

Court No. 1

ARMED FORCES TRIBUNAL, REGIONAL BENCH, LUCKNOW

ORIGINAL APPLICATION No. 1098 of 2023

Tuesday, this the 23rd day of April, 2024

**“Hon’ble Mr. Justice Anil Kumar, Member (J)
Hon’ble Lt. Gen. Anil Puri, Member (A)”**

No. 681010A Ex. MWO Kishore Thalappillil Gopalan, son of Late Gopalan TK, resident of Present address C/o Mr. J.N. Singh, resident of 172, Sainani Vihar, Raibareli Road, Telibagh, Lucknow.

..... Applicant

Ld. Counsel for the : **Shri Manoj Kumar Awasthi**, Advocate
Applicant

Versus

1. The Union of India, through the Secretary, Ministry of Defence (Air Force), New Delhi-110011.
2. The Chief of the Air Staff, Air Headquarters, Vayu Bhawan, New Delhi-110011.
3. Air Headquarters Directorate, of Air Veterans, Subroto Park, New Delhi-110010.
4. The Dir-III (Appeal), Directorate of Air Veterans Building, Subroto Park, New Delhi-110010.
5. Office of Joint CDA (Air Force), New Delhi C/o Air Force Central Accounts Office, Subroto Park, New Delhi-110010.

.....Respondents

Ld. Counsel for the : **Shri Pushpendra Mishra**, Advocate
Respondents. Central Govt. Standing Counsel

ORDER

“Per Hon’ble Mr. Justice Anil Kumar, Member (J)”

1. The instant Original Application has been filed under Section 14 of the Armed Forces Tribunal Act, 2007 for the following reliefs :-

- (a) *To issue pass an order or directions to set-aside/quash the order no. Air HQ/9998/1/681010/05/20/DV (DP/RMB) dated 17.11.2020 passed by the respondent no. 3 annexed as Annexure no. 1 in the original application.*
- (b) *To issue pass an order or directions to the respondents to grant Disability Element of Disability Pension @50% with effect from date of discharge i.e. 31.05.2020 in light of Hon’ble Apex Court judgments.*
- (c) *To issue pass an order or directions to respondents to grant benefits of Rounding off Disability Element of disability pension @50% to @75% for life to the applicant and pay due arrears including consequential benefits with interest @12% p.a. till final payment is made in light of Hon’ble Apex Court judgments and letter dated 31.01.2001.*
- (d) *Any other relief which the Hon’ble Tribunal may deem fit and proper in the fact and circumstances of the case be also granted along with cost of the OA.*

2. Briefly stated, applicant was enrolled in the Indian Air Force on 21.08.1982 and discharged on 31.05.2020 in Low Medical Category on fulfilling the conditions of his enrolment. At the time of discharge from service, the Release Medical Board (RMB) held at SMC, 3BRD, Air Force on 21.08.2019 assessed his disabilities

(i) **'TYPE – 2 DIABETES MELLITUS' @30%**, (ii) **'CENTRAL NERVOUS SYSTEM EVALUATION (ENCEPHALOPATHY) {STEROID RESPONSIVE ENCEPHALOPATHY WITH AUTOIMMUNE THYROIDITIS (OLD)' @20%** and (iii) **'OBSTRUCTIVE SLEEP APNOEA (OLD)' @ 15%** for life, **composite disabilities @50% for life** and opined the disabilities to be neither attributable to nor aggravated (NANA) by service. The applicant's claim for grant of disability pension was rejected vide letter dated 17.11.2020. The applicant preferred First Appeal dated 21.04.2022 but of no avail. It is in this perspective that the applicant has preferred the present Original Application.

3. Learned Counsel for the applicant pleaded that at the time of enrolment, the applicant was found mentally and physically fit for service in the Air Force and there is no note in the service documents that he was suffering from any disease at the time of enrolment in Air Force. The diseases of the applicant were contracted during the service, hence they are attributable to and aggravated by Air Force Service. He pleaded that various Benches of Armed Forces Tribunal have granted disability pension in similar cases, as such the applicant be granted disability element of disability pension and its rounding off to 75%.

4. On the other hand, Ld. Counsel for the respondents contended that composite disabilities of the applicant @50% for life have been regarded as NANA by the RMB, hence as per

Regulation 153 of the Pension Regulations for the Indian Air Force, 1961 (Part-I) which provides that “*Unless otherwise specifically provided, disability pension may be granted to an individual who is invalidated from service on account of a disability which is attributable to or aggravated by Air Force service and is assessed at 20% or over*” the applicant is not entitled to disability element of disability pension. He further submitted that in the background of older age, the applicant was initially detected to have the aforesaid disabilities at the age of 49 years and onset of disabilities was on 29.05.2012 at Chandigarh vide AFMSF-16 dated 21.08.2019. The RMB was not solely on medical grounds. He pleaded for dismissal of the Original Application.

5. We have heard Ld. Counsel for the applicant as also Ld. Counsel for the respondents. We have also gone through the Release Medical Board proceedings as well as the records and we find that the questions which need to be answered are two folds:-

- (a) Whether the disabilities of the applicant are attributable to or aggravated by Air Force Service?
- (b) Whether the applicant is entitled for the benefit of rounding off the disability element of disability pension?

6. The law on attributability of a disability has already been settled by the Hon’ble Supreme Court in the case of ***Dharamvir Singh Versus Union of India & Others***, reported in (2013) 7

Supreme Court Cases 316. In this case the Apex Court took note of the provisions of the Pensions Regulations, Entitlement Rules and the General Rules of Guidance to Medical Officers to sum up the legal position emerging from the same in the following words.

"29.1. Disability pension to be granted to an individual who is invalided from service on account of a disability which is attributable to or aggravated by military service in non-battle casualty and is assessed at 20% or over. The question whether a disability is attributable to or aggravated by military service to be determined under the Entitlement Rules for Casualty Pensionary Awards, 1982 of Appendix II (Regulation 173).

29.2. A member is to be presumed in sound physical and mental condition upon entering service if there is no note or record at the time of entrance. In the event of his subsequently being discharged from service on medical grounds any deterioration in his health is to be presumed due to service [Rule 5 read with Rule 14(b)].

29.3. The onus of proof is not on the claimant (employee), the corollary is that onus of proof that the condition for non-entitlement is with the employer. A claimant has a right to derive benefit of any reasonable doubt and is entitled for pensionary benefit more liberally (Rule 9).

29.4. If a disease is accepted to have been as having arisen in service, it must also be established that the conditions of military service determined or contributed to the onset of the disease and that the conditions were due to the circumstances of duty in military service [Rule 14(c)]. [pic]

29.5. If no note of any disability or disease was made at the time of individual's acceptance for military service, a disease which has led to an individual's discharge or death will be deemed to have arisen in service [Rule 14(b)].

29.6. If medical opinion holds that the disease could not have been detected on medical examination prior to the acceptance for service and that disease will not be deemed to have arisen during service, the Medical Board is required to state the reasons [Rule 14(b)]; and 29.7. It is mandatory for the Medical Board to follow the guidelines laid down in Chapter II of the Guide to Medical Officers (Military Pensions), 2002 - "Entitlement: General Principles", including Paras 7, 8 and 9 as referred to above (para 27)."

7. In view of the settled position of law on attributability, we find that the RMB has denied attributability to the applicant only by endorsing that the first and second disabilities '**TYPE - 2 DIABETES MELLITUS**' and '**CENTRAL NERVOUS SYSTEM EVALUATION (ENCEPHALOPATHY) {STEROID RESPONSIVE ENCEPHA-LOPATHY WITH AUTOIMMUNE THYROIDITIS (OLD)}**' are neither attributable to nor aggravated (NANA) by service on the ground of onset of disabilities on 29.12.2012 while posted in Peace location (Missamari 825 SU, Chandigarh), therefore, applicant is not entitled to disability element of disability pension. However, considering the facts and circumstances of the case, we are of the opinion that this reasoning of Release Medical Board for denying disability element of disability pension to applicant for these disabilities is not convincing and doesn't reflect the complete truth on the matter. Peace Stations have their own pressure of rigorous Air Force training and associated stress and strain of Air Force service. The applicant was enrolled in Indian Air Force on 21.08.1982 and the first and second disabilities have started after more than 29 years of Air Force service i.e. on

29.05.2012. We are therefore of the considered opinion that the benefit of doubt in these circumstances should be given to the applicant in view of ***Dharamvir Singh vs Union of India & Ors*** (supra), and the first and second disabilities of the applicant should be considered as aggravated by Air Force service.

8. We have gone through the Medical Literature and found that the applicant's third disability i.e. '**OBSTRUCTIVE SLEEP APNOEA (OLD)**' is a common sleep disorder and it is not related to stress and strain of military service. Further, there is no evidence to suggest that this disease can be caused by stress and strain of military service. Therefore, we are agree with the opinion of the RMB as NANA for the third disability.

9. In para 17 A (a) of Chapter VII of the Guide to Medical Officer (Military Pensions), 2002 the provision for composite assessment has been mentioned which reads as under :-

“17A. Composite Assessment

(a) Where there are two or more disabilities due to service, compensation will be based on the composite assessment of the degree of disablement. Generally speaking, when separate disabilities have entirely different functional effects, the composite assessment will be the arithmetical sum of their separate assessment. But where the functional effects of the disabilities overlap, the composite assessment will be reduced in proportion to the degree of overlapping. There is a tendency for some Medical Boards to reduce the composite assessment in the former group of cases. This is not correct.”

10. In the instant case there are functional effects of the first and second disabilities overlapping, as such composite assessment is to be reduced in proportion to the degree of overlapping. The composite assessment of all the disabilities is @50% for life. The degree of first disability is @30% and second disability is @20% for which we are of the view that there is some overlapping. Accordingly, we hold that composite assessment of first and second disabilities is less than @50% for life.

11. The law on the point of rounding off of disability pension is no more RES INTEGRA in view of Hon'ble Supreme Court judgment in the case of ***Union of India and Ors vs Ram Avtar & ors*** (Civil appeal No 418 of 2012 decided on 10th December 2014). In this Judgment the Hon'ble Apex Court nodded in disapproval of the policy of the Government of India in granting the benefit of rounding off of disability pension only to the personnel who have been invalided out of service and denying the same to the personnel who have retired on attaining the age of superannuation or on completion of their tenure of engagement. The relevant portion of the decision is excerpted below:-

“4. By the present set of appeals, the appellant (s) raise the question, whether or not, an individual, who has retired on attaining the age of superannuation or on completion of his tenure of engagement, if found to be suffering from some disability which is attributable to or aggravated by the military service, is entitled to be granted the benefit of rounding off of disability pension. The appellant(s) herein would contend that, on the

basis of Circular No 1(2)/97/D (Pen-C) issued by the Ministry of Defence, Government of India, dated 31.01.2001, the aforesaid benefit is made available only to an Armed Forces Personnel who is invalidated out of service, and not to any other category of Armed Forces Personnel mentioned hereinabove.

5. *We have heard Learned Counsel for the parties to the lis.*

6. *We do not see any error in the impugned judgment (s) and order(s) and therefore, all the appeals which pertain to the concept of rounding off of the disability pension are dismissed, with no order as to costs.*

7. *The dismissal of these matters will be taken note of by the High Courts as well as by the Tribunals in granting appropriate relief to the pensioners before them, if any, who are getting or are entitled to the disability pension.*

8. *This Court grants six weeks' time from today to the appellant(s) to comply with the orders and directions passed by us."*

12. Additionally, consequent upon the issue of Government of India, Ministry of Defence letter No. 17(01)/2017/D(Pen/Policy) dated 23.01.2018, Principal Controller of Defence Accounts (Pensions), Prayagraj has issued Circular No. 596 dated 09.02.2018 wherein it is provided that the cases where Armed Forces Pensioners who were retired/discharged voluntary or otherwise with disability and they were in receipt of Disability/War Injury Element as on 31.12.2015, their extent of disability/War Injury Element shall be re-computed in the manner given in the said Circular which is applicable with effect from 01.01.2016.

13. It is also observed that claim for pension is based on continuing wrong and relief can be granted if such continuing wrong creates a continuing source of injury. In the case of **Shiv Dass vs. Union of India**, reported in 2007 (3) SLR 445, Hon'ble Apex Court has observed:

“In the case of pension the cause of action actually continues from month to month. That, however, cannot be a ground to overlook delay in filing the petition. It would depend upon the fact of each case. If petition is filed beyond a reasonable period say three years normally the Court would reject the same or restrict the relief which could be granted to a reasonable period of about three years. The High Court did not examine whether on merit appellant had a case. If on merits it would have found that there was no scope for interference, it would have dismissed the writ petition on that score alone.”

14. As such, in view of the decision of Hon'ble Supreme Court in the cases of **Union of India and Ors vs Ram Avtar & ors (supra)** and **Shiv Dass (supra)** as well as Government of India, Ministry of Defence letter No. 17(01)/2017/D(Pen/Policy) dated 23.01.2018, we are of the considered view that benefit of rounding off of disability element of disability pension less than @50% for life to be rounded off to 50% for life may be extended to the applicant from three preceding years from the date of filing of the Original Application.

15. In view of the above, the **Original Application No. 1098 of 2023** deserves to be partly allowed, hence **partly allowed**. The

impugned order, rejecting the applicant's claim for grant of disability element of disability pension, is set aside. The first and second disabilities of the applicant are held as aggravated by Air Force Service. The applicant is entitled to get disability element less than @50% for life which would be rounded off to 50% for life w.e.f. three years preceding the date of filing of Original Application. The respondents are directed to grant disability element to the applicant less than @50% for life which would stand rounded off to 50% for life w.e.f. three years preceding the date of filing of Original Application. The date of filing of Original Application is 11.09.2023. The respondents are further directed to give effect to this order within a period of four months from the date of receipt of a certified copy of this order. Default will invite interest @8% per annum till the actual payment.

16. No order as to costs.

(Lt. Gen. Anil Puri)
Member (A)

(Justice Anil Kumar)
Member (J)

Dated : 23 April, 2024

AKD/-