



# SOLDIERING

— A LIFE ON —

# THE EDGE



P S GOTHRA







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# Soldiering: A Life on the Edge

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# STRIKE 1

It was ten in the morning when Captain Bharat woke up with a start to the ring of the field telephone. He had been awake throughout the night, sitting out in an ambush until six in the morning. He had requested his buddy not to disturb him till noon.

The Captain hesitated to answer the phone at first, but the intensity of the ring of the field phone increased. Assuming something must be wrong, he reluctantly answered the phone.

The company operator in the exchange spoke frantically, “Saab, *hamari water party par ambush hua hai* (Sir, our party, which had gone to fetch water, has been ambushed).”

Captain Bharat mulled for a second before answering, “Tell the Company Havildar Major to prepare the Quick Reaction Team, I will be there in a moment.”

The Captain started to get ready and carried out a mental appreciation. He was sure the soldiers were probably ambushed at the Water Point itself. The Water Point was a kilometer towards the Battalion Headquarters. He was also sure that enemy commandos would try to get away by going down Chatri Nallah (Rivulet). In fact, this post was named Chatri Post due to its proximity to that nallah. The Line of Control was in the form of a semi-circle, approximately five hundred meters around the post.

Subedar Mani Singh reported that the Quick Reaction Team of twelve soldiers was ready for the operation. Captain Bharat quickly briefed the team about the situation and the plan of action. He ordered Subedar Mani Singh to remain at the post and fire the 2-inch mortar on the nominated targets where Chatri Nallah meets the Line of Control.



He also said, “Ring up the Commanding Officer and ask him for two things. Firstly, to bring down the 81mm mortar fire, on the same targets that are engaged by our company. Secondly, to send Ghatak Platoon (Commandos in a battalion) towards Water Point. Also, ask the Ghatak Platoon to contact me on the radio set when they reach Black Rock which is two hundred meters short of Water Point.”

Within ten minutes, Captain Bharat and his party reached the area of Water Point. Two young soldiers, Sepoy Velu and Sepoy Ramesh, were firing single shots haphazardly towards the nallah below. Captain Bharat asked them to stop firing and to explain to him what had happened.

A totally shaken Sepoy Velu said, “We came here to fetch water. Lance Havildar Sajjan asked us to be on guard. He, along with Sepoy Ashok, went down towards Water Point. The moment they reached Water Point, they came under heavy fire. After some time, Lance Havildar shouted and asked me to inform the company that they have been ambushed.”

Captain Bharat explained the situation to his men. He divided them into two teams, one under Havildar Jasbir and the other one under him and started cautiously approaching the Water Point from two directions. There was no firing heard from that side.

Soon, Havildar Jasbir’s voice cracked on the radio set, “Charlie two for Charlie one, I can see two bodies lying near the Water Point.”

“Charlie one for Charlie two, keep advancing cautiously towards Water Point,” replied Captain Bharat.

When they reached the Water Point, they could see the dead body of Lance Havildar Sajjan Singh and that of Sepoy Ashok. The head of Sepoy Ashok’s has been severed and taken away. They could see a blood trail moving down towards the nallah. Captain Bharat picked up the radio set and called.

“Charlie one for Tiger.”

“Tiger for Charlie one okay,” replied Commanding Officer’s operator.

“Charlie one, give set to Tiger.”

“Tiger listening, go ahead,” said Commanding Officer from the other side.

“Sir, I have reached the ambush site. I can see we have lost Lance Havildar Sajjan Singh and Sepoy Ashok, roger so far.”

“Roger.”

“The enemy has beheaded Sepoy Ashok and taken his head along with them.”

“Not clear, come again.”

“I say again, enemy has cut the head of Sepoy Ashok and taken it along.”

“Roger.”

“I can see a blood trail moving down the nallah. I am taking my party along to search in the nallah.”

“Be deliberate; you may enter another ambush.”

“Roger, Sir.”

“You will not, repeat, not cross the Line of Control.”

“Roger, Sir. Request stop mortar fire in nallah after five minutes.”

“Okay, I will ensure that; I am also reaching the Water Point in a few minutes.”

Captain Bharat further explained his plan to his team. They started following the blood trail and slowly advancing down the nallah. Four hundred meters down, they found Sepoy Ashok’s head.

Havildar Jasbir said, “Saab, I think they were trying to carry his head holding his hair. Because of his crew cut hair, they were probably unable to get a grip. Or maybe when we started mortar fire, they left his head for a faster exit.”

Captain Bharat felt a pang of pain seeing the head of his soldier who had joined the unit just two months ago.

In the meanwhile, Lance Naik Balbir who was ten meters below shouted, “Saab, I can see another blood trail here.”

Captain Bharat went down and after examining it said, “Yes, it seems one of the enemies is injured. He may have been injured in the firefight with Lance Havildar Sajjan and Sepoy Ashok. Let us follow the trail. We might find some enemy. It will be good to take revenge.”

He could see an affirmative look on the face of all his men. They carefully started descending towards the Line of Control. At the Line of Control, they could see the blood trail going across. He signalled everyone to stop.

Captain Bharat told everyone, “I feel if we chase the enemy into his area, we may catch him before he reaches his post because he has a casualty to carry. I am going ahead; it is not an obligation on any of you to come along. Anyone who doesn’t want to come can stay here.”

Without confirmation, he moved ahead. After a minute when he looked back, everyone was following him. He felt proud of his soldiers.



Colonel Rathore was just eight hundred meters away from Water Point when he had given the go-ahead to Captain Bharat to follow the enemy. He called out on his radio set.

“Tiger for Lion, over.” (Lion is code for Captain Kashyap, the Adjutant).

“Lion for Tiger, okay.”

“Tiger for Lion, stop the mortar fire after five minutes, as Charlie one will be approaching the target area.”

“Roger Sir, will stop mortar fire in five minutes.”

“Nothing else, out,” said Colonel Rathore and started moving towards the Water Point.

He shouted to the scout, “Water Point se apni party nale mein niche jaa rahi hai dhyan rakhna (Just watch out, our party has gone down towards



nallah from Water Point).”

They reached the Water Point in a few minutes to find some of their men guarding the dead bodies of the two soldiers. After closely inspecting, Colonel Rathore ordered that the bodies be covered up. He then talked to the Brigade Commander to very briefly inform him about the incident. He also informed the Adjutant to send stretchers and organise some ice. Then he asked his Second-in-Command to talk to him.

When Major Vineet, the Second-in-Command, came on air, Colonel Rathore instructed him, “Vineet, after one hour, bring down maximum mortar and machine-gun fire on enemy posts Chabutra, LP and Lone Hut. Maj Sandhu must be there in the Battalion Headquarters. Send him to Chatri Post. On the way, he should meet me.”

By the time he finished his call to Second-in-Command, the scout Sepoy Latif came to him and said, “Saab, our party has crossed Line of Control and can be seen below LP post of the enemy.”

Colonel Rathore asked his operator to get Captain Bharat on air. As soon as Captain Bharat came on air, Colonel Rathore shouted in the handset, “Bharat, you clot, I told you very clearly that you will not cross Line of Control. Roger so far, over.”

“Yes, Sir, you did tell me that,” replied Captain Bharat.

“Then what the hell are you doing below LP post?”

“Sir, I thought I would avenge the beheading of Ashok and cut ten heads of the enemy.”

“What sort of dumb-witted officer are you? Do you think they will not be alert? I order you to immediately withdraw and report to me at the Water Point in next fifteen minutes. Any doubts?”

“No doubt, Sir.”

They could see Captain Bharat’s party moving back.



When they crossed back the Line of Control, Captain Bharat shouted to the scout, “We will use the other side of nallah to move up, so that we can search the area on that side also, but be careful.”

The scout signalled ‘okay’ with his hand. They had moved up just sixty-five meters when the scout stopped. He signalled towards something hanging on the tree. It was a human leg, but there was no sign of the body. On examining the other trees, they could see human body parts on those too.

Havildar Jasbir came up to Captain Bharat and whispered in his ear, “Saab, it seems our 81mm mortar has blasted the enemy. It seems parts of one or two of their men have got scattered.”

“Let us search the area for any injured person, then we will collect these body parts,” said Captain Bharat.

“Saab, search, of course, but we should not take these body parts. Let them rot and get eaten by the birds and animals,” said Havildar Jasbir.

“It is not our culture to desecrate the dead, so do as I say and start the search.”

After half an hour, they inferred from the inspection of the body parts that only one person was blown to pieces. They took out four turkey towels from their sacks and packed these parts to carry the load.

Captain Bharat instructed, “All those carrying body parts have awkward loads, so they should move in the middle as it can take them some time to shed the load and come to action.”

Just as they were about to move, they could hear Colonel Rathore asking for Captain Bharat.

“Tiger for Charlie one, over.”

“Charlie one for Tiger, okay.”

“Where the hell are you? I hope you are not upto some other act of

foolishness.”

“Negative, Sir.”

“Then what is taking you so long.”

“Sir, we are on our way up, we had taken a different route. Just a few meters short of Line of Control, we found some human body parts. Roger so far.”

“Okay.”

“It appears one enemy soldier was blown off in our mortar fire. We have collected his body parts and are bringing them up. Roger so far.”

“Okay.”

“We have also found the head of Sepoy Ashok. Nothing else from my side.”

“Now do hurry up as some offensive action is underway, out.”

Captain Bharat and his party hurriedly started moving upward.



Colonel Rathore called for his Second-in-Command and said, “Regarding the opening of mortar fire, delay it by two hours, roger so far, over.”

“Roger,” said Second-in-Command.

“I hope as per procedure, you have informed everyone to be under overhead protection.”

“Yes, Sir. I have passed the instructions.”

“Also inform the Brigade Headquarters and other units about our plan to fire on the enemy as in the retaliatory fire their personnel may come under barrage.”

“Will comply (Wilco).”

“Do the paperwork for post-mortem, embalming and FIR of our Sajjan and



Ashok. Anything from your side?”

“Sir, the brigade has ordered a court of inquiry. Major Tyagi, the Presiding officer, along with two other officers, will reach the unit in another three hours. Major Tyagi asked me to check with you if he can go to the Chatri Post today to inquire.”

“Arrange for their accommodation. Tonight, they will stay at the Battalion Headquarters only. I will get Captain Bharat, Sepoy Velu and Sepoy Ramesh along. He can record their statements today and then tomorrow morning, they can go to Chatri Post.”

“Roger Sir.”

Colonel Rathore wondered what the condition of the kith and kin of Sepoy Ashok would be when they saw his mutilated body. What type of political hue and cry would people make? He decided that the bodies of both his soldiers would not be sent home. He would call the kith and kin here, and he would pay for their airfare. He also thought for a while about his plan of action to sort out the enemy. Colonel Rathore also wondered what Brigadier Sharma the Brigade Commander’s reaction would be when he spoke to him.

The brigade exchange was already trying to connect him to Brigadier Sharma, but he was avoiding it on the pretext that he was not able to hear their voices clearly. He decided that he would talk to Brigadier Sharma on the arrival of Captain Bharat.

When Captain Bharat reached with his party, he found his Commanding Officer, Colonel Rathore, talking to someone on the radio set. From the body language of the Commanding Officer, one could guess that someone was bullshitting Colonel Rathore. As soon as the call got over, Colonel Rathore turned to Captain Bharat, who was surprised by the calmness of Colonel Rathore. Maybe he was going by the *fauji* (army) dictum to not scold an officer in front of his subordinates.

“Well, Bharat, good response and presence of mind, but I also would like to

caution you about your over-exuberance,” said Colonel Rathore.

“Sir, actually...” started Captain Bharat.

Colonel Rathore interjected, “Don’t try to cover up your mistakes; I am not going to buy any of it.”

“Yes, Sir.”

“Immediately organise the move of the mortal remains of Sepoy Ashok, Lance Havildar Sajjan and the enemy soldier to the Battalion Headquarters. You, along with Sepoy Ramesh and Velu, will also go to the Battalion Headquarters to give your statement for the court of inquiry instituted to investigate today’s incident.”

Captain Bharat only said, “Yes, Sir,” but he felt bad that an inquiry had been instituted. One feels like a criminal when questioned.

As he was about to move, Major Sandhu reached the spot and saluted Colonel Rathore to say, “Good morning, Sir.”

“Okay, Sandhu, you have come. I want you to go to Chatri Post, organise everything,” said Colonel Rathore.

“I will, Sir,” replied Major Sandhu.

“You have to be quick. We will soon be firing heavy weapons on enemy posts, so I want your men to be under overhead protection so that we do not get casualties in retaliatory fire,” added Colonel Rathore.

Captain Bharat was surprised to hear Major Sandhu’s response to Colonel Rathore, “Sir, why should we fire heavy weapons on the enemy now?”

Colonel Rathore controlled his anger and said, “We want to punish the enemy.”

“But the enemies will be hiding under their shelters, our bombardment will not punish but amuse them,” insisted Sandhu.

“I don’t know; it will boost the morale of our soldiers. We may get a direct hit on the enemy bunker which could probably kill them,” said Colonel

Rathore.

“Sir, that is bad planning. Besides, in the counter bombardment, we may also get directly hit and suffer a casualty,” suggested Sandhu.

“You are teaching your Commanding Officer?”

“No, Sir. I am just suggesting. There are better solutions like sniping at the enemy or firing at them when they get exposed to fetch water or while moving to the rear,” said Sandhu.

Colonel Rathore then remembered that when he came back from leave two months ago, Second-in-Command had informed him that Sandhu had made a plan to inflict casualties on the enemy without crossing the border.

He told Sandhu, “You reach Chatri Post and discuss the other options with me on the telephone.”

Both the parties left for their respective locations. Captain Bharat had developed a sort of respect for Major Sandhu for uprightly speaking out to the Commanding Officer. He also realised soldiering was a lot of brains and not just muscle power.

On reaching the Battalion Headquarters, Col Rathore talked to Major Sandhu, who had been able to convince the Commanding Officer with his plan. The Commanding Officer called the Adjutant and Second-in-Command to his office.

As soon as they entered, he said, “Call off our plan to fire heavy weapons.”

“But Sir...”

The Commanding Officer interjected and said, “Do as I say. Sandhu seems to have a good plan. He says by tomorrow evening, he will be able to kill at least four enemy soldiers.”

“Yes, Sir,” said Second-in-Command.

“Also talk to Sandhu and provide him all the assistance, let’s wait and watch what he is able to do.”



Second-in-Command and Adjutant saluted him and walked out of the Commanding Officer's office. The Commanding Officer got busy sorting out other things. It was already three in the morning. He felt he should call it a day, but the phone rang. The operator in exchange informed him that Major Sandhu wanted to talk to him.

"Yes, Sandhu, what is it?"

"Sir, congratulations, we brought accurate fire of two automatic grenade launchers on the enemy's water fetching parties," Sandhu paused for a second.

"Go on, Sandhu," said Commanding Officer.

"Sir, we just used three grenades each at two places. At one place, three of their soldiers died, and at the other, two soldiers got killed. In addition, many of their soldiers have got injured," said Sandhu.

"Come on, Sandhu, you are talking as if you have taken a head count of the enemy casualty," said Commanding Officer in a fit of anger.

"Sir, I had alerted the radio interception parties; they have provided me this information. I have got recordings of the enemy's conversations also."

Commanding Officer paused for a second and then said, "I want to listen to those conversations."

For the next ten minutes, the Commanding Officer listened to the audio recordings. He was convinced that five of enemy soldiers had been killed.

He picked up the phone and told the Adjutant, "Ask everyone to be under overhead protection. Ask all the post commanders to be careful. They will personally check the alertness of sentries every hour."

"Right, Sir."

"Tell them that we have been able to kill five enemy soldiers, so we should be ready for enemy retaliation any time."

He dropped the phone on the cradle to pick it up again and dialled the Brigade Commander.

As soon as the Commander came online, he said, “We have been able to avenge the injury inflicted on us by the enemy.”

“How is that, Rathore?” asked Brigadier Sharma.

“Sir, my boys have effectively fired on the enemy and killed five of his soldiers.”

“Rathore, I made it clear to you, my idea of revenge is to cause similar pain to the enemy, if not more than what we have suffered from losing Sep Ashok. You still have seven days. Have I made myself clear?” asked Brigadier Sharma.

“Yes, Sir,” said Col Rathore thinking there was no point in arguing.



## STRIKE 2

Captain Bharat was sitting on a chair in the bunker, where the mortal remains of the martyrs were kept. Besides the guard, he was the officer on duty, and the Adjutant had told him to sit in the bunker for at least four hours. A number of incense sticks were glowing incessantly, and the aroma of these was becoming offensive to his nostrils, but he had to put up with it. A pain hit his heart when he remembered his last conversation with Sepoy Ashok three days ago.

“Saab, *agle mahine chhutti jana hai* (Saab, I want to go on leave during the next month),” said Sepoy Ashok.

“Okay, Ashok, no problem, very few people go on leave at this time of the year.”

“Saab, I have to undergo coaching for the interview to become an army officer.”

“Good, you are looking forward to becoming an officer.”

“I had cleared the written test last year but failed in the interview.”

“I don’t know myself what they look for in the interview. When I appeared for it, I was sure I would not make it, but I got selected. There were some very embarrassing questions. I just answered them truthfully and honestly.”

“Saab, my girlfriend is already undergoing training to become a Nursing Officer, so I must become an officer.”

But destiny had something else in store for him. It was three thirty in the morning, and Bharat had to sit here for one and half hours more. He could hear some commotion.

Another officer came in. He said, “Colonel Rathore has asked me to replace

you. You have to meet the Commanding Officer along with the Adjutant.”

“I will, Sir, but when?”

“Now. Go to the Adjutant’s office, he is waiting for you.”

“But Sir, Commanding Officer must be sleeping.”

“No, Commanding Officers can never sleep, so go ahead.”

Captain Bharat was about to enter Adjutant’s office when he saw him coming out.

He said, “Bharat, let’s go to the Commanding Officer.”

The Commanding Officer was sipping his brandy and pensively sitting in his rocking chair when they wished him.

“Good morning, Sir.”

“Come, Bharat and Kashyap, sit down, will you have a drink?”

“No Sir,” they both said in unison.

“We have a task at hand, the Brigade Commander wants us to give a befitting reply to the enemy’s misadventure of beheading our soldier,” said Colonel Rathore.

“I will do it, Sir,” said Captain Bharat instinctively.

“I know you will do it, but it requires a lot of preparation, I don’t want any let-down.”

“Sir, I will make sure it is a success.”

“You have four days to carry out reconnaissance, take the best boys of Ghatak Platoon along and brief me about your plan from a vantage point.”

“I will, Sir.”

“Kashyap, give him all the resources required and keep me in the picture, good night.”

Commanding Officer made sure that the conversation didn’t continue any



further.



For the next couple of days, Captain Bharat, along with Havildar Reddy and Naik Thapa observed all the targets. A raid inside the enemy territory requires very careful planning. The trio sat for long hours in the bunker and observed the routine at the enemy post. They discussed all kinds of details for this operation.

Thapa brought up one of his concerns, “Saab, you and Reddy *ustad* (colloquially used for senior/instructor) put on so much perfume and powder that enemy will smell us from a mile.”

“Thapa, don’t worry. On the day of our mission, Reddy and I will take a good shower, and not put on any perfume after that,” assured Bharat.

“And Saab, no scented soap. Or hair oil,” added Thapa.

Reddy thought that Thapa took too many digs at them. He had to get back at Thapa. He complained, “Saab, we made a mistake in taking Thapa along. In case we get injured, he will leave us there. Both of us weigh at least twenty-one kilos more than him. We should have chosen someone our size and weight.”

“Your concern is right, Reddy. I chose him because he moves like a cheetah in the jungle. He is excellent in field and battle craft,” said Bharat defending Thapa.

“By the way, Thapa, what do you have to say about the weight difference?” asked Bharat.

“Saab, that is no problem. In the Commando course, my buddy weighed fifty-five kilos, whereas my weight was just forty-seven kilos. I was able to carry him without any problem,” assured Thapa.

“But Thapa, I am sixty-nine kilos, and Saab, maybe a kilo less. How will you manage to carry any of us?” said Reddy. This was not a dig. Just an honest question.

“Don’t worry, ustad. If need be, I will cut one or two of your limbs, but I will bring you back alive,” replied Thapa. They all had a hearty laugh.

“Don’t cut my arms. My wife loves my biceps. You can cut my legs. You know Shanti agreed to get married to me after I showed her my biceps,” said Reddy.

“You must be joking, Reddy?” said Bharat.

“No, Saab. We used to study in the same school. I started liking her. When I proposed to her, she plainly said she is going to get married to a soldier only. When I asked her why, she replied that soldiers are good at heart, masculine and are smart to look at,” said Reddy.

“So you joined the army because of that?” enquired Bharat.

“Yes, Saab. But getting into the army was difficult. The physical tests for entry are very tough. I was a chubby boy with a lot of baby fat all around my body. I started working out. It took me four months to get into shape. After I got into shape, I decided to remain that way,” replied Reddy.

Bharat could see that Reddy had a V-shaped body with big biceps. With his tall frame, crew cut hair and dark complexion, he really looked smart.

He turned to Thapa and asked, “Are you also married?”

“No. I have the responsibility of two sisters and a younger brother. I lost my father long ago. Therefore, I must take care of my siblings’ education. I will get married after they are settled.”

“What are they studying?”

“Both my sisters are pursuing MBBS, and my brother is in the tenth standard,” said Thapa.

“That must be costing a lot? How do you manage?” asked Bharat.

“All from my salary. In fact, to supplement it, I had volunteered and had a tenure at Siachen. I rarely spend on luxuries. In fact, I also volunteered for Para Commandos, but I was not taken in after the probation. The selectors

had the same apprehensions as Reddy *ustad* that I may not be able to carry my injured buddy.”

Reddy asked Bharat about his love life. Bharat told them about Anjali and her parents’ objections as Bharat belonged to a different faith and religion.

After observing the targets, they decided to raid the listening post of the enemy’s Tekri Post. They established that four men occupied this listening post, approximately four hundred meters away from the main post after dusk every day. They would stay alert until one in the night and then they would start moving back in a disorganised manner. The plan was to go and sit in that listening post an hour after it was vacated by the enemy soldiers and ambush them the next day when they came to occupy the post. For this, they would also use claymore mines (a directional mine, which throws out many shrapnel on its victim). It would reduce the requirement of firing small arms. As soon as the work was done, they would extricate themselves.



On the fourth day, the Commanding Officer heard the plan and saw the recordings of enemy activities that were recorded from a thermal sight. He communicated his two major observations.

“Bharat, you have not told me how many dogs are there on the enemy post?”

“Sir, we could see four dogs roaming around.”

“Are these dogs following the party which comes out?”

“Sometimes, Sir.”

“So if these dogs are moving ahead of these patrols, they can give away your position.”

“Sir, we will kill them with the silencer-fitted weapon.”

“That would still make some noise. I suggest you take some mincemeat, lace it with heavy sedatives, put it in a packet and throw it near the enemy

post at around last light.”

“Right, Sir.”

“Now, about your exfiltration. You have planned to come back straight. I don’t think it is prudent. If you could inflict casualties on the enemy by firing mortar on their assessed escape route in Chatri Nallah, what stops him from doing the same? I suggest you select a hiding place behind the enemy post and stay there the whole of the next day. And return the next night.”

“Sir, in case they start searching their own area to find us?”

“In that case, we will start engaging their posts with heavy weapons so that they do not move out of their overhead protection.”

When Bharat and his party nodded their head to acknowledge, the Commanding Officer asked, “Do you need more people with you?”

“No, Sir. Havildar Reddy and Naik Thapa are sufficient. I do not want to give out a bigger signature.”

“Okay, then best of luck, you use the radio only in case of an emergency. Second-in-Command will be here. He will keep a watch on you and the enemy. In case he and his party sense some danger, he will inform you using the signals agreed upon.”

“Right, Sir.”

“And last thing, Bharat, Reddy and Thapa, at any point, if you feel there is a chance of your getting captured or losing your life in the enemy territory, you are at liberty to abort the mission. Because in such a contingency, the nation will have to do a lot of explaining to get you or get your body back. Is it clear to you all?”

“We understand that, Sir,” said Bharat, Reddy and Thapa in unison.

Colonel Rathore felt very proud of his men. A detail that he kept to himself was that he had planned for a company under Major Sandhu to be prepared to launch a full-fledged attack and get his men back, dead or alive, in case such



a contingency occurred.



On Friday afternoon, Bharat, Reddy and Thapa spoke to all their family members for more than two hours. They ensured that their families did not get even the slightest idea about their impending task from their conversations.

At eleven in the night, they all went to the *Sarva Dharm Sthal* (common prayer hall for all religions) to pray for the success of their mission. They started from their post one hour after midnight and reached three hundred meters short of their target by half past three. Now, they kept waiting for the Second-in-Command to give them the torch signal.

After about forty-five minutes, Havildar Reddy whispered, “Saab, our post has given the signal that the enemy has vacated the listening post and has reached Tekri Post.”

“Now we will occupy the listening post,” ordered Bharat.

In next fifteen minutes, they crawled up close to the listening post. Ten meters short of the listening post, Captain Bharat whispered to Havildar Reddy, “Both of you stay here, I will move up and check, then I will give out the signal (bird call), and you can move in.”

By quarter past five in the morning, they were in the listening post and started working. By daylight, they had dug a three-feet-long burrow. They placed a speaker with the recorded sound of a chicken at the base of the burrow. In the trial, they found it was functioning perfectly. Simultaneously, Captain Bharat fixed two claymore mines on two trees to suitably target whoever was around the opening of the burrow. Using the dry leaves, they camouflaged the burrow and the mines. It was a long wait thereafter. From this point, they could even watch the enemy activities in the post.



At daybreak, Havildar Major Imtiaz of Tekri Post reported to Officiating

Company Commander Subedar Junaid.

“Saab, sentry near the toilets reported that early in the morning, the enemy was showing a red light.”

“Imtiaz, when we object to each other’s construction activity, we show the red flag. Why is he showing a red light? Keep a watch. During the day, he may raise some red flag. Are we carrying out any construction within five hundred meters of the Line of Control?”

“No, Sir. The only construction going on here is the mule shed, which is a hundred meters behind this post. It is certainly more than a thousand meters away from the Line of Control.”

“Maybe it is a signal meant to convey something to civilians on our side who work as their sources (spies).”

“Could be.”

“So tell all sentries to be careful and to watch out for any movement from our own side.”

“Yes, Saab.”

“Today in the evening, you will go with the listening post party. The other Havildars are complaining that you never move out of the post. Also look out if any civilian moves towards the enemy side.”

“Yes, Saab.”

At six in the evening, Havildar Major Imtiaz collected his other three men and briefed them about the task they had to perform at the listening post. They left for the listening post after twenty minutes. Sepoy Amjad was the scout. As a drill, they stopped short of the post and deployed themselves. Sepoy Amjad went ahead to check the bunker. He did not find anything amiss. He attached the telephone instrument to the terminal of wire already laid and signalled for everyone to move in.

At fifteen past ten, the telephone rang up. It was immediately picked up by

Havildar Major Imtiaz.

“Hello.”

“Ustad, the enemy soldiers are again flashing the red light. Company Commander asked you people to be careful,” said the company exchange operator from the other side.

“Don’t worry, we are alert.”

Just then, they heard a sound as if a chicken was being strangled.

Sepoy Sayed said, “*Ustad, lagta hai kisi janwar ne jungli murga pakad liya hai* (It appears some animal has caught a jungle fowl).”

“Don’t worry about the chicken, be alert.”

Again, they heard the same sound.

Havildar Major Imtiaz instructed, “Naik Abdul and Amjad, just go and have a look.”

Abdul and Amjad went down to take a look. When the chicken noise was heard again, Naik Abdul shouted, “Ustad, it seems some animal has dragged a chicken into a burrow.”

Within two minutes, Havildar Major Imtiaz and Sepoy Sayed joined them.

Havildar Major Imtiaz said, “I have brought a bigger torch, just have a look.”

Just when Naik Abdul and Sepoy Sayed knelt to have a closer look in the burrow and Imtiaz and Amjad stood nearby, two loud explosions occurred. Naik Abdul, Sayed and Amjad died instantaneously, and Imtiaz was very badly injured.

Bharat and his party moved closer and observed. After seeing no signs of life, they closed in to see four bodies. Bharat asked Thapa to cut their heads and pack them in their rucksacks. Thapa took out his Khukhri, and as he was about to sever the head of the first enemy soldier, he heard him faintly crying for water.

“Saab, *yeh to jinda hai aur paani maang raha hai* (Saab, he is alive and asking for water).”

Havildar Reddy said, “Do your work.”

But Bharat stopped him, “*Ruk jao* (Stop)! We will not cut any head.”

He took out his water bottle and gave water to Imtiaz.

Naik Thapa said, “We have orders to take their heads along.”

Captain Bharat said, “Don’t worry, now I am the Commander on ground, and I have decided not to do so. Reddy, take out our device from the burrow. We will start in the next two minutes, we will reach our location in ten minutes.”

Captain Bharat knelt to see any sign of a pulse on the other three soldiers; they were all dead. He clicked their photos and collected all their weapons, leaving the magazines and ammunition.

Within a minute, they started moving down, but after fifty meters of descent, changed direction to move towards the nominated hideout behind the enemy post. After five minutes, Bharat could see hundreds of mortar bombs raining on the route that they had initially planned to follow.

The next eighteen hours were a long wait. Besides the danger of the enemy finding their hideout, Bharat also had to put up with the contempt in the eyes of Reddy and Thapa.

The next night, they reached Chatri Post at half past midnight. The Brigade Commander and the Commanding Officer were at the post to receive them.

After checking his party for any problems, Bharat gave a report to the Commanding Officer, “All okay Sir, request permission to break off.”

“Break off, Thapa and Reddy. You come with recoveries to Company Commander’s bunker, Brigade Commander is waiting there,” replied the Commanding Officer.

Taking the recovered weapons and his camera, Bharat moved to the

Company Commander's bunker. As soon as he entered, Brigade Commander welcomed him in a loud voice, "Good youngster, how many enemies killed?"

"Sir, three killed and one injured."

"Where are my trophies?"

Bharat started displaying the weapons.

"These are weapons, where are the heads of those three bastards?" asked Brigadier Sharma.

"Sir, I have not brought the heads; I didn't feel like mutilating the bodies of the enemy soldiers."

"Was it because your team members refused?"

"No, Sir, it was my decision."

"I don't believe you killed anyone. You chicken-hearted youngster."

"Sir, I have got the picture of the dead bodies; you can't doubt my integrity."

"Rathore, I don't want to see this chicken-hearted officer. Take him away."

Colonel Rathore immediately nudged Bharat out of the room and told him, "Go and have your tea in the *langar* (dining hall). I will meet you after an hour."

Bharat felt very dejected, but he was happy too. He had taken a stand for the right cause.

After two hours, Colonel Rathore reached the langar. Bharat along with Reddy and Thapa were waiting for him. He hugged each of them and conveyed his appreciation.

He also said, "Don't worry about the Commander, I will handle him. Tomorrow, all three of you will be granted two months' leave, you had a tough time, get over it in the next two months."

The next morning, the convoy dropped them at the airport. On the Indian

Airlines flight, two men sitting next to Captain Bharat were talking loudly.

“Our enemy has accused that our soldiers have crossed over and killed three of their soldiers and injured one critically.”

“Our soldiers have done a great job. It is a befitting reply to the beheading of our soldier and years of abetting terrorism in our territories.”

“Yes, it really requires nerves of steel to go into the enemy area and kill them.”

Bharat felt too sleepy to claim the credit; he also remembered the Official Secret Act, which he had to read and sign every year. He reminded himself not to say anything about the incident to his parents or even Anjali. He went off to sleep dreaming about Anjali.





## STRIKE 3

“Good evening, Sir, I am back from leave,” said Captain Bharat when he entered the Adjutant’s office.

“Good, Bharat, how was the leave? Any progress on your marriage?” asked Adjutant.

“Negative, Sir, her parents are still against inter-religion marriage,” replied Bharat.

“Don’t worry; you will win someday. Well, the Commanding Officer is calling for you,” said Adjutant and then informed Commanding Officer on the intercom, “Sir, Bharat is here, I am sending him to you.”

“Okay, you can go and meet him.”

“But Sir, I am still in the civil dress. I hope he doesn’t mind it.”

“Bharat, you are his favourite officer, you can get away with anything.”

“Thank you, Sir,” said Bharat and moved out.

Before he could say anything, the Commanding Officer got up from his chair and hugged Bharat to say, “How are you, Bharat? I hope you have got de-stressed on your long leave?”

“Sir,” Bharat was very terse in his reply.

“Okay, now I have a special task for you.”

“I will do it, Sir.”

“It has a great personal risk, and I have chosen you for your good hand-to-hand combat skills and your dexterity with a pistol.”

“That I do have, Sir.”

It is like this. One of our sources has contacted an infiltration launchpad

Commander of terrorists across the Line of Control. The launchpad Commander is ready to work for us. To that end, he wants an officer to meet him at the Line of Control.

“Sir, do you want me to meet this launch Commander of the terrorists?”

“Yes, you are right, but you will have to go there alone without any of our soldiers. Iqbal, the guide who also works as our source, has assured me that there will not be any harm to you.”

“When do I have to go, Sir?”

“Tomorrow night, you will start from Madhuri Post and go down to appointed place on the Line of Control.”

“We can always talk to this launch Commander on the mobile phone, Sir. I am not saying that I don’t want to go, but this sort of arrangement doesn’t sound right.”

“Bharat, I also feel there is a great risk, but our unit is moving out of the field area in the next four months. We have already killed seventeen terrorists trying to infiltrate. If we kill five more terrorists, we will be the only unit in this sector that has eliminated more than twenty terrorists. I don’t think any other unit will be able to match that score in the future either. This launch Commander is ready to send five terrorists whom we can kill.”

“That is pure murder, Sir.”

“In case you feel you can’t do it, I can assign the task to another officer.”

“No Sir, I will do the task. But tell me if this launchpad Commander asks for some money, how much can I promise him?”

“As per the guide, there is no money required to be paid.”

“I do not understand this bargain at all, Sir. A launchpad Commander of terrorists is ready to get his terrorists killed without any gratification.”

“No, the guide says whatever money we recover from the terrorists will be shared by him and the launch Commander.”

Bharat could now understand the motives of his Commanding Officer, the guide and the launchpad Commander.



The next night, Bharat went up to Madhuri Post along with Iqbal, the guide. The Company Commander at this post was Major Alam, who was already briefed about this meeting. They started watching the area in front of the post. At half past eleven, they saw a man from the village on the enemy side coming down towards the Rendezvous (RV) Point. Major Alam had installed three night-surveillance devices to watch the area of the RV. At fifteen minutes past midnight, the launch Commander sent out a signal by showing the light of a muffled torch. Major Alam took another ten minutes to ensure that there was no other enemy soldier hiding and only then allowed Captain Bharat and Iqbal to move.

He also warned Iqbal, “It will be very bad for you if anything happens to Bharat Saab.”

“*Kasam, Saab, meri guarantee hai kuchh nahin hoga* (I swear, nothing will happen. This is my guarantee),” assured Iqbal.

Bharat once again touched and checked his pistol tucked into his jacket, before starting on the mission. Iqbal knew the route through the minefield. He walked very confidently. Bharat made a mental note to tell the Commanding Officer that the minefields must be resuscitated. If a civilian can go through, so can the terrorists.

In twenty-five minutes, they reached the RV. Iqbal gave out a bird call, which was responded to by another bird call from the launchpad Commander. Within five minutes, all three were sitting on a big rock. Bharat’s anxiety levels decreased once he met the launchpad Commander. The launchpad Commander started the talking, “Saab, my name is Bilal Sheikh. I have been appointed as Lashkar’s launchpad Commander for last one year. We will talk in a very straightforward manner here.”

“I assure you, I will do the same,” said Bharat.

“First of all, let us come down to the purpose of our meeting.”

“Yes, we should hurry up,” said Bharat.

“Saab, I will give you five militants. They will cross over from this route, guided by Iqbal.”

“Okay, what do you want in return?”

“Nothing, it is a gift from my side, but I have called you here because I want an assurance from an officer that all of them will be killed.”

“How can I do that? What if someone wants to surrender?”

“We will indoctrinate them so much that they will not surrender, but even if they do, you have to kill them all.”

“You are a terrorist yourself, and you want other terrorists to be killed?”

“Our politicians have sold the whole country so what, if I give you five terrorists. But, if anyone survives, he may expose Iqbal and me.”

Though little confused and not convinced, Captain Bharat assured him that it would be done as per his will. In the next few minutes, they decided the route, date and place where those five terrorists would be infiltrated and then killed.

As they were about to part, Bilal spoke to Captain Bharat again, “Saab, I require your assurance on one other thing. Whatever money is found on the person of the militants, you will give it to Iqbal. Iqbal and I will share it fifty-fifty.”

Bharat just nodded; he was disgusted and didn't want to talk to this filthy person anymore.

They started moving back to their respective locations. Bharat made out from Iqbal's silhouette that there was something heavy in his pocket. He realised that while he was talking to Bilal, Iqbal had picked up something, which he was now carrying in his pocket. He reminded himself to check

Iqbal's pockets as soon they reached Madhuri Post. But when they were just hundred meters from Madhuri Post, Iqbal requested, "Saab, I will beg leave. I will take a shortcut to my village from here."

Captain Bharat insisted on him coming to the post, which Iqbal agreed to reluctantly. As soon as they entered the post, Bharat asked the sentry to frisk Iqbal. Sure enough, they found a packet of drugs on him. After a couple of slaps, Bharat left him but handed over the drugs to the Madhuri Post Commander. He was sure there would not be any terrorist sent; it was all a ploy to smuggle in drugs.

The next day, Bharat went to Commanding Officer to narrate the whole story. Commanding Officer called for Iqbal who had already reached the Battalion Headquarters.

"You tried to fool the army and smuggle drugs right under our nose," thundered the Commanding Officer as soon as Iqbal entered.

"I am sorry, Saab. I will not do it again."

"Okay Bharat, get that packet of drugs, let us mix it with mud and destroy it, we cannot give it to the police as we can also be accused of abetting a crime."

Bharat went out and got the packet of drugs that had been given to the Adjutant for safekeeping. When he entered the room again, he heard Iqbal saying, "Saab, this packet is worth lakhs, please don't destroy it. I assure you that you will get the terrorists."

It appeared that he had hit the right chord. The destruction of drugs was put off. It was decided that the packet would be given to him only after the terrorists were killed. On the appointed night, Bharat and the Ghatak Platoon were asked to ambush the terrorists, as decided, in conjunction with Iqbal.

At the previously identified open place and time, Iqbal asked the terrorists to lie down flat on the ground, as he claimed that he felt something was wrong. Bharat and his party were looking at them through their weapon night

sights. They could see the terrorists with weapons. The terrorists followed Iqbal's instructions. Iqbal went fifty meters ahead and jumped into the ditch dug for his protection. It is then that Bharat signalled for everyone to open aimed fire at the terrorists. After about five minutes, Bharat called his troops to cease fire.

Bharat and his party waited for ten minutes to observe the terrorists for any sign of life. Seeing no movement, they closed in to find four terrorists dead and one still alive, but with his right hand and left foot seriously injured. His rifle lay nearby, but he showed no inclination to pick it up and fire.

Bharat ordered first aid for him and called the Commanding Officer to report, "Sir, four terrorists killed, one caught alive but badly injured."

There was a silence on the other side. Then the Commanding Officer replied, "You had promised something to the launchpad Commander, are you not going to fulfil that?"

"Negative, Sir, if he promises something and starts peddling drugs, he doesn't deserve sincerity."

"Okay then, I will send the porters in the morning; get the dead bodies and the injured terrorist here."

By this time, Iqbal had joined the party.

He took Bharat aside and said, "Please kill him."

"Why?" said Bharat.

"Because you promised," said Iqbal.

"Why are you so interested in that, you can carry the money. It is four lakhs."

"No Saab, the launchpad Commander has already shown fourteen lakhs as the money sent with these boys. If this terrorist remains alive, he will spill the beans."

"I don't care," said Bharat and moved on to see the injured terrorist.



The Nursing Assistant had given the injured terrorist painkillers and tied up his wounds. He was in his senses.

Bharat sat next to him and asked, “What is your name?”

“I am Abu Qital.”

“Which Tanzeem (organisation)?”

“Lashkar.”

You belong to which place?

“Jalalpur.”

“Others, are they from the same place?”

“Yes, nearby.”

“Where were you trained?”

“Ilaqa Gair.”

“What is your age?”

“Fifteen and a half years.”

“Why have you become a terrorist?”

“To achieve martyrdom.”

“Do you smoke cigarette?”

“Yes.”

“Would you like to have a smoke now?”

“Yes.”

Bharat asked a smoker in his party to light a cigarette and put it on the young terrorist’s lips. The terrorist took two long puffs from the cigarette and started to look relaxed. After some time, tea was prepared at the ambush site and served to everyone, including the terrorist. By the time Bharat finished his tea, Iqbal had sent a message to him through a soldier.

Bharat walked up to Iqbal and asked, “What is it now, Iqbal?”

“Saab, I need one favour.”

“Okay, but don’t ask me to kill him.”

“As you wish, Saab, but ask him two questions.”

“Tell me.”

“Ask him, if an army man was injured the way he was, what would he have done with him?”

“Okay, what is the other question?”

“Ask him if he had successfully gone ahead, how many of our countrymen would he have killed?”

“Don’t tell me what to do,” said Bharat angrily and moved on to sit with the terrorist.

He wondered what sort of parents this boy had. They had sent their fifteen-year-old son to get killed.

Iqbal’s two questions lurked in his mind, so he asked Abu Qital, “If you had gone through, would you have killed our people or just spent your time and gone back?”

“I would have killed hundreds of your people.”

Bharat got agitated but he displayed his calmness, he asked him the second question, “If an army man was injured like you and didn’t have a weapon, would you have given him medical aid and a cigarette as I have done?”

“No, I would have slowly tortured him. I would have skinned him alive, then gouged his eyes out and finally cut his penis to put it in his mouth.”

“Why?”

“That way, I will go to heaven by killing and torturing non-believers.”

Rage ran through Bharat’s body. He picked up his rifle to shoot Abu Qital, but then, sanity prevailed on him, and he walked off. Abu Qital was handed over to the local police. However, the next morning, when he was being

taken to Judicial Magistrate for remand, the police vehicle carrying him was blown off by the terrorists. It appeared that launch Commander and his party wanted Abu Qital dead at all cost.



As Bharat entered Commanding Officer's office the next day, he heard Iqbal pleading, "Saab, you cannot go back on your promise, I need that packet of drugs it will be a great loss to me."

"What is the cost of this packet of drugs in the local market?" asked Commanding Officer.

"It is approximately four lakhs," said Iqbal.

"I am going to destroy the drugs," said Commanding Officer. Without waiting for Iqbal's answer, he ordered Bharat and Subedar Major to destroy the drugs by burning it and to confirm that it was done, in five minutes.

"But Saab, I will be killed by the drug mafia. Please stop them," said Iqbal as Bharat and Subedar Major moved out.

"Iqbal, I am sure you can make a fool of even the drug mafia. As it is, you have recovered enough money from the dead terrorists and that given by me. You can give a part of it to the drug mafia," said Commanding Officer. But Iqbal kept pleading to Commanding Officer to stop the destruction of the drugs.

Iqbal stopped pleading only when Bharat came back and informed that the drugs had been destroyed.



## STRIKE 4

“Saab, Commanding Officer wants to talk to you,” said the company exchange operator as Bharat inspected the cook house and langar at Nutan Post where he was sent as a Post Commander for two months.

“Okay, I am coming,” said Bharat and moved to his room to attend to the Commanding Officer’s phone call.

“Bharat, I called you to say that from tomorrow, no one from your post will go down to bathe or fetch water from Water Point. I am deputing six porters to ferry water for your post, they will come tomorrow morning,” instructed the Commanding Officer.

“Right, Sir, but there is no place for the porters to stay in this post,” replied Bharat.

“They will not stay in the post; in fact, they will not even enter the post. Install a big tank at the gate. Beyond the gate, the water will be ferried by our soldiers,” instructed the Commanding Officer.

“We will ensure that, Sir,” replied Bharat.

Bharat moved down to the *langar* and passed on the instructions to Subedar Saab. Lance Naik Rajiv, the langar Commander, who was listening to all this interjected, “Saab, six porters will eat the food of twelve. These porters devour a lot of food when they bring the load. They also should be authorised rations, or we should not give them food or tea.”

“Rajiv, it is not our tradition or culture to send anyone without food or tea when he comes to our house. This post is our home. I am sure we can eat a roti less so we can give food to these poor porters.”

“But Saab, our soldiers will object to this,” said Rajiv.

“Don’t worry, I will explain it to all. Besides, you start demanding rations for two people in addition. Also, cut down my food, but make sure no one goes away without food from our post.”

Bharat turned towards the Subedar and said, “Saab, I want to interact with all the porters who come tomorrow.”

The next day, Subedar informed Bharat, “Saab, five porters have reached. The sixth one is an old man. They say it will take him some time to reach the post.”

“Okay, please ask someone to put two chairs near the gate. I want to interact with the porters one by one.”

When Bharat had finished interacting with the fourth porter, he saw a frail old man walking towards the post. He wanted to immediately make a phone call to the Battalion Quartermaster and complain that the old man would not be able to fetch water, but something told him to hold on. He thought it prudent to talk to the old man before talking to the Quartermaster. When the old man reached the gate, Bharat got up from his chair and walked down to greet him.

*“Salam Walaikum Baba.”*

*“Walaikum Aslam Saab,”* replied the old man.

“Baba, take rest and have some tea. After that, I will talk to you like the other porters.”

“Okay, Saab,” replied the old man.

After fifteen minutes, it was the old man’s turn to be interviewed. He got up and walked up to the chair in front of Bharat.

Bharat asked him, “What is your name and which village are you from?”

“I am Mushtaq from Mandi Sudan.”

“You are Gujjar or Rajput?”

“I am a Syed.”

“Syed? Since when have the Syeds started working as porters? Are you sure you are a Syed?” asked Bharat.

“Yes, it is all because of poverty that I have to work as a porter even in this old age. I have seven daughters and no landed property.”

“But Syeds can earn a living by doing the job of a *Peer* (Soothsayer). Do you know the rituals of a *Peer*?”

“Yes, I know the job of a *Peer*, but when these terrorists came, they brought in Salafi ideology. They also threatened people not to go to *Peers*. As a result, I became jobless.”

“But you can’t work as a porter here. It is physically too tough a job for you. I am going to tell the Quartermaster to change you from here.”

“Please don’t do that, Saab, I will try my best. The Quartermaster will stop employing me.”

He was almost in tears when he said this. Bharat felt pity for the old man and decided to see his work for 3 to 4 days.

After three days, the langar Commander came to Bharat and said, “Saab, that old porter wants to talk to you.”

Bharat went down to the gate where *Peer* Mushtaq was waiting for him.

“What is it, *Peer* Saab?” asked Bharat.

“Saab, there is a very confidential thing I am going to talk to you about. I want your help.”

“Tell me, if I am able to do something, I will certainly help you.”

“The mate (supervisor) of porters named Salim has been exploiting my poverty for more than five years.”

“What is he doing?”

“He threatens me that he will get me removed from the rolls as a porter. He has been forcing me to make my wife sleep with him.”

“How can he do that?”

“Saab, you don’t know him. He blackmails other porters also. He is hand in glove with the labour officer, who listens to him. He deducts a percentage of our salary also. He forces other porters to make their females sleep with him.”

“Don’t worry. I will apprise Commanding Officer about it, and we will find a way out.”

“Saab, the problem is bigger.”

“What is it?”

“Saab, my eldest daughter is twenty-two years old. Salim wants me to make her sleep with him. To force me, he has made the Quartermaster shift me to this post, knowing fully well that I will not be able to cope up with work here and thus give in to his demand.”

“That is sheer exploitation of the poor. I am sure our Commanding Officer will kick Salim out as soon as he learns about such exploitation. Besides, doesn’t Salim respect the tradition here to respect the females of Syeds as mothers?”

“That was the tradition, but terrorism has changed the fabric of our society. Abetted by foreign terrorists, some people have even started ill-treating the descendants of the Holy One. Probably that is why the number of terrorists has dwindled from a lakh to a couple of hundreds. And every second year, there is some natural calamity.”

“You just don’t worry about your job. I will make sure you do not lose it. Also, educate your daughters and make them self-reliant.”

“I am doing that as the education of girls is free. The previous Commanding Officer had bought books and clothes for my elder daughters, which are being passed on from year to year to my younger daughters.”

Bharat discussed the plight of Mushtaq with the Commanding Officer, who got highly perturbed. The next day, after confirming his bad character from



the other porters, the Commanding Officer removed Salim from the job of a mate. He also moved *Peer* Mushtaq to the Battalion Headquarters where he was assigned lighter duties. The daughters of Mushtaq were given books and clothes. The officers were asked to voluntarily contribute to this.

In return, *Peer* Mushtaq gave a *taawiz* (amulet containing verses from Quran) to the Commanding Officer saying, “Saab, please wear it on your left arm, it will protect your soldiers.”

The Commanding Officer was an atheist, but in the days to come, one could see him wearing the *taawiz*. After all, it was the question of the well-being of his soldiers.



It was a sunny morning in October and Bharat was basking in the sun after a tiring night patrol. He saw *Peer* Mushtaq walking up the hill to come to the post. It had been more than a month since Mushtaq was shifted to the Battalion Headquarters. He had no business to be there. Bharat rushed to the gate to greet him, “*Salam Walaikum Peer* Saab.”

“*Walaikum Aslam*,” replied the Mushtaq.

“*Peer* Saab, why have you come?”

“Saab, I wanted to talk to you.”

“Has Salim done some mischief?”

“No, Saab, he is keeping away from my affairs. It is about a different thing.”

“What is it?”

“Today, early in the morning, I had gone to Langa Village, which is very close to the Line of Control. I could see a number of crows flying on top of the Pharuda Forest, across the Line of Control.”

“You have walked all the way to tell me this?”

“Yes, crows flying in that area means that there is a presence of some

terrorists in that forest and they have slaughtered an animal as *qurbani* (sacrifice) for successful infiltration. I am very sure that they will try to infiltrate tonight.”

“I hope it doesn’t lead to jungle bashing for us. As it is, I had long hours of patrolling for the last three nights,” replied Bharat.

*Peer* Mushtaq ignored Bharat’s comments and said, “From that location, there are two routes, which can be used by the terrorists. I am ready to show you those. If you lay ambushes on those routes, you will be able to kill the terrorists.”

“You could have gone to the Commanding Officer also with this information. Isn’t it?”

“Saab, I am here because I have taken a liking to you after you solved my problem. If you are successful in this, you will become a General.”

“Well, no problem. I will come with you, and you can show me the infiltration routes, but it is up to the Commanding Officer to decide whom to use for any operation.”

After fifteen minutes, Bharat along with his troops was on the move to see the routes. On completion of reconnaissance, he moved to the Battalion Headquarters to brief the Commanding Officer. The Commanding Officer decided to use the local Company Commander and gave him the two Ghatak Platoons to carry out the operation.

The next day, Bharat received the information that five terrorists had been killed while trying to infiltrate and their arms and ammunition had been recovered. Commanding Officer gave reward money to *Peer* Mushtaq. In addition, currency worth three lakhs recovered from the terrorists was distributed to all the villagers who came to see the dead bodies of the terrorists. This act of benevolence made the villagers look forward to future kills of the terrorists.



## STRIKE 5

As Captain Bharat was walking towards the Battalion Headquarters, he told himself, 05 Nov is a very bad day in his life as he had got his posting to a National Rifles Battalion.

In the morning, the Adjutant came up on the phone and said, “Partner, you are lucky.”

“What happened, Sir?” asked Bharat.

“Your posting order for 75 National Rifles (NR) has been received, and you have to move next week.”

“But Sir, I am planning to leave the army after five years of service. I love this unit. Why should I be posted to NR? I want to talk to the Commanding Officer.”

“Come over, he is expecting you.”

After two hours, Captain Bharat entered the office of Commanding Officer and saluted him, “Good Morning, Sir.”

“Come, Bharat, have a seat, Adjutant said you want to talk to me.”

“Sir, are you unhappy with me?”

“No, Bharat.”

“Why have I been posted out to NR? Is it because I didn’t complete the task exactly as desired by the Commander?”

No, Bharat, it is not like that. Commander did show his momentary annoyance, but I could make him understand. In fact, he insisted that you and your team should be recommended for a gallantry award.

“Sir, please get my posting cancelled, I do not want to leave this unit, I will

never be able to perform better in any other place.”

“Okay, no problem. But do you know anything about this 75 NR? Do you know who is the Commanding Officer of that unit?”

“No, Sir. I do not want to know anything about NR.”

“Alright, you talk to some soldiers from our unit who have recently completed tenure in 75 NR and then let me know whether you want to get your posting cancelled.”

“Right, Sir.”

In his heart, Bharat was very sure that he would come back the following day and request for the cancellation of his posting again.

For the next two hours, he spoke to the soldiers who had come back from 75 NR. He began to feel it would be a mistake to refuse posting to NR. The NR seemed to be the perfect machine to kill terrorists and the persona of Commanding Officer of NR Battalion had started mesmerising him.

Four hours later, Bharat walked into the Commanding Officer’s office and said, “Sir, I am ready to go to 75 NR.”

“Good, Bharat, go and have a drink, you have taken a big decision in life,” said Commanding Officer.



Bharat saluted him and started moving to the Officers’ mess. As he entered the Officers’ mess, he saw Maj Sandhu sitting there alone having his beer. Bharat wished him good evening.

Maj Sandhu replied, “Good evening, Bharat. Come, have a drink. It’s on me. It is a day of celebration.”

“Thank you, Sir, but what is the good news?” replied Bharat.

“It is my birthday,” said Maj Sandhu.

“As far as I can remember, I was very proud when I learnt that I share my

birthday with you, and it falls in June,” said Bharat. He then turned towards the bartender, “One large Rum, Old Monk with hot water please.”

“You are right, Bharat, but this is my third birthday,” said Maj Sandhu.

“Third birthday, Sir, you must be joking. People have a birthday on paper and their actual birthday, but I have never heard of a third birthday,” said Bharat.

“On this day, I got my third life, so I celebrate this day as my third birthday.”

“What happened, Sir?”

“It is a long story. In my last tenure on the Line of Control, on this day of the year, at around ten in the night, I was going along the fence with my company, Quick Reaction Team. It was very cold, and the snow was almost up to ten feet. The fence was already buried in the snow. At one place, we found fresh footmarks. We could assess that almost ten people or terrorists had freshly infiltrated the country, maybe an hour ago. The weather was overcast. It looked like it could start snowing any time. Fearing that the fresh snow may obliterate the footmarks, I decided to immediately follow the footmarks of these terrorists with my Quick Reaction Team of just six people.”

“Oh, that must have been very exciting, Sir.”

“Yes, I was excited but, in my excitement, I lost sight of the fact that I was chasing ten or more well-trained terrorists.”

“You should have taken more soldiers.”

“I informed the Commanding Officer to send reinforcement because all the people of my company were deployed in ambushes along the fence, which I could not denude.”

“So you waited for the reinforcement?”

“No, I proceeded without reinforcement. It was difficult because it was a

cross-country route, plus, one was not sure when one may bump into terrorists. That too, in the pitch-dark night where one could hardly see anything.”

Maj Sandhu paused to take a sip of his beer and then continued, “Sepoy Khalko, who is a tribal, did a good job of leading my party. We had been moving for an hour. Even in that cold, I was sweating everywhere, even in my underwear, and then, the unexpected happened.”

“You bumped into the terrorists?”

“No, one of my soldiers slipped and had a fall of about twelve feet. With great difficulty, we pulled him up, but both his legs were fractured, plus he was bleeding profusely. Now it was a difficult decision for me to take.”

“It was a question of the life of a soldier, did you abort the chase?”

“No, I made a difficult compromise. I asked my four soldiers to take the injured soldier to the helipad near the fence. My buddy Lance Naik Wasim and I resumed following the footmarks. To our good luck, after moving for one and a half hours, we heard some noise. It was one terrorist talking to someone on the radio set saying that they had reached the appointed location and they would wait there for the guide to take them further. In fact, he seemed to be annoyed with someone as he expected the guide to be there already.”

“What was the time when you heard this noise?” interjected Bharat.

“It was around ten past three. I remember this because the clouds were clearing, and the moon was rising. We could see that the terrorists were around sixty meters away in a *dhok* (a house made in the forest by shepherd community). One sentry was on top of the *dhok* along with their leader who was talking on the radio set. Everyone else was inside the *dhok*.”

“You were not able to establish the exact strength of the terrorists?” asked Bharat.

“We were able to do that at four in the morning, when all of them came out

to offer Namaz. We counted ten of them. They had their meal and went back into the *dhok*, leaving only the sentry on top.”

“Where was the reinforcement?”

“It was somewhere nearby but not able to reach us because they didn’t know our exact location. In fact, they were asking us to give them an indication by firing a flare. I couldn’t do that as we were too close to the terrorists.”

“You could have given them your GPS location.”

“The GPS was being carried by the soldier who got injured. I realised the magnitude of the problem. So, Wasim and I discussed the whole thing. A suggestion from Wasim appealed to me. He said he would go and silence the sentry while I fired at anyone who tried to come out of the *dhok*. Simultaneously, the reinforcement would hear the sound of firing, which should help them find our location. I told him we would reverse the role wherein I would crawl to the *dhok* and kill the sentry while Wasim would fire at the terrorists trying to escape from the *dhok*.”

“That was very audacious, only two people taking on ten. Things could have really gone wrong, Sir.”

“Yes, things did go wrong a little. I crawled to the *dhok* without being noticed. I grabbed the sentry and was able to kill him, but in that hand-to-hand fight, he was able to stab me in the stomach. I was bleeding profusely.”

“Did Wasim come to your help?”

“No. As planned, he kept engaging terrorists attempting to come out of the door of the *dhok*. He was able to kill three. As a result, the rest of them stopped attempting an escape and there was no other way out, since these *dhoks* do not have any windows.”

“Did the terrorists fire upwards towards the roof from inside?”

“I do not know, or maybe if they were, it was not affecting me as a lot of wood and mud goes into building these *dhoks*. I could feel myself going



weak every minute. I called on the radio set to check whether the reinforcements could hear the firing. They said they couldn't. I knew they were in some other valley; it may take hours for them to reach us. My body was getting cold. To save myself from hypothermia, I crawled on top of the dead terrorist to take benefit of his body heat. I also knew my body needed electrolytes and liquids so as per my survival training, I slit the dead terrorist's vein to suck out his blood, but the humanity in me prevented me from ingesting the terrorist's blood."

"So did the other terrorist not come out?"

"No, Wasim tried a bluff, which he succeeded in. He shouted to the terrorists that the army had surrounded them from all sides and they did not have anywhere to exit, therefore, they should drop their weapons and come out. In turn, the terrorists shouted that they had come to get killed, so they would not think twice before causing harm to the army. Hence, they argued that the army ought to give them a safe passage. In the guise of this argument, Wasim held them on for three hours, by when the reinforcement finally reached him. I had fainted long ago."

"Finally, did the other terrorists surrender or not?"

"No, they didn't, and ultimately, our party had to plant explosives and blow up the *dhok*. I was evacuated by a helicopter and regained my consciousness after two days. These three fingers of mine had to be amputated because of frostbite."

"Did you get an award for this action?"

"No. I had asked the Commanding Officer not to recommend me but to recommend Wasim instead, for the gallantry award. Because I had put his life in peril, and with his cunningness and presence of mind, he had saved the day. He got a Sena Medal."

"Sir, what is the story regarding your second life?"

"Some other time over a drink, I will narrate that too."



## STRIKE 6

Before joining the NR, Captain Bharat went on leave.

On his way, he had to stop at the transit camp. There he met his schoolmate, Captain Bawa, who was also serving at the Line of Control. His wife Captain Ganga serving in the base hospital as a Medical Officer, accompanied Bawa.

After exchanging some quick pleasantries at the Officers' mess, Captain Bawa expressed interest in learning about the details of the Chatri Incident. Bharat narrated the incident but withheld the details of the counter strikes. He then asked Captain Bawa, "How has life been treating you at the Line of Control?"

Before Bawa could answer, Ganga said, "He never shares anything. Maybe his experiences are not as tough as yours."

"Yes, my experiences have not been as good as Bharat's. Maybe my Commanding Officer is concerned because I have a family to look after. He doesn't want me in harm's way. However, tell me, Bharat, did we avenge the Chatri Incident?"

"Yes," replied Bharat.

"How? I have not heard anything. You know, one doesn't even get the newspaper at some posts," said Bawa.

Bharat narrated his action at the Tekri Post.

Captain Bawa was still not happy. He said, "If the enemy had beheaded our soldier, the befitting revenge is mutilation of his soldiers."

"Your remarks remind me of a senior officer who thinks like you," said Bharat.

"Don't worry about his remark, Bharat. I am sure my husband has not seen

an enemy till date,” remarked Ganga jokingly.

“I have seen the enemy, but I feel it was an unpleasant experience, so I don’t feel like narrating it,” said Captain Bawa.

“Do share it, man. It will de-stress you,” advised Bharat.

“I was Post Commander of a post which was just fifty meters away from the enemy post. I had a very cordial relationship with the enemy Post Commander, Captain Malik. We used to sit on top of our respective posts and talk for hours. We made it a point not to bring up any army related topic or talk poorly about each other’s countries,” said Captain Bawa.

“For Hours! You never talk to me for more than five minutes. What were you talking with this Captain Malik?” asked Ganga.

“We talked about books, politics, international relations, culture and traditions. Every now and then, I would also pass on a bottle of liquor to Captain Malik. On festivals, we exchanged sweets,” said Bawa.

“That is interesting. How did you exchange the liquor or the sweets? Aren’t the areas between our posts and Line of Control heavily mined?” inquired Ganga.

“You are right about the mines. We used our dog Sheri for the exchanges. We would tie the liquor or sweets to the harness of our dog and send the dog over. A dog doesn’t weigh too much and can safely go through the minefields,” clarified Bawa and continued, “anyway, the bonhomie didn’t last long.”

“Did Captain Malik play dirty?” asked Ganga.

“No, Captain Malik had a fall and got injured, so he was evacuated. He was replaced by a Subedar Afzal, who was a Punjabi with limited capabilities and a huge ego. Subedar Afzal had heard about Captain Malik and my conversations, so he tried to continue that. But he did not have much depth in his knowledge or character. He wanted the perks enjoyed by Captain Malik, especially the liquor. While I felt like giving this to Captain Malik, Subedar

Afzal would just demand the liquor. And his demands became very frequent. I got very annoyed, but continued to accommodate him,” said Bawa.

“You should have poisoned his liquor,” said Bharat.

“Well, I did end up killing him,” responded Bawa.

“Killing!! Why? How?” asked Ganga.

“One day, when we sent the liquor, I noticed that there was a paper folded and stuck in Sheri’s harness. When we opened the paper, there was a note written on it. Whoever wrote the note had requested us to stop sending the liquor. The note clarified that after consuming the liquor, Subedar Afzal was becoming very abusive towards his men. Not only that, he would also sodomise the young soldiers,” said Bharat.

“Idiot! Such people should be kicked,” said Ganga in disgust.

“We stopped sending the liquor. Subedar Afzal got very annoyed at us. He would alternate between sending requests for liquor and hurling abuses at us,” continued Bawa.

“That is being two-faced. Literally! Did you then kill him?” asked Bharat.

“Well, we cannot kill enemy soldiers just for being abusive,” replied Bawa. “We had to shoot him for a different reason. One day, one of the bunker walls towards the enemy had fallen after some rain. So, we started repairing it. As the work was going on, Afzal came up on his post and asked us to stop the repairs. We refused. He cocked his weapon and threatened that if we didn’t stop the work, he would shoot at us. I told him that he should remember we have much more ammunition than him. To this, he said, *‘Aap ki jamhooriat mein to fire karne ke liye Delhi se permission lena padta hai* (In your democracy, to fire, you require permission from Delhi). ’”

“That is a misconception with quite a few of our enemy soldiers. I hope you didn’t stop the work?” asked Bharat.

“We didn’t stop the work. He kept his word and fired at my boys. One of my soldiers got injured in his thigh. Before I could retaliate, Afzal took

cover. I had to evacuate my soldier from the post. Since that time, we were always looking for Subedar Afzal to return the favour. On the third day, we heard from him. From behind a loophole, he shouted, ‘*Sathi, maaf karna* (Partner, I am sorry).’”

“I could identify the loophole from which he was calling. I aimed my sniper rifle and fired one bullet. There was a commotion at their post.”

After ten minutes, his Havildar shouted, “*Saathi shukriya* (Thank you, friends). Subedar has expired. Now we will have to fire some ammunition towards you to show retaliation to our senior commanders. So, please tell your men to remain behind cover.”

“After two minutes, the enemy opened ineffective fire and kept firing for an hour,” said Bawa.

Captain Bharat and Captain Ganga both high-fived Bawa.

“We should move for dinner and get some sleep because the convoy starts at three in the morning,” suggested Bharat.

And they proceeded to have dinner.



Although Anjali’s parents did not like her meeting Bharat, yet she spent most of her time with him during that leave. At the same time, Bharat’s parents had grown very fond of her. In fact, Anjali was the one to pick up signs of nervous disorder in Bharat and told this to his mother, “I am finding something amiss in Bharat’s behaviour. His eyes are always worried. That is not like our Bharat.”

Bharat’s mother, Mona, confirmed Anjali’s apprehension, but the actual confirmation came next day when they were at the marriage ceremony of a common friend. Bharat’s parents were also attending the same. During *pooja* (prayers), Anjali was sitting next to Mona.

The *pooja* had been going on just for ten minutes, when Anjali told Mona, “Aunty, can you see Bharat breathing heavily and sweating profusely?”

“Yes, this is strange; the air conditioning is quite effective.”

It is then that Bharat got up and started walking towards the exit. Both Anjali and Mona could see the imbalance in his walk. They quickly got up to follow him. As he came out, he lost his balance and was about to fall when both Mona and Anjali held him and took him to a chair. As he sat down, he said, “Mummy, I just cannot stand the smell of these incense sticks. It reminds me of death. I am sorry I left the ceremony.”

“Don’t worry about the ceremony; we are going to a doctor.”

Bharat knew that his mother would not accept any excuses, so he agreed to go along. The doctor checked and found his blood pressure abnormally high, and after a detailed talk, he recommended him to a psychiatrist.

Seeing signs of worry on Bharat’s face, Anjali said, “Don’t worry partner. I am not going to marry anyone else, even if psychiatrist declares you insane.”

“I know you will never leave me, but I am worried about the army sending me out.”

The psychiatrist was an ex-army man who could diagnose Bharat’s condition and assured him that the problem would be gone if he took prescribed medicines and performed the recommended yoga exercises. Mona ensured that Bharat would never miss a dose of medicine. Anjali ensured that Bharat attended the yoga classes with her. After twenty days, the psychiatrist declared him fit for any type of duty.

During this leave, Bharat learnt that Reddy, Thapa and he were awarded the Sena Medal (Gallantry). His father and mother felt extremely proud of him. Though they asked him a number of times, he could never tell them all that he had done to get this medal.

His father was also worried about his NR posting. People showed a lot of concern. Even his friends from army background came to meet him, as if it was the last time they were going to see him.

Anjali was worried about his NR posting too. She made a scene at the

coffee shop when she walked up to the manager and asked him to stop the song being played there, “*Ae jaate hue lamhon, jara thehro, jara thehro* (Fleeting moments, please halt, please halt). ”

But Bharat was excited; he wanted to experience all that, his soldiers had told him about NR.





## STRIKE 7

Captain Bharat reached the 75 NR Battalion Headquarters at around five in the evening. He was taken to the Adjutant. He saluted the Adjutant and said, “Good Evening Sir, Captain Bharat Singh Labana reporting.”

“Good Evening, Bharat. We are proud to have you in our folds.”

“Thank you, Sir.”

“Are you comfortable in the room allotted to you?”

“Yes, Sir. I am comfortable.”

He took out his Identity Card and handed it over to the Adjutant. The Adjutant took out the Identity Card Register, gave it to Bharat, and said, “Please enter your Identity Card details in the register.”

Adjutant took a closer look at Bharat’s photo on the Identity Card and said, “I must say, unlike other officers, you were healthier when you joined the army.”

“Yes, Sir, my mother was feeding me well.”

Adjutant gave him another register and said, “Please fill up the details of your next of kin in this register along with all other relevant information. You never know when we may need to call your parents with some sad news.”

In the next few minutes, Bharat filled up all the details required.

“Okay, Bharat, are you married?” asked the Adjutant.

“No, Sir.”

“Your record of service says you were the best student in the sniper course and in young officer’s course. This means you didn’t devote much time to merrymaking in Mhow.”

“Sir, I was a little wise in using my time.”

“How?”

“My course mates used to go to watch movies in Infantry School theatre, but I used to go only to watch the movie intervals.”

“Smarty, that is the time you can have a look at the beautiful girls.”

“Sir, when will I meet the Commanding Officer, Colonel Pammi?”

“Soon, in fact, he is equally anxious to meet you. He has gone to the ration store to inspect the vegetables. Perhaps you can go there and see him in action.”

Without waiting for his reaction, the Adjutant rang the bell and commanded the Runner, “Take Saab to the Commanding Officer.”

Captain Bharat started following the Runner. On reaching the ration store, he saw Commanding Officer talking to the Ration Havildar.

“These potatoes you have brought are not good.”

“Saab, these are as per the size specifications.”

“That is alright,” he said and then asked his buddy Vinod, “take some potatoes in a bucket and wash them quickly.”

The Commanding Officer saw Bharat approaching and said, “You must be Bharat?”

“Yes, Sir,” answered Bharat and saluted the Commanding Officer.

“Welcome to 75 NR. We wish you a very happy tenure; I hope you are comfortable in the room allotted to you.”

“Yes, Sir, I am very comfortable.”

“The journey must have been tiring in the civil hired bus.”

“Yes, Sir, the leg space is very less, and the backrest is not at all reclining.”

“As per contract, the buses are supposed to have comfortable seats with

inter-seat space of fourteen inches, but these contractors cheat us and give buses with inter-seat space of just ten inches. My fight against this is on. In next ten days, I assure you that my soldiers of 75 NR will travel in buses with proper leg space. How are your parents?”

“They are fine.”

In the meanwhile, the Commanding Officer saw Sepoy Vinod coming back with washed potatoes. He turned to Ration Havildar and said, “Now after washing, you will see 30% of the potatoes are green and 30% have big cuts, which the contractors conceal by smearing the potatoes with mud.”

Bharat was surprised to see the potatoes. The Commanding Officer was right and the Ration Havildar also acknowledged. The Commanding Officer instructed, “Tomorrow take these potatoes and give them back to the depot,” then he turned to Bharat and said, “Let’s walk to my office, Bharat.”

Bharat was not very impressed by the Commanding Officer’s looks, but he began to get impressed by his attention to details. As soon as they entered the office, Commanding Officer said, “Bharat, please tell me frankly. I hope you are not afraid of getting posted to NR?”

“No, Sir, I am not.”

“Also let me know if you are afraid of going out for operations. You may take some time to answer this question.”

“I will never be afraid to go out on operations.”

“Don’t take it amiss, but I ask these questions to all soldiers joining my unit.”

“Sir, I was told that you are a Commanding Officer with whom one can be very frank. That is why I am taking this liberty. Why ask such a question? The answer will always be the same. No one will say he is afraid.”

“You will be surprised to know, Bharat, a few soldiers do confess that they are afraid.”

“Oh, that means we have cowards in our army. They should be sent back to their parent units, or I must say they should be sent home.”

“To be afraid is a state of mind which is momentary. People psyche up others by telling stories. Even parents and neighbours give you an impression that you are going to perish during the NR tenure. Therefore, the soldiers should be allowed to express their feelings. If not done, the stress can really build up to such levels where people commit suicide.”

“Sir.”

“At the same time, such persons can turn out to be fine and brave soldiers.”

“How, Sir?”

“You saw Sepoy Vinod, the soldier who had gone to wash potatoes and accompanied us to the office?”

“Yes, he appears to be very smart.”

“He is my buddy and accompanies me to all operations,” said Commanding Officer, sipped his tea and continued, “When he joined the unit, he also told me that he was afraid to go out on operations.”

“Sir, by keeping him with you, are you not risking your life?”

“On the contrary, he will sacrifice his life to save mine.”

“How is this transformation, Sir?”

“I had put him as part of the surveillance team. I told him that he just has to look through the HHTI (Hand Held Thermal Imager). He would not have to move out of the post. He did that job very diligently. It requires extreme patience. He could track out the movement of terrorists at night. After seeing the pattern of movement, we could kill two terrorists by laying an ambush, which he directed through his HHTI. The next time, he didn’t want to sit in the post but wanted to kill terrorists himself. So, I sent him on an operation where he was instrumental in killing a terrorist.”

“Sir, then he should be sent to Ghatak Platoon.”

“He volunteered for that, but the Company Commander told me that he had become too bold. He may risk his life unnecessarily, so I got him here as my buddy. He is proud to be with me. At the same time, I can ensure that he doesn’t put his life at unnecessary risk.”

After that, Commanding Officer asked him several things about his personal and professional life. In just half an hour, Bharat felt that he could talk and discuss anything with the Commanding Officer. Once the Commanding Officer gave him the permission to leave, he went to his room. There was still time for dinner. He was about to lie down when someone vigorously knocked on his door.

“Come in,” said Bharat thinking it must be his buddy.

But the door opened with a thud, and his course-mate Captain Anil stood there, hurling abuses, “*Gadhe* (Donkey), you didn’t think of meeting me. Idiot, you got Sena Medal, and you have forgotten your friends?”

“Sorry *yaar* (friend). I didn’t know you are in this unit, but you were commissioned in Information Warfare Unit, how come you are here?”

“Oh *yaar*, my Commanding Officer in the Information Warfare Unit wanted to sort me out, so he sent me to NR. I have been climbing mountains all these days.”

“I know you always shammed it out, and I am sure you must be shamming here also.”

“Oh no, this Baba ji doesn’t let me sham.”

“Which Baba ji?” asked Bharat.

“This Commanding Officer, Col Pammi, *bade pyar se leta hai* (sorts you out very politely).”

“Why, what happened?”

“He caught me shamming.”

“That is very good, you always got away with shamming, even during our

training in the academy. He must have used some innovative methods to catch you. Tell me, how did this happen?”

“I joined this unit three months before Baba ji. I used to avoid going out on ambushes at night and just keep reporting from my *rajai* (quilt) on the radio set.”

“That is professional dishonesty. You are my friend, but if you were my subordinate, I would have sent you home for cheating.”

That is what I thought when Baba ji caught me. But let me narrate the remainder of the incident. Ten days after taking over, Baba ji gave me a call on the radio set at half past midnight, and this is how the conversation flowed.

“Tiger for Charlie one.”

“Charlie one for Tiger okay,” I replied.

“Report your location, over,” asked Commanding Officer.

“Sir, I am at Ziarat.”

“Which Ziarat?”

“Sir, Ziarat north of Doba village.”

“Okay, I am also at that Ziarat. I give you thirty minutes to report to me, out.”

“What did you do?” asked Bharat.

“I reached there in forty minutes, but I was panting all the way. I could see a cynical smile on the face of my troops at my predicament.”

“Commanding Officer must have given you a piece of his mind?” asked Bharat.

“No, he didn’t. He just asked me to take my party back.”

“Did he discuss anything about it later?” asked Bharat.

“Never, but he had conveyed his point. Besides, I also realised from that

day onwards that if you sham it out, your troops also see you with contempt. I will never sham again irrespective of whether anyone is watching me or not.”

Bharat wondered, what an innovative way to convert a shammer subordinate to self-starter! It was dinnertime. Bharat and Captain Anil moved to the Officers’ mess.

It was a very professional affair at the Officers’ mess. The food was laid out. Commanding Officer walked in precisely at eight, picked up the food and started eating. Other officers followed suit.

The Commanding Officer said, “Bharat, as a rule, we lay out lunch at one o’clock and dinner at eight. In case you want to have a drink, you can walk in earlier.”

“Yes, Sir.”

“We do this so that officers get sufficient time for some professional reading and do not waste time in the Officers’ mess.”

“That is a good idea, Sir,” said Bharat.

“However, if the officers want to have fun, once a month, they can tell Second-in-Command. I will also join in. After all, we need to relax sometimes.”

Before anyone could say anything, Captain Anil said, “Yes, Sir. Bharat is a good mimicry artist. Next party, we will have him mimicking you.”

Every face in the group turned tense. However, the Commanding Officer lightened the environment by saying, “I will look forward to that.”

Before going to sleep, Bharat talked to Anjali for about fifteen minutes and his parents for five minutes. He could sense that they were worried. He narrated to them his interaction with the Commanding Officer and Captain Anil.



During the next four days, he trained on different types of equipment and

weapons available only in an NR Battalion. The next formal Pre-Induction Training was to start after ten days, so the Commanding Officer had given instructions not to send him out on any operations till he had completed his Pre-Induction Training. On the fifth night after reaching 75 NR, Bharat heard some commotion outside.

He rang up the Adjutant, who told him, “There is an operation shaping up, so the parties are getting ready.”

Bharat could not suppress his excitement he quickly put on his uniform and moved out of his room.

The Commanding Officer was briefing both the Ghatak Platoons and his Quick Reaction Team, “Tonight at nine, the surveillance detachment of Bravo Company has observed two persons sneaking into the house of Master Alam in Gopalpur Village. The way they were cautiously moving, it appeared that it was a terrorist movement, so I called the Bravo Company to fire one illumination bomb on the opposite side. When the illumination came up, these two persons froze at their location. This happens only with people who are trained in warfare. A civilian starts running as soon as such illumination comes up. I have the photos of Master Alam’s house and the adjoining area. Have a look at these. It will help us familiarise ourselves with the area. How many of you have not been to Gopalpur Village?”

Six soldiers raised their hands.

“Okay, these people will be paired up with those who have already been there, right?”

“Yes, Sir,” said both the Ghatak Platoons Commanders.

“All of you will rest in the dining hall. One radio set will be kept on so that you can listen to my conversation with surveillance detachments. Ideally, we will launch the operation in the morning, but in case anything else comes up, we may go in sooner. Any question?”

Sub Bhat of Number 1 Ghatak Platoon said, “Saab, we should further try to



ascertain whether they are terrorists.”

Col Pammi responded, “Good thinking, Saab, you and other party commanders, please come to my office, we will discuss.”

Captain Bharat thought that such a suggestion to any other officer could have drawn flak, as it could be interpreted as reluctance to go for the operation.

“Bharat, you also can come to my office,” said Commanding Officer as he walked away.

“I will, Sir,” said Bharat.

Commanding Officer’s office looked more like an operation room. The Commanding Officer’s table was pushed to a corner. A video projection system was screening the photograph of Master Alam’s house and the areas around. Col Pammi asked everyone to get familiar with the area depicted on the screen while he moved to the washroom to relieve himself.

Bharat was seated next to the Adjutant. Looking at the photographs, he asked, “What are those alphabets written on the photograph, Sir?”

“These photographs are available with all the parties, including the surveillance detachments. They are all annotated with these alphabets so that the parties can easily convey to each other the location of terrorists or even our parties by using these alphabets as reference points. All they have to say is that a person has moved from Point ‘B’ towards ‘D.’ The surveillance detachment does not have to keep describing the house or landmark. This way, a lot of confusion can be avoided, which is lifesaving at night. In addition, if the communication is heard by nefarious elements, they cannot figure out what we are talking,” said the Adjutant.

“But collecting, marking and distributing these photographs must have taken a lot of effort?” asked Bharat.

“Baba ji is very passionate about this system. He has made sure that whole of our area of responsibility is photographed. You can also see the reference

number of the photo written on the bottom left corner.”

“Why is that, Sir?” asked Bharat.

“It is a number to ensure that all parties are looking at the same photograph.”

Commanding Officer was back from the washroom. As soon as he sat down, he asked, “Yes. Bhat Saab, what do you have in mind to confirm about the two persons who went into Alam’s house?”

“Saab, we can fire a number of machine-gun bursts from the Choti Post which is just eight hundred meters away. Listening to the sound of firing, the terrorists may run out and enter another house. At that moment, we will be surer that they are terrorists. We can kill them in the next house they enter,” said Subedar Bhat.

“But Bhat Saab, in the last two operations, we have delayed the terrorist till daylight by firing. They may or may not move out of the house at the sound of firing. I wish we could do something else.”

Subedar Bhat didn’t have any other options, but the Adjutant spoke up, “Sir, Master Alam has a landline phone number. If we call him masquerading as civilians and inform that very soon, the army is going to conduct a search in his house, the terrorists may move out.”

“That is a good idea. Please call one of our local soldiers, immediately.”

In next twenty minutes, a local soldier called up Master Alam. As soon as someone picked up the phone, he conveyed the message and hung up.

Commanding Officer picked up the radio set and called the surveillance detachments.

“Tiger for Bravo Sierra One (BS1) and Bravo Sierra Two (BS2) over.”

Both BS1 and BS2 acknowledged him.

“BS1 and BS2, keep a watch. You may see some people coming out of Master Alam’s house, follow them on HHTI.”

After ten minutes, BS2 came on air.

“BS2 for Tiger, three people have come out of Master Alam’s house, they have moved towards the cowshed of the house.”

“Okay.”

“One person has gone into the cowshed; the other two are waiting outside.”

“Keep watching, BS1 are you also able to see this movement?” asked Commanding Officer.

“Yes, I am also watching.”

After five minutes, BS1 reported, “BS1 for Tiger, one person who went into the cowshed came out and handed over something to the two persons waiting outside. Then he went towards Master Alam’s house. The other two have moved towards the ‘F’ marked in the photo.”

“BS1, you keep a watch on those two, and BS2, you keep watching Master Alam’s house,” instructed Commanding Officer.

Both BS1 and BS2 acknowledged his order. The Commanding Officer picked up the phone and dialled the landline number of Choti Post Commander.

As soon as he picked up, Commanding Officer said, “Hello Bhavnish, are you listening to the conversation between me and our surveillance detachments?”

“Yes, Sir, I have located the Point ‘F’, which they were talking about.”

“Now you are the nearest to this location, so you may have to launch an operation. Be prepared.”

“Wilco, Sir,” said Major Bhavnish.

“You will move out only on my orders. Do you have any party outside?”

“Yes, Sir, I have two ambush parties out at Nandiali North and South.”

“Get them in. Brief them about the situation and give them some rest.”

“Yes, Sir,” answered Bhavnish.

“I may ask you to fire some blank rounds or drill grenades or illumination, be prepared for it. Also, inform your parties outside that you will be firing, so that there is no communication gap or confusion at night.”

BS1 came up on air again and said, “BS1 for Tiger, those two have moved into the house, hundred meters, west of the Point F.”

“Okay, keep an eye on that house.”

The Commanding Officer reclined in his chair and addressed everyone, “Now it is almost certain that these two are terrorists and they are in this house. Operator, please zoom in on the photograph. It is half past one. The terrorists may change location after two hours. I don’t want to take on the encounter at night for two reasons. Firstly, at night, we can never be sure as to who is a terrorist and who is a civilian. Secondly, at night, they can crawl out if they suspect anything and melt away in the crops. So now, we make sure that they don’t move out of the house till morning. Adjutant, get Bravo Company Commander and Choti Post Commander on line together.”

Adjutant started dialling the phone number and said, “Sir, both are on conference call.”

Commanding Officer put the phone on speaker-mode and said, “Anil, you immediately move down with a party to the flour mill near the nallah. When you reach there, start firing three bursts of Light Machine Gun after every ten minutes. Understood?”

“Yes, Sir.”

“You will not cross that nallah. Am I clear?”

“Yes, Sir.”

“Bhavnish, you will remain in your Choti Post. From the post itself, you will fire bursts of Light Machine Gun at the same frequency as Anil but with a delay of thirty seconds.”

“Yes, Sir,” acknowledged Bhavnish.

“Also, Bhavnish, your three parties should be ready to move out by four in the morning.”

An hour before daylight, the parties of Bhavnish and the Ghatak Platoons surrounded the house. The house owner was caught by the parties when he came out at six. He informed them that two local terrorists had come at night and they were still inside. He revealed that his family was also inside. The Commanding Officer decided that these two terrorists would be captured alive. But the terrorists had taken the family members as hostages.

The persuasions to surrender continued for more than seventeen hours. Ultimately, at midnight, the two terrorists let off the hostages. They also came out to surrender. Bharat was highly impressed with the involvement and foresight of the Commanding Officer. He also realised the importance of organising the surveillance and synchronising the operations by pre-placing photos with different parties.



## STRIKE 8

Bharat went to the Pre-Induction Training where he felt that too much emphasis was laid on human rights education. He also felt that this overdose of caution could kill the initiative required in the operations against terrorists.

On return, Bharat was made the Ghatak Platoon Commander. The platoon was a fine body of soldiers. Within a few days, he knew the names of each and every soldier of the platoon, and soon enough, of the entire battalion.

On a very cold and dark night, his Ghatak Platoon laid an ambush near a footbridge on Richa Nallah. Intelligence indicated that terrorists used this bridge to go to northern areas of the nallah. The nallah had only three crossing places in a stretch of ten kilometers.

Captain Bharat briefed his parties. He told them that they would lay the ambush a little away from the bridge and the surveillance party would be kept at a high ground overlooking the nallah. By half past nine, they were in place. At a quarter to eleven, the surveillance party saw silhouettes of two persons moving.

Subedar Bhat, who was leading the surveillance party, reported, “Bhat for Bharat, two persons are moving from the east along nallah towards the footbridge.”

“Roger,” Bharat acknowledged and then instructed his other parties to look through their weapon night sights.

Within two minutes, everyone could see the two silhouettes approaching the bridge.

Then Bhat said again, “They have not crossed the bridge. Instead, they are moving further along nallah to the west.”

“Roger,” replied Bharat.

“One person is carrying something on his right shoulder,” added Bhat.

“Does it look like a weapon?”

“I can’t make out, as I can only see a rough silhouette in the thermal imager.”

“Roger.”

“Two hundred meters downstream, they have entered the nallah,” Bhat said again.

Captain Bharat assessed that, these were terrorists trying to cross the nallah by wading through. They were probably avoiding the bridge to avoid contact with any ambush laid there. He immediately asked his ambush party to close in towards the bank of the nallah.

While they were moving closer, Bhat informed him, “Saab, as soon as our party started moving closer to nallah, these two persons stopped in the middle of the nallah. Now they are doing something.”

“Okay,” said Bharat.

He was almost certain now that the two persons were terrorists. His party deployed just forty meters from the bank. They could see the two persons moving out of the nallah.

Bharat whispered, “No one will fire till I tell you, and Sunil, you take proper cover and call out to challenge these people as soon as they come out of the nallah.”

“Okay,” replied Sunil.

“Dinesh, you keep your weapon pointed at these people. In case they run, fire single shots on their legs,” instructed Bharat.

“Okay,” acknowledged Havildar Dinesh.

In the next two minutes, the two persons came out of *nallah*.

Sunil shouted, “Hands up.”

The two started running along the nallah. But Dinesh was quick, he fired two quick rounds in succession. They could see both the men falling.

It is then Captain Bharat shouted, “Drop your weapons.”

There was no response from the other side, Captain Bharat shouted again, “You are surrounded from all sides, drop your weapons, we don’t want to kill you.”

It is then that a reply came, “Saab, we are not terrorists. We are civilians.”

“What are you doing here at this time of the night when the curfew is on? Don’t you know the army lays ambushes at various places?”

“Saab, we know that, but the *Lambardar* (headman) forced us. He has a marriage in his house, so he requires ten kilograms of fish. We came here for fishing.”

“Are you hurt?” shouted Bharat.

“Yes, I am, my friend is unconscious.”

“Can you get up?”

“No, Saab. I have got a bullet in my leg; I am bleeding.”

Bharat threw caution to the wind, and within the next five minutes, gave first aid to both the locals. He called for an ambulance. The other man had just a scratch on his thigh. Bharat felt bad for the two civilians. He wondered at how livelihood makes one do all sorts of dangerous things. He was, however, happy that the two would survive reasonably well and not be crippled for life. He was also happy at the excellent coordination in his team and their good fire discipline.

After two days, Bharat went to the military hospital where the two civilians were being treated. The Commanding Officer handed over forty thousand rupees to Bharat to be given to each of the injured civilians.



The incident of civilians getting injured in the firing was not taken well by



the Senior Commander, General Sunil, who asked the Commanding Officer to report to him along with the Subedar Major.

The Commanding Officer took a PowerPoint presentation along and tried to explain the whole thing to General Sunil. But he would not take any of it. He said, “Shooting a civilian is just not acceptable.”

“But Sir, at night, it is not possible to distinguish between a civilian and a terrorist. The circumstances were such that it appeared beyond doubt that the two were terrorists,” replied the Commanding Officer.

“Have I not made myself clear? No civilian casualty means no civilian casualty, any doubt?” said the General angrily.

“But Sir, such caution will lead to delay in response from our soldiers when required. Sometimes, the soldiers may have to pay with their lives.”

“You don’t seem to understand. It is not a dictatorship, the life of each of our citizens is important, and we have to protect it, even if it costs us our lives.”

“Yes, Sir,” replied the Commanding Officer. He felt that the General was in no mood to listen. All he wanted was to get away from the unreasonable General, but there was more to come.

“How many *ranger warriors* have you trained?” asked the General.

“None, Sir,” replied Col Pammi.

“You have defied my orders.”

“I didn’t want to, but the concept of *ranger warriors* is too foreign. It will not work in NR,” said Col Pammi.

“I have read more than three thousand military history books, are you questioning my knowledge?”

“No, Sir. I am too insignificant to question your knowledge, but the concept of *ranger warriors* is more applicable to conventional warfare where the troops of both the opposing forces were equally clueless about the terrain and

ground conditions. Here, the terrorists use the locals as their eyes and ears. The capability of a *bakarwal* (shepherd) is such that he can identify the footmarks of one goat among two hundred goats and follow its trail. Concealing our soldiers at any place for more than three hours is wishful thinking. Besides...”

The General interjected as he realised that this Commanding Officer was aware of ground realities, so there was no point in arguing with him. He said, “I am in a hurry. I have to go somewhere. Remember, nothing should happen to the civilians. Also, when you entered, you didn’t salute properly, your thumb was bending outwards. Let me show you how to salute.”

When the Commanding Officer returned to his unit, the Second-in-Command asked him, “Any instructions from the General to be passed to the troops?”

“No, the General was very happy. Everything to continue as before.”



## STRIKE 9

After ten days, Col Pammi called Captain Bharat to his office and asked, “Bharat, the other day, Anil was saying that you are good at mimicking.”

“Yes, Sir. I do try my hand at it.”

“Can you copy a female voice?”

“Yes, Sir. I can do that.”

“Okay. I have a plan to trap a terrorist in a sort of honey trap. I need someone to talk to a terrorist in a female voice on the phone.”

“I would love to do that, Sir.”

Commanding Officer gave five CDs to Bharat and said, “For the next five days, you sit in the Officers’ mess with the VCD Player and practice the local dialect with the help of these local movies.”

“I will do that.”

“Also pay attention to the standard dialogues, which can be used for a romantic talk on mobile and write those down.”

“I will, Sir.”

“Besides that, make a list of some plausible excuses to get out of phone conversations.”

“I will do that, but Sir, how will we start the conversation?”

“In due course, I will let you know. First, prepare as I told you. After I am confident of your ability to converse in the local dialect, we will start this operation.”

Bharat minutely listened to and practiced the local dialect. He also started mimicking a female voice. After five days, the Commanding Officer made

Bharat sit behind a screen in his office. Then he brought six local soldiers to his office. Without disclosing who was on the other side of the screen, the Commanding Officer asked Bharat some general questions. Bharat replied clearly and confidently in a female voice.

Then, the Commanding Officer asked the local soldiers, “Which part of the country does this female speaking from across screen belong to?”

The soldiers replied that the female was a local. The Commanding Officer then dismissed the soldiers.

Once the soldiers had left, he asked Bharat to come out from behind the screen and said, “I am very happy that you have picked up the local dialect very well. Good!”

“Thank you, Sir.”

“Now, about the operation. I have obtained the phone number of the terrorist leader Abu Ali. He has been operating in our area. He is very fond of women and keeps bothering local girls. I have a plan to trap him by exploiting this weakness.”

“Sorry, Sir. Again, at the risk of repetition, how will we start the conversation with him?”

The Commanding Officer took out a mobile phone from his drawer and said, “Now text to Abu Ali, *Garam ho jaate hain mere hont jab yaad aati hai mujhe tumhari. Woh sard raaton ki kiss, jism mein lehar si daur jati hai – Tamana* (My lips start burning with desire when I remember you. That passionate kiss in that cold night electrifies my body – Tamana).”

Accordingly, Bharat texted to Abu Ali. The Commanding Officer and he started talking about other things.

After five minutes, Abu Ali texted, “*Kaun* (Who)?”

“Sorry, wrong number, please, please, please, this message was not for you,” Bharat texted back.

“Madam/Sir, please delete my message,” Bharat texted again.

Without waiting for a reply, he texted again, “Madam/Sir, please delete my message, I am a college going girl, any leakage of my message will spoil my life.”

Within five minutes, the phone started ringing. It was a call from Abu Ali. Bharat looked at the Commanding Officer for directions.

Col Pammi instructed, “Pick up the phone and start pleading.”

Bharat picked up the phone and said in a female voice, “Hello, by mistake my message has gone to you, please delete it. I will be extremely grateful to you.”

“I have deleted the message,” replied Abu Ali.

“Sure? *Kasam* (you swear)?” asked Bharat.

“Yes, *Kasam* (I swear),” said Abu Ali.

“You will not tell anyone about this, please.”

“Yes, I will not tell anyone about this.”

“Where do you live? I want to come and thank you.”

“I am a man of God, I do not have a fixed address.”

“Are you a *fauji* (soldier)? I hate *faujies*.”

“No, I am not, which class are you studying in?” asked Abu Ali.

“I am in BA second year. Can I send some sweets to you to thank for the goodness to me?”

“No. I don’t want any sweets, but I want to taste the kiss you mentioned in the message. I think it will be very sweet.”

Bharat disconnected the call and said to the Commanding Officer, “Now, I think he has walked into our trap. He will bother me again with phone calls.”

“Do not pick up the phone three times. On the fourth time, pick up the

phone and tell him you will call him at night, as you are with your parents,” instructed the Commanding Officer.

At night, Bharat called up Abu Ali, who picked up in two rings.

Bharat asked him, “Tell me what is it? What do you want?”

“Nothing, I want just a kiss,” said Abu Ali.

“Who are you? Tell me your name?” asked Bharat.

“I can’t tell you, but please give me a kiss,” said Abu Ali.

“You are blackmailing me. Are you a *fauji*? Your accent is not local,” said Bharat.

“I am not local. I am not a *fauji*,” replied Ali.

“Then who are you? I beg you not to disturb me.”

“I am a *mujahid* (militant) from Sialkotan,” said Ali.

Bharat was silent.

“Are you there? You are not speaking?” said Ali again.

“I don’t know what to say.”

“Why, are you afraid of *mujahids*?”

“No, I love them. But I am very sure you are fooling me.”

“No, I am not telling a lie, I am a *mujahid*.”

“Okay, what is your name?”

“I am Abu Ali, the District Commander of JuuM here.”

“I don’t believe this. Let me think. I will call you tomorrow evening, same time,” said Bharat and disconnected the call.

The following night, Bharat called Abu Ali again. Ali was quick to pick up the phone.

Without any frivolous talks, Bharat said, “Are you *mujahid*? *Kasam*?”

“Yes, *kasam*, I told you, I am Abu Ali.”

“Lot of girls in my college fantasize about you.”

“Is it?”

“Yes, they keep saying that they want to sleep with a *mujahid*.”

“How about you?”

“I also want to, but there is a problem.”

“What is it?”

“I am told that *mujahids* smell badly because they do not have time to bathe.”

“Don’t worry. I will come to meet you after a good bath. Also, I will spray a lot of *itar* (perfume) on myself.”

“I will be looking forward to it.”

“So, when do we meet?”

“My college starts after two days. Then I will be able to come out of the house.”

“Where do we meet?”

“I will decide. Do you have a motorcycle? Can you come to *bazaar* on motorcycle?”

“I will see if I can manage a bike, but I cannot come to the *bazaar*.”

“I must come in a *burqa* so that people from my village cannot recognise me.”

“That is all right, but when we are alone, no *burqa*, no clothes.”

Bharat (Tamana) giggled and disconnected the phone call.



Abu Ali was sitting with two other terrorists, Waleed and Musa, while talking to Bharat (Tamana). He had put the phone on speaker-mode. The other two

were enjoying the conversation. When Bharat (Tamana) disconnected the call, Waleed said, “Boss, she appears to be a hot female, ring her up and get her photograph.”

Abu Ali rang up Tamana (Bharat) again and said, “Please send me one photograph of yours.”

Bharat immediately said, “Send me your postal address, I will send it.”

Abu Ali said, “That is not possible, should I come to your house?”

“Don’t worry, we are meeting soon, I will get my photo along,” said Bharat (Tamana) and hung up.

He also texted Ali, “I love you.”



Bharat told his Commanding Officer about the conversation. They war-gamed the location where Abu Ali could be called. Bharat would meet Ali in a *burqa* and carry a pistol.

On the appointed day, the quick reaction parties and early warning parties were discreetly positioned along the road. Abu Ali kept his date. He came on a motorcycle and passed by Bharat (Tamana) who was walking along the road wearing a *burqa*. He stopped two hundred meters ahead and called Bharat on his mobile. Bharat picked up the call.

Abu Ali said, “I am on a motorcycle two hundred meters ahead of you, come and sit on the pillion seat.”

“That place is in the open. Everyone will see me taking a lift, you move ahead by another two hundred meters and halt at the turning. No one will see me sitting behind you there,” said Bharat.

When Bharat reached the next turning, Ali was waiting on his bike. Bharat reached and sat behind him on the pillion seat.

As they moved, Ali said, “*Meri jaan chipak ke baitho* (My love, hold me tight).”



Bharat moved closer and said, “*Kahan le jaoge* (Where are you going to take me)?”

Ali said, “*Meri jaan aaj to jannat ki sair karaunga* (My love, I am going to take you for a tour to paradise).”

Bharat put his hand around Ali’s waist and started patting him around to check for any weapon, which Ali apparently liked. And yes, there was a pistol tucked in his waist. Bharat withdrew his hand and said, “What is this, Ali?”

“That is a pistol. You never know when I have to fight the *fauji* dogs.”

Bharat took out Ali’s pistol and dropped it.

“What are you doing? You dropped my pistol, you bitch,” said Ali.

Bharat thrust his pistol into Abu Ali’s ribs and said, “I am Captain Bharat sitting behind you. Now, do as I say. Turn around, and we are going to Battalion Headquarters of 75 NR. Any doubt?”

“No doubt,” said Ali and turned the bike around.

When they crossed Havildar Shiva, Bharat signalled him to inform everybody on the radio set about the situation. When they reached the Battalion Headquarter, Bharat said, “The gate will be open, just drive in and stop.”

At Battalion Headquarters, it only took around ten minutes of interrogation for Abu Ali to reveal that two of his fellow terrorists were in the Training and Development Institute (TDI) building, where they had planned to mass rape the so-called Tamana.

Commanding Officer asked Ali, “Have you mass raped other girls also in this area?”

“Yes, we had raped three other girls,” replied Abu Ali.

“What were their names?” asked Commanding Officer.

“Nilofer, Akhtara and Arifa,” replied Ali.

“These are the names of girls who were raped and killed in Fopian and Chak Villages. People were blaming the paramilitary forces and police for that.”

“Yes, we killed them as they were indulging in immoral activities. We then forced people to lodge an FIR against the paramilitary forces who had come for operations to that area on that day.”

“Would you have killed Tamana also?”

“Yes, if there was a female by that name. These Kashmiri females are very immoral.”

Instinctively, the Commanding Officer kicked Ali and said, “Mind your language, you are talking about our sisters. Another bad word about them and I will pump in ten bullets in your head.”

Ali cried in pain and then said, “Sorry!”

“Okay, your other two friends, are they still in the TDI building?”

“Yes, because no bullet has been fired, they may be thinking that I have taken Tamana somewhere else.”

Within half an hour, the 75 NR soldiers surrounded the TDI building. It was a multi-storied concrete building with fifty rooms on each floor. They asked all the students and officials to vacate. The TDI building *chowkidar* (watchman) was contacted, and he could confirm that the two terrorists were still inside.

All the parties were keeping a close watch on all the doors and windows of the TDI building. The party led by Captain Chhetri noticed someone peeping from a window on the second floor. They immediately opened fire on that window. The terrorists inside immediately retaliated against the fire. The Commanding Officer ordered all the parties to fire only when they saw the terrorists. But the terrorists were careful to stay undercover and not expose themselves.

The encounter went into the second day. At around nine in the morning,

Bharat's party on the north of building heard a voice from inside, "*Fauji*, *fauji*, please listen to me."

Naik Paul, who heard this, told Bharat, "Saab, someone is calling from inside."

Again, a voice was heard, "*Fauji*, please listen to me."

Bharat replied, "Tell me, what do you want to say?"

The voice said, "Please call your officer, I want to speak to him."

Bharat replied, "I am an officer speaking, say what you want to."

"*Fauji* Saab, I want to surrender."

"Who are you?"

"I am Waleed, a *mujahid*."

"So, do you want to surrender with your other accomplices?"

"No, I want to surrender alone."

"Which place do you belong to?"

"I am from Ismailabad."

"How many more terrorists are there with you?"

"Only one, his name is Musa, he is on the other side."

"Why do you want to surrender?"

"I don't want to waste my life. I was told that your political leaders have ordered you people to burn the bodies of *mujahids* who are killed. If I remain inside, you will burn the building."

"Do you think we are fools? If you didn't want to waste your life, you wouldn't have come to this place."

"I was brainwashed, they said here the army is not allowing locals to perform *Namaz*."

"So why this change of heart?"

“I have seen locals having a good time.”

“Have you been involved in killing *faujis*?”

“No, never.”

“You motivate your other friend also to surrender.”

“He will not agree.”

“Try it. I will give you twenty-four hours.”

“*Fauji*, please don’t disclose details of my surrender to any local civilian.”

“Why?”

“The word will reach my place, and people from the agency will kill my parents, brothers and sisters.”

“Okay, now go and motivate the other chap to surrender.”

“I will try.”



The next morning, at seven, the same voice was heard from inside again, “*Fauji Bhai*.”

“Yes, tell me, what do you want?” replied Bharat.

“My friend is not ready to surrender, should I come?”

“Okay, you throw out your weapon.”

“*Jee Janab* (Yes, Sir),” saying this, the terrorist threw out his weapon.

Bharat ordered his party on the radio set, “Now a terrorist will come out to surrender. Do not fire at him. He has already thrown out his weapon.”

Then he shouted to Waleed, “You can come out with your hands raised above your head.”

Waleed had come out about five meters from the building when the other terrorist Musa fired at him from inside. Waleed’s body fell forward. His head was blown off.

Bharat picked up the radio and told the Commanding Officer, “Sir, the terrorist who wanted to surrender had come out, but his accomplice fired at him and he is down on the ground.”

The Commanding Officer asked, “Is he alive? Can we resuscitate him by giving him medical aid?”

“No, Sir, his head has been blown off.”

“Roger, then don’t risk going near him, get Abu Ali here, and after firing a volley of rockets at the building, ask Ali to shout at Musa to come out and surrender.”

In one hour, Abu Ali was brought to the scene and asked to shout to the Musa.

“Musa Bhai, you have been surrounded from all sides. It is better to surrender,” shouted Ali.

“Ali, you are a traitor, I don’t want to speak to you,” retorted Musa from inside.

“You will get killed unnecessarily. It is better to save your life.”

“I have come here to attain martyrdom. You are going to die a coward’s death. That female must have brainwashed you.”

“There was no female; it was a ploy by the *faujis*.”

“Then you are not a good friend if you want me to surrender. If they have fooled you, they can always do the same to me. I would prefer to die here,” said Musa and then he said five to six sentences in Arabic, which Bharat and his party could not understand.

Ali turned to Bharat and said, “I am sure he will surrender. If you allow me to go near, I will be able to convince him.”

“What is the guarantee that you will not join him?”

“You allow me to go up to that drum lying there. If I take a step beyond it, then fire at me. Besides, my hands are tied behind my back. I can’t do

anything.”

The answer seemed to convince Bharat. He asked his soldiers to be on the lookout and fire at Abu Ali if he crossed the drum. Abu Ali moved behind the drum and started some conversation in Arabic with Musa.

After about two minutes, Ali shouted, “Don’t fire, he is coming out without a weapon to surrender.”

Everyone felt happy as the ordeal would come to an end. With this type of building, it could have taken them a couple of days to clear the building. Just then, they saw Ali darting towards the building. Before the soldiers could fire, Abu Ali was already inside the building. From inside, he joined ranks with Musa and started throwing grenades. Fortunately, everyone had immediately taken cover, and the grenades did not cause any harm to anybody.

Sheepishly, Bharat informed the Commanding Officer about this fiasco and expected to get a mouthful from him. But he was surprised to hear the Commanding Officer saying, “Such errors of judgement do occur on the battlefield. Concentrate on the next steps, and do not be in a hurry.”

It took them three more days to eliminate the two terrorists and clear the building. On completion of the operation, General Sunil came to 75 NR, and the Commanding Officer introduced Bharat to him.

“Sir, he is Captain Bharat. He is the one who planned and executed the whole operation of killing Abu Ali,” and then he went on to brief the General.

At dinner, Bharat confronted the Commanding Officer, “Sir, the whole operation was planned by you, why did you give the whole credit to me?”

“Bharat, in the army, Commanding Officers are supposed to take the flak and not credit. In case something had gone wrong, I would have taken full responsibility. I am sure you will do the same when you become a Commanding Officer,” replied Colonel Pammi.

“Yes Sir,” is all that Bharat could say. Suddenly, it aroused an ambition in him to become a Commanding Officer someday. He had never thought of it earlier because his father had made him vow that he would not extend his service beyond five years and join him in his flourishing business.



## STRIKE 10

Winters were setting in. The Commanding Officer decided that the frequency of ambushes by the Ghatak Platoons would be reduced to thrice a week. Bharat got a lot of time to read. Since he was now unsure about leaving the army, he started studying for Part D promotion examinations, which is a mandatory requirement for anyone to pick up the substantive rank of a Major. He was fascinated with military history, but he found that there were very few details of events at the tactical level. His free evenings also gave him a lot of time to talk to Anjali.

On one such night when he was engrossed in a call with Anjali, his buddy came to his room and said, "Commanding Officer Saab has called you."

"Where?" asked Bharat.

"To his office," said his buddy.

Bharat quickly dressed up in his combat dress and went to the Commanding Officer's office. He noticed that the Commanding Officer was intently listening to some conversation on the radio set. The Commanding Officer gestured for him to sit down and listen to the ongoing conversation. Bharat could hear Anil talking to the other surveillance detachment.

"Anil for Suba. The person behind has stopped again, can you see that? Over."

"Suba for Anil. Yes, I can see them, the one ahead has also stopped now. It appears that these people are cautiously leapfrogging to Mubarak's house."

"Anil for Tiger. Both Suba and me are watching the movement of these two people towards Mubarak's house. Hundred meters beyond his house is all jungle. I think these two are terrorists and they will stop at Mubarak's house, have meals and melt away in the jungle. Roger so far."



“Roger,” replied Commanding Officer.

“Anil for Tiger. We must cordon this house by four o’clock and search in the morning.”

“Anil, you just keep a watch. I will organise the search,” said the Commanding Officer. Then he turned towards Bharat and said, “Anil and his Subedar have been watching Mubarak’s house since nine o’clock, from two places across the valley. The light of the house has been switched on at half past nine. The surveillance parties had picked up the movement of two persons coming up the bridge at around midnight. From that bridge along the footpath, it takes just a few minutes to reach Mubarak’s house. But it is one hour past midnight now. These two persons are still moving. It appears to be a terrorist movement. Anil wants to cordon the house and search it today itself.”

“Sir, we had a fiasco at the bridge last time. Why can’t we wait for a few days to watch this movement at night and then launch the operation,” said Bharat.

“I also feel so. But Anil seems to be too excited. He wants to go and carry out the operation himself.”

“Shouldn’t you tell him to stop?”

“No, I think I should not curb his initiative. But at the same time, I am not confident of how he will conduct the operation. I want you to go and cordon the house. Be very deliberate. Mubarak has six daughters aged five to twenty-five years. I don’t want any complaints of any misbehaviour with the females. Both the Ghatak Platoons are ready; brief them properly. Take the photographs of the house. Anil and Suba also have these. This will ensure that you are all on the same grid. You should leave by half past one.”

Bharat got up and went to the parade hall where the Ghatak Platoons were ready. He briefed them about the whole situation and about their role. When they crossed the bridge, Anil confirmed that the two persons they were

following were already inside the house one person was sitting outside maybe as a lookout. By three in the morning, a loose cordon was established around 75 meters away from the house. They could see someone still sitting outside the house. They could also hear some commotion of female voices and a female crying very loudly every five to ten minutes.

Bharat and his party thought the terrorists inside the house were raping the females one by one and the other terrorist was standing on guard. He felt rage rising within him, but he told himself to keep calm. At a quarter past three, the cries turned into laughter and jubilation. A female came out and called, “Mubarak come inside. Congratulations, a son is born.”

It dawned on Bharat that they had been listening to the cries of a mother during childbirth. It was also clear now that the slow movement of two silhouettes coming up from bridge was because the local midwife was lame. He informed his party about this revelation. But they decided to hold their positions till the daylight.

Meanwhile , Anil on the radio set said, “Anil for Bharat, someone came out of the house, and the person on sentry duty has also moved into the house, now is the time to close in and storm the house. The terrorists will be surprised.”

Bharat replied, “Bharat for Anil, keep giving me inputs, I will carry out the operation as per the situation on ground.”

At half past five, Mubarak came out of the house with a lame old lady and shouted to his wife, “I will just go and leave *dai maa* (midwife) at her house.”

Bharat told his party to remain at their places. He walked out of his cover towards Mubarak. The sudden appearance of an army man in front of his house surprised Mubarak.

Bharat sensed the discomfort. He quickly said, “*Salam Walaikum Mubarak, Salam Walaikum khala* (aunt).”

The midwife and Mubarak replied, “*Walaikum Salam.*”

He told them, “We were patrolling this area, we heard someone shouting a baby boy is born, congratulations.”

“Thank you. Yes, my eldest daughter has delivered a baby boy. Come and have tea.”

“No thanks,” replied Bharat. He then took out a hundred rupee note and gave it to Mubarak.

“This is from our unit. May Allah give a long and happy life to the newborn.”

With this, he signalled his party to move. After five minutes, he could hear Anil complaining to the Commanding Officer on the radio set, “Sir, he has not even entered the house, and his party is moving back, the terrorists may still be inside.”

Before the Commanding Officer could say anything, Bharat came on air, “Bharat, for all stations. Stand down, I will brief you all when I touch the base. I repeat, all parties to stand down.”



One day, Bharat was sitting in the office of the Adjutant when a soldier entered his office and said, “Saab, I have been granted final bail. Please restore my pay by publishing Part-II Order.”

“Okay,” said Adjutant and then told the Head Clerk over the intercom, “Pradip has come back, he has got his final bail order, publish Part-II Order for restoration of his pay to 100%.”

Bharat couldn't suppress his inquisitiveness; he asked, “What happened, Sir, was he in jail?”

“Yes, he was, I have no time to tell you his story, as I am expecting calls from all the company commanders. You must sit with him in the waiting room and listen to his story,” said the Adjutant and then turned to the soldier to say, “Pradip, tell your story to Bharat Saab.”

Both Bharat and Pradeep moved to the waiting room. As soon as Bharat sat, he asked Pradip to tell his story.

Pradip narrated, “Saab, I was posted to this unit last to last year. I had left my wife at her parent’s place. I have a daughter who is three years old.”

“So, someone ill-treated your wife,” asked Bharat.

“No Saab, she got friendly with a boy who was working in my father-in-law’s shop. I came to know about this when I went on leave. I asked my wife not to do so, but she told me to go to hell. When I came back from the leave, I just wanted to kill myself. One day, I cocked my rifle and was about to shoot myself when the senior Subedar came and prevented me from doing so. I was marched up to the Commanding Officer for disciplinary action. The Commanding Officer asked me to explain why I was attempting suicide. I told him about my wife. The Commanding Officer listened to my story in detail, but he was not convinced. He thought I was using this story as an alibi to escape punishment. So he asked me to call up my wife in the presence of another officer and Subedar Major. He had switched on the speakerphone for everyone to listen to my conversation. I dialled my wife’s number.”

“Did your wife pick up the phone?” asked Bharat.

“Yes, because it was from a different number. I talked to her very politely and asked her to leave that boy named Debu. She said she would never leave him. I told her in that case, she should divorce me. She said she would be foolish to do that as she was getting decent maintenance allowance. Then I told her I would kill myself. To that, she said it would be good for her. Because then she can lead a comfortable life with Debu with the benefits received from the army. And she hung up the phone.”

Bharat could see tears rolling down Pradip’s eyes. He offered a glass of water to Pradip, who after a sip, resumed narrating his story, “The Commanding Officer told me that my wife must be angry with me, so we would call her again the following day. The next day, the Commanding Officer spoke to her and advised her. He told her that what she was doing

was not good and that she should try to move ahead in her married life. She told the Commanding Officer that she did not want to live with an impotent man like me. Once this conversation ended, the Commanding Officer suggested that I should go for a divorce. To which I replied that I would lose the custody of my daughter, whom I love a lot. Besides, the court case for divorce would drag on for years, and all the while, I would be paying for her expenses too. I told him that as there was no meaning in my life, I wanted to kill myself.”

Bharat couldn't resist saying, “Your situation is bad, but suicide is not the answer.”

Pradip said, “Someone in the gathering also suggested the same and said that it is not I who should lose my life but the person committing a sin should lose their life. I told him that I still love my wife and I feel that it is my duty to ensure my daughter gets her mother's care. Someone laughed at my predicament and jokingly said that I should kill that boy called Debu. I liked the idea and asked Commanding Officer to help me.”

“Did the Commanding Officer agree to help you?”

“No, he didn't, but I was obsessed with the idea. So, on my own, I decided to kill the boy by giving him sweets laced with poison. I went on leave and killed this boy.”

“That boy didn't suspect you?” asked Bharat.

“There was a little problem; I had gone to Debu masquerading as a Sardar Ji. When I was giving the poison-laced sweets to Debu, he identified me due to a tattoo on the back of my hand. I had to hit him immediately on his head. He fell and started making a lot of noise. At that time, I had to slit his throat.”

“Did the police catch you?” asked Bharat.

“I had gone to the village at night. I had run into Debu right away. No one saw me before and after. I came back to the unit.”

“So, the police got some evidence and arrested you?”

“The police came under a lot of pressure from politicians as the people started agitating after seeing the gory scene. Though there was no direct evidence against me, the police wanted to interrogate me as I had a fight with this boy in public during one of my leaves earlier.”

“I was sent to the police where they tried third-degree torture and everything else on me to confess, but I didn’t give in. Then a police officer named Shanti came and talked to me in my cell. I was mesmerised by her and narrated the truth. She said that she would not tell this to anyone. She also said she would not file a charge sheet against me because she had a mother like my wife who eloped with her paramour, and she was brought up by her father alone. All through her childhood, she had wished that her father had killed that paramour of her mother to get her mother back. After three months, they gave me interim bail since they could not produce any evidence. Last month, I was given the final bail.”

“What about your wife?”

“Since I was arrested, I had to be suspended from the army. As a result, my pay was reduced to one fourth. Out of this, very less was sent to my wife. Now, feeling the heat of scarcity of money, she shifted to my side. Though initially, she was the one who gave the statement to the police that I had a fight with Debu.”

“Is she talking to you now?”

“Yes, in her heart of hearts, she knows that I have murdered Debu. So she fears me and sweet talks to me a lot every day on the phone.”

Bharat thought about the vulnerability of the wives of soldiers. In the absence of care and attention of their husbands, others can steal their affections. But he couldn’t contemplate any remedy for such a situation.



# STRIKE 11

Captain Bharat was sipping his bed tea and thinking about the tasks, which he had to perform. Subedar Bhat came to his room and said, “Saab, the Nanda Company and the police have surrounded some terrorists in a house in Kheta Village.”

“Good, keep our Ghatak Platoons ready, they may ask for our help in case there is a situation.”

“Yes, Saab.”

“Do take the new portable through-wall radar (a radar which can detect movement of a person on the other side of a wall) along, so that we can get some idea what is going on inside the house.”

“Saab, it only gives blips. Is it of any use?”

“We will see as the situation demands. Any extra information can make a lot of difference in an operation.”

He had just finished his sentence when his phone rang. It was the Adjutant on the line, “Hi, Bharat. We have surrounded some terrorists. We may call for the Ghatak Platoons for entry into the house.”

“We are ready, Sir. I will wait for your orders.”

Bharat quickly started to get ready in anticipation of the upcoming operation.

At five past eleven, he got the call from the Adjutant, “Bharat, we need your help, move along with your troops to Kheta Village. The Commanding Officer is asking for both the Ghatak Platoons.”

Both Ghatak Platoons were on the move within two minutes. In another fifty minutes, they reached Kheta Village. Bharat deployed his men alongside

the Nanda Company troops, who were providing the outer cordon. He then moved to the site of the encounter with the guide sent by Major Shashi.

The Commanding Officer, Colonel Pammi, who was already at the site updated Bharat, “We have cordoned the village since two o’clock in the morning based on the information that three terrorists are hiding in the house of Abdullah. Around five in the morning, our men who formed the inner cordon were fired at. Havildar Noor was hit in his leg. We have held the cordon in place.”

“Are the militants still inside, Sir?”

“Yes, I am very sure.”

“Have we attracted any fire after Havildar Noor got injured?”

“No, but our stops have seen some suspicious movement as if someone was looking through the windows.”

“Where are the residents of the house?”

“Four members of the family are still inside, but they are not responding when their family members are calling out to them. It is probably a hostage situation.”

“Right, Sir, can I take Captain Chhetri with me to carry out a reconnaissance (recce)?”

“You can,” and he signalled Captain Chhetri to go with Captain Bharat.

Captain Bharat sent a guide to get his Ghatak Platoons to where Colonel Pammi was located. Meanwhile, he carried out preliminary recce by crawling to all the stops in the cordon and looking at the house from all the sides.

When he returned, he told Colonel Pammi, “Sir, it is very dangerous to storm the house without knowing the location of the hostages. We may end up killing some civilians.”

“I don’t want any civilian killed, whatever it may cost.”

“Sir, we have brought the through-wall radar. I will try to determine the



location of the hostages and terrorists by putting it on the wall of the house at different places.”

“Go ahead, but don’t get shot.”

“Right, Sir.”

By this time, Bharat’s Ghatak Platoon had arrived too. He prepared the radar, and with two of his men, he crawled up to the wall of the house. The radar could detect signatures of four bodies under the stairs of the house. He scanned the whole house, but could not find any other movement. Bharat suspected that the terrorists were not in the house. Perhaps they had got away. He crawled back to Colonel Pammi.

“Sir, I want to go around the cordon again.”

“Why? You will get shot.”

“Sir, I suspect that the terrorists are not inside the house.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Sir, I will clarify after I come back.”

Captain Bharat again took Captain Chhetri along and started crawling around the house to do a second check. After twenty minutes of recce, Captain Bharat came back and briefed Colonel Pammi and his party, “I think that the terrorists have moved out because I saw a magazine of an AK-47 dropped outside one of the windows of Abdullah’s house. I also saw some footprints going towards that green-coloured house.”

“Then why are the family members not responding from inside?”

“That is difficult to explain, Sir, but I feel we should carefully check out that green house before storming into Abdullah’s house.”

“Go ahead,” said Colonel Pammi.

Bharat asked Subedar Bhat and two of his soldiers to go and enter the green-coloured house with great stealth and look for terrorists. Nobody was to talk on the radio set to ensure that there was no sound. All communication

had to be done using text messages using the icom radio set. He planned to make a lot of noise and ruckus near Abdullah's house so that all the attention was diverted here, and Subedar Bhat's party could get inside the green-coloured house unnoticed.



Meanwhile, on the first floor of the green-coloured house, three terrorists were watching the activities of army surrounding Abdullah's house.

One of them said to their leader, "*Bhai* (brother), these two have crawled again, should I shoot them?"

"No, you idiot, the *faujis* do not know we are here. They still think we are in Abdullah's house."

"We have come for martyrdom; let us kill some *fauji* dogs."

"Keep quiet and watch the fun. By the way, have you properly gagged and locked up the owner of the house and his family in that room?"

"Yes, *bhai*, I have also taken all their mobiles."

"I want you to go down to the kitchen and get something to eat."

"Yes, *bhai*."

"But do not start eying the females of the house. You have earned us a lot of bad reputation. In fact, this may be the reason, why Abdullah or someone from his family tipped off the army."

"Don't worry, *bhai*, Abdullah will be punished soon. *Faujis* will put his house on fire, and he will be burnt inside with his family. I have tied and gagged his family members properly."

"Alright, Numan, now go and get something to eat."

A very confident Numan descended the stairs. As soon as he entered the kitchen, two soldiers and Subedar Bhat pounced on him, and immediately gagged him. They made sure that he could not make any noise. Subedar Bhat put his rifle to Numan's temple and asked him to answer his questions by

moving his head horizontally or vertically. Within five minutes, they knew that there were two more terrorists upstairs and the house owners were locked up. Subedar Bhat texted Captain Bharat about the situation.

Captain Bharat texted back, “I will create more noise and activity to keep their attention towards me; you go ahead and kill the other two terrorists.”

After tying up the terrorist, Subedar Bhat and the two soldiers moved to the upper floor without making the slightest sound. They saw two terrorists sitting near the window and watching the operation as if enjoying a movie show. As two army men got to the top, one of the planks of the floor creaked. One of the terrorists turned back and, on seeing the soldiers, picked up his AK-47 to fire. Subedar Bhat and his companion were able to react quickly and put two bullets each through the heads of each of the terrorists. Both terrorists died on the spot.

Subedar Bhat texted Captain Bharat, “Two terrorists killed, one apprehended.”

Captain Bharat replied, “Good, the party here will continue the diversion operation. I am coming there.”

When Captain Bharat reached the green-coloured house, Subedar Bhat had freed the family members. They were frightened but very thankful.

Captain Bharat told the head of the house, “Two terrorists have been killed on the first floor, and one has been captured in your kitchen. I hope there are no more terrorists inside your house.”

The owner was a very well respected and educated person. He said, “Saab, there were only three of them. They made our life hell. We are very thankful to you.”

Captain Bharat ordered Subedar Bhat, “Saab, ask the third terrorist if he has any accomplice left in Abdullah’s house.”

Subedar Bhat started to move towards the kitchen, but the house owner said, “Saab, don’t worry; I guarantee you that there were only three terrorists.

You do not have to fire a single bullet to clear Abdullah's house."

"I take your word. But I will still have to search Abdullah's house."

Captain Bharat was about to move out of the green-coloured house when one of the girls whom his party had rescued fell on his feet. She was the eldest daughter of the house.

She said, "Saab, I have a request as your younger sister. Please do me a favour."

"Please get up and say whatever you want to," said Captain Bharat.

"Saab, please kill the third terrorist, they are all very cruel and inhuman. They have been raping me and the other girls of this area. As revenge, I want to see him dead."

Captain Bharat thought for a moment and then said, "Sister, I can't do that. Killing someone in cold blood is against my teachings and principles."

But the girl insisted and started crying. She said, "If you don't want to kill him, then please let me kill him."

Captain Bharat saw the tears in her eyes. He said, "Okay, his weapon is there, you have just two minutes."

Captain Bharat was quite certain the girl would not do anything. To his astonishment, the girl walked up to the weapon in the kitchen. Bharat and his soldiers followed her. She picked up the gun and fired two shots in the groin of the terrorist. The terrorist was still gagged. He could not make any real sound, but his eyes nearly popped out in pain. She took a kitchen knife and slit the throat of the terrorist. In no time, he was dead. She then spat on the dead body of the terrorist and wiped off the splatter of blood from her face.

They wound up the operation. The next day, the headlines in a local newspaper were,

**"THOUSANDS TURN UP AT THE LAST RITES TO PAY RESPECT TO THREE MUJAHIDS."**

Captain Bharat wondered about the whitewashing of reality in the media and the dark truths of these sick individuals, passing themselves as Jihadis. And amidst this entire situation, the hardships endured by women of the area.



## STRIKE 12

At lunch one day, the officers saw their Commanding Officer visibly upset about something.

Captain Bharat asked him, “Sir, you seem to be upset, what happened?”

“These 78 NR and 28 Para Commando battalions are repeatedly asking to operate in our area to kill terrorists in Batangi Village and in Khooni Nallah. This means there are terrorists operating in that area, but we do not know or have not been able to do anything.”

“Don’t worry, Sir, we will get them. Besides, we can always leak a message to the civilians that we are launching operation so that other units do not get the terrorists,” said Captain Bharat.

“That is unethical; we should concentrate our energies on getting the terrorists rather than disrupting the operations of other battalions.”

“We will do that, Sir,” said Captain Bharat sheepishly.

“You take Subedar Bhat along, and in the next ten days, talk to at least twenty-five people from Batangi Village individually. Then identify 3-4 houses where we are likely to see the terrorist movement at night.”

Over the next ten days, Captain Bharat and Subedar Bhat extensively talked to people of Batangi Village. They found out that the locals did not come out due to fear and the curfew at night. But they did hear dogs barking as if someone was moving around in the village. From the pattern of dogs barking, Bharat inferred that three houses near the primary school needed to be watched.

The next day, Bharat took photographs of the houses and went up to the Popra and Skipper Posts to brief the surveillance parties. On the fourth night, the surveillance party at Skipper Post observed the suspicious movement of

two persons near a house identified earlier. These people entered the house and were inside till three in the morning. At that time, they came out of the house and started moving uphill. But after following the movement for about two hundred meters, the surveillance party lost track as their thermal imager developed a snag. The other surveillance party was still looking at the house.

Bharat called the Commanding Officer after forty minutes and gave him the situation report.

“Let me have a look at the photographs, just hold,” replied the Commanding Officer.

After five minutes, the Commanding Officer came back on the phone, “Bharat, you relax for the day. We will launch an operation tomorrow night if we get to see the movement again.”

“Right, Sir, but please send two more surveillance parties here,” said Bharat.

“I will do that. What I think is that these terrorists must have moved up and crossed the hill. The other side of the hill is all forested. So, they may have a hideout in the forest. Even if it is not the case, when we see the movement again, we will place our ambushes along the crest line. Simultaneously, we will place small parties a kilometer below the village in the Khooni Nallah. As soon as the ambushes at crest line are placed, we will fire from the Khooni Nallah. This will scare the terrorists to move up and get into the ambushes.”

“Sir, should I come down to go for ambushes on the crest line?”

“No, you just organise surveillance. Ambushes will be laid by Major Shashi from Nanda Company, and the party from Dhara Company will move to the Khooni Nallah.”

“Okay, Sir,” said Bharat.

The next day, two more surveillance parties reached the Skipper Post. Bharat got them organised and deployed for the next night. At around half

past ten, they could see the movement of terrorists again.

Bharat informed the Commanding Officer, “Bharat for Tiger; movement noticed at the same house as yesterday.”

“Tiger for Bharat, okay wait.”

“Tiger for Nanda, move four ambushes on the track six hundred meters above the village parallel to the ridgeline and place ambushes at Point Z, Point P, Point T and Point X.”

“Tiger for Dhara, move one party as decided to Khooni Nallah, start firing as soon as Nanda confirms their parties have been placed. All stations, confirm message, understood?”

Bharat, Dhara and Nanda confirmed that they understood the message.

Bharat took out the photograph and saw the points indicated by Commanding Officer. Then he looked through the thermal imager to figure out how those points might look at night. He now dedicated one thermal imager to follow the movement of his own soldiers coming from Nanda. Fifteen minutes to midnight, they could see the first party coming and occupying the ambushes. In next twenty-five minutes, all parties were deployed.

Nanda Company Commander confirmed to the Commanding Officer, “Nanda for Tiger, my parties are in location, over.”

“Tiger for Nanda, okay. Tiger for Dhara, are you also in position?”

“Dhara for Tiger, my party is in location.”

“Tiger for Bharat. Put all the devices on generator power to save on the batteries and report in five minutes.”

In the next five minutes, Bharat switched all the thermal imagers to generator power. The generator had rested for an hour. He was certain the devices would now work for four hours on the generator. In addition, they had the battery backup for four hours in case the generator developed a snag.



He gave a report to the Commanding Officer, “Bharat for Tiger, all devices shifted to generator, all ready to work for four hours uninterrupted. Over.”

“Roger, Dhara, fire ten bursts from your location in nallah, out.”

Within one minute, Bharat heard the firing sound from down below. They were looking at the village. No movement could be seen for five minutes. Then the door of the house, where those shadows had entered, opened. Two men slipped out cautiously to move upwards. When they were just four hundred meters short of the ambush at Point X, Bharat guessed that the terrorists had taken a track that was two hundred meters east of the ambush.

He quickly informed the ambush about his assessment, “Bharat for Point X, the terrorists are likely to go two hundred meters east of your current location, so move east.”

“Point X for Bharat. Okay.”

Bharat saw the ambush moving in the next three minutes. But by that time, the terrorists had come close, and they had sensed the troop movement. They opened fire at the Point X party. There was no damage. Point X party fired towards the terrorists. Bharat could see terrorists running down only for two minutes. Bharat briefed the Commanding Officer about the unfolding situation.

The Commanding Officer quickly came on the radio and said, “Tiger for all stations, remain at the place you are in. No pursuit of terrorists at this time.”

Throughout the night, all the surveillance devices kept searching the area, but they could not see any terrorist movement.

In the morning, the Brigade Commander called up Bharat. He said, “Bharat, I believe you had a contact with the terrorists, last night.”

“No Sir, I was just carrying out surveillance, it was the troops from Nanda Post who had a contact, but we missed them.”

“What happened?” asked Brigadier BDB Singh.

Bharat narrated the whole incident to Brigadier BDB Singh.



Shortly after this conversation, the battalion exchange received another call from the Brigade Commander. The Battalion Exchange Operator informed Col Pammi that Brigadier BDB Singh, the Commander, wanted to speak to him.

As soon as the Commander came on the line, Col Pammi said, “Good morning, Sir. All okay here.”

“What, all okay? You missed some terrorists last night,” thundered Brigadier BDB Singh.

“Yes, Sir, but I will get them soon.”

“Do you think they will be stupid enough to remain in the same area?”

“Yes, Sir, many operations have been carried out against these terrorists, but they remain there. It appears that they have some good hideout or an excellent early warning system organised there. 78 NR has also carried out operations in this village just last week. The Para Commandos have tried their luck too. But for some reason, these terrorists remain in this area.”

“You didn’t think that it was appropriate to inform me about last night’s operation?” asked Brig BDB Singh.

“I was going to give a full situation report once the search was over. The search is expected to last for another two hours,” replied Col Pammi.

“How could you miss the terrorists. Better pull up your socks. I am getting an impression that you want to operate independently!” retorted Brig BDB Singh.

“No, Sir. We coordinate with Para and 78 NR,” said Col Pammi defensively.

“SHO Charan Singh came to me yesterday. He was saying you have some unauthorised weapons, which you give to local boys, who promise you that

they will kill the terrorists. It is all illegal,” said Brig BDB Singh.

“That is a complete fabrication. I do not have any unauthorised weapons. I am a Tiger who loves to kill my prey with my own hands. This SHO has some axe to grind with me. He had requested me to include his name in the after-action report of our last successful operation. I refused as he was not there on the scene. He has been trying to get back at me,” said Col Pammi.

“By which date will you be able to kill the two terrorists in Batangi? I need this success early,” said Brigadier BDB Singh.

“No date, Sir, but I assure you it will be soon,” replied Col Pammi.

“You must do it. It is only your unit that is conducting successful operations. I rely on you,” said Brigadier BDB Singh and ended the conversation abruptly.



After half an hour, Bharat got a call from the Commanding Officer, “Did Brigade Commander call you?”

“Yes, Sir,” replied Bharat.

“What did he say?”

“He was asking about the missed contact. I told him the details,” replied Bharat.

“Okay, the Brigade Radio Monitoring Company must be listening to our radio conversation. The Commander bullshitted me also. He was asking how we could miss the terrorists. Well, don’t worry about it, we will keep tracking these terrorists and get them.”

Bharat was perplexed at the Commander for asking how they could miss the terrorists. He, however, decided to discuss with other officers about how they could have avoided the failure.

No movement of terrorists could be noticed the next three nights. But the Commanding Officer insisted on continuing the surveillance operations. The

Commanding Officer must have felt that there was fatigue setting in. So, on the fourth evening, the Commanding Officer climbed and reached the Skipper Post. He inspected the surveillance devices and, after having an early dinner, remained with the surveillance party.

At half past eleven, they saw the movement of terrorists again. They entered a house near the primary school. After three hours, the two figures came out of the house and started moving up along a track. After going up three hundred meters, they turned left and moved towards a longish jungle patch coming down from the main ridge. Once they entered the jungle, the surveillance party lost track of them. They assessed that the terrorists probably had a hideout in that jungle patch.

Bharat asked the Commanding Officer, “Sir, this jungle patch is just 800 meters long and 300 meters wide, should we carry out cordon of this forest and search in the morning?”

“No, we must watch these movements for some days. It may happen that we are able to ambush them on the way,” said Commanding Officer.

“You are right, Sir. We will observe them for a few days. Establish a pattern of the route and time.”

“Bharat, gather all the members of the surveillance parties. I want to talk to them.”

Within fifteen minutes, all the surveillance parties were with the Commanding Officer. He gave them a motivational talk for ten minutes.

During the next three nights, almost the same type of movement was observed. The surveillance parties would track the terrorists to the jungle patch and then lose them as soon as they entered the forest.

Bharat thought that he needed more information about the jungle patch. The next day, he went on a patrol to observe the jungle patch from various angles. He identified a bump-shaped feature about a kilometer from Dhara Post. From this location, some open patches in the jungle were seen. However,

from there, he could not see the village.

Bharat clicked photographs of the area and moved down to the Dhara Company. He asked Captain Chhetri to get some printouts of these photos with some alphabets annotated on them. He despatched one photo each to the Commanding Officer and the Nanda post through porters.

Then he briefed the Commanding Officer on the phone, “Hello Sir. This is Bharat, I am speaking from Dhara Post.”

“Okay, Bharat. What are you doing in Dhara Post? You should be resting at Skipper.”

“Sir, I have come here to do some day-time reconnaissance of the area. I thought I would have a look at the jungle patch from different angles. I have found a location from where some clear patches are seen in the jungle. I had clicked a photo too. I had sent you a copy about two hours ago. Have you received it?”

“No, not yet, but tell me, what do you want?”

“Sir, when these terrorists move towards the jungle patch, there should be a surveillance party at the bump-shaped feature near Dhara Post to observe this area of the jungle. Some movement in clear patches may be seen. I have explained it to Captain Chhetri. He also wants to be part of this operation.”

“Okay, hand over the phone to Chhetri.”

Bharat gave the phone to Chhetri.

The Commanding Officer asked Chhetri, “Have you understood?”

“Yes, Sir.”

“When I get the photo, I will talk to you. Meanwhile, when Bharat is going back, you go with him to the bump-shaped feature, so that you are able to identify the location and the route to it at night.”

“Yes, Sir. I will do that,” replied Chhetri.

That night, one surveillance party picked up the movement of the terrorists.

The movement was in a house about 250 meters away from the cluster of houses they had been watching. This was the house of the *sarpanch* (headman) of the village. Bharat recalled that his name was Riyaz. He remembered this from a meeting of all sarpanches that had been called at Dhara Post to decide on the projects required through Sadbhavana (Goodwill) Fund.

At two o'clock, all the surveillance parties could see the terrorists moving back towards the jungle. Bharat called, "Bharat for Chhetri, over."

"Chhetri for Bharat. Pass."

"Bharat for Chhetri, those two shadows have started moving towards the jungle patch. They will be there in approximately fifteen minutes, switch on your thermal imagers," instructed Bharat, considering that it takes about seven minutes for the device to be operational.

"Chhetri for Bharat, Wilco."

After the terrorists had entered the jungle patch, Bharat told his parties, "We will watch the area for ten minutes more, and then we will pack up for the day."

They had started switching off their thermal imagers when Chhetri came on air.

"Chhetri for Bharat, I can see two images coming out of the jungle and moving further west."

"Keep watching; I think they must be heading towards Nanda Village, which is three kilometers from there."

In the meanwhile, he told his surveillance parties, "No rest, gentlemen. Switch on the devices; the terrorists are moving towards the Nanda Village across the jungle patch."

It took them ten minutes to make these thermal imagers functional again. Bharat himself was looking through one. He called out, "Bharat for Chhetri. I am looking at the track going to Nanda Village; I cannot see anything."

“Chettri for Bharat. After the jungle patch, if you move along the track for six hundred meters, you can see two big trees, these terrorists came up to those trees. Then, they left the track and came down hundred meters. You can see a big rock there. They are sitting near that rock. Since you have not seen their movement, it will be difficult for you to make out, but they are there.”

Bharat took out the photo and explained the location of the rock to the other surveillance parties who were trying to locate the terrorists. There was no further movement noted until Chettri came on air at four in the morning to report, “Chettri for Bharat. Now you can see the terrorists moving near the rock.”

“Yes, I can see them, but the movement has stopped again.”

“Yes, Sir. Even I can see only two spots.”

“Bharat for Chhetri. I do not see what they are doing near that rock. This area has very little vegetation; they cannot have a hideout there.”

“Yes, Sir. But I have lost even those two spots now.”

After sunrise, all the parties strained their eyes on the telescope but could not find anything amiss. For the next four days, they were able to trace the movements up to the big rock but not beyond.

On the fifth day, the Commanding Officer asked Chettri to discreetly survey the rock area in the daylight and click photographs from different angles. He also asked Bharat to come down to Dhara Company and watch the rock area with the surveillance party at the new location.

The next night, as soon as the two terrorists entered the forest patch, Bharat and his party moved into the selected position and switched on the thermal imager an hour past midnight.

Chettri called him on the radio, “Chettri for Bharat. Can you see the two terrorists sitting near the rock?”

“Yes, I can see them,” replied Bharat.

At a quarter past three, Chettri said, “Sir, I have lost the two as before.”

“I have seen them crawling under the rock, it seems there is a hideout,” said Bharat.

The Commanding Officer, who was listening to the conversation, came on air. “Tiger for Bharat, are you sure you have seen them going under the rock?”

“Yes, Sir. I am very sure,” replied Bharat.

“We will conduct this operation today. I will ask the exchange to bring Nanda Post Commander and both Ghatak Platoon Commanders on air too.”

After five minutes, the Commanding Officer came up on air and said, “Tiger for all stations. The information about terrorists is that they were in the village until 2:00 AM. After that, they came to the rock area where they were sitting near the rock till 03:15 AM. And now, they have gone underneath the rock. It is assessed that there may be a hideout there. I am very sure the terrorists will come out at around 4:00 AM to offer *Namaz*. Then, they will go off to sleep at around 4:30 AM. As they will be fast asleep, it will be prudent to surround them by 6:00 AM. Nanda Company will surround the hideout. While surrounding the rock, it will be ensured that everyone remains at least two hundred meters away from the rock to avoid casualties due to fire by the terrorists.”

Everyone acknowledged his instructions.

“Chettri and Bharat. You will keep watching the rock area. As soon as the terrorists come out for *Namaz*, you will inform us all,” he concluded.

Both Chettri and Bharat acknowledged his orders. As assessed, at four o’clock, both the terrorists came out; it could be inferred from their movements that they were offering *Namaz*. After ten minutes, they went back into the hideout. The Commanding Officer ordered the Nanda Company to move. At around six in the morning, the rock area was surrounded.

At that time, the Commanding Officer asked Maj Shashi, “I am sure we



will not be able to fire into the hideout. But just to probe that the terrorists are still there, fire two Light Machine Gun bursts at the base of the rock. Other parties should be behind some cover.”

After two minutes of firing on the rock, terrorists fired back towards the Light Machine Gun party.

Maj Shashi and the rest of them were very happy. It was certain now that terrorists were there inside. Patience was to be the name of the game from then on.

They kept firing intermittently until ten o’clock, but the terrorists were not neutralised. It was then the Commanding Officer ordered, “Bharat, you are a sniper marksman. Get a sniper party from Dhara Post and deploy yourself five hundred meters away from the rock at a place where you can get a clear view of the entrance of the hideout. When the terrorists pop up a little to return fire, you take them on.”

In another two hours, Bharat and a sniper team were in a place where they could see the head of the terrorist periodically coming out of the hideout.

He informed the Commanding Officer, “Sir, I am at a place where I can take on the terrorists. Permission to go ahead.”

The Commanding Officer replied, “You will have to take him on with one shot only. If you miss him, he will not show up. You should practice fire on some other point and figure out any adjustments.”

Captain Bharat tested the accuracy of his sniper rifle by aiming towards the jungle on the other side to get an idea of the wind conditions, elevation and range variations.

As soon as he was confident, he called Major Shashi, “Sir, now fire a long burst at the base of the rock and then stop. I will take on the terrorist who pops out.”

Major Shashi did accordingly. Bharat could see the bullets ricocheting from the rock. A minute later, Bharat saw a barrel protruding from the hole

beneath the rock and then a head appeared. Bharat aimed and fired. The bullet was right on the target; he could see blood splattering on the rock. There was no further moment or response from the rock. They waited for an hour. Maj Shashi, along with his buddy Sepoy Bagh Hussain, crawled to the rock.

After taking cover, they shouted, “We know you are inside. Are you coming out or should we blow up the hideout with explosives?”

“Please do not do that. I want to surrender. But I cannot come out as the passage has been blocked by the body of my friend,” shouted the terrorist stuck inside.

“If that is the case, we will help you, but first, throw out your weapon.”

Within a few seconds, the second terrorist threw out the weapon.

“Now throw out your grenades and ammunition,” demanded Maj Shashi.

The terrorist again obeyed this.

“You belong to which place?” shouted Maj Shashi.

“I belong to Marha, and I am son of Shamsdin.”

“We will get your father and brothers to pull you out. Don’t try anything funny.”

“I swear, I will not do anything,” replied the terrorist.

It took three hours to get the relatives of the terrorist. With great effort, the body of the dead terrorist was pulled out, and then the other terrorist came out and surrendered.

Upon interrogation, he disclosed that the local separatist leader had been giving them the orders. Their tasks were, generally, to go and threaten the local population at night. The separatist leader looked after all their needs and administration. The unit lodged an FIR against the separatist leader who was arrested by the police the next day.



## STRIKE 13

With the conclusion of the operation, the next afternoon, a celebration was held in the form of a *Barakhana* (feast), for all the troops. Later in the evening, a party was also organised at the Officers' mess. The special highlight was Bharat mimicking the Adjutant and the Commanding Officer.

Life in NR was split into two parts. Training and operations. As the Ghatak Platoon Commander, Bharat took his training very seriously. One day, Bharat was in the training area when the Adjutant called him.

As soon as Bharat entered his office, the Adjutant said, "Old man wants to see you."

"What happened, Sir?"

"I think you have created a fuck up. He has asked me to keep a party ready for you to go to Marha Post."

"But I have not done anything wrong. I hope he is not unhappy at my mimicking him in the party that day?"

"It is something else, but the old man would like to disclose it himself," said Adjutant with a mysterious smile.

Bharat saluted and entered Col Pammi's office, who smiled at him and asked him to sit down. Bharat felt relieved to see the Commanding Officer smiling.

Then he was confused when the Commanding Officer said, "Bharat, you pack up and go to Marha Post today. Maj PP Singh is preparing for the staff college entrance examination. We need an officer to move around in that company."

"Sir, I have to carry out some urgent documentation on the internet, which

is available here only; and sufficient internet speed is available at night, so can I go tomorrow?" asked Bharat.

"No, you move within the next two hours," ordered Col Pammi.

Bharat was a bit surprised at the abruptness of the Commanding Officer. But he did not want to question the Commanding Officer. He got up, saluted and turned to leave.

As he approached the door, the Commanding Officer asked, "Hold on and sit down. Don't you want to know why this hurry?"

"I want to know, but one cannot doubt the judgement of the Commanding Officer."

"Sycophancy?"

"No, Sir, you know I will not indulge in that."

"Actually, we have a problem. You know Mr. Querishi?" asked the Commanding Officer.

"Yes, Sir," replied Bharat.

"Well, you see, Mr. Qureshi's daughter has taken a fancy for you. She has been dropping love letters for you in the suggestion box kept outside our post for the civil population to air their grievances."

"Sir, I can assure you that I am not involved with this or any other girl. You can take my word for that. As you know, Anjali is waiting for me."

"I believe you. But you should know that all these letters were received by us and never were delivered to you. They are all here."

Commanding Officer took out a bundle of letters and placed them on top of his table.

"So, many. These must have been written over several days!"

"Yes, the earliest one came about two months ago."

"What has she been writing?"

“All sorts of girlish stuff. Like, you look like Shah Rukh Khan to her. Your biceps and six packs excite her when she sees you playing badminton. She falls flat when you wear a black leather jacket with the red scarf. She has bought a pair of binoculars to watch you from her house on top of the hill, which overlooks our post.”

“Sir, we should have put an end to this.”

“Yes, we should have. But we had a vested interest. So, we let her continue,” clarified Col Pammi.

“What vested interest, Sir?”

“She is highly concerned about your well-being and safety. So, she has also been advising you in her letters not to go to certain places where she has confirmed information of the presence of terrorists. This has helped us in chasing the terrorist. In fact, one day she delivered a letter directly to the sentry and told him to give it to you immediately. That day, she wrote that you should not go towards Danna Village as a landmine had been planted in the culvert, south of the village. Remember that day, we actually recovered an improvised explosive device there.”

“What is her age, Sir?”

“She is just thirteen years old.”

“That is an idiotic child. But what has happened now? Why all this hurry?”

“In order to put an end to all this, we had sent her a letter informing that you are getting married the week after next. We were hoping that she would back off at the news of your marriage. However, this ploy of ours misfired.”

“What, Sir?”

“She sent a letter written with her blood, saying she wants to commit suicide in front of your eyes. So, before she comes out of her school today, I want you to leave this place for at least a month. I had called Mr. and Mrs. Qureshi and explained the situation to them. They feel that they will be able to handle her if you are not around for some period of time.”



The month flew by. Towards the end of this month, Col Pammi called all his officers to the Battalion Headquarters. After a long time, everybody had dinner together. The next day, Commanding Officer called for a conference of all the officers.

He started the conference with an assessment of the last operation, “We have killed a terrorist and apprehended one after a number of days of hard work. I am not happy with the result compared to the work put in.”

The Second-in-Command said, “Sir, I feel it was an excellent operation. We neutralised two terrorists without any loss on our side.”

“Yes. We had some success, but that success could have been exploited further.”

“Sir, you mean we should have interrogated the terrorist more before handing him over to the police?”

The Commanding Officer drifted into deep thoughts. After a brief silence, he spoke again, “We will go over this some other time. As of now, I have something else that I want to talk about. I have been working on another target. Let us start our next project from tomorrow. Are you all ready?”

“Yes, Sir,” said everyone in unison.

The Commanding Officer continued, “There are two terrorists in Mir Topa Village. Let us get them next. I am told one of them is Abu Huzief. He is having an affair with Nazia. She has been working as my informer too. Her main motivation for giving information was to get bottles of liquor from me. I stopped giving her liquor bottles as I came to know that she passes on these to Abu Huzief.”

“Sir, why can’t we add poison to the liquor? It can kill Abu Huzief when he consumes it,” said Bharat.

“The idea can be disastrous. What will happen if she passes on the bottle to some innocent person? Even her affair with Abu Huzief may be an

overstatement by people. She may be interacting with the terrorists out of compulsion. Actually, her father-in-law Havildar Bashir, an ex-serviceman, had murdered his friend Sub Inspector Shabir, about four years ago. It is believed that Sub Inspector Shabir had illicit relations with Nazia's mother-in-law Tahira. Something went wrong. Eventually, Sub Inspector Shabir ended up dead. Now, Sub Inspector Shabir's sons have accumulated a lot of wealth in last two years. With the help of this money and the contacts of their family in police, they have been creating problems for the family of Havildar Bashir. As a counter, Nazia is helping or patronising the terrorists."

"Sir, I know about this Nazia. My predecessor had briefed me about her. He very categorically told me to keep away from her. All she wants is the money. For that, she is even ready to sleep with anyone. Her information is totally fabricated and unreliable," added the Second-in-Command.

"I know that, but do we have any other informer from the area? People are tight-lipped. Maj Brar, it is your company's area of responsibility. Tell me, how many reliable informers do you have?" asked Col Pammi.

"None, Sir. The population is all grey," replied Brar.

"In that case, we have to rely on Nazia. We have to spend a lot of time talking to her to get some useful leads," directed Col Pammi.

The next day, Nazia was called. When she was in the waiting room, Commanding Officer called for Bharat. The Second-in-Command and Maj Brar were already there in the office. When Bharat entered and saluted, the Commanding Officer said, "Bharat, come. We have called Nazia. I am setting up my video camera on the laptop. She will be made to sit on the chair in front. Once she has been in the office for about two minutes, you enter the office and ask me to give money for the source. I will give you the keys to this cupboard. You open this cupboard and take out wads of currency worth about ten lakhs lying on the top shelf. Do not touch the currency lying on the lower shelves. Those are all dummy bundles to depict an abundance of currency. Very deliberately count the currency you have taken out. Make

some mistakes in counting, and count again. One wad has a hundred rupee note less. You bring it to my notice, and I will give you one more note.”

“Sir, why this activity in front of her?” asked Bharat.

“We want to look at the hunger for money in her eyes. It may entice or tempt her to work for us wholeheartedly. To observe her reactions, Second-in-Command and Maj Brar will be sitting behind this one-sided glass screen,” said Commanding Officer.

“All right, Sir, but why this web camera? Will she not come to know?” asked Bharat.

“I am going to conceal it in this pen stand. We want a record of the conversation. Since she is a female of ill repute, she may lay an allegation that I tried to molest her, if it works to her gain. Therefore, to be on the safer side, I always interact with females under camera and with at least two people watching through the one-way glass. After all, I have a lot to lose in case any false allegation is levelled against me.”

“But Sir, she can always say that the recording is of some other day.”

“For that purpose, you will ask me what date you should sign on the receipt for that money. I will frown at you and tell you to sign with today’s date. After signing the receipt, you tell me that you have signed the receipt for 21 June. We do this to ensure that the date gets recorded in the video. All this while, I will keep talking to her.”

After ten minutes, Nazia was called in. As decided, Bharat walked in and asked for the money. As he started counting the currency, Bharat could feel Nazia’s discomfort looking at the money. Col Pammi spoke to her about her family, and then he started asking her about the terrorists.

In between, she couldn’t control herself and asked the Commanding Officer, “Is this money for the person who gave you information about the terrorist killed at Batangi Village?”

“Yes, we must honour our word,” replied the Commanding Officer. And



then, he continued to ask information of Abu Huziefah.

In the end, the Commanding Officer gave her two thousand rupees. As soon as she left, Commanding Officer called for a conference of Second-in-Command, Maj Brar and Bharat.

He told them, “We have three pieces of information to work on. Firstly, there are two terrorists in Mir Topa Village according to Nazia. Secondly, they do visit the house of *Lambardar* Shiekh Aziz. Thirdly, Mushtaq the *Gujjar* has some connection with the terrorists.”

“But Sir, Mushtaq’s house is just four hundred meters away from Mir Topa Post. His house is directly visible from our post. I am sure he must be going to some far off place to meet the terrorists. That leaves *Lambardar*’s house. We should carry out surveillance on his house to catch these terrorists,” said Maj Brar.

“Bharat, take two surveillance parties to Singla Post of 82 NR. From there, you will be able to look at whole of the Mir Topa Village. Ensure all the equipment and batteries are in working condition,” instructed Col Pammi.

After watching Mir Topa Village for six nights, Bharat reported to the Commanding Officer, “Sir, there is no sign of terrorists in *Lambardar*’s house. Maybe we should start looking at Mushtaq’s house.”

“What is the point in looking at a house which is just four hundred meters away from our post? I think you should continue watching *Lambardar*’s house,” replied the Commanding Officer.

“Yes Sir,” said Bharat.

Bharat decided to start watching Mushtaq’s house on his own. After three days, Bharat reported to the Commanding Officer, “Sir, I am sorry, I defied your orders. I started watching Mushtaq’s house three days ago, and something very interesting has emerged.”

“Now that you have already said sorry, please go ahead. Tell me, what is it?” asked the Commanding Officer.

“Sir, there is a small pine forest just hundred meters away from Mushtaq’s house. One member of Mushtaq’s house goes to this pine forest thrice a day at dawn, dusk and afternoon.”

“Is this pine forest towards our Mir Topa Post?” asked Commanding Officer.

“No, it is away from the post. It will be around five hundred meters from our post.”

“Click a photograph of this pine forest and the area around, write it on a CD and send it to me by evening through a porter. Remember to password protect this and inform Adjutant about the password.”

Bharat clicked the photographs as instructed, and sent them over to the Commanding Officer. After studying the photographs, Col Pammi called Bharat in the evening, “It appears that there may be a hideout in the pine forest. Have you been constantly watching this pine forest?”

“No Sir, I have only been watching Mushtaq’s house and following the movement from his house to the pine forest,” replied Bharat.

“Were you able to make out whether the person moving from Mushtaq’s house is a civilian or terrorist?” asked Col Pammi.

“Sir, I am very sure he or she is a civilian because, during the day, I could also see a child going there.”

“Today onwards, you task one surveillance detachment to watch the pine forest, and the other one should watch Mushtaq’s house,” ordered the Commanding Officer.

“Roger, Sir,” said Bharat.

“And tomorrow morning, Maj Brar and I will come to you. Maj Brar will stay with you overnight for further coordination.”

“Sir, I would like to bust this hideout myself, whenever you decide to do so,” begged Bharat.

“We will see that later. First, establish if there is a hideout,” said Commanding Officer.

The next morning, Commanding Officer and Maj Brar set off to meet Bharat. They reached the Singla post at ten in the morning. Bharat had stayed awake the whole night. Though tired, he was excited to share the information gathered from the surveillance that night.

As soon as the Commanding Officer sat down on the chair, Bharat said, “Sir, yesterday night at half past ten, two people got out from the pine forest. They visited these three houses.” He pointed at houses on the photo, one of the houses indicated was Nazia’s. He then continued, “Then they got back to the pine forest after four hours. I have not seen any other movement out except for one person from Mushtaq’s house who went to the pine forest at half past five and returned at six in the morning.”

“Good, Bharat, we must establish their pattern in terms of visiting particular houses or taking particular routes,” said the Commanding Officer.

“Sir, I am hundred percent sure these were terrorists,” said Bharat with confidence.

“Good, Bharat, keep a watch. We may get something bigger,” said the Commanding Officer.

Then they studied the area as seen from Singla and discussed various options.

After an hour, Commanding Officer got up to go and said, “Bharat and Brar, this information about our detection of the terrorist movement should not be leaked out to anyone. Even to the soldiers of 82 NR.”



When Col Pammi reached his office, the Runner gave him an update, “Saab, that lady Nazia is waiting for you for more than two hours. Should I call her?”

“Wait for ten minutes. I need to set up the camera. Also ask Subedar Major

Saab to be present when Nazia is here.”

After a few minutes, Nazia entered the Commanding Officer’s office; Subedar Major was already sitting with him. Col Pammi got up from his chair and with folded hands greeted her,

*“Salam walaikim, Nazia ji.”*

*“Walaikum aslam, Saab.”*

For the next fifteen minutes, Nazia complained about the SHO for keeping her family members in police custody. She also confessed that she had levelled a false allegation of molestation against the SHO.

“Those terrorists—are they still there in your village?” Col Pammi asked her.

“No Saab, I am told that the terrorists have shifted to Marha Village a week ago.”

Col Pammi felt like throwing her out of the office, but then he thought he would play naïve by saying, “Can you give me information about the house these terrorists are staying in at Marha Village?”

“Yes, Saab, but I will charge fifty thousand rupee for the information,” said Nazia.

Col Pammi gave her five thousand rupees as advance, knowing fully well that it was dead investment. This female who had hosted terrorists in her house the previous night was trying to send them out on a wild goose chase to Marha Village.

That evening, on a conference call with the officers, he shared the details about his interaction with Nazia in order to make them wiser in dealing with such sources.



For the next ten days except one, they saw terrorists getting out of the pine forest going to 2–3 houses in the village and then coming back between two

and three in the night.

Bharat wondered if it was prudent to lay an ambush while the terrorists were returning to their hideout. He suggested this to Commanding Officer, but the reply was, “I will let you know.”

In a conference call with the Commanding Officer, Maj Brar took up the same point, but Commanding Officer said, “In an ambush, there are always chances of things going wrong. So, we will not take that chance.”

“Sir, it has been established beyond doubt that the terrorists visit the houses of Iqlak, the Sarpanch and Kabir, the government employee, after every two days. We should kill them at one of those houses,” suggested Bharat.

“No, the vegetation around those houses is very high. An operation in those houses may lead to losses on our side. Of course, we need to sort out Iqlak some other way.”

“Sir, if we do not launch the operation soon, all these efforts being put in by Bharat and his party will go waste. Other units are also asking for our area. One day, they will come and kill these terrorists, and we will keep watching,” said Major Brar, sounding a little perturbed.

“Don’t worry. Do you remember the night when the other unit laid an ambush in your area, there was no movement of these terrorists seen? This means people tell them about the movement of security forces in this area.”

“Sir, then what do we do?” asked Brar sounding frustrated.

“If you see the photograph of the village I sent you today, you will see Tariq’s house duly marked. Terrorists were in that house for more than two hours, the day before yesterday. This house is ideal for taking them on. We can kill them there. The next time they get into that house, we will launch the operation,” said the Commanding Officer.

“Sir, then I will only be doing the surveillance. I will not be able to participate in action,” said Bharat.

“Don’t worry. Brar will only surround the terrorists. You can come and

finish the operation,” said the Commanding Officer.



That night, while talking to Maj Brar and Captain Anil in a conference call, Bharat said, “Sir, the old man is taking a lot of time to launch this operation. These terrorists are available on a platter. I don’t know why he is unwilling to go ahead. Sometimes, I feel he is scared to carry out this operation.”

Before Maj Brar could say anything, Captain Anil interjected, “That is too much of conjecturing because ten days ago, the Commanding Officer told me that we may get another success in a day or two, which indicates he had no plans to delay this operation deliberately.”

Bharat said, “Sir, we should launch the operation without informing the old man. Once we are successful, Commanding Officer will not say anything to us.”

“I will never do that, Bharat. I learnt my lesson very early in my life to avoid taking on a venture beyond my capability and stature,” said Maj Brar.

“What happened, Sir?” asked Bharat.

“When I was just seven years old, I was fascinated to urinate in the piss-pots fixed in toilets of cinema halls. Since I was not tall enough, my father used to lift me up to fulfil my desire. One day, I wanted to do it all by myself, so while my father was buying popcorns, I sneaked into the toilet. Fortunately, there was no one else. So, I positioned myself in such a way that with full pressure, I made it to the piss pot. I was thrilled. But the feeling was short-lived because when the pressure reduced, all the urine started falling on my shorts, and I was all wet. I became the laughing stock of my family and the public.”

“What do we do then, Sir?” enquired Bharat in exasperation.

“Sometimes, I feel that we *faujis* are too focused on our task. We are so excited to carry out these operations when we know fully well that in any operation, there are high chances of losing our life or that of our men,” said

Maj Brar.

“Count me out of that focused category, Sir. I am counting my days to go back to peace station. But I certainly wonder what you Infantry guys are made up of. All through your life, you are in operations. Yet, you are always excited to participate in more,” said Anil.

“You know, Anil? A foreign terrorist once said that soldiers in our army are like ants who swarm the terrorists even when they know that some of them may die in the bargain. Regarding this operation, I think we should leave it to the judgement of the Commanding Officer,” said Maj Brar pensively.



Two days later, an hour past midnight, Bharat called up Col Pammi and said, “Good morning, Sir. Sorry to disturb you at this hour of the night, but I wanted to inform you that the two terrorists have entered the house of Tariq five minutes ago, and they are still inside.”

“Firstly, don’t be sorry for calling me at this hour. I am paid for this only. Secondly, I will give you a call after five minutes, after bringing in all the relevant people on a conference call,” said the Commanding Officer and hung up.

After some time, the battalion exchange called Bharat to join the Commanding Officer’s conference call. Maj Brar, Second-in-Command, Adjutant, Ghatak Platoon Commanders, Captain Anil and Maj Shashi were all on line.

The Commanding Officer spoke, “Good morning, gentlemen. Coming straight to the point, do you have photo B/73 in front of you?”

All of them confirmed that they did.

“In this photo, at the bottom left of the Mir Topa Post, you can see the house of Tariq duly marked. And there is a house of Mushtaq, left of Mir Topa Post. Has everyone seen it?” asked the Commanding Officer.

Everyone confirmed that they had.

“If you look hundred meters left of Mushtaq’s house, you will see a pine forest. The situation is that Mushtaq is an over-ground worker, who is supplying food and information to two terrorists who are living in a hideout somewhere in the pine forest. These terrorists come down every night to the village and visit a few houses. They are generally back in the pine forest two to three hours after midnight. We have been watching them for more than fifteen days. I had decided that the day they visit house of Tariq, we will take them on. Tonight, at 12:59 AM, the terrorists have entered that house. We are going to launch an operation on that house. Any doubts so far?”

Everyone said, “No Doubts,” except Anil who said, “Sir, why have we been delaying this operation for many days? We could have killed them in the pine forest fifteen days ago.”

“Anil, if we kill them at any place other than the pine forest, the villagers will think that we do not know about the hideout in the pine forest. Once we get these terrorists, some new terrorists may come and reside in the same hideout. Is that clear?” clarified the Commanding Officer.

“That is a masterstroke, Sir,” said Anil.

“For this operation, we have to ensure that these terrorists do not leave Tariq’s house till 04:00 AM. By that time, we will surround it. I want to avoid encounter at night. For that purpose, Brar, you will send a small party to Walnut Grove by 1:45 AM. Their task is to make a lot of noise by throwing drill grenades and fire blank rounds in such a quantum, that these terrorists feel it is unsafe to leave that house. In fact, you can start firing immediately from your post also. Have you got sufficient drill grenades and blank round?”

“Yes, Sir in abundance,” replied Brar.

“The remaining people from your company, under your leadership, will start moving at 3:15 AM and surround this house. After surrounding the house, start announcing on the loud hailer that the terrorists have been surrounded and that they should surrender. All your people should be behind



cover to prevent any casualty due to fire by terrorists from inside. Keep the terrorists and residents engaged until daylight. At daybreak, ask all residents to come out. I will reach the location by five o'clock along with both Ghatak Platoons and Captain Bharat. Now get cracking."

"Yes, Sir," said Brar.

"Bharat in the next two hours, Captain Anil will reach your location. You will hand over surveillance to him and come down on the road to Mir Topa Village. I will meet you there at the Public Health Centre."

"Thank you, Sir," said Bharat.

"Anil, you immediately get ready and reach Bharat's location. You will be in charge of the surveillance party during the operation."

"Wilco, Sir."

"Adjutant, give a party of six soldiers to Anil. He will go with them to Bharat, and then, the same party will accompany Bharat to the Public Health Centre. Get my Quick Reaction Team also ready to move anytime."

"I will get that done, Sir," replied Adjutant.

"Subedar Bhat and Subedar Raju Saab. Please get both your Ghatak Platoons ready, take your rocket launchers and explosives along. I will come and brief your parties at three o'clock."

Both Subedar Bhat and Subedar Raju acknowledged his instruction.

"Second-in-Command, you organise medical cover and the other administrative details. The operation may get prolonged for two days, so cater for all administrative contingencies. Tell Subedar Major, he will come with me. He will be left at Public Health Centre area to organise protection of the vehicles with available drivers."

"I will organise all this, Sir," replied Second-in-Command.

"And our Medical Officer should also be at Public Health Centre with the necessary medical instruments and equipment."

At half past four, Bharat reached the Commanding Officer at Public Health Centre. The Commanding Officer was talking on the radio, taking stock of things. From the conversation, Bharat gathered that the target house had been surrounded and the terrorists were still inside, as per the surveillance party. Tariq had been called out of the house. Tariq told Maj Brar that there was no terrorist in his house. He further added that no one came to his house at all. Tariq was kept engaged in different conversations till five in the morning. At that point, he was allowed to go back to his house.

Within about ten minutes of letting off Tariq, the Commanding Officer's party, the Ghatak Platoons and Bharat reached Tariq's house. The Commanding Officer again called for Tariq, but he again denied the presence of terrorists in his house. The Commanding Officer asked him to call all eight members of his family out of the house as he suspected that Tariq is telling lies to prevent harm to his family members who may have been taken hostage by the terrorists.

But to his surprise in the next five minutes, all the members of Tariq's family were out of the house. Tariq and his family members were escorted away on the pretext of questioning. Following this, announcements were made on a loud hailer for the terrorists to come out and surrender. There was no response to this order. Slow and deliberate steps frustrated everyone. Even the Commanding Officer started doubting the presence of terrorists in the house.

Bharat volunteered, "Sir, I will crawl to the house with my buddy and try to peep in and listen."

"Which route will you take?" asked the Commanding Officer.

"I will crawl along that little dike. It will protect my buddy and me from direct fire," replied Bharat.

"Okay, go ahead, Bharat. And Brar, you inform all your parties about Bharat and Sepoy Raja crawling up to the house. They should not mistake these two as terrorists."

It took Bharat and his buddy more than ten minutes to slowly crawl and reach the window of the house. As soon as Bharat got up to look through the window, a grenade landed on his feet. Bharat did not notice the grenade, but Raja saw it. Raja quickly grabbed Bharat by his collar and dragged him over the dike. Just as they hit the ground, the grenade exploded. Immediately after the blast came a burst of an AK-47 from the cowshed of the house.

Bharat now realised why he had been hauled so unceremoniously by his buddy. Bharat thanked Raja, "Thank you, Raja. Today, you have saved me."

"Don't worry about that, Saab. Now, we must figure out how to get out of this place. Otherwise, the next grenade may land here," said Raja.

"Raja, I dropped my weapon when you pulled me down. I will have to crawl back to get it," said Bharat.

"Saab, that is too dangerous. I will not allow you to go. Let us withdraw, and let the rifle remain where it is," said Raja.

Without the weapon, Bharat felt like a naked man, but it was not prudent to fetch it in this situation. They both started crawling back. They were about halfway, when a long burst of fire hit close to them. Bharat checked himself and was relieved that he was alright. Then he asked Sep Raja, "Are you okay?"

"No, Saab. I have a bullet in my leg. You move ahead to safety. I can't move," replied Raja.

Bharat looked back at Raja and saw his blood-soaked trousers. Bharat crawled back to Raja, and said on radio, "Bharat for Tiger. We are under fire. Terrorists firing from cowshed. Please direct fire on cowshed to suppress the terrorists. Raja has been hit. As soon as you suppress the terrorists, I will dash to safety with Raja."

"Okay, Bharat, but wait for my signal. I will coordinate the fire, and as soon as I say 'go' on the radio, you dash for safety," replied Col Pammi.

Immediately, a barrage of fire started. Bharat could see that the fire was

directed at the cowshed.

The Commanding Officer came up on the radio to say, “Go.”

Bharat quickly grabbed his buddy and ran like hell. Fifteen meters ahead, there was a ditch. Bharat jumped into the ditch and rolled sideways with Raja. As they landed, Raja’s helmet fell off, and his head hit something hard. Within no time, Nursing Assistant and Col Pammi joined them.

The Nursing Assistant examined Raja and said, “It seems the bullet has gone through his thigh. We need an X-Ray to determine the condition of his bones.”

Col Pammi said, “Bharat, you and four soldiers, take Raja to Public Health Centre, and from there, you will accompany him to the hospital. Give me a report after he has been examined by the Surgeon.”

“But Sir, may I drop him at the Public Health Centre and join back here, as the operation is not yet over?” asked Bharat.

“Bharat, I want you gone with Raja. You cannot stretch your luck for this operation anymore. Besides, you owe it to Raja. He saved your life today. With the loss of blood, he may go unconscious. I want you to be right in front of him when he regains consciousness. Is that clear?” said Col Pammi.

“Yes, Sir,” replied Bharat.

The doctor at the Public Health Centre did a thorough examination on Raja. He looked worried.

Bharat asked, “Will his leg be alright?”

“I am not worried about his leg. The leg will recover. It seems that in all the pulling and pushing, Raja has suffered a bad internal head injury also. That is why he is bleeding from his nose. We will have to rush him to the hospital for CT scan and neuro care,” clarified the doctor.

“I hope it is not life threatening?” asked Bharat.

“It looks like it is serious. I am giving him two injections. His chances of

survival will increase if he vomits. Also, keep him awake,” said the doctor.

As soon as the injections were administered, Raja was moved to an ambulance. Bharat held Raja’s head in his lap. To keep him awake, Bharat started talking to Raja about all the operations they had carried out together. He was talking on the outside, but praying to God within, to save Raja. After ten minutes, Raja vomited, with most of the vomit landing on Bharat’s lap.

Bharat’s face lit up with happiness. Raja felt guilty. He mumbled, “Sorry, Saab.”

Bharat took out his handkerchief and wiped Raja’s face. Then bent down to kiss Raja on his forehead and said, “Don’t worry, Raja. The doctor told me that if you vomit, then nothing will happen to you. I am very happy that you vomited.”

Tears rolled down both Raja’s and Bharat’s eyes. Bharat thought about how much he had changed from the college days. During a college excursion to a hill station six years ago, one of his friends had vomited on his shirt due to motion sickness. Bharat had got very upset. And now as an officer in the army, he felt happy to clean the vomit of his buddy.

Maybe it was because of the conditioning that he had to undergo while in the training academy. He always used to wonder why the seniors gave *Ragda* (Ragging) to juniors during their spare time. *Ragda* included making them vomit by rotating around one of their fingers touching the ground and then forcing them to lie down naked and roll sideways right over the vomit of each other. He was sure that if Anjali came to know about such *Ragda*, she would stage a *dharna* (protest) for human rights infringement in front of his training academy.

At the hospital, Raja was immediately taken to the Intensive Care Unit. Bharat dozed off while waiting outside the Intensive Care Unit. After some time, one of the doctors woke him up and informed him that Raja’s condition was stable, and he would make a complete recovery. Bharat was pleased to hear that. He wanted to go and see his buddy. The doctor told him that Raja

had fallen asleep and suggested that he also should go and rest. As Bharat walked towards the Officers' mess, a soldier from his unit came and handed over a package to him. It contained clean clothes, which the Adjutant had sent for him. Bharat checked into a guest room and had a long shower. He then crashed on the bed.



While Bharat had been attending to Raja and taking him to Public Health Centre, Col Pammi moved with his party to an area behind the cowshed. Maj Brar surrounded the other side of the cowshed. Col Pammi had snipers monitoring the exit of the cowshed. Intermittently, the terrorists kept firing from holes in the wall. The fire wasn't particularly effective against the soldiers.

Maj Brar briefed Col Pammi about the situation and then said, "Sir, I will crawl to the shed and then throw a grenade inside or fire a rocket launcher into the shed."

"We can't do either. The rocket may go through the shed and detonate in the village. We will lose civilian lives. I don't want anyone to crawl to the shed, as the terrorists are throwing grenades," said Col Pammi.

"Then what do we do, Sir?" asked Brar in exasperation.

"Get a long rope, tie its one end with a stone and throw it over the cowshed so that it reaches our party on the other side of the shed. To this end, tie up a charge made up of explosives carried by Ghatak Platoon. Position the charge on top of cowshed with the help of the rope and blow up the shed," instructed Col Pammi.

After a few minutes, the cowshed was blown off, and the two terrorists were buried in the rubble. Colonel Pammi didn't allow anyone to go near the rubble for the next three hours.

By four in the evening, the dead bodies of the terrorists were removed. Their weapons were recovered, along with ammunition and some grenades.

As the soldiers carefully went through the debris, the mobile phone of one of the terrorists was recovered intact. Colonel Pammi told Major Brar to send an SMS from the mobile to most of the phone numbers stored on the mobile.

The text of the SMS was to read, “*Mukhbiri Iqlak ne ki* (Information given by Iqlak).”

“Seeing this message, Iqlak will come under the terrorists’ scanner!” exclaimed Maj Brar.

“Just Hurry Up. We do not have too much time to get these messages out. The messages have to leave before the news of the terrorists death spreads,” iterated Col Pammi.

Maj Brar quickly typed the message, selected all the contacts and hit send. He reported the completion of the message transmission to Col Pammi.

Col Pammi acknowledged it and explained further, “Seeing this message, everyone will start doubting Iqlak. The terrorists may even kill him. This will weaken the over-ground organisation of the terrorists.”

“But, Sir, the terrorists were blown off in the morning. However, we have sent the message only now. The time of the emission of the message can be seen in the notification below the SMS. Our ploy will be exposed.”

“All that the villagers know is that the explosion happened in the morning. No one knows when the terrorists died. Just fire some bullets so that the villagers feel that the encounter is still going on,” explained Colonel Pammi.

Major Brar did the needful.

## 7

After ten days, Nazia tried to confirm the rumour about Iqlak sharing information about the terrorists, to which Colonel Pammi said, “I cannot name anyone, but it was someone important in the village who gave the information to us.”

Precisely eight days after Nazia’s visit, the terrorists killed Iqlak.

A new pair of terrorists occupied the hideout in the pine forest. These terrorists were killed within two months. Major Brar wanted to plant Nazia's name in the text message this time, but Colonel Pammi didn't allow him to do so, as he felt this would get SHO in bigger trouble. Moreover, the credibility of the text message may be doubted.

The hideout of the terrorists was not disturbed by 75NR. As a result, the over-ground workers brought still two more terrorists, who were again killed by the unit, in all, killing six residents from the same hideout. Then, one fine day, another unit took the area for operations and busted the hideout. There was no terrorist inside. They made a big news splash about having found a hideout.

Major Brar was highly perturbed, he told Colonel Pammi, "Sir, we should not have allowed the other unit to operate in our area. The hideout was like our ATM, which they have busted for a pittance."

"Every deception has a shelf life. Do not worry, we will get our *shikar* (prey) somewhere else," assured Col Pammi.





## STRIKE 14

One thing about the NR postings that Bharat liked was that all the soldiers were diligently sent on their authorised leave. The high level of alertness required for operations necessitated some downtime. When the month of Ramzan came, a slowdown in terrorist operations was seen as every other year. The Commanding Officer took this opportunity and proceeded on fifteen days' leave.

There was a kind of euphoria and jubilation among the company commanders. With their highly cautious and deliberate boss on vacation, they felt that they would be able to react fast to different leads, rather than confirming repeatedly as stipulated by the Commanding Officer.

Captain Bharat was sent to the Marha Company, as Major PP Singh, the Company Commander had sprained his ankle.

During one of the nights, Bharat was sitting in an ambush when he heard Major PP Singh on the air, "PP for all parties, over."

All four parties out on ambushes acknowledged him.

"PP for all parties, at half past midnight, the surveillance party here in the post has seen movement of two people crossing over from the crest line into our area of responsibility. They were very deliberately moving towards Gujjar Hut Area. All to be alert, over."

Bharat carried out a quick mental appreciation. Gujjar Hut Area had just four houses. It was on a smaller ridge between two spurs coming down from the mother ridge. He assessed that anyone coming down from the top would get to the huts in just thirty minutes. This seemed to be an ideal opportunity. As Gujjar Hut Area had a very small number of houses, they could easily surround the area by three o'clock and carry out a search after daybreak.

After forty minutes, the voice of Maj PP Singh cracked on the radio set, “PP for all parties over.”

“Okay, over,” replied everybody.

“PP for all parties, two persons have reached Gujjar Hut and entered one of the houses. I have decided to go in for a cordon and search of the Gujjar Hut Area, roger so far.”

“Roger,” replied all the parties.

“Now take out photograph 63 Charlie,” said Major PP.

They all confirmed within a minute that they were looking at photograph 63 Charlie.

“Gujjar Hut is in the centre of the photograph. There are three foot-tracks to this Gujjar Hut. You can see them in the photograph also.”

“Roger,” replied everyone.

Major PP Singh instructed all the parties about the route they were to follow for cordoning the house. Captain Bharat’s party was to deploy on the ledge which overlooked the track going south at Point ‘G’ shown in the photo. Similarly, other parties were given points to reach and establish stops to prevent the escape of terrorists. The night-surveillance party at the post was to direct the parties so that they did not bump into each other by mistake. In his heart, Bharat admired Major PP Singh for quick decision-making, clarity of thought and implementation of plans against Colonel Pammi’s cautious ways.

At ten to three, all the parties were in place, and the cordon was established. The Ghatak Platoons had started from Battalion Headquarters to get to the Gujjar Huts and search them in the morning.

Forty minutes later, someone came out of one of the huts. The surveillance party alerted all the parties in the cordon. The individual who came out walked fifty meters towards Hav Vijay’s party. There was now only five meters distance between that person and Hav Vijay’s party. The person

started urinating. Suddenly, he hurled something towards Havildar Vijay's party. He may have sensed some danger. There was no time to give instructions, but Havildar Vijay's party didn't make any move as per their training. They were not sure whether the item hurled at them was a grenade or a stone. Fortunately, it was a stone and didn't hit anyone. The individual remained there for a short time to look for any activity and then walked back. From the way he walked, it appeared that he didn't suspect their presence. Hav Vijay informed Maj PP that they narrowly avoided firing at a civilian.

“Vijay, it is a common practice here to wipe the last drop of urine with a stone and throw it,” interjected Bharat.

At quarter past four, the two terrorists came out of the hut and started walking up towards Subedar Das' party. As they closed in, Subedar Das' party challenged them. In turn, the terrorists opened fire. The fire was not effective. The surveillance party could see both terrorists running down. To facilitate accurate firing, Major PP Singh ordered firing of illumination bombs from mortars. All the parties could see the two terrorists dashing behind a big rock. Suddenly, there was a minute of darkness because three illumination bombs misfired in succession.

Bharat was trying hard to adjust his eyes to the darkness, when he heard the surveillance party saying, “Bharat Saab, the two terrorists are dashing towards your party.”

Before Bharat could alert his party, he saw the silhouettes of two terrorists approaching him and firing with their weapons. Bharat quickly pointed his weapon towards them and fired. He could see one of them falling. He also felt that he had been hit in his chest and legs. He found it difficult to breathe; he knew his lungs had been punctured by the bullet. Before he could do anything, he fell unconscious.



Bharat regained consciousness in the hospital. His parents and Anjali were by his bed. He could see signs of worry on their faces.

As he tried to move his hand to feel his body, the doctor said, “Don’t move. You are safe. But I am sorry to say we had to amputate your left leg below the knee.”

A flood of emotions and thoughts ran through Bharat’s head.

*Will I be retained in the Army?*

*If so, will I be allowed to be on active duty?*

*Will Anjali marry me or leave me for good?*

*Will I be able to walk again?*

With the oxygen mask on his face, he was not able to speak.

Suddenly, he noticed Anjali stepping forward and saying, “Will you marry me? You just move the fingers of your right hand to say yes.”

Bharat didn’t move his fingers; he was worried that with his disability, he might not be able to give his beloved a good married life.

Anjali could read the worry in his eyes and then said, “To hell with your yes. I am marrying you, and I have already convinced my parents. Your parents also have no objection to it.”

Bharat felt elated. His eyes were smiling. He moved his fingers four times to convey his ‘yes.’ From the corner of his eyes, he could see Colonel Pammi and his wife entering the room.

Colonel Pammi said, “Get well soon, Bharat. I am proud of you,” he then turned to Bharat’s parents and said, “Madam, your son is a brave man. The country needs many more brave boys like him. But I am not going to recommend his retention in the army, as he is always in a hurry to get himself into tight spots. I want him to get married and lead a happy married life. And I am not going to listen to him.”

“That is so nice of you, Colonel Pammi; we have always failed to convince him. With you, he doesn’t have a choice but to accept the order,” said Bharat’s parents in unison.

Anjali said, “Bharat, you seem to be disturbed about something.”

Colonel Pammi interjected, “I know he wants to know about the soldiers with him on that day. Well, Bharat, besides you, Sepoy Kishan and Sepoy Alam were injured. They are both fine and will be discharged from the hospital within two to three days. Your party killed one terrorist, and the other terrorist got away. I have investigated the whole episode. It is because of temporary blindness due to the gap in illumination, you and your men were late in detecting the terrorists coming towards you. You were not following the basic teaching of closing one eye when the illumination bombs are fired. That way, at least one of your eyes could have adjusted faster to the intermittent darkness.”

Bharat thought how Colonel Pammi’s deliberate and detailed methods had helped save countless lives of soldiers and civilians. Tears started to roll down his face, as he repented his negative feelings about Colonel Pammi’s cautiousness.



# STRIKE OF STRIKES

Ten years later, Bharat landed at the Musharaf Memorial International Airport. Latif, the manufacturer of T-Shirts, was there to receive him. They both sat down in his Mercedes. Bharat was mixing business talk with his appreciation of beauty, food, culture and traditions of the city.

Then Bharat changed the topic, “Latif, why are we carrying a gunman along? Is the situation so bad?”

“You never know. Besides, it is a status symbol,” said Latif.

“By the way, I hope he doesn’t understand our talk in English.”

“He can, but don’t worry he is highly reliable.”

Bharat talked very less for the rest of the journey to Latif’s factory in Fazalabad. All this while, Bharat felt a peculiar sense of familiarity with this gunman. Bharat kept wondering where he had met this person.

At the factory, Bharat inspected the T-Shirts made by Latif. Latif showed him all the manufacturing units. Having completed his MBA from Harvard, Latif knew the importance of quality control. Bharat liked the samples shown to him. He placed an order of ten thousand pieces. He promised an advance payment of fifteen percent to Latif within three days. All this time, the gunman had been following them. Bharat could see that he was limping a little. After the tour of the factory, they moved to Latif’s factory office where Latif ordered tea. The gunman waited outside the office.

Making sure that he was out of hearing distance, Bharat asked Latif, “Your gunman seems to hate me.”

“You are right, Bharat. Although I told him to conceal his feelings, he has not been able to do so. Actually, he hates your country even though the relations between our countries have become extremely cordial.”

“Why is that so?” asked Bharat.

“He had lost his leg because of an action by your army,” replied Latif.

“Is he an ex-serviceman?” asked Bharat.

“Yes, he is,” replied Latif.

“Can I talk to him in private?” asked Bharat.

“I cannot take that chance. He might kill you. His hatred is intense,” responded Latif.

“Tell him that I also have a prosthetic leg. That is why I want to share my feelings,” insisted Bharat.

“Okay, if you wish, but don’t blame me if he manhandles you,” said Latif.

“Don’t worry; I can take care of myself. What is his name?” asked Bharat.

“He is Imtiaz,” said Latif as he left the room.

After a few minutes, the gunman entered the room. Bharat requested him to take a seat. He could see hatred written all over Imtiaz’s face.

Bharat spoke to break the silence, “I have been told that you hate all my country.”

“I totally hate your people; they are all bad. I don’t know why Latif exports garments to you people,” replied Imtiaz.

“Every country has a mix of good and bad people,” said Bharat suppressing his anger.

“Yes, I know. There is one good person in your country also who is like a *darvesh* (saint) for me. I don’t know him, but I desperately want to meet him,” said Imtiaz.

“I may be able to find him if you tell me more about him,” enquired Bharat.

“He is a soldier in your army. He was supposed to kill me, but he spared my life. I have not had any chance to properly recognise him or meet him.”

“Imtiaz, how many children do you have?”

“I have four children—three sons and a daughter. I will send all my sons to army to defeat your army whenever we have war.”

“That is too much of hatred. It is not good for health.”

“You don’t know what I have gone through. I have lost a leg because of your army.”

“Okay, I want to give four lakh rupees for your children. Please accept it,” said Bharat.

“I get some disability pension. And I also get ten thousand rupees per month from this job. But I am not so *begairat* (without self-esteem) to take anything from an enemy of my country.”

“You are very right, Imtiaz. But you did not apply this logic when the enemy was giving you water,” said Bharat.

Imtiaz was stunned at this little detail he had only shared with his wife.

Bharat added, “If you lost your leg at the Tekri Post, then I am to be blamed. That night, I was in charge of the party, which ambushed you. And I gave you water.”

Imtiaz was dazed. His throat was choked.

“So you were the one who instructed your party not to mutilate the bodies of our soldiers?”

“Yes.”

Imtiaz got up from his chair and hugged Bharat. He then looked up, and said, “My God, you have heard my prayers; you have sent my saint to me.”

In the evening, Imtiaz called Bharat to his house for dinner. Bharat was received with deep reverence. After repeated requests, he accepted the money that Bharat offered.

Goku, the five-year-old youngest son of Imtiaz, became very friendly with



Bharat. He asked Bharat to narrate a story to him.

Bharat told him Bhai Kanhaiya's story, which always used to fascinate him when he was a

Student at Guru Harkrishan Public School. Bhai Kanhaiya was a disciple of Guru Gobind Singh ji. He used to serve water to the injured enemy soldiers on the battlefield irrespective of their caste, creed and religion. His fellow soldiers objected to this act. However, Bhai Kanhaiya told them that he was not able to see an enemy in the injured persons. He could only see human beings in them.

When night fell, Bharat had the most peaceful sleep of his life. A night without nightmares, unlike the other nights when he used to see severed human heads crying for water.





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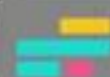
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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

The author is a senior army officer, who has a vast experience in the counter terrorist operations in Manipur, Sri Lanka and Jammu & Kashmir. He has also handled intelligence and information warfare assignments. Educated and brought up in various parts of the country, he is post graduate in History and Defence Studies. Hailing from a family of soldiers the author is the fourth generation serving in the Army.

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