

# How Srinagar stayed tranquil as war came to Kashmir

*Reuters correspondent Doon Campbell, who arrived in India in March 1947 and spent the next 15 months covering the independence of India and birth of Pakistan as well as the tragic assassination of Mahatma Gandhi a few months later, is now 77 and lives in retirement in England. In this seventh article in a series on that tumultuous period, written in the form of a diary, he talks about Kashmir and about the day it became a flashpoint between India and Pakistan.*

BY DOON CAMPBELL

Very late one night in Delhi, two months after India won freedom, I heard aircraft. The din plus the excited street activity percolated to my bedroom. Aircraft were taking off, troops were on the move.

Unknown to me, at that very moment Kashmir had become a flashpoint: War between the world's two newest nations was uncomfortably close. At dawn the next morning, October 27, 1947, nine DC-3s unloaded 329 Sikhs and eight tons of guns, ammunition and other material at the airfield in Srinagar, capi-

tal of Kashmir. Under the British there were two Indias: The India of the provinces administered by the Central government, and a separate India of the princes: 565 maharajas, nawabs and rajas ruling over one-third of India and a quarter of the whole population.

Most acceded to either India or Pakistan when British India was carved in two in August 1947. By late October, two significant exceptions remained. One was Hyderabad, the largest state in India, with a Muslim prince, the Nizam, ruling 17 million subjects, of whom 86 per cent were Hindus.

The other was the Himalayan state of Jammu and Kashmir where a Hindu, Maharaja Hari Singh, ruled over four million subjects, of whom 77 per cent were Muslims.

The immediate reason for the emergency, involving the airlift of a token force of Indian troops, was an invasion of the western border of Kashmir by Pathan tribesmen armed with rifles, machineguns, mortars and artillery, supported by Pakistan.

The maharaja had dithered over accession, wanting to keep his state indepen-

dent. He took fright over the invasion, applied to India for help and offered accession in return.

He also released from prison Sheikh Abdullah, a Muslim Congressman of forceful personality who led the National Conference, the strongest political party in the state.

Hari Singh had a reputation as a playboy, a weak, indecisive man who

furnace or an ice-box.

Bright as a jewel, sharp as a knife, the weather turned from glorious, crisp sunshine to bitterly cold evenings. We had heard a lot about the British in Kashmir. One story said British residents, despite fears of massacres by invading tribesmen, had declined an offer of evacuation by air because they couldn't take their dogs with them. The 220-odd Britons in

## FLASHBACK TO 1947

### A REPORTER LOOKS BACK

showed little interest in the affairs of his state. Some critics said he was afraid of his Muslim population, especially the Poonchis who had rebelled against him in the 1930s.

Srinagar — the Venice of Asia with waterways for some roads — had one hotel and two boarding houses when I got there. I had to keep an eye on the wood-burning stove in my bedroom or in no time at all the room could become a

Kashmir were too often caricatured, represented as a Noel Cowardish breed of English hothouse bloom, or stiff upper lips with a yen for tiffin and gin-based sundowners.

They were in fact sensible and robust men and women, usually retired Army officers or Indian Civil Service officials, living more comfortably on limited pensions than they could hope to do in Delhi or Dorset.

For some of them India was the only country they knew. Now Kashmir was their retirement home. Forbidden to buy land in Kashmir, the British had houseboats built, floated on the lakes, and wedged into position with log poles.

Sometimes whole families — and animals — lived on houseboats, which came in various sizes with bedrooms, flush toilets, running hot water and wooden furniture.

Woodcarving being an important Kashmiri craft, nearly everything was carved — ceilings in a traditional geometric pattern, chests with lilies and birds, tables with lotus blooms and chinar leaves.

In the fabled Vale of Kashmir, Srinagar showed no scars of war, not even the tension of life in a frontline city. Ringed by hills and forests and behind them the magnificent Karakoram and Himalayan ranges, it had a superb setting: serene-mirror-like lakes, tumbling streams, fir and chinar trees catching golden fire in the early morning light, giant lotus lilies, acres of gardens.

And in the town sprawling among lakes and crisscrossed by canals with wild

duck and bright-plumed kingfishers, an Aladdin's cave of bargains — silver and copperware, carpets, chess sets, bowls, statues of Buddha. Saris, kaftans and suits — choose your cloth, have the first fitting before dinner and delivery next day.

In this undiscovered paradise, the war was just down the road. But it was a manageable sort of war to cover, not like Europe or Vietnam. There were no regular briefings or communiques. You could actually take time to assess tactics, capture the flavour, become familiar with the terrain.

If Srinagar had really been the objective, the big prize, then heads should have rolled. The tribesmen wasted so much time, unopposed, along the way — "giving vent to their ancient appetites for rape and pillage," according to one version — that the Indian Army units were able to secure positions in the Vale and consolidate their hold on Kashmir's only airfield. After skirmishing a few miles outside the capital, they stemmed the enemy's advance and, spearheaded by armoured cars which had arrived by road, drove the tribesmen back. (Reuters)