ECHOES OF COURAGE

Untold Heroism of the Indian Armed Forces

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ECHOES OF COURAGE

Untold Heroism of the Indian Armed Forces

Compiled by

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हतो वा प्राप्स्यसि स्वर्गं
जित्वा वा भोक्ष्यसे महीम्।
तस्मादुत्तिष्ठ कौन्तेय
युद्धाय कृतनिश्चयः॥

Hato vā prāpsyasi svargaṁ
Jitvā vā bhokṣyase mahīm,
Tasmād uttiṣṭha Kaunteya
Yuddhāya kṛta-niścayaḥ.

– Bhagavad Gita 2:37

If you fall, you attain heaven; if you conquer, you enjoy the earth.
Therefore, arise, O Arjuna - determined to fight.

Dedication

To the soldiers, unsung warriors, and guardians of our nation –
who serve in silence, far from their homes, their comforts, and their loved ones.
To the courage that cannot be measured,
and to the quiet resolve that stands watch while the world sleeps.
To the men and women - the silent sentinels
who held the line on frozen heights and burning sands,
who turned pain into pride and carried their wounds as medals of honour.
To those who never came home,
whose supreme sacrifice became the heartbeat of Bharat,
and whose echo still stirs the conscience of a grateful nation.
And to Brigadier J.S. Kanwar,
who saw a soldier in me when I believed that dream had withered,
and gave me a mission greater than myself –
to tell the stories that must never be forgotten.
This book is my salute to them –
to every heartbeat that has ever echoed with the Tricolour.

Jai Hind.

– Rajan Arya

Youth Manifesto: Carrying the Echoes Forward

We, the youth of India, rise from the echoes of courage and sacrifice. In this spirit, we will

- ❏ Choose courage when fear whispers.
- ❏ Seek honour when ease tempts retreat.
- ❏ Stand loyal to my nation, my family, and my friends.
- ❏ Serve something greater than myself to make India stronger and prouder.
- ❏ Respect every Indian, for our unity is our greatest strength.
- ❏ Remember the fallen, for every freedom we enjoy is paid for by someone's courage.

The Tricolour beats in my heart:

- ❏ Saffron for Courage
- ❏ White for Peace
- ❏ Green for Growth

We vow to live bravely, act with integrity, and serve selflessly, so that the ***Echoes of Courage*** never fade.

Jai Hind.

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FOREWORD

1. Courage is often spoken of in moments of triumph, yet its truest expression is revealed in silence - when duty demands action without promise of recognition, when fear must be mastered without witness, and when duty continues despite personal cost. In the profession of arms, courage is not an episodic act; it is a way of life, sustained by discipline, conviction, and an unwavering sense of responsibility.

2. 'Echoes of Courage : Untold Heroism of the Indian Armed Forces' is a powerful testament to this enduring truth. Through a carefully curated collection of narratives, the book brings to light stories that seldom find space in formal histories-stories of men who stood firm in moments of peril, of intelligence operatives who served unseen, of women who broke barriers, and of animal warriors whose loyalty and sacrifice became inseparable from the missions they supported. Together, these accounts reflect the quiet, resolute spirit that defines the Indian Armed Forces.

3. Written by Lt Gen Ajai Kumar Singh (Retd), a soldier who has lived the very ethos he chronicles, this book does not approach courage as an abstract virtue. Instead, it presents courage in its most authentic form-contextual, situational, and often profoundly lonely. These stories unfold in moments where doctrine offers no easy answers, where technology falls silent, and where the individual must act because the call of duty permits no alternative. Such lived understanding lends the narratives a depth and credibility that only experience can provide.

4. In an era marked by rapid technological change and increasingly complex security challenges, there is growing tendency to view warfare through the prism of systems, platforms, and algorithms. While technology undoubtedly shapes the character of modern conflict, it does not-and cannot-replace the moral courage, ethical judgement, and personal accountability of the soldier. This book serves as a timely reminder that the decisive element in war remains the human spirit.

Contd. 2/-

5. For those in uniform, Echoes of Courage reinforces institutional memory and lineage. It reminds every soldier, sailor, and airman that they are custodians of a legacy forged through sacrifice, professionalism, and honour. Such awareness fosters humility in leadership, resilience in adversity, and strength in unity. Armed Forces draw their enduring power not only from present capabilities, but from the values carried forward through example and tradition-values these stories preserve and transmit.

6. For the youth of India, this book offers something even more enduring than historical knowledge-it offers orientation. In a world saturated with instant gratification and fleeting measures of success, these narratives recalibrate our understanding of achievement and purpose. They demonstrate that true greatness is not always loud, that significance is not measured by visibility, and that a life of meaning is often forged in service to something larger than oneself. While today's youth may not stand guard on icy summits or advance under fire, they will fight their own battles in life itself. The lessons of courage, loyalty, and resilience remain universal.

7. 'Echoes of Courage' is a tribute to acts of bravery, and the ethos of service that sustain the nation. It is a reminder that duty performed with integrity becomes immortal; and that India's strength lies not only in her weapons, but in the character of those who wield them.

8. I am confident that this book will resonate deeply with readers across generations. As a tapestry of lived experiences, it reaffirms the values that sustain our Armed Forces. May these echoes inspire reflection, reinforce, resolve, and ensure that the stories of our sentinels-seen and unseen-continue to reverberate through the soul of India.

Jai Hind !

(Anil Chauhan)
General
Chief of Defence Staff & Secretary, DMA

30 December 2025

Preface

"A soldier doesn't fight because he hates what's in front of him; He fights because he loves what's behind him."

– G.K. Chesterton

India is a land where every mountain echoes with courage, every river carries the memory of sacrifice, and every sunrise rises upon the promise of resilience. From the deserts of Rajasthan to the icy cliffs of Kargil, our soil has been sanctified by bravery, sacrifice, and an unyielding spirit that defines our nation's soul.

Within this glorious history lie countless untold tales – of men and women who stood tall when the world wavered, of silent warriors whose names may not be etched in textbooks but whose courage is carved in the conscience of Bharat.

This book, *Echoes of Courage: Untold Heroism of the Indian Armed Forces,* is not just a collection of stories. It is a tribute to the invisible spirit that surrounds us – the valour that walks unseen among us, the devotion that breathes life into our nation's heartbeat.

Through these pages, we bring to light the unheard echoes – stories of soldiers, officers, and even animal warriors whose service went beyond duty, whose courage defied fear, and whose humanity shone even in war.

Today's youth live in a world overflowing with notifications, chasing likes, followers, and fleeting fame. But true greatness is not in being noticed – it is in standing for something that matters.

Beyond metrics lies meaning. Beyond recognition lies responsibility.

When you read about a young officer scaling cliffs under fire, a mule carrying ammunition till its last breath, or a soldier from the Northeast whose name history forgot but whose sacrifice built our tomorrow, remember this: heroism is not noise; it is the quiet strength of character.

These are not just tales of war.

They are lessons for life:

- ❏ In courage when fear surrounds.
- ❏ In loyalty when the world forgets.
- ❏ In resilience when the path seems impossible.

This book salutes not only the men and women in uniform, but also their silent comrades – the war dogs who charged into fire, the mules that carried the nation's burden, the women officers who broke barriers, and the unsung spies who served unseen.

Heroism has many faces. Some carry rifles. Some carry stretchers. Some carry secrets. But all carry one thing in common – *the spirit of India.*

In these stories, sacrifice is not tragedy. It is immortality. The soldier's breath gives a billion others the right to breathe free.

Our true strength does not lie in weapons, but in the passion, discipline, and devotion of those who wield them for Bharat.

To the youth of India: These are not stories of the past; they are mirrors of your potential. You may not fight on icy summits, but you will fight your own battles – in classrooms, in boardrooms, in life itself.

When fear grips you, when comfort tempts you, when purpose feels faint – **Remember these heroes**.

Echoes of Courage is more than a book. It is a promise – that India will never forget her sentinels, her warriors, and her silent protectors.

As you turn each page, may your heart swell with pride, your spirit blaze with resolve, and your soul whisper an eternal vow.

To live bravely. To serve selflessly. And to ensure that the Echoes of Courage forever reverberate through the soul of India.

Jai Hind.

Author's Note

I am delighted to partner with Rajan Arya as we bring together *Echoes of Courage*, a wonderful compilation of stories of valour and grit of our men and women in uniform as also the dauntless four-legged warriors that too play a very important role in keeping the nation's frontiers secured.

The book has been created with one single thought in mind – To tell the untold stories of valour and sacrifice, and through that, to further invigorate today's generations towards their own sacred duty to the Motherland, be it within or outside of uniformed services.

When it comes to the safety and security of the Nation, each and every citizen is a warrior in their own rights. However, by the nature of their chosen profession, men and women in the Armed Forces stand apart. They are all heroes of the Nation, putting their very lives on the line for us all. Yet, at times their own stories remain unknown.

These are stories that have the potential to motivate and fill the youth of today with unparalleled *josh*. This *josh* is what makes nations march ahead on the Path of Glory, unhindered by obstacles and the occasional setback.

The stories themselves have been carefully chosen to share a wide gamut of the aspects of soldiering that are not generally known outside of the defence services. These include the story of an officer in Dhaka who went unarmed into an enemy held premises and convinced tens of armed Pakistani soldiers to surrender. It highlights the fact that soldiering is not just about knowing how or when to kill, but also about how and when *not* to kill.

Then there is the story of Harbhajan Baba who stands guard in Sikkim to this day – a fact that is acknowledged and honoured by the Chinese too who leave a vacant chair for him whenever they meet their Indian counterparts.

There are so many such beautiful stories in this book that make for a compelling read. My personal favourite amongst them is the story of Pedongi, an army mule with the heart of a lion. Pedongi fought in the 1962 and the 1971 wars, distinguishing itself with exceptional gallantry on both occasions.

Each and every one of these stories are about grit and perseverance against all odds. But at the same time, they are also about just doing your job – your *dharma*, regardless of the circumstances and leaving the rest to the Almighty. If even one of the readers of this book can understand this, and incorporate this principle in their life, I will consider this book to be a grand success.

Happy Reading!

– Lt Gen Ajai Kumar Singh

Publisher's Note

A soldier in spirit, a storyteller by duty

I was born with *olive green in my veins*. As a child, I didn't just dream of the Army, *I lived it*.

Sunday evenings in our lane were sacred. The whole neighbourhood gathered around Doctor Aunty's black-white television to watch films...sometimes war films. Each time the hero saluted, my little hand rose too, saluting not the screen, but a dream. Patriotism back then was pure, innocent, and deeply felt. The *mohalla* was one family, our joys shared, our laughter loud, and our love for India unquestioned.

I belonged to the last batch before the 10+2 education system. There was no roadmap, but one truth burned bright within me – *I wanted to serve my country.* I wanted to join National Defence Academy (NDA). I wanted to wear the uniform.

My beloved friend *Chachu* served in the Army. His polished boots, his calm composure, and his quiet pride fascinated me. He was everything I wanted to be – disciplined, dignified, and devoted.

But dreams can be fragile. Friends said, "You're not tall enough for NDA.... It's too tough… look elsewhere." Slowly, the dream slipped away, but the *fire* never went out.

Then came 1999. The *Kargil War* shook India – and it shook me. I can still see the coffins draped in the Tricolour, mothers weeping with pride and pain. Those nights changed me forever – sleepless, restless, and helpless.

I wanted to do *something*.

Destiny intervened in olive green. *Brigadier J S Kanwar* of the Sikh Light Infantry lived in my Apartment Complex. During our evening walks, I often spoke of my longing to serve. The Army as – the Kargil War was on and media was – active. One evening, he stopped, looked me straight in the eye and said:

"Rajan, if you can't wear the uniform, wear the words.

Tell the stories of our men. Serve the nation in your own way."

That single sentence lit the torch that still burns in my heart.

Through *Brigadier Kanwar*, I met *Colonel Harjeet Singh*, another officer of the Sikh Light Infantry. *Colonel Singh*'s passionate engagement, unwavering support and readiness to travel on short notice is the key to success of Pentagon Press. That meeting laid the *first brick of Pentagon Press LLP*.

Pentagon Press was born in the aftermath of Kargil – not as a business, but as a *mission of gratitude and duty.* What began as a small effort to tell stories of valour soon evolved into a Movement to awaken minds, to build awareness of national security, and to bring the voices of India's soldiers, scholars, and strategists to the nation.

Over two decades later, *Pentagon Press LLP has become more than a publisher*. It is a *platform of patriotism*, a bridge between the soldier and the citizen, a forum where courage finds its voice and knowledge becomes national strength.

Our aim is simple yet sacred – To *ignite the fire of duty, discipline, and pride* in the hearts of young Indians. To ensure that every citizen knows the price of the peace they enjoy.

I was blessed with mentors like *Dr K Subrahmanyam, Shri N N Vohra, and Dr Santhanam,* who guided me with patience and purpose. They taught me that there are many ways to serve the nation, and mine was to preserve the legacy of our soldiers through the written word.

Along the way, I met a comrade who became my dear friend, *Col Ajay Singh*. Together we shared ideas, dreams, and duties. Many stories in this book were born from his insights and lived experiences. Without his friendship, *Echoes of Courage* would not have taken flight.

This book is my salute to the men and women who *serve in silence*, far from home, far from fame, but never far

from honour. Each chapter carries its heartbeat, its sacrifice, its unwavering spirit.

Some heroes returned.

Many did not.

All left behind a legacy written in courage.

This book is also a personal tribute

To *Brigadier J S Kanwar*, who saw the soldier in me.

To *Colonel Ajay Singh*, my comrade-in-arms.

To *Colonel D D Goel*, who continues to inspire.

To *General Ajai Kumar Singh*, who showed me the spiritual path of service.

And to *every unnamed hero* whose courage echoes through India's mountains, deserts, skies, and seas.

I may not wear the olive green, but I carry it forever in my heart.

This is my uniform.

This is my mission.

This is my service.

Jai Hind.

– Rajan Arya

1

Major O.S. Kalkat*
He Foiled Pakistan's Kashmir Plan

"*True courage is quiet, steady, and relentless.*"

– Indian Armed Forces Creed

The ceiling fan in the Bannu bungalow turned lazily, pushing warm September air around without cooling it. *Major Onkar Singh Kalkat*, still wearing the starched *khaki* of the old Indian Army, sat at a wooden table piled with files stamped "Pakistan Army – GHQ" in fresh green ink.

It was 1947, barely a few weeks since Partition, and the world he had known – the single, massive British Indian Army – had been sliced into two: one for India, one for Pakistan. Officers and men like him had been caught in between. Committees in Delhi and Karachi were still counting guns, vehicles, mules, even typewriters and books, deciding which side would get what. Officers and men were allowed to choose the country they would decide to go to. Most Muslims opted for Pakistan, the Sikh and Indian

*with inputs from Col Ajay Singh (Retd.)

officers and men opted for India. But those who were present in the land of the other had to stay behind till they could be repatriated to the country of their choice. *Kalkat* who had opted to go to the Indian Army was posted as Brigade Major in the Brigade Headquarters at Bannu and was awaiting his orders to move to India.

He had been told, politely and firmly, to keep working at the Headquarters for "a few more weeks." He did not protest. He was a soldier, and orders were orders. Besides, he knew the men here; they had all been comrades for months. But as the days passed, and trains full of dead and dispossessed arrived from across the border, he began to feel that invisible line hardening around him. Pakistan was no longer an idea; it was a state, and he was now an outsider in uniform.

The city in September 1947 was edgy. Rumours of communal violence in the Punjab, trains arriving full of corpses, skirmishes in Kashmir – it was all in the air. *Major Kalkat* had begun to sense, in the Officers Mess and in the corridors of GHQ, a change of tone when they spoke to him. Earlier it had been "*Kalkat*, old chap"; now it was "*Major Kalkat*" or sometimes just "Major." The Muslim officers in the Headquarters, who had opted to stay behind in Pakistan, now treated him with barely concealed hatred. And then came the file.

It was late afternoon when the orderly brought in a thin

brown folder tied with white tape. "*Yeh Rawalpindi se aaya hai, sahib*," the man said. "*Urgent*."

Kalkat nodded. It was addressed to his Brigade Commander, Brigadier Murray, but the Commander was away and he had authorised *Kalkat* to open any official correspondence in his absence. He decided to open it should it be an urgent message requiring immediate attention.

Inside was a cyclostyled document with a bold title in English, underlined twice: "OPERATION GULMARG."

He frowned. He had never heard of an exercise by that name in the old Army. He glanced at the heading: GHQ PAKISTAN – 20 August 1947 was barely six days after independence. Pakistan was barely born, and yet here was an operation order, numbered, formatted, and circulated. He began to read. After the first few paragraphs, his mouth went dry.

This was no routine training order. This was a *plan to invade the princely state of Jammu & Kashmir*. Not with regular Pakistani troops – that would have been too blatant so soon after Partition – but with tribal leaders and from the North-West Frontier, to be raised, armed, and sent in waves. The document laid it out coldly:

- Each district in the Frontier was to raise a lashkar of 1,000 men.
- They would be provided weapons, rations, and transport by Pakistan.

- ❏ They would move to assembly areas near Abbottabad, Murree, and Naushera.
- ❏ Their objective: "liberation of Kashmir".
- ❏ Date of likely movement: the second half of October 1947.

There were even instructions that the raiders were to be "encouraged" to loot as incentive. Roads to Srinagar were identified. Local Muslim elements in Kashmir were to be contacted. Even Ikhwan-like elements in Poonch were mentioned.

And at the bottom, in neat staff-college English, the chilling line: "*This operation will not be attributed to the Pakistan Army*." *Kalkat* sat back.

He was in Pakistan, wearing their temporary badge, reading a secret Pakistani plan to invade a state that had not yet acceded to either dominion. India suspected Pakistan of such designs, yes, but suspicion was one thing; this was proof – typed, signed, distributed.

For a long moment he just listened to the fan creak overhead.

He knew at once the implications of this file. And he knew, with equal certainty, that if anyone realised an Indian optant had seen it, he might not get another morning. He put the letter back in the envelope, and resealed it after memorising the contents. He did not tell anyone what he

had seen. That night he barely slept. His mind kept running over the facts:

- ❏ Lashkars from NWFP.
- ❏ Moving in October.
- ❏ Objective: Kashmir.
- ❏ Pakistan Army to supply transport.

He pictured the map: from Abbottabad to Muzaffarabad, then over to Baramulla, and thence to Srinagar. If they moved fast and the Maharaja was still vacillating, Kashmir would fall before India could react. India had to know.

A Dangerous Realisation

The next morning *Kalkat* forced himself to act normal. But in his stomach he felt that cold, tight knot that soldiers sometimes get before battle. That night he made his decision. He would leave Pakistan and go to Delhi to inform the Indian Army Headquarters of what he had seen.

Not through official channels or telephone. This would be definitely intercepted by the Pakistanis. He would simply… go. And he would carry with him the most lethal thing he could: *knowledge*.

He packed light: one change of clothes, his documents, some money, and, wrapped in cloth, his service pistol. He might not be able to keep it, but no officer liked to move completely unarmed.

Then he slept for two hours, woke before dawn, and dressed not in uniform but in plain *kurta-pajama* and a coat. Then with four other Sikh soldiers they slipped away from the Headquarters, and raced to the railway station at night.

The Railway Station

The station was a sea of uncertainty – families huddled on platforms, soldiers in *khaki*, refugees clutching trunks, men with lists trying to find their relatives. On the walls were new signs, "PAKISTAN RAILWAYS," painted hastily over the old ones.

Kalkat bought a ticket to Lahore. No one questioned him – he spoke Punjabi like a local, looked like a local, and in 1947 every other man was a traveller.

But even as he waited for the train, he felt eyes on him. Were they watching him? Or was he just nervous? At one point, two Pakistani officers in uniform walked down the platform. He turned away slightly. One of them glanced at him without recognition and moved on. *Kalkat* exhaled.

The train to Lahore clanked in, already crowded. He climbed on, found a corner in a compartment with Sikh refugees, and sat quietly. It was risky to be with Sikhs – attacks could happen *en route* – but it was also his cover. To the eye, he was just another Sikh trying to get to India.

As the train pulled out, he looked back with relief. The crowded train moved slowly towards India. The journey to

Lahore was slow and tense. Twice the train halted at small stations where armed local groups peered in to see who was travelling. At one place, a young Pakistani volunteer with a bandolier stepped into the compartment. His eyes swept over the turbans.

"Where are you going?"
"Lahore," someone said.
"From there?"
"To India."

The man stared for a moment, then shrugged and left. Maybe he was tired of killing. Maybe the presence of a tall, calm "uncle" in the corner, *Major Kalkat*, made him pause.

At Lahore, the scene was even more chaotic. Trains for Amritsar were crammed. He decided to go on foot towards Attari, and crossed the border into India. He and his fellow soldiers reverentially kissed the soil of their new nation.

But he had to get to Delhi. He went by bus and truck to Jalandhar, and then caught a goods trains heading towards Delhi, reaching late at night. He spent a fitful night at the home of a cousin and next morning went to Army HQ of the Military Operations Directorate to tell them what he had seen.

He was ushered into South Block, to a room where senior Army officers and, according to some accounts, even political leaders were meeting almost daily to track the situation in Jammu & Kashmir.

A Brigadier he knew from pre-Partition days came forward. "*Kalkat!* We thought you were still in Rawalpindi!"

"I was," he said. "And I've brought something you need to hear."

They sat him down. Tea was served. A stenographer was called.

"Start from the beginning," the Brigadier said.

And *Major Kalkat* began to speak.

He told them about the file – its title, its date, the issuing authority. He described the contents as precisely as if he were briefing an Indian.

- ❏ Number of lashkars: one thousand men per district in NWFP.
- ❏ Organisation: under local tribal leaders, armed and supplied by Pakistan.
- ❏ Assembly areas: Abbottabad, Manshera, Murree sector.
- ❏ Probable axis of advance: Muzaffarabad–Domel–Baramulla–Srinagar.
- ❏ Likely timing: second half of October.
- ❏ Pakistani regulars: officially non-participating, but trucks and "advisers" to be provided.

The officers around him listened in silence. Some scribbled notes. Others exchanged glances. This was the confirmation

they needed. India had suspected Pakistan was stirring trouble in Poonch and Gilgit, but a named, timed operation to take Srinagar – that was new.

"Are you certain of the date?" someone asked. "As certain as a man can be who read the order himself," *Kalkat* said. "They aim for October. Before the passes close. Before we can react."

There was a moment's silence after he finished. Then the Brigadier said, "You've done the country a great service, Major."

The Aftermath

Then on 22 October 1947, almost on the date *Major Kalkat* had indicated, tribal lashkars poured into Kashmir from Pakistan, sacking Muzaffarabad and Baramulla, committing atrocities, and racing towards Srinagar. Because of the intelligence that officers like *Kalkat* had brought, the Indian leadership was not completely blind. When the Maharaja finally signed the Instrument of Accession on 26 October, Indian troops were flown into Srinagar almost immediately – just in time to save the airfield.

Would India have reacted anyway? Perhaps. But intelligence inputs like *Kalkat*'s shaved off hesitation. It turned rumours into fact. It told the Army exactly where to expect the blow and in what form.

Operation Gulmarg is now part of the story of the origin of the Kashmir conflict. It shows that the Pakistani move in 1947 was not some spontaneous tribal uprising; it was planned, organised, and timed. And we know this, in large measure, because a single Indian major happened to be in the right place, read the right file, and refused to look away.

There is a quiet kind of heroism in that.

2

Col Narendra 'Bull' Kumar*
The Man who Saved Siachen

The safety, honour and welfare of your Country come first, always and every time.
The honour, welfare and comfort of the men you command come next.
Your own ease, comfort and safety come last, always and every time.

– Indian Military Academy credo

Colonel Narendra Kumar – better known across the Indian Army and the mountaineering world as *'Bull' Kumar* – was the kind of officer who seemed designed for a very narrow slice of history. He was a soldier who could think like a surveyor, climb like a *Sherpa*, and argue like a strategist. And he arrived on the scene just when India needed someone to look at a blank patch of ice on the map and say, "This will matter one day."

What follows is not just the story of a man who climbed great mountains. It's the story of how one officer's curiosity,

*with inputs from Col Ajay Singh (Retd.)

stubbornness, and love for high places helped India secure *Siachen*, the highest battlefield in the world.

Roots of a Mountaineer

Narendra Kumar was born on 8 December 1933 in Rawalpindi, in undivided India. The Partition of 1947 pushed his family into independent India – an early lesson in how quickly borders can change, and how fragile "possession" can be. Many who knew him later believed that this experience – seeing how a place that was "home" could suddenly become "across the border" – sharpened his instinct to protect India's frontiers.

He joined the Indian Military Academy and was commissioned into the Kumaon Regiment in 1954. The Kumaonis already had a reputation for being tough, mountain-friendly infantrymen. But even in that environment, the young officer was different. He was powerful, compact, and full of restless energy. He didn't just walk – he charged. His seniors and coursemates started calling him 'Bull', partly because Kumar sounded too simple, because once he decided to do something, he lowered his head and went through obstacles.

Very early he found that the mountains gave him the kind of challenge he craved – biting cold, thin air, technical difficulty, and no room for laziness. He joined Army mountaineering teams, at first as an eager young officer and soon as a natural leader.

Building India's Mountaineering Muscle

Post-independence, the Indian Army realised it would have to become a Himalayan Army. The new frontiers with China and Pakistan ran across glaciers, mountain passes, and high ridges. So, the Army created specialised institutions – the High Altitude Warfare School (HAWS) in Gulmarg and Sonamarg, and the Himalayan Mountaineering Institute (HMI) in Darjeeling. Kumar would go on to play a defining role in HAWS, eventually commanding it. In 1958, he opted for mountaining course at HMI by skipping his annual leave to complete the course.

He made a name for himself in the 1960s and 1970s on some of the biggest mountains in the world.

- ❏ His first expedition to the Mt. Trisul in 1958 was suggested by his good friend Tenzing Norgay.
- ❏ In 1961, he led a five member expedition to scale Neelkanth (6597 m) in the Garwal Himalayas.
- ❏ In 1964, he was the first Indian to scale Nanda Devi, India's second largest peak.
- ❏ He was part of the 1965 Indian Everest Expedition – India's first successful ascent of Everest – where he served as *deputy leader* under *Captain M.S. Kohli*. That expedition put India on the world's mountaineering map.

- He climbed Kanchenjunga in 1970 – at 8,586 m, one of the hardest Peaks – showing that Indian climbers could take on technically demanding peaks and not just "national prestige" climbs.
- He led or participated in several expeditions to Nun, Nanda Devi East, and other Himalayan peaks, often opening new routes.
- He became known for his study of snow conditions, crevasse behaviour, and glacier movement – boring to some, but exactly the sort of thing a future Siachen pioneer needed to understand.

At HAWS, Kumar was not the classic parade-ground colonel. He was more likely to be seen on skis, or roped up, teaching young officers how to jump crevasses or survive a white-out. He drilled into them a simple line: *"Mountains are neutral. They don't care who owns them. Men decide that."* In other words, if you can get there and stay there, it's yours.

That line would become a prophecy.

The Karakoram: A Quiet Contest

To understand why 'Bull' Kumar's Siachen work was so important, you need to picture the map of the Karakoram around the late 1970s.

After the 1949 Indo–Pak ceasefire line (later the Line of Control after the 1971 War), was demarcated only up to a

point called NJ 9842. From there the agreement said: "thence north to the glaciers." It was a vague phrase, because at the time nobody thought anyone would want to sit at 18,000–20,000 feet in the middle of a glacier wasteland.

India interpreted that line as running along the Saltoro Ridge, keeping the main passes – *Bilafond La*, *Sia La*, *Gyong La* – on the Indian side. Pakistan, however, started showing maps where the line bent north-west towards the Karakoram Pass, giving Pakistan *de facto* control over the entire Siachen Glacier.

For years this remained cartographer's stuff – ink on paper. And then Pakistan did something clever. It began to permit foreign mountaineering and trekking expeditions into the Siachen area – from the Pakistani side. Climbers from Europe and Japan are nice, honest people, but they go where permits allow them to go. So, they climbed on Siachen with Pakistani permits, wrote books and reports, and these in turn influenced Western maps. Slowly, the world began to think: "Oh, this area must be Pakistani."

India, meanwhile, had almost no physical presence there. This is where a soldier-mountaineer like 'Bull' Kumar becomes invaluable. A normal staff officer might look at a remote glacier and say, "Too high, too cold, too far. We'll deal with it later." A climber looks at the same glacier and says, "Let's go and see."

1978: The First Reconnaissance

In 1978, *Colonel Narendra Kumar* led an Indian Army mountaineering expedition into the Siachen region. This was not billed as a "military operation." It was, on the surface, an expedition – something the Army routinely did. But Kumar had sharper intent.

When his team reached the Saltoro Ridge and surrounding areas, they found exactly what he had feared: evidence of Pakistani-sponsored climbs. There were Pakistani flags, cairns, and references to Pakistani-issued permits. That meant that Pakistan was trying to establish a pattern of presence. If India did nothing, Pakistan would one day claim: "We have been using and administering this area for years."

Kumar came back and reported this up the chain. His briefing was blunt: *we are losing Siachen on paper, and soon we will lose it on the ground.*

Some in Delhi and even in Army HQ were sceptical. It was an icefield. It had no people, no roads, no immediate tactical value in the old, plains-warfare sense. Why get worked up? But the 'Bull' did not let go.

1981–83: Climbing for Proof

If 1978 was the warning shot, the 1981 and 1983 expeditions were the smoking gun.

Kumar pushed deeper, higher, and more precisely onto

the key features that control Siachen: Bilafond La, Sia La, and Gyong La. These are not just pretty names; in mountains, he who holds the ridge holds the valley. From Saltoro, India could dominate the glacier. From the glacier floor, Pakistan could not dominate the ridge.

Kumar's teams photographed Pakistani climbing activity, logged routes, and – most importantly – prepared *accurate Indian maps* of the area. Remember, this was before satellite imagery was a daily thing. Good, hand-made, on-ground maps were operational gold.

At those altitudes – 16,000 to 20,000+ feet – even walking in a straight line is exhausting. You breathe like you've run a race, your sweat freezes, and a sudden wind can blind you. White-outs make compass work difficult. A single mistake can send a man into a crevasse. Frostbite comes silently. And despite all this, Kumar kept leading from the front. Accounts from his men say he was tireless and cheerful, pushing younger climbers with the simple promise: "We have to be the first Indians here."

By 1983, he had irrefutable evidence: Pakistan intended to occupy Siachen by stealth. India now had a choice – act, or allow a crucial northern wedge to slip away.

Operation Meghdoot: Strategy on Ice

The Indian Army chose to act. In April 1984, based heavily on the terrain familiarity, routes, timings, and intelligence

that Bull Kumar's expeditions had produced, the Army launched Operation Meghdoot – named after Kalidasa's cloud messenger, fitting for a mission in the sky.

The key to Meghdoot was pre-emption. At those heights, whoever gets there first has a massive advantage because landing, building shelters, and deploying weapons all take longer. Thanks to Kumar's pioneering climbs, India knew the approach routes, knew where to land Cheetah helicopters, and knew which passes to occupy first.

Indian troops, many of them trained at HAWS in the very techniques Kumar had refined, were heli-lifted and marched onto Bilafond La and Sia La before Pakistani troops could get there. Pakistan, realising what had happened, rushed its own forces, and a high-altitude standoff began. But the crucial fact is this: India held the Saltoro Ridge first, and has held it ever since.

That single decision – made possible by years of Kumar's "mountaineering intelligence" – is why today the entire Siachen Glacier lies on the Indian side of the line of control. Had Pakistan got there first, India would have had to fight uphill forever, or accept a fait accompli.

It is no exaggeration when senior officers say: *"If 'Bull' Kumar had not climbed Siachen, there might have been no Meghdoot."*

The Man Behind the Legend

Decorations followed: Padma Shri, Arjuna Award, Param Vishisht Seva Medal (PVSM). But those who served with him remember other things.

They remember a Colonel who knew the name of every rope and knot, not just the staff paper. They remember his insistence on meticulous acclimatisation – no bravado with altitude, no shortcuts. They remember that he never underestimated the real enemy on Siachen: the weather. He used to tell young officers:

> "*Up there, Pakistan is only one threat. The bigger threat is the mountain. Respect it, or it will take you.*"

That line has proven painfully true. Since 1984, more Indian soldiers have died on Siachen from avalanches, cold, and crevasse falls than from bullets. Kumar understood this from day one, that is why he kept pushing for better clothing, better ice-craft training, and better route marking.

Even after he retired, the Army kept calling him back – as an advisor on Siachen and high-altitude warfare. He would visit, review positions, and encourage troops. For soldiers freezing at 19,000 feet, it mattered that the man whose climbs had started it all still cared.

A Wider Legacy

When *Colonel Narendra Kumar* passed away on 31 December 2020 at the age of 87, obituaries called him "The man who discovered Siachen." Strictly speaking, the glacier was not unknown – geographers and explorers had recorded it. What he discovered was its strategic vulnerability and Pakistan's creeping attempt to occupy it.

Not every soldier can relate to geopolitical essays. But every soldier can understand this: "One colonel saw the enemy coming before anyone else, climbed up there himself, and because of him we are holding it today." That's a clean, inspiring narrative.

He once said in an interview – paraphrased by those who knew him – that *a mountain reveals itself only to those who go to it with purpose*. He took that purpose with him to Siachen, and the glacier yielded its secret: that whoever held Saltoro would hold the roof over Ladakh.

Today, when a young jawan at 19,000 feet melts ice for water, watches for avalanches, and looks out over a shining-white emptiness, he is part of the chain that began with that first 1978 expedition. Most of them may never have met *Colonel Narendra 'Bull' Kumar*. But they stand where they stand because he first went where no one else in India had thought it worth going.

Mountains, as someone wrote, guard the soul of a nation. *'Bull' Kumar made sure one of those mountains – and the glacier behind it – would guard India, not someone else.*

3

Rifleman Devi Prasad Limbu*
He Fought Like a Tiger

"If a man says that he is not afraid of dying, he is either lying or is a Gorkha."

– Field Marshal Sam Manekshaw

High in the Himalayan silence, where the wind howls like a living creature and even stones seem to shiver, lie the windswept heights of Chola Pass.

Six kilometres northwest of Nathu La, East Sikkim, the landscape looked deceptively still on the morning of 1 October 1967. But deep beneath that calm, the tension between India and China simmered like a volcano waiting for a crack.

D Company of 7/11 Gorkha Rifles, under the young and dynamic Lieutenant Ram Singh Rathore, had taken over Point 15450 from the JAK Rifles barely a day earlier. The night patrols had returned exhausted and were resting in their dugouts. Some soldiers were repairing fortifications,

securing communication lines, or melting ice for drinking water. Others stood guard, rifles cradled in cold-numbed hands, eyes fixed on enemy trenches barely a few yards away.

At Chola Pass, the distance between life and death was measured not in metres but in steps.

Here, at some points, Indian and Chinese sentries stood so close that they could hear each other breathe. In the thin air of 15000 feet, even a raised eyebrow could trigger an international incident. Yet the soldiers held their ground with icy patience.

Between the two positions stood a large boulder, infamous on both sides, known simply as Black Rock. The international boundary line cut across it. Half belonged to India, half to China. It was a symbol of a divided world, but more than that, it was a symbol of stubborn pride.

And on this day, that pride would light a fire no one could contain.

The Kick that Shook the Mountains

On that cold morning, Naib Subedar *Gyan Bahadur Limbu*, tired from the night's patrol, rested his boot lightly against India's side of Black Rock. A Chinese sentry, aggressive and edgy, glared at him and suddenly kicked his foot away, barking that the rock belonged entirely to China.

Gyan Bahadur was Gorkha. And a Gorkha never steps back when honour is challenged. He calmly placed his foot back on the same spot. A silent challenge.

The Chinese sentry, enraged, repeated the act aggressively. This time, *Gyan Bahadur* moved like lightning. He grabbed the Chinese soldier, and in the scuffle that followed, the enemy thrust his bayonet into *Gyan Bahadur*'s shoulder, piercing deep into the muscle.

Blood stained the snow.

In seconds, what began as a minor scuffle turned into a storm.

Lance Naik Krishna Kumar Rai, the sentry post commander, arrived at a run. Seeing blood on the rock, his comrade's blood, he did not hesitate. With a roar of fury, he charged and bayoneted two Chinese soldiers. That was the spark. Within seconds, gunfire cracked the silence of the mountains. The Chinese opened automatic fire on the Indian position. And the Gorkhas, true to their creed, responded with the only thing they know, which is Courage.

The Battle Erupts

The Chinese poured fire upon the Indian trenches. Bullets tore through the icy wind, ricocheting off rocks and smashing into sandbags. Krishna Kumar Rai was hit thrice. The bullets shattered his arm, but he refused to fall back. Dropping his useless rifle, he pulled out his khukri, the curved blade that had made the Gorkhas legendary, and charged straight at the enemy line. It was courage beyond reason.

A burst of machine-gun fire tore into his chest, and Krishna Kumar fell far ahead in Chinese territory. His hands gripped his *khukri* firmly, even in death.

The battle at Chola Pass was now raging at full intensity. Lt Rathore, though bleeding from bullets that tore through his forearm and abdomen, refused to evacuate. He moved from trench to trench, urging his men forward, defying death. Another bullet smashed into his chest, and he died with his last command on his lips: "*Aghi badho* – move forward!" His men obeyed without hesitation.

From a forward position, *Havildar Tenjong Lama*, in charge of the recoilless gun, saw the Chinese heavy machine guns cutting down Indian soldiers. Without waiting for orders, he swung his RCL into position, sighted the enemy gun, and fired.

The Chinese gun exploded in a ball of smoke. But the blast exposed his position. Waves of Chinese soldiers advanced towards him. Two of Lama's gunners fell. He was now alone at the gun pit. But he did not abandon his position. He fired again and again and again.

Only when every last shell was gone did the Chinese finally overrun his post. Lama fell fighting to his last breath, and his courage inspired every soldier on that mountain.

The Gorkhas now charged with renewed fury.

The Rise of Rifleman Devi Prasad Limbu

Amid the smoke and chaos was a young soldier barely months into service, *Rifleman Devi Prasad Limbu*.

He had joined the battalion only recently, but the blood of his ancestors flowed firmly within him. He could have stayed behind. He could have waited for orders. But he did neither.

As the Chinese lines wavered under the Indian counter-charge, *Devi Prasad* pulled out his khukri and sprinted forward with the battle cry that had sent chills down the spines of enemies.

"JAI MAHAKAALI…AYO GORKHALI" – Hail Mother Kali, The Gorkhas have come!"

The war cry echoed across the mountains.

He leapt into the Chinese trenches alone, cutting down enemy soldiers with fierce, fearless strikes. Eyewitness accounts say he killed four to five Chinese soldiers with his khukri, fighting with a ferocity that stunned the enemy.

His courage ignited his comrades. The Gorkhas surged forward like a human avalanche, pushing the Chinese back in hand-to-hand combat.

The Chinese line faltered.

But *Devi Prasad* was already bleeding from multiple wounds.

Still, he fought on.

Still, he advanced.

Still, he refused to fall back.

Finally, he collapsed in the enemy trench, but his khukri was still warm with enemy blood.

He had given his life, but taken the enemy's spirit with him.

The Chinese Rage

Humiliated by the courage of a single Gorkha, the Chinese soldiers committed an act of barbarity that would be remembered for decades.

They mutilated *Devi Prasad*'s body, smashing his skull with rifle butts, scooping out his brains, an act born of frustration, because they could not defeat him while he lived.

Yet even in death, he commanded respect.

For when the Chinese returned his body under a truce, their senior commissar spoke words that honoured the Gorkha more than any medal:

"**He fought like a tiger.**"

The mountains remembered those words.

So did history.

The Aftermath: Courage Echoes Beyond Battle

The Chola confrontation became one of the fiercest post-1962 clashes with China. India not only held its ground

but pushed the Chinese back, inflicting heavy casualties. The bravery of the Gorkhas, many of whom gave their lives, ensured that the Tricolour flew proudly on those heights.

Rifleman Devi Prasad Limbu was honoured with a posthumous gallantry award for his unparalleled courage.

His story is rarely told, but his sacrifice is eternal.

Why his Story Matters Today

In an era when battles are often fought far away from public view, the courage of warriors like *Devi Prasad Limbu* reminds us that the peace we enjoy is paid for in the blood of the brave.

He was not a 'General'.

He was not a 'decorated war veteran'.

He was a young rifleman, just a few months into service.

And yet, when the moment came, he rose higher than the mountains he defended.

His courage was not born from training alone, but from something more profound – a soldier's love for his regiment, his comrades, and his nation.

The Chinese commissar's words were not empty praise. They were an admission that even an enemy must bow to the spirit of a true warrior.

A tiger indeed.

A Gorkha to the core.

A son of India forever.

The Roar that Still Echoes

Today, when the cold winds blow over the Chola Pass, they carry with them the echoes of that deadly morning, the clash of steel, the cry of "*Ayo Gorkhali*," and the heartbeat of a rifleman who fought beyond fear.

Rifleman Devi Prasad Limbu may have fallen that day, but he did not fall alone.

He fell with the pride of his battalion.

He fell with the honour of the Gorkhas.

He fell with the spirit of a nation in his chest.

His story is not just history.

His story is a reminder that courage can be quiet, but never small.

And like a tiger,

He roars like a TIGER.

4

Rifleman Dhan Bahadur Rai*

He Brought Down a Plane with his Light Machine Gun

> *"We fight to win and win with a knockout because there are no runners-up in war."*
>
> **– General JJ Singh**

War rarely gives advance notice. It tests men in moments they never expect, moments where instinct must replace thought, and courage must outrun fear.

Rifleman Dhan Bahadur Rai, barely nineteen, uneducated, unknown, and unassuming, would meet such a moment on a cold December morning in 1971.

What he did that day would enter the history books forever.

A Young Boy from the Mountains

Before he wore a uniform or held a rifle, *Dhan Bahadur* was a simple mountain lad from Nundhiki, a tiny village in eastern Nepal. His world was full of steep trails, grazing animals, icy winds, and long walks that would leave most

people breathless. He had never been to school, never seen an aeroplane, and never imagined he would one day stand in the middle of a battlefield.

But he had something rare.

A strong heart and the spirit of a Gorkha.

At nineteen, he crossed into Darjeeling on foot and joined the legendary Indian Army's 11 Gorkha Rifles, a place where bravery wasn't taught, only sharpened. Eleven months of hard training turned the shepherd boy into a soldier ready to serve India.

What he didn't know was that destiny had chosen him for something extraordinary.

The 1971 War Begins

The Indo-Pak War of 1971 is remembered for the birth of Bangladesh. But while fierce battles raged in the East, Indian soldiers in the West, especially in South Jammu & Kashmir, also faced intense fighting.

This is where the 7/11 Gorkha Rifles were deployed.

Winter had arrived harsh and heavy. The mountains were beautiful but merciless, the winds sharp, and the nights freezing. Yet the Gorkhas marched enthusiastically. These were men who could smile even with frost biting their fingers.

On 3 December 1971, India launched *Operation Cactus Lily*. The next day, the Gorkhas made history by crossing

the International Border under the shadow of enemy aircraft. They pushed through tall elephant grass, seized key positions, and sent panic into the enemy ranks.

Village after village, bunker after bunker, ridge after ridge, the Gorkhas took every objective with determination and teamwork.

Their final and most crucial task was securing the Baluchak Ferry, where the Pakistani Army was expected to launch a major counterattack. This is where our story zooms in.

A Quiet Morning Turns Dangerous

It was cold. The kind of cold that makes one's breath fog instantly. The ground was wet from night dew. A thick haze hung over the landscape.

Rifleman Dhan Bahadur Rai was on sentry duty at the perimeter of his company's position. His job was straightforward: watch, listen, and raise the alarm if anything unusual happened.

He stood near a half-dug trench, holding his 7.62 mm Light Machine Gun (LMG) – a heavy, solid weapon meant for ground fire, not for shooting at the sky.

Suddenly, he heard a low rumble. A growing roar. He looked up. Five Pakistani Sabre jets were circling overhead.

His heart thumped. Jets meant danger - bombs, bullets, and destruction. One jet broke formation and turned sharply toward the Indian position. It had spotted him.

Most People Would Hide, but he didn't

In that split second, *Dhan Bahadur* had a choice.

He could jump into the trench and save himself.

Or he could stand his ground to protect his unit.

His training, his courage, and the Gorkha spirit within him chose for him.

He did not move.

The Sabre jet roared toward him and opened fire.

Bullets sprayed the ground.

Dust exploded into the air.

Soil flew in all directions.

A few bullets passed so close to him that he felt the rush of wind on his cheek.

Yet he stood firm.

Soldiers watching from a distance would later say it looked impossible, like watching a young man stand against a storm.

But *Dhan Bahadur* wasn't reckless.

He was calm, focused, and ready.

He waited patiently for the pilot to turn around for the second attack run.

The Impossible Shot

The aircraft looped back, diving low, fast, and straight toward him.

Dhan Bahadur adjusted his stance. He gripped his LMG tightly. He steadied his breathing. And the moment the aircraft lined up for the next strike, he pressed the trigger.

Rat-tat-tat-tat-tat!

Flames burst from the muzzle.

He swept the gun along the path of the jet, aiming not at where it was but at where it would be. Most soldiers would have shut their eyes. But he didn't. Most would pray for luck. He relied on instinct. And then it happened.

A single bullet, one speck of metal, hit the Sabre in just the right spot.

There was a flash.

Smoke.

Then flames.

The Sabre jet shuddered violently, caught fire, and spiralled downward. Within seconds, it exploded in a blaze nearly a kilometre away.

The sky, clear a moment ago, now glowed with streaks of fire and smoke.

All around him, soldiers began shouting, cheering, laughing in disbelief.

A Gorkha had shot down a fighter jet.

With an LMG.

From the ground.

It had never happened before in recorded military history.

The Pilot Falls from the Sky

The Pakistani pilot, Flt Lt Wajid Ali Khan, ejected just in time. His parachute opened, and he drifted safely to the ground. Soldiers from a nearby Indian unit surrounded him and took him as a prisoner of war.

During interrogation, he confirmed the unbelievable truth that his jet had been brought down by ground fire from a single soldier's LMG. There was no debate. No denial. No confusion. *Rifleman Dhan Bahadur Rai* had done the impossible.

A Medal for a Mountain Boy

After the war ended, the stories of bravery flowed back to India like a tide of pride.

But even among hundreds of tales, this one stood out.

At a grand ceremony in Rashtrapati Bhawan, President V.V. Giri awarded the Vir Chakra to *Rifleman Dhan Bahadur Rai*.

The hall was packed with senior officers, government leaders, and proud families. Yet the nineteen-year-old Gorkha stood quietly, almost shy, as the medal was pinned to his chest.

He didn't boast.

He didn't smile widely.

He didn't talk about glory.

He saluted, straight and sharp, like the soldier he was.

What Makes a Hero?

Young readers often imagine heroes as giants, muscular, fearless, larger than life.

But real heroes, like *Dhan Bahadur Rai*, are often simple folk who rise to the occasion when duty calls.

He had no education, no special training in anti-aircraft weapons and no technological advantage.

What he had was far greater

- ❏ Calmness under fire.
- ❏ Courage to stand alone.
- ❏ A refusal to run.
- ❏ Faith in his duty.
- ❏ The unbreakable spirit of a Gorkha soldier.

He showed the world that bravery isn't about size or strength.

It's about the heart.

Why his Story Matters Today

For young readers growing up in a world of screens, noise, and distractions, *Dhan Bahadur*'s story is a powerful reminder

- ❏ Courage can come from anyone.
- ❏ Greatness often hides in ordinary people.
- ❏ Age doesn't limit bravery.

- ❏ Fear can be defeated by duty.
- ❏ And sometimes, a single act of courage can inspire generations.

His example tells every young Indian: You don't need superpowers to do something extraordinary. You need the courage that refuses to step back.

A Legacy that Still Inspires

Rifleman Dhan Bahadur Rai's heroic act became a part of military history – not because of technology or tactics, but because of pure human bravery.

Even today, soldiers of the 11 Gorkha Rifles proudly remember him. His story is told to inspire new recruits, reminding them that courage flows in their bloodline.

And young readers can draw a simple but powerful lesson. "Heroes are not born. They are made in moments of choice."

On that misty morning in 1971, a nineteen-year-old mountain boy chose courage over fear and duty over safety. And because of that choice, his name will never be forgotten.

5

Lt Col Poonam Sangwan*

She Climbed where Dreams Run Out of Breath

"True leadership is tested not in comfort, but in crisis."
– General Bipin Rawat

As a child, she was a girl with dust on her knees and a ball always in her hands. The kind of girl who didn't walk, she ran. Who didn't sit still, she played. Long before her world comprised snow and ice, ropes and oxygen cylinders, and the thin air of Everest tested her lungs to their limit, she was merely a spirited young girl in Haryana who loved to bounce back after every fall with the certainty of sunrise. Basketball courts and volleyball grounds were her first arenas of battle, where she learnt an unspoken language that every defeat was training for later victory. Her father wanted her to become a doctor. It was a respectable, safe dream. But lives that are destined to shake mountains are rarely ensconced in safety.

*with inputs from Lt Col D D Goel (Retd.)

Captain (later Lt Col) Poonam Sangwan was born with a heart that refused to accept neat boundaries. Medicine was not her calling; Adventure was. Strength was. Service was. And somewhere between bouncing a basketball and a roaring crowd, the Indian Army quietly entered her life.

The Uniform that Changed Everything

It was her second year in college when everything shifted. She joined the National Cadet Corps. She didn't know, couldn't have known, that that one decision would become the hinge upon which her entire life would turn. Marching drills became her meditation. Discipline became her language. Early mornings stopped feeling like punishment and became a privilege. Her feet blistered from endless formations, but each blister was a badge of belonging to something larger than herself. She trained harder than most because deep inside, she wasn't just learning to drill; she was learning to belong to an institution, a legacy, a purpose that had existed long before her and would outlive her.

The day came when she was selected to participate in the Republic Day Parade in New Delhi. To a young officer cadet, this was more than an honour; it was a calling answered. As she marched down the wide boulevards of the capital, her eyes caught something that would transform her forever.

Rows of decorated officers stood in ceremonial perfection, their uniforms impossibly bright against the

January sky. Medals caught the sunlight like small mirrors reflecting their journeys. Insignia told stories of postings in distant mountains, in harsh deserts, in conflict zones where courage had been tested and forged. Each badge whispered sacrifice, service, moments when someone had chosen duty over comfort, nation over self.

As she watched them, something ignited deep within her heart. Not envy. Something far more powerful. A recognition. A calling. She didn't wish to admire such officers from a distance. She wanted to be one of them. She wanted to earn those medals herself. To carry their stories. To wear that uniform with the weight of purpose on her shoulders.

Her determination became relentless. She threw herself into every task, every drill, every leadership opportunity with the intensity of someone who knew exactly what she wanted. And the institution recognised it. She was adjudged the Best NCC Cadet by the Delhi Directorate, a recognition that spoke not just of her discipline, but of the leadership qualities burning quietly beneath the surface. Yet, not everyone understood her dream. Not everyone believed it.

Why Waste Money on a Girl?

The question hung in the air like morning fog, not born from malice, but from the weight of generations. It was whispered in kitchens across the country, echoed in conversations during family gatherings, embedded in the very fabric of how society measured a girl's worth. "Sending

her to college will be a waste of money," they said, not because they were cruel, but because that was what the world had always taught them to believe. These words, meant perhaps with practical concern in a world of limited resources, had instead become a flame in Poonam's heart. They fuelled her. Every examination passed, every award won, every recognition earned – they were all quiet answers to that single, doubting sentence.

She remembered the day of her commissioning in 2007 with the clarity of a moment frozen in time. Standing in her new uniform, a first lieutenant's star gleaming on her shoulder flaps, she caught her father's eye. When that first star was pinned on her shoulder, it wasn't just metal and insignia. It was a revolution in miniature. It was the quiet truth that when a girl is given education and trust, she doesn't just rise, she soars. And when she soars, she lifts generations with her.

An Officer in the Army Ordnance Corps

The Army Ordnance Corps is not for the faint-hearted. It demands intellect, precision, and an almost supernatural attention to detail. It demands physical endurance beyond that of ordinary people. The Corps doesn't just fight wars; it keeps the men fighting them with supplies. It maintains, it cares for the vast machinery of military operations under conditions where a single mistake can cost lives. It is the backbone that allows soldiers on the front lines to focus on their mission, not their equipment.

Captain Poonam Sangwan entered this world knowing she would have to be twice as meticulous as anyone else, because she would be watched twice as carefully. She embraced it. Her uniform soon collected the quiet evidence of her excellence. She was conferred with the Vishisht Seva Medal, a national honour awarded for the successful summit of Mt. Everest. And then came the Chief of Army Staff Commendation Card for distinguished and selfless service, a recognition from the highest echelon of the institution for work done without fanfare, without expectation of applause.

Yet, even as medals found their place on her uniform, even as she rose through the ranks with steady competence, another calling was stirring within her. One that whispered in the language of wind and altitude, of challenges that couldn't be solved with paperwork or protocol. Mountains had begun to call her name.

The Call of the Highest Battlefield

In the Indian Armed Forces, adventure is not a hobby pursued on weekends or a break from the serious business of soldiering. Adventure is a way of life. It is preparation. High-altitude warfare, survival in extreme cold, endurance under conditions that would break ordinary people; these are not sports or recreation. They are professional necessities. They are the conditions under which soldiers may one day be asked to fight, and so they must train as if their lives depend on it. Because one day, their lives might.

In 2012, when the Indian Army announced an all-women Everest Expedition, it sent a signal that reverberated far beyond mountaineering circles. This was no symbolic climb. This was no public relations gesture. This was a military declaration: Indian women, as soldiers, possessed the same physical endurance, mental strength, and operational discipline as their male counterparts, even at the harshest altitude on Earth.

Captain Poonam Sangwan responded. She knew what this meant. Not glory. Not personal achievement. A mission. A statement. A chance to prove something not just for herself, but for every woman who had been told there were heights she could never reach.

The team would attempt Everest via the Southern Nepal Route, the traditional path up the mountain, the one walked by thousands, and therefore bearing a kind of mastery hard-won and deeply respected. But there is nothing easy about it. Nothing classic about its cruelty.

The route is a gauntlet. Avalanche zones where tons of snow can fall without warning, burying climbers in seconds. The Khumbu Icefall, a constantly shifting maze of glacial ice where climbers must move through crevasses as wide as houses, some bottomless, all deadly. Deep crevasses that open suddenly beneath your feet. Ladders suspended over these ice-carved voids, narrow metal rungs, the only thing between you and a fall that would last forever. And finally, the Death

Zone above 8,000 metres, where the air itself becomes too thin to sustain human life, where the human body begins to die, where every moment costs something irreplaceable.

To climb here is to gamble with flesh, bone, and breath. To climb here is to meet yourself in a way that comfortable life never allows.

Many women officers had volunteered for this expedition. Only few were selected. One of them was *Captain Poonam Sangwan*. And she knew, with absolute certainty, that this climb would define not just the rest of her career, but the rest of her life.

Preparation: When Your Body Learns to Suffer

The months before the expedition became a blur of pain and purpose. High-altitude courses where the body learns to function on less oxygen. Endless endurance runs where muscles scream, and lungs burn, but you keep moving because stopping means failure. Ice-wall climbing, where your fingers go numb, and every grip feels impossible, but you grip anyway. Load carrying with backpacks weighing 20 to 25 kilograms, up mountains, down slopes, in heat and cold, until your back forgets what it felt like not to hurt.

Survival drills in sub-zero temperatures, where the body enters a state of shock, where the only thing keeping you alive is will and training and the knowledge that others are counting on you. Acclimatisation treks where the air gets

thinner with every step, where sleep becomes a luxury, where your body operates in a state of permanent oxygen deprivation, teaching itself to function in conditions where functioning should be impossible.

Blisters formed, burst, and reformed. Muscles tore and somehow healed just enough to tear again. Lungs burned with a pain that felt like breathing fire. There were mornings she woke and wondered if her body could continue. Yet every morning she rose again. Because Everest does not test the body first, it tests the spirit. It tests whether you will break or bend. It tests whether you believe in yourself more than you think in your pain.

The March into the Khumbu

In May 2012, the all-woman Indian Army Everest Expedition set foot on Nepalese soil. The mountains rose ahead like frozen fortresses, ancient and indifferent to human ambition. From the base camp, Mount Everest looked serene in the distance, even beautiful, its white summit glowing in the thin air. It was a beautiful lie. The real enemy lay hidden in its ice.

The Khumbu Icefall was the first test, and perhaps the most terrifying. It is not a slope to be climbed so much as a minefield to be navigated. A constantly shifting maze of collapsing glaciers, where walls of ice the size of buildings move and settle and sometimes, without warning, without mercy, break apart and crash down. Crevasses crisscross it

like scars, some hidden beneath delicate bridges of snow that collapse under weight, some yawning vast and bottomless. Every step across it was a calculated risk, a gamble, a prayer.

Ladders, ordinary aluminium ladders, bridged the voids. These ladders were sometimes just two rungs long, sometimes longer, each one spanning a crevasse hundreds of feet deep. Your feet are on the ladder rungs. Your hands are gripping cold metal. But below, nothing. Just white void and the certainty of death if you slip.

Captain Poonam crossed the Khumbu Icefall repeatedly during acclimatisation rotations. Slowly. Deliberately. With fear tightly leashed by discipline. Each time, she learned something new about herself, about her courage, her resilience, her willingness to face the abyss and keep moving forward.

Storms battered the camps with a fury that seemed personal. Winds howled at night like wounded beasts, so loud that sleep became impossible, so strong that the tents trembled. Temperatures plunged below minus 30 degrees Celsius, so cold that exposed skin freezes in minutes, so frigid that you stop feeling cold and start feeling numb. Frost nipped at fingers through layers of gloves, crept through seams in clothing, attacked any exposed skin with the patience of something ancient and malevolent. Each breath felt stolen from a shrinking sky, thin and precious and never quite enough.

Yet she endured. Not because she was superhuman. But because she was a soldier, and soldiers are trained not for comfort, but for a mission. The mission was to conquer the summit. The mission was to prove that women could stand at the top of the world in uniform. The mission was to return home alive.

The Death Zone

Above 8,000 metres lies what climbers call the Death Zone, and the name is not metaphorical or poetic. It is literal. The human body perishes here. Every minute. Every second. At sea level, your blood carries oxygen at a concentration your body evolved to depend on. Here, the oxygen is only a third of what it is at sea level. Your body, which has been fed a certain amount of oxygen your entire life, now receives barely enough to keep your brain functioning.

Appetite vanishes because the body shuts down non-essential functions. Sleep becomes impossible because your body is in a constant state of crisis. Judgement blurs because your brain, starved of oxygen, stops functioning normally. Hallucinations are common. Seeing things that aren't there. Hearing voices. Time becomes elastic and strange.

Collapse is common in the Death Zone. Rescue is rare. Mistakes are fatal. People have died here. People are dying here. People will die here.

Wearing an oxygen mask, her face encased in it, struggling to breathe through its resistance, encased in ice-

covered clothing that weighs dozens of kilograms, hauling herself step by step up the mountain with frozen boots that feel like blocks of ice attached to her feet, *Captain Poonam* moved upward towards the summit. Each step was a negotiation with gravity, with exhaustion, with mortality itself. Each step was a choice to continue when continuing seemed impossible.

She wasn't climbing for personal glory. She wasn't climbing for records, fame, or recognition. She was climbing in uniform. For her unit. For her Army. For her nation. For every young Indian girl who had been told that some heights were not meant for them. For her grandmother, who had once doubted. For her father, who had believed.

The Summit: Where the Earth Falls Away

When she finally reached the summit of Mount Everest at 8,848 metres, the world beneath her fell away into a vast white silence that words cannot quite capture.

There were no crowds. No applause. No victory songs. No photographers waiting with cameras. No journalists asking questions. Just silence. Just sky. Just cloud. Just the fragile fluttering of the Indian Tricolour in a frozen wind, a piece of fabric carrying the hopes of 1.2 billion people, fluttering at the top of the world.

The moment was so profound it was almost unbearable. She had pushed her body to the edge of what humans can

endure. She had looked into the face of her own mortality and had not blinked. She had stood where few people on Earth have ever stood. And in that moment, with her heart pounding and her lungs burning and her entire body screaming in pain and exhaustion, she understood something that no medal could ever convey.

The Everest Badge would later be pinned on her uniform, a small piece of metal signifying that she had stood at the roof of the world. But the real medal was invisible. It was the silence of the highest point on Earth bearing witness to a woman officer's resolve. It was the knowledge that she had climbed into history, not alone, but with six sister officers, proving that courage is not gendered, only earned. That strength is not divided by gender, only by will.

The Descent is Always Longer

Every Everest climber knows a brutal truth that is often overlooked in tales of triumph: The summit is optional. The descent is mandatory. And more climbers die on the way down than on the way up.

Her body was already failing. Oxygen depleted – muscles beyond exhaustion. Frostbite is creeping into fingers and toes. Her mind, oxygen-starved and desperate, wanted only to rest, to close her eyes, to give in to the seductive numbness that cold brings. But she had to descend. And descending, when you are this exhausted, is actually harder than climbing.

Going down requires precision and focus when your body wants only to collapse.

The Khumbu Icefall, which had been terrifying on the way up, was somehow more frightening on the way down. Exhausted climbers make mistakes. Exhausted climbers fall. And there is no one to catch you in the Icefall.

Captain (later Lt Col) Poonam descended with the same calm discipline with which she had climbed, step by step, breath by breath, knowing that survival is its own kind of battle. Because in the mountains, reaching the summit is half the journey. Getting down alive is the other half.

Medals that Carry Ice and Sky

When she finally returned to India, to a lower altitude, to thicker air, to places where the human body could breathe normally again, accolades followed. Recognition came. But none of them, she would say, fully captured what she and her team had endured, what they had proved, what they had sacrificed.

She has been awarded medals that carry the weight of history:

- The Vishisht Seva Medal for distinguished service, a recognition that acknowledged not just the Everest climb but a lifetime of dedication to duty.
- The Chief of Army Staff Commendation Card, marking exceptional service to the nation.

- ❏ The Everest Badge worn only by those who have stood at the roof of the world, who have looked down at the clouds, who have pushed their bodies beyond every conceivable limit.

Yet, when asked about those awards, she always speaks first of teamwork, of the discipline instilled by the Army, of the ethos of service that defines the institution. For her, Everest was not her individual victory. It was a unit success. A national statement. A military demonstration of endurance, leadership, and operational capability in conditions so extreme that they serve as a training ground for the human spirit itself.

Adventure as a Way of Life

"Adventure in uniform," *Captain Poonam* often reflects when she mentors young officers, "is not a break from service. It is an extension of it. It is service taken to its highest expression."

Her journey reinforces a truth that has defined the Indian Armed Forces for generations: A soldier prepared for the harshest adventure is a soldier ready for the most brutal war. When men and women train together under the same rigour, under the same standards, with the exact expectations of excellence, something extraordinary happens. Excellence becomes inevitable. Fear becomes manageable. The impossible becomes merely difficult.

The Army does not create superheroes. Superheroes are fantasy. It creates disciplined human beings who learn to

conquer fear. It makes people who can look at a mountain, at a challenge, at an impossible task, and say: "Yes. I will do this. Not because I am special. But because I have trained to be ready." Today, as the Indian Army empanels *Lt Col Poonam Sangwan* for promotion to the rank of Colonel, the announcement carries a weight that transcends the ordinary course of military progression. This is not merely promotion. This is a continuation of a story that began as a young Lieutenant and has evolved into an institution's pride. As she takes command of her unit, *Lt Col Poonam* carries with her not just her medals, her training, Everest experience, her years of distinguished service. She carries the hopes of a nation that is still learning truly means to unleash the full potential of its daughters.

From Basketball Court to the Roof of the World

Today, when young cadets and young officers look at her medals, they see an Everest climber, a decorated officer, a national symbol. But behind that image, if you look carefully, you can still see the young girl who once chose sports over stereotypes, discipline over doubt, uniform over comfort, and courage over convention.

Her story whispers a powerful truth to every young mind willing to listen:

You may not know your destination yet. You may not know where your path leads. But one decisive moment can

change everything, if you listen carefully and act decisively. The moment she decided to join the NCC. The moment she chose the Army. The moment she said 'yes' to Everest.

Your decision may raise doubts. People may question it. But remember, you must resist the urge to break. You must forge ahead towards your goal, step by step, even when the path seems impossible, even when the air grows thin, even when everything in you wants to turn back.

Most challenges in life, whether in exams, sports, or life itself, are first overcome in the mind. The body follows where the mind leads. Fear is not conquered by courage alone. Fear is conquered by preparation, by discipline, by the knowledge that you have done everything possible to be ready.

Don't rest on your laurels after you succeed. Success is not a destination where you can finally stop and rest. Success is a threshold that leads to new challenges, new heights, new mountains. Remain responsible for yourself. Remain hungry. Remain willing to climb higher.

Sports teach you skills to overcome obstacles later in life. They teach you that defeat is not permanent. They teach you that pain is temporary. They teach you that the human body and spirit are capable of far more than we ever imagine.

Greatness rarely begins with permission. It starts with insistence. It begins with a young girl who refuses to accept limitations. From a grandmother's doubts to a father's pride, from college drills to frozen summits, from a hopeful cadet

to a Lt Col in the Indian Army, *Captain (later Lt Col) Poonam Sangwan* did not just climb a mountain.

She climbed past every limitation placed before her. She climbed past every doubt, every stereotype, every low expectation. She climbed into history, bringing with her the dreams of millions.

And today, her echo resounds far beyond Everest, on parade grounds where young cadets march, in training academies where the next generation of leaders is forged, in village schools where a girl looks up at the sky and dares to dream, and in the quiet courage of countless young girls who now dare to look upwards and believe that there is no height too high for them to reach.

Because when one woman in uniform climbs to the top of the world, when she stands at the highest point on Earth and plants her nation's flag in the snow, an entire nation rises with her. Every girl becomes braver. Every mother becomes prouder. Every sister becomes bolder. One woman at the summit becomes a thousand women finding their own mountains.

One woman's courage becomes a nation's inspiration.

6

Baba Harbhajan Singh
The Eternal Soldier

Do not lament the death of a warrior, for those who die in battle are honoured in heaven."

– Bhagavad Gita

High in the Eastern Himalayas, at Nathula on the India-China border, the altitude makes everything slower – breathing, walking, even thinking. Snow, mist, and silence swallow sound. And yet, for decades, soldiers have said there is someone who is never slow, never absent, never off duty. Someone who died in 1968, but still reports for service.

That someone is *Baba Harbhajan Singh*.

Ask any unit that has done a tenure in that sector and you will hear some version of the same line: "*Yahan Baba dekhte hain*" – "Baba watches here." It is not said with drama. It is said the way a sepoy might say, "The rations will come tomorrow." Matter-of-fact. Accepted. Part of the routine of a hard posting where nature and the enemy both have to be watched.

*with inputs from Col Ajay Singh (Retd.)

The most retold story is of the avalanche. It was a winter night, years after his death. The post stood at around 14,000 feet, lashed by wind that rattled tin sheets and seeped in through every crack. Inside, men slept in their sleeping bags, weapons within reach. A sentry walked his path outside, stamping his feet to keep warm. Then it began.

First, the sentry felt a sharp push on his shoulder – not the wind, not a stumble. A deliberate push, as if someone had come up behind him to get his attention. He swung around, torchlight slicing through the dark. Before he could make sense of it, he heard a thud inside the bunker.

Inside, the Guard Commander, a veteran of that area who had heard stories of Baba, woke up with the clear feeling that someone had shaken him by the arm. Another jawan sat up at the same time, saying, "*Kisne jagaaya*?" – "Who woke me?" No one had. But three, four men reported the same thing: someone was waking them, urgently, without speaking.

The Commander didn't hesitate. The terrain had taught him that sometimes you don't get explanations first. You act first. He ordered everyone out. Grumbling, half-awake, men strapped on boots, pulled on jackets, grabbed weapons and moved out into the freezing night.

Half an hour later, as they watched from a distance, a wall of snow broke loose high above and rushed downwards with a terrible force, smashing straight through the post

where they had been sleeping. No one died. Not because of good luck, they said, but because Baba had come on his rounds.

That story alone would have been enough to turn a dead soldier into a legend. But with *Baba Harbhajan Singh*, there were many stories, and they stacked up, slowly, over years, in different units, with different Commanding Officers, in different seasons. That is what has made hardened soldiers, not given to superstition in the face of artillery and frostbite, quietly accept that this was something else.

Who was he? *Harbhajan Singh* was not born a saint or a seer. He was born a farmer's son in the Kapurthala area of Punjab, in 1946. Like many young men from that belt, the Army was a natural path – service, salary, respect. In 1967 he joined the Army and was posted to 23 PUNJAB, a battalion that was already earning a reputation for tough duty in the high Himalayas.

The Nathula area was not some quiet countryside. Only a month before he reached that sector, in September 1967, Indian and Chinese troops had clashed there. Artillery and small arms fire had been exchanged at heights where even breathing is an effort. Several Indian soldiers fell. The area remained sensitive, tense, and watched closely. It wasn't a front where a young jawan could relax.

Those who served with him later remembered him as a simple, disciplined, somewhat quiet soldier with a spiritual

bent. He would go to the Gurdwara whenever he could, he kept his kit neat, he obeyed orders, he didn't create trouble. In a battalion, such men are valued. They are reliable.

On 4 October 1968, he was detailed for what seemed like a routine task: to take a column of mules carrying supplies to a forward post. In those mountains, mules are lifelines. Vehicles can't reach many places, and helicopters can't fly in bad weather. So, men and mules carry what is needed – ammunition, rations, kerosene, and mails.

The route was treacherous, with narrow tracks alongside fast-flowing mountain streams. Somewhere along that path, in bad weather, *Harbhajan* slipped. The terrain there is merciless. A single misstep can send a man tumbling down into icy water and boulders. That is what happened. He fell into the rivulet and was swept away.

His comrades searched for him. For three days, in thin air, among rocks and snow, they combed the area. In that temperature, every hour matters. They didn't find him. On the third night, something unusual happened. *Harbhajan* appeared in the dream of his friend and colleague, Sepoy Pritam Singh. But this was not the usual kind of dream, the sort that fades when you wake up. This was clear, detailed, purposeful. *Harbhajan* told him where his body lay – beneath a drift of snow, in a specific spot. He wanted to be found.

Pritam woke up shaken. He reported it. In the Army, especially in forward areas, you do not waste men's time on

fantasies. But the battalion had already begun to sense that there was something odd about this missing soldier. They sent a party to the spot that Pritam described. And they found *Harbhajan*'s body exactly there, under snow.

This was the first time his spirit, as the men believed, had helped the unit. After that, the dreams did not stop. He appeared to others as well, not only to Pritam. Sometimes he warned of storms: "*Kal mausam kharab hoga, party jaldi bhejo*" – "Tomorrow the weather will be bad, send the party early." Sometimes he scolded: "*Guard duty theek se nahi karte*" – "Your guard is not doing his duty properly." To be reprimanded in a dream by a dead comrade is not a common thing. But men woke with a sense of having been disciplined.

The battalion did what soldiers do when they encounter something they cannot quite explain but have to live with – they formalised it. *Harbhajan* asked, in a dream, for a *samadhi* to be made for him. So, 23 PUNJAB built a shrine near the place where he had fallen. It was simple. Later, when units rotated and the road to Nathula became more accessible, the shrine was shifted to a more reachable spot – the place now known to thousands of visitors as Baba Mandir.

Today, Baba Mandir is a three-room structure, but it is run like a soldier's living quarters. One room is his "office," where files, reports, and offerings brought by visitors are kept. Second is a storeroom. Third is his living room – the most striking of all.

In that room, his bed is always made. His Army uniform is neatly ironed and placed out. His boots are polished, his water bottle stands ready, his blankets are folded. The most curious thing: sometimes in the morning the blankets are found crumpled, or the boots have slush and snow on them, as if someone walked out at night and came back. No one is officially assigned to "mess up" the bed to maintain the legend. The jawans there will tell you they find it like that.

Over time, *Baba Harbhajan Singh* became something more than the memory of a soldier. He became, for that sector, a protective presence. There are many smaller incidents soldiers narrate. A JCO once recounted that during a blizzard, when visibility was near zero, a patrol was moving along a ridge. Suddenly the man in front felt a hard slap on the back of his helmet and heard, in Punjabi, "*Khadda*!" – "Hole!" He froze, held up his hand, and the column stopped. When the snow settled a little, they saw an unseen crevice right in front of them. A few more steps and two or three men might have gone straight down, dragged the others, and rescue would have been almost impossible in that weather. No one had actually seen who slapped him. But everyone knew whom they credited.

Another time, a young soldier new to the area had been posted as sentry. It was freezing, and he had nodded off standing with his rifle. A dangerous mistake in any post, more so on a live border. He woke up not to the voice of his NCO, but to a stinging slap on his cheek. He spun around.

No one. Embarrassed, he didn't tell anyone at first. But when he mentioned it later in the *langar* area, the older hands just smiled. "*Baba ki duty hai. Sone nahi dega*." – "It's Baba's duty. He won't let you sleep."

Medical stories also emerged. Because Nathula and the surrounding Sikkim areas are visited by many civilians now, the shrine became known for "healing water." Bottles of water are kept overnight at Baba Mandir. Families take these bottles home, give the water to ailing relatives, and come back with thanks. Whether one believes in such things or not, the fact remains: the Army allows, even supports, this practice. For an institution known for being practical and regulation-bound, this tolerance says something about the depth of belief around Baba. Then there is the extraordinary practice of his annual leave.

Every year, on 11 September, a small but formal ceremony is held. Baba "goes on leave" to his village in Kapurthala. His portrait, his uniform, his boots, and other personal effects are placed in a reserved seat on the Lohit Express at New Jalpaiguri railway station. Three soldiers escort these belongings. Tickets are booked. It is not done half-heartedly. The Army does it as if he were alive.

At his village, the items are received with respect by his family. There is a small shrine there too. For about two months, he is considered to be on leave. Interestingly, soldiers at Nathula admit, almost sheepishly, that during this period

the unit is extra careful. "*Jab Baba chhutti par hotey hain na, hum zyada alert rehte hain*." – "When Baba is on leave, we stay more alert." It is said lightly, but the implication is serious: they have grown used to a supernatural overwatch, and its absence is felt.

Baba returns to Nathula the same way. His kit is brought back on the train, with escort, and restored to his room. His fame is not confined to the Indian side. Chinese border personnel, too, have reported seeing an Indian soldier on a white horse at night. There have been occasions, Indian officers say, when the Chinese have asked in flag meetings, half in curiosity, half in concern, "Who is this soldier?" Over time, the story of Baba reached them as well, and a peculiar, almost touching, protocol evolved: in some flag meetings between Indian and Chinese border officers, a chair is left empty – for Baba.

This detail is important. Borders are places of suspicion and formality. Nothing extra is placed on tables. Yet, for a dead Indian soldier, an empty chair is sometimes kept. That tells you how deeply the story has sunk into the culture of that border.

As with any long-standing legend in the Army, Baba was not left behind in rank either. After his death, over the years, his "promotions" were periodically announced – from sepoy to naik, to havildar, to JCO. Finally, in 2006, he was ceremonially retired as an Honorary Captain. His pay was

sent to his village family for years. This, again, is not something the Army does for every fallen soldier. It is something it did for him because tens of thousands of men who served in that sector had come to see him not as a story, but as a colleague still on strength.

Of course, not every officer in every era believed literally in ghosts. Some said: this is a morale device, a psychological anchor in a lonely, dangerous, weather-beaten posting. And there is truth in that. When you stand guard at 14,000 feet in snow and fog, hearing that someone else – someone who cannot be shot, cannot be buried by an avalanche, cannot fall asleep – is also on guard, it helps. It makes young soldiers feel less alone. It builds a tradition shared by all units that pass through. It binds Sikh, Gorkha, Dogra, Rajput, Maratha, and Assam – every regiment that serves there – with a common guardian.

But even the practical officers, the ones who wrote measured situation reports and insisted on proper drill, did not interfere with Baba Mandir. Many of them, before taking over command of a battalion in that sector, went first to the shrine, placed a ceremonial rum bottle, *pagri*, or *chadar*, and sought his blessings for a safe tenure. That is how traditions deepen: when even the rational accept that a shared belief is doing more good than harm.

Over the years, further stories accumulated. A transport convoy heading up to a post was once delayed at the last

minute because the jawan who was supposed to drive fell sick. A replacement had to be called. By the time the vehicle actually left, a small landslide had already occurred on the road it was to take. Had it left on time, it might have been right under it. The men joked: "*Baba ne driver ki tabiyat kharab kar di*." – "Baba made the driver ill." Joking, but grateful.

Another time, a new CO, slightly sceptical, is said to have thought the room was being secretly maintained at night by jawans to keep the legend alive. He ordered strict checks – no one was to enter after a certain hour, locks were to be used. The next morning, according to the men, the bed was still crumpled, the boots still had moist mud. The CO didn't interfere again.

And sometimes the guidance was not about danger, but about discipline. A jawan who had been careless with his weapon, or who was slacking in turnout, would dream of Baba that night, standing in front of him in full uniform, neat and exact, simply looking. The next day, the jawan's turnout would be flawless. "*Baba ne dekh liya*." – "Baba saw."

What makes the story of *Baba Harbhajan Singh* powerful is not that one man became a legend. India has many such shrines, many such local guardians. What makes this special is that a professional, modern Army – which deals in logistics, artillery, helicopters, electronic warfare, joint commands –

still made room for this legend to breathe. Because it protected lives. Because it upheld discipline. Because it gave lonely men in a white, wind-blasted landscape the sense that their dead comrade still cared.

It is also powerful because of what it says about Indian soldiers' idea of camaraderie. A man who died at 22, who slipped on a mule track, who was not a war hero in the classical sense, became in death what every soldier would like to be remembered as: someone whose watch never ended.

Today, visitors to Sikkim and Nathula go to Baba Mandir as part of a tourist circuit. They click pictures in front of his portrait, tie threads, offer sweets, take bottles of water. Many of them know only the simplified version: "This is the Mandir of a soldier whose soul still guards the border." They don't always hear the avalanche story, the dreams, the railway journey, the Chinese chair. But behind the tourist crowds there is still a functional, lived tradition.

And somewhere above the shrine, on those ridges where the wind never quite stops, jawans still tell each other, when weather turns suddenly, or when a patrol has to go out at night:

"*Chalo. Baba saath hain*."

"Let's go. Baba is with us." The eternal vigil of the eternal soldier continues – as long as there are men in uniform on that cold frontier, as long as the Army keeps his bed made, his boots polished, and his name on the rolls.

7

Chuni Lal*

The Braveheart who Fought Till his Last Breath

> *"Perform your duty with courage, without the fear of outcome."*
>
> **– Bhagavad Gita**

The valley he was born in was gentle.

The life he chose was not.

Bhaderwah, often called "Chhota Kashmir", rests quietly in the folds of the Doda hills. Apple orchards sway in cold winds, streams whisper through green meadows, and winters turn rooftops silver with snow.

On 6 March 1968, in this peaceful mountain town, a boy named *Chuni Lal* was born into an ordinary family that lived by hard work and simple dreams.

But destiny had written for him an extraordinary path.

As a child, *Chuni Lal* watched soldiers march through his valley, sometimes in peace, sometimes under tension. To

*with inputs from Col Ajay Singh (Retd.)

him, the idea of India was not found in textbooks. It lived in those men in olive green who stood guard between villages and violence. Even as a boy, he understood one thing clearly: freedom survives because someone stands watch.

While other children dreamed of city life, *Chuni Lal* dreamed of the uniform.

At just 15 years of age, against all odds, he joined the Indian Army and was enrolled into the 8 Jammu & Kashmir Light Infantry (8 JAK LI), a regiment born from the same rugged terrain that had raised him. He was quiet, soft-spoken, and unassuming. But behind that gentle exterior lived a will forged of steel.

Siachen: The Boy became a Warrior

His first actual test came not against an enemy but against nature itself.

In 1987, the world's highest battlefield, Siachen Glacier, became his proving ground. At heights where breathing itself is a struggle, Indian soldiers prepared to recapture a Pakistan-occupied peak known as Quaid Post, later renamed Bana Post.

It was a near-vertical wall of ice. One slip meant death.

Chuni Lal volunteered. Led by Major Virendra Singh, along with Naib Subedar Bana Singh (who got a Param Vir Chakra for the operation) he climbed through screaming winds and thin air, weapon strapped to his back, fingers numb with cold. At the summit, the enemy lay waiting. Yet

when the final assault was launched, *Chuni Lal* was among the first to reach the top, capturing the first trench and clearing the path for others.

The operation succeeded. The peak came under Indian control. History was written at 20,000 feet.

For his gallantry, that quiet mountain boy received his Sena Medal (Gallantry).

He was barely a man. But India had found a soldier.

The Long War at Home

The 1990s changed the nature of war in Jammu & Kashmir. It was no longer icy peaks and uniformed enemies. It became a shadow war, insurgency, ambushes, village cordons, and forests that hid danger behind beauty.

Under Operation Rakshak, *Chuni Lal* fought in his own homeland. This was no distant battlefield. These were his people, his valleys, his language.

In 1999, during a fierce counter-insurgency operation in the Jhelum Valley, his unit came under heavy militant fire. The terrain was tight, the enemy entrenched. One wrong step could cost many lives.

Now, a Havildar, he did not shout from cover.

He led from the front.

Charging forward under intense fire, he closed in on militant positions, firing relentlessly and exhorting his men

to move with him. His calm under pressure transformed fear into determination. By the end of the fight, several militants lay neutralised, and the post stood secure.

He also demonstrated exceptional courage.

He also did two tenures with the United Nations Peacekeeping Force in Somalia and Sudan.

The display of exemplary courage by his team in Sudan earned his unit a UN citation for valour.

Kargil: Volunteering for the Heights Again

The summer of 1999 brought war back to the mountains at Kargil.

Pakistani intruders occupied Indian peaks. The nation was shocked. *Chuni Lal* did not wait to be asked. He volunteered again.

In those brutal climbs under enemy fire, where rock faces were vertical, and bullets descended like iron rain, one belief guided him:

"Never send your men where you will not go yourself."

He climbed with them. He fought with them. And he returned with them.

No separate medal followed. But his men carried back something greater, faith in their leader.

Vir Chakra and a Soldier's Reputation

By the early 2000s, militancy grew deadlier. Foreign terrorists, automatic weapons, suicide missions. The job grew riskier. But *Chuni Lal* never hesitated.

During a major anti-terror operation, intelligence warned of an armed terrorist group in his sector. Now a Naib Subedar, he personally led the search team.

The encounter was brutal and close. Decisions had to be made in seconds. *Chuni Lal* moved fast, cutting off escape routes, pressing forward under fire. His swift and decisive action neutralised the terrorists and saved countless civilian lives.

For this operation, he was awarded the Vir Chakra – India's third-highest wartime gallantry award.

Now his chest bore three stories of India's wars.

Yet at home, he remained the same quiet man who spoke little and avoided praise.

"Medals shine only when the Tricolour flies high," he once told his family.

"The rest is noise."

Kupwara: The Final Battle

June 2007. Kupwara is one of the most infiltration-prone sectors along the Line of Control.

Summer had melted the snow. Old routes opened. Terrorists are prepared to slip into India.

Now promoted to Naib Subedar, *Chuni Lal* was in charge of a forward post when movement was detected near the fence, late at night.

He instantly understood what was at stake.

If the infiltrators crossed, innocent civilians would die. Markets would bleed. Children would not return from school.

With a small team, he moved forward into thick forest darkness. An ambush was laid. The first exchange of fire erupted suddenly, violently, at close quarters.

Chuni Lal charged.

One infiltrator fell. Then the second. Then the third, each neutralised by his own weapon.

But in the exchange of fire, a bullet tore into his abdomen.

Severely wounded, bleeding heavily, he could have withdrawn.

He did not.

Instead, he crawled behind a rock, continued firing, and kept issuing orders, ensuring that the remaining infiltrators could not escape.

His leadership held the cordon tight. By dawn, every attacker was neutralised.

The mission had succeeded.

India was safe.

But Naib Subedar *Chuni Lal* had fallen, not in retreat, not in hesitation, but while fighting till his final breath.

Chuni Lal was martyred on 24 June 2007, but his courage and valour still live on.

India's Highest Honour

For his supreme sacrifice, his unmatched battlefield leadership, and his indomitable courage, the nation bestowed upon him its highest peacetime gallantry award:

The Ashoka Chakra (Posthumous)

His journey was complete.

From the icy heights of Siachen...

To the dark forests of Kupwara...

From a 15-year-old recruit...

To one of India's most decorated soldiers.

A Legacy Beyond Medals

To the world, he became a hero.

To his comrades, he was:

- ❏ The man who always stepped forward
- ❏ The leader who never hid behind rank
- ❏ The soldier who never spoke of fear

To his wife Kamlesh Kumari and his children, he was a quiet father who rarely spoke of war, who returned home with dust on his boots and silence on his lips.

And to the young boys of Bhaderwah, he became a living definition of courage.

Why His Story Matters Today

Naib Subedar Chuni Lal did not fight for fame.

He did not seek history's spotlight.

He fought because he believed India must constantly be guarded.

His life tells today's youth one simple truth:

- ❏ Greatness does not shout.
- ❏ It stands firm.
- ❏ It moves forward.
- ❏ It protects.

He proved that a boy from a small valley can rise to protect a nation of a billion hearts.

He proved that quiet men often roar the loudest in battle.

And he proved that true courage is not the absence of fear, but it is an action despite it.

Three Medals. One Life. Infinite Courage.

- ❏ Sena Medal – Siachen, 1987
- ❏ Vir Chakra – Counter-terror operations, 2000
- ❏ Ashoka Chakra (Posthumous) – Kupwara, 2007

But his most excellent decoration is not worn on his uniform.

It lives on the Line of Control.
In the safety of villages.
In the breath of a child who spelt peacefully at night.
He was born in silence.
He lived in courage.
And he became immortal in duty.

8

Zafar-4
He Spied in the Jaws of Death

"A brave heart is the strongest armour."
– Classical Indian Wisdom

Karachi, August 1971. The city that had bustled with life in the day, now, at night, had become a different world. People moved out only if they had to and that too with extra caution. A war-like situation seemed to be looming. In a tiny tea shop, a frail, weak man stirred sugar into his glass of milk tea. He looked just like another trader from Multan who had come to Karachi to sell his goods. The local police did not think he was worth any consideration and therefore did not give him a second glance.

However, the man was a living example of the adage that appearances can be deceptive. No one could guess that he was an important cog in the network of spies spread by Indian Army Intelligence. His codename was '*Zafar-4*.' He had been recruited by a Colonel a decade earlier and had

crossed the porous Punjab border disguised as a devout pilgrim.

Zafar-4 built up his fake identity as a small export broker over the years. Mainly operating at Karachi port, he bribed port clerks and customs officials. His work seemed genuine and above board. He was exceptionally friendly and developed quite a wide circle of friends, including from among the police.

While he laboured over exports in his dingy office, he kept track of another kind of activity. He noted the movements of ships and military convoys, and kept his ear to the ground to learn of purchases of defence equipment and spares, including ammunition. Each scrap of information gleaned thus was given to special couriers, many of whom had operated in Karachi for years. Some information was dropped in assigned places. Whatever the route, the information eventually landed up at Army Headquarters in New Delhi where it was assessed by experts and disseminated to those who needed to know.

A Dangerous Mission

By August 1971, the subcontinent was in turmoil. Atrocities by the Punjabi-dominated Pakistani Army on the citizens of what was then East Pakistan continued with full vengeance. Refugees from there streamed into India by the millions. War seemed to be inevitable.

One day, *Zafar-4* received a tiny folded note that had been slipped under his shop door. It told him to arrange guides for an Indian Army special group by midnight of the next new moon.

It was a tough and dangerous assignment. He guessed that Indian commandoes would slip secretly across the border in civilian clothes. They would carry silenced pistols and cyanide vials. *Zafar-4* would have to guide them in avoiding the Army and police check posts and arrange safe accommodation for them. He would also have to arrange vehicles that could roam around without raising any doubts. He also realised what failure could mean: torture and death and the probability that he would blurt out details of his network thus putting many lives in danger.

The Night of the Crossing

A dark moonless night in September was fixed for the crossing. The rendezvous was a salty marsh quite close to the international border. *Zafar-4* reached there before time in a nondescript jeep and waited patiently for his 'guests' to arrive. The owner of the vehicle was supposed to be a goat trader.

At seven minutes after midnight, he could make out three dim figures emerging from the thick bushes. He couldn't identify the men. They were dressed in *kurtas* like the locals but stepped hastily and warily like trained killers.

One of them had a canvas bag slung over his shoulder. They exchanged their identification codes.

They drove along dusty winding rural roads with the vehicle's headlights at low beam. *Zafar* pointed out police outposts to avoid as they bypassed villages that seemed deserted. Actually, the villagers were fast asleep. At one point, a police patrol waved them to a stop. However, no one panicked. *Zafar* grinned at the policemen, jovially told them a few dirty jokes in Punjabi, and discreetly passed a wad of rupees to them. That was all there was to it.

In Karachi

In the following weeks the men were on tenterhooks, preparing for their assigned tasks. Safe hideouts had been arranged for them in a nondescript locality. A local small-time smuggler was paid to ferry in, under cover of night, crates that most probably contained radio interception and demolition kits.

Every night, the team leader and *Zafar* pored over railway maps and fuel shipment schedules. They discussed and identified potential targets but always in whispers.

They were told that two companies of soldiers were stationed in the nearby barracks but half of them would be away on Friday attending the afternoon prayers at the mosque. They were also informed that the armoured column at Clifton was more for public display and that the actual

depot was at Korangi. *Zafar* warned them that attacking it could be quite risky as it was surrounded by heavy security.

They worked with mutual trust. The team trusted him to ensure their safety while *Zafar* wanted them to finish their job quickly and return to India before the ISI got scent of him and their activities.

Sense of Betrayal

One evening, *Zafar* received a surprise visitor. It was a rickshaw driver he knew who came to his shop with a message. A worker at the docks who acted as a lookout for *Zafar* informed him that two new police officers had come from Lahore and were making inquiries about him.

Even though he was a trained and experienced spy, his blood turned cold. He did not fear so much for himself as for the success of the 'mission'. Pretending to arrange a pre-wedding party, he shifted the Indian team that very night to another safe house. In the street, music from bands and drums blared and dancing girls pranced while inside the house the men were ensconced with their plans and maps.

The Last Farewell

Days later, the team from India completed its assignment. They now had to return to the safety of their own country. Again, *Zafar* played a prominent role. He organised a marriage procession with many trucks filled with families posing as 'guests'. The procession drove south towards the

International Border. The marriage party ruse worked once again. No one stopped them as they drove past check points. Finally, it was time to say 'Good bye'. The commandos crossed over without being seen.

The End

Zafar-4 disappeared after that. A month later, an Urdu newspaper published from Karachi had a small item that mentioned that a minor trader had been killed by dacoits near Gharo. The police attributed it to personal animosity.

It is against this background that we must remember men like *Zafar-4* who put their lives at stake just to ensure that humanity and peace survived. Admittedly, he remained in the shadows and shunned the limelight but he plodded on silently with torture and death constantly in his mind. Yet, he went on doing what he believed in without flinching.

The recent Indian film *Dhurandar* offers a rare cinematic glimpse into the perilous, unseen lives of covert operatives like "*Zafar-4*", men and women who serve in silence, carrying the nation's gravest burdens without recognition. Echoes of Courage goes beyond the screen to chronicle true stories of the Indian Armed Forces, where real bravery is measured not in applause but in sacrifice, discipline, and unwavering duty.

9

Flt Lt Dilip Kamalkar Parulkar*

The Great Escape

"Courage is when the earth falls away, and only duty remains."

– Air Chief Marshal Arjan Singh

The Sukhoi-7 sat on the Ambala airfield tarmac like a coiled animal, metal skin already shimmening with jet heat, when *Flight Lieutenant Dilip Kamalkar Parulkar* climbed into it on the cold morning of 10 December 1971.

He was 30, but he had the look of men who had spent a long time at 600 knots – eyes narrowed by sunlight on the canopy, movements economical, nerves tuned to a thin, steady line. India and Pakistan had been at war for barely a week, and the IAF was flying hard. That day the target was a Pakistani radar installation east of Lahore – hurt the enemy's eyes so your own bombers can go in later.

*with inputs from Col Ajay Singh (Retd.)

Parulkar was flying No. 2 in the strike element – never the glamorous lead, but the man who makes sure the leader's blind spots stay covered. He acknowledged the tower, rolled, and blasted off behind his formation, the Sukhoi's roar flattening the winter air.

He thought he knew how that sortie would end. He didn't know he was flying straight into a year of captivity, a prison break that would be told for decades, and a test of stubbornness even fighter pilots don't always pass.

Shot Down

They crossed the border low, fast, hugging the folds of the land. But the Pakistanis were ready. The sky over their target erupted with accurate, continuous anti-aircraft fire – not the blind, scattered stuff, but disciplined flak that climbed and blossomed exactly where fast movers like his Sukhoi wanted to fly.

Shrapnel whanged off the airframe. Warning lights began to blink on his panel. He pulled to climb out of the worst of it. The aircraft didn't respond. He tried again. The stick came back, the Sukhoi hesitated – and then the controls went sloppy, as if a muscle had been cut inside the jet. A round had chewed into a vital system, and he suddenly had nowhere to go but down.

There's a second inside every pilot's head where he weighs the impossible: "Can I nurse her home?" It passed. He was

over hostile territory. Smoke was trailing. The engine was misbehaving. He reached for the yellow and black handle. He pulled the ejection handle.

There was the deafening blast, the savage punch in the back, the sudden cold. Then the violent, beautiful deployment of the parachute, the earth below him changing from target to prison. He floated down over Pakistani soil, helpless and very visible. The Sukhoi spiralled away and hit, a flower of fire against the earth.

Captured

He had barely hit the ground when villagers began to converge. They had seen the parachute. They knew a war was on. Here, right in front of them, was the enemy.

They rushed at him, shouting, grabbing, one or two landing blows just to show that this was Pakistan and he was not welcome. He tried to fend them off without hurting anyone – pilots are taught to stay alive, not provoke a lynching.

Then a Pakistani Army officer arrived with troops. Professionalism replaced anger. The officer pulled the villagers off him and took custody. For Pakistan, an Indian pilot was a prize – useful for propaganda, for information, for exchange. For Parulkar, it was the start of the long, slow part of war.

They blindfolded him, questioned him in the field, then moved him through channels until he reached what would be his home for months: a Prisoner of War (POW) camp near Rawalpindi – high-security, guarded, designed to hold Indian officers who had fallen into Pakistani hands in 1965 and now 1971. Most men, once inside such a place, settle into waiting. Parulkar did not.

The Camp

The first thing he noticed was that he wasn't alone. In the barracks he was introduced to other captured IAF officers – *Squadron Leader (later Wg Cdr) M.S. "Garry" Grewal, Flt Lt (later Gp Capt) Harish Sinhji*, and others. They were like him – young, proud, irritated at being shot down but very much unbroken.

Prisoners swap stories very quickly. Within days they knew where each man had been shot down, which Squadron he belonged to, what aircraft he flew. They shared ICRC rations (the Red Cross sent parcels), cigarettes, jokes, and an unspoken vow: *we will not let captivity define us.*

The Pakistanis weren't brutal in the cinematic sense – they knew the Geneva Convention, and India held Pakistani prisoners too – but they were careful. Roll calls were strict. Searches were random. Guards were posted on rooftops and along the perimeter wire. The POWs were not allowed to mingle too freely. Letters were censored. Radios were forbidden. Which meant that if anyone wanted to escape,

he would need information, tools, disguises, a route, and luck. So, the planning started.

The Idea of Escape

Escape is, on the face of it, insane. You're in a foreign country where you don't speak the dialect well enough to pass. You have no money. You're being watched. The border is far. And if you're caught, you will be treated far less gently.

But as Parulkar said years later, "*If we hadn't been mad enough we would never have escaped.*"

They began the way good officers do – observe.

- ❏ How often were the sentries changed?
- ❏ Which guard was lazy?
- ❏ Where did the light fall at night?
- ❏ Was there a blind spot on the back wall?
- ❏ When were they taken out for exercise?
- ❏ What did Pakistani ID cards look like?

Bits of data collected over weeks became patterns. Patterns became possibilities. They pooled what they had: blades from shaving kits, wire from cots, string, empty tins, scraps of cardboard. From ICRC ration tins and cadged magnets, they fashioned a makeshift compass. From carefully copied designs they made forged Pakistani IDs. They hid these in innocuous places – under floorboards, inside repaired shoes.

Maps were the hardest. They didn't have proper ones. What they had were snatched glances at newspapers, an occasional glimpse of a guard's wall map, and sheer geography knowledge. They knew they were near Rawalpindi. They knew that if they could reach Peshawar and then Jamrud/Landi Kotal, they were within reach of the Afghan border. Cross into Afghanistan and you were no longer a Pakistani prisoner – you were an escaped Indian airman on foreign, neutral soil. It was audacious and borderline crazy. So, of course they chose it.

August 1972: The Night

By August 1972, the war was over, but the prisoners hadn't been repatriated yet. Negotiations were dragging. For the POWs, it was intolerable. The guns had fallen silent, but they were still behind wire fences.

So Parulkar, Grewal, and Harish Sinhji picked a monsoon night – rain could dull footsteps, darkness could hide shapes.

The details of how they actually got out of the camp have been told a few ways over the years – slipping through a weak section of wire, exploiting a guard change, using a concealed tool to open a lock. What is common to every telling is this: they got out without raising an alarm.

Outside the wire, shadows among shadows, three Indian Air Force Officers in civilian-ish clothes began to walk. They carried:

- ❏ Their forged ID cards, meant to pass them off as Pathans or soldiers on leave.
- ❏ A homemade compass to keep them generally westward.
- ❏ Pooled Red Cross rations – biscuits, maybe some tinned stuff.

They were free – for now.

Through Pakistan as Pakistanis

The next 12 hours were the most nerve-racking. Pakistan in 1972 was still in a heightened security state. Roads had check posts. Soldiers asked questions. Travel by night looked suspicious. So, the three did what clever fugitives do: they hid in plain sight.

They took buses, like ordinary travellers. They rode *tongas* – those horse-drawn carts common in NWFP – because locals used them. At each checkpoint they played the part – softly spoken, Urdu-capable men travelling west. Their forged IDs were glanced at, stamped, waved through.

They passed Peshawar. They were approaching Jamrud, gateway to the Khyber. Beyond that, Landi Kotal, and beyond that the Afghan border. Freedom was no longer an idea; it was a number of kilometres. They could almost smell it in the wind – dust, sweat, the tang of a frontier bazaar. And then, like in every good escape story, one tiny detail tripped them.

Landi Kotal

At Landi Kotal, Pakistani soldiers – Frontier types, used to smugglers and nervous travellers – interacted with them. In conversation, one of the Indians (accounts differ which) mentioned "*Landi Khana*" – a railway station beyond Landi Kotal that had been shut down since 1932 when the British closed that section.

To an ordinary Pakistani soldier in Punjab, that might have passed. To a frontier soldier, it stuck out. Why would a supposed local mention cause a suspicion? How did he even know the name? Suspicion flickered. Questions sharpened. IDs were re-examined. Accents scrutinised. The soldiers compared notes. And just like that, after almost a full day of freedom, the three Indian pilots were identified, arrested, and taken back – this time under much tighter watch – to Peshawar, and from there to captivity again.

They had come within a few kilometres of freedom.

Back Behind Wire

You might think the Pakistanis would have been furious. They certainly tightened security. The escape was an embarrassment. But they did not torture or shoot the men – that would have caused an international incident. They put them back with the others, under sterner eyes. How did the other Indian POWs react?

With pride. Because for them, the point wasn't just "Did you make it?" The point was "Did you try?" In a POW camp, where hopelessness is always at the door, a serious escape attempt is a shot of oxygen. It tells every prisoner: *we are still officers, still resourceful, still cheeky enough to run from the enemy's backyard.*

In that sense, Parulkar and his two comrades won. They had shown that Indian airmen were not cowed, not broken, not waiting passively. And within months, as diplomatic negotiations concluded, all Indian POWs – including them – were repatriated. They came home to a country that had won the war, liberated Bangladesh, and was ready to celebrate its men.

Back Home, Never Broken

When *Dilip Parulkar* stepped onto Indian soil again, he wasn't just a returned prisoner. He was the man who had tried to escape and nearly made it. Word of the attempt had travelled fast in service circles. Air Headquarters knew. So did the Army. So did the press.

He was decorated – the Vayu Sena Medal for Gallantry and later the Vishisht Seva Medal for his overall distinguished service. But if you asked those who served with him later, what stayed with them was not the medal list but the attitude. He didn't come back bitter. He came back still flying. He became a Flying Instructor, taking young cadets up and

teaching them the small, life-saving things: how to read a cloud's mood, how to keep your head when a gauge goes red, how to trust your training but also your instinct.

He later served as Battalion Commander at the National Defence Academy – which, for hundreds of cadets, meant that the man inspecting their turnout or hauling them up for slackness was the same man who once slipped out of a Pakistani POW camp on a rainy night. That matters. Because leadership isn't just what you say; it's what people know you've done.

The Final Salute

On 10 August 2025, in Pune, *Group Captain Dilip Kamalkar Parulkar* (Commissioned on 09 March 1963) – the boyish pilot of 1971, the escapee of 1972, the instructor, the commander – passed away at 83. The Indian Air Force put out a tribute:

> *"A 1971 war hero, who led a daring escape from captivity in Pakistan, embodying unmatched courage, ingenuity & pride in the IAF...".*

He left behind a story that still makes young pilots sit up in class. There are air combat heroes who shot down more planes. There are soldiers who won battles. But *Dilip Parulkar*'s story has a special flavour because it says this:

- ❏ Even when you lose your aircraft,
- ❏ Even when you are captured,

- ❏ Even when the war is technically over,
- ❏ You can still fight.

You can fight with forged IDs, with a compass you made out of scrap, with your ability to blend in, with your sheer audacity to walk through enemy checkpoints. You can get heartbreakingly close to freedom, get pulled back – and still return home with your head up. Parulkar himself once said of their escape attempt:

> *"If we hadn't been mad enough, we would never have escaped."*

That's the legacy of *Group Captain Dilip Kamalkar Parulkar*, Vir of 1971 – the man who fell from the sky into enemy hands and still tried to outfly the war.

10

Lt Cdr Firdaus Darabshah Mogal
A Hero of the Deep

"The Indian Navy does not seek storms, but it never turns away from them."

– Admiral Karambir Singh

Born to Lead, Raised to Serve

On 15 October 1974, in Ahmedabad's quiet lanes, where communities lived as families and every festival echoed with warmth, there was joy and celebrations in the home of Shri Armin Mogal. The reason: the birth of a son whom they named *Firdaus*.

He was the first of three sons. Right from childhood, he exuded the gentle confidence of a born leader. At Maneckji Cooper Educational Trust School, where he studied, he won laurels in academics and excelled in sports. Discipline, the hallmark of a leader, was in him in full measure and his teachers remember him for it. Besides, those who studied

with him, juniors and seniors, recall he had a kind word for everyone in distress and went out of his way to help those in need.

Little did they know that when they stated that he was born to be responsible and had the ability to show calm courage under fire, it would turn out to be true later in life. Right from early childhood, he had set his heart on serving the country and donning the uniform of the Defence Forces.

NDA: Where Boys are Made Leaders

Firdaus walked through the gates of the National Defence Academy at Khadakwasla for the first time into a world where his dream of wearing a uniform would fructify into reality and where his physical and mental capacities would be honed to the highest level possible. The years he would spend there would forge his character and instil in him the qualities needed to become an outstanding leader.

The NDA is a place where boys are trained to become officers in the Defence Forces and who can be entrusted the responsibility of protecting the nation's security and sovereignty. *Firdaus* embraced every challenge with equanimity. However, gruelling the training assignments, he remained calm and composed. The punishing PT sessions, the endless runs, the torturous drill, and the tough life of the cadets – *Firdaus* faced every activity with aplomb and nerve. Nothing was too difficult for him. The

camaraderie that developed in these activities was something that would last throughout their careers and beyond.

He emerged stronger, sharper, and steadier – a leader who inspired through action, not words. The NDA taught him endurance. The sea would demand it. The NDA taught him courage. Destiny would call for it. The NDA taught him leadership. He would prove it with his life.

A Submariner is Born

On 1 January 1998, he was commissioned into the Indian Navy as a Sub Lieutenant. While surface ships or aviation was what most of the new officers went for, *Firdaus* did not want to do anything ordinary. He chose to be a submariner. He selected the Submarine Arm for his career that would entail his working in a cooped atmosphere of silence, claustrophobia, and crushing pressure.

He excelled in his Basic Submariner Course, and earned the coveted Dolphin Badge – the prestigious insignia of a breed apart – after successfully completing a gruelling and arduous year-long training programme at the *INS Satavahana* at Visakhapatnam. This badge signifies the wearer's membership in the elite submariner community and is a symbol of achievement and courage.

Firdaus was now a warrior of the sea.

The Making of a Naval Leader

His career graph and achievements were outstanding from the very beginning. As the Anti-Submarine Warfare Officer on *INS Shalki* his incisive understanding of submarine warfare enhanced the concept of the Navy's underwater fighting capabilities.

His next assignment was as a Training Coordinator at *INS Satavahana* where he shaped and developed the next generation of submariners. He not only taught them necessary skills but also instilled in them important and high values like discipline, calmness, precision, and responsibility.

After successfully completing his tenure at *INS Satavahana,* he was posted as Executive Officer (XO) on *INS Shankush.* This was a sea-going assignment and here too he came out with flying colours. His leadership qualities shone brightly and the men learnt to depend and place their unwavering faith in him. Whatever the problem, inside or outside the submarine, the men looked up to him for guidance. For his part, *Firdaus* ensured that he never let them down, regardless of how tricky or dangerous the situation was.

He was awarded a Flag Officer Commanding-in-Chief (FOC-in-C) Commendation in 2007. This was official recognition of his brilliance, devotion, and professionalism. However, there was much more to come.

29 August 2010: The Day the Storm Broke

In May 2010, *Lt Cdr Firdaus* assumed the duties of XO of *INS Shankush* – one of India's frontline submarines.

By late August, the submarine was on an operational deployment in the Arabian Sea.

The sea was unpredictable and unforgiving; trouble seemed to be brewing. Just two months into his new tenure, *Lt Cdr Firdaus*'s submarine developed a defect in the starboard flap – a vital control surface. Without it in perfect working condition, manoeuvring the vessel underwater would be a risky, maybe near-impossible, proposition. Something had to be done immediately.

Firdaus decided to raise the submarine to the surface at sunrise. Once there, an attempt could be made to repair the defect and put the flap back in working order. However, the sea was choppy and stormy creating treacherous conditions. Gale-force winds were howling like banshees threatening to sweep away anyone coming on the deck. There was no question of putting off the repairs till the weather calmed. It had to be done on an urgent basis. There was no other option.

The Next Day: The Gruelling Test

They waited till the next day. Just as dawn broke, exactly at 6.55 a.m., the repair team climbed on to the bridge. Led by the Engineering Officer, three sailors stepped gingerly out of the hatch. The waves were as furious as the previous day,

shaking the balance of the vessel and rocking it vigorously. A wrong step would fling the men into the raging sea.

Suddenly, a monstrous wave crashed over the submarine. Its bridge was covered with several feet of water. Driven by the raging wind, the giant wind swept three of the men into the water. They were the Engineering Officer and two sailors. The alarm, 'Man Overboard' was sounded.

The First Rescue: Carrying Life on his Shoulders

Firdaus was the first to spot the third member of the repair party – still on board, but barely clinging to the aft casing, one leg badly injured. Unmindful of the sea that was hammering the submarine with full force and with rain falling incessantly, he crawled towards the sailor who was clinging on for dear life. Slipping and slithering, he reached the sailor. He cried out he could not move because of his leg. Without saying a word, *Firdaus* hoisted him on to his shoulder and slowly carried him to the bridge crew that waited with bated breath. They quickly rushed him to the medical room.

The effort took twenty agonising minutes with every muscle of *Firdaus* strained to its limit. The bridge crew put out their hands towards *Firdaus* and pulled him and his load to safety.

Those sailors who were on the bridge that fateful day will remember what they witnessed for the rest of their lives.

One lone man, *Firdaus*, battled the elements that raged in all their fury, ignored the danger to his own life and rushed, in the most detrimental circumstances, to save one of the men under his command.

The Second Rescue: Bravery Beyond Imagination

Though the injured sailor had been rescued and was now being given medical treatment, there was no time to rest. Two men were still in the water, trying desperately to cling on to life Having achieved one rescue, *Firdaus* plunged in to bring the rest of the washed away sailors to safety. A three-man diving team was already in the sea.

Seeing *Firdaus* return to the edge, hope flared up in the battered survivors. To them, it now did not seem as hopeless as they had probably thought. After all, it was their commander himself who was coming to save them. They had always reposed their trust in him and his capabilities. They believed his sheer willpower could beat the fury of the storm.

The sea made one more surge. Another monstrous wave swamped the submarine. This time it pulled in all six men – divers, survivors, and the XO – and dumped them in the freezing ocean. The scene was so frightening that an average human would break out in sweat just by imagining it. However, *Firdaus* had no such thought in his mind.

Reaching near them, he motioned for them to stick together in a close group. The cluster they formed looked

like a human island determined to cheat the sea and the wind of victory. *Firdaus* spoke to them and told them to be calm and not panic. Then he signalled the submarine. It was a sign they were all for one and one for all.

The six men together slowly, though painfully, tried to swim as vigorously as they could towards their vessel. They summoned all the strength they could to reach their goal. With their commander's motivational presence prodding them, they drew near their submarine.

Firdaus helped them up one by one. Only when the fifth and last sailor had reached the safety of the deck and was in the hands of his comrades, did he attempt to climb up.

The Last Wave

When safety was a mere few inches away, the sea struck its final blow. Seeing its victims escaping its clutches, it pushed in all its resources to create a gigantic wave and smash on the submarine. *Firdaus*, being the last to go into the hatch, was caught by its immense pressure. It crushed his head against the vessel and flung him into its churning waters determined to pull him to its depths.

He fought with all his might to come up to the surface. However, the relentless struggle all morning to save his men had taken a heavy toll on his strength and energy. When rescue teams located him, he was inert. A helicopter rushed him to Indian Naval Hospital Ship (INHS) Ashwini.

The best medical treatment could not bring life back to *Lt Cdr Firdaus Darabshah Mogal*. He had already gone. He had given up his life to keep others alive. This is a quality that only the greatest of heroes have, and Firdaus had this in full.

A Hero Remembered

The Indian Navy mourned the loss of one of its brave officers. His crew wept unabashedly. Despite claiming his life, the sea too seemed to have calmed down to pay its tribute to one who had challenged it with unforgettable courage despite the heaviest of odds.

Firdaus's supreme sacrifice to save six of his men was recognised by the nation. For displaying exceptional leadership, fearlessness and devotion to duty, *Lt Cdr Firdaus* was posthumously awarded a Shaurya Chakra, India's third-highest peacetime gallantry honour.

He left behind his parents, Shri Darabshah and Smt. Armin, his wife, Kerzin, and his little son, Yashaan. Time will never be able to erase his memory and the legacy that is carried like a badge of honour in every submarine, every naval base, and in every sailor's heart.

Today, every submariner knows his story; his courage is cited in every leadership class and every young cadet is told what it means to lead, what it means to be an officer and what it means to be a proud member of the Indian Navy.

11

Major Ashok Tara*

Saviour of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's Family

> *"For a warrior, there is no greater duty than a righteous battle."*
>
> **– Bhagavad Gita**

It was mid-December 1971. The Pakistan Army in East Pakistan had formally surrendered to *Lt Gen J.S. Aurora* the previous day. The world was hailing India for winning a war in just 13 days. A new country – Bangladesh – was being born in front of everyone's eyes. Columns of Indian troops were entering the city, cheered by exhausted Bengalis waving makeshift flags. Prisoners of war were being collected. Intelligence teams were hunting for stragglers. The crackle of small-arms fire could still be heard once in a while – pockets of Pakistani soldiers who hadn't yet accepted defeat, or plain confusion in a city that had just changed hands.

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*with inputs from Col Ajay Singh (Retd.)

In the middle of that chaos, an urgent message reached the Indian formation:

> *"There is a VIP family still being held at Dhanmondi. Pakistani soldiers still around the house. They have refused to surrender. The family must be secured."*

The "VIP family" was no ordinary household. It was the family of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman – the undisputed leader of the Bengali struggle. He was thousands of kilometres away, imprisoned in West Pakistan. But in Dhaka, in the house at Dhanmondi 32, his wife Begum Fazilatunnesa, his daughters Sheikh Hasina and Sheikh Rehana, his son Sheikh Kamal, and other members of the family were trapped. For nine months they had lived under virtual house arrest, guarded by armed Pakistani troops. Now that Pakistan had lost, those guards were unpredictable. Cornered soldiers can kill out of panic or spite. Someone had to go and talk them down.

The Soldier

Major Ashok Tara of 14 GUARDS was, in many ways, the right man for an impossible task.

Born in 1947, in the same year as independent India, he had grown up listening to stories of the 1948 and 1965 wars, and like many young men of his generation, he had joined the Army to be part of that larger nation-building story. The Army gave him exactly the kind of professional

home he wanted. By 1971 he was a young Major – old enough to command, young enough to take risks.

His battalion was operating in the Dhaka area as Indian Forces closed in. The war, though short, had been intense. The Indian Army was fighting along with the *Mukti Bahini*, the Bengali guerrillas who had risen against Pakistani rule. Tara had already seen what Pakistani repression looked like – burnt villages, bodies in ponds, terrified families. He knew what the Pakistan Army had done to Bengali intellectuals and political workers in the days before surrender. When he heard that the very family of Sheikh Mujib was still surrounded by armed Pakistanis, he understood the stakes immediately.

If that family was harmed now – after victory – the moral triumph of India's intervention would be scarred. And Bangladesh, barely born, would lose the heirs to its most important leader.

Orders – and a Choice

The order was straightforward but not simple: "Proceed to the residence. Convince the Pakistani guards to surrender. Ensure the safety of the occupants. Avoid bloodshed if possible."

That last sentence mattered. The house was in a built-up area. A firefight could have killed the very people they wanted to save. Also, at that point, India wanted to show

the people of Dhaka that the war was over, that the Indian soldier was not a conqueror but a liberator.

Tara could have insisted on going with a full section, guns at the ready. He could have asked for an armoured vehicle. He could have asked for artillery cover. Instead, he did something that still sounds reckless and yet perfectly in character – he went in unarmed.

Why? Because he understood something basic about soldiers: a man holding a gun will rarely put it down if he is looking at another man holding a gun. Violence invites violence. He had to give the sentries at Dhanmondi 32 a face to talk to, not an enemy to shoot at.

On his uniform, he made sure his rank badges were clearly visible – as he wanted the Pakistanis to know they were talking to an Indian Officer, not a local civilian – and set off, with a small escort that stayed back.

Dhaka, 1971: The Approach

Imagine Dhaka that day. Roads clogged with celebrating people. Mukti Bahini fighters firing in the air. Pakistani vehicles abandoned at junctions. The smell of smoke. Loudspeakers blaring the news of surrender. And through that, a jeep carrying an Indian major making his way to a house everyone knew belonged to Sheikh Mujib.

When he reached the lane leading to the residence, he could see it at once – the house was still guarded. The men

around it were not joyous Bengali youths; they were tired, tense Pakistani soldiers, still in fighting order. Their nerves would have been frayed. They would have heard rumours – "Indians are rounding up officers", "Mukti Bahini is taking revenge", "Anyone in uniform will be shot." Cornered soldiers are the most dangerous kind.

Tara got down from his vehicle and walked forward alone. Rifles swung towards him. He raised his hands slightly to show he was unarmed. "I am Major Tara of the Indian Army," he called out, in clear, firm Hindi–Urdu, the language both armies shared. "The war is over. Your Commander in Dhaka has surrendered. Put down your weapons."

The soldiers shouted back for him to stop. One of them, probably the local NCO, came forward, weapon still in hand. Tara could see in their eyes that they had been told to guard this house at all costs. Perhaps they had been informed that Indian troops would kill the family inside. Perhaps they simply didn't know what was happening outside. The radio sets in the house had not necessarily been updated.

"You have lost nothing by surrendering," Tara went on. "You will be treated as prisoners of war. If you fire now, you will die for nothing – and the people inside will die too."

It was, in truth, one of the most dangerous moments of the whole operation. He was a single officer, within range of multiple rifles, with no cover. All it would have taken was one frightened jawan to press the trigger.

What saved him was his absolute calm. He did not shout. He did not plead. He spoke like one professional to another. Pakistani soldiers, like Indian soldiers, respected that. And they knew – deep down – that the war was indeed over. Slowly, under his gaze, the weapons began to lower. "Put them down," he said again. "You will walk out alive." They obeyed.

Inside Dhanmondi 32

With the outer ring disarmed, Major Tara stepped through the gate of the house that would, in later decades, become one of the most important addresses in Bangladesh.

Inside, he found what he would later describe simply as a terrified family – women and children who had lived for months with the fear of being killed, now suddenly face to face with a stranger in an Indian uniform.

Some accounts say the family members were in one section of the house, not moving about freely because of the guards. There were whispers, hurried looks, children clinging to their mother. They had heard gunfire outside for days. They knew Pakistan had lost. Their worst fear was that the Pakistani detachment guarding them would kill them in anger before fleeing.

The sight of Major Tara must have been surreal. He was not Bengali, not Pakistani, not a relative – yet he spoke with authority and kindness.

"You are safe now," he told Begum Mujib and the daughters. "The Indian Army is here. No one will harm you."

Among those present was a young woman in her mid-twenties – Sheikh Hasina – and her younger sister Sheikh Rehana. For nine months they had lived in uncertainty, heard of massacres across the city, and not known if their father was even alive. When Tara spoke, the fear broke. Later she would recall that they cried – from relief, from exhaustion, from finally seeing the face of someone who had come to protect, not to threaten.

Tara made sure to check the whole house. He ensured that all Pakistani soldiers were disarmed, collected in one place, and put under guard. He radioed back to his superiors, informing them that the Mujib family was secure. He organised a small protection party to stay with them.

It is easy, in hindsight, to make this look routine. It was not. This was combat psychology at its finest – a man walking unarmed into a hostile pocket, reading the minds of the enemy, choosing exactly the right tone, and defusing a massacre before it happened.

Why it Mattered

At that moment, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was still a prisoner in West Pakistan. The entire Bengali nation, drunk on freedom, was waiting for his return. Imagine if, when he landed in Dhaka in January 1972, he had been told: "*Your*

wife and daughters were killed by soldiers on the last day." It would have been a national heartbreak, a permanent wound in India–Bangladesh relations, and a power vacuum for extremists to exploit.

Because *Major Ashok Tara* acted when he did, Mujib returned to a living family. When he stepped out of the aircraft at Tejgaon, he was greeted not only by a jubilant people and the Indian leadership, but also by the faces he loved. That continuity was crucial. Sheikh Hasina and Sheikh Rehana would go on to become, the longest-serving Prime Ministers of Bangladesh and an important moral voice in its politics. The line of Mujib did not end in 1971 – because one Indian Major refused to let it.

Recognition and a Lifelong Bond

The Indian State recognised the act with the award of Vir Chakra. Bangladesh recognised it too; in 2012, decades after the war, the Government of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina conferred on him the Friend of Liberation War Honour – a public, national recognition that without him, her story might have ended in 1971.

But perhaps the most touching recognition was personal. Whenever *Major Ashok Tara* visited Dhaka later, he was welcomed not as a visiting officer, but as family. Hasina reportedly introduced him to others by saying, "This is the officer who saved our lives." For a soldier, no medal shines brighter than the gratitude of those he rescued.

He once said something to the effect of: *"Anyone can shoot. Not everyone can walk into gun barrels and ask them to lower their weapons."* That was not arrogance; it was a statement of fact from someone who had done exactly that.

A Different Kind of Gallantry

Most war stories are about assaulting enemy bunkers, holding positions under fire, leading counterattacks. Major Tara's story is different because it stands at the intersection of war and mercy. The guns were all around, the stakes were geopolitical, but the act itself was deeply human – an officer protecting a mother and her daughters.

In military history, such acts matter even more than we realise. They shape the moral memory of wars. Bangladesh remembers 1971 not only for the surrender at the Race Course but also for the fact that Indians protected their leader's family. That memory lubricates diplomacy even decades later.

Major Ashok Tara's story keeps resurfacing every few years, especially when Sheikh Hasina visits India or when India marks *Vijay Diwas*. Each time it is told, listeners are struck by the simplicity of it: one man walks in, talks, and brings a family out alive. It sounds almost like a fable.

But it was not inevitable. It happened because a young officer trusted his uniform, trusted his voice, and trusted the professionalism of the soldiers facing him. He carried no rifle, only his authority – and that day, it was enough.

So, when we speak of the 1971 war, of tank battles in Garibpur and air raids on Tejgaon, we should also remember the scene in a house in Dhanmondi: a frightened family, a group of defeated soldiers, and an Indian Major saying, "It's over. Come out. You are safe."

That was the day *Major Ashok Tara* proved that bravery is not always loud. Sometimes it is a calm man standing in front of loaded guns, saving the future of a nation.

12

Captain Anuj Nayyar

The Tricolour was more Important than his Life

"Fearlessness is the first step toward victory."
– Upanishadic Teaching

By early July 1999, the ridges around Dras and Kargil were drenched with the blood of hundreds of soldiers who had been mowed down by a relentless enemy in a war that had already dragged on for several weeks. Soldiers had fallen in the line of their sacred duty to their Motherland without a grumble or complaint, but with unflinching bravery.

Captain Anuj Nayyar of the 17 JAT Battalion had barely seen 24 summers of his life. The innocence of youth had yet to fade into the seriousness of adulthood. His sharp piercing eyes were constantly on the watch for shadows that could rain down sudden death on him and his men. His company was spread out under the rocky overhangs below what was indicated as Point 4875 on the military's maps. It had an ominous name too – *Pimple Complex*.

Captain Nayyar and his men had been tasked with a ruthless and merciless mission – to over-run the enemy and

demolish the bunkers they were safely settled in at nearly 16,000 feet. The Indians did not have the luxury of a safe and protective terrain and their positions were already exposed to heavy enemy machine gun fire. Lance Naik Bhim Singh commented that even the mountain air was conspiring against them and helping the enemy. To which Capt. Nayyar calmed him saying that the air too would soon be Indian territory and not to worry.

Ordeal by Fire

On the night of a new moon, when the light was at its lowest, *Anuj* led his men forward. They clawed their way up the cliffs, skidding down a little every time their boots pried out loose stones. When the stones hit the bottom, the Pakistanis pricked up their ears and peered into the darkness but could see nothing. When occasional Pakistani flares shot up lighting up the mountainside, the Indians would fall flat on the ground to avoid detection.

However, the enemy was not taking anything for granted. Even though they could not discern the Indian soldiers, they let loose a barrage of machine gun fire preceded by tracer bullets. The area resonated with deafening sound. Constant rounds of mortar fire shook the ground. As he crawled forward, *Anuj* whispered to Bhim to remain at his flank and to Naik Raju to constantly keep firing his LMG at the enemy to keep them down. He told him to continue firing even if the weapon became unbearably hot with continuous action.

An explosion blew two men off the cliff to certain death. *Anuj* steeled himself to ignore them and continue crawling ahead. He knew much was at stake and went on doggedly until he reached a small ledge from where he could hurl a grenade at the bunker ahead of him.

Most of what happened that night was related much later by the survivors whose eyes welled up in tears as they recounted the events. *Captain Anuj* motioned to Bhim to throw a grenade at the bunker but it bounced off a rock and exploded hurling burning hot shrapnel into Bhim's neck. Seeing warm blood trickling out of Bhim's wounds, *Anuj* made him sit against a rock and uttered a few words to bolster his morale.

Then he got up and ran the final twenty feet under roaring gunfire with bullets flying around him, some so precariously so close that he could feel the wind as they whistled past. With numbed fingers he pulled the pin on his grenade so vigorously that it peeled the skin off his thumb.

The grenade moved in a perfect arc and found its mark with accuracy. The bunker went up in flames. But *Anuj* didn't stop there. He ran around the flaming bunker and pursued the retreating Pakistanis firing at them while on the run. He was finishing the last Pakistani when his men caught up with him.

The Last Action

When they reached the main mortar position of the enemy, *Anuj* took the lead again even though his shoulder was

bleeding profusely after a stray bullet that had ricocheted had torn away quite a lot of flesh.

It was at that point that an enemy sniper's bullet smashed into his neck. He fell. His men shouted for the medics but *Anuj*, even as life was ebbing out of him, slowly managed to whisper in an unfamiliar hoarseness to his men to plant the Indian Tricolour.

The Indian flag fluttering bravely on the hill top he had helped to conquer was probably the last thing he saw before he closed his eyes for ever, surrounded by his men whose cheeks were wet with tears streaming down them.

The Final Letter

Many weeks later, even as the grief of the tragedy that had hit the family had yet to die down, Capt. Nayyar's mother received his last letter. It was in a simple brown envelope. The words were not many but were scrawled in the neat, deliberate hand of a young officer who seemed to have an extraordinary prescience of what Fate had in store for him. It was in Hindi. It read:

"Maa,
Agar wapas na aaoon, toh rona mat. Mujhe pata hai main wapas aaoonga – shayad patthar ban kar is pahaad pe, ya baarish ban kar teri chhat pe.
Bharat Maa ke liye marna zindagi se bada hai."

("Mother,
If I don't return, don't weep. I know I will return – perhaps as stone on this mountain or as rain on your roof.
Dying for Mother India is greater than living.")

"Did he die fighting?", these were the words from *Anuj*'s father, Professor Nayyar when he received the call regarding his son's martyrdom.

When we recall the supreme sacrifice of *Capt. Anuj Nayyar*, we must not forget the countless *Anuj*'s who charged lesser-known ridges, some never to return. Try to recall the anguish and wailing of the grief-stricken and inconsolable families who have lost their loved ones.

Captain Nayyar's story reminds us that bravery and sacrifice is not linked to medals or loud speeches; it is the determination and passion that the line on the map that delineates two countries is not broken or meddled with. It also reminds us that the sovereignty and integrity of the country cannot be tampered with or violated and that our brave men in uniform on the borders who endure all sorts of hardships and privation will not hesitate even a second to give even their lives to ensure that our National Honour is not tarnished.

'Dhoop' a film by Ashwini Choudhary was based on the life of *Captain Anuj Nayyar*.

- A road in Janakpuri, New Delhi, is named Captain Anuj Nayyar Marg in memory of the late soldier.
- A park is named after Captain Anuj Nayyar in Janakpuri, New Delhi.

Maha Vir Chakra

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Operation Vijay (Kargil War, 1999)

On 06 July 1999, Charlie Company was tasked to capture an objective, which was a part of the Pimple Complex on the Western Slopes of Point 4875, in the Mushkoh Valley. At the beginning of the attack, the Company Commander got injured, and the command of the company devolved on *Captain Anuj Nayyar*. *Captain Nayyar* continued to command his leading platoon into the attack under heavy enemy artillery and mortar fire. As the platoon advanced, the leading section reported the location of 3 to 4 enemy positions. *Captain Nayyar* moved forward towards the first enemy position and fired a rocket launcher and lobbed grenades into it.

Thereafter, the section, along with *Captain Nayyar*, physically assaulted and cleared the position. The enemy, which was well entrenched, brought a heavy volume of automatic fire. *Captain Anuj Nayyar*, unmindful of his personal safety, motivated his men and cleared two more enemy positions. While clearing the fourth position, an enemy rocket-propelled grenade hit the officer and martyred him on the spot. This action, led by *Captain Anuj Nayyar*, resulted in the killing of nine enemy soldiers and the destruction of three medium machine gun positions of the enemy. The success of this operation after a brief setback

was largely due to the outstanding personal bravery and exemplary junior leadership of this daring officer. *Captain Anuj Nayyar* displayed indomitable resolve, grit, and determination. He motivated his command by personal example, acting beyond the call of duty and making the supreme sacrifice in accordance with the true traditions of the Indian Army.

13

Brig Navin Kumar Maini*
The Gas Tragedy of Bhopal

"A fearless soldier is the greatest asset of a nation."
– Arthashastra

A City that didn't know it was dying

The night of 2 December 1984 began like any other in Bhopal. In the cantonment, the sentries changed guard on time, the mess staff washed the last of the dinner vessels, and the Sub Area Commander *Brigadier Navin Kumar Maini* signed off the day's file with the comfortable certainty of a man who knows his city is asleep and safe.

He had no way of knowing that, a few kilometres away, death had already begun to creep out of a rusting tank.

At 12:30 a.m., in the Union Carbide pesticide plant, Tank 610 began to vent. Inside it was Methyl Isocyanate (MIC) – a colourless, highly toxic industrial chemical. Water had entered where it should never have entered; pressure

*with inputs from Col Harjeet Singh (Retd.)

shot up; safety systems failed. A ghost-like cloud began to rise and flow outwards, riding the faint winter breeze.

At first, people in the nearby *bastis* twitched in their sleep, thinking it was just some odd smell. Then the MIC hit their throats.

Eyes burned. Lungs seized. People woke up choking, stumbling out of their houses, clutching at their necks. Mothers tried to pick up two children at once and could barely lift one. Men ran without knowing where to run. Dogs yelped and fell. Chickens flapped once and lay still.

Panic has a sound – high, desperate, without words. That sound spread through Bhopal. Phone lines to the civil administration began to jangle, then choke. Hospitals started filling up – first a few cases, then dozens, then hundreds. Nobody knew what the gas was, how much had leaked, or whether more would come.

Brigadier N K Maini had been called by retired Brigadier M L Garg, general manager of Straw Products, a factory which lay in the path of the gas cloud at about 1.15 am. *"Something Terrible Has Happened..."* He had been asleep for barely an hour. Officers learn to wake up switched on. He picked up the telephone, and a breathless voice from the Signals staff began to explain – there was a gas leak, people were collapsing, civil lines were jammed, the scale was unknown. He didn't say, "*Let me check with higher HQ*." He said, "*I'm coming*." Within minutes, he was in uniform,

driving through the dark to the Signals Centre. Even with the windows rolled up, there was a faint, acrid sting in the air. He knew two things at once: This was no minor accident, and the Army was the only organised force in the city that could move in strength at this hour.

By the time he reached the Signals Centre, his plan was already formed. He began issuing instructions like a man directing a battle:

- ❏ "Alert all units in the station. This is not an exercise."
- ❏ "Open the Military Hospital to civilians. No one is to be turned away."
- ❏ "Mobilise every available 3-ton and ambulance. Mark them clearly."
- ❏ "Set up casualty collection points – Cantonment Gate, Polytechnic Ground, any open area."
- ❏ "Get all loudhailers, public address systems, even unit band mikes – people will panic."
- ❏ "All kitchens: start cooking. *Khichdi*, tea, anything hot. Feed whoever comes."

He didn't wait for the district administration to formally "requisition" the Army. People were dying now. Procedures could wait. By 03:00 a.m., Army trucks with red crosses were moving out, drivers and jawans with wet cloths tied around their faces – the only protection available. Sikh Light Infantry troops and EME personnel were the first to roll,

because they were closest and ready. What they saw upon entering the city would stay with them forever.

Bhopal, Turned to Hell

The streets looked like a battlefield without bombs. Men, women, children lay on the roads, on pavements, in drains, in whatever direction they had run before the gas felled them. Some were twitching. Some were very still. Eyes streamed—foam gathered at lips. The air was sharp, stinging – "*like onions and death mixed*", one soldier would later say.

A young jawan muttered, "*Sahab, jang mein bhi aisa nahi dekha.*" ("Sir, even in war I haven't seen this.") There was no time for shock. The soldiers began lifting people – any people – into trucks. No questions. No paperwork. A woman with two unconscious children was hoisted along with them. An old man was carried like a child. Some victims vomited blood on the truck floor. Others stopped breathing en route. The soldiers wiped their faces, tightened the wet cloths, and kept loading.

In the middle of it, the Brigadier's staff cars were also out. *Brigadier N K Maini* himself was not sitting in a safe Operations Room watching a map. He moved with a small team through the worst-hit zones, taking stock, pushing units forward, telling frightened people, "*Fauj aa gayi hai. Truck mein baitho.*" ("The Army has come. Get into the truck.")

When panicked crowds saw olive green, something in them relaxed. The Army, they knew, was not there to ask who they were. It was simply there to save.

Improvising a Lifeline

Civil hospitals were overflowing. Some doctors were working with handkerchiefs over their mouths. The Army could not just dump casualties at their gates.

So, *Brig Maini* did what good commanders do – he improvised a parallel system.

- ❏ Every unit *langar* and kitchen began cooking *khichdi* in bulk – hot, soft, easy to digest, and cheap.
- ❏ Open grounds and unit spaces were turned into medical camps. Army doctors – accustomed to working in field tents – set up on tables, on benches, even on the back of trucks.
- ❏ The Military Hospital threw its gates open. By afternoon, even the corridors were full of patients. Camp cots were lined up wherever there was six feet of space.

What was extraordinary was who all helped. Wives and daughters of officers and JCOs came in, unasked, to do what needed doing: wipe eyes, feed orphans, hold babies whose parents hadn't made it. Someone procured sodium thiosulfate solution and began washing patients' eyes.

Doctors and nurses worked far beyond their shifts. Some fainted, were revived, and went straight back to work. The Army was doing what it does in war – only now the enemy was invisible.

Moving the Living Out of the Death Zone

By late morning, it became clear that what lay closest to the factory – the poor *bastis* – was still dangerous. Gas might linger in low-lying pockets. People were too terrified to go back. The civil system was overloaded. *Brig Maini* took another bold call: "We will shift entire clusters."

Army trucks began doing street-to-street evacuation. Soldiers shouted through loud hailers: "*Bahar aao! Truck mein baitho! Idhar rehna khatarnak hai!*" People stumbled out – sobbing, coughing, clutching the only things they could grab. Many of them had literally nothing left – no documents, no money, no certainty that their families had all survived. And yet, when they saw the soldiers, they held on to them and wept. In that moment, olive green became the colour of safety.

In the cantonment, thousands of displaced people were fed. No one asked what caste they were, what faith they followed, or whether they were "entitled." Were you breathing? You were fed. That is what the Brigadier meant later when he said: "The city was dying. We were simply the nearest lifeline."

A City of Ghosts

By 4 December, the immediate crisis had eased, but Bhopal looked unreal. Dogs, cattle, and even birds that had dropped mid-flight lay dead. Shops were shut. Streets were quiet in a way a city should never be. A white powder – bleaching powder – was being sprayed from Army vehicles to disinfect.

Brigadier Maini did not relax. He kept going back to the worst-hit areas – not in a mask and sealed car, but in the same uniform, often with just a wet cloth, to make sure no one had been missed in some dark lane, no body left uncollected, no family left without information.

He coordinated with civil authorities when they could function, bypassed them when they couldn't. He accepted help from NGOs but refused anything that looked like a "hush" from the company. The Army's role was clear: serve the people, not anyone's embarrassment. For those days, when politicians argued and administrators gasped, the Indian Army was Bhopal's only calm centre.

Leadership in a Poison Fog

What did *Brig Navin Kumar Maini* do that was so exceptional?

- ❏ He acted before being asked. He did not wait for a formal call-out.
- ❏ He overruled the peacetime routine. Military hospitals are for serving personnel and families – he threw the doors open.

- ❏ He mobilised everything, not just "what the rulebook allows." Kitchens, vehicles, women's volunteer groups, engineers – everyone.
- ❏ He led from the front. Men are more willing to drive into a toxic area if they know their commander is out there too.
- ❏ He stayed calm. Panic is contagious. So is composure.

Because of this, thousands who might have died on the roads received treatment. Thousands who would have remained trapped in gas pockets were evacuated. And a city that could have descended into chaos found a structure.

For this, he was later awarded the Ati Vishisht Seva Medal (AVSM) – a high honour, but, as he said, nothing he felt needed fame. "I just did what any *fauji* would have done," he said quietly. And he meant it.

We often say, "The Army protects our borders." Bhopal 1984 showed something else: the Army also protects our breath. When the danger is not an enemy nation but a man-made disaster, it is still the same soldier who turns up.

On that winter night in Bhopal, the enemy was invisible, the battlefield was a city, and the casualties were civilians who had done nothing wrong. In the middle of it, a Brigadier in olive green said, "We are the lifeline," and proved it. That is how you lead when the air itself has turned against your people.

14

Badlu Ram and the Assam Regiment*

A Story too Small to Notice, too Great to Forget

"When duty calls, hesitation becomes defeat."

– Itihasa Tradition

To the uninitiated it sounds comical, even absurd – why are soldiers singing about their colleague who was killed in action, fighting against the Japanese, his battalion kept on drawing rations in his name? in one sense this song is more than a joke. But in regimental history when set to music, it is a way of honouring a soldier who died in action young, and a Quartermaster who kept on drawing rations in the name of this soldier either by design or default to serve his comrades with honour and dignity. In the Napoleonic era dictum that an Army marches on its stomach lies the legacy of *Badlu Ram* and this immortal Regimental song in his memory.

Let's now recall that story through the pages of History of War as it unfolded.

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*with inputs from Col Ajay Singh (Retd.)

Raising a Regiment of the Hill People of India

The Assam Regiment was born during the Second World War, on *15 June 1941*, when the British-Indian Army realized that if the Japanese pushed through Burma, it would be the hills of the North-East that would first have to absorb the first blow. The plainsman units of the Indian Army were already stretched. Therefore a requirement was felt to organise and raise a tough, sure-footed and lightly equipped force drawn from the hill tribes who knew the terrain. The obvious choices fell on *Khasis, Nagas, Kukis, Garos, Bodos, Assamese*, and other groups that moved comfortably in these jungles and mountains.

To begin with the Assam Regiment had a slightly different flavour. It was multi-lingual, multi-tribal, and yet expected to fight as one entity. To wield such a group together, the early commanders introduced a simple, direct style of functioning. They adopted *Roman Hindi* as a common working language so that everyone could follow orders. They coined the greeting *"Tagra raho!"* – "Stay strong/fit!" – to which a Rifleman was expected to roar back, *"Tagra hai, sa'ab!"* It was more than a simple greeting; it was also a reflection on the morale of individual soldiers. If they answered with energy, their morale was high too.

The Regiment also took the *one-horned rhinoceros* – icon of Assam – as its mascot and chose the motto "*Asam Vikram*" meaning "Peerless Valour" or, playfully, "the valour of

Assam." These were not very simple and cosmetic adoptions but were to have very far reaching effects. For a young regiment, especially one that had to earn its place among older, battle-tested units, such symbols were to have uniting effects for the regiment and its men.

Within three years of its raising, the new regiment found itself thrown into one of the hardest campaigns of the war – the defence of India's eastern gate in 1944.

The Japanese Push and the Siege of Kohima

By early 1944, the Japanese Fifteenth Army under Lt Gen Renya Mutaguchi had swept through Burma. Their bold plan – later called Operation U-Go – was to cross the Indian frontier, capture Imphal and Kohima, cut the Allied supply line, and open the road to the plains of India. If they had succeeded in these operations, the entire complexion of the war in Southeast Asia might have changed.

Kohima, by geography, is not a grand fortress. It is a town straddling a ridge, with steep sides and limited room to manoeuvre. But in April 1944 it became, quite literally, the last blocking position between the Japanese and the Indian plains. The fighting there would later be called "The Stalingrad of the East" and, in a 2013 British public poll, it has been graded as the **Greatest Battle of the Second World War** – ahead of Normandy, El Alamein, and Monte Cassino – because of what was at stake and how desperately it was fought.

The width of the front between two opposing forces narrowed to such an extent that at one point the defenders and the attackers were firing at each other across **a tennis court** – the famous Deputy Commissioner's bungalow tennis court in Kohima – using its white lines as reference point for targets. Earl Mountbatten, Supreme Allied Commander, SEAC, later compared it to **Thermopylae**: a small force holding back a larger one, by sheer grit, determination and refusal to yield ground aided by difficult terrain.

In this brutal setting was the **1st Battalion of The Assam Regiment**, a young unit, tasked to fight like an old one.

Entry of Rifleman Badlu Ram

Among many riflemen posted to that sector was this soldier *Badlu Ram*. Most retellings agree that he was a simple soldier, not an officer, not even a JCO – just a rifleman in the 1st battalion of the Assam Regiment that had moved up to face the Japanese. We don't have a full biography – village, parents, exact company – but in some ways that is fitting. He stands for every anonymous infantryman whose name could easily have disappeared into the casualty returns, a document that specifies the details of individuals killed in action.

Badlu Ram did not get to become a hero in the cinematic sense. He was not even the last man on the Bren gun; he did not even lead a bayonet charge. Sometime after arriving at the front during the battle of Kohima, he was killed by Japanese fire – "Japan War mein mar gaya," as the song puts

it with a disarming bluntness as a very mundane routine death. In most wars that would have been the end of his story. A report would go up from the company to battalion HQ, his name would be struck off the effective strength, the quartermaster would reduce rations by one, and the battalion would move on.

But the North-East hills in 1944 were not an ideal place for tidy paperwork.

The 'Bloody Wireless' and the Smart Quartermaster

Communication between forward companies and rear echelons was patchy. Wireless sets were heavy, batteries weak, the jungle dense, and the weather uncooperative. Officers of the time – including British officers serving alongside Indian troops – often complained that the wireless gave you bad news on time and vital news too late.

In this fog of war, the company quartermaster – the man responsible for rations, clothing, and other supplies for the company – never informed the rear echelons responsible for administrative back up to the forwarded troops that *Rifleman Badlu Ram* had been killed in action. Maybe he forgot in the chaos of evacuation and redeployment; or maybe he thought, "Let me send the casualty report later." Maybe, as the song cheekily suggests, he was simply "smart."

What was the result? Every time supplies were dropped

by air with the help of parachutes when the Japanese pressure made roads and mule convoys impossible to operate – there was this **ration for one extra man**. In normal circumstances, a pedantic quartermaster would have stopped the anomaly, or allowed the company to eat the bonus ration right away. This man didn't. He **hoarded** it.

Anyone who has read accounts of Kohima and Imphal knows how critical rations became, once the siege tightened. Japanese anti-aircraft guns made supply drops also hazardous. The garrison was on short water – Maj Boshell of 1st Royal Berkshires recorded that it was cut to about a pint per day. Men were fighting, digging, and patrolling on reduced food. In such conditions, an extra man's rations, saved over days and weeks, quietly stashed where the company could reach them later, was worth its weight in gold.

So, when the siege grew harsher and other units began to feel the pinch, *Badlu Ram's company had a cushion*. The men knew why. They knew whose name was still on the roll, whose death had gone "unreported," and whose body now lay buried underground while his rations continued to feed his comrades.

Soldiers have an unsentimental way of expressing gratitude. They don't write odes; they simply make marching songs.

The Song Itself

"Badlu Ram ka badan zameen ke neeche hai…
…toh humein uska ration milta hai!"

It is mischievous, almost bhajan-like with its "Saabash… hallelujah!" refrain (very likely picked up from hearing British troops sing, and then twisted with Indian humour). It begins, as soldiers' songs often do, with a comic detour – a rifleman too distracted by a pretty girl forgets to pull his *"chindi"* (a little piece of cotton used to clean the barrel of the Rifle), the **Havildar Major** catching him and giving him *"pitthu"* punishment. This opening has nothing to do with *Badlu Ram*; it is just the Regiment's way of making the song lively, of giving every recruit something to laugh at.

Then it pivots:

- *"Badlu Ram ek sipahi tha"* – He was one of us (a soldier).
- *"Japan war mein mara gaya"* – He was killed in the Burma theatre.
- *"Quartermaster smart tha, usne ration nikala"* – Our supply NCO was clever and kept drawing his ration (even after his death).
- And the punchline: because *Badlu Ram* is now underground (buried after death), *we are still eating his ration*.

It is not meant as disrespect. On the contrary, it is a way of saying: *even in death, he served us.* The song is part war story, part inside joke, part salute. In today's world, it will amount to "Situational Awareness".

Over time, the song became regimental property (Regimental song). New recruits were taught to sing it; officers took pride in it; it was sung at barakhanas and social evenings, and later, famously, at passing-out parades. Very few regiments in the Indian Army have a song so uniquely recognised as theirs, so tied to a specific incident, so instantly evocative of their Second World War baptism.

After Kohima: A Regiment Matures

The siege of Kohima ended on 22 June 1944, after 77 days of savage fighting. The Assam Regiment, alongside British and other Indian units, had held their ground. The Japanese offensive towards India failed; and from then on, the Allies pushed back. For the Assam Regiment, this was their entry into the profession of arms by fire. A unit raised just three years earlier had stood their ground.

After Independence, the Regiment did not fade into ceremonial obscurity. It expanded from the original three battalions to a total of 22 battalions – (15 regular battalions, 3 Rashtriya Rifles battalions, 3 Territorial Army battalions and one Arunachal Scouts battalion). Its battalions fought in 1962 against China, in all the Indo-Pak wars, and later in Sri Lanka with the IPKF. Some of its units wore the UN

blue helmet in Cambodia, Lebanon, and the Democratic Republic of Congo. Its list of gallantry awards include – Ashoka Chakra, Maha Vir Chakra, Kirti Chakra, Vir Chakra, Shaurya Chakra, Sena Medal – the list is long, especially for a regiment that began its journey only in 1941.

Throughout its existence the Regiment has kept its hill-warrior flavour. "*Tagra raho*" remained. Roman Hindi stayed. The rhino stayed. And so did "*Badlu Ram ka badan*." Young officers posted to the Regiment for the first time often hear it at a *barakhana* and ask, "What on earth are you all singing?" – and then they are told the story. From then on, it isn't just a funny song; it is part of the unit's collective memory of Kohima.

In 2013, when the Battle of Kohima and Imphal was voted in Britain as the greatest battle of the Second World War, it revived interest in that entire campaign. People discovered, or rediscovered, that Indian units – the Assam Regiment among them – had fought and died on their own soil to stop the Japanese. But long before the British public voted, the Assam Regiment had been remembering it in its own way – on parade grounds, in barracks, in Shillong, Jorhat, and wherever a battalion of the Brave Rhinos was stationed.

15

The Ghosts of Lansdowne
They Still Stand Guard Here!

"Some warriors never leave the battlefield; they simply change their post."

– Indian Army Lore

Lansdowne, an Army township, is a serene and picturesque hill station in the Pauri Garhwal district of Uttarakhand. It's known for its tranquil atmosphere, colonial era architecture and scenic views. It was developed by the British as a cantonment and training centre for the famed Garhwal Rifles. It is home for the Garhwal Rifles, one of India's most well-known infantry regiments.

It was originally raised in 1887 as the 39th Regiment of the Bengal Army. It became the Royal Garhwal Rifles as part of the British Indian Army. The Regimental Centre houses the Regimental War Memorial and the Darwan Singh Museum, which showcase the regiment's history, achievements and sacrifices of its soldiers.

Old and New at Lansdowne

A new batch of recruits entered the Centre in the winter of 2003. They had been recruited from *Tehri*, *Rudraprayag*, and *Pauri*, and had still to accustom themselves to the new surroundings. They were cautioned on their first night itself in their barracks. An old Lance Naik stood at their door and told them to be wary as old ghosts too occasionally came to their parades. While some of them considered this part of the ragging of recruits, there were others who were genuinely scared out of their wits.

There's a silent stretch called Kho Barah – a lonely training ground where morning fog descends to ground level. It is believed that during World War I in 1914–18, Garhwali men learnt the rudiments of battle here and were then sent to Mesopotamia to join the British Army there. Many never returned and were either buried or cremated, when possible, in distant lands.

This became the basis of a legend at Lansdowne. People went on garnishing it with their own versions over the years. Ultimately, what became popular was the story that sometimes at dawn, when dense mist swirls and shrouds the parade square, eerie figures come marching in perfect formation with sloped rifles and shining bayonets, and their boots thumping the ground and creating phantasmal music.

However, when the mist eventually clears with the rising of the sun, the parade ground is deserted!

A Night at the Range

Over the years, more ghostly appearances were linked to real happenings making a mix of fact and fiction. Take take the case of Naik Darwan Singh, a young instructor. One evening, he was told to prepare for a live-firing exercise the next morning. Two jawans were helping him.

They had lanterns to provide light. While doing their work, they were surprised to hear the sound of boots approaching. Though scared, they could make out dim figures dressed in outdated uniforms. One of the jawans pointed out that the kits the figures were carrying were outdated.

A chill passed through *Darwan's* spine. The dim figures merely marched past them, their faces half covered by their hats. One seemed to nod an acknowledgment to Darwan Singh and his comrades. Their lanterns flickered violently and the light dimmed as the figures marched past. When it ultimately steadied, the 'marching column' had disappeared.

The next morning the officer-in-charge to whom they reported the previous night's incident brushed it off saying their imagination must have worked overtime. But that day's live firing practice went off without a flaw – not a single rifle jammed, and every shot found its mark. Later, the men ascribed the perfection and success of the exercise to the phantoms of the previous night. They believed they were Garhwali soldiers who had passed away and had thoroughly checked the guns and the ammunition.

The Midnight Bugler

Another story that is often repeated is that of the 'Midnight Bugler.'

Veteran soldiers of the Garhwal Rifles claim that a bugle is sometimes heard just a few hours after midnight. They add that the notes are clear in the thin air and waft among the mountains. The tune is familiar to most of them as it resembles the 'Last Post' that is played at military funerals and at ceremonies commemorating those who have died in battle. Sentries posted at and around the Regimental Centre peer into the dark trying to locate the bugler, but nothing is seen.

Once, a young subaltern became curious and tried to locate the bugler. Without waiting to put on his boots, he rushed out of his quarters in his slippers and with his revolver drawn. All he could see was a grey wraith of mist floating around the gate. He got a strange answer when he asked one of his men the next morning about the mysterious bugler. He was told the bugler played 'The Last Post' in honour of the martyrs of the Garhwal Rifles and that he should not disturb the 'ceremony'.

Ghost in the Mess

One of the popular ghost stories of the Garhwal Regimental Centre revolves around Colonel Montgomery Browne Robert whose bungalow was in front of the Officers' Mess. It had only one floor. People believe that his ghost reads

throughout the night in the light of a lamp. Some years later, he decided to pull it down and build a double-storey building. Legend states that fairies came to him in a dream and requested him not to build a second floor as it would obstruct their flying route to Badrinath. He ignored them and went ahead with his project. It is said that he was struck with blindness the day the second floor was completed. Whether this story is fact or myth is difficult to say but a plaque at the bungalow says the story is unverified. Yet, it is fairly popular among the locals.

These stories and many more about the Garhwal Rifles Regimental Centre have passed into legend. The stories do not scare; rather they enthuse them with pride that their predecessors gave their all, even their lives, in the service of their country. Even if it was under colonial rule in those times, it was after all their country, their homeland.

Our modern age rushes forward at such a fast pace because we are focussed more on the future than on anything else. Sometimes, we even forget to think about the present. In such a milieu, we tend to forget our past and those who made it possible for us to live the lives we are living today. The so-called 'ghosts of Lansdowne' are not mythical or supernatural apparitions – they are living reminders that commitment to duty does not ever die and that sacrifice, however small or insignificant, leaves permanent footprints on our Earth.

16

Mansi: The Four-legged Soldier
Pawprints of Valour

"Loyalty that serves without reward is the purest form of courage."
– Indian Ethical Thought

Birth of a Warrior

In 2009, in the serene kennels of the Indian Army's Remount and Veterinary Corps (RVC) Centre in Meerut, a female Labrador delivered a lively litter of pups. They were playful, clumsy, and innocent – but one little female pup stood out.

Her eyes were bright and piercing and seemed to be constantly scanning her surroundings. It was as if she was committing to memory all that she was seeing. She was not the strongest of the litter but there was something unique about her that attracted those who saw her and created a lasting impression on them. She exuded a rare kind of confidence, apparently saying she could face anything that confronted her. She would not be cowed down by danger or

be frightened. Her trainers realised that she possessed rare qualities; little did they know that she would prove them on the battlefield and in the face of death.

They named her *Mansi* after a Sanskrit word meaning 'voice of the heart' or of 'unique mind and intellect.' Even as a pup and growing, she displayed these qualities impressing those who saw her that she was a soldier in the making.

Training for the Battlefield

Her training began when she was three months old. While her siblings were taught to obey basic commands, *Mansi's* attitude and boundless energy led to her being trained for combat; obeying basic commands was child's play for her. She absorbed them easily as a duckling takes to water.

Her trainers considered her ideal to be trained to track. As a tracker dog she would be one of the Army's most valued assets in counter-insurgency operations and with the men patrolling the borders. She learned how to pick up scents and signals. She could identify the acrid stench of gunpowder. She could locate barely visible human footprints on rocky ridges. She nosed out buried metal, hidden grenades, and concealed weapons with alacrity. Nothing escaped her. Her keen sense of smell was sharp and strong.

In six months, she became adept in tracking infiltrators from across the border. Her accuracy was astonishing and she never failed. Six months after some more intensive

training her expertise in sniffing out the faintest of explosives was beyond imagination. She had become a matchless expert at it.

That was when Lance Naik Bashir Ahmed, of the 160 Territorial Army Battalion was assigned to be her permanent handler. Soon, both of them forged a strong bond of friendship and trust, a bond that would stand them in good stead later in life.

"Mansi, Let's Go!": A Bond Minted in Duty

Bashir was a quiet Kashmiri soldier – brave, soft-spoken, and with a heart that loved both his valley and his uniform. Their first meeting was memorable. Though she had never seen him earlier, her first glimpse of him made her impulsively trot up to him with a rare level of confidence. She behaved as if she had been waiting for him all along.

He knelt to pat her and she sniffed him evidently showing her affection and the brotherhood that sparked in an instant like lightning. After that, there was no question of separating them or keeping them apart. They did everything together in tandem – training, patrolling, eating and resting. Her world revolved around Bashir – his voice, his whistling to call her, his stroking her. She followed him everywhere like a shadow.

He would keep encouraging and motivating her with softly spoken words. She would express her satisfaction and

pleasure by wagging her tail furiously. He was not merely a handler but as far as she was concerned – he was her family.

Into the Valley of Fire: Kupwara

It was early 2016 in Kupwara in North Kashmir. The terrain is mountainous and inhospitable. Navigating and negotiating the area is dangerous as it is covered with thick forests, harsh slopes and usually enveloped in a thick mist. Death could emerge from anywhere; it could be lurking behind any tree

It was in such a hazardous area that *Mansi* and Bashir were deployed in Tangdhar Sector, one of the most infiltration-prone areas along the Line of Control. A constant vigil had to be maintained there because practically every night militants would cross over, trained and ready to spread terror. They carried rifles and IEDs. They randomly planted the IEDs along paths likely to be traversed by the Army patrols and the local population.

Mansi and *Bashir* accompanied the constant patrols that maintained an eternal vigil. They braved the treacherous terrain with fortitude and dedication ensuring that their senses remained as keen and sharp, if not more, than the biting and freezing cold that numbed them to the bone. Encouraged by Bashir, *Mansi* alerted the soldiers many a time to the dangers that faced them. The number of lives *Mansi* helped to save or the casualties she prevented using just her sharp senses are innumerable. She did this in diverse

ways. She sniffed out IEDs that had been covered with leaves or camouflaged in other ways to avoid detection. She tracked infiltrators who used every method possible to remain hidden from the soldiers. If danger loomed, she was the first to sound the alarm.

Mansi was not just a dog for the soldiers she had been assigned to accompany. She was their friend and comrade and in more ways than one had saved them from danger and even death.

The Day Destiny Took a Hand

The morning of August 2016 dawned as usual with dense fog that reduced visibility to practically nil. The hushed silence of the mountains and forests was ominous; it seemed as if a wall of conspiracy had been built all over. As usual, *Mansi* led the first patrol of the day to set out. She trotted playfully ahead of her six-man patrol, raising her head and sniffing all around. Bashir walked beside her, his rifle pointing to the ground, but with his eyes and ears straining for any glimpse of the enemy..

Suddenly, *Mansi* froze where she stood. Her fur bristled in tension and a low angry growl emanated from deep within her chest. She seemed to have noticed something unusual. Bashir, in his normal, quiet voice whispered, asking her what was wrong. He saw that *Mansi* was concentrating on a dense cluster of bushes barely ten metres ahead. In an instant, she

charged towards the bushes, barking so wildly that the sound penetrated the dense mist. From ahead of her, a shot rang out, obviously aimed at her. The bullet found its mark. She fell, but did not give up. She got on her feet again and surged forward with renewed energy, barking more furiously that before.

Mansi's brave action, despite being severely wounded, exposed the militants' position. Bashir opened up with his rifle while shouting warnings and calling for reinforcements.

Meanwhile, another burst of bullets crashed into *Mansi*. Despite intense bleeding turning her golden coat red, she did not stop barking, conjuring up her waning strength. The decibel level fell, yet she continued marking the militants' presence.

Suddenly, a loud explosion rent the air. An IED had been triggered off blasting *Mansi* squarely and hurling her bullet-ridden body into the air. Something within Bashir snapped and without waiting for reinforcements, he barged ahead, letting loose round after round at the enemy.

Eventually, enemy's bullets found him too, felling him to the ground right beside his beloved *Mansi*, his faithful and brave companion. His last shallow, shuddering breath left his body with his eyes transfixed on *Mansi*, the dog that had charged bravely into danger to save them and his comrades. When they caught up with him, both handler

and companion were dead. Those two deaths foiled an infiltration bid, neutralised the enemy and saved the men in the patrol. Man and animal had bonded in life, and had died together, sacrificing their lives for the glory and honour of the country.

When Soldiers Salute a Dog

The next day, the unit lined up to bid farewell to them. There was no discrimination; both the bodies were draped with the Tricolour. The unit, officers and men alike, stepped forward one by one, touched *Mansi's* fur and whispered a silent prayer. Some of them could not hold back their emotions and cried unabashedly. Some others could not bear to see the bodies and turned away. Some saluted as the plaintive notes of The Last Post wafted over the valley.

Bashir Ahmed War was posthumously awarded a Sena Medal. *Mansi* was Mentioned-in-Despatches and her name entered for ever in the *Gazette of India* – the first female Army dog in that sector to be honoured with a wartime gallantry mention.

She was buried with full military honours at her unit lines in Trehgam. Her leash and collar were placed on her grave. By its side, Bashir's family placed flowers on his grave as their final tribute. The phrase 'United in life, united in death' holds true in the story of Bashir and *Mansi* who proved that there are no boundaries to unbreakable bonds.

Mansi Lives on

Today, at RVC centres and dog lines across India, trainers still tell new handlers to train their charges well and let them grow like *Mansi*. Young pups sniff the air, wag their tails – unaware that the soil beneath them was once treaded by a dog that became a legend.

Posters of *Mansi* hang in some units where her name is taken with pride. They act as a symbol of courage and a constant reminder that even the sacrifice of one's life pales into insignificance when the security and sovereignty of the country is in peril.

A Final Echo of Loyalty

In life as well as in death, *Mansi* has left behind a lesson for all those in uniform and out of it – that heroism is never exhibited merely for plaudits. Heroism does not seek an audience and courage is not something to be only talked about – it has to be displayed when danger looms.

Mansi knew only one thing – her soldier, her companion and his comrades were in danger. She had to protect them at all costs. She had to fight for those who were guarding the country's borders. And she did, without hesitation, without qualms and without thinking of her own danger.

Mansi is not only the golden Labrador of Kupwara or the sentinel of Tangdhar. Her action in charging fearlessly into a hail of bullets that eventually cost her life is one of the

proud exploits of the Indian Army. She proved that hearts covered by fur could also summon up qualities of lion-heartedness and dauntlessness. Her story will be told and retold for generations as her legacy has been imprinted imperishably in the snows of Kashmir.

A Personal Note

I must add something here about that is close to my heart.

I, too, have a Labrador named *Joy*. He is now the same age as *Mansi* when she passed away. The similarity with *Mansi* is is that *Joy's* parents were also fauji dogs.

Every time *Joy* clambers on to my lap and rests his head on it, every time he runs towards the door when he hears a sound, and every time he looks at me with his honest and loyal eyes... . *Mansi* comes to mind. To me, he symbolises her courage, her innocence, and her devotion.

Mansi continues to live in the stories of soldiers, in the annals of the Army's Remount and Veterinary Corps and not just in the files of the Army or in the *Gazette of India*. Every dog that walks with head held high, with pride, loyalty and love is a living symbol of the *Mansi* that gave up her life in the service of the country.

In *Joy*.... She lives with me.

Indelible Pawprints

Heroes are not defined by rank, or by species, or by the uniform they wear. Even those who do not wear any uniform can be heroes. What makes heroes stand out from the rank and file is that their heart ticks for others, not only for themselves. Neither is heroism restricted to humans alone; it lies embedded in the hearts of every species that walks the face of this Earth.

17

Pedongi*
The Mule with the Heart of a Lion

"Victory walks on the shoulders of the unseen."
– Indian Military Ethos

On most days, *Pedongi* was just a brown hill mule.

She was born that way – on a damp hillside in Garhwal in the late 1950s, in a wooden shed that smelt of grass, wet earth, and smoke from her owner's *chulha*. The forest around her was loud with cicadas, mist clung to the pines, and she spent her first months doing what young mules do – kicking at nothing, chasing butterflies down slopes, and annoying older animals who were actually trying to graze.

The family that owned *Pedongi* watched her antics and laughed. They named her *Pedongi*, after a village higher up in the mountains. It was a good, earthy name, the sort you can shout across a hillside.

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*with inputs from Col Ajay Singh (Retd.)

They didn't know that one day that name would be read out on Rajpath in New Delhi.

From Village Slope to Army Lines

When *Pedongi* was older and strong enough, the family sold her – like many hill families did – to the Indian Army's Animal Transport (AT) wing. In those days, before every Himalayan road got widened and blacktopped, mules were not just useful – they were lifelines. A mule could go where a truck could not dream of going.

At the AT depot she met drill for the first time. No more walking where she pleased. No more chasing butterflies. Instead there were:

- ❏ Steep, narrow practice paths cut into hillsides.
- ❏ Loads strapped perfectly on either side – sacks of rice, boxes of ammunition, even disassembled mortars.
- ❏ Orders – clicked tongues, short whistles, rope signals.
- ❏ And a wiry Dogra NCO with sunburnt skin and laughing eyes: Havildar Maan Singh.

He was assigned as her handler, and he treated her exactly as he would a new recruit.

"*Pedongi!*" he'd call in the morning, rubbing her neck. "*Uth meri jaan, aaj kaun sa pahad fatne wala hai*?"

He would talk to her about his village near Kangra, about his children, about how his wife mixed too much water in the *dal*. And he would finish his *roti* and save the last warm piece for her. Bit by bit, a brown mule and a Dogra havildar became a team.

The 1962 Storm

By 1962 they were posted to the 853 Animal Transport Company and sent to the North-East, to the rugged, rain-soaked hills near the India-China border. October 1962 came in like a knife. The rain thinned and the cold rose from the valleys. At night, jawans' moustaches froze into little white spikes. Men walked with hunched shoulders. The hills, usually quiet at dusk, began to echo with distant gunfire.

China had attacked.

For the infantry holding tiny, scattered forward posts at places like *Walong*, the problem wasn't just the enemy – it was supply. There were no proper roads to many of these posts. Trucks and jeeps could only come up so far. After that, the job of feeding and arming the men fell on sure-footed, underfed, uncomplaining mules.

Mules like *Pedongi*.

That week the loads changed. No more rice sacks. No more blankets. Now the 853 AT Coy started strapping on 3-inch mortar shells – heavy, dull, deadly – and carried them up tracks that were barely walkable.

On one of those mornings, with mist still in the gullies and the river Lohit rumbling far below, Havildar Maan Singh checked *Pedongi's* load himself – two heavy crates of mortar ammunition, lashed tight. He patted her neck. "*Sun, ladki*," he murmured, cheek against her bristly face, "*aaj zara goli-bomb zyada leke jaana padega. Upar jo baithay hain na, unko bina iske raat nahin katni*." She snorted, as if to say, "*Theek hai*." And they started.

The Climb to Walong

The path to the forward post was a mean thing – a goat's idea of a road. On the left, a rock wall. On the right, nothing – just a drop into green nothingness where the river looked like a vein.

Loose shale rolled under *Pedongi's* hooves. Her breath came out in white puffs. Maan Singh walked slightly ahead, one hand on the halter, singing under his breath to keep the rhythm steady.

Then the mountain exploded. A burst of Chinese machine-gun fire raked the slope. Chips of rock flew. Tree trunks split. The sound came in hard, metallic waves that made even seasoned soldiers flinch.

Pedongi reared, eyes wide, ears twitching.

"Steady, *Pedongi!* Steady!" *Maan Singh* hissed, pulling her close to the cliff.

Another burst tore overhead. One round sliced the tip of her ear – just a grazing shot, but enough to make blood shine on her brown coat. She brayed once, loud, and angry.

Maan Singh's heart hammered. He knew: if she panicked now and slipped, the load would go, the mission would fail, and the post above would be left without mortar support. So he did the only thing he could – he made himself calmer than he felt.

"*Bas, bas, ladki. Goli tujhse darti hai, tu goli se nahi*."

Step-by-step they moved, sometimes on all four hooves, sometimes almost crawling. Above them, mortar bombs began to land – Chinese fire meant to cut off reinforcements. Each explosion sent a shock through the slope, knocking down snow and dust in powdery sheets. Men farther down the track shouted: "*Wapas jao! Aage bahut goli aa rahi hai*!"

Maan Singh shouted back, "*Upar ammunition nahin hai! Wapas kaise jaayein*?" So they went on.

For a moment *Pedongi* lost her footing; gravel slid under her, and her foreleg dangled terrifyingly over the edge. Maan Singh yanked the halter with every muscle he had, leaning backward, cursing, pleading.

"*Arre, meri maa, seedhi ho ja*!"

The mule groaned, scrambled, and found rock again. Then she did something only a mule with brains does – she paused, planted all four hooves firmly, and waited for the next explosion to pass before climbing the last stretch.

When they appeared over the last rise, into the little clearing where the Indian mortar detachment was lying low, the jawans there actually cheered.

"*Arre aa gayi! Pedongi aa gayi*!"

Hands came from all sides, unstrapping ammunition boxes, opening them in frantic haste. Within minutes the mortar tubes coughed back to life, sending Indian bombs whistling into Chinese positions. The enemy, who had assumed the post had run out of ammunition, was suddenly under fire again. A battle that might have been over by dusk was saved – because a mule and a havildar had refused to turn back.

That day wasn't the last. For three days, under sporadic shelling, in icy wind, *Pedongi* made trip after trip. Sometimes, the soldiers lined the path just to pat her as she passed, bandaged ear and all. Maan Singh grinned. "*Nahin, yeh fauj ki jawan hai*."

Another War, Another Front

You'd think that would be the end of her story, but *Pedongi* wasn't done. She stayed in service. And when 1971 came – another war, this time with Pakistan – she was on the move again, this time on the western front.

This was a different terrain – dusty, flat, thorny. But the job was the same: carry what the men need, where the trucks can't go.

One day, Pakistani fire came in low over an Indian animal transport column. Animals scattered – snorting, panicked. In the confusion, *Pedongi* and a few others were captured by Pakistani troops. The Pakistanis, being practical soldiers, didn't shoot the animals. They simply used them—loaded them with their own machine guns and ammunition and sent them towards their forward posts.

For several days *Pedongi* did the same work, but for the other side – plodding along dusty tracks with a load on her back. But then something happened that no one quite explains. Maybe she smelt her old unit. Maybe she heard familiar voices. Maybe she was just done working for strangers.

One day she simply walked across. Across the scrub, across the bewildered no-man's-land, across 15–20 kilometres, right back to the Indian side, carrying an enemy machine gun and loads of ammunition on her back.

Imagine the scene: Indian soldiers at a post see a lone brown mule, with Pakistani-marked loads, trotting in. Someone yelled: "*Arre, yeh toh…Arre, yeh Pedongi hai*!"

The men erupted. They ran to her, took off the enemy loads, checked her for wounds, and fed her. After a day's rest and some first aid to old scars, she was back at work—this time for her own. Even animals, it seems, know where they belong.

A Mule on Rajpath

By now, stories about a bullet-grazed, mountain-trained mule had spread beyond 853 AT Coy. They had reached Delhi, the newspapers, and the men in uniforms with lots of braids on their chests. A mule that had done ammunition runs under fire and then walked back from Pakistani captivity – well, that was a story India needed to hear.

So on 26 January 1963, when the Republic Day Parade rolled down Rajpath, audiences saw something they had never seen before.

After the marching contingents, after the tanks and guns, after the bands and the colour parties, came a brown mule, trotting calmly, ear scarred, harness gleaming. Beside her walked Havildar Maan Singh, ramrod straight, moustache bristling with pride.

The President of India, Dr. S. Radhakrishnan, smiled broadly. When *Pedongi* halted at the saluting base, he pinned a specially minted Vir Chakra on her harness. Cameras flashed. Newspapers the next day carried the photograph: a simple animal, head slightly bowed, wearing a gallantry medal as if it was the most natural thing in the world.

It was the first time an Indian Army mule had been so honoured. After years of service, *Pedongi* was retired to the Animal Transport Depot at Bareilly. She wasn't left to fend for herself. Her stall was cleaned daily. Fresh hay waited. Children of soldiers were brought to see her.

"This is *Pedongi*," the fathers would say. "She fought in the China war. She came back from Pakistan. *Medal-wali ghodi hai*."

When *Pedongi* finally grew old, back hollowed, steps slower, she was not forgotten. And when the day came that she lay down and did not get up, the depot did something it didn't do for ordinary animals.

A bugler sounded a short, clear tribute. Havildar Maan Singh, older now, hair silver, stood to attention and saluted. In his eyes was the wetness of a man remembering a comrade.

That's what the soldiers saw in her on that mountain track in 1962. That's what India applauded in 1963. And that's what young people should remember today: heroes don't always look like heroes. Sometimes they have big gentle eyes, a torn ear, and a medal on a leather harness. *Pedongi* the Mule did her duty, step by stubborn step. That was enough to make history.

18

Bahadur
The Bear who Bonded with Soldiers

"Compassion is also a form of courage."
– Indian Spiritual Thought

The Outpost Beyond the World

High in the wind-lashed Himalayas, where the mountains rise like silent Gods and the air tastes of ice, a handful of Indian soldiers were detailed to man a remote outpost high in the hills to keep an eye on enemy activity and infiltrators who might attempt to cross the border and indulge in terrorist activities in India. The men lived in arduous conditions. The weather was as dangerous an enemy as humans from across the border. Icy winds and freezing snowfalls placed an unimaginable stress and took a heavy toll of their bodies. Besides, there was always the danger of avalanches and raging blizzards.

As fluffy white snowflakes fell from the sky, the area was

constantly covered with a carpet of thick icy snow which made simple movement an arduous effort. Boots slithered and men slipped in the snow but the valiant men were not disheartened. They continued their patrolling the icy slopes with dedication and determination.

A deathly silence prevailed over the terrain. In such an atmosphere it is natural for the men to crave for company. It even led to brooding.

One night, company did arrive. The light patter of four furry feet followed by the sound of a smaller pair shattered the oppressive silence. A female Himalayan grizzly bear ambled towards the outpost. Her little cub (male) followed her.

The First Meeting

Initially, it was a standoff. The men stared in awe at the animals and the latter just stood a little distance away, presumably trying to gauge whether the men facing them were friends or foes. Somehow, positive natural instincts got the better of both the groups. They realised they would not fight each other. The men lowered their rifles and the animals shed their inborn animosity.

Realising that the bears were hungry and had wandered close to humans in search of food, the men placed leftover *chapattis*, rice, and a little *dal* for them to eat. That was all they had anyway. The mother approached the offering

cautiously and then sniffed at it trying to figure out whether it was eatable or not. When she started eating, the cub ran towards it, slipping, and tumbling in the snow.

That night became a memorable one. A bond of trust and friendship developed. The bears had discovered food; the men had found companionship

A nightly routine was established. The men looked forward to the arrival of their 'guests'. At first their visits were marked by caution and fear but gradually, both waned off. Food was kept every night for them. A warm intimate friendship was forged.

When the Cub became one of them

Six months later tragedy struck causing sorrow and consternation among the men. The mother bear just stopped coming. No one knew what had happened. All kinds of theories and guesses were put forward. Some believed that the bear had lost its way in the vast stretches of ice that stretched as far as the eye could see. Others felt she had been caught in a heavy snowstorm, had been buried under tons of ice and had given up the ghost. Yet others held that she had fallen victim to a wild animal superior to her.

However, there was a silver lining to the cloud of despondency that covered the outpost. Suddenly, the cub made an appearance but its condition was pitiable. It was scared, hungry and seemed to have lost its bearings.

He wanted to come near the post, but the dogs that the Army had kept there to sniff out explosives and warn about infiltrators barked furiously at him and chased him away. The frightened cub would run for its life and then return timidly and with fear. It desperately hoped for the intimacy that had developed and the food that was given to it regularly. Noticing that the cub was shaking and trembling at the sight of the dogs, the men put leashes on them and kept them tied up. The cub realised that the cause of its fear no longer existed and it walked up to the post, but still with wary and cautious steps.

The men stood motionless as the cub came near them. It sniffed at their boots, patted it and tried to allay its fear. One of them brought some *rotis* and offered them to it. Seeing it eating them as fast as it could, tears formed in the eyes of the men. It was obvious it had been hungry for quite some time. Now, it had come to stay.

They thought of giving it a name. As they belonged to Bahadur Company, they named it *Bahadur*, a name he would grow up with.

A Bear among Soldiers

Bahadur was not just a pet; he had become part of them, seemingly enjoying the camaraderie he found himself in. He mixed freely among them and was happy to be patted. He became a source of joy for the men in the dreary routine of the outpost.

He gambolled with them in all their activities. If they dug trenches, he would roll over playfully in the loose snow churned up by the digging. If the men were on guard duty, he would snuggle against them. When rations were delivered, he would stand on his hind legs and sniff it as if conducting an inspection.

If he had strayed and could not be seen, all the men had to do was to loudly shout his name. It would echo among the snow covered mountains. That was enough to being him running, in joy and happiness and his excitement showing plainly on his shaggy face.

In that bitterly cold atmosphere of the high Himalayas in which everyone was numbed by the terribly freezing cold, *Bahadur* brought a welcome warmth that penetrated to the cockles of their hearts. It brought them cheer.

The men's happiness was seen in the letters they wrote home. They would frequently describe his antics and say they had a friend in *Bahadur*, the bear who kept their morale high in the bleak terrain where they operated.

The Day he Disappeared

Disaster struck again when suddenly one day *Bahadur* disappeared. They searched for him, called out to him but he just did not make an appearance. He seemed to have vanished into thin air.

Time passed in the gloom of his disappearance. Days

turned into weeks, one after another but yet no sign of *Bahadur*. The men behaved as if they had lost someone dear. They missed his presence, his tricks, and his affection.

Again, the same kind of apprehensions and doubts began to arise. All sorts of explanations were given: he may have fallen in a crevasse, he might have strayed too far away and lost his way back, he may have... . Sentences remained incomplete not daring to fear the worst.

One day, the wireless crackled with a message. It had been sent from another post nearly a kilometre away – a post usually cut off in 60 feet of snow. At first, the wireless operator was dumbfounded at what he had heard. He ran breathlessly to his commander. Seeing him rushing in this manner, the men who were present followed him. They too were wonder-struck as they overheard the operator reporting to the officer: "Sir, the men at the other post have seen a bear stumbling around aimlessly with its head stuck in a tin can!" The men were swamped with an avalanche of mixed feelings of hope and despair. They concluded it had to be *Bahadur*. Who else would be roaming in those heights? But why was his head covered with a tin can?

The Company Commander was quick to react. He too was convinced that it had to be *Bahadur*. He ordered the men to get ready to leave. He was determined to rescue *Bahadur* from whatever misfortune he had got involved in and bring him back safely. The men too had the same

determination. Six men and the Commander trudged towards where *Bahadur* was reported to have been seen. They waded through heavy snow, their feet sinking with every step. Though it was a physical strain to lift one leg after another in such a condition, the fear of triggering an avalanche or falling into a snow drift was also uppermost in their minds. Yet they slogged ahead. After all, they were going to rescue their pet and constant companion – *Bahadur*. No one complained, no one lost hope.

The Cornice of Death

They reached the area – a deadly overhang of hardened snow known as a cornice. It looked solid, but was a trap; one wrong step could send hundreds of tons of snow hurtling down on them.

They peered around, their eyes desperately searching for *Bahadur*. Eventually, they located him. A tin can seemed to have stuck onto his head, preventing his vision. Unable to see, he staggered here and there, sometimes zigzagging, sometimes going around in circles. He had lost all sense of direction. He could have walked into a fatal disaster.

"*How do we reach him? The cornice will crumble*!"

The men were confused how to conduct the rescue. The danger of the cornice crumbling stared them in their faces. An idea cropped up. They decided to send the lightest among them to bring *Bahadur* to safety.

A young soldier volunteered. The others tied a rope around his waist to pull him back if danger threatened. He was given precise and detailed instructions how to bring *Bahadur* to safe ground.

His first step caused the cornice to shake, producing an ominous sound. It did not deter him. He slowly and carefully took a few steps. Then, a paralysing fear gripped him. He froze on the spot, unable to move any farther.

Every second seemed like an hour. In a knee-jerk reflex, the commander decided to go himself. He did not think of danger, he did not think of what the fateful consequences could be. All that mattered was that *Bahadur* had to be saved; also, his young volunteer.

He removed his jacket, and any equipment he would not need but would only add to his weight. Then he slowly dropped to his knees crawled forward with measured and slow movements taking care not to disturb the fragility of the cornice. He knew very well that one false move, one jerky movement would send him, and *Bahadur* hurtling to a sure icy death.

The Rescue

As he drew near *Bahadur*, the Commander whispered tender words of affection to him. The voice galvanised the suffering animal. He turned his head in the direction of the voice. He seemed to have realised that help was at hand.

Ignoring the creaking snow, the Commander, after several heart-wrenching moments, reached *Bahadur*. He gently tied the end of the rope he had dragged along with him around *Bahadur*. The other end was held by one of the men back on hard ground. The others joined in and slowly, though painfully and with their hearts in their mouths pulled back the Commander, the young soldier, and *Bahadur*.

Bahadur was in a really pitiable condition. Weak with days of starvation, he collapsed on the snow. His breathing was laboured, he was completely exhausted; he was safe, but unable to see – the tin was still fixed to his head.

The men began working to free him of it. Carefully, like a surgeon conducting a serious operation, they cut off pieces of the tin taking care they did not injure *Bahadur*. Ten minutes later, *Bahadur*'s head emerged. He blinked several times while his eyes adjusted to the bright light of the sun shining off the snow.

As he recognised the men around him, his expression took on one of gratitude. The men laughed as the tension they had lived through evaporated. One of them could not hold back tears of joy that flowed down his cheeks. They patted and stroked *Bahadur*.

The Bear who Became a Legend

After that day, *Bahadur* wasn't just a visitor. He was now the unofficial mascot of *Bahadur* Company. His daily routine

was the same as theirs. He waited for them to return from patrols. At mealtimes, he wandered playfully among them entertaining them with his monkey tricks and impishness. At other times, he would come bounding and frolicking as soon as his name was called out. In this and in various other ways, he kept the men delighted and happy. He had the habit of disappearing for hours and then returning, obviously pleased with himself.

His constant presence in the brutal and harsh terrain of the Himalayas always helped to lessen the tension and loneliness that the men endured. This was a kind of pleasure that not all soldiers in the solitary ambience of the Himalayas could boast of.

Why Bahadur Matters

In every story concerning the Army, there are numerous stories of unsung companions who bring gleefulness in a landscape that takes a great toll of humans – both physically and mentally. Strangely, this companionship is not restricted to humans; it includes mules, dogs, horses, goats, and even wild animals that have helped our soldiers on the borders overcome the loneliness that is part of their lives there.

Bahadur was one of them, and an exceptional one at that. He not only eased the aching loneliness of the brave soldiers but also taught them an important and precious lesson; that love can exist anywhere. It can be kindled and fostered in any situation.

Bahadur's companionship made them remember their own relationships back home, thousands of kilometres away. They remembered their children, their family, their friends, and their neighbours. They remembered the camaraderie that prevailed in their hometowns and villages and the happiness that it engendered in them. *Bahadur* the bear became the bridge that linked their patriotic duty with their family responsibilities.

Pawprints on Snow, Prints on Hearts

Over the years, *Bahadur* has not faded into oblivion. Many retired soldiers whom he frolicked with in the distant Himalayas claim that though they served there for three years, the most treasured memories revolve around *Bahadur*. They wonder whether he is still roaming on the mountains or lies buried under the snow he once played on.

However, he established one basic truth that will never die. He was not just an animal from the wild; he was a part of the unit. He was part of the brotherhood that exists among soldiers everywhere. And that brotherliness, akin to kinship, is pure and honest and can be shown by four-legged animals to two-legged humans too,