

## COLUMNS

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### **Memories of Pakistan**

**Nearly 20 years ago, the country faced challenges**



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**The Daily News**

Our Air India flight from New Delhi to Lahore is several hours late when we finally arrive in Pakistan, convinced that we have missed our connecting flight to Rawalpindi. But no, the Pakistan International Airlines (PIA) airplane is still there, sitting on the tarmac, its passengers and crew broiling in the hot sun.

We learn later that when the PIA airplane started to pull back at the scheduled time, a Pakistani colonel in our official welcoming party, his hand lightly resting on the pistol on his hip, casually informed the control tower personnel that the plane wasn't going anywhere until we arrived.

Other members of the welcoming party smirk at the Indians' incompetence in managing to make a one-hour flight more than three hours late. They view it as a bit of one-upmanship, knowing full well the Indians' condescending nickname for PIA - "Perhaps It'll Arrive."

As we scramble down the aisle of the airplane to take our seats, the other passengers glare at us, but no one utters a word of criticism.

It is Sept. 25, 1989, and although Benazir Bhutto has taken over as prime minister 10 months earlier and reinstated civilian rule, the tarmac incident is my first experience of military power in a country frequently run by the armed forces.

I am part of a 12-man group from London's Royal College of Defence Studies (RCDS). Eighty senior military officers and government officials are on the year-long course, 40 from Britain and 40 from "overseas." I am the lone Canadian.

The British have divided the world and the students into eight groups. Under a British general officer, each region is visited for a month by one team, to study defence, security, political, economic, social and other issues in-depth. Our group spends two weeks in India, a week in Pakistan and a final week in Sri Lanka.

Our time in Pakistan is well-spent, and never dull. The RCDS is highly regarded in the country, as all the Armed Forces' most senior officers attended it. We see things most visitors don't; doors are opened to us that remain closed for many.

## ***Peshawar***

For me, perhaps the most fascinating part of the trip is a visit to Peshawar in the North-West Frontier Province, on the border with Afghanistan. We arrive there on a Friday.

It is a holy day, so after a brief morning tour there is no official program and the afternoon is free. Two Brits - an army colonel and a police assistant chief constable - and I immediately decide to walk into the old city. It's like stepping back into the 19th century.

The old city is an impossible jumble of narrow streets, meandering lanes and dark alleys, a unique kaleidoscope of sights, sounds and smells. Open-front shops are stacked high with exotic foods and the latest in Western consumer goods - as well as bits and pieces of Soviet uniforms and equipment.

Smiles from the men and boys - there are virtually no women to be seen - greet us everywhere. Many ask us to take their pictures, striking a martial pose when we agree.

We meet a few who say they are *mujahedeen* from Afghanistan and claim to have shot down Soviet helicopters. We're not prepared to dispute them - every male older than 12 of age is carrying a rifle or shotgun over his shoulder.

When we get back to the hotel after three hours in the old city, we are hot, dusty - and thirsty. But we are in a strict Islamic country, where the consumption of alcohol is forbidden.

Then we notice a room off the lobby with a neon sign above it proclaiming: "Non-Moslem Foreigners Only." Intrigued, we enter. It is a beautiful, fully-stocked bar. Salvation has arrived.

"Three beers," one of us cries out.

"Do you have an alcohol permit?" the barman asks in good English.

"No," the British policeman replies, "where can we get one?"

"I can sell it to you."

It turns out only one of us has to buy a 10-rupee (about 67 cents) permit, and all three can drink on it - excellent Murree beer brewed in the country.

It is yet another part of the puzzle that is Pakistan.

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***John Boileau has fond memories of his incredible month in South Asia.***