

Court No. 1**ARMED FORCES TRIBUNAL, REGIONAL BENCH, LUCKNOW****ORIGINAL APPLICATION No. 990 of 2023**Thursday, this the 11th day of January, 2024**“Hon’ble Mr. Justice Anil Kumar, Member (J)
Hon’ble Lt Gen Atul Puri, Member (A)”**

Ex Sgt Arun Kumar
 H. No. 21, Ward No. 3, Kasturba Kanya Inter College
 Arya Samaj Mandir, Khekra
 Dist – Bagpat, Uttar Pradesh - 250101

..... Applicant

Ld. Counsel for the : **Shri Raj Kumar**, Advocate.
 Applicant **Shri Vinay Pandey**, Advocate

Versus

1. Union of India, through Secretary Ministry of Defence, Room No. 101 A, South Block, DHQ PO, New Delhi – 110011.
2. Chief of the Air Staff, Air HQ (Vayu Bhawan), Rafi Marg, New Delhi – 110106.
3. Air HQ, Dte of Air Veterans, Subroto Park, New Delhi – 110011.
4. Joint Controller Defence Accounts (Air Force) Subroto Park, New Delhi – 110010.

.....**Respondents**

Ld. Counsel for the : **Shri Alok Kumar Mishra**, Advocate
 Respondents Central Govt. Counsel

ORDER

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

- “(a) To quash and set aside the RMB proceedings and Impugned Order dated 15.11.2021 to the extent they deny the grant of disability element of pension to the applicant.*
- (b) To direct the respondents to grant the disability element of pension @ 30% broad banded to 50% with interest @ 12% p.a. wef date of discharge, by treating the disabilities as attributable to and/or aggravated by military service.*
- (c) To pass any other orders or /and direction in favour of the applicant which may deem just and proper under the facts and circumstances of the case in the interest of justice.”*

2. Briefly stated, applicant was enrolled in the Indian Air Force on 19.12.2001 and was discharged on 31.12.2021 in Low Medical Category on fulfilling the conditions of terms of enrolment after rendering 20 years of service. At the time of discharge from service, the Release Medical Board (RMB) held at 26 ED-BNG on 18.03.2021 and assessed his disabilities, (i) **‘EPIRETINAL MEMBRANE WITH RETINAL VASCULITIS (RT) EYE (OPTD)’**, @ 20% for life and (ii) **‘MIGRAINE WITHOUT AURA (OLD)’**, @ 15% for life and both the disabilities were considered as neither attributable to nor aggravated (NANA) by service. The applicant’s claim for grant of disability pension was rejected vide letter dated 15.11.2021. The applicant submitted a legal notice dated 14.05.2022 but the same has not been replied by the respondents. 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 disease of the applicant was contracted during the service, hence it is attributable to and aggravated by Air Force Service. He placed reliance on the judgment of the Hon'ble Apex Court in the case of **Dharamvir Singh vs. Union of India & Others** (Civil appeal No. 4949 of 2013), AIR SCW 4236 and pleaded that various Benches of Armed Forces Tribunal have granted disability pension in similar cases, as such the applicant be granted disability pension and its rounding off to 50% for life.

4. On the other hand, Ld. Counsel for the respondents contended that both the disabilities of the applicant @ 30% for life have been regarded as NANA by the RMB, hence, as per Rule 153 of Pension Regulations for the Air Force, 1961 (Part-1), applicant is not entitled to disability element of pension. 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 of 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 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 (i) disability **'EPIRETINAL MEMBRANE WITH RETINAL VASCULITIS (RT) EYE (OPTD)'** is neither attributable to nor aggravated (NANA) by service on the ground of onset of disability in 2007 while posted in Peace location, therefore, applicant is not entitled to 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 pension to applicant for first disability 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 19.12.2001 and the first disability has started after more than 6 years of Air Force service i.e. in the year 2007. 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 first

disability **'EPIRETINAL MEMBRANE WITH RETINAL VASCULITIES (RT) EYE (OPTD)'** of the applicant should be considered as aggravated by Air Force service.

8. As far as second disability, **'MIGRAINE WITHOUT AURA (OLD)'**, of the applicant is concerned, we are in agreement with the opinion of RMB that cause of Migraine is not related to military service, hence, second disability of the applicant is treated as NANA.

9. 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."*

10. Additionally, consequent upon the issue of Government of India, Ministry of Defence letter No. 17(01)/2017(01)/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.

11. As such, in view of the decision of Hon'ble Supreme Court in the case of ***Ram Avtar (supra)*** as well as Government of India, Ministry of Defence letter dated 30.01.2001, we are of the considered view that benefit of rounding off of disability element of pension for the first disability '**EPIRETINAL MEMBRANE WITH RETINAL VASCULITIES (RT) EYE (OPTD)**' @ 20% for life to be

rounded off to 50% for life may be extended to the applicant from the next date of discharge from service.

12. In view of the above, the Original Application is **partly allowed**. The impugned order dated 15.11.2021 passed by the respondents is set aside. The first disability '**EPIRETINAL MEMBRANE WITH RETINAL VASCULITIS (RT) EYE (OPTD)**' of the applicant is held as aggravated by Air Force Service. The applicant is entitled to get disability element @20% for life which would be rounded off to 50% for life from the next date of his discharge. The respondents are directed to grant disability element to the applicant @20% for life which would stand rounded off to 50% for life from the next date of his discharge from service. 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.

13. No order as to costs.

14. Misc. Application(s), pending if any, shall stand disposed off.

15. Ld. Counsel for the respondents orally submitted to grant Leave to Appeal against the above order which we have considered and no point of law of general public importance being involved in the case the plea is rejected.

(Lt Gen Anil Puri)
Member (A)

Dated : January, 2024

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(Justice Anil Kumar)
Member (J)