‘I fly a helicopter to work.’

Lieutenant Colonel Anupam Gaur, of the Army Aviation Corps, shares what being a helicopter pilot in the Army is all about and describes a miraculous chopper rescue he was part of. 6 October 2007 At 19,000 feet Somewhere in the Siachen Glacier Snow has started falling when the Cheetah helicopter reaches the frozen heights. The young pilot looks out at the vast sea of white, his eyes desperately searching for the missing mountaineers. He knows he cannot land in the soft snow. And also that he has very little time. If he runs out of fuel he will have to return, reducing further the adventurers’ chances to live. Keeping his nerves steady, he hovers above the sloping glacier, the helicopter’s rotor blades kicking up a cloud of snow. Every passing second reduces the possibility of rescue. It is then that his co-pilot draws his attention to some blurry shapes moving towards them in the haze. ‘It’s them!’ he whispers. Even in that moment of extreme stress, the two of them look at each other and smile. They watch breathlessly as the mountaineers come into their line of vision. They are trying their best to reach the chopper as fast as they can. The two Army Aviation Corps pilots know that, out of the team of eleven mountaineers, one has a broken shoulder, another an ankle fracture and two have developed frostbite. They have attempted this rescue a day earlier too, but have had to fly back since there was no place to land. The plan today is to hover over the ground and pull in the mountaineers, one at a time, take each down to a safe location, and return for the next. The chopper is on mininum fuel to lessen its weight, so that it is easier to control, which is another reason why the rescue has to be quick since the machine can crash if it runs out of fuel. The first mountaineer reaches the chopper, lean and haggard, his face streaked with tears, and is pulled up by the co-pilot, amidst sighs of relief from the others. Major Anupam Gaur flies off into the air, promising to return. He does three trips that day and manages to take three of the mountaineers back to safety. Between the three helicopters on the rescue mission that cold day in Siachen, they save the lives of all eleven members of the stranded team.

When I meet forty-four-year-old tall, dark and good-looking Anupam Gaur, now a Lieutenant Colonel, ten years have passed since that daredevil rescue in Siachen. With aviators shading his eyes, he looks more like a movie star than the young pilot who helped save three lives on that freezing October day. Tell him that and he gets really embarrassed. ‘I’m not a hero—I’m just a regular guy in the Army. That rescue is one of the most precious memories of my life but it is nothing extraordinary if you look at a career in uniform. Army officers do these things all the time. I can bet you that no other profession can match what we do for a living,’ he says. ‘I fly a helicopter for a living—I’ve dropped skydivers off at 10,000 feet. I’ve chased lions in an African national park, my chopper hovering twenty feet above the ground while on a UN mission. I’ve flown fellow officers around, including Lieutenant Colonel Mahendra Singh Dhoni from the Indian Territorial Army,’ he quips with a wide smile while adding, ‘You might have heard of him —he also plays cricket.’ If he’s asked to express in one word what the Army has given him, Gaur says the answer would be ‘everything’. His journey began when he cleared the National Defence Academy (NDA) entrance exam at eighteen and took a train to Pune to join the academy. ‘We were a bunch of thin, scruffy young boys nervous about what lay ahead but the moment we reached the Academy, we were lined up for haircuts and given an NDA blazer each. And overnight, without doing a thing, we became local heroes. When we went out, girls would look at us and it was a nice feeling,’ he laughs. Besides regular academics, the three years at NDA taught Gaur swimming, boxing, horse riding, football, handball, martial arts and also had him

going on ten-kilometre cross-country runs regularly. Learning a foreign language was compulsory so he picked German. Table manners were taught by a senior who sat next to him at meal times for a year and from whom he learnt stuff like keeping his elbows off the table while eating, and using the right fork and knife for each course. After a year, Gaur had learnt enough to sit next to his own understudy (a fresher) and teach him the same things. ‘We also attended parties where we would be given the opportunity to sit alongside ladies, mostly the wives of our instructors. That’s how we were taught to pull out chairs and open doors for ladies, be attentive to them and pick up other nuances of chivalrous behaviour.’ The Academy even had a ballroom dancing club where dances would be organized and girls from local colleges would be invited as partners for the cadets. ‘The Academy reinvented us completely. It taught us to walk smartly, talk confidently, address gatherings and learn self-defence. Boys who were non-swimmers became swimmers, some like me who had never been near a horse became riders, some developed a passion for sailing and yet others went on to become boxers and shooters. Knowing how to do so many things made us really confident,’ he says. ‘We came out of the Academy feeling like supermen, we felt there was nothing that we couldn’t do and we had the moral responsibility and more importantly, the strength and training, to stand up for our country and our principles in times of need. I’m sure that even the best university in the world cannot give you so much in one package,’ he says.

First posting at the Siachen Glacier

Gaur’s first posting as a twenty-two-year-old, was at the Siachen Glacier. He remembers, ‘I was sent to Amar, a post at 20,000 feet, where breathing was difficult due to the thin air. That is where I saw Army Aviation Corps pilots with their Cheetah helicopters dropping down from the sky and I was completely awestruck. They would take us to the post, landing there despite heavy shelling from the Pakistani side. Then, with a cheerful wave, they would fly off, ignoring the Pakistani fire completely. Nothing seemed to scare them. Every few days they would return with medicines, rations and letters for us. They would evacuate sick men and bring reinforcements and for me they became instant heroes. Flying a helicopter at the highest altitude in the world, supporting your own men in uniform was glamorous work and that was what I wanted to do.’ After three years of service, Gaur volunteered for the Army Aviation Corps. He was selected and landed in the Air Force Academy in Dundigal near Hyderabad. ‘For the first six months, we were trained on fixed-wing training aircraft along with Air Force cadets. Wearing blue overalls, flying solo, learning about the system of the aircraft, interacting with fighter pilots who had amazing stories to tell, who would tell us how it felt to break the sound barrier—all these were amazing new experiences for us,’ Gaur recounts nostalgically. ‘From a ground soldier who did route marches with a rifle and backpack, I had suddenly become airborne. Of course, I didn’t think of it then but the cost of training to be a pilot is Rs 30 to 50 lakhs outside and we were doing it for free. In fact, we were also getting paid a salary. Our evenings would be free—we would eat out, attend parties and meet people. We were doing the same kinds of things any other youngster our age would be doing outside the Army—plus a lot more.’ After six months, the officers were shifted to helicopters, and were trained for a year on the fiveseater light combat Cheetahs, which hold the record for high-altitude flying amongst all categories of helicopters, and the seven-seater Chetaks, which are used for cargo transport, casualty evacuation, and search and rescue operations. Now, of course, the Army also has the state-of-the-art Dhruv helicopters which are multi-engine glass cockpit aircrafts. After the training was complete,

Gaur was posted to Udhampur in Jammu and Kashmir. ‘It was a great feeling to be alone in the cockpit. We used to memorize the Line of Control, do fuel calculations and often take loads to posts on the border in bad weather conditions and low visibility. It was a new experience.’

Chasing lions in Africa

Another incident that Lieutenant Colonel Gaur shares is his experience in the United Nations Peacekeeping Forces in the year 2005-6. ‘Our unit was sent to the Democratic Republic of Congo as part of a UN Peacekeeping Force. When you go on missions like these the boundaries of being from different countries blur. All of us are soldiers who wear the UN uniform and the light blue UN beret. Our salary shoots up in those tenures since the UN is paying that to our country. ‘When we went to Congo, supporting a division (headed by a General from Senegal) with three brigades comprising Indians, Bangladeshis and Pakistanis. There was a ‘surgical strike’ across the Sudan border, quite like in the movies where commandos were inserted before first light and extracted as soon as the operation is completed.’ ‘I had the opportunity to be a part of that stealth operation,’ he says. While in Congo, Gaur also had the opportunity to fly in countries like Rwanda, Uganda, Tanzania and the Republic of Congo. ‘Interacting with their people, flying over their terrain was an enriching experience,’ he says. He recounts for me an incident when he was flying his chopper from Goma to Beni to recce some militant camps that had to be destroyed. Flying over the Virunga National Park, known for the glaciated Rwenzori Mountains—also knowns as the Mountains of the Moon—the conversation with his fellow officers veered to how they frequently spotted herds of wild elephants and buffaloes but had never seen a lion so far. ‘Even as I said this, an officer on board shouted out that he could spot a lion below. He directed us to turn the chopper and fly lower. Hovering just twenty-five feet above the ground, we saw a big beautiful African lion with a magnificent golden mane trying to figure out who or what we were. Startled by our whirring wings, he ran! We followed him for a while till he hid behind a bush. We then hovered lower, clicked some pictures, waved him a respectful goodbye and went on our way. I also remember an incident when we were flying over a herd of elephants. Just for fun, I lowered the chopper and hovered before them. It was fascinating to see how the alpha male, with his complete herd behind him, lifted his trunk, flapped his big ears and took an attack stance even as our helicopter took off and left. These are experiences I shall treasure all my life.’

The Siachen rescue

Gaur talks to me about that amazing helicopter rescue he was part of in Siachen in the year 2007, when he was posted there soon after his Congo tenure. ‘We were at the base camp, where three Army Aviation and four Air Force helicopters would be parked, on standby for emergencies. We lived in fibreglass huts and there was twenty-four-hour electricity. Every morning, we would be up at 5.30 a.m. to sort out what supplies needed to be carried to which post. If a soldier had taken ill at a post, we would help evacuate him. If medicines needed to be dropped off somewhere, we would do that too. It was a very satisfying job since we were supporting our own men.’ Around 22 September 2007, the base camp had some visitors. These were seasoned mountaineers on an expedition. They were on their way to Rimo, one of the toughest peaks to climb. At 24,229 feet, it is one of the highest Himalayan peaks in India, located in the north-east of the subcontinent, in the Siachen

Glacier, where the borders of all three countries—India, China and Pakistan—meet. ‘They were taking an off-route track to the summit which was not a good idea since the weather was turning bad. We advised them not to go but they were adamant and so we saw them on their way.’ Nearly ten days after the team had left, Gaur was sitting in his fibreglass hut wondering why the expedition had not returned when he got a satellite call through the Leh exchange. The expedition leader was on the other end. He told Gaur that during the final climb, the ropes securing the mountaineers had broken and the entire team had taken a nasty fall. Three members were badly injured, and the rest were also in bad shape. The team needed to be evacuated immediately since they had run out of food. ‘I have just two minutes of phone battery left, we are near the final summit. If you don’t come and rescue us, we will all die here,’ the expedition leader told him. Necessary permissions were sought and obtained at once for the rescue, food packets loaded into the helicopters and the pilots took off. ‘It took us nearly an hour to locate them in the snow; they were stranded at 19,000 feet,’says Gaur. They dropped food packets to the climbers but most were lost in the snow. The mountaineering team managed to communicate with the chopper crew and told them that one climber’s shoulder had broken, another had an ankle fracture and two people had developed frostbite. They were in no condition to walk and the choppers would have to come and rescue them from where they were. Since there was no place to land, the helicopters had to return and one more day lapsed. The next morning, the pilots took off again, this time with a do or die spirit, flying on minimum fuel to lessen aircraft weight so that it was lighter and easier to control. The pilots swooped down over the climbers. Hovering barely a foot above the ground, since they couldn’t land on the soft snow, the plan was that the pilot would keep the chopper steady while the co-pilot would pull the injured people into the machine. ‘The weather was really bad that day. The helicopter rotors were kicking up freshly fallen snow. It was too soft for us to risk a landing so we flew close to the ground, looking out for the missing mountaineers. It was a moment of great elation when the first mountaineer managed to climb into the hovering helicopter. It was as if life had won,’ remembers Gaur. All eleven members were rescued and evacuated to Leh where an IL-76 aircraft was waiting to take them to New Delhi immediately. They were admitted to the Army Research and Referral Hospital and all of them survived. Some had lost fingertips to frostbite but it was a small price to pay for being alive. ‘When you face situations like these, you surpass your own limitations. I would have never believed that we could have hovered there in the falling snow with one skid on the ground and the other in the air, but we did it. Our only concern at that time was to save their lives, and we managed to do it,’ he says, nostalgia clouding his eyes.

There’s no better life

Gaur says there is no better life than being in the Indian Army. ‘I was a cadet at eighteen and an officer at twenty-two. From an absolute nobody, the Army shaped me into a soldier, a flier, an instructor, an adventurer, an officer and a gentleman. It helped me to see the world, gave me the confidence to walk into any situation, be it a party or a war zone. If I had to convince a youngster about joining the Army I would say it gives you a starting pay package of Rs 1.5 lakhs a month cost to company, which is comparable to the best starting job opportunity in the world. What’s more is that it ensures you will never be bored in the rut of a nine-to-five job,’ he says. ‘You have complete flexibility about what you want to do. You can be a ground soldier, a doctor, an engineer, a pilot, a skydiver, a rallyist or a sailor. You can participate in adventure sports, play golf all your life and climb mountains. From the very first day you go to work in your uniform, there are people waiting to take orders from you. And yes, of course,

ladies tend to get impressed with your work clothes.' With that parting shot, Lieutenant Colonel Anupam Gaur, recipient of two commendation cards from the Army Chief and one from the General Officer Commanding, Northern Command, puts on his aviator shades, flashes me a Tom Cruise smile, and drives off into the mad din of Delhi. His faithful helicopter probably waits for him somewhere.