded in the Lonemoor Road, Londonderry, whilst travelling in his van and on 22 April 1974 Abdul Khalid, a relation of the contractor, was found shot dead in Crossmaglen. On 15 August 1979 two Pakistani contractors were wounded in Belfast on the Springfield Road.

4. Said Khan, the contractor who I met during my visit to 41 Commando, is a relative of Haji Ramatullah who, with the original but rival firm of Hamid Gul, has looked after the RM Commandos ever since the end of World War II. An article from a "Globe and Laurel" of 1959 is attached which gives a good account of how this relationship was established. Hamid Gul still lives in Birmingham (Ramatullah has retired to Pakistan) but his firm is run by a relation, Umar Shah. About three years ago the constant soliciting for contractors reached an unacceptable level and a modus vivendi was worked out whereby Umar Shah looked after 40 and 45 Commandos while Said Khan looked after 41 and 42 Commandos. This arrangement has worked well for two years although it is currently showing signs of wear and tear.

5. The relationship between the Royal Marines and these two firms of contractors has been a success story and has proved extremely beneficial to both parties. However, the contractors do not of course confine themselves to serving the Marines. Many Army units have a similar long association with 'unit sutlers' (as they are also called) and are looked after in very much the same way. Although their contracts are contested just as vigorously, the Army also values very highly the excellent service these sutlers provide to units, especially in Northern Ireland. The contractors do not operate in Great Britain but do offer their services in many overseas stations with the major exception of BAOR.

HAMID GUL - *Honorary RM*

IT IS TRUE to say that Hamid Gul has "shared the fortune" of 3 Commando Brigade for a number of years. Hamid is a Pakistani contractor from Janozai, Peshawar District, where he was born on 25th December, 1927. He started his service career as a "char wallah" on the North West Frontier in 1939, and graduated to contractor to 44 Commando RM in Colombo in 1944.

He was next associated with the Corps in Malaya, 1950-1952, serving with 45 Commando RM at Sungei Patani, Kedah and Tapeh. It is his proud claim that almost every major jungle patrol was accompanied by a Hamid Gul "char wallah." Hamid's success and popularity during this time was built up by his credit system, whereby accounts were settled each week. He claims that no marine ever failed to settle his debt before leaving the unit.

When the Brigade moved to Malta in 1952, Hamid was not able to follow; however, he kept up a lively correspondence with Commanding Officers on notepaper headed "By appointment to Lieutenant Colonel F. A. Eustace, Royal Marines," until in 1956 he moved to Cyprus to work once again with 45 Commando.

When 45 returned to Malta in 1959, Hamid joined 4 M.L.B.U., ROAC in Cyprus, and he recently visited the United Kingdom to arrange the contract with 42 Commando RM when the unit moves to Singapore next year. During his visit he descended on the Royal Marines Office, and entertained the officers with many anecdotes from his vast experiences with the Corps.

Hamid's family, consisting of mother, father, four brothers, two sisters, wife, two sons and one daughter continue to live in Peshawar District, whilst Hamid functions as a modern camp follower and contractor to the Royal Marines.

Of Hamid Gul "Sandpiper" writes:—

THE COMING OF HAMID GUL

It was a hot, stifling day in early August, 1950, the heat shimmered over the patches of oily water and in the haze, myriads of tiny flying insects wavered and hovered. High in the colourless sky a Crested Serpent eagle sailed, lonely, seemingly aimless in its search of prey.

Beyond the hazy, steamy thousand acres called Gibraltar Camp, the jungle cut off the outside world but for a furrowed track of deep red sand that twisted through the rubber trees towards the town of Sungei Patani in the state of Kedah.

Based in Gibraltar Camp, which those of long memory will liken to Passchendaele when it rained, as it frequently did with tropical thoroughness, was a Royal Marine Commando whose leisure requirements were catered for only by the more enterprising TQ's.

On the fringe of the grey-green cluster of rubber on the Western edge of Gibraltar Camp one early afternoon, appeared a figure, hesitating—unsure which way to turn. It peered first at the tents and bashas of the Gurkha training camp then, in turn, to the massed tents in the far distance.

Emerging from the vegetation of the Gheebang-Geng Estate, the figure, that of a dark-skinned man in his twenties, wearing a whitish coloured dhoti with an European jacket across the upper part and a bluish turban, arranged into a spike at the back, advanced across the strip of lallang to accost a green-clad Marine Commando, walking stick in hand, who was making his way towards the deepest part of the surrounding ulu.

Hamid Gul, for so the figure was named, was directed to the tent of the Second in Command.

That evening by the trackside in the centre of Gibraltar Camp, a bent figure with a battered frying pan squatted over a guttering fire. "Chip Banjos—Very good"—and very good they were too. The thin trickle of Marines swelled.

Within a week, Hamid Gul had a staff of two Pakistanis and his bill of fare included egg banjos, egg and beans, or even egg, beans and chips.

Within two weeks, an acquired IP Tent, complete with two Six-foot tables displayed a selection of tooth-brushes, soap, shaving cream and nutty. Outside, the further increased staff brewed hot sweet tea and fried suppers to an appreciable throng.

When 45 Commando moved from the state of Kedah, southwards to the jungles of Perak, Fighting Troops were often as much as fifty or sixty miles away from their parent HQ—and from the Base NAAFI which had opened up at Temoh Hill. To each Fighting troop and to each isolated section went one of Hamid's boys to "Set up shop."

How many can recall plodding back from a heavy day squatting to find by the roadside, a bearded char wallah with tea urn on one hip, a rusty Sten gun, which probably didn't work anyway, on the other and a grin from ear to ear as the Marines bantered and bartered and called him, among other things, a "Bewhiskered old Bandit."

In the smallest tented camp from Paradise Park to Colorado, there reigned a char wallah within his tent, surrounded by a galaxy of tea urns and all the good things that go to make life in the Outback more comfortable. His tent was always open from dawn—or even before dawn if the troop had an early call—until long after dark.

At Temoh Hill, the NAAFI did a roaring beer trade after dusk, but it was the old char wallah that dispensed early morning tea, that provided nutty and fags when the NAAFI was shut and provided them even if the Marines were temporarily out of funds.

In 1952, 45 Commando moved from Malaya to the Middle East. In war-torn Cyprus, the firm of Hamid Gul was in evidence, but it is the really early days that we remember best: the days when living was rough and a piping hot meal of egg and chips really went down well. It was in those days that Hamid Gul, the gentleman who came out of the jungle, made himself a name and really became a part of the Commando Brigade.



It was Malaya in the Jungle Operations—1951.