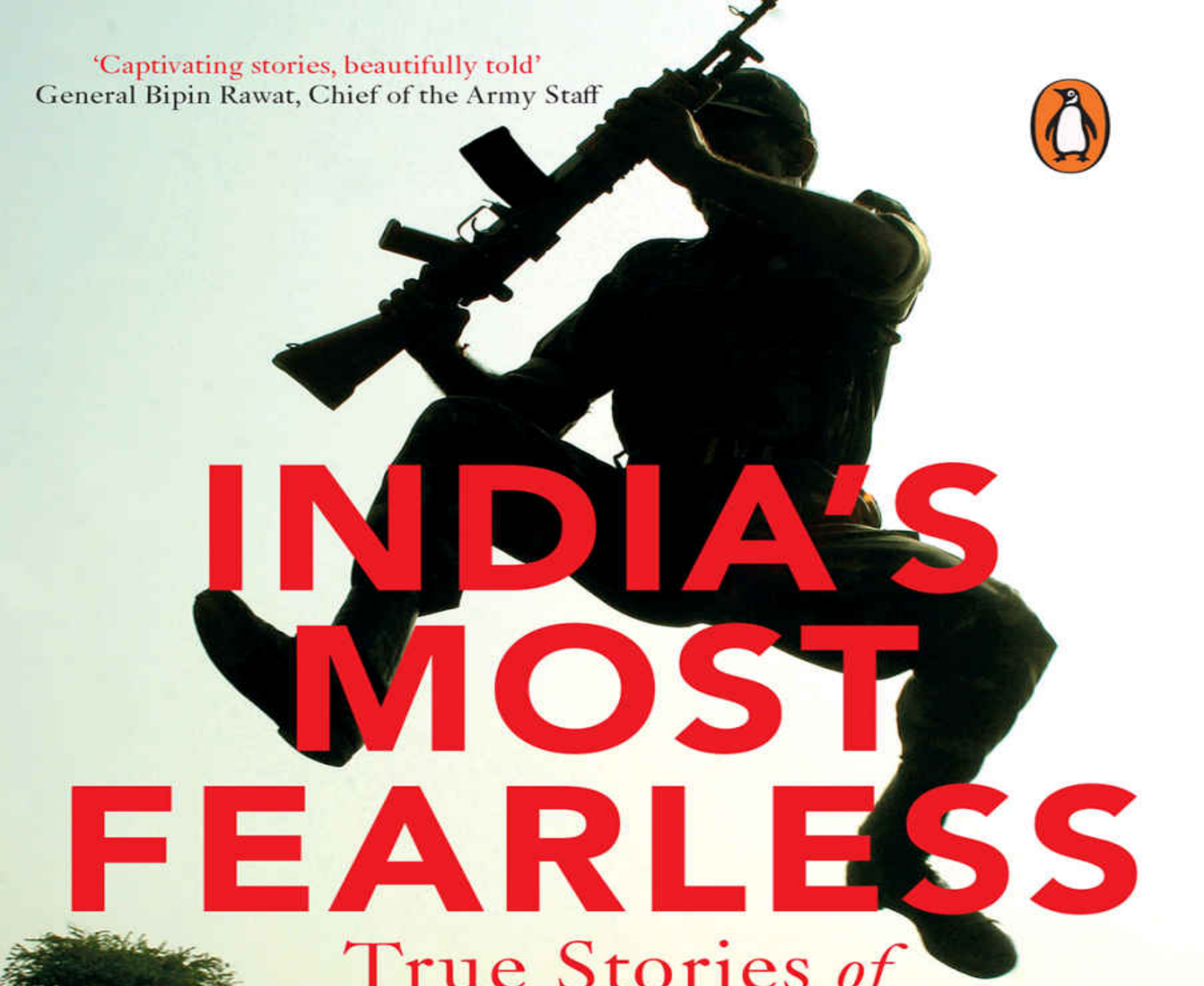
'Captivating stories, beautifully told'
General Bipin Rawat, Chief of the Army Staff



INDIA'S MOST FEARLESS

True Stories *of* Modern Military Heroes

SHIV AROOR | RAHUL SINGH

INCLUDES EXCLUSIVE FIRST-HAND ACCOUNT OF THE 2016 SURGICAL STRIKES

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PENGUIN BOOKS

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Shiv Aroor is an editor and anchor with India Today television, with over a decade's experience covering the Indian military and conflict. He has reported from conflict zones that include the Kashmir Valley, India's North-east, Sri Lanka and Libya. For his work on the latter, he won two awards for war reporting. Aroor also runs the popular award-winning military news and analysis site Livefist, on which he frequently tells the stories of India's military heroes.

Rahul Singh has covered defence and military affairs at the *Hindustan Times* for over a decade in a career spanning eighteen years. Apart from extensive and deep reporting of the Indian military from around the world, including several newsbreaks that have set the national news agenda over the years, Singh has reported from conflict zones including the Kashmir Valley, the North-east and war-torn Congo.

To every Indian hero who has lived and died

Introduction

‘Without heroes, we are all plain people
And don’t know how far we can go.’

—Bernard Malamud

‘Lead me, follow me,
Or get the hell out of my way.’

—General George S. Patton Jr

As we sat in an underground chamber with the young Indian Army officer, his beard hiding most of his face, it was with an overpowering sense of disbelief. Here was a man who had been trained for swift, unapologetic destruction of targets, a man who, only a few months before, armed with an assault rifle, night-vision goggles and a hand-picked group of India’s most fearless warriors, had led his band of Special Forces (SF) men into Pakistan-occupied Kashmir (PoK) near the Line of Control (LoC). We needed to remind ourselves constantly that this was the first time Major Mike Tango was talking to journalists about the hair-raising mission he led into Pakistan-occupied Kashmir (PoK) in September 2016. As a result, the book you hold in your hands contains the only first-hand account of that astonishing mission—by the very man who led it.

Maj. Tango’s awe-inspiring tale is the first of fourteen stories we have the privilege of narrating in this book. The recounting of each story has been a journey into spaces that are usually both physically and emotionally out of bounds: where brothers in arms of fallen heroes still pick up the pieces of a glorious shared past; where widows, from the mountains of Uttarakhand and Arunachal Pradesh to the plains of Karnataka, resign themselves to a life that will forever be laced with a curious mix of pride and grief; where men who have demonstrated fearlessness beyond anything even

conceivable to most of us explain it away as ‘just another day on the job’ . . .

These are stories like that of Lt. Col. Oscar Delta, who led a revenge mission on foreign soil just as his mother was being wheeled away for cancer surgery; or the young marine commando who would save fellow warriors only to have a grenade burst like a birthday balloon on his chest; or the Air Force pilot who decided, trapped in a screaming, shattered cockpit, that all those years of torture-testing needed to amount to something.

Not every one of the heroes you will read about in this book is alive. Telling their stories has meant that those who saw them fall, those who fought alongside them in their final moments, have permitted us access to what is for them a sacred place. It is a place where memories and trauma remain untouched and stowed away perforce so that the proverbial show may go on—like the hair-raising tales of Lance Naik Mohan Nath Goswami and Havildar Hangpan Dada, who are deified and worshipped by their units for acts of courage that even their fellow warriors say they will spend an entire lifetime coming to terms with. It is an irony we would encounter endlessly as we conducted interviews for this book—soldiers often do not have more than a few minutes to mourn their departed comrades.

The way we as citizens regard the lives and stories of soldiers today is another monumental irony. We live in times when we encounter almost daily a stream of grainy mugshots of deceased soldiers followed by photographs of their flag-draped caskets at military funerals. We feel exultant pride at their acts of bravery, fuelled by social and television media —only to be forgotten the next day. It occurred to us in the writing of this book that the levels of fearlessness displayed even routinely by the men you will read about—and countless more whose stories we hope to tell in future —reserve for them a place in the pantheon of immortals, legends. But never mind the details of their courage, how many soldiers can most of us even recall by name?

A third irony that we found ourselves frequently wrestling with was the godlike portrayal of military heroes in the media for the brief moments that they were remembered. As we journeyed through these tales, we were often

struck by a violent collision—between the perception of these men as superhuman, and the frequent sledgehammer reminders that they are just like us, their lives back home just like ours, where PAN cards need to be obtained, home loan instalments to be paid, ageing parents to be taken care of, tiffs with girlfriends to resolve, decisions to be pondered over such as what cake to get for their daughter's birthday, and whether to order butter chicken or kofta curry.

Historically, an impulse has existed to revere the military and its heroes as a physically and mentally superior class of human beings (Plato called them 'guardians', for instance), closer to divinity than their human roots. It is possibly a way to offset our own feeling of inadequacy that such acts of courage and fearlessness are really possible by those among us. In the stories you read in this book, we have attempted to straddle both these worlds.

Becoming a part of the lives of the men we have written about, their units and their families, we found ourselves dealing with our own sense of trauma. Drawn into a world where life and death were literally just that and not a clichés, it was difficult for us to remain unscathed. We do not claim to bear wounds, but we also cannot claim to have been immune to the threads of heartbreak, fury, pride and disbelief that weave through all of these tales.

One often hears the phrase 'supreme sacrifice' being used to describe the death of a soldier in the line of duty. It is a paradoxical term, heavy with implication. Yet, it instantly conveys what it intends to: an act of selflessness so high that the most basic instinct—to survive—fades away and yields to the decision to fight to the death.

American writer and mythologist Joseph Campbell once said, 'A hero is someone who has given his or her life to something bigger than oneself.'

What explains that final act of giving? What is that inscrutable space where the will to survive gives way to an epiphany that death in those circumstances will serve a higher purpose? What is that purpose? The survival of fellow comrades, the extraction of a hostage, successful escape from a tightening cordon of a marauding enemy.

Where there is battle, there will be heroes. There is then as much the inevitability that most of them will not be remembered. How does one remember so many heroes, and so many acts of conspicuous courage?

On the rare occasions when they are recalled, Indian military heroes and legends in public consciousness are mostly from our wars: Captain Vikram Batra from Kargil; Major Kuldip Singh Chandpuri from the Battle of Longewala in 1971; the astonishing last stand of Major Shaitan Singh in 1962 . . . It would be the rare citizen who knows or recalls in any great detail the exploits of Second Lieutenant Arun Khetarpal in 1971, or Subedar Bana Singh in 1987, or even Naib Subedar Sanjay Kumar, who, like Vikram Batra, was awarded the Param Vir Chakra, but whose story remains obscure to most of us. These are stories that have fallen through the cracks, not a fraction of the well-known legends they ought to be. It is the odd story of military heroism that manages to penetrate and then pervade public consciousness with any degree of detail as to have instant recall. Capt. Vikram Batra's war-cry '*Yeh dil maange more*' during the Kargil War eased his passage into that rare public immortality.

The truth is that India remains constantly at war. Fighting terrorists in Jammu and Kashmir and the North-east means an endless state of combat for several units, including the Para Special Forces that you will read about in many of the stories that follow. We have chosen to tell fourteen stories that stood out to us as extraordinary tales of fearlessness in recent memory. By no means is this to suggest that this is an exhaustive or definitive list. On the contrary, we hope that this will be a small tribute to the large number of uncelebrated heroes in our military past, and the acts of invisible heroism that continue each day.

When we decided to call this book *India's Most Fearless*, there wasn't a moment of doubt that we had chosen correctly. What, after all, is a more human emotion than fear? Yet, are we to believe that these men truly felt no fear at all?

As we present these stories, in the hope that they will mean as much to you as they do to us, we place them in your hands with a note on the astonishing generosity of the men we have written about. Asked what they

owed their courage to, we encountered a perplexingly unanimous answer. We quote one of the men: ‘I would say I owe it to the opportunity—being in that place at that time. I think any soldier in my place would do the same.’

It’s true. Heroes walk among us.

Foreword

> ‘Let me not pray to be sheltered from dangers,
> but to be fearless in facing them.
> Let me not beg for the stilling of my pain, but
> for the heart to conquer it.’
>
> —Rabindranath Tagore

The Indian Armed Forces personnel are the epitome of courage, valour and sacrifice. ‘Peacetime’ is an enduring misnomer for the Indian Armed Forces with a host of constant operational and training commitments.

Our soldiers, sailors and air warriors remain in a constant state of mission alert. The Indian Army’s Special Forces are among the world’s only elite units permanently deployed in hostile conditions and missions in Jammu and Kashmir and the North-east. For the preservation of peace, the war is constant. I am of the view that our citizens must hear about these stories of the unparalleled challenges and operational environment in which our soldiers operate fearlessly; their purpose to accomplish *any* mission, *anywhere, any time*.

Having seen combat through my years in one of the world’s most professional and capable militaries, I can tell you that it is difficult to fully understand acts of heroism and fearlessness. What drives heroes to put everything they have worked so hard for—their families and their own lives—at stake during an antiterror operation? What compels a pilot to delay an ejection so he may save lives on the ground even though such a delay means certain death for him? What pushes a sailor to willingly venture into harm’s way if it means the oceans are just a fraction safer? One of Mahatma Gandhi’s lesser-known quotes perfectly captures how we in the armed forces regard acts of courage:

Fearlessness is the first requisite of spirituality. Cowards can never be moral.

For all the decaying values we tend to be surrounded by, let nobody convince you that true heroes don’t exist. It is therefore with great pride and anticipation that I recommend to you the true stories you are about to read. May India never forget her most fearless.

Jai Hind.

New Delhi

General Bipin Rawat, UYSM, AVSM,
YSM, SM, VSM
Chief of the Army Staff

1

‘We Don’t Really Know Fear’

The September 2016 Surgical Strikes in PoK

Uri, Jammu and Kashmir
18 September 2016

Final checks on the AK-47 rifles. Final checks on the stacks of ammunition magazines and grenades stuffed into olive-green knapsacks. The 4 men shoved fistfuls of almonds into their mouths, chewing quickly in the darkness and swallowing. Small, light and packed with a burst of energy, mountain almonds are as much a staple for terrorist infiltrators as their weapons are. The high-protein mouthfuls would have to sustain the 4 men for the next 8 hours.

At least 8 hours.

Dressed in deceptive Indian Army combat fatigues, and shaven clean to blend in, the 4 emerged from their concealed launch point below a ridgeline overlooking a stunning expanse of frontier territory. In total darkness, they trekked for 1 km down to the powerfully guarded premises of the Indian Army’s Uri Brigade in Jammu and Kashmir’s Uri sector, on the LoC.

The 4 men knew their mission was not particularly extraordinary. Indian military facilities had been attacked by Pakistani terrorists before. In fact,

just 8 months earlier, in January 2016, an identical number of terrorists had infiltrated the Indian Air Force's base in Pathankot, where they had managed to kill 7 security personnel before being eliminated.

But there was something these men did not know. What they were about to do would change India like nothing else had in the past quarter century. It would compel India across a military point of no return that it had resisted until then.

Above all, it would awaken a monster that Pakistan had been arrogantly certain would remain in eternal slumber.

Infiltrating the Army camp at Uri before sunrise, the 4 men crept forward with an unusual sense of familiarity. Their Pakistani handlers had clearly 'war-gamed' the attack with maps and models of the camp. Wasting no time in familiarizing themselves with the camp's layout, they headed straight for a group of tents where the soldiers were sleeping.

By the time the sun was fully up and Special Forces (SF) commandos had been diverted to Uri as reinforcements, 17 Indian soldiers lost their lives. Two more would die later in hospital.

In a valley that has steadily numbed India with uninterrupted spillage of blood, the Uri terror ambush was special. Other than the horrifying scale of casualties the 4 terrorists managed to achieve, it was the hubris of the Uri attack that ignited unprecedented anger. It had come while families still mourned those who had died defending the Pathankot Air Force base only 8 months before.

Like the 4 terrorists, Pakistan was probably confident that India's ensuing wrath would be confined to public outrage and diplomatic condemnations, a standardized matrix of responses that it had learnt to handle with mastery. But Pakistan did make 1 devastating miscalculation. India was about to use precisely its reputation for inaction to exact a hitherto unthinkable revenge.

As blanket coverage of the Uri attack took over television news and the Internet on the morning of 18 September, a chill descended upon India's Raisina Hill in Delhi. Emergency meetings were held in the most secret 'war rooms' of the security establishment, one of them presided over by

Prime Minister Narendra Modi along with National Security Adviser Ajit Doval.

It was at this meeting that the Indian leadership secretly took 2 major decisions: (1) the Indian military would take the fight to the enemy this time to deliver a brutal response to the Uri attack; (2) the country's ministers, including Modi himself, would play their parts to perpetuate and amplify India's reputation for inaction until such a time when the response had been delivered. An elaborate, carefully crafted political masquerade would thus begin the following morning.

Meanwhile, 800 km away and high up in the Himalayas, a young Indian Army SF officer sat grimly in front of a small television in his barracks. Uri was his area. His hunting ground. Away on a special 2-month mission to the Siachen Glacier with a small team of men from his unit, the calm of Maj. Mike Tango's demeanour belied the fury that consumed him within. He watched familiar pictures from the Uri Army camp flicker on the screen in front of him. And just as the Indian government was about to decide on an unprecedented course of action, a prescient warning rang in the Major's mind.

'We knew the balloon had gone up. This wasn't a small incident. There was no question of sitting silent. This was beyond breaking point,' he says.

As second-in-command, or 2IC, of an elite Parachute Regiment (Special Forces), or the Para-SF as it is called, Maj. Tango had spent a decade of his 13 service years in J&K. He had been part of over 20 successful antiterror operations. And yet, the morning of 18 September had sent a knife through the officer's heart. He could not wait to get back to the rest of his unit deployed in and around where the terrorists had struck.

Upon receiving the call from Udhampur that he had been expecting, from his unit's Commanding Officer, or CO, Maj. Tango gathered his men immediately for a quick return to the Valley. The team reached Dras that same night of 18 September—a date the men would never forget.

The next morning, as they began their journey to Srinagar, things were already in motion in Delhi. The first minister to make a statement was former Army Chief, Gen. V.K. Singh, who, after the traditional

condemnations, made a remarkably generous appeal in the circumstances—he said that India could not act on emotion. It would be a critical spark to the success of the masquerade, followed shortly thereafter by Defence Minister Manohar Parrikar, who declared that the sacrifice of the Uri soldiers would not go in vain. Speaking to the Army in Srinagar, Parrikar sounded a familiar note, asking the Army to take 'firm action', but not specifying what such action needed to be. This was standard-issue *Bharat Sarkaar* (Indian Government) response after a terror attack.

However, to ensure that the government's messaging was not so measured as to rouse suspicion, junior ministers were tasked with adding some fire to the proceedings. That crucial bit was deftly served up by Manohar Parrikar's junior minister, Subhash Bhamre, who declared that the time had come 'to hit back'.

Two more top-level meetings took place on 19 September—one chaired by Home Minister Rajnath Singh, who had cancelled his visit to Russia, and the other by Prime Minister Modi at the PMO. Army Chief Gen. Dalbir Singh, who had dashed to the Kashmir valley just hours after the previous day's attack, had been conveyed the government's clear political directive. He arrived in Srinagar with the green signal that the SF had so far only ever dreamt about: permission to plan and execute a retaliatory strike with the government's full backing.

Over the next 24 hours, the Army would draw up a devastating revenge plan, with options for the government leadership to choose from.

The Army routinely simulates attacks on enemy territory during combat exercises and as preparation for possible hostilities. But as the COs of the 2 SF units (one of them being Maj. Tango's unit) began listing their options, they knew that history was being written then and there.

On 20 September, just as Maj. Tango and his team arrived in Srinagar, the Army's Northern Commander, or GOC-in-C of the Udhampur-headquartered Northern Command, Lt. Gen. Deependra Singh Hooda, had in his hands a final list of mission options and was preparing to present them to the government in Delhi through encrypted channels. The options were presented with remarkable detail.

‘We just needed clearance. In the SF, we are war-ready at all times. When we are not in operations, we are preparing for them. There’s a purpose behind everything we do,’ Maj. Tango says.

At the Army Headquarters in Delhi, the mood was expectedly sombre, but focused. Aided by a team that had been galvanized by the attack, Vice Chief of the Army Staff (later Chief) Lt. Gen. Bipin Rawat was steeped in the planning phase, bringing decades of infantry training to what would be the most decisive operation he would help oversee. What happened on 18 September was personal for Lt. Gen. Rawat. As a young Captain, he had commanded a Gorkha Rifles company in Uri in the early 1980s and had gone on to command a brigade in one of the most restive parts of the Kashmir valley. He would return years later as a Major General to command the Baramulla-based 19 Division. As he focused on the unprecedented plans on his table, Lt. Gen. Rawat had no way of knowing that a few months later, his experience in J&K and his crucial role in planning India’s response to Uri would be high on the government’s mind when it entrusted him with leadership of one of the largest armies in the world.

The options were tabulated. The first column bore the name of the location that would be attacked. The second column provided its location represented by distance inside PoK from the LoC. The third column provided information about the location and the number of terrorists who were likely to be encountered there. The fourth column provided a detailed list of required resources in terms of men, equipment, logistical and back-up support. There was 1 final column. It provided a figure of the number of casualties India could expect for that particular target. Some of the targets listed predicted the possibility of zero casualties if men and equipment were adequately ramped up. Other options predicted definite casualties, in some cases in double-digit numbers.

‘The options provided were as specific as possible. The government would have to take a decision based on these inputs, which included probable casualty count. We spared no details,’ says Maj. Tango.

The target list was scrutinized along a top-secret chain of command that numbered barely a handful of people, with ‘need to know’ rules applicable throughout. The options were vetted by designated officers from the Intelligence Bureau and the Research and Analysis Wing, before a final recommended brief was presented to the government.

Meanwhile, arriving in Srinagar on the morning of 20 September, Maj. Tango went straight to a designated operations room to meet his CO, who had arrived after spending the previous day in Uri with his men.

‘*Chhote, serious matter hai*,’ the Colonel told Maj. Tango. The two men could cut to the chase like they always had. A decade ago, Maj Tango’s CO had been Team Leader to a young, recently commissioned Mike as Troop Commander. Now, as 2IC, Maj. Tango would march into hell if his CO ordered him to. The Colonel had never hesitated before when speaking to Mike. But that morning, there was a clear trace of hesitation. And with good reason.

Orders had just arrived posting Maj. Tango out from the Kashmir valley and to a course in a different part of the country. While his departure was scheduled for a whole month later, Army units regard such situations jokingly as ‘posted out, not interested’ or PONI. Simply put, the sense is that once officers have received their next posting, they might not really have their heart in the current one any longer.

For Maj. Tango, that morning in Srinagar, there was no PONI, and no dilemma.

‘I was given the option to either stay back and monitor the operation, or lead the operation and go in. It didn’t take me a moment to decide,’ Maj. Tango recalls.

Maj. Tango knew that the mission afoot was an operation all SF men dreamed of. The officer also knew there was no real option. His CO needed his best men in the lead. As the 2 men smoked, Maj. Tango reached out.

‘*Sir, aap tension mein lag rahe ho*. (Sir, you look worried.) How can you be in a dilemma, sir? Just give me the order. No hesitation,’ Maj. Tango said to his CO, his voice confident and unwavering.

‘*Jis cheez ke liye SF join kiya tha, woh mauka ab aaya hai aur aap option de rahe ho* (The reason for which I joined the SF, that opportunity has now arrived, and you are giving me options),’ Maj. Tango smiled.

Twenty minutes later, Maj. Tango and his 19 men bundled into squad vehicles to begin the 70-km dash to Baramulla. By midnight on 20 September, Maj. Tango’s team arrived at a post on the LoC in the Uri sector.

The plans were so secret that even the teams tasked with executing the attack were not in the loop. The COs of the two Para-SF units had simply informed the teams to head to locations on the LoC in Uri, Kupwara and Rajouri sectors and await further orders. They were instructed to be on 12-hour notice to begin moving.

Maj. Tango and his warriors moved on foot. Being airlifted by chopper to the LoC post was out of the question. Apart from dangers posed by flying so close to Pakistan Army positions, the echo effect in the mountains would infinitely amplify the unsubtle whirring of helicopter blades.

Morale was high that night of 20 September as the soldiers crept up to the LoC. Their furtive arrival was an unmissable sign that offensive action was afoot. The SF are never deployed for defence. Their principal task is to attack and destroy. But remaining hidden would be an enormous challenge.

‘When SF men get close to the LoC, alarm bells ring on the other side,’ says Maj. Tango. ‘No matter how much you try to mask your arrival, there’s something about SF soldiers. They just know.’

Like Maj. Tango’s team at Uri, 2 more Para-SF teams had been deployed —one in the Poonch area north of Jammu, and another at a post on the LoC in Kupwara in north Kashmir, each with a single launch pad to attack inside PoK. At these 3 locations, the warriors hunkered down and awaited their orders.

The weather at the LoC was mild and temperate in September, but would change only a few weeks later. The terrain, on the other hand, never changed, mountainous, undulating and hostile in every possible natural way —features that added immeasurably to the uninterrupted danger afforded by eyeball-to-eyeball perches of Indian and Pakistani border posts.

The weather, at any rate, was the only thing that was mild. The morale boost that came with the SF reinforcements had done nothing to blunt the fury that pervaded Army ranks after the Uri attack. In fact, the Army had decided to use soldiers from the units that had suffered losses in the Uri attack for the elaborate revenge mission. A Ghatak platoon was formed and soldiers from the 2 units that had lost men were roped in to man border posts and provide crucial terrain intelligence and support to the mission that lay ahead. Tactically, this was a smart move—few knew the lay of the frontier land better than they did. But there was another astute reason. Involving them in the mission would at least begin to lay the ghosts of Uri to rest.

But if the eagerness for payback was not already acute, Pakistan would gamely fan India's fury into an inferno the following day. And the man who would do it would be Pakistan's Prime Minister himself.

On 21 September 2016, Nawaz Sharif addressed the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA). The irony of his address would become apparent only in hindsight. A traditional platform for Pakistan to raise the Kashmir issue, Nawaz Sharif went a step further that evening in New York City, less than 4 days after the Uri attack:

> Peace and normalization between Pakistan and India cannot be achieved without a resolution of the Kashmir dispute. . . . Our predictions have now been confirmed by events. A new generation of Kashmiris has risen spontaneously against India's illegal occupation—demanding freedom from occupation. Burhan Wani, the young leader murdered by Indian forces, has emerged as the symbol of the latest Kashmiri Intifada, a popular and peaceful freedom movement, led by Kashmiris, young and old, men and women, armed only with an undying faith in the legitimacy of their cause, and a hunger for freedom in their hearts.[1]

The message was unmissable. Not only had Sharif dispensed with any bilateral decency of referring to the Uri attack, he had in fact found it fit to venerate a man India had designated a terrorist, and whose group had been responsible for hundreds of terror attacks on Kashmiri civilians. No one had expected Sharif to offer anything more than the usual diplomatic platitudes about how India and Pakistan are both victims of terror. But they had not expected the bare effrontery of choosing to invoke an enemy of the Indian

state. In India, while public anger turned into a virtual call to war, Sharif's insolent speech was the confirmation the political leadership needed that their political masquerade was working. But the true master stroke in the elaborate theatre would be delivered 3 days later. And the man to deliver it would be the Indian Prime Minister himself.

On 24 September, at 1755 hours, thousands gathered for a public rally in Kozhikode, Kerala. The Prime Minister, silent since the Uri attack except for tweets, had the media's gaze fixed on him. What would he say about Uri? Would he respond to Nawaz Sharif, a man he had cheerfully diverted his helicopter to visit in Lahore less than a year before? Would the Prime Minister satiate a public that was looking for Pakistan to be taught a lesson? It was time for Modi to play his part in a masterful facade that was now fully in motion:

> A leader [Nawaz Sharif] is reading the speech of a terrorist. I wish to speak to Pakistani citizens. Before 1947 your forefathers loved this entire land. India is ready to fight a war. A war against poverty. Let India and Pakistan fight a war to end social evils, illiteracy and unemployment. Let us see who wins.[2]

The media and the public were stunned. This was not anywhere close to the harsh, thundering rebuttal Modi was capable of. It provided not even the visceral satisfaction the crowds had come to expect from the Prime Minister when he spoke about or to Pakistan. The call to war on poverty was a feat of cunning that would be the penultimate step in the subterfuge. The messaging was calibrated precisely to accentuate India as a country high on political rhetoric and substantially low on political will.

At the LoC, Uri, Maj. Tango and his men were on their 4th day forward deployed. Unused to sitting in wait for long, the SF men were yearning for an order, whatever it was.

'We were very calm. Since we were so close to Pakistan Army posts, we had little or no movement. They may have suspected SF presence on the LoC, but being spotted was not an option,' says Maj. Tango.

As Team Leader, Maj. Tango had chosen every man himself, including the officers and men who would play a supporting role. He was also acutely

aware of the fact that the lives of 19 men were, quite literally, in his hands.

The SF men waited, conducting brief reconnaissance patrols from the Uri post, but never straying too far. The wait was laced with tension, a numbing irony all commandos are familiar with—there is infinitely more disturbance in calm than in an actual firefight. Once ‘contact’ is made and bullets begin to fly, that’s when calm truly returns.

Maj. Tango and his men had not been informed of their precise targets yet, but the team was by now certain of the nature of the mission they would be embarking on. The men were fully prepared. Each man knew the specific role he would play. Permutations of outcomes were discussed threadbare. The entire operation would be planned based on timing with the other 2 teams at the other 2 locations along the LoC. Given how terrain changes from south to north, inter-team coordination would prove to be a bit of a magical process.

From their post, Maj. Tango and his men had heard the Prime Minister’s speech in Kozhikode. Maj. Tango was also aware that India’s Minister for External Affairs Sushma Swaraj was scheduled to speak at the UNGA 48 hours later. That speech would be the final act of a national deception that had begun 8 days ago, a day after the Uri attack.

With signature indignation, Sushma Swaraj appeared to speak directly to Pakistan’s Prime Minister. But the tone of her speech had been carefully sculpted to amplify not anger or indignation, but hurt and betrayal:

> Did we impose any pre-condition when Prime Minister Modi travelled from Kabul to Lahore? What pre-conditions? We took the initiative to resolve issues not on the basis of conditions, but on the basis of friendship! We have in fact attempted a paradigm of friendship in the last two years which is without precedent. We conveyed Eid greetings to the Prime Minister of Pakistan, wished success to his cricket team, extended good wishes for his health and well-being. Did all this come with pre-conditions attached? And what did we get in return? Pathankot, Bahadur Ali and Uri.[3]

Maj. Tango watched the minister’s speech live on the evening of 26 September. There had been no warning in the address, no aggression. The chief emotion was disappointment. It would all make sense later, but the diversion was as unobvious to Maj. Tango as it was to Pakistan.

The officer did not know why, but he had an inkling that the team's orders were about to arrive. He was only half right. By midnight on 26 September, the warriors received word ordering them to be on standby, and identifying their targets: 2 terror launch pads in the area across from Uri. The 2 other teams were given a single launch pad target each.

A total of 4 terror launch pads operated by Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) and protected by the Pakistan Army had just been selected for doom.

The Indian soldiers now needed to find out everything they possibly could about the targets in real time. An operational standby meant they would have nothing more than a few hours to roll out the mission once the final go-ahead was given. And they knew that the go-ahead could come any time.

A series of extremely furtive observation missions by Maj. Tango's team over the next few hours revealed that the 8 Pakistan Army posts overlooking the Uri post were not in an aggressive or overly defensive posture. Their guard was far from down, but it was clear that they had loosened up and were distinctly unaware of what was about to come their way.

The team knew that, for all the intelligence they were armed with, nothing could be quite as reliable as human intelligence on the ground in enemy territory. Through a series of masked communications over mobile, Maj. Tango's men contacted 4 'assets'—2 local villagers in PoK and 2 Pakistani nationals operating in the area—both moles in the dreaded Jaish-e-Mohammed terror group, men who had been turned by Indian agencies a few years before. All 4 assets separately confirmed the target information that was placed before them. In terms of intelligence, there was nothing further for the team to do on this side of the LoC.

Apart from the final preparations and reconnaissance missions from the Indian side, the men checked their weapons and equipment. Maj. Tango would be armed with his M4A1 5.56-mm carbine, the rest of the assault team with a mix of M4A1s and standard-issue Israeli Tavor TAR-21 assault rifles, Instalaza C90 disposable grenade launchers and Galil sniper rifles.

Batteries on night-vision equipment were checked and other devices were charged too. As the hours went by and it was clear that a final go-ahead was about to come, Maj. Tango's chief worry bubbled to the surface.

'As Team Leader, my concern was to get all my men out safely. I had chosen the best men for the job. But the one thing bothering me was the de-induction—the return. That's where I knew I could lose guys,' Maj. Tango recalls.

This was no small worry. The 'induction' process, the trek down a steep ridgeline into PoK, would actually be the simplest part of the operation. Even the actual attack was not something that flustered the commandos. It was the return, an uphill trek to the LoC, that was the truly daunting part. Their backs would be facing a blaze of fire from Pakistan Army posts, belatedly roused from their slumber. And the dominant position held by the posts would make the escaping warriors easy targets to spot and kill.

Maj. Tango knew it was impossible to overthink the de-induction phase. And so, during those crucial hours, he rummaged through every bit of SF training he had had—to see if there was a tactic or stratagem he could employ to better ensure that every one of his men got out alive. Or, even better, not badly injured. Of all the uncertainties that faced them in the darkness that loomed over them from the mountain range, Maj. Tango knew the escape phase could be their true enemy.

The 2 terror launch pads identified as targets for Maj. Tango's team were well inside PoK and roughly 500 metres away from each other. Each launch pad is really a transit staging area for terrorist infiltrators before they are sent across the LoC. Both launch pads were close to Pakistan Army posts for logistical and administrative purposes. ISI handlers would often visit these launch pads before infiltration attempts.

Maj. Tango made a final call to his CO in Srinagar before ordering his team to turn off their radios. The men would now maintain total radio silence until they returned from the operation, with only the most fleeting data transmissions on their hand-held satellite equipment.

Shortly before noon on 27 September, the 3 assault teams received their final go-ahead to attack the 4 terror launch pads. Seven days after they had

taken position on the LoC, they had finally been cleared to go into PoK. The mission brief was uncomplicated. The soldiers were expected to reach their targets, study the latest intelligence they could possibly access with their satellite devices and then proceed to wipe out every man they saw there.

Nobody in the military or the government knew about the mission apart from a carefully pruned chain of command that stretched from the Prime Minister at one end and 3 SF team commanders at the other. A bare handful of officers populated the top-secret chain, an imperative given Pakistan's remarkable human intelligence capabilities in the Kashmir valley. The assets Indian intelligence agencies had on the other side were far fewer in comparison.

Late on the evening of 27 September, with final confirmatory checks complete and darkness setting in over the frontier, Maj. Tango and his team from the Para-SF rolled out from their post at 2030 hours, putting the LoC behind them 25 minutes later and heading into PoK. They then began a 4-hour trek downhill into one of the most dangerous places in the subcontinent.

'This was meant to be total surprise action. And it was. But as we neared our targets, the Pakistan Army posts began firing illumination rounds to light up the area, as they normally do. This was a huge risk as we were inducting just then,' Maj. Tango recalls. 'If they even smelt us, we would have a fight on our hands. And their positions meant they could dominate us.'

Then, just as suddenly as the illumination bursts had begun, they died down. Maj. Tango took no chances, ordering his men to stay down, and waiting nearly 20 minutes before moving forward.

A kilometre from their targets, Maj. Tango split his team into 2—one for each target. Nine of the warriors followed the Major as they made their way in darkness towards their designated launch pad target.

Approximately 200 metres from the launch pad, Maj. Tango's team came to an abrupt stop. The men dropped down flat on their bellies—because the

sound they heard from up ahead was the last thing they were hoping for: gunfire.

Out in front with his night-vision goggles, Maj. Tango quickly deduced that the firing emanating from the launch pad was speculative. It came in short, uncertain bursts rather than with the searing sureness of a targeted bullet hail. This was good news, because it meant that the Indian warriors had not been spotted. It was bad news too in a way, because it also implied that the terrorists suddenly had their guard up and may have been alerted that something was afoot. The intelligence network that Pakistan's military machinery enjoys along the LoC and in J&K is formidable. It was not beyond the realm of possibility that the news of the arrival of Indian soldiers had been shared with the Pakistan Army posts as a belated input, even as the final approach was in flow.

It was this possibility that made Maj. Tango pause. He knew that an enormously difficult decision needed to be made quickly—whether he would order the assault right then, or wait.

Maj. Tango craned his neck slowly, looking back towards the men behind him. He didn't need reminding that each of their lives was in his hands. Through the darkness, they looked straight back at him, waiting for the order. Crawling backwards on his elbows, Maj. Tango retreated a few metres to where his team lay in wait, informing them of his decision in the lowest, most hushed tone he had ever employed: he and his men would seek out a safe, hidden position in the area and hunker down through the night and the following day. Maj. Tango knew it was an enormous risk remaining in such hostile territory after sunrise. But the potential value of having a chance to visually study their targets before the final assault was difficult to ignore.

There was no question of sleep. Maj. Tango and his men retreated on their elbows about 200 metres in the darkness, finding a rocky crevasse wreathed by a thick clump of trees. They regrouped and waited for sunrise, a pair of look-outs keeping their night-vision-assisted gaze fixed in the direction of the terror launch pads.

The next 24 hours would be perilous in the extreme. With the cover of darkness gone, Maj. Tango and his men would need to do all they had to with only a bare fraction of the freedom that night afforded them. Switching on the sole satellite kit among them, Maj. Tango tapped on the touchscreen to first transmit his decision to his CO in Srinagar, and then to download two crucial bits of data: (1) a set of coded text messages from Srinagar with updated intelligence; (2) a pair of photographs of the area taken by an Indian Air Force Heron surveillance drone flying near the LoC.

Both sets of data confirmed that there was no major change in the situation, nor any reason to alter their plans. If their presence had been detected by the Pakistan Army posts or those manning the terror launch pads, the satellite data would have likely had indicators that their game was about to be up.

The data was useful, and a confirmation to proceed with the assault that night. But in those daylight hours, the team hadn't managed to visually study their targets first-hand. It had been deemed simply too risky to the mission to send out reconnaissance teams in daylight. Maj. Tango made one last transmission to his CO before powering off his satellite kit: the operation would be carried out late that night.

In Delhi that evening of 28 September, the Indian Coast Guard commanders' conference was getting set to host its annual dinner. But its top invitees, Defence Minister Manohar Parrikar, National Security Adviser Ajit Doval and Army Chief Gen. Dalbir Singh, excused themselves from the event. The 3 would meet instead at the military operations room on the first floor of Army Headquarters in South Block—for one final look at the historic mission that was about to commence.

The media hadn't a whiff of what was afoot. The full focus was on India's diplomatic response to the Uri attack. As India publicly rallied support at the SAARC Summit, reports emerged that US Secretary of State John Kerry had spoken to his Indian counterpart Sushma Swaraj twice over the phone with a request that India not escalate tensions. In Delhi's upscale Gurgaon suburb, a scheduled concert by Pakistani singer Atif Aslam was cancelled following advice from the administration citing 'sentiments of

armed forces/soldiers at the frontier'. The carefully crafted 'mess' of diplomatic, public and political indignation was the ultimate ruse.

At midnight, less than 1000 km away from India's capital, Maj. Tango and his men had emerged in the darkness from their temporary hideout, returning to their final positions from the previous night. There, Maj. Tango ordered his men to lie low and remain motionless until he gave the final word. Stilling the sound of his breathing, the Major peered through his night-vision goggles at the terror launch pad that lay literally a stone's throw away from where he and his men lay on their bellies, their weapons primed and ready. The speculative firing continued for many minutes, echoing through the valley. Then, finally, it stopped.

Maj. Tango once again told his men not to move. He needed to be absolutely sure that the terrorists were not waiting in ambush. If they were, this mission would end before it had even begun. The men in Maj. Tango's team were India's finest SF commandos. But even they could not face a terror ambush backed by dominant firing posts that could pour uninterrupted hell on them from positions of advantage. A few minutes after the firing had stopped, Maj. Tango ordered his men to spread out into 2 squads and follow him as he crept forward.

Fifty metres from the launch pad, Maj. Tango summoned his buddy to crawl forward towards him. He then pointed directly to the open space in front of a forested outcrop that made up the launch pad itself. Their silhouettes clearly visible in the green glow of their night-vision devices, they identified 2 terrorists who stood guard at the spot.

This was the moment the SF team had been waiting for—the moment when the fight would begin, when tension would dissipate and calm would return as bullets flew.

From a distance of 50 metres, Maj. Tango opened fire at the 2 terrorists, dropping them instantly. The officer then whispered urgently to the squads behind him to move towards the forest launch pad and attack the other terrorists who were certain to be there. Before they entered the forest, 2 commandos opened heavy fire from their hiding places directly at the launch pad, allowing the assault team to move in unchallenged. The men

now sprinted in a crouch towards the hideout, immediately opening a blaze of fire as they reached. Nearly every bullet fired found a target.

The open area cleared by his initial attack, Maj. Tango now sped towards the forest hideout to join his men. As he reached the spot, he noticed 2 terrorists moving through the jungle in an attempt to attack the Indian warriors from behind. These were terrorists with commando-style training who employed movements and tactics that bore a disturbing resemblance to military strategy, a fact that was shatteringly brought home to India during the 26/11 attacks, and has been a staple with infiltrators ever since. The terrorists at the launch pads were trained like soldiers.

Realizing that the 2 terrorists would, in seconds, be in a position to shoot down his men with a few bursts of fire, Maj. Tango sprinted through the forest directly towards them. As he neared them, they saw him and leapt behind a tree taking offensive positions, ready to greet the incoming Indian team leader with a burst of fire that would drop him in his tracks. But before they could raise their AK-47s, Maj. Tango was upon them. The hectic dash had deprived him of the precious seconds he would need to raise his M4A1 carbine and fire. So in the few seconds that he had before they could fire, he had whipped out his Beretta 9-mm semi-automatic pistol. With a series of shots just 5 feet away from the terrorists, Maj. Tango felled both the men.

From the moment the firefight began until the last bullet was fired, it had been just over an hour. The frenetic pace of the assault meant the teams, now united after the split attack on 2 launch pads, would prepare to leave with only a very rough estimate of the number of terrorists they had managed to kill: 20. The figure would be corroborated days later by India’s external intelligence.

A total of 38–40 terrorists and 2 Pakistan Army personnel were killed at the 4 targets. The 3 separate teams had simultaneously struck 4 launch pads across the LoC. Their entry into PoK had been coordinated and precisely timed. The assault and exit were conducted in total radio silence; therefore, each team was entirely on its own. Their 2 designated launch pads cleared,

Maj. Tango's band of warriors turned about and headed east, back towards the LoC.

The officer's biggest fear was about to come true in a far more frightening way than he had imagined.

The return, or de-induction, had to be carried out with a step beyond extreme care. The route was known, since the warriors had just used it to enter PoK, so it would take them less time to make the uphill trek back. But through the entire stretch, they would be dangerously vulnerable to Pakistan Army posts freshly aware of the intrusion and now doing everything in their power to stop the Indian soldiers from escaping back over the LoC.

A decision had to be made whether to risk taking the speedy escape route that would bring with it the certainty of angry firepower from Pakistani posts, or to trek a different path that would be longer and more circuitous, but offer safer passage to the warriors. Maj. Tango knew he didn't have more than a few seconds to take a decision. He was well aware that even a circuitous route wouldn't fully confuse the army posts that were now in an angry state of alert all along the LoC. Every alarm bell in Pakistan's military system in the field was now blaring. But aware of the immediate danger of interception by Pakistani quick reaction teams that were probably already in motion, the Major and his men decided on a longer, circuitous exit.

The return would need to be quick, but phased. One squad from Maj. Tango's team was designated as the fire support group. Men from this group would provide intermittent cover fire from the mountainside as their mates made onward progress. It would be a dangerous exercise, given that the Indian soldiers would be vastly outgunned and outnumbered by the dominant Pakistan Army positions. What they did have access to was continuous real-time guidance from the Indian drone that was back in the air over the LoC, helping the returning warriors chart as deceptive a route as they possibly could as they trudged back.

Maj. Tango was right about the risk of retaliation no matter which route they took. Enraged by the cross-border strike, the Pakistan Army posts opened fire with everything they had. From medium machine guns to

rocket-propelled grenades, ammunition of every kind, short of heavy artillery, rained down on the earth around the escaping Indian warriors.

‘At one point, the bullets were so close, they were whistling past our ears. There’s a familiar *put-put* sound when rounds fly very close to your head,’ Maj. Tango recalls. ‘If I were a foot taller, I would have been hit many times over.’

During the circuitous escape, the men were frequently flat on the ground as trees in their path were shredded to bits by hails of ammunition. A particularly vulnerable 60-metre patch in the de-induction route gave the commandos their closest call. Still flat on their bellies, but with no natural feature hiding them, they needed to slither the full distance without being hit. Crossing in pairs as ammunition hit the ground inches from them, Maj. Tango’s team made it to the LoC before the sun was up, finally crossing it at 0430 hours. But the men knew the LoC was not any sort of force field against Pakistani bullets—they still had some distance to go before they were fully out of range. But now, they were provided heavy covering fire by Indian Army border posts, and so the commandos could quickly cover the distance to the post they had departed from 36 hours before.

With 7.62-mm Pakistani sniper rounds still finding their way to targets within a few feet of the team, Maj. Tango and his men finally reached the Uri post. Maj. Tango made his first encrypted radio call to his CO. A few minutes later, Maj. Tango received a call from Lt. Gen. Satish Dua, commander of the Army’s 15 Corps, headquartered in Srinagar and responsible for the entire Kashmir valley. Lt. Gen. Dua, himself a counterterrorism specialist, kept the call brief, merely informing Maj. Tango that a chopper would soon be on its way to get him.

Lt. Gen. Dua had been crushed by the Uri attack. As the man who oversaw all operations in the Valley, the ambush had taken place on his watch. If there was one senior officer who could not wait to get even, it was he.

In Delhi, Prime Minister Modi and the national security leadership was informed of the mission’s success. A second act of making history would ensue shortly thereafter.

Meanwhile in Uri, as Maj. Tango waited, he took a full debrief on the other 2 strikes. Apart from a landmine blast that injured a commando in one of the other teams during de-induction, there were no casualties. Not only had the surgical strikes of 28–29 September been the most audacious and dangerous peacetime attacks mounted by Indian forces, they had also been the cleanest. In the table of options provided by the Army to the government leadership, the final list of chosen targets carried a probable casualty number of 1 or 2 for each target. By that measure, the mission would have been deemed successful even if 4–8 commandos had perished during the operation. With no man dead or left behind, the government would be thrust into a daze that such a surgically clean operation was possible. The reputation of the Para-SF, already inestimably high, would reach a historic zenith on the morning of 29 September 2016.

A few hours later, an Army Cheetah helicopter landed at a helipad near the Uri post. The helipad was on the leeward side of the mountain and facing away from Pakistani firing that still had not stopped. As Maj. Tango made his way towards the helipad, a series of sniper rounds smashed into the ground in front of him, killing a dog.

‘The dog was walking a few feet in front of me. A bullet smashed right into the poor creature. And I was saved,’ Maj. Tango says.

The officer rushed forward towards the helipad as a final blaze of sniper fire tried to cut him down. Taking off and following a terrain-hugging flight path, the Cheetah transported Maj. Tango to the headquarters of the 15 Corps, known in the Army as the Chinar Corps, after the rich, deciduous trees native to the Valley.

At the Corps Headquarters, Lt. Gen. Dua had skipped lunch in anticipation of Maj. Tango’s arrival. At 1530 hours, the Cheetah landed at the 15 Corps’ helipad. Maj. Tango was led straight to the operations room. Waiting for him at the door was his CO.

‘*Chhote!*’

‘Sir!’

The two men hugged, slapping each other on the back, pulling back and regarding each other wordlessly. Both knew what had just happened. There

was no need for small talk.

Emerging from within the operations room was the Corps Commander, Lt. Gen. Dua. The no-nonsense General had a broad smile on his face as he approached the two officers. Maj. Tango straightened up immediately, saluting the senior officer.

As the Major and Lieutenant General shook hands, a waiter appeared bearing a tray with glasses half-filled with the rich amber of Black Label whisky.

'Bring the bottle,' the General ordered the waiter, 'these men eat glasses'—a fact Maj. Tango confirms as being true.

The waiter disappeared, quickly reappearing with a full bottle of Black Label. Lt. Gen. Dua grabbed the bottle, ordered Maj. Tango to open his mouth and began pouring. Then Maj. Tango, a full 5 ranks junior to the 3-star officer, returned the favour. It was only after the officers had had a chance to recover from the well-earned whisky celebration that an operational debrief took place.

Maj. Tango was now the secret centrepiece of the Indian military's modern history. An Army Dhruv helicopter arrived at the Srinagar Corps headquarters a few hours later, flying him straight to Udhampur, the headquarters of the Army's Northern Command. There he would meet Lt. Gen. Deependra Singh Hooda, the officer who vetted the final targeting options before they were presented to the Army Headquarters and government.

More whisky followed. Maj. Tango and his men hadn't eaten for a whole day. In his mind, he remembers thinking, '*Koi khaana de do. Saare daaru pila rahe hain* (Could we get some food too, please? Everyone's giving us only alcohol).'

In January 2017, 5 men from the 3 teams were decorated with the Shaurya Chakra, while 13 received Sena Medals for gallantry during the assaults. The COs of the two Para-SF units involved were awarded Yudh Seva Medals for their planning and leadership from Srinagar during the operation.

Maj. Tango went on to receive the highest decoration of the lot—a Kirti Chakra. His citation read:

By his decisive thinking, professional approach, warrior ethos, exemplary leadership and courage beyond the call of duty, Maj. Mike Tango ensured the execution of the task flawlessly with clockwork precision and eliminated 4 terrorists in close quarter combat.

Life changed drastically for Maj. Tango after the surgical strikes.

'Life has changed completely. It's more restricted now. But I cannot stop being an SF officer. That's who I am,' Maj. Tango says, referring to his inevitable status as a 'person of interest' for Pakistan and the terror groups his men smashed on the intervening night of 28–29 September.

Maj. Tango, 35 years old at the time this book was written in 2017, knew from the age of 6 that he wanted to be in the military. He remembers sitting wide-eyed on the edge of his parents' bed at their Mumbai home, watching the 1980s film, *Vijeta*, in stunned silence.

'I used to watch the movie once every day for months. I couldn't pull myself away from it. I knew I had to be in the military,' Maj. Tango says. 'My parents freaked out so much that they taped over the *Vijeta* tape.'

Over the next 12 years, Mike Tango's obsession with a future in the military would only intensify. In 2000, he joined the National Defence Academy (NDA) in Pune after failing to crack the test twice. While the Indian Air Force was a teenaged Mike's first choice, inspired by his memories of *Vijeta*, he would have to settle for the Army. He was not disappointed. He had just taken his first steps into the military, and that was all that mattered.

Over the next few weeks, Mike would be mesmerized by stories from J&K shared with him by a member of his directing staff, an officer from another elite Para-SF unit. Mike had already decided that he wanted to be in the infantry, clear in his mind that he would not fit into any other combat arm. And by the time he had finished at the NDA, it would be nothing but the SF. The young cadet's new ideal was cemented as he joined the Indian

Military Academy (IMA) in Dehradun. His platoon commander at the IMA was from his future unit in the Para-SF. There would be no looking back for Mike Tango.

In 2004, Mike Tango was commissioned into the Army's Para-SF as a Lieutenant. The initial 6-month probation phase was a finely crafted period that would be the final boot camp before true SF operations. Over 3 months, Mike and other young officers were put through tests of mental toughness, integrity and honesty.

'In probation, *everyone* is assessing you. Are you a team leader? Are you a good support guy? Physically, everyone who joins the SF team is tough. They attempt to break you mentally,' Maj. Tango remembers.

None of the mental tests would of course preclude or replace physical trials. That would intensify dramatically during SF probation.

'The attempt is to try and break you, to find your breaking point, to see where you give up. The point is of course not to. But everyone has a breaking point,' says Maj. Tango.

The officer remembers occasionally considering giving it all up and quitting service during his probation. Sleep deprivation and stress tests had brought hell, in his words, to daily existence. Maj. Tango will never forget being thrown into a gutter or being ordered to dissect rotting carcasses of animals. It would dawn on the young officer that the seemingly sadistic rituals of probation were all part of the indispensable toughening-up that made the SF special.

'You can't freak out in a bad situation. No matter what happens, you have to deal with what's in front of you. That's what probation teaches you.'

A special memory remains of being dragged out of his bed at 0200 hours and being ordered to write a persuasive 1000-word essay on how the menstrual cycle of a former Pakistani leader affects the monsoon in West Bengal.

'The attempt is to throw anything at you and see how you deal with it. There are no options. You deal. Or you're out.'

Mike completed his 6-month probation in just under 4 months. He was dispatched quickly to the Kashmir valley to begin what would be an

explosively active decade in the state. By October 2004, just a few months into service, the young officer had managed to prove beyond doubt that he would be a successful SF warrior. But the unit had decided that the young officer, high on his abilities, needed to suffer just a little bit longer. And so an elaborate plan was hatched by his seniors. It began with a summons to north Kashmir's Lolab Valley on Dussehra, 2004, and orders to embark on a mission fabricated to end without success. When Mike returned to the field headquarters that evening, he was roundly castigated.

'I was shouted at very harshly and told I wasn't fit for the SF,' Mike recalls. 'The next day in Srinagar, I got an even worse shelling by my Team Commander and CO. They said I lacked aptitude. I was shocked and angry. I had trained so hard for this.'

The prank was a meticulous one. Mike's seniors had even procured a movement order posting him out of the SF to a regular infantry unit.

'I was given a movement order to 18 Mahar Regiment and ordered to proceed immediately to a transit camp. I packed my bags and was on the verge of tears. I had never been so low.'

Just as Mike was leaving, a waiter from the officers' mess jogged up to him, informing him that the CO wanted to meet him one last time. Mike remembers being in no mood to meet his seniors, and simply wanting to leave as quickly as possible. Fighting back a tide of frustration, he decided to follow the waiter to the mess.

Mike's CO stood there, grim, staring, silent. A perplexed Mike was ordered to do 50 push-ups right then and there. Furious and in disbelief, Mike knew he could not disobey a direct order, so he fell to the ground to do as he was commanded. But as he rose to his feet, Mike saw his CO holding a brand-new maroon beret in his hand. The young officer had just earned the most iconic symbol of the Special Forces.

'I was beyond exhilarated. What followed was our traditional drink in the SF—every kind of alcohol mixed in a jug with our rank badges in there too. We drink it all in one go, and then the rank badges are pipped. I woke up two days later.'

Mike would see his first live firefight less than a year later in June 2005. Intelligence had just arrived about suspicious movements in Bandipora. Arriving on the scene with his squad, Lt. Tango and his men spotted the 3 ‘suspects’, all in burkas. Their masculine voices while speaking on a mobile phone and the chance sighting of an AK-47 between them blew their cover. Mike and his men positioned themselves in a cordon around the suspects.

‘It was the first and the last time my hands shivered before action. It happens only that first time. Never again,’ Mike recalls.

He would go on to raise a covert/pseudo ops (operations) team for the Para-SF—a subunit dedicated to deep cover and intelligence gathering from the general population. It would allow Mike to begin understanding the level of intelligence in infiltration Pakistan had managed in the Kashmir valley, and how difficult it would be to conduct SF missions there. Not once during the 7 years he spent in covert operations did he imagine that he would one day be ordered to cross the LoC.

The Indian Army’s September 2016 surgical strikes caused an immediate global sensation, facilitated and then fanned by a second stroke of history sanctioned by the Modi government—an official announcement. Just hours after Maj. Tango and the other 2 teams crossed back over the LoC, the Army was given orders to hold a press conference to formally declare that the attacks had taken place, unheard of in special operations concerning Pakistan.

The honour of officially revealing the surgical strikes fell on the Army’s Director General Military Operations, Lt. Gen. Ranbir Singh, at a joint press conference with the spokesperson of India’s External Affairs Ministry. In front of a shocked crowd of media persons at Delhi’s Jawaharlal Nehru Bhawan, the officer detailed the audacious mission:

> Based on receiving specific and credible inputs that some terrorist teams had positioned themselves at launch pads along Line of Control to carry out infiltration and conduct terrorist strikes inside Jammu and Kashmir and in various metros in other states, the Indian Army conducted surgical strikes at several of these launch pads to pre-empt infiltration by terrorists. The operations were focused on ensuring that these terrorists do not succeed in their design to cause destruction and endanger the lives of our citizens.

> During these counter terrorist operations significant casualties were caused to terrorists and those providing support to them. The operations aimed at neutralizing terrorists have since ceased. We do not have any plans for further continuation. However, the Indian Armed Forces are fully prepared for any contingency that may arise.[4]

Four Pakistani terror launch pads had been annihilated. If the assault mission itself enraged Pakistan, at least Islamabad was not compelled to respond politically. But the audacious Indian press conference pushed the Pakistan Army, headed at the time by Gen. Raheel Sharif, into an embarrassing corner from which signature Pakistani obfuscation ensued. Pakistan's defence minister, Khawaja Asif, called India's claim a lie, while its military declared that only 2 Pakistan Army soldiers, Lance Havildar Jumma Khan and Naik Imtiaz, had been killed, and that too in a ceasefire violation.

On 20 March 2017, 6 months after the surgical strike, Maj. Tango received his Kirti Chakra from the President at Rashtrapati Bhawan. The Army had made efforts to play down the award ceremony's obvious links with the September mission across the LoC.

'By now they probably know who I am and where I am,' says Maj. Tango, then adds:

'But in the Special Forces, we don't really know fear.'

*

Note: In the interests of security, certain details have been masked in this account, and no sensitive operational details have been revealed. Some names in this chapter have been changed to protect the identity of Special Forces officers who operate in hostile territory.

2

‘They Didn’t Know We Were There’

The June 2015 Surgical Strikes in Myanmar

Imphal, Manipur
5 June 2015

A light breeze scattered the smell of burning flesh that morning as the bodies of 18 Army jawans lay charred and mangled in the remains of their convoy. The soldiers, all from the Dogra Regiment, were headed to their base after an operational deployment when their trucks were ambushed at 0830 hours, just over 100 km from Manipur’s capital, Imphal. The surprise attack had been swift and unforgiving. As the 11 survivors were plugged with morphine drips and helicoptered out of the site soon after, they knew 2 things for certain: this was one of the most expensive insurgent attacks in the restive North-east in decades, and that revenge would be a faraway castle.

On that second point, though, it would take less than a week for them to be proved more wrong than they had ever been before.

As the Army choppers with the grievously wounded survivors coursed through the air towards a base hospital in Manipur, in the country’s national capital a team of India’s toughest fighting men was making final

preparations to depart for the strife-torn Democratic Republic of the Congo. The commandos from the Army's secretive Para-SF carried a fearsome reputation, and were looking forward to the UN peacekeeping duties they had been recently assigned in a country where daily brutality had made the Congo War Africa's deadliest in modern times.

In the Democratic Republic of the Congo, the Indian commandos would replace the coveted maroon berets of their Parachute Regiment with the blue headgear that sets UN peacekeepers apart from other soldiers. The UN Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, known by its French acronym MONUSCO, accounts for the Indian Army's largest footprint on foreign soil. A fourth of the over 19,000 peacekeepers serving at MONUSCO, the world's most costly peacekeeping mission with an annual budget of $1.25 billion, come from India. In June 2015, a Para-SF team of about 100 men was to join a battalion-strength force of about 500 men that was on its way to North Kivu, a province blessed with a bounty of minerals in its earth, but which now had rivers of blood flowing through it as a result of war.

The Indian soldiers were ready for their African assignment. They would be part of an Indian brigade headquartered in North Kivu's capital, Goma, a fighting force controlling an area of 62,400 sq. km, encompassing a breathtaking landscape dotted with lakes, volcanoes, mountains, savannas and rivers. UN postings are sought after in the Army, and units go through rigorous screening before peace missions are assigned to them. There was no question of the men from the elite Para-SF unit not making the cut. In fact, they had been hand-picked to tackle the barbarism that had come to define daily life in the eastern part of the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

Just as they were about to leave from the Palam Air Force Station in Delhi, they got a call—from their home base in Jorhat, Assam. In the brevity that defines communication between commandos, the men were informed about the ambush in neighbouring Manipur. In 5 minutes, they had the story and fresh orders.

The soldiers did get on a plane that day. But it was the C-130J Super Hercules from the Indian Air Force's 77 'Veiled Vipers' squadron, which carried them at full throttle over 2350 km to Manipur. Everything had changed. Plans for the Democratic Republic of the Congo had been instantaneously put on hold.

The commandos knew what had happened, but would be briefed about their new mission only the next day. The Indian Army had been wounded—and deeply. Death on duty was nothing new, but the audacity of the ambush threw a blanket of unusual, simmering rage, not only over the Dogra battalion that had been targeted, but the entire security establishment as well as the government at the Centre.

The Army was breathing fire.

It soon emerged that insurgents from 3 outfits active in the state were behind the ambush: the Nationalist Socialist Council of Nagaland-Khaplang (NSCN-K), Kangleipak Communist Party and Kanglei Yawol Kanna Lup. The Army's Dogra unit had wrapped up its 3-year field tenure in Manipur and was in the process of relocating to a sprawling military station in the country's north when it had been attacked.

The insurgents had managed to slip back across the porous border with Myanmar to safe camps in the jungles along the border. Their hasty hit-and-run retreat wasn't surprising. In the past too, insurgents had been lulled into the comfortable routine of mounting attacks and fleeing across the border to safety. What they hadn't accounted for was that the blood spilt on that highway on 5 June would take the Army on a course of planning it had refrained from trudging on before.

A path down which there would be no turning back.

Lt. Col. Oscar Delta, 35 years old, was at Leimakhong, the Manipur headquarters of an Army Mountain Division, when news of the highway bloodbath came in. As with the death of any soldier or innocent in his area of responsibility, Lt. Col. Delta felt the blood run to his face. He closed his eyes for a moment, collecting his thoughts. Three words repeated themselves over and over in his mind.

18 soldiers. Killed.

Lt. Col. Delta couldn't remember a more savage action by insurgents in his military career, if not his entire memory. As the 2IC of his Para-SF unit, Lt. Col. Delta was well-known to the insurgent groups responsible for the ambush. They knew what he looked like. They were aware of what he was capable of. And they had just drawn blood, terrible amounts of it, in Lt. Col. Delta's own backyard.

'To say it was a big blow doesn't describe it,' Lt. Col. Delta, now a Colonel, remembers. 'When you lose 18 men like this, you have to figure out how you can hit back and what options you have. My first instinct was to launch an operation immediately with my team, hunt down those responsible and blow their brains out.'

A part of a commando's conditioning and training is how to keep his emotional responses in check. Emotions can be the enemy of every mission. Successful special operations require execution unclouded by sentiment—the knee-jerk quality of anger or sorrow. Suppressing the urges that welled up inside him after the ambush would be among the hardest things Lt. Col. Delta had ever done.

In the Army for 14 years at the time, he had spent a good part of it chasing and killing insurgents in the hilly jungles of the North-east. Among the many medals pinned to Lt. Col. Delta's chest is a Shaurya Chakra awarded to him for exceptional gallantry in action in 2004—over a decade before the Manipur attack. That year, a young soldier under his command was killed in an ambush laid by insurgents. Delta, then a young Captain, led a group of crack commandos that hunted down the insurgents and killed 8 of them.

'We killed 8 of the 11 guys who laid the ambush. We got them the same day. Their joy was short-lived. We were faster than them.' Lt. Col. Delta remembers the psychological significance of that swift retribution. It was a lesson that stayed with the insurgents for years.

Now, a decade later in 2015, Lt. Col. Delta was quick to grasp that the Manipur ambush would be a turning point in the conflict spread across the North-east. He also knew that his unit, specializing in jungle warfare, would be enlisted to deliver whatever retribution was deemed necessary. Over the

next 36 hours, Lt. Col. Delta's squad, with the guidance and blessings of a grimly determined Army and government leadership, would chart out a spectacular mission of revenge.

Few know the North-east better than the men of this particular Para-SF unit. And nobody fights the way they do. The North-east has been a hunting ground for the unit for nearly 2 decades. From its Assam headquarters, commando squads are scattered across the region, primed and ready to jump straight into action anywhere they're ordered to.

Lt. Col. Delta knew he was a marked man. A well-built warrior standing 5 feet 10 inches tall, his reputation had already spread wide. For insurgents, he was the man to take down. Since 2006, the officer had been (and remains) on most-wanted lists of the Manipur-based People's Liberation Army and United National Liberation Front. The fact affects neither his peace of mind nor his work.

'Militancy is all about fear. They have been seeing me for over 10 years. I think they should be afraid of me. *I* am the one authorized to carry an automatic weapon and walk freely on the streets in the area, not they,' he says.

But the paratrooper does not keep his family with him. For their own safety, they continue to live at an undisclosed Army base where they have been for several years. Their ancestral home in the North-east remains locked even today.

When Lt. Col. Delta got his battle orders, he didn't need to prepare his men. Even before the Manipur ambush, Lt. Col. Delta's unit had been preparing to strike NSCN-K camps across the border in Myanmar after suspected Naga rebels ambushed and killed 8 soldiers in the state's Mon district on 4 May 2015, exactly a month before the Manipur attack.

Had the 5 June ambush not happened, the Army would have gone ahead with the original plan. A team of Para-SF commandos would have infiltrated Myanmar on the night of 5 June and wiped out an NSCN-K camp that had been on their radar for a while.

Headed by Myanmar-based insurgent leader S.S. Khaplang, the notorious outfit fighting for the creation of Greater Nagaland ended a 14-year-long

ceasefire with the Indian government on 27 March that year. It was clear that Khaplang did not want peace. After the abrogation of the ceasefire, the insurgent outfit launched a series of attacks against security forces. Retribution was already thick in the air. The punitive strike had been planned at the local level, but the central government wouldn't take ownership. It would have been executed swiftly and quietly, as such strikes mostly are.

But these sensitivities, along with the planned punitive strike from Nagaland, went straight out of the window when the Manipur massacre happened on 5 June 2015.

'We were told that the Army Chief was flying to Imphal on 5 June. Something bigger was unfolding,' Lt. Col. Delta recalls.

Something bigger and deeply more audacious was indeed being planned. The government at the Centre was absolutely certain that the Manipur massacre deserved immediate punitive action. But what precisely that action would be was yet to be determined.

There were already early signs that retaliation was being planned and it would be severe. Hectic developments followed. In Delhi, National Security Adviser Ajit Doval dropped out of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's tour of Bangladesh. Gen. Dalbir Singh, then Army Chief, postponed a visit to the UK. None of this was normal.

A day after the ambush, Gen. Dalbir Singh flew to Imphal where he was briefed on the developments by Lt. Gen. Bipin Rawat (who became Army Chief the following year), then commanding the Army's Nagaland-headquartered 3 Corps. Lt. Col. Delta and the involved Para-SF unit's CO were among the select group of men present at the briefing, where Lt. Gen. Rawat made it clear that the Manipur attackers were not beyond the Army's reach. Every man in that room knew that the attackers were now on foreign soil. The message couldn't have been clearer.

In the warm yellow glow of halogen lamps, the locations of insurgent camps were red-pinned on the maps showing the border areas spanning Manipur, Nagaland and Myanmar.

‘We were told by Gen. Dalbir Singh that the operation had been approved at the highest levels of the government, and the defence minister would be controlling it. Full support. Full backing. This was the moment we had been waiting for,’ Lt. Col. Delta says.

While most aspects of the plan remained fluid, one thing was clear by the end of that top-secret briefing: the Army would have its revenge within 72 hours. The decks had been cleared for a daring cross-border raid into Myanmar—surgical strikes that the government in Delhi would not deny.

7 June would be D-Day.

The senior Generals asked Lt. Col. Delta to stay back in the briefing room. The broad contours of the surgical strikes on insurgent camps emerged for the first time. The commandos from the lethal Para-SF unit would mount a 2-pronged attack. From Manipur and Nagaland, 2 teams would simultaneously infiltrate and destroy the jungle sanctuaries that were known to harbour and train insurgents.

The orders were grim but clear. Lt. Col. Delta and his squads were to hit camps with the largest numbers of insurgents, so the commandos could inflict maximum damage. The targets had to be chosen carefully before launching the mission. It would have served no purpose if the men found themselves at the doorstep of a thinly held camp. The stakes were enormously high and it wasn’t just the government expecting results. A grieving, but steadfast Army was, too.

‘We spent our first few hours selecting camps which the insurgents would have thought were beyond our reach—where they felt secure. It was not to be a token assault,’ Lt. Col. Delta recalls.

Conventional military manoeuvres require a great deal of intricate planning. Special operations on foreign soil are something else entirely. They require a degree of preparation and detail that would make regular drills seem like child’s play. Success of special missions depends on a range of factors, chiefly sound strategizing, accurate intelligence and scrupulous planning that takes every eventuality into account.

There was no shortage of targets to choose from across the border in Myanmar. Insurgents had found security in the border jungles. Hours after

the Manipur attack, the Army had zeroed in on the targets that its highly skilled commandos would attack in Myanmar: 3 insurgent camps, which Lt. Col. Delta and his men would target. A similar squad would mount an assault from Nagaland.

But there was a problem. And it wasn't a minor one.

Distance.

The camps across the Manipur border were located deep inside, and striking them on 7 June, just 2 days later, was a daunting prospect. D-Day would have to be rescheduled. And that, Lt. Col. Delta knew, was the only way to increase the chances of a successful strike. He spoke his mind to the Generals that evening. There was still much work to be done.

'The distance was too much. We needed more time. The attack could have been launched on 7 June from Nagaland as everything was in place, but the idea was to launch the teams simultaneously. And we couldn't have done it from Manipur in that time frame,' Lt. Col. Delta remembers. His assessment was as clinical as it could have been.

Distance wasn't the only hurdle. The Para-SF's strength in Manipur wasn't enough to mount the operation. Lt. Col. Delta had just 40 men on 5 June. And that was why the detachment of 100 Para-SF men on their way to the Democratic Republic of the Congo was stopped and diverted to their neck of the woods. They were in Imphal by dinner time.

Corps Commander Lt. Gen. Rawat had shifted base from his headquarters in Nagaland's Dimapur to Imphal to manage the new mission.

As a Brigadier, Lt. Gen. Rawat had helmed the Indian brigade in the Democratic Republic of the Congo in 2008–09 and the UN had credited him with defending a key Congolese province that could have been overrun by rebels. Lt. Gen. Babacar Gaye, then the Force Commander of the UN mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, wrote in a commendation later awarded to then Brig. (now Gen.) Rawat that it was due to his 'leadership, courage and experience' that North Kivu's capital Goma never fell, stability returned to the country's eastern region and the main rebel group was forced to come to the negotiating table.

The presence of a hands-on commander, known for his military acumen, helped the commandos prepare literally to defy death on the mission into Myanmar. They knew they were in able hands.

‘The top bosses were in the loop, and arranging a special aircraft to fly the Congo-bound men to Imphal happened without a hitch. Lt. Gen. Rawat made sure all logistics were taken care of so that we commandos could focus solely on the mission,’ Lt. Col. Delta recalls.

The timely arrival of the commandos was critical for the mission. The 3 insurgent camps were built next to each other. Intelligence inputs pegged the number of insurgents present at these camps at more than 120. Planning the mission with 40 commandos would have been possible, but a grave risk. It would have also limited Lt. Col. Delta’s options to choose the best men for the mission.

For this mission demanded the best—of the best.

By midnight on 5 June, the raid schedule had been reworked and defined. Striking the targets on 7 June was officially ruled out. D-Day was now pushed 2 days further to 9 June, giving the commandos sufficient time to physically reach their targets. Lt. Col. Delta relaxed for the first time that day, exhaling as the men returned to their barracks for a few hours of sleep.

The plan had been discussed in as much detail as possible. Lt. Col. Delta had told his men that their objective would be to reach a wooded hilltop overlooking the targets by midnight on 8 June. The plan was to mount the final assault at the crack of dawn on 9 June. It sounded simple enough in theory, but no man listening to Lt. Col. Delta breathed any easier. They were looking forward to a tough new assignment on foreign soil. They had spent years training hard in the jungles of Mizoram and elsewhere for precisely this kind of mission. Lt. Col. Delta watched them as they retreated to rest. They were ready to prove to the country what India’s Special Forces were capable of.

Alone in the briefing room now, Lt. Col. Delta stared hard at the map. A passion nurtured over the years, the officer adored maps of every kind, displaying an incredible ability to memorize locations and compute distances at terrific speed. His knack for understanding geography from a

piece of paper had always been incredibly valuable to his squad. He switched off the light and walked back to his quarters, aware that this was possibly his final full night of sleep before they set off to exact revenge.

The Para-SF warriors were to reach a predetermined staging area on the border from where they would move into Myanmar. The movement of the commando team had to be kept as discreet as possible. There was no scope for the insurgents to get the slightest whiff that something was afoot. It would spell the mission's doom. Not only would revenge remain elusive, but more Army lives could be lost.

'We put our heads together and worked out a deception plan,' Lt. Col. Delta recalls. The commandos would be transported in Army trucks to make it look like regular infantry troops being moved, a routine affair in the North-east. Helicopters were out of the question—they would draw attention. Airlifting the commandos was therefore ruled out. Every detail was a closely guarded secret. Other than the commanders involved in the planning, not a soul knew about D-Day, the mode of transport or the composition of the 2 teams in Manipur and Nagaland. After a series of early morning briefings and presentations on 6 June, the commandos set out.

The men were very heavily armed. They were taking no chances. Sixty-four of them hand-picked for the job were carrying Carl Gustav 84-mm rocket launchers, Pulemyot Kalashnikov general-purpose machine guns, Israeli-built Tavor TAR-21 assault rifles, Colt M4 carbines, AK-47s and under-barrel grenade launchers.

Lt. Col. Delta was carrying his M4A1, the assault firearm he preferred. A smaller, fully automatic version of the venerable M16 assault rifle, the M4A1 carbine is finely tuned for use in special operations. Light and packing lethal power at both close and medium ranges, it remains the weapon of choice in elite squads around the world. Used across the US military as a primary infantry weapon, Lt. Col. Delta finds it perfect for quick reaction assault missions. The assault team's arsenal also included Israeli Uzi silenced submachine guns to take down sentries at the camp, and Galil 7.62-mm sniper rifles. SF battalions are usually the best-equipped units of the Army. And it showed that day. They were carrying enough

weapons and ammunition to cause a great deal of damage. The rifles weren't slung across their shoulders. Commandos try not to use slings. A weapon sitting in your hands reduces reaction time. In a firefight, that could be everything.

Apart from the weapons, the men were carrying backpacks stuffed with extra ammunition, combat rations, medical kits and water. The soldiers were not travelling light. Each of them was carrying a personal load of 40 kg, excluding the weight of weapons. Carrying their heavy loads, the men strode towards the Army trucks that were waiting with their engines on to transport them closer to the Myanmar border.

Just as they were about to clamber into the vehicles, Lt. Col. Delta handed over his M4 to one of the men, who immediately realized what Lt. Col. Delta was about to do. The officer knelt down and kissed the earth, a ritual he followed before every mission: an invocation to the soil as a friend and guide.

The Army trucks dropped off the battle-ready team at the staging area at around 0300 hours on 7 June. The targets were across the border and still very far away. The men would have to cover a distance of more than 40 km on foot to reach a designated hilltop, from where they could scan the camps before beginning the actual attack.

Lt. Col. Delta had more than proven his worth as a soldier, but the next 48 hours would test his skills and leadership as a commander. On his shoulders rested the fate of the mission, the lives of the young men under his command and, above all, that intangible element that colours everything that soldiers account for in their line of work—national prestige.

At daybreak on 7 June, the commandos began their trek through hilly terrain towards the border, with Lt. Col. Delta setting the pace and ensuring there was no slow-down. He remembers thinking of nothing else.

Only very occasionally would he allow his mind to go to his mother who had been battling cervical cancer and was to undergo surgery 2 days later at a hospital near his hometown. Nobody in Lt. Col. Delta's chain of command knew this. It had not even crossed his mind to ask for leave to be

with his family. The mission was literally the only thing that occupied his thoughts.

It was nearly dark when the Para-SF team reached the border. The temperature had dropped to about 25 °C and the men were greeted by a refreshing breeze coming from Myanmar. In 36 hours, this mission would be over. Everything was on schedule. After spending the night on the Indian side of the border, the men crossed into Myanmar at first light on 8 June.

There was no turning back now.

On foreign soil, Lt. Col. Delta and his men trekked through 6 km of hill and jungle. The men had done their homework. As part of the detailed planning that went into the operation, the team had hired 2 guides from an Indian border village in Manipur. The guides spoke Burmese fluently and knew their way through every bend in the thick woods that greeted the commandos. The guides' knowledge of the land, coupled with Lt. Col. Delta's photographic map-like memory, kept the squad precisely on course.

Prepared for anything, the commandos had not encountered a hurdle so far. But they soon would. Not long after the men had crossed a rivulet that demarcates the border between India and Myanmar, they stopped in their tracks. The route they were taking through the wilderness was supposed to be isolated, bereft of human settlements. Apparently not.

A group of men walked right into the squad, hauling a bounty of monitor lizards from among the 5 species found in the area. At being questioned by the guides, it turned out that the men were Burmese hunters who had killed the large lizards, considered a delicacy and aphrodisiac in some parts of the world. 'There were 5 of them. We weren't expecting them. But there they were, and something had to be done,' Lt. Col. Delta remembers.

The easiest option was to leave them alone and move on. But Lt. Col. Delta didn't want to leave anything to chance. Loose ends are frequently what cause the demise of precisely planned operations. There was always the possibility that the men were informants sent by the insurgents as eyes and ears. It would take one word of warning from them to destroy the entire mission.

The other option was to kill them. But Lt. Col. Delta knew he and his men couldn't ever bring themselves to do that—not without proof that they were helping insurgents. They could well have been hunters who were just in the wrong place at the wrong time.

'Or maybe it was us. We were on their turf,' Lt. Col. Delta smiles.

Lt. Col. Delta made his decision. He ordered his men to secure the hunters with the ropes they were carrying, and decided to take them along as captives right up to the point from where reconnaissance teams could survey the camps. They simply could not risk the mission.

Lt. Col. Delta glanced at his Mountain Hardwear watch, which had replaced his Fitbit activity tracker band that was his usual wristwear when not on duty. The men hadn't lost time. He told them they would make a brief halt soon for a quick meal. The team hadn't slowed down for a moment, moving briskly as they neared their targets. The tune playing in their heads could well have been a memorable military song from the film *Lakshya*. Lt. Col. Delta had played it on the sound system in their barracks the night before they left Imphal.

> *Kandhon se milte hain kandhe, kadmon se kadam milte hain*
> *Hum chalte hain jab aise toh dil dushman ke hilte hain*
> (When we walk shoulder to shoulder, and march in step as brothers
> When we move like this, our enemies tremble in fear.)

Like most Army men, the commandos loved the song and knew the lyrics by heart.

By noon on 8 June, the steep hill they were headed towards loomed into view. From its flattened crest, the commandos would get their first view of the camps they would obliterate the next day.

It was time for a much-needed hot meal. The commandos' backpacks held hexamine fuel tablets along with cooking stoves. A quick lunch was rustled up using the smokeless, odourless, long-burning tablets. The meals, ready-to-eat packs, contained *rajma*–pulao. The famished men ate in turns. A cordon of soldiers made sure they were well-guarded at all times. For

dessert, they helped themselves to *shakkarpara* from a common polythene bag, a sweet that reminded them of celebrations back home.

Marching into thicker foliage at the base of the steep hill, their fatigues ensured the commandos blended in well. By the time the team began climbing up the hill, they realized they had almost run out of water. Each man had carried 7 litres in his backpack. It was the peak of summer and the men were parched. It wasn't something they were not trained for, but neither was it a favourable situation the day before a big assault. The sooner they finished their mission, the faster they could get water from the destroyed camps, Lt. Col. Delta joked to quiet laughter and cheers. He glanced at the men in his squad. Every one of them was under his charge. He was responsible. The mission had primacy in the men's minds, but Lt. Col. Delta knew that it was his responsibility to make sure no one got hit.

Or worse.

In a fast-paced situation, anything could happen. A casualty evacuation scenario would not only be a nightmare logistically, but also leave fewer men available for the mission. It was something the squad simply could not afford. Apart from the big picture, there was also something that only those in fighting units could fully comprehend.

'We knew if something went wrong, the battalion's honour would be sullied. People would say SF stands for *sabse faaltu* (most useless)! How could we let that happen? Never!' says Lt. Col. Delta.

As leader of the mission, Lt. Col. Delta was in touch with the Army leadership in Imphal. He was carrying a mobile phone and the signal strength was at 3 bars. It was known to the Army that Indian mobile phones continue to function up to a certain distance along the border. Missed calls based on a predetermined code were used to stay in touch during the operation. Through a combination of missed calls and communications over a secure satellite link, Lt. Col. Delta remained connected with the Army leadership.

Fully backing the Army's mission, the government in Delhi had kept its counterpart in Nay Pyi Taw, Myanmar's capital, in the loop.

For security reasons, Lt. Col. Delta cannot reveal the other modes of communication he maintained during the mission. The team would regularly receive intelligence updates.

Some inputs suggested the insurgents might have fled the camps.

‘Delta, are you sure the guys are still there? Can you see them? There’s a possibility that the situation may have changed,’ said a voice at the other end of the line during one such transmission.

Lt. Col. Delta had been prowling the North-east for over a decade and had built an excellent network of informants. There was no doubt in his mind that the insurgents were at their camps, and in large numbers. He calmly told the caller not to worry. He and his men hadn’t come all the way to raid empty camps.

As the commandos began climbing the steep hill, those carrying TAR-21 assault rifles took their slings out. The Israeli weapon is built butt-heavy and muzzle-light—the magazine and firing mechanism are located behind the weapon’s trigger.

‘SF guys don’t use slings. We believe in carrying our weapon in our hands to react swiftly. But you can’t climb a steep hill holding a Tavor due to its design,’ Lt. Col. Delta explains.

A few hours later, as the sun set, the Para-SF squad arrived at the hilltop. Lt. Col. Delta and his men took carefully picked positions from where the targets were now in sight. The men felt their first big rush of combat adrenaline. The camps were barely 400 metres away. The reconnaissance elements from the team were at the highest positions to observe the camps, their layout and possible movement of insurgents within. The rest of the men had occupied positions below them. Every man on that hilltop had night-vision gear.

The camps they now gazed at belonged to the Manipur-based People’s Liberation Army, but were used extensively by NSCN-K cadres.

As moonlight bathed the hilltop that June night, Lt. Col. Delta rehearsed and fine-tuned the final plan for the predawn assault. With his team leaders, he went over how the teams would be divided 4 ways. The first subunit would storm the camp in an initial direct assault. Two ‘cut off’ subunits

would take down insurgents trying to escape. And a fourth team would form the crucial rearguard group.

The orders were clear. The assault would begin with devastating firepower before sunrise the next day, 9 June. At the same time, the corresponding Para-SF squad 100 km away in Nagaland would begin its own assault on an NSCN-K camp that was believed to be sheltering the insurgent group's notorious military adviser, Niki Sumi.

Just as the final assault plan was firmed up, the silence on the hilltop was shattered by a burst of automatic fire at around 2100 hours. The commandos sat up in their positions, their weapons ready. Had their cover been blown? Lt. Col. Delta hoped it hadn't. Had the insurgents discovered the commandos' arrival? Had they anticipated their route?

'I thought the whole plan had gone to hell. I thought it was finished,' Lt. Col. Delta remembers. He took a deep breath and in whispers ordered his men to remain statue-still in their positions. Not a sound could be heard but a mild breeze through the trees.

If the men had been detected, Lt. Col. Delta would have had to make an immediate decision. The mission would have been turned on its head from being primarily a surprise assault to a totally defensive, evasive escape mission. It would no longer be about prestige and retribution but about survival.

It was clear now that the insurgents had begun sending out patrols to secure the perimeter of the camps. They had ventured uphill, coming as close as 150 metres to the positions held by the commandos on the hilltop. The patrollers were singing at the top of their voices and flashing their torches. Their cheer, probably drunken, was a sign the patrolling was routine and that they likely did not have a clue about death crouching on a hilltop above them.

'They fired some shots in the air. It turned out to be speculative firing to provoke a reaction and confirm if someone was in the darkness in the woods around. They didn't know we were there,' Lt. Col. Delta says. A wave of quiet relief swept over the soldiers. Their plan was intact.

Some of the men had puris and chutney for dinner as they prepared to go without sleep for the third night straight. But even if the commandos had wanted to get a few hours of shut-eye, midnight brought a fresh surprise.

Just after midnight, a group of insurgents from the camp began firing in the air. The same worrying question about being robbed of the element of surprise exploded once again in Lt. Col. Delta's mind. A voice inside his head told him that Plan B was very likely going to be necessary. He didn't need to communicate this to the commandos. The men lay silent and motionless, rooted to their positions. Every last one of them expected a full firefight to break out at any moment.

The firing continued for 10 minutes. And then, just as abruptly, it stopped. The insurgents walked sleepily back into their camps, only to emerge again 3 hours later for another round of firing.

It was 0300 hours. This was proving to be confounding and frustrating. Had the insurgents really been tipped off about the stealthy advance of the Para-SF team? It became evident to Lt. Col. Delta by this time that the assault plan would have to be considerably altered. As things stood, the squad's solitary reconnaissance team was still perched on the hilltop, while the rest of the squad held positions on the slope below.

A commando officer on the team crawled from his position to where Lt. Col. Delta was. Then leaning in, he whispered that if the men could take their final assault positions on the hilltop without getting into a firefight with the insurgents, they should go ahead with the attack as planned, come what may. The mission commander had only 2 hours to decide.

'The conclusion we came to was that if we occupied our final assault positions without loss of surprise, then we would go ahead with a modified plan,' Lt. Col. Delta recalls. The modifications were significant. Instead of splitting the team into 4 subgroups, the mission commander now decided on 3.

Two teams would carry out the direct assault, while the third would cover the rear to prevent the commandos from being encircled by insurgents. The third team's crucial task was to ensure safe exit for the 2 assault teams. The

plan to send 2 ‘cut-off’ parties to the other side of the camp was dropped in the changed circumstances.

By 0400 hours, the commandos were able to crouch and crawl to their final assault positions on the hilltop without giving themselves away. Lt. Col. Delta looked through his night-vision glasses directly at the camps down the hill. The insurgents had not returned to their enclosures after the last round of firing an hour before. They were still around.

‘They were not too far from us. We could have caught up with them in about 10 minutes. They were walking towards the camp,’ says Lt. Col. Delta.

The commandos had reached the most critical phase of their operation. They started moving cautiously in the direction of their targets. Lt. Col. Delta took a deep breath and told his assault teams that they would tail the insurgents right up to the perimeter of the first camp. The strategy worked perfectly.

The insurgents had entered their camp oblivious to the sudden creeping presence of 40 heavily armed Indian commandos who had formed a semicircle around the site. The men were positioned so that each one of them could directly fire at their targets. The other 24 commandos stayed behind, keeping a close watch through the techno-glow of their night-vision goggles, ready to jump in if they were needed. Inside the camp, the insurgents were apparently preparing their first meal of the day, clueless that it would be their last. Their guard was at its lowest.

‘These guys have 2 meals a day—at 0500 and 1500 hours. The attack was timed with their first meal. We knew they would all assemble in the dining area and would be the most vulnerable at that time,’ Lt. Col. Delta recalls.

The attack squad made a final assessment of the target. The first sentry post was empty. There were 2 posts behind it—one manned by 4 insurgents and the other by 2. With a sweep of his hand, Lt. Col. Delta quietly ordered the commandos equipped with Carl Gustavs to unleash their first rockets at the 2 sentry posts, blowing them to pieces in a wave of flame. There was nothing left of the 6 insurgents on guard duty.

The rocket explosions made the ground shudder. It was only then that the insurgents inside the camp realized they were being attacked. But they also knew they had nowhere to run or hide. The commandos then opened fire on the camp with their assault weapons. A single shot followed by a double tap, repeating the sequence till they emptied their magazines. The men would quickly slap in new magazines and continue raining rounds on the insurgents.

The commandos had not put the selector switch on their weapons to full auto mode for burst fire. ‘The problem with bursts is that the bullets spread. Single shot and double tap is far more accurate and you also conserve ammunition,’ says Lt. Col. Delta. Double tap is a technique where 2 shots are fired at the same target in quick succession.

The insurgents scattered, baffled and unable to understand what had hit them. The first camp was cleared without much effort. Dazed by the strength of the assault, the insurgents could not respond for the first 25 minutes. When the men were in the process of clearing the second camp, the insurgents started returning fire with automatic weapons. The layout of the camp had sprung a fresh surprise. The commandos had been under the impression that the camps didn’t have bunkers. Not true. The insurgents had built Army-style deep-dug bunkers inside the camps from where they were now firing at the commandos.

The firefight had been on for about 20 minutes when the entrenched insurgents from the third camp began engaging the commandos in the rearguard, sending a deadly fusillade of bullets whizzing over their heads. The well-prepared commandos answered with overwhelming firepower: they opened up their automatic weapons and pumped grenades from their under-barrel grenade launchers (UBGLs), sending shrapnel scything through the air. The men also fired 2 rockets in airburst mode to cause maximum destruction over a wider area. As the earth burnt, it was time for another decision.

The mission commander realized that the assault teams had achieved their objective with 2 camps completely destroyed. It was time to pull back. ‘When the rear party got caught in a firefight, I decided that it was time to

move out ASAP. The assault teams also attacked the third camp with heavy weapons before leaving, but we did not enter it,' Lt. Col. Delta recalls.

On the ground, there was no time for arithmetic. It would emerge later that the insurgents had taken a huge beating. During that 45-minute assault, the commandos had expended almost 15,000 rounds, more than 150 grenades and a dozen rockets. The men had clear instructions not to stay back to conduct a headcount, but to return as quickly as possible after the mission was complete. They followed those orders.

Miraculously, not a single man on Lt. Col. Delta's team was hurt. Not even a scratch. The exfiltration route had already been planned. As the commandos pushed closer towards the Indian border, Lt. Col. Delta made the call that the Army had been waiting for. The magic words were spoken: 'Mission accomplished'.

In the operations room at Leimakhong, Lt. Gen. Rawat smiled broadly. Everyone in the room cheered. The message was immediately relayed up the chain of command. In the hours that followed, in a rare move that stunned the world, New Delhi would officially reveal India's military response to the Manipur ambush.

Lt. Col. Delta and his men returned to Manipur around noon on 9 June, trudging through forest for the next few hours before arriving at the first border village on the Indian side. It was 1500 hours. The sun was scorching and the men were exhausted, hungry and dehydrated, but smiling grimly in the glory of their mission's success. From a local store, Lt. Col. Delta and the men purchased bottles of ice-cold beer, treating themselves to hungry gulps of the beverage. Lt. Col. Delta noticed, as he drank, that the beer was from Myanmar. The men allowed themselves their first laugh in days.

Later that day, 2 Army Aviation Corps Dhruv helicopters clattered into a clearing near the village. They had taken off from Leimakhong an hour before to fly the victorious commandos back to base. On foot for days, the commandos were delighted that they didn't have to trek the 30 km more to the staging area where they had been dropped off for the mission. By the next morning, all 64 men on Lt. Col. Delta's team were back in Leimakhong.

The commando team assigned to target the NSCN-K camp across the border from Nagaland was not as lucky as Lt. Col. Delta's combat group. The insurgents there had fled hours before the raid. The men simply set the camp ablaze and returned.

Fifteen minutes after landing in Leimakhong, Lt. Col. Delta's phone rang. He was not expecting to hear from the man at the other end of the line. It was Defence Minister Manohar Parrikar.

'I hadn't even untied my shoelaces when the *raksha mantri* (defence minister) called to congratulate me and the team. It was exhilarating and absolutely incredible. It's not every day that you get a call from the Defence Minister,' Lt. Col. Delta, who went on to command a battalion in Manipur, recalls.

His work wasn't over, however. Lt. Col. Delta spent the day debriefing the Army leadership about the mission. He spared no detail. It missed nobody up the chain of command and government that history had just been made by the men of the Para-SF.

When he was finished, Lt. Col. Delta allowed himself the liberty of remembering his family. He wanted to drive to the hospital to meet his mother who had been operated upon that morning. Lt. Gen. Rawat and the other commanders were astonished to learn of Lt. Col. Delta's mother's cancer surgery just a few hours before. The commanders were not comfortable with Lt. Col. Delta's plan to drive down to the hospital alone in his Maruti 800. They knew hit squads would be after him. But Lt. Col. Delta politely refused a commando team for his personal protection. He spent 4 hours with his mother and returned to the base the next morning.

In Delhi that day, the Army would tell a packed news conference that the commandos had raided the insurgent camps on the basis of 'credible and specific intelligence' and inflicted significant casualties on the insurgents. The Army gave no specific numbers but estimates that emerged later pegged the figure in the range of 40–50. The Burmese Army is believed to have transported the bodies in 2 trucks to a nearby location for quick burial. Scores of badly wounded men were taken for treatment to a hospital south of where the commandos struck. The casualty figure would have been far

higher had the cut-off teams been able to deploy on the other side of the camps as well.

Two months after the strikes, on the eve of Independence Day, the government announced a Kirti Chakra for Lt. Col. Oscar Delta, a Shaurya Chakra for a Havildar-rank commando on his squad and Sena Medals (Gallantry) for 5 other commandos who were involved in the cross-border raid into Myanmar. The strikes made Lt. Col. Delta a cult figure in a regiment already full of heroes. But you'd never know it if you met him.

'You are not a Rambo out there. My Kirti Chakra (India's second-highest peacetime gallantry award) belongs to every man who took part in that mission. We did our job and it's a fantastic feeling being recognized for it. But other than that, awards really do not matter,' says Lt. Col. Delta.

The officer does have one regret regarding the mission, though—not having brought back a flag or any other object from the camps as a 'war trophy'. Before heading out for the mission, Lt. Col. Delta had requested the Army leadership not to fix a deadline for exfiltration as the commandos were planning to return with a captured flag. 'Unfortunately, there was no opportunity for us to seize a flag. I guess we will have to wait for another mission,' he says, smiling.

But what happened to the Burmese hunters the commando squad had taken captive? Lt. Col. Delta instructed his men to set them free minutes before the commandos began their descent from the hill for the final assault. They were given Rs 5000 each to compensate them for the trouble. In appreciation, before they melted into the woods, the hunters offered the commandos some monitor lizard meat. Lt. Col. Delta remembers the flavour.

And the meat was just the way he liked it. Raw.

*

Note: Some names in this chapter have been changed to protect the identity of Special Forces officers who operate in hostile territory.

3

‘When He Awoke, Death Smiled’

Lance Naik Mohan Nath Goswami

Udhampur, Jammu and Kashmir
1 September 2015

When he awoke each day, Death smiled.

It whispered in his ear, its arms outstretched. It stalked him with every crunch that his boots made over beds of dry pine needles—on the snow-blown peaks of mountains few have even heard of.

Death would tap him on the shoulder as he trudged forward eagerly through the thickest forests, never hesitating. Like the hundreds of times before, he brushed Death off like he would a speck of dirt on his camouflage combat fatigues.

L. Nk Goswami didn’t have time for death. In the final 11 days of his life, he laughed at it straight in the face. And when it was finally time for their dance to end, it was he who let Death have him. Willingly, without wavering. And not on Death’s terms, but his own.

Even among the countless tales of unspeakable courage in the Indian Army, the story of Lance Naik Mohan Nath Goswami of the Para-SF is legendary. It is a story that even the Army regards not just with pride, but

also with a sense of awe and disbelief. It is the story of a man who volunteered for 3 operations over 10 days in 2015, killing 11 terrorists in all.

On 1 September 2015, L. Nk Goswami stretched his legs outside his quarters at his Para unit headquarters in Udhampur, J&K. The unit, respected by other SF units and deeply feared by terrorists who infiltrated across the LoC, had a job that none envied.

Wearing his combat trousers, boots and a vest, the muscular warrior was fitting a few hours of rest into what had been a week bristling with action and peril. Just 4 days before, in an encounter on a mountainside not far from Rafiabad in Baramulla, L. Nk Goswami and his team had eliminated 3 Lashkar-e-Taiba terrorists over an extended, furious, 2-day firefight. The squad had even managed to capture a fourth terrorist, a Pakistani national, alive. L. Nk Goswami never breathed easy, but as he strolled back and forth that morning 4 days later outside his unit camp, he did the one thing he loved more than hunting terrorists.

L. Nk Goswami used his cell phone to call his wife, Bhawna, at their small home in Lalkuan village, about 30 km outside Uttarakhand's popular hill station of Nainital. The two would speak for a few minutes every day when possible. A gap, and this was often, always told Bhawna that L. Nk Goswami had set off on an operation. That morning, the phone didn't need to ring a second time for her to pick up.

'It was a very personal conversation on 1 September,' Bhawna recalls. 'Mohan spoke about the future, about our lives and how we needed to plan. He would constantly remind me of how uncertain a commando's life is, and how anything could happen at any time, and how we must prepare. But he said nothing like that in his last call. He was very matter-of-fact in his manner. He was building a new house for us across the path from where we live. All I wanted to know was how he was holding up. And all he would say was he was hoping to complete the construction of our new house the following March when he came home.'

The warrior had been home in the hills of Uttarakhand the previous month for his daughter Bhumika's seventh birthday. It had been 2 weeks of

real rest before he took his train back to Udhampur and onward back to the unit he loved. Barely a week after his return to Kashmir, L. Nk Goswami would set off on the first of his final 3 operations.

Physically supremely fit, it hadn't taken L. Nk Goswami more than a few hours to work his muscles back into action mode following a fortnight of relative repose with his family. He had been raring to set off on another hunt the moment he stepped off the train at Udhampur on Independence Day, 2015.

On 21 August 2015, a Para-SF squad led by a young officer, Capt. Dipesh Mehra, was deployed to hunt terrorists near a remote village named Khurmur in north Kashmir's Handwara district.

The intelligence was solid: 3 terrorists were expected to arrive at a designated spot to receive 6 more who had freshly crossed the LoC. The warriors lay waiting. On the night of 22 August, while the squad descended the mountain towards Khurmur village, they spotted the shadows of 3 terrorists right in front of them in the dark. One was walking in a battle-ready position in front like a commando scout, followed by 2 behind. All 3 were carrying AK-47 rifles. Two had heavy rucksacks, presumably filled with ammunition and provisions.

Through the darkness, the commandos spotted them at a distance of no more than 10 metres. The warriors had night-vision glasses, but the foliage was very dense. The squad needed to make sure they were not civilians or woodcutters, or maybe even another Army unit that had accidentally stepped into the path of the Para squad on the hunt. They had to carry out a 'challenge protocol', an inherently dangerous task that involves calling out to the other.

'This was a face-on moving contact at very close range,' recalls a warrior who was part of the operation. 'As soon as they were challenged, the terrorists opened fire in our squad's direction. We returned fire. Capt. Mehra was hit by a ricocheting bullet. In the darkness it wasn't clear how serious the injury was.'

As a fierce, close-range firefight broke out that night in Handwara, back at the squad's headquarters in Udhampur, L. Nk Goswami and Maj. Anurag

Kumar were getting set to depart in a squad vehicle on a separate mission with 2 more Para commandos. L. Nk Goswami was eager to begin. Looking at a piece of paper containing the input, while pacing excitedly in the small room where the men had met that night, L. Nk Goswami said over and over again: *'Pukka kuchh hoga, yeh solid input hai* (Something will definitely happen; this is credible information),' insisting they leave immediately.

When not on an operation, L. Nk Goswami was known to sit from morning to night near the unit's 'anchor'—the communication set that was used to convey inputs on terrorists, or summon the warriors on a hunt. In ways that even his comrades sometimes failed to fathom, living, for L. Nk Goswami, was the lull between operations.

The 4 men departed late that night in a squad vehicle. The plan was to gather reinforcements on the way and arrive at a contact site where intelligence had reported the presence of at least 10 terrorists.

They were 20 minutes away from the contact spot when they received a message on their portable communication.

'Mehra saab ko lag gayi (Mehra Sir has been shot),' said a voice at the other end. It was from Khurmur. L. Nk Goswami immediately asserted to his colleagues, *'Mehra saab ghaayal ho gaye hain. Wahin pe turant chalte hain* (Mehra Sir is injured. Let us go there immediately).'

Maj. Kumar, the only officer among the four, paused, wondering if this was wise. Wading into a live firefight could be a terribly risky proposition for them. But L. Nk Goswami implored the officer, saying there was nothing more important than reaching their comrades in trouble.

'As team commander, I had to think for the whole squad. Their lives were my responsibility. But L. Nk Goswami had amazing persuading power. This was emotional work for him. He would not let go,' remembers Maj. Kumar.

He asked L. Nk Goswami to calm down and think straight. There were conflicting reports from the Khurmur site about precisely what kind of trouble Capt. Dipesh Mehra's squad was in. Did they really need to divert there instead of continuing with their separate mission to hunt 10 terrorists? By now, L. Nk Goswami was beseeching the officer.

‘We have to go there. We will regret it forever if it turns out that Mehra saab could have been saved if we had intervened on time. We don’t have a choice,’ L. Nk Goswami had said.

By this time, word had also reached them that the terrorists in Khurmur may have also had a Pulemyot Kalashnikov machine gun, a brute force weapon that the Para commandos would have found near impossible to dodge in such a close engagement. Worse, communication from the squad at Khurmur had fallen silent. Was it all over? It was the trigger needed for a final decision.

Maj. Kumar ordered the vehicle to turn around and head straight towards Khurmur at full throttle. As the vehicle tore through the night at a speed of 120 kmph, L. Nk Goswami sat up straight, every bit of his posture ready to leap out and into battle.

About 200 metres short of the contact site in Khurmur, L. Nk Goswami asked the vehicle’s driver to switch off the headlamps, sensing they were exposed. He was right. The moment the lights were switched off, a hail of bullets clattered around the car, missing it by barely a few feet. The terrorists had seen the approaching vehicle and let loose a few shots directly at it. The four Para warriors scrambled out of their car and began the careful trek through the darkness in the general direction of the terrorists. L. Nk Goswami led the way.

‘Mohan Nath always led from the front, in the dangerous but critical scout position,’ recalls Maj. Kumar. ‘I would often tell him he was senior enough now, and that he should let younger warriors play scout to get experience. His reply was always the same, and there was no arrogance in it, just plain, honest opinion: *“Sir, mujhse achha kaun kar sakta hai?* [Sir, who can do it better than I?]”. He promised that if anyone proved more effective than him as a scout, he would personally invite that person to lead.’

Until a better warrior was found, L. Nk Goswami wouldn’t risk the lives of the men he was with. He was clear about that.

Though the squad had just faced fire, they only had a general 6-figure grid reference, a rough geographical coordinate, on the location of the

terrorists who had let loose the volley of bullets. The 4 men crept down the path towards the 100-sq. m area that would be their hunting ground in the dark. On the fringes of Khurmur village, as the land rose into a forested Handwara hillside, the 4 warriors got on to their bellies. In the darkness, 20 metres up that same hillside, were the terrorists with their weapons.

And 10 metres away from them lay an injured Capt. Dipesh Mehra along with the rest of his squad. Intermittent fire rang out at close quarters. L. Nk Goswami and the other 3 warriors had crept right up to the firefight, positioning themselves flat on the ground under a large tree.

The situation was ripe for disaster. With neither squad accurately aware of where the other was, the risk of shots being fired at mistaken targets was very real. L. Nk Goswami quickly slithered over to Maj. Kumar and told him to convey on the communication set to the other squad that he would be blinking his flashlight to indicate his position—a terribly dangerous move in the situation, but it was the only way to take the next step. Maj. Kumar once again cautioned him, saying the flashlight would paint a big fat target sign on them for the terrorists to fire at. L. Nk Goswami was nonchalant. ‘Let them fire at us, sir. This tree will protect us.’

Maj. Kumar was right. As the flashlight was switched on, a burst of Kalashnikov fire exploded down the hillside towards the 4 men under the tree. And as L. Nk Goswami had predicted, the fat branches of the tree took much of the fire. Their position now revealed, the squad engaged directly with the militants, with L. Nk Goswami managing to quickly kill 1. Capt. Mehra’s squad quickly relocated to join their 4 comrades at the base of the hill. As the terrifying close combat continued, L. Nk Goswami helped the injured Captain out of the area, his arm slung across his shoulder. All the while, he kept himself between the injured man and the firing terrorists, just in case a bullet managed to find them in the darkness. By morning, the other 2 terrorists had been killed too.

Operation Khurmur, as it was later formally code-named, was a victory, and a powerful message to the terror training camps in PoK. August was the heart of the waning summer season, and every soldier in the state knows what that means: that terror groups would be looking to crank up the

infiltrations and replenish their hidden cells on India’s side of the LoC before the unforgiving winter put a virtual stop to any such cross-border activity. The next 2 months would see a visible ramping up of scale and audacity. L. Nk Goswami and his team knew that squads like theirs were India’s principal weapon against this annual rising tide.

The squad had barely squeezed in a 2-day lull when a fresh intelligence input trickled into their camp on the morning of 26 August. They hadn’t expected much rest anyway. Para squads never do.

Five Pakistani terrorists had infiltrated across the LoC in the Uri sector. It was a difficult entry point, with some of Kashmir’s most hostile terrain, but one that afforded several hiding places. The 5 had trekked over the Shamshabari range, scaled the formidable Kalapahar mountain and weathered the 4000-metre-high Kazi Nag Dhar as they made their way towards the more manageable lowlands of the Kashmir valley. One of the men had been shot dead in a brief encounter with men from the Army’s 35 Rashtriya Rifles on a remote ridgeline on the Shamshabari. The other 4 had escaped at double speed, taking advantage of the evasive tactics that are a special part of terrorist training.

Minutes after killing 1 of the 5, the leader of the 35 Rashtriya Rifles team at the site had quickly called for a drone to track the 4 terrorists who had escaped. A Searcher Mark II drone was scrambled immediately from an airbase in the Kashmir valley, darting straight and high over the Shamshabari range, its cameras and thermal imagers switched on. Infiltrating terrorists make sure they limit their movement by day, using the darkness to cover ground and head to their destinations. But before sunrise on 26 August, the featureless crests of the Shamshabari gave the drone a perfect view of the terrorists in the dark, their bodies showing up as 4 ‘hot’ blotches ambling over the featureless expanse of the range. The drone would remain in the air, tracking their every movement as they made their way towards Baramulla.

The 4 men could be seen climbing down a hillside littered with enormous boulders and, apparently, a network of caves and crevasses. At 0545 hours,

with the sun now out, the drone witnessed the 4 men stopping and taking cover. This would be their last known location.

An hour earlier, over at the Para-SF unit's headquarters, L. Nk Goswami was among 12 men who were issued a 'warning order', placing them on operational standby to be dropped from a helicopter on to that boulder-strewn ridge to hunt and kill the 4 infiltrators. By 0700 hours, an Army Dhruv chopper lifted off from Udhampur with the 12 commandos, including L. Nk Goswami and Maj. Kumar, taking a deliberately circuitous route before finally identifying a landing zone on the ridge and dropping the warriors off at 0930 hours. The fully armed men grouped for a quick execution plan for a hunt that would later be code-named 'Operation Lidder Panzal'.

The landing zone was about 4 km away from the last known location of the terrorists as designated by the Searcher Mark II drone, which was still in the air above the range.

Twelve of India's most hardened warriors were on the hunt for the 4 terrorists. But even they knew that being transplanted to a 4000-metre altitude would substantially limit their true strength. The thinner air would bring on fatigue faster. And this being an airborne operation, each man had a combat load of over 40 kg. As they gazed up at the ridge, none of the dozen knew just how long the hunt that lay before them would stretch on for.

As the men began their careful trek through a maze of boulders along the ridgeline, the drone kept the warriors in its sight, its pilot sitting far away at a secret location, updating the Para commandos in real time about how close they were to where the terrorists were believed to be resting. The men trudged on towards their quarry, crossing a glacial lake and uninterrupted mountain terrain. By noon, they were close.

As always, L. Nk Goswami led the squads as the scout out in front. Maj. Kumar remembers how L. Nk Goswami actually managed to keep the squads a step ahead of the technologically advanced drone that buzzed high above them.

‘He used his terrain wisdom to detect a trail—something that the drone couldn’t see. Mohan actually discerned what he was sure were footprints in the misty dew that settled on the patches of grass between rocks at that altitude,’ Maj. Kumar remembers.

Some of the men were sceptical, wondering whether L. Nk Goswami was reading too much into what he saw on the ground. But the warrior was certain.

‘*Issi taraf se gaye hai, sir. Contact humko mil jaayega* (They have definitely passed through here. We will find them),’ L. Nk Goswami said, bending down to scrutinize a trail that was clear to him and apparently nobody else.

Not for the first time, team leader Maj. Kumar decided to go with L. Nk Goswami’s gut. He dispatched 1 squad down the ‘trail’ L. Nk Goswami had found, and sent the second one higher up the ridge to take a commanding position in case the terrorists were waiting in ambush.

‘I have never known a highlander like Mohan. If he hadn’t spotted that trail in the mountain dew, we were almost certainly headed into an ambush situation,’ remembers Maj. Kumar. ‘We would have lost men.’

By this time, the Army drone pilot had communicated to the Para team that the 4 terrorists were hiding *inside* a cave at the target location. The 2 squads had split up through the boulders, agreeing to arrive at the cave at precisely the same time. The tactic was simple. Two teams arriving from 2 different directions would distract and divide the attention of the terrorists, halving the effectiveness of their possible retaliation.

An hour later, the squad taking the higher path along the ridge communicated to the trail squad below saying they had spotted something suspicious in the shadow of a huge 30-foot boulder. It was a grey pheran, the traditional woolly, robe-like garment worn in the state. The squad leader reported that he was about to fling a pair of grenades down at the boulder. He was asked to wait—because by this time, L. Nk Goswami had walked far ahead on the trail and reached the cave all alone.

A fierce firefight immediately erupted. L. Nk Goswami fired with his TAR-21 rifle, taking cover behind a low boulder in a small open area

outside the cave's mouth. When the firing slowed, L. Nk Goswami jogged back up the trail to the rest of his squad, briefing them on what had just happened. Maj. Kumar remembers L. Nk Goswami's face.

'I had never seen him calmer. He had just come back to us after a few minutes of heavy firing at close range with 4 militants. But he wasn't even excited. All he said was "*Sir, bande dikh gaye. Aur ek ko lagi hai*. (Sir, I have seen them. And one of them has been hit.)"'

The Major immediately cordoned off the area surrounding the cave, a 50x30-metre piece of land strewn with high boulders, creating an insidious maze. Twelve armed warriors stood waiting, their weapons trained directly at the mouth of the cave. The militants had been cornered.

'Storming the cave wasn't an option without incurring casualties,' remembers Maj. Kumar. 'We had rations and water. We had ammunition too. So we decided to wait the night and draw them out.'

L. Nk Goswami sat on the cave's right at a distance of 15 metres. If the terrorists emerged, they would be cut down by a C-shaped formation of soldiers. Night fell heavily on the tired dozen. There would be no rest, sitting as they were, flexed and primed for action through an uncomfortable, chilly night that brought waves of the same dew that had caught L. Nk Goswami's attention and led the men to their target earlier that day. In turns, they gratefully ate packed dinner of puri and pickle.

To send the holed-up terrorists a clear message that there was no way out, a soldier was ordered to fire 2 rocket-propelled grenades into the clearing outside the cave at night. In the concussive blast, 2 terrorists emerged from the cave in panic, trying to make a desperate run for it. The moment they emerged into the open area, 2 shots were heard. L. Nk Goswami, his TAR-21 in his favourite single-shot mode, fired 2 quick rounds, abruptly ending the escape bid.

'In such a situation, men usually fire their weapon in bursts. They want to be sure. Mohan fired just 2 shots,' recalls Maj. Kumar, who had been sitting just a few feet away from L. Nk Goswami when he fired. 'Just 2 rounds. He was that confident of his skill.'

After all the firing, a deathly quiet descended on the ridge that night. The Para-SF squads were running low on support ammunition too, so they decided to wait till morning to see if the remaining 2 terrorists could be drawn out. It would be a long, sleepless wait.

Till noon the next day, 27 August, there hadn't been another sound. Four men, including L. Nk Goswami and Maj. Kumar, began a hectic search operation in the area around the cave. The mandatory task was to ensure that the terrorists hadn't, by some slim chance, emerged in the darkness and relocated to a different position.

With L. Nk Goswami once again as scout leader out in front, the 4 men crept between the boulders, their weapons cocked and ready. The 3 men heard a series of shots from L. Nk Goswami's rifle up ahead as a fresh firefight erupted. Creeping up virtually silently around a boulder, L. Nk Goswami had spotted the leg of one of the hiding terrorists behind another boulder. He had immediately aimed and fired at the leg, sparking a volley of return fire from a crevasse behind the boulder. L. Nk Goswami returned to the 3 others, and all 4 took position, their weapons now aimed directly up the path towards the boulder.

Moments later, screaming slogans in a hoarse shriek, the injured terrorist hobbled out into the clearing, firing his weapon, only to be cut down instantly by the 4 waiting warriors.

Only 1 terrorist now remained alive. And the squad knew he was fully cornered, deep inside a cave behind the boulder. Maj. Kumar remembers wanting to empty the last of his squad's rocket-propelled grenades into the cave, sealing the last terrorist's fate where he hid.

'We wanted to finish up and de-induct. We were out of rations too,' he recalls. But L. Nk Goswami broke the bristling silence. Stepping towards the cave he cupped his hands around his mouth and made a loud call.

'*Bhaijaan, abhi bhi mauka hai. Aap surrender kar do. Baahar nikal jao. Kis liye marne ke liye aaye ho?* (Brother, there is still a chance. Surrender and come out of the cave. Do you want to die here?)' L. Nk Goswami was speaking firmly, but on that windswept mountain ridge, there was a

gentleness in his voice as he called into the gaping maw of that mountain cave.

The terrorists had been trekking for 5 days through the harshest terrain Kashmir could offer. L. Nk Goswami knew that they would be at the end of their reserves, their energy and perhaps their sanity.

‘That was his presence of mind. He knew the terrorist would have no heart left for a fight. It was the perfect opportunity to capture him alive. That’s what Mohan did,’ remembers Maj. Kumar.

Many minutes later, the last terrorist finally hobbled out of the cave, his hands up. Emaciated, thirsty, with bloodshot eyes, he stood in front of the men, saying nothing. L. Nk Goswami turned towards Maj. Kumar. Both men knew they couldn’t kill him.

The men secured the terrorist, giving him the last of their food and water. He was Sajjad Ahmad, alias Abu Ubaidullah. A young man from Muzaffargarh in Pakistan, he had been recruited into the Lashkar-e-Taiba and trained like a commando to infiltrate India and inflict casualties in population centres. His testimony would go on to add to the already enormous dossier of evidence India had in Pakistan-sponsored terror. With their very valuable captive, the men summoned a helicopter to fly them back to base.

‘Mohan was far above the standards of even our battalion. Trust me, that’s saying *a lot*!’ says Maj. Kumar, who was later awarded the Shaurya Chakra for his leadership during the operation. ‘He was as intelligent and emotional as he was fit.’

The men would get a ‘bonus’ of just 3 days before they got their next call.

L. Nk Goswami’s next operation began on 2 September. Barely rested after the Lidder Panzal mission, L. Nk Goswami and his squad were put on scramble alert for the third time that week. It was a month that perfectly defined the relentless high-tempo operations that are the unique preserve of the Para-SF.

The intelligence this time was about 6 fresh infiltrators on their way across the remote Sutsalyar forests of Kupwara, one of Kashmir’s densest

jungles. Visibility through the foliage was never more than 3 metres.

The squad planned a long-haul operation of 96 hours with 6 squads of 36 men who would lie in wait for the infiltrators. The men were on location by first light on 1 September. Splitting into 2 groups, the teams deployed on either side of a wide mountain stream flowing through the forest. While the men knew the terrorists would arrive, the intelligence they had was not specific on precisely which direction they would come from. That explained the larger number of Para commandos in what the regiment calls a ‘speculative ambush’. A bigger number had a greater tactical chance of knocking out the terrorists before they had an opportunity to act.

At 2030 hours, L. Nk Goswami’s squad detected the terrorists as they arrived in the area. The intelligence had proved to be very good. There were 4 of them, as the input had said. The squads, positioned in buddy pairs through the forest trail, had set down Claymore mines. Unlike landmines, Claymore mines are detonated on remote command and designed to have their explosive effect pointed in a certain direction. But the terrorists arrived from an entirely unexpected direction, giving L. Nk Goswami and the other troops barely a few minutes to readjust and reconfigure.

But first, as always, the infiltrators needed to be challenged by the Para commandos. It remains one of the most risky standard operating procedures, but SF units have no way around it yet. Since such operations take place among Indian citizens and on Indian territory, protocol demands that every precaution be taken before hostile action. Challenging someone in such a situation instantly gives away your position, allowing the challenged party to take the first shot.

As the 4 figures were spotted in the darkness, it surprised nobody that L. Nk Goswami volunteered once again to step forward and challenge the intruders.

Taking cover behind foliage, L. Nk Goswami shouted into the shadows, demanding to know who the 4 men were. In the darkness of that forest in Kupwara, the response was instantaneous. The clatter of assault rifle fire immediately broke out.

In the first few minutes, 1 of the 4 terrorists was hit by a shot L. Nk Goswami fired, but not killed. The close fire exchange continued for several minutes. But then it began to drizzle, and the guns fell silent. The terrorists didn't dare move in case they gave away their locations. And the hunting commandos waited, watching through night-vision devices that were virtually useless in such foliage and weather.

As they waited, shortly after midnight, the squads were caught off guard by a loud explosion in a tree above them. It took seconds for the soldiers to realize that the terrorists had fired from an under-barrel grenade launcher attached to their AK-47 rifles. Splinters from the exploding grenade rained down on 2 commandos positioned under the tree, tearing open wounds on the sides of their faces.

Positioned a few metres away in the darkness, L. Nk Goswami was watching. And he knew what he needed to do. He always did.

If there was one impulse stronger than killing terrorists, it was L. Nk Goswami's overpowering need to make sure he evacuated a comrade injured in an encounter. The 2 wounded commandos were now pinned down, sitting ducks for whatever would come next. L. Nk Goswami and his buddy, Havildar Mahendra Singh, sprang from their location towards the 2 injured men, their assault rifles at the ready for what L. Nk Goswami knew would be a hail of bullets directed straight at them.

He was right. The terrorist who had fired the grenade moments earlier now opened a burst of fire with his assault rifle, cutting down Singh with a bullet that entered his abdomen and went straight into his spine, instantly paralysing the lower half of his body. L. Nk Goswami knew that in the next few seconds, his buddy would be torn to shreds in the volley of following bullets. His weapon now in burst mode, L. Nk Goswami sprang from his cover position, firing furiously at the terrorists. Two bullets tore through L. Nk Goswami's waist, 1 passing straight through him, the other lodged inside. As he crumpled sideways with a roar, he kept his weapon pointed straight, meeting the 2 advancing terrorists with a spurt of shots, killing them just as he crashed to the ground.

Bleeding from his gunshot wounds, L. Nk Goswami attempted to crawl towards Mahendra and the 2 injured jawans under the tree. But as the rain came down a little harder, washing his wounds, L. Nk Goswami seemed to decide to let Death have him.

With cover fire from Maj. Kumar, L. Nk Goswami crawled forward in the darkness towards Mahendra Singh. The injured soldier was quickly secured and pulled to safety for evacuation. Then Maj. Kumar, now on his elbows, pulled himself towards the fallen figure of his favourite soldier.

‘I sat with Mohan, holding his hands through the night. There was no pulse. He would have done the same for me. He would not have left me.’

Maj. Kumar remembers those moments every day since it happened.

‘Sitting there with him, his flesh cold, I don’t remember anything feeling more unreal. A good part of me said he would wake up. This wasn’t a man who could be felled by bullets. And yet here he was—cold.’

The disbelief stretched out through that rainy night.

‘For many moments, I wondered if this was another one of his tactics. To play dead so he could spring up to kill the remaining terrorists,’ Maj. Kumar says, smiling. ‘I actually waited, hoping that was true. I have lost men before, but I couldn’t come to terms with it. I waited till sunrise to see if he would wake up.’

The next day, the officers and jawans of the unit held a *bada khaana*, an alcohol-fuelled banquet at their headquarters. Through the disbelief and mourning, there was sweeping pride. A man who had walked among them, as jovial as he was fearless, had signed off in the only way he could have wanted—on his terms, doing what he loved. Over drinks to dull the disbelief and sorrow, the men raised their glasses to L. Nk Mohan Nath Goswami that night, hailing him loudly for his fierceness in battle and generosity in victory.

‘He was the very core of an SF soldier. He loved his family and missed them every day. And he was married to the adrenaline of combat.’

As the national media stood mesmerized by the tale of L. Nk Goswami, his mortal remains would travel by road up the hills of Uttarakhand to his wife in their village. Viewers across the country would watch the stoic

figure of Bhawna Goswami next to L. Nk Mohan Nath Goswami's flag-draped casket.

Through uncontrollable tears, his mother, Radha Devi, would appeal to the government: 'Build a school in his name—a playground in his name. This is what he cherished as a child. This is what he would have wanted for others.'

'He knowingly pushed himself into a hail of bullets to save his comrade,' a Lieutenant Colonel with the unit, who led L. Nk Goswami years ago as a troop commander, remembers. 'We are all working for the country. But in an SF unit, you're also working for each other. He was emotionally attached to us and his work. He was an ideal SF commando.'

That unwillingness to countenance suffering stretched beyond the battlefield.

'He had a very soft corner for those suffering,' recalls L. Nk Goswami's wife, Bhawna. 'If he saw a poor person, or someone mentally disturbed, he would give them his clothes. He would never give beggars a rupee or two; he would give them Rs 100! A yogi baba once came to him in a market and asked him to buy him some grapes. He bought him a kilo of grapes! Once, he took off his shirt and jacket and gave it to a naked beggar. He was like that.'

Four months after Operation Sutsalyar, Bhawna Goswami would make her way to Delhi to receive L. Nk Goswami's posthumous Ashok Chakra, the country's highest decoration for gallantry in peacetime. She steeled herself as it drizzled that morning on Delhi's Rajpath.

'Before we got married, he always said to me that I needed to be prepared for anything. I did feel scared, but it was written in our destinies that we would make our lives together,' Bhawna, who still lives in Lalkuan, says. 'In my heart, a voice would tell me that as a commando's wife, I needed to be as fearless as he was. If one has to die, it can be anywhere.'

Bhumika, L. Nk Goswami's daughter, is now in a boarding school not far from home.

'For us, he is always here. He will be with us for a lifetime. It's just that I can no longer see him. He walks with me. He even talks to me. But I cannot

see him.’

A signboard, ‘Shahid Mohan Nath Goswami’, points to the couple’s small home. After his death, Bhawna decided not to complete the construction of the bigger house they had been building across the path from where they lived.

‘My nephews want to be like Mohan. All the children in our family want to take his legacy forward. They say, “He killed ten terrorists; we will kill twenty.”’

In the many tales of inspiring courage in the Special Forces, an abnormal, nearly magical film coats the tale of L. Nk Mohan Nath Goswami.

‘His call sign was *jaadugar* (magician),’ remembers a fellow warrior who accompanied him on that final mission.

‘I don’t think I will ever see a braver person than him facing fire.’

*

4

‘Even the Toughest Take Cover. But Not He’

Havildar Hangpan Dada

Shamshabari mountain range, Jammu and Kashmir
26 May 2016

His right hand, cold, blue and dead, was squeezed around the trigger of his Kalashnikov rifle. His face lay half in mountain snow, at a height of 12,000 feet. As life flowed out of him through a gunshot wound in the neck, the Havildar’s dying hand had emptied a full magazine of bullets. A dead man had fired 30 7.62-mm rounds.

30.

There had always been something other-worldly about Havildar Hangpan Dada. Courage in combat is far from a rarity in the treacherous highlands of Kashmir. But nearly every officer and soldier who fought alongside Havildar Dada swears they have never seen a man so possessed by the fight. A man for whom the world revolved so absolutely around terrorist encounters, his courage was frequently alarming.

‘He became a ghost long before he fell,’ a soldier from his unit would later say. They would be referring to Havildar Dada’s most unforgettable fight. His last.

On 26 May 2016, some 150 km north-west of Srinagar and across the LoC, a group of heavily armed terrorists did a final weapons and stores check as they walked out of their camp nestled in the lush Leepa valley in PoK. Their manner would get steadily less confident, but more furtive, creeping as they neared the front line.

They were departing from one of the most breathtakingly mellow parts of PoK. The Leepa valley draws huge numbers of Pakistani tourists in the summer months. Pictures of happy visitors in the splendid walnut and apple orchards, mountain brooks and meadows throng social media sites each year. But there is a side that few have ever visited, or even seen in pictures —a side infested with terror launch pads from where infiltrators are regularly dispatched across the LoC into J&K.

It was pitch dark and raining that May night as the 4 men began their hike towards the LoC. Flashes of lightning lit up a snowy ridgeline of the Shamshabari mountain range, the formidable natural barrier they would have to cross to reach the Kashmir valley. The barrier was where Indian soldiers held positions at heights of more than 14,000 feet, each post commanding a panoramic vista of unspeakable beauty—but also uninterrupted danger.

The posts, vacated in the winter of 2015, had been reoccupied by the troops barely a week before to choke off infiltration that begins with the onset of summer. For logistical reasons, it is not unusual for the Army to withdraw soldiers from desolate forward outposts in J&K to lower altitudes at winter's peak, before sending them back to control the positions once the weather improves. The unforgiving winter shuts down all infiltration routes, giving soldiers rare downtime in an unending cycle of combat.

As always, the terrorists had been well-trained in the route to follow and what to expect—the Indian Army's most hardened mountain warriors. They followed a carefully chosen path, sneaking across the LoC and heading east towards the ridgeline. A large part of their training would be expended in putting the Shamshabari range behind them. Once crossed, all the terrorists needed to do was duck into the many hiding places afforded by the gently flattening valley that would rise to greet them as they stumbled off the

mountainside. If the terrorists could go undetected for a few more hours, they would be in a position to inflict a great deal of real damage.

Besides the deployment of its fighting units, India has spent hundreds of crores on building and maintaining a fence along the de facto border with Pakistan, but heavy snow causes severe damage to it every year. Apart from routinely taking advantage of such gaps, infiltrating terrorists, helped by Pakistan Army border units, also target vulnerable border stretches that have been left unfenced due to topographic factors.

This group of infiltrators had, on 26 May, found 1 such gap. The distance between the fence and the LoC can vary from 50 metres to over 2 km, depending on the area's geography. It was about 2 km in this sector.

Dawn was just breaking as the terrorists crept up the rugged ridgeline running from south-west to north-east when a sentry of the 35 Rashtriya Rifles battalion, a unit drawing soldiers largely from the Army's Assam regiment, saw something move from the corner of his eye. His eyes darted in that direction. There was nothing. He wondered briefly if the cold, as it frequently did in that stillness, was playing tricks on him.

It could have been an animal, he thought to himself. Leopards and bears were known to roam the snow-swept heights. But the Army post was on the lookout for something a good measure smarter, and incalculably more dangerous. Sepoy J.N. Baite, in his early twenties, quietly ventured out of the 'Meera post' atop the ridgeline to take a closer look. Infiltration season was about to resume and nothing could be left to chance.

As the icy wind whipped across his face, the Assam Regiment soldier trudged through the snow to check if the movement he had noticed in his peripheral vision was something that needed more attention. Baite's finger rested on the trigger of his AK-47 as his company commander's words echoed in his ears.

'Never let your guard down. Not even for a moment. Split-second decisions can mean the difference between life and death.'

It was a tenet every soldier forward deployed in J&K operated by.

A soldier's instinct is seldom wrong. Baite had barely walked 30 metres from his post when he spotted human footprints in the pristine snow. He

knew instantly that the boys of the 4th battalion of Assam Regiment, or 4 Assam, would have to skip breakfast that day.

Raised during the Second World War in 1941, the Assam Regiment draws its troops exclusively from the 7 North-eastern states, and the dauntless men are well-suited for deployments in the mountains. Maj. (later Col.) Sonam Wangchuk of 4 Assam was conferred the Maha Vir Chakra, India's second highest wartime gallantry award, for capturing an 18,500-feet-high cliff in Batalik's Chorbat La sub-sector during the 1999 Kargil conflict. It was the highest honour won by the regiment. Seventeen years later, the unit found itself in similarly hostile heights, waiting to face intruders.

Pretending that nothing was amiss, Baite, a Manipuri, retreated to his post and immediately raised the alarm about the presence of an unknown number of infiltrators in the vicinity. Within moments, a radio operator relayed the message to the 'Echo Company' commander, Maj. K. Amirtha Raj, who was controlling all active operations on that patch of the Shamshabari.

The Major had just had his first sip of the hot, comforting chai. That was all he would have that day. The radio message made it obvious that a fight was on its way—the first one of the season in Kupwara's beautiful but deadly Naugam sector.

A familiar drill played out. The Army's posts near the LoC sit astride notorious infiltration 'highways' that terrorists use to enter the border state. The route that opened into Naugam was one of them. Soldiers manning these posts are tasked with carrying out patrols day and night, and to lay ambushes for terrorists, making sure no flank of the mountains is left uncovered even for a few minutes. Four posts on the ridgeline along with 3 posts sticking out from the snow-clad slopes below were alerted to the presence of infiltrators and ordered to tighten the net around them.

Havildar Dada and a few other soldiers were preparing to leave one of these posts, 'Sabu Post', 2000 metres below the ridgeline, to collect rations and stores from a logistics base down the mountain. That's how Army soldiers keep their forward posts stocked up on supplies. It would take the

men 2 hours to reach the base on foot and another 2 to return to their post with provisions: food, fuel, ammunition, batteries and other rations.

Havildar Dada's patrol carefully negotiated snow-blown slopes as the higher reaches of the Shamshabari range had received more than 10 feet of snow over the previous few days, sending temperatures plunging to a bone-chilling –15 °C.

Just as the men were about to depart from Sabu Post at 0545 hours, in came the radio alert from Maj. Raj. The Major, a mechanized infantry officer on deputation with the 35 Rashtriya Rifles, had issued a simple order: Havildar Dada's unit, along with a handful of others below the ridgeline, had to immediately cordon off the area to prevent the terrorists from slipping away down the mountainside. No one knew how many terrorists there were—could have been 2, 4, 6 or even 8.

The numbers were of little consequence to Havildar Dada, at least at that juncture. Taking each of those terrorists down in the shortest possible time was the only thing that mattered to him as he met with 10 soldiers in the post for a quick operational briefing.

Dada was in charge of Sabu Post, a position he and his men had reoccupied barely a week before. Patrols are regularly sent trudging up to winter-vacated posts till the weather permits permanent positioning. Till that time, aerial reconnaissance is used as a stopgap measure. The desolation of Naugam was not entirely unfamiliar to Havildar Dada. The Shamshabari terrain resembled to a large extent some of the remote landscape of the state he had grown up in and the one he called home—Arunachal Pradesh. Havildar Dada had been sent up to the heights barely 3 weeks after he volunteered to serve in Kashmir with the Rashtriya Rifles battalion.

The night before, he had spoken to his wife, Chasen, on the phone. In that 5-minute conversation, Havildar Dada made a fleeting mention of the setting of his post and the challenging role he and his team were assigned. In another part of the country, holding the phone to her ear and closing her eyes, Chasen Lowang Dada tried to picture the view her husband had just described.

Eight hours later, Havildar Dada's universe would shrink to his area of responsibility, not uncommon on difficult operations in hostile conditions. Summoning all his experience as a soldier of 16 years, he swiftly ran his men through the possible routes the terrorists could take and ordered them to take positions at vantage points near the post. Before they spread out, Havildar Dada raised his voice in a familiar and commanding tone.

'*Woh hamaari post tak aa gaye hain. Bas, ab aur aage nahin. Yahin khatam kar denge* (They have come right up to our post. But we will not let them go any further. We will finish them off here).'

The soldiers who departed from Sabu Post with him that morning would have obeyed any order. Havildar Dada had proven his ability to motivate teams by example. There was nothing he demanded of them that he would not do himself, or that he did not do exceedingly well. He was an extremely skilled handler of weapons. When not on an operation, he would volunteer to instruct fellow soldiers on handling support weapons like rocket launchers, medium machine guns, light machine guns and multi-grenade launchers.

With Sabu Post some distance behind them, Havildar Dada and his men lay in wait. The terrorists were lying low near the ridgeline and the Army was yet to make contact with them.

From his mountainside position, the 32-year-old company commander radioed instructions to the posts above to open automatic fire with assault rifles and light machine guns in the direction where the terrorists were believed to be hiding. Bewildered by the sudden intensity of fire pouring around them, the terrorists made a panicked dash down the slope towards Sabu Post where Dada and his men had planned a grand reception for them.

Escaping the hail of ammunition from the ridgeline Army posts, the terrorists were now literally running for their lives, stumbling through snow down the mountainside, unsuspecting of what lay ahead. In the meantime, Maj. Raj had left the company operating base at Jatti, at a height of 12,500 metres, and was moving as fast as he could towards Sabu Post along with his squad to provide reinforcement and supervise the operation. It would take them at least 1 hour to arrive.

‘I knew Dada was there and he was more than capable of dealing with any situation. He had the ability to work in teams and handle teams,’ recalls Maj. Raj, who hails from Tamil Nadu’s Dindigul district.

Havildar Dada, flat on his belly, half-hidden by a rock in the snow, lay very still until the terrorists had come very close. The terrorists had split themselves up into 2 groups to distract the soldiers and increase their odds of survival in the fight that was about to erupt. Two of them would soon be within range of Havildar Dada’s AK-47. He didn’t move a muscle. But something was amiss. The terrorists had stopped in their tracks. Havildar Dada and his men held their breaths.

Why had the terrorists stopped? The unthinkable, in what would have been a textbook ambush, had just happened. The terrorists appeared to have spotted the positions held by Havildar Dada’s men. In bare seconds, it became clear that the terrorists were now readjusting themselves to draw first blood. Less than a second after that realization dawned on the men from Sabu Post, a burst of fire came clattering down the hillside from 2 terrorists towards Havildar Dada and his men, pinning them down in their positions.

What happened next is as difficult to explain for those who actually saw it, as it is for anyone else to imagine it. It would be the beginning of Havildar Dada’s fearsome ‘possession’. Watching his men duck for cover as the incessant rain of fire continued from the terrorists’ rifles, Havildar Dada leapt from his position and charged up the slope towards the intruders with his fully loaded AK-47. Reaching them in a series of swift steps, the soldier then emptied his Kalashnikov magazine, 30 rounds, into both the men, cutting them down as they fired. It was a terrible risk, but one that Havildar Dada had clearly felt he had no choice in—it would have taken the terrorists only a few more moments for their bullets to find and shred Havildar Dada’s men.

He swiftly thumped a fresh magazine into his AK-47 as he spotted 2 more terrorists sprinting in different directions to take cover behind giant boulders. They had seen what Havildar Dada had just done to 2 of their

comrades, and had correctly concluded that they needed to handle this man with care.

By now, while his men remained in their cover positions, Havildar Dada had no cover at all. The soldiers behind him remember the silhouette that their leader cut against the snow. They could hear his breath as he finished loading his weapon and took the first tentative steps forward towards the 2 terrorists who had darted away. The men remember wondering if their leader would be doomed by his utter and total fearlessness that day.

Fear had given up on Hangpan as a teenager. In the early 1990s, he had dived into a fast-flowing river in Arunachal Pradesh's Tirap district to save a drowning classmate, earning the praise and admiration of an entire village. Later, shortly before he was recruited into the Army in 1997, young Hangpan risked his life to rescue passengers from a bus that had fallen into a gorge.

Havildar Dada's men knew they couldn't stop him from the course he had just chosen. But they tried.

'*Dada sir, ruk jao, cover le lo* (Dada sir, stop, take cover). *Aage khatra hai* (There's danger ahead),' one of the soldiers yelled through a cupped hand. It was futile. It became clear to his men that Havildar Dada had decided how he was going to finish this fight. And he didn't turn around once. By this time, his buddy, Lance Havildar Vareshang, had reached a spot 20 metres behind.

Havildar Dada, trudging through the snow, broke into a dash past rocks towards the third terrorist, with Vareshang trailing right behind. Vareshang would be 1 of the 2 men who saw what happened next.

The third terrorist sprang from behind the boulder, attempting to bring a marauding Havildar Dada down with a sudden burst of fire.

'It was a foolish miscalculation by the terrorist. And he would pay for it with his life,' recalls a soldier involved in the operation.

Havildar Dada twisted his body and flung himself sideways with lightning speed, incredibly managing to dodge a burst of bullets fired straight at him. The terrorist had taken cover behind the rock again, not realizing that those bullets had, far from deterring the advancing soldier,

simply confirmed to him where the terrorist was hiding. The next few seconds would see Havildar Dada muster every bit of skill in hand-to-hand combat he had excelled in during his training, a skill he had demonstrated across deployments.

Creeping gently up and round the boulder, Havildar Dada lunged at the waiting terrorist, smashing him straight in the face with his rifle butt. He followed it with a series of swift, rapid blows. The bludgeoned terrorist dropped his weapon, struggling hard to wrench himself free from the Havildar's devastating grip. Havildar Dada made it quick. In a flash, the Havildar snapped the terrorist's neck, and let his body fall to the snow.

Havildar Dada had just dispatched 3 terrorists, all trained in military commando tactics and mountain warfare.

'His actions spoke volumes about his mental toughness, unflinching dedication and sense of purpose,' recalls Maj. Raj.

But Havildar Dada's fight was not over. There was still a fourth terrorist left, hiding a short distance up the hillside. As Havildar Dada began the final hunt, his AK-47 cocked and ready for a quick finish, a 7.62-mm round came whizzing down from behind a rock and ripped through the Havildar's neck. He had been sniped from close quarters as he stood exposed in his hunt. Havildar Dada collapsed in the snow, bleeding out. The sun was fully in the sky now, its brightness amplifying the blinding snow and crisp, clean air as Havildar Dada took his final breath.

The last terrorist had got him. It was 0945 hours—about the time when, in his village thousands of kilometres away, Roukhin and Senwang, Havildar Dada's 9-year-old daughter and 6-year-old son, would be getting ready for school. They knew that their father was on a mountain far away, and often wished they could visit him.

As Havildar Dada fell, a volley of shots spat out of his AK-47, the sound ringing through the deathly cold of the white landscape. Nobody knew it then, but Havildar Dada had managed to injure the last terrorist before he fell.

Havildar Dada's team and Maj. Raj's men, who had reached the spot, were in no position to retrieve the Havildar's body as the fourth terrorist

was still alive, had a commanding view of the foreground and was possibly preparing to launch grenades. This would be a familiar situation for the Army. A beloved comrade had just been felled in combat, but the rush of sorrow and heartbreak had to be trampled, packed away, set aside at least for the duration of the operation. Fighting on with a broken heart is the most cruel, difficult thing a soldier ever has to do. Maj. Raj remembers feeling the hollow, dull grief of losing one of the most prized men in his charge.

But there was no time to rest. He quickly devised a plan to outflank the terrorist from the top before pinning him down and finishing him off. It would take the Major and his team 7 more hours to implement the plan. Finally, it was the Major himself who crept up on the last terrorist, and eliminated him with 3 quick bursts at 1645 hours.

The men could now finally reach Havildar Dada safely. It had started to get dark. The soldiers' faces were furrowed with tears when they saw him lying motionless in the snow, his hand still clutching the pistol grip of his Kalashnikov.

One of the soldiers knelt down to check for vital signs of life. He knew there would be none. But he had to. He pulled the magazine from Havildar Dada's rifle only to find that his team leader had fought till the proverbial last round. His lifeless hand, frozen on the trigger, had pumped out 30 bullets from the assault rifle. It was Havildar Dada's ghost that had injured the last terrorist, allowing the Major and his men to hunt him down later that day.

As they stood over his body, it was an overwhelming moment that the soldiers are unlikely to forget in their lifetime—one that is bound to find special mention in the Assam Regiment's historical records.

'Dada fought like a man possessed. And it is such men who win battles for an Army. He went after the terrorists *alone*. There are some things that cold logic can't explain,' recalls Col. Manish Agarwal, who commanded the 35 Rashtriya Rifles during the operation in Naugam. The mission was officially called off only the following day as the Army needed to comb the area and make sure it had taken down all the terrorists who had infiltrated.

The numbers that hadn’t mattered to Havildar Dada when he left Sabu Post mattered now.

The tale of Havildar Dada’s final fight at the frigid heights of Kupwara would become a legend almost immediately. Hailed as a national hero, he was posthumously awarded India’s highest peacetime military honour, the Ashok Chakra, by the President of India on 14 August 2016, for scripting an incredible tale of courage and sacrifice.

‘I have come across lots of courageous soldiers during my 23-year military career. But when bullets are whistling over your head, even the toughest guy takes cover. Dada was something else. I feel honoured to have been his CO. The men cried, the officers wept when Dada died,’ remembers Col. Agarwal.

Not a single soldier of Echo Company ate a morsel that night. And none slept. Havildar Dada’s death had soured the taste of victory.

‘We didn’t celebrate the killing of 4 terrorists. We mourned the loss of a remarkably brave soldier, a brother. For 3 days, no one in the company spoke about the operation,’ reminisces Maj. Raj, who was awarded a Sena Medal for gallantry.

Roukhin and Senwang miss the times they spent playing video games with their father when he visited them. The battalion misses Havildar Hangpan Dada also for the sermons he delivered as a pastor at the unit church, sermons that were attended by all the men.

Havildar Dada had visited home for the last time in early 2016. Chasen remembers he had bought her a new saree and a blazer, both items she considered expensive, but admired. She remembers Hangpan telling her that the colour of the clothes—the blue saree and the white blazer—looked perfect on her.

‘I think he liked the dress more than I did. Maybe it was his favourite dress on me,’ smiles Chasen, 33, who never needed to ask Hangpan what he wanted to eat when he came home—it was Chasen’s signature pork and *daal-bhaat,* each and every time.

Not surprisingly, she remembers every word of her last conversation with Hangpan, the night before the operation on 25 May. Nothing meant more to

her than those rare calls from that mountain in north Kashmir.

‘He asked me if the children and I had had dinner. He told me about his post. He said he would take us to Kolkata for Christmas. I wish we had spoken longer,’ she says. ‘*Kahaani adhoori reh gayi* (The story was left unfinished).’

Havildar Dada and Chasen were married for 10 years. She remembers them as being friends as much as they were husband and wife. But he never spoke about the dangers soldiers faced in the field. Later she would learn that Havildar Dada always asked his brother, Laphang Dada, to offer prayers for the safety of his men.

Chasen also remembers reeling in horror when she learnt that Havildar Dada was an avid snake-keeper, a habit he had nurtured through tenures in the jungles of the North-east.

‘Who keeps snakes as pets? I don’t know of anyone! Had I known about it, I would have scolded him and asked him to mend his ways,’ Chasen says.

More recognition would come for Havildar Hangpan Dada with the main office block at the Shillong-based Assam Regimental Centre being named after him. Chasen was invited to unveil the plaque in her husband’s memory. The Arunachal Pradesh government decided to additionally immortalize the soldier by renaming the annual chief minister’s football and volleyball championships after Havildar Dada. He is likely to also be commemorated closer to where he became a legend.

‘There are plans to name an 8-km operational track from Jatti to Tiranga Post in the Shamshabari after Dada. We will never stop speaking about Dada’s courage and how he fought that day. We will every day,’ says Maj. Raj.

At the 2017 Republic Day parade on Delhi’s Rajpath, Chasen received Havildar Dada’s Ashok Chakra from President Pranab Mukherjee. Her head bowed in Namaste, she gracefully accepted the honour. Visibly steeling herself, it was one of Chasen’s most difficult moments.

‘Dil mein toh ro rahi thi, par sabko apne aansoo kaise dikhaati? Aakhir mai Dada ki wife hoon, aur Dada ki wajah se wahan hoon jahan hoon. (I

was crying in my heart but how could I show my tears to everyone? After all, I am Dada's wife and I am where I am because of him),' she says.

She wore the blue saree and the white blazer that day.

*

5

‘Two Bullets Can’t Kill a Commando’

Captain Jaidev Dangi

Tral, Jammu and Kashmir
19 June 2014

The commando smiled.

It was Ritu.

Her name blinked on his battered iPhone screen.

The two had exchanged rings 4 months before, on Valentine’s Day in 2014, as she had wanted. In 2 more months, he knew what would happen—he would be hoisted on to the shoulders of his comrades in his Para-SF unit and packed off to rural Haryana to be married.

Ritu sat in her hostel room in Rohtak, waiting for the commando to pick up the phone. She would not disconnect until the phone had rung through. If he didn’t pick up, she knew he would call back.

From his team’s operating base in the terrorist haven of Tral in south Kashmir, Capt. Jaidev Dangi, 25 years old, always called back.

He swiped to accept the call. Capt. Dangi and Ritu had not known each other before they had been brought together by their families earlier that year. It had been awkward in person, and since Capt. Dangi had no choice

but to rush back to Kashmir after the engagement ceremony, they had only come to know each other over text messages and the daily phone call, which was sometimes as brief as a few seconds.

Capt. Dangi sounded relaxed that June evening, not something that Ritu got to hear often. She had found him calm enough not to ask about his work. Instead, she kept the conversation light, telling him what she had decided to wear for the wedding and the additions she was hoping to make to the guest list.

Capt. Dangi, who usually acknowledged every word she said with a sound, suddenly seemed distracted. Ritu found herself talking into a void. Something was amiss. The commando always gave her his full attention when he spoke to her. All too soon, he cut in abruptly.

'Ritu. Listen. I can't talk. I will speak to you later. Don't call back.'

He hung up. Ritu held the phone to her ear for a few seconds after it was disconnected. Was this what it was always going to be like? She waited for a few moments, staring out of her hostel window. Then she tapped out a text message and sent it: *Call me when you're free. Please take care*.

The silence was new, but Ritu had been faced with Capt. Dangi's hushed, distracted tone earlier. A month before, on 5 May, as the country braced itself for the big verdict of the national elections, her fiancé had fronted an operation that led to the killing of a Pakistani terrorist in a village near Tral. On that day too, he had cut their conversation short. Ritu knew that the man she was to marry was a soldier whose business was to hunt and kill terrorists. But that first time had made her blood run cold. It was something she would never quite get used to. Nor would Capt. Dangi's family.

The commando jogged to the operations briefing room that evening on 19 June 2014. Capt. Dangi and his team of Para-SF warriors had returned to their base earlier that day from a different operation. And just as Capt. Dangi had begun to tentatively unwind over the phone with Ritu, a fresh intelligence input had alerted the team to the presence of a terrorist inside a house in Buchoo village, less than 10 km away.

As the team spilt out of their field headquarters, the distinct scent of eucalyptus floated through the mild summer breeze. Young Kashmiri boys

were enjoying a game of cricket at the playground a stone's throw away. The comforting sound of a ball against bats hewn from the willow trees abundant in the area resounded in the air.

The men did their final weapons check as an electric crackle passed through the team. Familiar to all soldiers, it is the frisson right before a hunt.

Capt. Dangi stroked his full beard. Normally clean-shaven and boyish, the lush growth on his face made the young commando look much older than his 25 years. Either way, it was crucial to his work. A beard helped conceal his identity as an outsider. There was now another incentive to keep it, though. Clean-shaven at his engagement, the commando had let his beard grow since, sending Ritu a stream of daily selfies that documented the steady shrouding of his sharp jawline with thick hair. Ritu reacted instantly. She forbade him to shave.

The hunt Capt. Dangi's team had set off on that June evening was a special one. The commandos had been waiting for that particular intelligence input for months. Their body language was brimming with quiet excitement.

The man whose whereabouts had been discovered was no ordinary terrorist carrying an AK-47 and a few magazines. He had been prowling south Kashmir for several years and was far more wily and dangerous than the men Capt. Dangi's team usually hunted down. It was Adil Ahmed Mir, a Hizbul Mujahideen area commander who the commandos had pursued unsuccessfully for several months. Adil had been mentor and trainer to Burhan Wani, then an upcoming social-media-savvy Hizbul commander, whose killing 2 years later in 2016 would plunge the Kashmir valley into a fresh cycle of bloodshed and turmoil.

Adil could not be allowed to slip through the net this time as he had several times in the past, to the intense frustration of the many teams that had been dispatched to capture him, dead or alive.

A Casspir mine-protected vehicle carrying the commandos rumbled off from Hardumir towards the location where Adil Mir was supposed to be hiding. The Hardumir company operating base offered a sweeping view of

the area, including Buchoo village in the distance and the thick forest around it. Capt. Dangi quickly organized his thoughts. There was first a sense of disbelief that Mir had allowed himself to be spotted. Over 6 months, the terrorist had honed his skills of shaking his pursuers off into an art form. Capt. Dangi set everything else aside and focused his thoughts on the one thing he was certain of: Adil's killing or capture would deal a crushing blow to the Hizbul Mujahideen.

'We were 99 per cent sure it was Adil Mir and 100 per cent sure we would get him,' recalls Capt. Dangi. 'My team was looking forward to the action as this is what we were trained for. It was our chance to get the slippery fellow. You know, he never used a cell phone. He was so guarded.'

It was the height of summer and the sun would not disappear below the horizon for at least another 90 minutes, as the commandos sped towards the map location they'd been given.

As the Casspir rumbled swiftly past apple orchards, towering chinar trees and lush paddy fields, Capt. Dangi and his men conducted a quick tactical briefing. They made it to the spot in less than 10 minutes.

Capt. Dangi recalls the conversation he had with his men inside the vehicle.

'*Andhera hone se pehle operation khatam karna hai* (We have to finish the operation before darkness sets in).'

He did not need to tell them twice. The men knew that this was likely to be their one final chance to get Adil Ahmed Mir before he truly disappeared before the winter months.

It was 1700 hours when Capt. Dangi's 8-man squad reached Buchoo village with a team each of 3 Rashtriya Rifles and the J&K Police special operations group in tow. The intelligence input they had received was specific: it pointed to the presence of only 1 terrorist, Adil Ahmed Mir himself, in the village. This would soon prove to be a dangerous miscalculation.

Stepping quietly out of their Casspir vehicle in daylight, a short distance outside the village, the team was faced with a fresh quandary. The intelligence input had failed to factor in a crucial point. The man in whose

home Adil was supposedly present owned 3 adjoining houses in the same compound. If Adil was actually there, he could be in any of the 3 houses.

In a matter of seconds, finding Adil Ahmed Mir had become thrice as difficult.

The men were rapidly assigned their roles before they headed towards the compound with the 3 houses. The Rashtriya Rifles soldiers would lay a cordon in front of the compound. Capt. Dangi and his commando squad would position themselves behind the wall at the rear end of the complex.

The young officer's instincts had told him that this was the escape route Adil was likeliest to take. Capt. Dangi and his 19-year-old buddy, Paratrooper Mukesh Kumar, took cover behind a eucalyptus tree with their Tavor TAR-21 assault rifles. They had chosen the spot for its unobstructed view of the compound's backyard. The 2 men did another weapons check as the sun sank a little lower on the horizon.

Almost 800 km away, Ritu was sitting in her hostel room, a silent prayer on her lips.

The eucalyptus scent wasn't just a familiar friend in the Kashmir valley. Capt. Dangi had grown up in Haryana's Madina village, where towering eucalyptuses lined the edges of fields owned by his father, who had died when Capt. Dangi was still in school.

For a boy who did not know much about the Army when he was a teenager, and who was coaxed by his physics teacher to sign up, Capt. Dangi's journey to Kashmir as a commando is an intriguing one. It was his instructor at the IMA, Maj. Kunal Rathi, who made him take the big step into the Paras. 'If you want to do what you are being trained for, then come to Special Forces,' the cadet had been told.

He had never regretted the decision.

Capt. Dangi and Mukesh strapped on their ballistic combat helmets. The remaining men had also formed pairs with their buddies and taken positions behind Capt. Dangi and Mukesh. This was to provide the lead pair cover, while sealing off alternative routes that could allow the terrorist to reach the stream and swim to the forest beyond. If he reached the forest, this mission was as good as dead.

The police team cautiously approached the entrance to the main house, ready to open fire if required. Seconds after they knocked on the door, Capt. Dangi spotted a well-built, bearded man in a pheran make a wild dash out the back door.

Not only was this a suspicious move, it was plainly hostile and confirmed the intelligence input. Yet, standard protocol had to be followed. The commandos had to be absolutely sure that the man who had rushed out of the house was not a civilian. In an icy calm voice trained not to alarm, Capt. Dangi called out to the man, asking him to reveal his identity, remove his pheran and drop his weapon to the ground if he was carrying one.

'You can surrender if you want to. There's still time,' Capt. Dangi warned.

This routine drill during the conduct of counter-terrorism operations exposes soldiers to enormous additional risks. But nothing is more important to the Army than eliminating the possibility of collateral damage. Never mind if it increases the chance of its own casualties, as it very often does.

The man did not respond to Capt. Dangi's call.

Instead, he jumped across the compound's back wall with the support of his left hand while the other grasped a now visible AK-47 assault rifle. As he landed on the ground 15 metres away from Capt. Dangi and Mukesh, the terrorist opened fire.

Dodging that first hail of bullets, the commando leaned towards Mukesh, '*Iska khel khatam* (His game is over).' The 2 men exchanged quick nods.

It is near impossible to describe the trust buddy pairs place in each other during operations. Placing their lives in each other's hands forms the basis of the relationship. When a firefight breaks out, buddy pairs are not just working towards eliminating an adversary; they also draw strength from and protect each other. It is a force multiplier system that creates the most basic human linkage at a tactical, instinctive and emotional level.

Right in front of them, the terrorist fired for 8 more seconds until he drained his first AK-47 magazine. Before he could reload his rifle, Capt. Dangi and Mukesh began their counter-fire, sending 6 single shots each

from their TAR-21s whizzing through the air and straight into the terrorist's body, shredding him where he stood. The precision shots ensured swift death.

If the intelligence input was accurate, the mission had just been successfully completed—it lay in a bloody heap in front of the 2 lead commandos. And yet, somewhere in Capt. Dangi's reptilian brain, he knew it couldn't have been *this* easy. The men would know only moments later how the intelligence input had really only scratched the surface.

'We relaxed a bit for a few seconds thinking we had got our guy. But hell, we were wrong. Everything had only just begun,' remembers Capt. Dangi.

Less than a minute after the first man was shot dead, 2 more terrorists sprang from the house they were hiding in and immediately opened fire at Capt. Dangi's position. Firing their weapons on full automatic, the terrorists took the warriors by surprise. Not only had the intelligence input specified the presence of a single terrorist, the 2 men who had just emerged were not making any attempt to escape like the first one—they were in all-out attack mode.

It quickly dawned on the squad that the terrorists seemed to be following a well-thought-out plan. The first one stormed out of the house and made contact with the commandos. The ensuing firefight revealed the position Capt. Dangi and Mukesh were holding. The next 2 terrorists emerged by surprise to finish the commandos off.

At this point, Capt. Dangi and his squad did not know that 1 of the 2 men firing at them was Adil Ahmed Mir.

The man they had just shot dead was only a foot soldier—either Abdul Ahad Shah or Tariq Ahmad Parray of the Hizbul Mujahideen. But the 2 men now firing aggressively at them were doing so with a worrying level of skill.

'The two were firing very accurately. They were extremely well-trained. The sheer intensity of the fire forced us to take cover with our heads down. We had to do something quickly,' recalls Capt. Dangi. He remembers feeling a spasm of anger at the abrupt turn of events that had put the

commandos on the defensive. He felt a familiar dryness of the mouth as he wondered if the 2 terrorists would use their hail of fire from just 20 metres away to make a getaway. What he had not accounted for was actually taking a bullet while this happened.

The 2 terrorists had realized that they would need to get rid of Capt. Dangi and Mukesh, the lead pair, if they were to disappear into the tall grass and crawl down to the stream without being pursued. They were surrounded and that was the only exit route. By now, they were desperate to break out of the cordon laid by the commandos to prevent their escape.

The trunk of the tree behind which Capt. Dangi and Mukesh had taken cover was not wide enough to shield them both. Sensing an opportunity to pin the commandos down, if not hit them directly, the terrorists began moving towards them, their rifles blazing non-stop.

Capt. Dangi felt a sudden stab of pain in his left thigh as a Kalashnikov bullet ripped through it. Immediately after, a second bullet pierced his abdomen on the side. Under the hail of ammunition, Capt. Dangi inspected his injuries for a moment, but quickly looked to his buddy. To his horror, Mukesh had sustained nearly identical injuries to the right side of his body.

‘It was only when I saw blood gushing from my wounds that I realized I had been shot. I was more worried about Mukesh as his injuries seemed to be worse. The tree trunk had covered our vital organs but some parts of our bodies were exposed,’ recalls Capt. Dangi.

He quickly checked Mukesh’s helmet. Fortunately, it was intact. No headshots.

‘*Kuch nahi hua hai. Thodi si lagi hai* (Nothing has happened. It’s a minor wound) You are alive. Stay that way,’ he told Mukesh.

It had been barely a year since Mukesh had enlisted in the Army, and Capt. Dangi knew his first gunshot wounds would shake him up more than a little. His battle fatigues soaked in blood, the pallor on Mukesh’s face showed that he thought the end was near. Over the deafening crackle of fire drawing towards them, Capt. Dangi whispered to his buddy. Pointing to his own wounds, Capt. Dangi told him 2 bullets were not enough to kill a

commando. Mukesh smiled weakly, with a thumbs-up gesture. He was losing blood rapidly.

Capt. Dangi quickly dragged Mukesh to a position behind the tree that made him less vulnerable to the incoming fire. He then signalled to one of the other soldiers holding ground behind them to crawl to their position to watch over the injured Mukesh.

As the commandos provided him covering fire, Naib Subedar Tribhuwan Singh crawled on his hands and knees to reach the wounded man. Tribhuwan knew what had to be done. Reaching Mukesh, he quickly put pressure on the man's wounds with both hands to prevent further blood loss, telling him that the operation would be over soon and help was on its way. Mukesh's face was deathly pale by now, his breathing more rapid.

Blood oozing from his own gunshot wounds, Capt. Dangi stuck his TAR-21 out from behind the tree and opened fire at the advancing terrorists. In the tense crossfire, the officer's bullets hit one of the terrorists, sending him crashing to the ground.

It was Adil Ahmed Mir. But he wasn't dead yet.

Just as Capt. Dangi was about to open a final burst at the fallen terrorist to finish him off, a bullet came whizzing through the air and hit his assault rifle, jamming it and rendering it useless.

A more devastating situation could not have transpired. Capt. Dangi was now holding nothing but a piece of metal composite in his hands in the middle of a firefight at 10 metres. And he didn't have a moment to lose to think of alternatives.

He swiftly bent over to pick up Mukesh's weapon. Just then, the last standing terrorist decided to make a break for it, dashing full speed towards the tall grass about 30 metres away that led down to the stream behind Buchoo village. As he reached the grass, he dropped to his hands and knees and began crawling through it, trying to disappear in the undergrowth. Capt. Dangi checked the magazine of his new weapon only to find that Mukesh had emptied it in the firefight. Quickly slamming a new magazine in, Capt. Dangi stepped out of his position to finish off Adil Ahmed Mir, who he had hit a moment ago.

Mir, lying a few metres away, had enough strength to swing his weapon forward and open a fresh burst of fire directly at the now fully exposed Capt. Dangi. A bullet grazed Capt. Dangi's cheek. An inch to the right, and it would have been a direct headshot that would have instantly killed the young officer. Thankfully the bullet had only opened Capt. Dangi's skin, a mere trifle compared to the first 2 gunshot wounds.

That bullet was the last of the dying terrorist's ammunition. Capt. Dangi stepped up quickly, pumping 10 rounds into him. Standing over him to make sure it was over, Capt. Dangi bent closer to take a look at the terrorist's face.

'Before I took the headshot, I recognized him. It was Adil.'

Ten metres behind, Tribhuwan was still tending to the injured Mukesh and was unable to engage the third terrorist who had fled towards the stream. Capt. Dangi, bleeding heavily and losing strength, refused to be shifted out of the encounter site. Adil was dead, but this operation would be incomplete if the third man escaped.

'I didn't mind bleeding a little more. I knew I could deal with it,' Capt. Dangi recalls. 'If this guy made it to the stream, there was no way we were going to get him, at least not that day.'

Capt. Dangi quietly moved in the direction where the terrorist had disappeared into the undergrowth. The large rucksack on his back gave the man's location away.

'I could see something moving. His rucksack blew his cover. It was sticking out as he crawled on his belly towards the stream.'

His limbs stiffening from the pain and blood loss, Capt. Dangi stepped on the grass, his weapon ready. But this time there would be no firefight as the young officer crept up on the terrorist and killed him in a quick burst of close-range fire. It was time for Capt. Dangi to take another headshot.

'The third man didn't put up a fight. His commander was dead and all he wanted to do was escape. He had lost the will. It made my job easier,' says Capt. Dangi.

The officer did not stop to savour his victory. There were other priorities for now—Mukesh. Blood dripping to the ground, Capt. Dangi stumbled

back to check on his buddy. Mukesh was still conscious.

‘*Kaha tha na, do goliyan commando ko maarne ke liye kaafi nahi* (Told you, 2 bullets aren’t enough to kill a commando),’ Capt. Dangi grinned.

As the sun began its final descent, the two men smiled. From start to finish, the operation had lasted less than 20 minutes. From the time the first terrorist opened fire, till the time Capt. Dangi fired that final headshot, it had been just 8 minutes. The killing of Adil Ahmed Mir that evening in Buchoo village would be the definition of a lightning-quick operation. The 5 gunshot wounds suffered by 2 commandos were acceptable damage—every operation begins with the recognition that injuries are highly likely, if not fatal.

The Casspir vehicle carried the team back to its operating base in Hardumir where an Army helicopter was waiting to fly Capt. Dangi and Mukesh to the 92 Base Hospital in Srinagar.

In Rohtak, Ritu was close to panicking. Every passing minute had seemed like an eternity to her as she fought to keep away frightening thoughts. Like a good professional, Capt. Dangi had shared broad aspects of his work with his family, but never the specific details—as much for their own safety as his.

What Ritu did know was that her fiancé operated in south Kashmir. Unable to bear the worry any longer, she contacted a paramilitary officer also deployed in Tral. The officer was a friend of her cousin’s. It was through him that Ritu learnt of Capt. Dangi’s mission to hunt a deadly terrorist commander. That piece of information was enough for Ritu to throw Capt. Dangi’s promise right out of the window—that he would call her back and not to worry. She began dialling his number repeatedly, but there was no response. The young commando’s phone happened to be with his team commander, a Major, who finally picked it up at 2100 hours.

Ritu felt her skin crawl. In a calm tone, the Major informed her that Capt. Dangi had suffered minor injuries in the operation and had been admitted to hospital. Ritu phoned nobody else that night, neither her family nor Capt. Dangi’s mother. And she didn’t sleep. Through the night, she tried to

contact Capt. Dangi, hoping his phone had somehow found its way back to him.

But it wasn't until the next morning that she finally heard his voice.

Capt. Dangi's CO and team commander arrived at the hospital to see him early on 20 June. The Major dialled Ritu's number and handed the phone to Capt. Dangi.

'I was too shy to speak to my fiancée in the presence of my CO and the team commander. I just told her I would speak to her after 2 days. She was silent. She wanted to talk. But she understood the situation I was in,' he says.

Their wedding had to be postponed from August to December as Capt. Dangi's injuries needed time to heal. Both commandos were discharged from the base hospital after 3 weeks.

Six months later, Capt. Jaidev Dangi was awarded India's second highest peacetime gallantry award, the Kirti Chakra, on 25 January 2015 for showing 'dauntless courage and extraordinary valour under heavy fire from close quarters in face of certain death.' The award citation would note that 'despite his near fatal injuries, the officer refused to be evacuated till the termination of operations'.

He would receive the award from the President of India at the Rashtrapati Bhawan on 21 March 2015. With him was Ritu, his bride of 3 months, his mother and his best friend, Capt. Pradeep Balhara of a sister SF unit.

Capt. Dangi's example has inspired many in and around Haryana's Madina village to join the military.

'Jaidev was the first boy from our school to join the NDA,' says Ravinder Dangi, director at the Ramakrishna Paramhansa Senior Secondary School where Capt. Dangi had studied. 'But now a steady stream of students joins the academy every year following in his footsteps. He will remain an inspiration for current and future generations of students.'

School friends talk fondly of Jaidev, who still meets them on the rare occasion that he has time off from his duties. They remember how he once limped to school with his foot in a plaster cast as he did not want to miss classes.

‘I told him to take leave and rest. I loved his answer. He said he would rather sit in class than sit at home,’ the school director says.

After the Buchoo operation, Capt. Dangi entered a Para refresher course that commandos have to undergo every year to hone their skills. It was during the toil of this course that Capt. Dangi would receive news about the gallantry decoration the recently elected Narendra Modi government had decided to pin on him.

‘No words can explain the joy and pride I felt when I was told I had been awarded the Kirti Chakra. I had never imagined in my dreams that I would come so far in life,’ says Capt. Dangi.

The operation that killed Adil Ahmed Mir would be the first major SF win in Kashmir under the new Modi government, barely a month old at the time. It would become a touchstone referred to by the country’s security top brass as India’s Parachute Regiment units prepared for devastatingly more ambitious operations in the months that followed.

SF officers rarely have time for leisure or other interests. In Capt. Dangi’s case, the binding nature of his work allows him hobbies not far removed from his professional duties. In the little spare time that Capt. Dangi gets, he pursues interests deeply related to the profession he has chosen for himself. He likes to fire different types of weapons, research tactics employed by global special operations units and read about military leaders. Mongol leader Genghis Khan, who rose from humble beginnings to carve out the largest empire in history, tops his list of favourites.

Capt. Dangi’s beard was shaved off at the hospital to treat the wound on his cheek. As they cleaned him up, he remembers the mixed feelings he had at the time.

‘Ritu really loved that beard. I would have to grow it back really fast,’ he remembers.

Following the operation in south Kashmir, Capt. Dangi was posted as an instructor at the NDA outside Pune, where cadets, like he once was, prepare for a military career. At the time this book was written, the young officer was waiting to complete the posting and return to the Kashmir valley to do what he likes the most.

Hunt.

*

6

‘Just Tell Me, Will He Live or Die?’

Colonel Santosh Yashwant Mahadik

Subaya, Jammu and Kashmir
16 November 2015

‘*Papa jaldi aao. Hum wait karenge*. (Papa, return soon. We will be waiting for you.)’

Kartikee Mahadik, 11 years old, threw her arms around her father’s neck. It was near midnight that night in May 2015. Kartikee’s little brother, Swaraj, waved from behind her. Their father was headed, with a group of his men, to Muhri, not far away, where a group of terrorists who had infiltrated across the LoC had been spotted.

Kartikee was old enough to wonder why her father, the CO of the 41 Rashtriya Rifles, needed to personally lead every operation into the beautiful, unforgiving forests of north Kashmir that surrounded his field headquarters. She was old enough to know that battalion bosses were not required to physically front every mission, but play the nerve centre with command and control.

Yet, she never once wondered.

Which is why, 8 months later, when Col. Santosh Yashwant Mahadik phoned his wife, Swati, then staying 300 km away at the Army's Northern Command Headquarters in Udhampur, she didn't blink.

It was freezing that night of 16 November 2015. Col. Mahadik and a team of his men had dashed by road from Kupwara to a thick sector of forests in the frontier hamlet of Subaya. It was the red alert the Colonel had been waiting for.

Over the first half of November, along with the first snow, the trail of a small group of terrorists wearing white snow jackets and bearing suspiciously heavy backpacks had gone cold. They had been spotted by civilian porters on 3 November in Trumnar, a village within the 41 Rashtriya Rifles' area of responsibility. Rushing to their destination at Kamkari, the porters had immediately notified officers at the 57 Rashtriya Rifles unit headquartered there about the suspicious men in snow gear. The men they saw were definitely not locals, the porters insisted, before they went on their way.

An officer at the 57 Rashtriya Rifles immediately relayed the tip-off to Col. Mahadik's unit, advising him to make preparations to intercept the suspicious group of men as they came down the Shamshabari mountains. The CO of the 41 Rashtriya Rifles immediately deployed teams to place ambushes along points near the range. For 3 days, the men searched, patrolled and waited. A fresh batch of snow, several feet deep, fell on 7 November—4 days after the hunt had begun.

The soldiers were then redeployed on surveillance missions in the area. Two days later, on the afternoon of 9 November, fresh intelligence reached Col. Mahadik's men that a body had been recovered from Trumnar, the village where the suspects had first been spotted. As always, the Colonel rushed to the site himself.

The body had clearly been dumped there. The dead man's weapon, an AK-47, lay by his side on the banks of a thin stream. A closer inspection revealed that the man's legs had rotted from gangrene. Speaking to his contacts among Trumnar's locals, Col. Mahadik made a quick deduction. The dead man was likely from the same group that had been spotted by the

porters 3 days earlier. Snowfall and frostbite had clearly got to them. The 4 suspects had probably passed through the village, and this 1 man had been left behind because he could walk no further. He had then probably died in the care of someone ordered to look after him. Locals, fearing they would be held responsible for harbouring a terrorist, then probably dumped the body outside the settlement in a nala so sniffer dogs would not be able to detect it.

The sighting of the corpse was confirmation that at least 3 others in the group had survived and were moving towards the Kashmir valley. On 10 November, Col. Mahadik launched operations at 2 sites—Kupwara's Manigah and Baramulla's Jugtial. Meticulous patrolling through snowbound forests and ridgelines revealed nothing. The hunt continued for 48 hours.

At 0800 hours on 13 November, Col. Mahadik received word that one of the suspects had descended from a jungle and entered a hamlet near Trumnar to ask for food. Teams were rushed to the spot, but they were too late. The suspect had collected food and was already headed back up towards the jungles. Locals showed the Army team the direction in which he had gone.

Following the trail up the hill, soldiers noticed someone attempting to conceal himself with a shawl. It was a hill track frequented by people from the village. When challenged, the man in the shawl turned around, revealing an assault rifle and opened a burst of fire. The spray of bullets hit 2 jawans, injuring them. As the Army team took cover, the weather and visibility worsened abruptly, bringing fresh rain and snow, allowing the man to escape.

Over the next 2 days, the team searched grimly for the man who had got away. By 15 November, the team was exhausted after an uninterrupted phase of combat alert, and their morale had dipped considerably. They had effectively been on the hunt for 7 days and achieved nothing. Troubled but determined, the men were asked to return to their headquarters.

As they moved back from the location, another group of soldiers took their place to continue the hunt, this time in the adjoining hamlet of Subaya.

The team, from the 160 Territorial Army battalion, began scouring forests near the village. The 160 TA, comprising infantry soldiers, looked after intelligence operations and was co-located with Col. Mahadik's 41 Rashtriya Rifles. The unit had been deployed just to make sure nothing was amiss. But as they entered the area on the night of 16 November, they walked right into a firetrap.

A soldier in the party, Rifleman Mohammad, received a gunshot straight in the leg, and the team was now pinned down by sustained fire from at least 2 quarters. The sun had set, and the clatter of Kalashnikov fire echoed through the forests that night.

Back in Kupwara, Col. Mahadik was getting ready to meet local officials as part of Operation Sadbhavna, the Army's ambitious mission to build bridges and, as the government officially states, 'win the hearts and minds' of the local population. At 2000 hours, he received word about the 'contact' that had been made in the general area of Subaya village.

Col. Mahadik summoned his men, which included a few J&K Police special operations group jawans, climbed into his vehicle and sped towards Subaya. He and his teams reached the area and formed a wide cordon to hem the suspects in. Col. Mahadik climbed to a vantage point and established a quick surveillance post that often proves crucial in such operations. He needed to ensure that the entire area could be seen. His weapon ready and the cordon in force, they carefully extracted injured Rifleman Mohammad from the forest and transported him to safety. Up in his perch, the Colonel spent an uncomfortable, cold night, his gaze scanning the swathe of dark, nebulous forest before him.

Early the next morning, on 17 November, Army reinforcements had been called in to join the hunt. Now an infantryman, Col. Mahadik had a special strength urging him on—he was a commando himself, originally from an elite Para-SF unit. In 2003, he had earned a Sena Medal for bravery in action against the United Liberation Front of Assam terrorists in the North-east. Twelve years later, he had volunteered to lead a counter-insurgency unit in the restive Kashmir valley. He knew what the Paras brought to any fight. They were most welcome.

As the search continued with renewed aggression, Col. Mahadik received a call on his cell phone. It was from a local source, one of many he had cultivated as friends during his time in the Valley. The voice at the other end of the line kept it brief: 1 suspect had come down a hill in the Kashmiri Manigah area nearby and requested food from villagers there. The Colonel had no reason to doubt the information he had just been supplied. And once again, with his men deployed in the active operation, he decided to act on the information himself.

He gathered half of his Quick Reaction Team (QRT) and the J&K Police jawans who had accompanied him, jumped into 2 squad vehicles and made straight for Manigah. When they arrived, it became clear that the suspect had headed back up the mountainside and into the jungles. Col. Mahadik reconnected with his source from the ground. There was more information. The suspect likely had at least 2 more men for company up in the jungles. The officer smelt the end of an operation that had stretched for a full 2 weeks now.

The 14 men were quickly split into 2 teams of 7 and sent in 2 different directions to begin their search. The terrain was familiar and taxing. A nala cascaded down the mountainside, with ridgelines ascending on both sides. An hour-long search revealed nothing. The teams patrolled along the nala on their way back to the village. Just outside the village, they stopped for a quick break to plan their next move. It was there that one of them spotted it.

A bottle of mineral water, its top half cut off to make a tumbler, sat precariously on a rock. Next to it was a battered cooking utensil with some freshly cooked food—rice and meat. Commanded by Col. Mahadik, the men immediately took cover positions. Two things were immediately and disturbingly clear. The suspects were definitely nearby. That was the good news. The bad: they had likely abandoned their precious food because they had spotted the Army team, and were therefore almost certainly in a position of advantage.

‘It was an extremely tense situation. We had no time to readjust. We needed to quickly make our next move, or we stood the risk of being

ambushed and massacred,' remembers a jawan who was in the team that morning.

Col. Mahadik wasted no time. He quickly sent one half of the team up the ridgeline to gain a vantage position, crucial to a situation where they didn't know where a burst of fire would come from. Col. Mahadik and his team of 7 moved laterally across the ridgeline. As they did so, one of the police jawans noticed a black pheran behind a tall bush right ahead. He held the Colonel back, pointing straight ahead and alerting him to 2 men hiding behind the foliage. The men were ordered to cock their weapons and pull the chain levers on their rifles to 'rapid' mode, which allowed for a burst of fire. Single shots weren't going to be of use in this fight.

As the team inched forward, one of the terrorists abruptly changed position. The other remained where he was. Stopping in his tracks, and motioning to the other men to stand back, Col. Mahadik raised his weapon and fired a few rounds directly at the bush. Four of his men were in cover fire positions, while 3 stood with him as he fired. But it was the other terrorist, who had shifted position moments earlier, who fired back. And this was from a position the Colonel and the 3 men next to him didn't have their eyes on. A hail of rifle rounds tore through him as he fell to the ground.

Nobody could see where the firing had come from. The 3 men with Mahadik were in the open and totally vulnerable. They dropped on to their bellies, waiting for a certain follow-up volley of bullets. Their CO knew that if he didn't act fast, his men would be butchered in the open. Despite his gunshot wounds, Col. Mahadik crawled forward towards the ridgeline.

Word about the CO having been shot hadn't yet reached the other teams because Col. Mahadik was the one with the radio set. Teams attempting to make contact with him thought he was silent so as not to alert the terrorists. With blood gushing from his many wounds, Col. Mahadik heaved himself across the ridgeline to the other side. Hauling himself up over a rock, he opened fire on the positions where he assumed the terrorists were hiding. The bullets he fired didn't find the terrorists, but effectively pinned them to their positions.

By firing continuously while still exposed and wounded, he basically ensured that the terrorists did not fire at the men behind him. He was running out of ammunition and began pacing his fire to keep the terrorists on the defensive for as long as possible so that his men could get to safety.

By this time, other Army teams had reached the location, but there was nobody to brief them on the situation because the CO was down. Desperate to make contact with the team up on the ridgeline, a Havildar in charge of the QRT team called one of the Police special operations group jawans on his mobile phone.

'*Saab ko goli lagi hai* (Sir has been shot),' he reported back. It was the first information from the fight.

The Havildar rushed to the ridgeline where Col. Mahadik lay. As the other men provided covering fire, he picked up the CO and carried him down the hill to a location 1.5 km from the roadhead. Evacuation by helicopter wasn't possible because the Manigah area was located in a narrow valley. Pale from blood loss, his body already turning cold, Col. Mahadik was driven to the nearest site of hope—the 168 Military Hospital in Drugmulla, just off the Sopore–Kupwara highway. Doctors at the hospital quickly declared that they couldn't revive the Colonel and suggested he be flown immediately to the Army's Base Hospital in Srinagar 85 km away.

'While Col. Mahadik was being airlifted to Srinagar, I received a call from his wife. She had already heard,' remembers Maj. Pravin, then Adjutant at 41 Rashtriya Rifles headquarters. 'Her question still haunts me. All she asked was '*Zinda rahenge ya nahi rahenge? Bas itna bata do* (Will he live or not? Just tell me that).'

Maj. Pravin did not know what to say. He knew that she knew the truth. But he still hoped that the doctors at 92 Base Hospital, often magicians in their abilities, could bring Col. Mahadik back.

'She called again a short while later. This time, she asked me a question that haunts me even more,' remembers Maj. Pravin. 'She asked how many rounds had hit her husband. I mustered my strength to inform her that he

had taken 7 bullets and that he was unlikely to survive. She said nothing further and hung up the phone.'

Col. Mahadik was declared brought dead at the 92 Base Hospital in Srinagar.

At the time this was written, Col. Mahadik's wife was at the Officers Training Academy in Chennai, gearing up to become an Army officer. Less than a year after her husband's passing, she decided she wanted to wear the olive-green uniform. It was a difficult decision that forced her to send her 2 young children away to boarding schools in Maharashtra and Uttarakhand. Like they never did when their father picked up his weapon and ventured out at night, Kartikee and Swaraj never once wondered why their mother, well past the age to be a cadet, has decided to be an Army officer.

'We didn't think this was the right way forward. But she is an incredibly courageous lady. She wishes to take her husband's unfinished work forward,' says Maj. Pravin, who continues to be deployed in the Kashmir valley.

The Colonel's unfinished work has nothing to do with the terrorists who managed to escape that day. They were perhaps only incidental to a larger mission he had assumed for himself in a beautiful and dangerous land. His business was war, but accounts of what Col. Mahadik was engaged with in Kupwara suggest he was looking to sow every last bit of goodness he possibly could in the terrain and the people around him.

From sessions on inspirational leadership for children in Kupwara to yoga camps and lessons in adventure tourism, Col. Mahadik took the task of winning the hearts and minds of people as seriously as he took his fighting. Described by his men and peers as a visionary, the Army has spent the months since his demise studying the work he did in Kupwara.

Warned by local leaders that yoga would not be accepted by the predominantly Muslim population, in 2014, the Colonel decided to send a group of 15 citizens to Pune to attend a camp conducted by the Siddha Samadhi Yoga programme. The group returned with a request that the organization set up a special camp in Kupwara. A group from Pune arrived

shortly thereafter to conduct special sessions for children and local traders in Kupwara, with a promise to institutionalize yoga in the town.

‘He had an outstanding rapport with Kupwara’s citizens. He met locals very often and sometimes kept an open house. He did for Kupwara tourism what local government officials haven’t even tried to,’ says an officer who was deployed with him at the 41 Rashtriya Rifles.

Maj. Pravin concurs. ‘Col. Mahadik never really believed that the military was a lasting solution in this area, and that we are only here temporarily—we must leave this beautiful land even better than we found it,’ he says.

During his time in Kupwara, there was a discernible change in the public perception of the Army, say men who served under the Colonel.

‘Separatists from the Hurriyat would often attack Col. Mahadik through the local media or through statements issued in public,’ recalls a jawan of the 41 Rashtriya Rifles. ‘They didn’t like how he was reaching out to the locals and having an impact on their lives. They warned him to simply do his work and get out. All that never bothered him.’

Col. Mahadik’s leadership by example would become legend well beyond his unit, and has already become a touchstone of what inspiring COs do.

‘Even as a CO, he would go and sit in ambushes for 2–3 days, which is unusual for someone of his seniority and rank. He enjoyed being in the field with his men,’ says Maj. Pravin. ‘He always said that every officer is a soldier, and every soldier is a leader. He truly believed that. He never differentiated between the two.’

Soldiers in his unit remember the unusual level of personal interest the Colonel took in the well-being of men under his charge. They speak of a particular jawan from Col. Mahadik’s state, Maharashtra, who was distressed following bitter marital discord. As divorce proceedings began, Col. Mahadik invited the jawan’s wife and children to Kupwara, acquiring special permission from the Army so they could stay on-site for a month. Over that month, Col. Mahadik counselled the couple. The two decided not

to separate and are still together. A few weeks later, the domestic problems of another jawan were similarly resolved.

‘It is very rare for officers to get so deeply involved in the personal lives of their soldiers. It earns them loyalty of a kind that cannot be put into words,’ Maj. Pravin says.

Five days after Col. Mahadik was lost, 1 of the terrorists was killed in an encounter with soldiers from the 160 TA at Haji Nakah. What became of the remaining 2 terrorists is as yet unknown.

An image remains imprinted in the mind of an Army officer who accompanied the family as Col. Mahadik’s remains were transported by air from Udhampur to Pune that November.

‘Swaraj sat on the coffin, playing. He was too young to know what had happened,’ the officer remembers. ‘He was oblivious. I just sat and watched him play.’

*

7

‘I Got Hit. I Can’t Believe It’

Major Mukund Varadarajan

Yachu Guchan, Jammu and Kashmir
June 2013

Single 7.62-mm shots rang out through the air. The Jaish-e-Mohammed terrorist commander was cornered. Two terrifying odds loomed before him as he crouched with his AK-47. One, he had a single ammunition magazine left. And two, the 12-man Indian Army team that had him cornered was led by Maj. Mukund Varadarajan.

It was a warm June evening in 2013 and Altaf Baba knew the end was near. One of the most fiercely hunted terrorists in Kashmir, he knew he did not have a choice but to fight until everything faded to black. The apple orchard in south Kashmir’s Yachu Guchan village he had chosen as his final hiding place was in bloom, but the fruit would not be ripe for picking until 2 months later.

Altaf Baba had not been following a cardinal rule he had learnt from his Pakistani handlers. According to that rule, terrorists should keep their weapons in full automatic mode during a firefight with Indian forces to maximize the possibility of inflicting damage. Now down to his last

magazine, Altaf Baba had no choice but to fire 1 bullet at a time to draw the encounter out for as long as possible. Hemmed in by a dozen of the Indian Army's most determined hunters, the terrorist seemed to know that this was his final fight, and that escape was impossible.

But he was not the only one counting his bullets. Several feet away, taking cover with his men from the 44 Rashtriya Rifles battalion, Maj. Varadarajan was counting them too. Each and every bullet fired from within the orchard was duly noted.

'He is running out of ammunition,' Maj. Varadarajan whispered to his buddy, Sepoy Vikram Singh, correctly guessing the reason why the terrorist was not firing a spray of bullets. 'I will take him down after he has fired 30 rounds.'

The arithmetic was crucial. A regular Kalashnikov magazine holds 30 7.62-mm rounds. And Maj. Varadarajan knew how many rounds from his last magazine the terrorist had already fired.

17 . . . 16 . . . 15 . . . 14 . . .

Half a magazine was left. Maj. Varadarajan knew it was more than enough ammunition in the hands of a cornered, determined, military-trained terrorist to kill at least 5 men before being stopped. He waited, his finger on his weapon's trigger, as the shots continued to ring out.

9 . . . 8 . . . 7 . . . 6 . . . 5 . . . 4 . . .

With deliberate pauses, Altaf Baba expended the last of his bullets.

As Maj. Varadarajan had predicted, the firing stopped. The young Major had spent the previous 25 minutes taking cover, and was fully ready for his next move. With Vikram providing cover fire, the 6-feet-3-inches-tall Maj. Varadarajan emerged from his position and charged directly at the terrorist's position inside the orchard. Sprinting the short distance in a few long strides, the officer arrived with his weapon blazing. Altaf Baba was thrown off the ground in a hail of point-blank fire, landing with a crunch in the leafy undergrowth, dead.

Standing over the remains of the Jaish commander, Maj. Varadarajan took off his bulletproof headgear and fished out a Motorola handset from a pouch in his combat fatigues. He had to report the operation's success to his

CO. Altaf Baba, a native of Pakharpora, oversaw all terror operations for the Pakistan-supported Jaish-e-Mohammed in south Kashmir. This was a big kill.

‘Sir, there’s good news. We got Altaf,’ Maj. Varadarajan said as he wiped the sweat off his forehead before placing his headgear back on. The terrorist had been killed, but officers and soldiers can rarely afford to let their guard down.

‘How can you be so sure it’s him, Maddy?’

The voice at the other end of the satellite line was Col. Amit Singh Dabas, the battle-hardened CO of 44 Rashtriya Rifles who was at his headquarters in Zawora Manlo, near the apple town of Shopian.

‘I am standing over his corpse, sir,’ Maj. Varadarajan replied. ‘I’m looking at his face.’

Col. Dabas, a decorated SF officer, quickly realized that Maj. Varadarajan was no ordinary soldier. The Major had been posted under his charge in the Kashmir valley barely 3 months prior to the incident. It was proving to be difficult for the Colonel not to like him. From the day they first met, Maj. Varadarajan was christened ‘Maddy’ by the CO.

‘I thought he looked like the spitting image of the film actor, Madhavan. Maj. Varadarajan was also from Chennai. So I started calling him Maddy and the name stuck,’ says Col. Dabas.

Maj. Varadarajan’s tactic of counting Altaf Baba’s final round of bullets soon became the talk of not just the 44 Rashtriya Rifles, but other battalions operating in south Kashmir as well, a hotbed for Pakistan-backed terrorists. He became known as the ‘44 RR Major’ who was so remarkably composed during a firefight that he could actually keep count of the bullets that were fired in his direction.

The legend would also be a source of amusement at the unit. Mathematics had never been Maj. Varadarajan’s forte and he would often share with fellow officers how he had a hard time not failing at mathematics in school. On one occasion, when the Altaf Baba encounter came up for discussion during a round of drinks at the unit mess, a fellow company

commander joked, ‘Thank God you didn’t goof up with your counting, Maddy. Look at your size! You think that bugger would have missed you?’

The jokes at Maj. Varadarajan’s expense were fine in the atmosphere of brotherhood and bonhomie at 44 Rashtriya Rifles. But not one of them had any delusions about just how crucial the killing of Altaf Baba was for the security forces. The terror commander had been steering an effort to establish linkages between the Jaish-e-Mohammed and the Hizbul Mujahideen to synchronize and amplify the terror machine’s effectiveness in south Kashmir. His killing would be a crucial step forward in the fight against established Jaish and Hizb networks in the area. Apart from the dead terrorist, mobile phones and coded matrix sheets found on his person left a trail for investigators. This eventually provided vital leads to help identify routes used by terror cadres and the civilian overground operatives supporting, protecting and facilitating them.

In the months that followed Altaf Baba’s killing, Maj. Varadarajan’s focus was on deciphering the codes he had found on the terrorist. And for that, he made repeated visits to the Army’s electronic warfare detachment in Srinagar.

‘He was in Srinagar every second day for several weeks to find out what progress the electronic warfare detachment had made,’ remembers Col. Dabas. ‘He knew that the codes masked solid details.’

Cracking the codes became an obsession. The young officer had become unusually convinced that the information that lay encrypted in the codes would lead to bigger terrorist targets and plans. The belief consumed Maj. Varadarajan for weeks—officers at his unit recall how there was little else he would speak about.

Three months after the encounter, Army specialists finally cracked the codes, allowing Maj. Varadarajan to piece together several vital details crucial to counterterror operations in and around Shopian. Maj. Varadarajan’s suspicion had been proven true—the codes provided extremely specific information. Chief among the secrets they held was a specific reference to a group of houses on a hilltop in Qazipathri village overlooking Shopian town. These houses sheltered terrorists on their transit

from the Yarwan forests to Shopian and beyond. As soon as Maj. Varadarajan received the classified report, he went to his CO with a satellite map identifying the houses.

‘Sir, these houses have to be kept under surveillance at all times. We will get something big there one day,’ Maj. Varadarajan told Col. Dabas. ‘But we have to be seen to be totally inactive in that area.’

Seven months later, in the summer of 2014, as India’s longest-ever general election reached its peak, Maj. Varadarajan’s prophecy would come true.

At 1430 hours on 25 April 2014, Maj. Varadarajan had just sat down to lunch at the 44 Rashtriya Rifles’ Charlie company headquarters at Shajimarg in Baramulla when he received a tip-off from one of his ground sources. It was the kind of input that meant lunch would have to wait. Jaish-e-Mohammed commander Altaf Wani was in Qazipathri village. And he was in one of the houses Maj. Varadarajan had identified from the codes. There was not a moment to lose. Ordering his QRT to arm up for the operation, Maj. Varadarajan dialled his CO.

‘Sir, I have A-1 intelligence. Wani is there. I am rushing to the village with my QRT.’

Altaf Wani had replaced Altaf Baba as the Jaish’s Divisional Commander and was trying desperately to take his predecessor’s work to the next level —in uniting the suicide squads of the Jaish and the commando-style units of the Lashkar-e-Taiba. Wani had popped up on the Army’s radar not long after Altaf Baba was killed.

Qazipathri, Jammu and Kashmir
25 April 2014

In their squad vehicles, Maj. Varadarajan and his men arrived at the village in less than 30 minutes. By 1500 hours, the QRT had split into 6 buddy pairs and set up a cordon around the two-storey brick house about which the men had received detailed targeting information. Maj. Varadarajan then

proceeded to do what he always did before operations in civilian areas—he ordered his men to move residents out of the area for their own safety.

The house Maj. Varadarajan and his men had their eyes on that afternoon was the biggest in the village. Its spacious compound included a sprawling orchard and 2 outhouses. Maj. Varadarajan scanned the setting quickly. Heavy-calibre weapons could not be used as the men were not clear how many civilians were still inside the house. Army snipers arrived a few minutes later and took positions on rooftops of neighbouring houses. But the sharpshooters had no clear view of their target. They would remain in position, but had no idea what they were aiming at.

As Maj. Varadarajan began a final briefing with his men, he received a shattering additional piece of information from a resident of Qazipathri. Terrorists hiding in villages routinely endanger the lives of citizens, most of whom are too afraid to speak. Others are desperate not to become pawns in the violence and at times break their silence. Maj. Varadarajan immediately radioed his CO.

‘Sir, it’s not just Altaf. There are 2 Lashkar terrorists with him. We are about to make contact.’

Barely had Maj. Varadarajan signed off when Col. Dabas heard gunshots. The battalion headquarters was not far from Qazipathri village. The sound of gunfire is usually the last thing that alarms a soldier. And in this case, Col. Dabas knew that one of his finest officers was on the job. Even so, he immediately ordered more soldiers from the unit to rush to the location and strengthen Maj. Varadarajan’s cordon.

The gunshots that Col. Dabas heard were the starting point of what would become a fierce firefight. From well-entrenched positions within the house, the terrorists fired at Maj. Varadarajan and his men, who returned tentative fire as they squinted at the house, trying to figure out where the terrorists were hidden. The gun battle raged on for an hour but the terrorists’ positions could not be pinpointed.

Maj. Varadarajan checked his watch. It was well past 1700 hours. He knew that something had to be done before daylight faded. Darkness would give the terrorists tremendous advantage. They were probably already

planning to draw out the encounter until the sun set so they could slip away from the cordon under the cover of night.

Maj. Varadarajan winced. He knew that was not an option. Allowing Altaf Wani to slip away after having him surrounded would mean the security forces could effectively forget about getting anywhere close to such an opportunity soon. It would be a psychological blow to the men, and a huge morale boost for the terror cadres. If Altaf Wani managed to escape this encounter, his image would be inestimably inflated across propaganda material as a ‘miracle man’ who had outfoxed the Army’s most hardened soldiers.

There were other reasons why that evening’s hunt was so important. The terrorists hiding in that house in Qazipathri had killed a polling officer and injured 5 others a day earlier in voting at the Anantnag Lok Sabha constituency. The polling staff was on its way to Shopian when the terrorists opened fire on their bus. Eliminating the men responsible for the murderous attack on the already vulnerable democratic process in the Valley went far beyond just kills by a Rashtriya Rifles squad.

The day rapidly ended, and with no real forward movement in the fight, Maj. Varadarajan came up with a plan, whispering it quickly to Vikram, who nodded back that he was ready to go.

As the other men provided covering fire, Maj. Varadarajan and Vikram dropped to their bellies and crawled through the orchard. As bullets flew in 2 directions over their heads, the 2 reached the front entrance of the house. Maj. Varadarajan quickly planted an improvised explosive device, armed it and then motioned to Vikram to retreat with him to a safe distance.

At 1730 hours, in a deafening blast, the front portion of the house came crashing down in a cloud of debris. Not waiting, literally, for the dust to settle, Maj. Varadarajan and Vikram switched their weapons to burst mode and stormed the house, straining through the murk for their targets. Instantly, they were greeted by a hail of bullets fired by a terrorist who had been half buried in the debris. One of the bullets grazed Maj. Varadarajan’s forearm. A microsecond more and the 2 soldiers would have been shredded,

but they both reacted fast, turning their own AK-47 rifles on the terrorist, pumping an unwavering stream of bullets at him.

Maj. Varadarajan took a step closer to the body in front of them. Bullet smoke rose from the dead terrorist. He bent down to get a clear look. Maj. Varadarajan knew what Altaf Wani looked like. And this definitely was not him. Two more terrorists were still in the house. They had mounds of rubble now providing them with cover. And 1 of them had to be Altaf Wani.

Before Maj. Varadarajan and Vikram could decide on their next course of action, grenades came flying through the air from a dark corner of the shattered ground floor of the house. Well-trained in room-clearing techniques, Maj. Varadarajan and Vikram dived to the ground, their hands protecting their ears. The grenades exploded feet from the 2 soldiers, shrapnel smashing off the debris, missing them by inches.

The terrorists followed the grenades they had thrown with fire from their assault rifles. Using this as cover, one of the terrorists bolted out of the house and towards an outhouse in a far corner of the compound. As he exited, the terrorist had briefly looked Maj. Varadarajan's way. And Maj. Varadarajan saw his face. It was Altaf Wani.

Maj. Varadarajan had gained a formidable reputation for dominating firefights, aggressively ending them with sheer power.

'His aggression was cold and calculated. There was nothing brash about it. It was Maddy's belief that the man who takes initiative and packs aggression in a firefight is the one who triumphs,' recalls Col. Dabas.

It hardly surprised Col. Dabas, therefore, when one of the officers at the encounter site radioed him with the update that Maj. Varadarajan and Vikram were now approaching the outhouse to take a cornered Altaf Wani down. The QRT continued to fire bullets at the house where they believed the third terrorist was still hiding. But there was no return fire.

Maj. Varadarajan lobbed a grenade into the outhouse. The blast should have debilitated, if not killed Altaf Wani. But as the 2 men stormed the outhouse, a volley of fire came smashing into Vikram. It became clear what had just happened—the grenade had killed 1 terrorist, but there was another with him. Altaf Wani wasn't alone when he fled from the debris of the

residence and into the cement outhouse—the second terrorist had fled with him. It was this second terrorist who had been killed by the grenade. Wani had survived.

The sepoy returned several rounds of fire at the terrorist, but Wani was shielded by a row of logs stacked in the outhouse and was able to fire his weapon from the confined space he was in.

Maj. Varadarajan saw his buddy collapse to the ground. Vikram had taken 2 bullets: 1 had sliced his neck open, while the other had penetrated his jaw. A gunshot through the neck usually spells certain death. Maj. Varadarajan knew he was about to lose one of the most courageous and dependable soldiers in his team. He knew that not only was his buddy through with this fight, his life too was about to end. As in all encounters, there was not a moment for emotion or mourning. Without pausing for a moment, Maj. Varadarajan lunged forward with his AK-47 and sprayed bullets at Altaf Wani, killing him instantly.

In those final seconds, some of Altaf Wani's shots hit Maj. Varadarajan.

'He walked out of the outhouse. He looked okay. We thought he was fine,' recalls an officer in the cordon outside the house. 'But then he suddenly collapsed.'

The soldiers were not sure if Altaf Wani was dead. And they didn't know what had happened to Vikram. Maj. Varadarajan was breathing heavily when he was pulled from the site, but nothing about his demeanour betrayed that he had 3 gunshot wounds and was losing copious amounts of blood from all 3.

'Yaar, we got him. But sheer bad luck, we lost Vikram,' Maj. Varadarajan said to an officer who was removing him from the site, barely a grimace on his face. 'And I got hit too. I can't believe it.' Then Maj. Varadarajan lost consciousness.

An ambulance had arrived to dash Maj. Varadarajan to the Army's 92 Base Hospital in Srinagar—the only place equipped to handle the injuries he had suffered in the firefight. Col. Dabas had alerted the Pulwama civil hospital en route about the officer's critical injuries and asked them to make arrangements to stabilize and possibly revive him before sending him

onward to Srinagar. But Maj. Varadarajan would not make it beyond a few kilometres from Qazipathri village. He died in the arms of his unit's 2IC and the regimental medical officer.

Maj. Varadarajan had celebrated his 31st birthday on 12 April 2014, a fortnight before the Qazipathri operation. It is a day his CO will never forget. The Colonel was on his way to Srinagar airport to drop off an officer, Maj. Aashish Dhankar, who had completed his tenure at the unit. He decided to pick Maj. Varadarajan up from his company operating base and treat him to an extra special lunch at a luxury hotel.

As the officers drove towards Srinagar, one thing needed to be resolved: should they head to the Taj or the Lalit? Col. Dabas remembers telling Maj. Varadarajan that while the Taj offered a stunningly beautiful view, the other hotel was reputed to serve better food.

'*Sir, pehle Taj chalte hain, phir Lalit* (Sir, let's check out the Taj first, then the Lalit),' was Maj. Varadarajan's instant reply.

The Colonel couldn't say no. The officers went to the Taj first where they had chocolate brownies and steaming cups of cappuccino, before driving to the Lalit where they cracked open a few bottles of beer and finished the afternoon with a sumptuous meal.

That afternoon was a rarity in the cloistered life that soldiers who participate in operations lead. Maj. Varadarajan wanted the unit's adjutant, Maj. Ankur Datta, to feel miserable about missing out on the jaunt. So he suggested to his CO that they take some pictures and share them with others in 44 RR.

'When he saw the snaps he decided against it. He thought he looked too bulky. Of course I shared them!' Col. Dabas later wrote in a letter to Maj. Varadarajan's young wife, Indhu Rebecca, 3 days after his death. In the same letter, he wrote:

> Now, he [Maddy] is the pillar on which the unit history will rest. The paltan and the Army are indebted to him. As his commanding officer, I am grateful to him for the moments of trust and laughter we shared. Whenever he is mentioned, I will walk tall and say, 'I knew him. He was my finest officer.'

Men from the unit remember how no matter how long or hard Maj. Varadarajan's day had been, he was always up for making others feel special on their birthdays or anniversaries. It was the CO's birthday on 24 March when Maj. Varadarajan arrived at his house at midnight along with his QRT and the neighbouring company commander. 'He would do that for everyone. That was Maddy. Personal relationships meant a lot to him,' remembers Col. Dabas.

Officers of the 44 Rashtriya Rifles say it was Maj. Varadarajan's strength and sheer bulk that kept him alive for over an hour even after taking so many bullets.

'The way he was bleeding, I knew he would not come out of this. But it didn't stop us from praying for a miracle,' says an officer who was part of the Qazipathri operation.

Another buddy pair pulled out Altaf Wani's body from the outhouse after Maj. Varadarajan was dispatched from the site. He had gunshot wounds in his head, neck, abdomen and limbs. Maj. Varadarajan had made sure that there was nothing left of him.

Maj. Varadarajan's last words would haunt his CO. Col. Dabas would spend days wondering why the young officer had said, 'I can't believe this has happened to me.'

'The only thing I can conclude is that Maddy was so sure of his battle craft and fighting skills that he couldn't believe they had got him,' says Col. Dabas who went on to become an instructor at the Defence Services Staff College in Wellington, Tamil Nadu.

The day after the operation, Col. Dabas called the 44 Rashtriya Rifles' Subedar Major, the most senior enlisted soldier in the unit, and told him he would like to meet Maj. Varadarajan's Charlie company. Their morale would have been crushed from the loss of 2 of their bravest. At dinner, Col. Dabas broke bread with Maj. Varadarajan's QRT. Few words were spoken. Grief overwhelmed pride that night.

'In Maddy, I saw a special operative. I could relate to him,' says Col. Dabas. 'He had the patience to cultivate sources and the aggression to influence the outcome of a firefight. His Charlie Company was very much

like an SF unit,' says Col. Dabas. And Col. Dabas would know. He was commissioned in the Para-SF and later moved to another Para-SF unit. Col. Dabas would beam with pride as Maj. Varadarajan's QRT would always bag top position during division-level competitions involving 6 teams each from the 9 battalions that were part of Victor Force, which oversees operations in the Anantnag and Pulwama areas of J&K.

Maj. Mukund Varadarajan was posthumously awarded the country's highest peacetime gallantry award, the Ashok Chakra, on the eve of Independence Day 2014. Indhu arrived in Delhi to receive the award from the President of India on Republic Day the following year.

'India should see the man Mukund was, not my sorrow,' Indhu said that evening in a television interview on NDTV.

Indhu has since moved with her daughter to Australia to pursue her 'new-found passion' for teaching.

'I often try my best to explain to my 6-year-old how wonderful he was, and we recently came to an agreement after watching *Baahubali* that Appa is our Baahubali because he was the strongest and he did the best he could to do his duty. It is true, he was perfect for me, but perfect or not, he did his best, always,' says Indhu.

Maj. Varadarajan's citation said he personally led the demolition team and used the resources available to him in a critically short time period to bring down the target house. The citation made a special mention of his 'aggressive action' and the avenging of the attack on election officials 'within 24 hours' that had 'restored the faith of public in democracy'.

'*Maj. Mukund Varadarajan exhibited most conspicuous bravery and exemplary leadership and made the supreme sacrifice while fighting with the terrorists*,' the citation added. His buddy, Sepoy Vikram Singh, was awarded a posthumous Shaurya Chakra, the country's third highest peacetime gallantry award.

Mukund would often ask Indhu to promise him that she would never cry if something happened to him in the line of duty. Indhu took that promise very seriously. As Maj. Varadarajan's mortal remains were brought to Chennai, television viewers across the country saw Indhu's calm, stoic

figure next to her husband's casket, their 3-year-old daughter, Arshea, by her side.

'There is this moment that I will never forget. Mukund told me that his parents and I were his gods. I could understand him extolling his parents, but I was scared when he put me up on that pedestal. I tried to explain to him that I am just human,' Indhu recalls.

'He saw it differently. He called our daughter his god too on the day she was born. He really did love and respect us as much as God. How can you not be blown away by that kind of love?'

'She (Indhu) would often say she would pull through because she had made a promise to him. We draw strength every day from Indhu's composure and demeanour,' says Col. Dabas.

The Ashok Chakra that Maj. Varadarajan was awarded posthumously was not the first decoration for gallantry that came his way. His CO had originally planned to recommend Maj. Varadarajan for an award in June 2013 for the Altaf Baba operation. But Maj. Varadarajan would not hear of it. Such recommendations are always confidential, but the young officer had learnt about the honour in store for him. He marched to the CO's office and insisted that if someone had to be recommended for an award, it needed to be 2 young soldiers from his company who had played the role of scouts during that operation.

'*Sir, bahut badhiya kaam kiya un donon ne. Woh award ke haqdaar hain* (Both of them did a tremendous job and deserve the award),' Maj. Varadarajan pleaded. He got what he wanted. The 2 men were awarded the Sena Medal for gallantry shortly thereafter.

The 5-page letter Col. Dabas wrote to Indhu was drenched in the emotions of a CO who respected and admired a soldier 8 years his junior.

'Each one of us who knew him will find our own way to overcome the loss. Grief will fade away and when it's gone, only one thing will remain—pride,' he wrote.

'To be honest every day is a struggle for his parents and for me,' says Indhu. 'It should not come as a wonder that some days are tougher than others. For his parents, he was the son who loved them to bits; he had pet

names for all of us and we yearn to hear him calling us by those names. We yearn for a sighting of his dimpled smile that could warm our now frozen hearts. It has not been easy and it is not going to get any easier. The trick is to conceal the struggle and will yourself through a day as happily as you can because that is what he would want. The toll it has taken is no joke and can be seen in my daughter too. She often hides Mukund's pictures because she is worried that either I or his parents will feel sad. It proves that she has definitely taken after him in terms of concern and love and that is the silver lining in an otherwise cloudy situation.'

Mukund's favourite quip over drinks would always be that he had already won the toughest battle of his life—convincing his traditional parents to accept his love for and intention to marry a woman from outside his community. In August 2009, aged 26 and barely 3 years into the Army, Mukund and Indhu were married.

'It wasn't easy getting married,' recalls Indhu. 'There are words that were thrown at both sets of parents by some relatives and the community that were difficult to stomach, but we were selfish in our love and had parents who stood by us irrespective of their misgivings. My parents took a little longer because they were giving away their precious daughter, but what held me through it all is the faith that we had in each other and his acceptance and understanding that I couldn't do without my parents. I knew he would wait and I knew his ideals were the same as mine. It took us 5 years to convince my parents and then tie the knot. To have lost all that in a few moments is never going to be easy to come to terms with. There are days when it gets really difficult to accept that the man who said that he will stand beside me and show the world how our relationship will survive whatever life throws at us is no longer with me.'

Three years after they got married, in December 2012, Maj. Varadarajan would arrive in the Kashmir valley to become part of the 44 Rashtriya Rifles.

Folklore surrounding Maj. Varadarajan's memory remains.

If unit officers had something tricky to discuss with their CO, they would get Maj. Varadarajan to articulate it to the boss. 'He would give it an

operational twist and leave me with little choice but to agree to whatever was put forth to me,' recalls Col. Dabas.

Apart from being an outstanding operations man, Maj. Varadarajan is remembered for his ruthless wit. Everyone in the unit knew that if Maj. Varadarajan was looking particularly happy, somebody was certainly having a miserable day.

The young officer missed his parents, Varadarajan and Geetha, tremendously. He knew he could not speak to them every day, but when he did, he would devote an hour if he could to his mother.

Maj. Varadarajan had dreamed of shifting his parents to a brand-new apartment in Chennai. The purchase had been finalized a month before his death. After he was gone, and as the family grieved, it would be the first thing that Indhu ensured.

Indhu will never forget her last conversation with Mukund that April morning when he departed on his final operation.

'We had just had a silly fight a few days ago and the fight was, as always, about how I needed more time with him. We got over it the same day as both of us would rarely leave a fight unresolved. On the morning of 25 April, we had a short and ordinary conversation. He asked for Arshea and spoke to her over the speaker and we told him that we missed him. He told me to take Arshea out and enjoy the day, do some shopping and cheer up, and that he loved us too. He hadn't been getting much rest, often coming back early in the morning after patrolling and calling me to wish me a good day before getting a few hours of sleep before he had to be up and about again. We said our goodbyes a little earlier than usual that day because I knew he was busy and needed some rest. Ironic, isn't it?'

Col. Dabas's WhatsApp profile picture is not his own. And his status message reflects the image: 'Mukund and Vikram. Salute.' He hasn't found the heart to change those settings for more than 3 years. And they remain a constant reminder of 2 of the finest soldiers the SF Colonel had known—2 soldiers he thinks of every day, 2 young men he will remember all his life.

'I think of them every single day. They were lost on my watch,' says Col. Dabas. On the Colonel's study wall are framed pictures of Maj. Mukund

Varadarajan and Sepoy Vikram Singh.

Indhu remains in touch with her husband's battalion.

'The army never leaves anyone behind and we are a family more than just a group of people tied together by a common profession. They have been with me with words of comfort and all forms of support. I am confident that they will stand by me as I will stand by them in the future as well,' she says.

'Death on the battlefield is the ultimate privilege for a soldier. We don't go there to die. But if it happens, we have to turn it around into a celebration,' says Col. Dabas.

'Only soldiers who have bled together in combat will understand that.'

*

8

‘Medical Science Cannot Explain This’

Lance Naik Hanamanthappa Koppad

9 February 2016, 1226 hours

Of the 10 soldiers presumed dead in #Siachen, one has survived. Lance Naik Hanamanthappa is critical. Pray for him. What a miracle!

The late-night flash on social media by newspaper correspondent Rahul Singh galvanized a country that had spent a week in mourning. TV news channels broke out of their regular recorded late-night programming. Across the Internet, a ripple of disbelief churned into a tide.

Was this even humanly possible?

Prime Minister Narendra Modi was nowhere close to turning in for the night. Two hours earlier, at his Race Course Road residence, he had received a call from the then Army Chief, Gen. Dalbir Singh. The conversation lasted barely a few minutes. And when it ended, it was not necessary for the Prime Minister to say it. He knew that the Army, already grieving over the loss of its men, would do everything in its power to save the superhuman they had pulled out alive after 6 days of being buried under

more than 25 feet of snow—6 days at temperatures of –40 °C under a terrifying block of blue, unforgiving ice.

From the moment it happened, the Prime Minister had demanded a daily briefing of the rescue operation 20,500 feet high on the northern glacier near Siachen.

Siachen Glacier, Jammu and Kashmir
2 February 2016

The 10 Army men, including 8 from the 19th battalion of the Madras Regiment, had hiked up to Sonam Post just 2 months before. Sonam, one of the highest permanently manned military posts in the world, sits way up on the Saltoro Ridge that overlooks the Siachen Glacier to the east and Pakistan-occupied territories to the west. Named for Havildar Sonam, an intrepid Ladakhi soldier who braved unspeakable weather and Pakistani fire to occupy the point in 1984, the Sonam Post offers soldiers a magnificent position of advantage, but is also fully exposed to what is literally the worst weather on earth. Not to speak of insidious crevasses and devastating avalanches similar to the one that came crashing down on the 10 Army men early on 3 February.

While some of the men were on observation and guard duty, the others were in their tents. And none of them even saw it coming. An enormous block of ice shattered the ridgeline above them and came rumbling down the mountainside, completely burying the post.

The men at Sonam Post had arrived in the Siachen area in October 2015. Including nursing assistant Sepoy Sunil Suryawanshi of the Army Medical Corps, the team comprised team leader and head of the post, Subedar Nagesha T.T., Havildar Elumalai, Lance Havildar S. Kumar, L. Nk Sudheesh B., Sepoy Mahesha P.N., Sepoy Ganesan G., Sepoy Rama Moorthy N., Sepoy Mustaq Ahmed S. and L. Nk Hanamanthappa Koppad. The men had been hand-picked in December to take position at Sonam. The choice was not random. Col. Um Bahadur Gurung, CO of 19 Madras, had chosen them for what everyone on the glacier knew was the most

demanding deployment possible. Soldiers deployed for high-altitude warfare are frequently the most resilient men. The 10 chosen to pitch their tents at 20,500 feet for a few months represented the cream of the crop.

Politics and tragedy have occasionally thrust Siachen into the national discourse. But away from the diplomatic aggression over the northern glacier areas, it remains the Army's enduring regret that few truly understand what it means to even operate in such terrain, far less engage in combat. It is not without reason that Siachen has earned the epithet 'frozen hell'.

Soldiers deployed to high-altitude posts do not only have to be rigorously trained in the art of warfare in the most devious, unforgiving terrain imaginable, but they also need to be highly skilled in survival and sustenance. In addition, every man has to be psychologically conditioned so he does not run the risk of losing his mind at those altitudes. The training regimen and deployment schedules for India's glacier units have been tailored over time to account for the worrying effects that spending long periods at those heights can have on men.

'They were all incredibly brave men,' says Col. Dinesh Singh Tanwer, who, as 2IC of 19 Madras when the avalanche struck, operated from the operations room established at Siachen base camp established under the base commander Col. Hari Haran, about 90 minutes away from Sonam Post by helicopter.

'These guys were the best of the lot. Motivated and fit. When you go to the glacier, the fear of the unknown overpowers all other fears. We know where the enemy is, but we don't know where avalanches will come from, or where the crevasses are. We can't take anything for granted,' he says.

The monstrous visitor at Sonam Post on the morning of 3 February was a slab avalanche, the most sinister kind. Formed by an enormous 800x1000-metre block of snow fracturing away from the mountain, it had buried the post up to 25–30 feet deep in mere seconds. Where the tents once stood, now there was nothing but scattered debris of blue ice boulders harder than rock. The wind dropped suddenly, as it ironically always does after an avalanche, filling the thin air above Sonam Post with a cold silence.

That was all Maj. Vipin Kumar, the Company Commander posted a short distance below Sonam Post, heard on his radio set. The Major, who would get a radio report from the men at Sonam Post each morning at 0400 hours, had heard nothing that morning. He was not immediately worried. The sub-zero temperatures frequently paralysed equipment, and radio sets sometimes needed to be warmed up artificially before they would work again. Over an hour later, there was still no word.

Then, at 0515 hours, a feeble voice cracked through the radio.

'*Saab, hum dab gaye hain* (Sir, we have been buried).' It was Havildar Elumalai.

Originally from Adukumparai village in faraway Tamil Nadu, Elumalai was now buried under a wall of snow 20 feet deep. He had miraculously been able to reach for his radio set and transmit the news.

Maj. Vipin knew instantly what had happened.

Exactly a month before, on 3 January, 4 Army men had perished in a similar avalanche on the Siachen Glacier. Havildar Dorjey Gason, Havildar Tsewang Norboo, Rifleman Jigmat Chosdup and Rifleman Mohammed Yusuf had died instantly. The voice from Sonam Post, however, suggested there was hope.

The Major did not waste another moment. He immediately formed a rescue party before alerting his CO, Col. Gurung, who was at the Kumar Post at an altitude of over 15,000 feet. He in turn relayed the message up the chain of command via the Siachen Glacier's Independent Infantry Brigade, on to the 14 Corps in Leh, the Army's Northern Command Headquarters at Udhampur and finally to the Army Headquarters in Delhi.

An early riser, Army Chief Gen. Dalbir Singh was about to go for a morning run when he received word about the avalanche. Cancelling his exercise routine, he immediately began to get ready to dash to his headquarters at South Block. Ten Army men at this lofty military post had been deluged in a terrifying flood of ice. The government leadership needed to be notified immediately. It was the first thing he needed to do.

As Maj. Vipin and his men gathered troops from other posts and headed straight for Sonam, lower down at Siachen Base Camp, a makeshift

coordination centre was set up under the unit's 2IC, Col. Dinesh. Soldiers at the base camp had been preparing for their own induction into high-altitude posts. Everything would now have to focus on the tragedy at Sonam Post.

Two hours later, Maj. Vipin and his team arrived at the site. It would take them whole moments to digest the scene.

The enormous debris field from the avalanche had gorged on every visible aspect of the post. There was nothing left to see. It was a scene of devastation the men would never forget.

Helicopters soon brought in more personnel, this time doctors and ace Army mountaineers. They arrived bearing metal detectors, excavation equipment and specially trained avalanche rescue dogs. By noon on 3 February, a team of nearly 50 personnel were at the site of the tragedy.

This in itself was an enormous logistical challenge. Sonam Post, which was suitable for no more than 10 men, was now not only completely destroyed and buried, but had 50 men who could not leave any time soon. In coordination with Col. Dinesh's team at Siachen Base Camp, the rescue teams needed to organize tents, water, medicine and rations for themselves. There could be no oversights at this juncture.

'We had to plan very carefully. These men were about to engage in hard labour at 20,500 feet. If we made errors, we could easily suffer further casualties,' says Col. Dinesh.

Accompanied by dogs and machinery and with prayers on their lips, the men began digging through the vast icy sheet of debris at Sonam Post in temperatures that forced them to take frequent breaks just to be able to flex their fingers and limbs. If frostbite or altitude sickness set in, it would not just damage the rescue effort, but would also place an exponentially bigger burden on the base camp to rescue the rescuers themselves.

By 1455 hours on 3 February, the media got wind of the disaster that had struck Sonam Post. Having just reported the deaths of 4 Army men a month before, the newsflashes sounded grim.

At 20,500 feet, the rescue effort continued till sundown. The night brought fresh snowfall and winds of unspeakable ferocity, forcing the large rescue team to hunker down into their tents. There was no question of

searching through the night. The men spent an uncomfortable night, their tents buffeted by a howling draft, fully aware that every hour they spent unable to search was an hour closer to the end for the 10 soldiers buried under several feet of ice. If the end hadn't already arrived for them, that is.

At first light on 4 February, the men set to work again. Shortly after 1100 hours, the Army Headquarters in Delhi put out the first of several updates on a rescue effort that would, in a matter of days, mesmerize the entire country.

The men saw and heard nothing as they continued to dig and scour through the icy debris on 4 February. Trained not to yield to despair even in the most hopeless conditions, the rescue teams could not help but be sceptical about the men surviving a full day under all that ice. Was this really a race against time any more, or simply an exercise to find 10 corpses? It did not matter. The Indian Army never leaves its men behind.

Then, when they were least expecting it, a radio set with one of the rescuers crackled, a broken voice emerging from it.

It was Sepoy Rama Moorthy N.

Like Havildar Elumalai the previous day, the sepoy from Gudisatana Palli village in Tamil Nadu had managed to find his radio and make a call. The rescue team had not been able to raise a sound out of Elumalai since they arrived on the scene, making them fear the worst, but not slowing them down. The call from Rama Moorthy exploded through the rescue team at Sonam Post, dusting every bit of despair from their shoulders.

The men doubled up, focusing every resource on trying to pin down Rama Moorthy's location under the ice.

'He stayed in contact with us for 2 hours, but he was unable to tell us exactly where he was,' recalls Col. Dinesh, a steady sadness in his voice. 'He tried very hard, but he couldn't direct us. He could have been upside down for all we knew. Both he and the teams knew his radio set would be out of batteries soon.'

Shortly before 2100 hours that night, Sepoy Rama Moorthy went silent.

A team from the Siachen Battle School had arrived that day too, carrying special sensor systems that were capable of seeing through walls of ice. The

new team had also brought tree cutters to slice through the ice with greater efficiency as they raced against time. By the time Rama Moorthy's radio transmissions died out from under the snow, the rescue team had swelled to 110 strong. A team of 50 civilian porters had also been employed to help transport equipment to the site.

The voice from below had acted as a booster dose of hope to the rescue team. But the silence that followed threatened to drag them down again. Search operations continued till late that night and for the following 2 days. For over 48 hours, the men saw nothing and heard nothing. Every pair of ears over the debris field strained to pick up any sounds. Some men put their ears directly to the ice, hoping to hear something, *anything* from below.

By the evening of 7 February, 5 days after the avalanche, the team had dug 3 40-feet-deep holes straight through the avalanche remnant.

'We were fighting to pinpoint any location that could give us a clue about the men below,' recalls Col. Dinesh. 'Then at 1800 hours on 7 February, we saw something.'

A team suspended on one of the shafts had spotted a cable sticking out from the side of the hole. It was a communication cable. In 5 days of digging, it was the first physical object the team had found below the devastation.

'It was obvious we had to follow the cable,' says a mountaineer member of the rescue team at Sonam Post. 'Digging further vertically was very difficult. The shaft was unstable too. We lowered barrel-halves above us so the shaft wouldn't cave in with us inside.'

With the blue ice threatening to crumble and bury them inside the shafts any moment, the men began carefully excavating a horizontal tunnel to follow the cable they had found. Night arrived quickly, bringing with it the most vicious winds the men had encountered that week at the site. Rappelling up the shaft, they rushed to their tents, with no choice but to suspend the search for another night. The team knew it had found something that could lead to the buried soldiers. Few slept that night.

At first light on 8 February, shaft work resumed. They were chilled to the bone, but members from the team remember an unusually calm morning bringing with it a palpable sense of hope in the shadow of the fractured ridgeline. They trudged to the shafts, lowering themselves once again to continue tunnelling, carefully following the communication cable through the icy darkness. Special halogen lamps on their helmets cast a grim glow on the featureless, solid ice they were cutting through. It was not until noon on 8 February that the team had its first big breakthrough.

Through the dark portal, created by ceaselessly drilling horizontally through the ice slab, they spotted a piece of tent. They did not hear a sound, but they knew they had to be very close to the men they were looking for.

The excavation continued for another 5 hours until they had gained access right into the snow-filled tent. As the shaft groaned once again with the shifting of ice, they spotted the first body. After 6 days in the snow, this was the first of the 10 men they had seen. Carefully, the body was removed from the tent. It was cold, stiff, unmoving. Another 3 hours passed before the rescuers reached the next body deep within the tent. But as they took hold of the body to move it through the shaft, the rescuers realized something that stopped them in their tracks.

The soldier was breathing.

Calling for an emergency evacuation, the body was quickly prepared and eased out through the horizontal tunnel, and then carefully up the long shaft to the surface, strapped to one of the mountaineers.

The man was L. Nk Hanamanthappa Koppad. Far from his home town in Karnataka’s Dharwad district, the soldier had been pulled out alive—and conscious—after 144 hours under nearly 25 feet of murderous ice. The disbelief among his rescuers had to wait—they needed to get him to safety as quickly and delicately as possible.

‘We immediately rushed him to the medical tent that had been set up with 3 doctors. He was provided humidified oxygen, warm intravenous fluids and passive warming from the outside. We could not risk anything else at that point, as he was clearly in shock,’ says one of the rescuers.

L. Nk Koppad was as medically critical as it was possible to be, but his body had sustained itself for 6 days under the avalanche debris. Not a soul slept that night at Sonam Post. Inside the medical tent, the Army doctors took turns to watch over L. Nk Koppad to help him survive the night. Now in an open space, they feared his body would sink into further shock. If he did, it would be impossible to revive him.

By midnight on 8 February in Delhi, the news of L. Nk Koppad's survival had broken on social media, rapidly becoming an overnight sensation. It would be the biggest story the following day. Across newsrooms, journalists were designated to track the rescue operation and feed the news machine as rapidly as possible. On the Internet, L. Nk Koppad was instantly hailed as a miracle man and a hero. A soldier from the hot, tropical South, selflessly deployed at death-defying altitudes and temperatures in India's extreme north, had survived while standing guard in the service of his country's sovereignty.

In equal measure, L. Nk Koppad had stunned, shamed and captured the nation's imagination. Shamed because his survival had come as a shattering, unexpected reminder of how little public or political attention was ever paid to soldiers who stood sentinel at the country's most dangerous forward areas.

Late that night in Betadur village, the Lance Naik's home town, L. Nk Koppad's family would learn about his miraculous survival from television news. His wife, Mahadevi, had spent the week in mourning, hopeful but quite certain her husband had not survived. A neighbour who visited the Koppad household that night later told a Kannada TV news station that Mahadevi was momentarily paralysed by the news, too terrified to believe it could really be true, wondering if someone was playing a cruel prank on her. She picked up her baby daughter, Netra, and wept as late-night celebrations began outside her house.

Nearly 2000 km away, her husband spent the night in the green glow of the medical tent, an oxygen mask over his face.

Early the next morning, barely conscious as he was strapped to a stretcher with a cylinder of oxygen by his side and a doctor for company, L.

Nk Koppad was flown in a Cheetah helicopter to the Siachen Base Camp. Col. Tanwer recalls the unforgettable moment he met L. Nk Koppad in the speciality medical tent he was shifted to.

'He was conscious,' Col. Tanwer says. 'I held his hand and he pressed my hand. His eyes were open. He had energy in him even after everything he had been through. I strongly believed he would survive.'

The Colonel did not know what to say, but found himself telling L. Nk Koppad, '*Tambi, tujhe kuch nahi hoga, tu theek ho jayega. Koi dikkat nahi hai, Tambi, tu bilkul theek ho jayega*. (Nothing will happen to you, young brother. There is no problem. You will be absolutely fine.)'

After a rapid medical check to make sure the flight down from Sonam Post had not further compromised his vitals, L. Nk Koppad was quickly loaded into another Army Cheetah and flown at full speed to Thoise, a military airfield that functions as the lifeline and gateway to the northern glaciers. Nestled in Ladakh's Shyok Valley, 'Thoise' is an acronym for 'Transit Halt of Indian Soldiers En Route (to Siachen)', and is barred to civilians.

When the Cheetah landed at Thoise, an Indian Air Force C-130J Super Hercules from the 77 'Veiled Vipers' squadron was already waiting for it. It had made the 90-minute flight from the Hindon Air Force base on Delhi's outskirts early that morning and was carrying specialized life-support equipment and a critical care specialist from the Indian Air Force. Its 4 engines whipping up dust over the high-altitude airfield, the aircraft roared off the tarmac minutes after receiving perhaps its most special passenger till date.

Shortly post noon, the C-130J landed at Delhi's Palam Air Force base, the military and VIP terminal co-located with the Indian capital's Indira Gandhi International Airport. A super-speciality ambulance from the Army Hospital Research & Referral was waiting to receive L. Nk Koppad. In a convoy with priority access, the ambulance tore down the short 5 km to the sprawling hospital complex, carrying L. Nk Koppad strapped to his stretcher in a thick sleeping bag, passing through a crowd of television

cameras and journalists that had collected in large numbers outside the hospital to capture the media's first glimpse of Siachen's heroic survivor.

Lt. Gen. S.D. Duhan, then commandant of the Army R&R Hospital, had seen nothing like this in his 38-year medical career in the military. And he had seen some amazing things. He stared at L. Nk Koppad in disbelief, wondering how the 32-year-old had defied all odds to stay alive.

'Medical science simply cannot explain how he survived at that altitude. It cannot. Remember, 9 others had died,' Lt. Gen. Duhan says. 'L. Nk Koppad was a man of incredible physical and mental courage. People have survived in those conditions for a day or 2. But 6 days? I have been through volumes of literature but have found no such instance,' says Lt. Gen. Duhan, who supervised the specialists attending to the soldier.

The soldier was immediately wheeled into the hospital's ICU. Thirty minutes after treatment began, Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Army Chief Gen. Dalbir Singh arrived at the hospital. The soldier had slipped into a coma. At his side in the ICU, the Prime Minister listened in silence as the doctors explained what L. Nk Koppad had endured.

The Lance Naik had been recovered alive and conscious, but he was severely dehydrated, hypothermic, hypoxic, hypoglycaemic and in shock. Comatose and in a precarious situation, the soldier also had severe pneumonia. Making matters worse, he had developed signs of liver and kidney dysfunction. One saving grace, the Prime Minister was told, was that L. Nk Koppad had miraculously escaped frostbite and bone injuries. The bodies of some of the other men in that same tent had been recovered crushed by the block of snow that buried them. In an enormously unlikely stroke of luck, L. Nk Koppad had managed to be caught in a tiny space between the ground and the ice slab, giving him a small bubble of oxygen to live on. Surviving in that position for a few hours, maybe even a day, was conceivable. How he did it for 6 days is something medical specialists, mountaineering legends and his comrades at 19 Madras can only guess about.

'It wasn't just about physical endurance. I like to think Hanamanthappa's belief in his team, his seniors and the Army pulled him through,' says Col.

Tanwer, who, at the time of writing this book, was deployed in a different sector of Ladakh, this time along the border with China. ‘He believed in his training and didn’t let despair or exhaustion force him to give up.’

On prime-time television that night on 9 February, anchors and reporters drafted medical experts into their studios to make sense of the miracle man of Sonam Post. A sense of hope and disbelief would pervade coverage late into the night.

‘We can talk all we want to about what happened,’ says Lt. Gen. Duhan. ‘But, for a moment, picture being buried in total darkness under a mountain of ice with nothing for company but the sound of your own voice.’ He paused, nodding. ‘Now imagine the same thing for 6 days.’

Late that evening, L. Nk Koppad’s wife, daughter and extended family landed in Delhi. Received by an Army vehicle and once again thronged by journalists, they were driven straight to the Army R&R Hospital where L. Nk Koppad lay.

A smiling but anxious Mahadevi would speak more confidently to television journalists this time. ‘It is a day of joy for me and my family, but let us never lose sight of the tragedy for 9 other families.’

The spotlight had shifted to Delhi, but search operations for the other men continued at Sonam Post and would not stop until all 9 bodies had been recovered.

By midnight, the team of doctors attending to L. Nk Koppad decided on a more intensive course of medical action to revive the soldier. It was a single notion that powered them on: if he had survived so much, surely he could make it. Surely, he was special.

Enlisting himself with the Army at a recruitment camp in 2002, L. Nk Koppad had immediately proven himself a tough infantryman. The year after he joined the Army, he was sent on counterterror duties in the Kashmir valley where he spent 3 years. He would return on a 4-year tour in 2008. In 2010, he was packed off to the North-east for counter-insurgency operations. It had become clear to his seniors that L. Nk Koppad was a tough soldier ready for greater operational challenges. Which was why,

when a 10-man team was to be selected in December 2015 to man Sonam Post, L. Nk Koppad's name was a shoo-in.

Mahadevi and her family visited a temple and prayed late into the night on 9 February. They had been reassured by the Army doctors, but knew that L. Nk Koppad's condition was extremely delicate. The hope that L. Nk Koppad's rescue had brought to Mahadevi had both energized and terrified her. On the one hand, it was a magical moment of joy and relief. On the other, the reality of his condition made it likely that her joy would be short-lived.

The next morning, the Army provided a brief update on the soldier's condition:

'L/Nk Hanamanthappa Koppad continues to battle the odds and his condition remains very critical. The medical team treating him is monitoring his situation continuously and is treating him with expertise available in the world.'

By this time, a panel of medical experts from Delhi's renowned All India Institute of Medical Sciences had arrived to inspect the soldier's condition, joining critical care specialists, a nephrologist and a senior neurologist.

In a span of a few hours, the news from inside the hospital took a sharp turn for the worse. Doctors had discovered evidence of oxygen deprivation in L. Nk Koppad's brain from a CT scan. The tone of the new medical bulletin that followed strongly suggested that the soldier's condition was no longer within medical control:

'There is evidence of pneumonia in both lungs. His multi-organ dysfunction state continues unabated. His condition has deteriorated despite aggressive therapy and supportive care.'

Prime Minister Modi received a briefing on the soldier's health that evening. The Army informed him in no uncertain terms that saving L. Nk Koppad was going to prove next to impossible. When the Prime Minister inquired if there were any other medical avenues that still existed for the soldier, the Army assured him that L. Nk Koppad was receiving the best possible treatment that existed anywhere in the world.

Early next morning, the Army released its final medical bulletin on L. Nk Koppad. It would spare no details and soften no words:

‘Extremely critical with worsening multiple organ dysfunction. His circulatory shock is now refractory to all drugs in maximum permissible doses and his kidneys remain non-functional. His pneumonia has worsened and his blood clotting disorder shows no sign of reversal despite blood component support. He is on maximal life support with aggressive ventilation and dialysis. He has slipped into a deeper state of coma.’

Mahadevi and the family were escorted to the hospital before noon.

At 1145 hours, L. Nk Koppad stopped fighting for his life.

An unusual eruption of nationwide mourning broke out that Thursday in February 2016. Amplified by a media that refused to move away from the story, L. Nk Koppad’s death had, for a moment, sobered millions.

Later that day, L. Nk Koppad’s remains were placed in a casket and taken to Brar Square, the ceremonial Army compound in Delhi reserved for the last rites of military personnel. Politicians do not normally attend wreath-laying ceremonies for soldiers. For L. Nk Koppad, they all did. The long line of government and state leaders would include the Prime Minister himself. Before he arrived, he tweeted a brief message:

He leaves us sad and devastated. RIP Lance Naik Hanamanthappa. The soldier in you remains immortal. Proud that martyrs like you served India.

‘L. Nk Koppad’s wife was amazingly strong. For her, the soldier had died for the second time in a matter of a few days,’ recalls Lt. Gen. Duhan.

When news of his death was broken to her at the Army hospital, Duhan recalls her saying, ‘Don’t tell his mother that he’s gone. She will not be able to bear it.’ His mother, Basamma, had not stopped praying.

‘Courage has many shades. The unbelievably strong-willed L. Nk Koppad added another shade to it,’ says Lt. Gen. Duhan.

The soldier’s body was flown to his home town in Karnataka, where his final resting place, a *samadhi* near his home in Betadur, became a site protected by a metal gate and fence.

Eleven months later, on Army Day 2017, Mahadevi arrived in Delhi to attend the parade and receive her husband’s posthumous Sena Medal. With

little Netra in tow, she was briefly the centre of attention at the Army Chief's residence that evening, at a reception attended by the President of India and members of the government. Mahadevi had been sitting quietly in a corner with her daughter.

'She can do what she likes, but I hope she will grow up to be an Army officer and be posted in Siachen,' Mahadevi smiles. 'I know they don't send women up there. But Netra is still young. That will change when she's old enough.'

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9

‘Everything Was against Us. *Everything*.’

Lieutenant Commander Niteen Anandrao Yadav

Dabolim, Goa
22 May 2009

It had been 6 months since 10 Pakistani terrorists had entered Mumbai from the sea in November 2008, holding the city hostage for 4 whole days and massacring 166 people across 3 locations. The 26/11 attacks would occupy India’s national security system for years to come. But just 6 months later, it was by far the biggest thing on the country’s mind.

By May 2009, as a wounded country attempted to make sense of the invasion and horror, the burden of keeping a watchful eye over the Arabian Sea had increased dramatically. India, it was clear, had let inevitable gaps in surveillance and intelligence be terrifyingly manipulated by foreign terror machinery focused on spilling blood on Indian soil. In the months after 26/11, it became clear that for all its ambitions as a regional power, India had let slip from its mind one of Jawaharlal Nehru’s most memorable quotes on strategy: ‘To be secure on land, we must be supreme at sea.’

The terror attack was a devastating jolt. But it served to amplify the inevitable—that India’s problems from the sea could only multiply. The

steady audacity of pirates on the high seas, pushing ever closer to Indian waters, had been keeping the Indian Navy feverishly busy throughout 2008. And when Ajmal Amir Kasab and his fellow terrorists stepped ashore from their rubber dinghy, India was about to be violently roused to the dangers the sea could present.

As Mumbai burnt, hundreds of kilometres away, at Goa's Dabolim airbase, groups of naval officers sat rapt in front of television screens, taking in the enormity of what was happening on their watch. Even before it became clear that the terrorists murdering people in Mumbai had come from Pakistan, military personnel across the country automatically knew they would be expected to be in a heightened state of readiness.

For anything.

From Air Force bases to Army infantry units and naval strike formations, explicit orders did not need to be given for men and women to brace themselves for what they were trained for. Among them was 38-year-old Lt. Cdr Niteen Anandrao Yadav. Lt. Cdr Yadav knew instantly that his unit would have an exponentially bigger role to play in what lay ahead for India.

He was right. Just days after 26/11, India officially bestowed its Navy with greater defence responsibilities. Already stretched thin by virtue of being the smallest of the 3 armed forces, but with the largest domain of responsibility—including a 7517-km coastline—the Navy collectively flexed its muscle as it assumed the role of guardian against every conceivable threat from the sea.

By May 2009, the Navy had possibly never been busier. Along with the gruelling after-effects of 26/11 on maritime security, the Indian Navy was preparing for another event with far-reaching ramifications—the expected delivery of a Chinese-built warship to Pakistan, the first of a new generation of lethal ships Islamabad had purchased for nearly $1 billion. The F-22P Zulfiquar-class missile frigate was expected to sail from Shanghai to Karachi in 2009. At Dabolim, Lt. Cdr Yadav and other naval aviators with the INAS 315 'Winged Stallions' had their mission cut out for them.

Early on 22 May, the base received word that 2 Pakistan Navy warships were expected to transit southward through the Arabian Sea, possibly in

preparation to escort the brand new Zulfiquar back to Karachi a few weeks later.

Snooping on each other's ships in the Arabian Sea has been standard operating procedure for India and Pakistan for decades. So the 'search and surveillance shadow' mission that Lt. Cdr Yadav and his crew were tasked with that May morning was not much more than routine. But volatility in relations between the two countries post-26/11 meant that even routine surveillance missions carried substantially greater risk.

The aircraft Lt. Cdr Yadav and his crew would be flying that day was IN305, a Soviet-era Ilyushin Il-38, a large ocean-surveillance aeroplane with 4 turbo-propeller engines. Fitted with advanced sensors to detect ships and submarines, this eye-in-the-sky aircraft can also fire torpedoes to destroy submarines or missiles to sink ships.

The Il-38 is little known or recognized beyond the military and the world of aviation enthusiasts. It is not a particularly arresting sight. And being tucked away at the Goa naval air station has helped to maintain a low profile that suits its typically classified surveillance duties. In 2002, however, the Il-38 entered public consciousness in a devastating manner when 2 aircraft collided mid-air over Goa during a flying display to celebrate the squadron's silver jubilee. Twelve Navy personnel perished in the freak tragedy. Lt. Cdr Yadav could well have been on board one of the doomed planes. It was something he would never forget each time he strapped himself in before a flight, just as he did 7 years later, that morning in May.

After a brief chat with his navigator and systems operators, Lt. Cdr Yadav and the rest of his 8-man crew clambered into their Il-38 through a hatch in the aircraft's belly—the aircraft has no other entry points. The 2 pilots strapped themselves into their seats in the cockpit. A flight signaller and a flight engineer took their seats in a small space behind the pilots. And in a cabin in the rear, 4 navigators cum sensor and systems operators sat at their electronic consoles. The crew's mission that morning was to fly straight to a patch of ocean where they expected to encounter a pair of Pakistan Navy warships—a tanker and an armed frigate—identify both and gather as much

information as possible about them, including their visuals and electromagnetic signatures.

In a routine surveillance mission, Lt. Cdr Yadav and his crew would have had authorization to ‘buzz’ the Pakistani warships—swoop down low and make it obvious that they had been spotted, a maritime equivalent of ‘Gotcha!’, part of the endless cat-and-mouse chase at sea. But during this mission, the crew only needed to locate and shadow the Pakistani warships. Under no circumstances would the crew put the aircraft in any danger. Pakistan Navy warships were known to be fitted with Chinese-built surface-to-air missile systems capable of easily hitting an aircraft as big and slow as an Il-38.

With permission to depart on that blazing hot morning, Il-38 IN305 roared off the Dabolim tarmac and climbed out over the Arabian Sea, heading due east towards its target. On board the aircraft, all systems reported normal. While the 2 pilots gently eased the aircraft higher, the navigator and operators made preparations for the mission objectives, corroborating their map coordinates and tuning up their sensors, which they would switch on only when they were close to the 2 Pakistani warships.

On board the plane, the crew wore intercom headsets to communicate with each other and with ground control. Without the headsets, the Il-38’s 4 Ivchencko AI-20M propeller engines would drown out every other sound in the cockpit and cabin. Even a pressurized, reinforced cabin could only keep so much of the sound out.

The crew checked in with ground control, indicating that they were now over the high seas. An hour had passed. The Il-38 was flying at 21,000 feet over deep, blue ocean, about 550 km off the coast of Goa.

The flight navigator signalled to the crew that they were now very close to their target, alerting the mission systems operators to get ready for the task. But as the crew prepared to descend slightly and begin its shadowing mission, they felt a small shudder pass through the 70-tonne aircraft.

It took Lt. Cdr Yadav a few seconds to realize what had happened. And it couldn’t possibly have come at a worse time.

The Il-38 had 8 electric generators providing power to virtually every system in the aircraft. Like a pack of dominoes, each generator abruptly sputtered and died. In a matter of seconds, the entire aircraft was stripped of electrical power, and every single one of its systems was suddenly suspended right before they were needed the most. But it was not just the mission that had been jeopardized by stalled equipment. The very lives of those 8 men now hung in the balance.

Lt. Cdr Yadav instantly realized that he and his crew were sitting on a ticking time bomb. Oil fed into the engines was controlled electrically. So was the temperature of the oil. When the generators failed, the oil-cooler shutters got stuck and couldn't be moved since they were electro-mechanically operated. Lt. Cdr Yadav stared in horror at his dying cockpit instruments. He knew the ideal temperature of engine oil was 70 °C, with an emergency limit that stretched up to 100 °C. The gauges informed him that the oil temperature in the engines had crossed 150 °C. It was very simple. The 4 screaming engines could explode at any moment.

The aircraft now completely stripped of electrical power, and the cockpit and cabin lit by the red glow of a solitary emergency lamp, the pilots lost engine indicators, crucial data necessary to keep the aircraft safe and not turn into a ball of fire hurtling into the Arabian Sea.

With all instruments either dying or dead, Lt. Cdr Yadav took his partner's altimeter—his own was electrically powered and rendered useless.

'I had no navigation, no communication and limited control over my engines. I was doing my best not to touch the throttles. I knew that a single abrupt move could cause the engines to explode,' Lt. Cdr Yadav remembers.

The engines weren't the only things screaming on board IN305. With their intercom headsets now rendered useless, the men on board had to literally scream instructions at each other to be heard.

The crew of IN305 had few friends in the air that afternoon, and many adversaries. Starting with the generators, virtually everything turned against them in a chain reaction of terrifying circumstance. Every minute brought with it a fresh piece of reality that pushed the crew ever closer to giving up.

The Il-38, built for extended missions over sea, was full of fuel that morning—26 tonnes of aviation kerosene for the 4 hungry engines. The mission commanders at Goa had wanted to give the aircraft crew enough endurance and range to shadow the Pakistani warships adequately before returning to base. That mission, of course, had now gone straight out of the window.

The one thing Lt. Cdr Yadav knew he needed to do was descend so he could allow the navigator to get his bearings. But there was a dilemma. Diving to a lower altitude meant feeding the engines thicker air, which could put an additional strain on them and accelerate a disaster. Lt. Cdr Yadav waited, making a series of rapid calculations in the air—something he had learnt to do as a young Lieutenant.

Using the artificial horizon, a thankfully analogue instrument that tells pilots the orientation of their aircraft relative to the earth's horizon, Lt. Cdr Yadav took charge and gently steered IN305 towards India's west coast. In his lap was an emergency compass, the size of a rupee coin. Every other navigational aid was dead. With the gentlest possible touch he could muster for a large aircraft that had nothing gentle about it, Lt. Cdr Yadav pushed it into slow descent to about 7000 feet. As the aircraft lumbered uncertainly through the thicker air, Lt. Cdr Yadav looked out of his side window at the whining propellers. Then he looked over at the younger pilot next to him, and the other men standing behind him. He knew he had to do it.

'I briefed the crew in no uncertain terms. I told them that if the engines started exploding, we had no choice but to bail out. No thinking twice, on my command, we would jump out through the aircraft's belly hatch with our parachutes over the sea,' Lt. Cdr Yadav recalls.

Jumping out of an Il-38 was a daunting proposition. Unlike other aircraft that had rear ramps or exit doors that were clear of the aircraft's propellers, exiting from the belly hatch of IN305 would send the crew careening through space between the 2 inner propellers on both wings. A tiny bit of abrupt turbulence could send them head first into the equivalent of a giant blender. There would be nothing left of them.

His crew stared back at him. He was the most experienced man on the plane. His word would be final. If he ordered them to jump, that was precisely what they would do. There was no doubt in their minds. What they would do once they landed with their parachutes in the middle of the Arabian Sea was a problem they would tackle once they got to it.

The crew waited. Every one of the 8 men hoped they wouldn't need to exit the aircraft over the ocean.

A set of 4 emergency batteries on board the aircraft were in a precarious state after the generators perished, but still had a few wisps of voltage left. Lt. Cdr Yadav picked up his high-frequency radio transmitter and beamed out a message he hoped would be caught by airliners in the surrounding airspace. The emergency battery indicators suddenly plummeted to near zero, ruling out that last vestige of communication with the outside world. A minute later, the batteries were dead too. IN305 was now 100 per cent bereft of any direct or stored electrical power.

'We were flying by the seat of our pants and hoping to make it back. The worry for me was, if we make it back, how do we land?' says Lt. Cdr Yadav.

An Il-38 that had finished its mission and expended its heavy load of fuel was automatically rendered light enough to land safely. But without the ability to dump fuel off the aircraft, the crew of IN305 was locked into what was a veritable missile. Lt. Cdr Yadav wiped his brow with the back of his hands. About 450 km off the coast, he lowered the aircraft's wheels, a hydraulic process.

A fresh dilemma presented itself. And Lt. Cdr Yadav knew he had bare minutes to make a decision.

'With all our fuel on board that we couldn't get rid of, we were 18–20 tonnes heavier than permissible landing weight. The wings had flaps to lower the approach speed, but wouldn't budge an inch without electrical power,' he says.

A safe landing speed on the Il-38 is no more than 200 kmph. Without his flaps to slow the aircraft down, IN305 would hurtle towards the runway at 300 kmph, an unacceptably high speed. As if a dangerously heavy,

unacceptably fast and almost uncontrollable aircraft coming in for a landing was not enough for the crew to deal with, they also had to contend with the fact that it was pre-monsoon season. The runway at Goa's Dabolim airfield was soaked with rainwater.

'Everything was against us,' Lt. Cdr Yadav recalls. 'Everything.'

For a brief moment, he brought up the possibility of ditching in water—the act of landing the plane in a controlled manner on the sea surface, and exiting rapidly in an inflatable boat. The navigator was asked to see if he could spot some ships for IN305 to ditch close to, so chances of a rescue would be quicker. Lt. Cdr Yadav hated the idea from the moment it left his mouth. He swallowed and waited for a few more minutes, holding the aircraft steady. Then he saw it.

The west coast loomed into view through the weather haze. Glancing out of the cockpit, Lt. Cdr Yadav realized they were about to fly over Karwar in Karnataka, a town about 100 km south of Goa and home to one of the Indian Navy's largest warship bases.

IN305 was now over familiar territory. But that brought no comfort at all to the crew on board. If those engines exploded now, they were too low to bail out. And if they were forced to, it was land below them. Well past the point of no return, Lt. Cdr Yadav used both hands to mechanically steady the aircraft. Bereft of electrical power, the control column strained against every bit of pressure from the pilots. Every input was manual. The sweat dripped off the pilots' faces as they fought to control the aircraft in its descent. Then, Lt. Cdr Yadav heard one of the men behind him yell something through the noise. He turned around to see one of the crew brandishing a mobile phone.

'I grabbed the phone. By some stroke of luck, there was a mobile signal,' Lt. Cdr Yadav recalls. The pilot used the mobile to call the Dabolim air traffic control, screaming into the phone a description of IN305's situation and calling for full preparation on the ground for a possible disaster.

Using the mobile phone on board was against procedure, like with civil flights. But Lt. Cdr Yadav knew it was his one lifeline in the event his

aircraft hurtled down the Dabolim tarmac with a collapsed landing gear and in a ball of angry flame.

Grimly aware of just how slim their chances were, Lt. Cdr Yadav and his crew steadied IN305 in its final seconds as the runway emerged through the haze. The engine roar increased as the temperature abruptly spiked, threatening to explode just a few feet off the ground.

‘I knew the engines could burst at any time. I shouted to the crew that we had only one chance to make it to the runway. This was do or die,’ he says.

There was no turning back now. The crew of IN305 held its breath as the aircraft slammed down on the runway. Just seconds before it did, a fresh realization dawned.

‘I remembered we didn’t have hydraulics to stop the aircraft. So how do we control the speed? I couldn’t shut the engines down either, because they are electrically operated too,’ Lt. Cdr Yadav says. But there was a little-known last resort that he recalled out of nowhere.

An emergency option had been designed into the Il-38 that allowed pilots to pneumatically ‘feather’ the engines, a method to decrease drag and stop the propellers. The option, though, was a terrible risk. The Il-38 has 4 engines, 2 on each wing. If even a single engine was feathered before the other, the aircraft could be thrown violently off its path and into a wreck of mangled metal and flame. Lt. Cdr Yadav looked to his flight engineer, directing him to pull the feathering levers at precisely the same moment.

‘We could have handled a small bit of yaw (oscillating movement on the vertical axis). But anything extreme would have meant the end of all of us,’ Lt. Cdr Yadav recalls.

The feathering worked. As soon as IN305 touched the tarmac, Lt. Cdr Yadav rushed to switch off first the outer 2 engines and then the inner ones. And with one final vestige of hydraulic power that had built up in the dead aircraft, he controlled it on the tarmac’s centre line, wrestling to keep it from veering off the runway. Keeping IN305 on the runway was crucial not only to their own lives but the safety of other personnel and aircraft at Dabolim.

After an unforgiving hour in the air, the crew of the Il-38 met their first friend: Dabolim's unusually long runway, one of the longest in India, that gave the hurtling aircraft the extra distance it needed to slow down and stop without brakes.

'Around 9000 feet after touchdown, the aircraft came to a stop. I could see the valley beyond the runway come into view. Luckily we were able to stop the aircraft,' he recalls.

The roar of the engines had died down, giving way to the sound of emergency sirens as a medical crew pulled Lt. Cdr Yadav and his men from the Il-38. It was only then, Lt. Cdr Yadav says, that he fully grasped what had just happened.

'When you're in the air, all you're doing is solving the problem in front of you, first one, then the next. You've got no choice. You can't see the big picture, only the problem in front of you,' he says.

That evening, after a mandatory medical check, Lt. Cdr Yadav made his way to his residence at the base. His wife and 2 young children were at home. The family had made plans to dine at the Naval Officer's Institute that evening. But Lt. Cdr Yadav was exhausted. When he told his wife he'd prefer to relax at home, she wasn't surprised. Her husband often came home tired after long airborne missions.

It was only the next day, when she was asked by other families about the incident, that she learnt about what happened on board IN305.

The crew of IN305 had flown raw, with all possible odds stacked against it. Three years later, when Lt. Cdr Yadav travelled to Russia on military work, an old designer from the Ilyushin design house cornered him at an event to ask about the now-legendary flight. In rapt attention, the Russian listened, taking notes, amazed by how the Indian crew had saved themselves and their aircraft.

A crucial mission to shadow Pakistani warships remained unfinished on that day. But the lives of 8 naval aviators had been saved by what the Indian Navy described as Lt. Cdr Niteen Yadav's 'high degree of maturity, composure and a sense of resolve in the face of impending peril'. A year later, his leadership on board IN305 won him the Shaurya Chakra.

While IN305 was grounded for investigation into the failure that nearly doomed its crew, 4 days later, Lt. Cdr Yadav strapped into another Il-38 on an identical mission. This time, a pair of Pakistani warships was transiting the other way.

The mission is reported to have been a success.

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10

‘We Follow That Man. He Has Seen Death’

Captain Varun Singh

Puttushahi, Jammu and Kashmir
2 May 2000

All that he remembers seeing, lying paralysed in that stretcher and slipping in and out of consciousness, was the blur of the Cheetah’s rotor blades as the tiny helicopter dashed through the airspace over the Kashmir valley. His chest had been ripped open by a hundred metal splinters. A handful of them had punctured his right lung, smashed his sternum and broken several ribs. Another had pierced his heart. His right arm hung from its skin. His thick beard was matted with drying blood, with more forming scarlet rivulets down his front, staining his assault vest and combat fatigues.

Capt. Varun Singh was as physically close to death as a man could possibly get. The first coded transmission from the encounter site in J&K’s Bandipora area had confirmed the Marine Commando officer’s death. But his eyes had fluttered momentarily while a combat medic bandaged his blown-open chest. As he was carried into the waiting helicopter, an officer updated the status: the commando was alive, but he was as good as dead.

On 12 July 2016, 16 years after that encounter, Capt. Singh still felt the pain—not an ambiguous discomfort that came in waves, but a real, steady, unrelenting pain. It was agony that was overwhelmed, however, by the honour that came his way on that searingly hot day in Visakhapatnam. In the shadow of a 20-feet-high human hand hewn from stone clutching a jagged hunting knife, Capt. Singh was appointed CO of the country's first dedicated Marine Commandos (MARCOS) unit, INS Karna. Every man and woman at the ceremony that morning knew that Capt. Singh's salute didn't just carry with it a sense of achievement. It exuded the energy of a miracle, and a sense of disbelief that Capt. Singh would feel every moment of his life after that incident 16 years earlier.

It was snowing heavily across the Kashmir valley in December 1999, 5 months after the Kargil conflict, when Capt. Singh, then a Lieutenant, landed in Srinagar. The young MARCO had just been deployed to the Wular Lake, a vast wetland reservoir on the Jhelum, about an hour by road, west of the state capital.

As beautiful and placid as the lake was, flanked by gentle hills, it was a veritable highway for terrorists that had infiltrated from PoK. Using the lake, terrorists easily cut 40 km from their journey to Srinagar. Devoid of the nuisance of Army and police checkpoints along the roads, the lake proved a perfect conduit for them. It was for this reason that in 1996, the Indian government decided to deploy a squad of the Indian Navy's MARCOS to secure the lake and patrol its environs. The Valley got a fresh set of highly qualified guardians. The MARCOS, in turn, got access to what was then their first and only live operational battleground in the country.

Capt. Singh remembers thinking it was a perfect opportunity for operational exposure.

'The MARCOS spent hard hours training, but we simply didn't have a place to demonstrate our skills in the real world. This was it,' he says.

Like the squad they were replacing, Capt. Singh and the other MARCOS would be based in a pump house overlooking the massive lake that provided water to surrounding villages. The position provided a commanding vista from Bandipora to Sopore, including the famed Baba

Shakur-ud-Din mosque, and prayers wafting through the crisp, clear air would become an accompaniment to the daily commando patrols on and around the lake.

On that day in December when he arrived, Capt. Singh stood staring out over the Wular Lake, its frozen surface glistening in the dying light. A memory that would visit him often inevitably came flooding back. His father, a retired naval sailor, had named him after the Hindu god of the sea because the infant's *janamkundli* (astrological birth chart) said he would die in water. A star at the Navy's diving school, he was trained to operate at depths of up to 180 feet. As he stared out over the lake, he told himself, and not for the first time, that if the lake claimed his life, it would all make perfect sense.

Capt. Singh hadn't always been drawn to the water. His teenage dream was much more specific. He simply wanted to kill terrorists. Growing up certain that he would join the military, he entered the hallowed campus of the NDA in 1989, fully prepared to become an Army officer. It was his father's coaxing that persuaded the young cadet to switch to the Navy.

'Like a good son, and to honour my father, I joined the Navy. It was an enormous thing for him. As a sailor in the Navy, to see his own son become an officer couldn't be described in words,' Capt. Singh remembers.

Honouring his father was one thing. But Capt. Singh knew that his dream of combating terrorists had receded considerably. The Navy would take him out to sea and far from the dangers he truly wanted to fight. As he had expected, soon after he was commissioned into naval service, Capt. Singh was posted as a navigating officer on a warship.

The years rolled on. Capt. Singh got married, and in 1997 his first child, Shivani, was born. As he held her in the hospital, he had the thought all fathers do—that he had never seen anything as beautiful. Watching his wife and newborn girl sleep that night, the sense of well-being and joy that pervaded his mind was also a reminder—that his long-cherished dream of going into combat was no longer a decision he could take easily. It was his wife, Reena, aware of what was bothering her husband, who pushed him to try.

Soon after, Capt. Singh enlisted as a trainee combat diver—his first voluntary brush with the element that he had been told would one day kill him.

‘Everyone told me, “Why now? You’ve got a family, Varun. Life at MARCOS is disturbing and dangerous. You know you will get in harm’s way.” They were right,’ Capt. Singh says. ‘In which other profession do you knowingly get into harm’s way?’

And there was no shortage of harm hidden in the expansive view Capt. Singh got that evening in December 1999 as he gazed out over the lake. In only 5 months, the young commando would experience first-hand the most dangerous kind of harm the restive valley could offer.

The MARCOS at Wular Lake operated under the Army’s 15 Rashtriya Rifles, its headquarters in Watlab on the lake’s banks. The unit’s CO, Col. S.K. Jha from the Gorkha Rifles, loved the MARCOS under his charge, and used his discretion to constantly send the young naval commandos on patrolling duties beyond their designated areas of responsibility just to give them exposure and experience.

‘He had a great deal of faith in us. And we promised him our undying support no matter what the requirement.’

In the winter months at the dawn of the new millennium, there was little the men around Wular needed to face beyond the rigours of daily patrols in hostile weather. By April, the heavy snow would melt and make way once again for infiltration across the LoC to the west. By the end of April, the harsh realities of Kashmir would have flooded back full force. Which is why, when Capt. Singh and 7 of his MARCOS mates were summoned at 0200 hours on 2 May to investigate an intelligence tip-off about possible terrorist bunkers on a mountainside, they sprung up ever-ready.

The 8 MARCOS joined about 100 Army men to search for hideouts across 3 mountains. In single-line formation, the men trekked up to each peak, then rolled downhill, checking each crevasse for possible weapon caches or hidden stores, or perhaps even terrorists.

The men found nothing that night. By lunchtime, they had assembled at a secure location in the foothills when they were alerted by radio static. A

crackling voice announced that an encounter was on in Bandipora, not far from Wular Lake, in a village called Puttushahi. Three Al-Badr terrorists were reported to be hiding there inside a two-storey house.

Capt. Singh stopped eating and walked over to the Army team leader, asking him if he and the MARCOS could dash to the encounter site. This was the first terror encounter since the snow had melted. Capt. Singh remembers feeling every fibre of his most enduring dream explode at once. Here was a chance to fight actual terrorists. There was another reason he wanted to get to the site without any further delay. The voice on the radio belonged to an Army officer who happened to be Capt. Singh's course mate at the Academy. And he was leading the antiterror hunt.

In minutes, Capt. Singh and his buddy, Lead Mechanical Engineer Vijay Singh Rawat, were cleared to proceed to the location by road. The 2 men arrived at the encounter site in 45 minutes. Right outside the village, they noticed that the 15 Rashtriya Rifles CO and their boss, Col. Jha was standing near his vehicle. The actual encounter was taking place a short distance inside the village. The Colonel had decided to stand back so there was no pressure on the team leading the hunt. As soon as he saw the 2 MARCOS emerge from their vehicle, he ordered them to proceed to the spot inside the village.

'He knew we had knowledge of explosives and demolition stores. He had faith in us. We ran into the village without a second thought,' Capt. Singh remembers. The 2 commandos received a quick briefing on the situation from the officer heading the operation as they took positions.

Surrounded by a 6-feet boundary wall, the house in which the terrorists were hiding was about 18 feet high, with an attic. The compound, which also had a small cowshed in the rear, was surrounded on all sides by 2-storey houses just feet apart, each one cleared of all residents for their safety. The closest house was to the right. Capt. Singh and Vijay sprinted into the house and up the stairs to a second-floor balcony that afforded a direct vantage point overlooking the house the terrorists were hiding in.

In radio contact with the Army team leader outside the compound, Capt. Singh relayed that he was providing fire cover as his buddy tossed a pair of

grenades into the house on 2 separate floors. The ensuing chaos, he thought, would allow him and Vijay to spot the terrorists and take them out with precision shots. The grenades were tossed, exploding loudly in the main house. But nothing moved. The men heard nothing but the sizzle of air after explosion.

Vijay had just used both his grenades. Just as Capt. Singh was handing over 1 of his own 2 grenades (MARCOS carry 2 grenades in their vest pouch), the Army team leader radioed in asking for help with an RDX explosive he wanted to plant in the house as the next course of action. Capt. Singh placed the grenade back in his pouch and went down to the staging area to inspect the bomb that had just been built. A resident of the area was enlisted to walk into the compound and plant the bomb quietly on the ground floor of the house.

‘The assault vest I was wearing was given to me by my brother-in-law, an Army officer posted in Srinagar. He had been presented the assault vest by a foreign Army when he was deployed there,’ Capt. Singh notes. The vest was made of cotton, not the polyester assault vests that were standard issue to the MARCOS at the time. That difference in material would play a shattering role in the minutes that followed.

The RDX explosive was placed and detonated, causing a clean implosion of the house the terrorists were hiding in. Not a single brick blew outward. The entire structure collapsed on itself in a cloud of dust. Shock waves from the blast shattered every windowpane in a 20-metre radius. Capt. Singh and Vijay emerged from behind a mattress they had propped up for protection. Stepping back out into the balcony, they tried to peer through the dust. When it had settled, they noticed the body of 1 terrorist hanging from the first floor. The other 2 weren’t visible. Capt. Singh looked at his watch. It was 1700 hours. The sun would set soon and that would give the other terrorists a chance to escape, if not attempt an attack. The operation needed to be completed before sundown at all costs.

The MARCOS could not spray bullets into the dust even if they wanted to.

‘We’re trained for *ek goli, ek dushman* (one bullet, one enemy). We conserve ammunition and use as little of it as necessary to do the job. We couldn’t fire at something we couldn’t see,’ Capt. Singh remembers.

Leaving Vijay on the second floor, Capt. Singh went downstairs and jumped over the wall and into the main compound of the detonated house. Three Army soldiers came in from the front. Capt. Singh stepped over the smouldering debris, reaching up to check the pulse of the terrorist who hung down from the first floor. He was dead. Capt. Singh removed the AK-47 the terrorist had with him and confirmed over the radio that the first terrorist was confirmed dead.

But in the next few seconds, there would be a momentary, but fatal loss of judgement, a split-second collapse of command and control, and of the unwavering focus required during such operations.

‘Since this was our first kill after the snows had melted, there was a sudden outburst of excitement by the jawans. It was a matter of great pride. There was some chaos. About 14 soldiers suddenly scaled the wall into the compound to see the dead terrorist. This was a big mistake,’ Capt. Singh remembers. ‘We didn’t know where the other 2 terrorists were. In those few seconds of excitement, this was overlooked.’

Amidst the impromptu outburst of cheer, 1 soldier from the group ventured towards the cowshed in the backyard. Standard operating procedure would have dictated that the men destroy the cowshed with a rocket or bomb, since there was no way to safely inspect its interior. In a fatal lapse of training, Army jawan Reddy opened the cowshed door and peered within.

The clatter of Kalashnikov fire rang out as the 2 terrorists hiding inside the cowshed cut down the jawan in a hail of bullets. Hearing the fire, most of the jawans in the compound ran for the boundary wall, hoping to scale it and take up safe positions to return fire.

The 2 terrorists crept slowly out of the cowshed, their weapons at the ready. It was the first time that Capt. Singh had seen a live terrorist in an operation. In that moment, ironically, he now recalls, his dream of killing terrorists could not have been further from his mind. This was no dream.

This was an operation, and he had little over a second to act. As he was raising his weapon to take aim, he noticed that 2 Army jawans had frozen in their tracks, unable to move, stunned by what had just happened. Wasting no time, Capt. Singh leapt towards them, forcing them to the ground, landing on his knees, his AK-47 pointed directly at the 2 terrorists.

‘The 2 terrorists were slowly stepping past me about 5 metres in front. But they hadn’t noticed me,’ Capt. Singh recalls. His weapon in single-fire mode to conserve ammunition, the commando opened fire. The next few seconds are a sequence Capt. Singh remembers in devastating slow motion.

‘As they were stepping past me, their right profile was facing me. I fired 7 rounds at them. That’s all I remember. When one of the terrorists fell, his finger was on his rifle’s trigger and his right hand was stretched out towards me,’ Capt. Singh recalls. ‘As he fell, his finger squeezed the trigger, spraying bullets all over. One of those bullets came straight at me and smashed into the grenade I had placed in my pouch a short while ago.’

If the grenade had exploded, there would have been nothing left of Capt. Singh and the soldiers around him. But that 7.62-mm bullet penetrated the upper part of the grenade, splintering it but not detonating it.

‘The bullet had hit the shoulder of the grenade, the top part of the device that houses the closing cap and striker. The pin was out. Had I been wearing my usual polyester assault vest, which was more spacious, the lever would have been activated and the grenade would have detonated, tearing me to pieces. The cotton vest I was wearing was so tightly packed that despite the grenade lever breaking free, it was seized by the vest.’

If a grenade detonation would have indisputably killed the young commando, the splintering grievously injured him. Just as it registered that he had fulfilled his boyhood dream of killing terrorists in live combat, Capt. Singh felt himself slip into darkness. Consciousness came in short, blood-tinged flourishes.

As he lay there, his body broken, the Army team leader ordered Vijay, who was still in the balcony of the neighbouring house, to destroy the cowshed with a rocket. Respectfully, the marine commando protested.

‘*Mere saab andar hain, mujhe unko leke aana hai* (Sir is still in there. I need to get him out),’ he said over the radio. The Army team leader was furious by this time, ordering the commando to blast the cowshed and get out of there as quickly as possible. But Vijay stood his ground. Exasperated, the Army officer gave the commando 5 minutes to retrieve what both believed was Capt. Singh’s body.

Vijay scaled the wall, stepping slowly towards the fallen figure of his MARCOS partner. First, he fired shots at the terrorists’ bodies to make sure they were dead. Then he reached down towards the officer’s bloodied torso and took hold of the splintered grenade. Holding it with both hands and pressing the lever, he removed the detonator and disarmed the device. Then he checked Capt. Singh’s wrist, feeling the faintest pulse. He shouted to the men positioned outside to begin the emergency evacuation.

Bandaged and strapped into an Army vehicle, Capt. Singh was dashed to the Army’s 15 Rashtriya Rifles headquarters 12 km away. Those with him, including Vijay, knew it would only be minutes before the officer bled out and died. They had seen men die from far slighter injuries in combat. This commando’s chest had been burst open, the cavity within visible, every organ impaled by unforgiving little shards of metal. There was literally no hope as the jeep carrying Capt. Singh accelerated down the highway towards Watlab.

An Army Cheetah helicopter at Sharifabad was alerted for a possible emergency airlift from Watlab to Srinagar, and the pilots had been briefed about who they would be carrying and the condition he was in. But they were finally told to stand down because the chopper could not take off in the dying light. With a 5-minute twilight window, the 2 pilots, who had met Capt. Singh at a unit party just 2 days before, decided to make a break for it. Cleared for the mission, they sprinted to their helicopter and were airborne in minutes, dashing straight to Watlab.

‘I only recall what happened in flashes. I remember being shoved into the helicopter. Then, it was landing at 92 Base Hospital in Srinagar where they had a helipad. The third was being pushed into the X-Ray machine there,’ Capt. Singh recalls.

The Army doctor in charge at the Srinagar base hospital, Lt. Col. Ravi Kale, took less than a minute to decide that it wasn't worth trying to save Capt. Singh—he was too far gone to be retrieved. To this day, Kale says he has no idea what stopped him from walking out of that ward. Something compelled him to stay and try to save the dying commando in the gurney in front of him.

'There was a Christmas tree of shrapnel inside my chest. Splinters were scattered everywhere. I was pushed into the operating theatre at 2030 hours. I was finally stitched up the next day. I didn't regain consciousness until the evening of 4 May,' Capt. Singh recalls.

Still extremely critical, the commando couldn't speak. He remained on forced ventilation since an entire lobe of his left lung needed to be amputated. By 5 May, he was fully conscious and able to speak very slowly.

'When the doctor came, he just pressed my hand and went away. He later told me that no matter how much anaesthesia I was under, whenever he asked me how I was, my thumbs were up. He couldn't explain it,' Capt. Singh says. 'And neither could I.'

In July 2016, 16 years after he decided to operate on a commando against his best judgement, Lt. Col. Ravi Kale (who retired as Major General) would write a letter to Capt. Singh. The man he had helped save was about to take over as CO of India's first MARCOS unit. He wrote:

> What kept you alive was your cool, not crying or taking big gasps when your chest was shattered. This kept the rest of the lung okay. If you had shouted with pain, the chest cavity outside of the lung would have got filled with air and compressed your lung and heart.
> You also had a large grenade splinter going from your right chest to embed in the left second intercostal space. Again if you had jumped with pain this would have torn your heart or the aorta with no chance of recovery. So friend, it was your cool which saved you. I was just a small cog in that wheel.
> Take care.
> (Private communication, 12 July 2016)

After the encounter, Capt. Singh spent a week in intensive care in Srinagar before being declared stable enough to be airlifted to Delhi. In his own words, he spent the next 2 years begging nurses for morphine injections at

both Delhi's Base Hospital and the Army R&R Hospital. His arm shattered, doctors had installed external fixators with metal rods bypassing the smashed humerus.

Teams of doctors fought valiantly to match the courage and inexplicable cheer the young commando displayed in his hospital bed. But even they knew that Capt. Singh would never fight again. His injuries had taken an enormous toll. Eventually, he was medically downgraded by the Navy—a process that keeps officers and soldiers in service, but for duties other than combat. If Capt. Singh was not already dealing with the agony of his injuries, he now had to stomach never being able to go to war again. It was a devastating blow for any soldier, especially a young commando.

When his family visited him for the first time at the R&R Hospital in Delhi days after the encounter, Capt. Singh's 3-year-old daughter, Shivani, clambered up on the bed her father lay in. Holding his forearm, she said, 'My daddy strongest!' It was one of only a handful of occasions in which Capt. Singh allowed himself to weep.

'My wife is an amazing human being. She preserved the sanity of our family when everyone thought I was dead. She rushed from Rewa in Madhya Pradesh to neighbouring Satna where my parents lived. They had nearly collapsed. She kept the family together. I can never thank her enough,' Capt. Singh says.

It soon became clear to Capt. Singh's superiors that the wounded commando would not be confined to a hospital bed. His right arm nearly useless, he trained himself to play squash and fire a weapon with his left hand. In and out of hospital for cardio-thoracic therapy that would never really stop, Capt. Singh proved instrumental in setting up a training wing for the MARCOS in April 2002 in Mumbai. Three months later, his son, Sarthak, was born.

'Sarthak wants to join the MARCOS. He's still young, but he seems determined,' Capt. Singh says. His daughter, Shivani, who would become more aware of her father's mission as she grew up, would be filled with a ferocious anger that her parents fought to calm.

‘She started hating Pakistan. She was at a very impressionable age. She could never understand why it was I who got hurt for a national cause. She had lots of personal questions. Some of those we could answer. Many of them we couldn’t,’ he says.

For Capt. Singh, being given command of INS Karna was an unspeakable privilege, one he still cannot fully personally fathom.

‘The men I train are my brothers. Unless we train together, we cannot fight together,’ Capt. Singh says.

‘When they look at me, I know what they’re thinking: This man has seen death. We will follow him to our deaths if necessary.’

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11

‘This Is India’s Honour. We Cannot Fail’

Commander Milind Mohan Mokashi

Port of Aden, Yemen
12 October 2000

It was an attack that shook the world—one that may have grown deeper roots in wider public memory had it not been overshadowed less than a year later by the 9/11 attacks. In more ways than one, what happened that day was a shattering trailer to 9/11. As the United States Navy’s formidably armed Arleigh Burke-class destroyer *USS Cole* docked for fuel at the harbour, a small fibreglass dinghy approached the 500-feet, 6000-tonne warship. On board, its sailors were lining up for an early lunch.

The boat, steered by 2 Al-Qaeda suicide bombers, carried a 300-kg explosive device that the 2 men detonated once they reached the *Cole*. The explosion killed 17 American sailors and tore a frightening 40-feet hole in the ship’s hull—a ship that no force in its right mind would mess with. Images of the fearsome vessel being helplessly towed away for repairs scarred a nation that depended on battle groups featuring ships like the *USS Cole* to project power far from American shores, and support the most difficult foreign military operations.

Two decades later, the bombing of *USS Cole* is a relatively vague memory, if it is remembered at all. In navies around the world, however, it remains a terrifying touchstone—a reminder of just how vulnerable menacing ships of war really are in the face of a threat that doesn't play by any rules. If a ship armed to the teeth with enough weapons to level a small town could be paralysed by 2 men in a tiny motor boat, then the game had changed forever.

Arabian Sea
31 March 2015

It was the inevitable first thought that crashed through Cdr Mokashi's mind that morning, as he captained the Indian Navy's patrolling warship *INS Sumitra* on an escort mission for vulnerable merchant vessels transiting through pirate-infested waters and out into the Arabian Sea. Cdr Mokashi and the 150 men under his command had arrived in the Gulf of Aden just 20 days before and had already ensured the safety of a continuous line-up of freight ships making their way through the internationally recognized trade corridor.

That day in March, Cdr Mokashi had just received orders to immediately pull out from the escort mission, turn his ship around and steam at full speed towards Yemen's Port of Aden. His instructions were clear: he was to reach Aden and hold position 20 miles out at sea.

Like all good military men, Cdr Mokashi was fully prepared. When his ship had arrived in the Gulf earlier that month, the situation in Yemen had already turned volatile, with a violent civil war drawing air strikes from a Saudi-led coalition. On 26 March, as Cdr Mokashi and his men were sailing towards the tiny African nation of Djibouti across the Gulf of Aden to refuel and stock up on supplies (termed 'operational turnaround' in military parlance), the crew was told that Saudi Air Force Typhoon jets had begun bombing runs in Yemen. Cdr Mokashi was focused on his anti-piracy mission. But he also knew that his ship and crew were in the best possible

position to dash to Yemen to rescue the huge numbers of Indian citizens who worked there, if things got worse.

On the night of 29 March, as a fully fuelled *INS Sumitra* sailed out of Djibouti on its escort mission, Cdr Mokashi summoned the ship's executive officer (XO). While the 2 men stood on the ship's deck watching the sun sink beyond the horizon, the skipper spoke his mind.

'We need to do our homework. We need to be ready in all respects for Yemen,' he said.

Over the next 36 hours, the ship and its crew quietly prepared itself. This would prove the first of many challenges that lay ahead. The *INS Sumitra* was practically brand new, commissioned into service barely 6 months before its deployment to the Gulf of Aden. Built to be versatile and nimble at sea, it is still a daunting exercise to reconfigure and realign a warship and its crew for a completely different mission—mentally, physically and materially. In this case, they needed to switch in bare hours from being a fearsome armed platform that nobody dared approach to a humanitarian relief vessel that would rescue Indian citizens from a war-torn country.

Very few men on the *INS Sumitra* slept that night. Over the hours, the crew worked out what lay ahead. A ship built to carry a carefully calculated number of battle-trained young men would soon see a flood of women and children, senior citizens and possibly the wounded. With limited rations, accommodation and medical supplies on board, Cdr Mokashi and his XO wondered how they would manage. But like all good military men, they knew they did not have a choice but to fight with what they had.

When the orders finally came on 31 March, there was a quiet lack of surprise on board the *INS Sumitra*. It took no more than 10 minutes for the ship to set course for Aden. With no charts and maps, essential to safely and easily sail into the port, Cdr Mokashi decided to wait until he had brought his warship to waters off Aden. Then he would deal with the very serious predicament of making his way into an unfriendly port without the essential charts for such sailing.

Now mentally prepared for the mission that lay ahead, Cdr Mokashi decided to use the few hours he had before arrival at Aden to sharpen all preparations. Speaking to his crew over the ship's intercom system, he briefed them. The crew were split up into units with specific tasks, including baggage screening, personnel screening and documentation.

But that would come later. Inevitably, the chief concern was security. Every single man on the *INS Sumitra* knew about the *USS Cole*. And now they knew they were headed to precisely the same place where that American ship had been ambushed 15 years before. Worse, they were headed there at a time when the country was mired in open hostilities.

Frayed nerves became apparent on board the Indian vessel as it sliced through the waters of the gulf towards Aden.

The team of 8 MARCOS on the *INS Sumitra* was prepared with weapons and boats. Armed and ready for antiterror operations, this crack team would 'sanitize' the area surrounding the ship and provide a formidable layer of security. Other protective measures included a group of armed sailors who prepared themselves for possible ground combat. Six months old and on its first humanitarian mission, the *INS Sumitra* had just stepped into a war zone.

On the afternoon of 31 March, Aden loomed into view, the forbidding jagged rim of the ancient dormant volcano of Kraytar visible on the horizon. Thirty miles out and approaching, Cdr Mokashi and the rest of *INS Sumitra*'s crew heard the first sounds of war. The low thud of shells and the reverberating shatter of airdropped weapons wafted across the water. The old port in the distance was swathed in wisps of smoke.

About 22 km out, the *INS Sumitra* stopped. The port was closed for normal operations. And without clearance from Saudi Arabia, which now controlled airspace over the port and whose jets were carrying out uninterrupted strikes, moving the ship any closer could be catastrophic. Looking through binoculars at what had become one of the most dangerous ports in the world, Cdr Mokashi waited. The Saudis were taking their own time to respond to his request. With no eyes on the ground and very little information, the CO signalled his headquarters.

India's diplomats in Yemen, key facilitators of information and data crucial to a humanitarian mission, were all in the country's capital, Sana'a, over 400 km away. The only representative they had in Aden was the principal of an Indian school there, who doubled up as honorary consul. Cdr Mokashi dialled him, praying the call would connect.

It did, opening the first and very welcome conversation with an Indian on the ground and amidst the hostilities in Aden. Things would hopefully move faster now, Cdr Mokashi thought, as he ordered his crew to prepare a final approach into the port. But the Indian at the other end of the line was tense. 'Anything beyond 1730 hours is dangerous. We cannot be on the jetty

beyond that time. It is extremely risky,' he told the Indian warship's Captain.

It was already 1600 hours. And there were still no orders to move closer. Cdr Mokashi waited, wondering if he should move in anyway. But a quick calculation in his mind told him it was futile.

The ship's crew watched as the sky began to darken at dusk. A planned daylight rescue operation had just been sunk. With the spreading darkness, the crew of *INS Sumitra* knew that their mission had just become infinitely more dangerous—for the ship and for them.

In that darkness, as flashes of light erupted from Aden 14 miles away, Cdr Mokashi ordered his MARCOS to lower their vanguard boat and set out for the port. Led by an officer and armed with assault rifles and sidearms, the 8 commandos sailed through the darkness of the ancient harbour to 'sanitize' the ship's intended path. Peering through the darkness and careful not to give themselves away, the 8 men scanned the area for suspicious boats that may have entered after sunset. Terror groups or rebels would have anticipated the arrival of foreign warships and may have wanted to spring another *USS Cole*-like incident, or worse.

The waters were quiet, almost lake-like placid, their surface disturbed only gently by the distant rumbling. Reaching the barely lit port, the commandos docked their boat and stepped quietly on to land, their weapons cocked in every direction. The team leader signalled back to the ship that the area was tentatively secure, but they needed to be prepared for any eventuality.

As dusk gave way to night, the *INS Sumitra* was finally ordered to proceed towards the port. The deserted city was shrouded in a darkness that was lit up intermittently by gunfire and flares. Guided by a rudimentary map, Cdr Mokashi's crew downloaded a steady stream of inputs from the Indian Navy Headquarters in Delhi and the Western Naval Command in Mumbai.

Four miles off the coast of Aden, Cdr Mokashi got a call from his MARCOS team leader at the port. The commandos had found groups of Indian citizens sheltered inside shipping containers. This was good news.

But the commando wasn't finished. The numbers were more than double of what the crew of *INS Sumitra* had prepared for or expected. There were 350 people waiting to be rescued. And not one of them could be left behind.

At 1945 hours, *INS Sumitra* docked at the deserted port of Aden. A sole Yemeni individual at the harbour, possibly a port official, approached the ship as it docked. Aware of why the Indian ship had come, he issued an ominous instruction.

'You have 45 minutes to dock fully, get your people and leave,' he said.

Cdr Mokashi and his XO glanced at each other. *45 minutes*. Both knew that demand was beyond the realms of the possible. Even if the crew screened and embarked 1 Indian per minute, it would take 6 hours to board the 350. Of course, it would take far longer than a minute per person. Apart from regular screening for contraband, the ship's crew needed to deal with another threat—the possibility of a suicide bomber sneaking on board with the crowd. If the pressure at hand was not enough, the Navy Headquarters in Delhi called Cdr Mokashi to board the Indians and get out of Aden as soon as possible.

Wasting not a moment more, the crew of *INS Sumitra* began their work. Unused to the logistics of humanitarian screening, the crew started tentatively, gradually increasing the tempo and getting into the rhythm of their mission. Minutes before they began, their Captain had a word of advice for them.

'This is a mission of honour. These are our people. They've just been through a lot of trauma. They've had to leave their homes and belongings. Many of them will be women, children and the elderly. We have to deliver them out of this place in a very short time. But let's be as gentle with them as we can. No high-handedness. No harshness. Be firm, but not impolite. Let us imagine what they have been through,' Cdr Mokashi said to his men, as he formally called for the embarkation process to begin.

Around the berthed *INS Sumitra*, there were 2 layers of security. The 8 armed MARCOS who had arrived earlier formed a wide outer cordon ready to engage with any threat that emerged from the darkness. An inner layer of armed naval sailors formed a QRT near the embarkation point. On board the

ship itself, 2 MARCOS sat perched on one of the ship's masts. While 1 kept a watch with his binoculars, the other sat with his Israeli Galil 7.62-mm sniper rifle, his head bent to the telescopic sight, scanning the port for anything he potentially needed to take down.

The boarding finally began, with the Indian citizens being scanned, photographed and boarded. Their luggage was scanned separately and loaded into a different part of the ship that could be accessed once boarding was complete.

The Indian Navy does not yet deploy women on board warships. So to screen the many women among the 350 people, the crew of *INS Sumitra* enlisted senior women from the group who appeared relatively calm. Several of the Indians boarding needed immediate medical assistance for heart ailments and diabetes. Others needed to be calmed down after the trauma of escaping a bombed city. Many hadn't eaten in over 24 hours.

The crew had already vacated their cabins and quarters for the rescued Indians. Women, young children and senior citizens were given priority accommodation in the officers' and sailors' mess decks, carefully chosen so they did not need to climb the steep ladders between decks that make up the inside of any big warship.

A galley equipped to cook for 150 men was now fired up beyond its capacity to churn out meals for 500 persons. No sailor ate a morsel until every one of their 350 guests had been served and made comfortable.

While the journey from Aden to Djibouti was only 7 hours, Cdr Mokashi knew the Indians under his care needed rest and access to facilities on board his ship. Strictly functional and based on community existence between brother sailors and officers, privacy on board the warship needed to be taken care of with sensitivity. The ship's crew, all 150 of them, made it a point to make the women on board as comfortable as possible, staying out of their way and only appearing when someone needed help.

After the last Indian had been boarded, the MARCOS and naval sailors finally relaxed from their ready-to-fire positions and got back aboard their ship. As the ship pulled away from its berth, several people remained at

Aden awaiting rescue. But the *INS Sumitra* had permission to board only Indians—a restriction that would change a few days later.

Through that night, *INS Sumitra* sailed at full speed across the Gulf of Aden. After a few hours of adjustment, exhausted from worry and exertion, most of the rescued Indians fell asleep. Safe in the confines of the 2200-tonne warship from home, they were likely too tired to dream that night.

The *INS Sumitra* arrived in Djibouti at 0700 hours on 1 April. The arrival and disembarkation of 350 rescued Indians became a broadly televised event in the Indian media, with the Minister of State for External Affairs, Gen. V.K. Singh waiting at the port and famously addressing the crowd. Pictures of the ship, the tearfully relieved citizens and the smiling sailors would appear on many front pages. Cdr Mokashi finally afforded himself the luxury to exhale. He knew that his work had just begun.

The crew would have only a few hours to rest as their ship was fuelled and restocked—this time with more suitable equipment, including disposable plates and spoons. That afternoon, they received fresh orders to make a dash for a different part of Yemen—one that was literally in flames.

On 1 April, a dairy factory owned by Yemen's massive Thabet Brothers business conglomerate in the Red Sea port city of Al Hudaydah had been bombed, killing over 30 workers. Given the large number of Indian nationals living in Al Hudaydah and known to have been employed at that factory, it seemed likely that Indian blood had been spilt in that attack. It was towards this port town that Cdr Mokashi and his men accelerated their ship.

The approach to Al Hudaydah would prove even more challenging than Aden. While the latter could be navigated with some care, there was a standing advisory to all ships approaching Al Hudaydah to arrive and depart in daylight. With very limited room and once again without navigational charts, the port would prove a dangerous gamble. But Cdr Mokashi and his men had their orders. As they sailed slowly down the narrow approach channel to the familiar roar of fighter jets overhead, the crew of *INS Sumitra* did not know that Al Hudaydah had already fallen into the hands of

Houthi rebels. This meant dealing directly with an armed rebel group in order to secure safe passage for Indian nationals.

At noon on 2 April, the Indian ship docked at Al Hudaydah. On board, it was action stations. Every armed member, including the MARCOS, was in a state of maximum alert with every weapon primed and ready. It was daylight, but the crew of *INS Sumitra* had just sailed into what was easily one of the most dangerous zones in the world that day.

Houthi rebel officials who had taken over the port communicated directly with the ship as it docked, ordering the crew to embark Indian citizens and leave within 4 hours. As the sound of bombing and air strikes got closer, the Indians waiting at the port were rapidly boarded. With the practice at Aden 2 nights ago, the ship's crew breezed through the procedures. But an unexpected challenge arose—an Indian woman stepped up for the screening with her 7 children. And while she had the relevant documents, none of her children did.

Cdr Mokashi knew he did not have the time to conduct a background check. Nor could he bring the woman on board without her children. With strict orders not to board individuals who couldn't be screened completely, it came down to the young officer's discretion to allow the family to board.

When the ship was finally ready to leave with 317 Indians, rebel authorities would not give them permission to cast off. From India came the constant, and alarming, input urging the ship to leave as quickly as possible. Every conceivable threat to the ship had been imagined. Cdr Mokashi needed to make a decision. And once again, the day had given way to night.

Once again in pitch darkness, *INS Sumitra* inched its way out of Al Hudaydah's treacherous harbour. Cdr Mokashi looked out from the bridge as his ship felt its way out from another bombed and broken town. The moon's phase ensured that there was no natural light to give the ship's crew a hand. They sailed out blind.

Clipping at 25 knots (about 46 kmph) through the darkness, the ship's crew needed to ensure that the many children on board remained safe as they leaned over the ship's railings. As the adults slept, the crew remembers the children who fanned out, fascinated by the vessel and the new

experience that had been thrust upon them. This passage was a long one. After hours of play, the children were escorted back to their parents' cabins, where they proceeded to fall asleep. Twenty hours later, on the night of 3 April, the ship once again arrived in Djibouti.

After Aden and Al Hudaydah, it was the third Yemeni port that would prove the trickiest of the lot. The crew had just been ordered to steam at full speed to Al Mukalla, 480 km from Aden on the Arabian Sea. The capital city of Yemen's Hadhramaut region, Al Mukalla had just witnessed a terrifying series of attacks the day before.

On 2 April, terrorists from Al Qaeda in the Arab Peninsula (AQAP) had stormed several buildings in Al Mukalla, including a large prison, freeing hundreds of inmates (including 2 AQAP commanders) and looting millions from the central bank. A street war between the AQAP, the Hadhramaut Tribal Alliance and the Yemen Army was raging, with at least 15 people having been killed over 2 days. The AQAP had seized full control of the port town. As the *INS Sumitra* zipped across the gulf in response to a rescue call for 250 terrified Indian nationals there, the infamous Battle of Mukalla had just begun.

Sailing at full speed for nearly 40 hours, Cdr Mokashi and the crew of *INS Sumitra* arrived off the coast of Al Mukalla on the morning of 5 April. But there was no talk of docking, not even the suggestion of it. The port was closed and completely under the control of Al Qaeda terrorist affiliates, groups not disconnected from those who had bombed the *USS Cole*. Cdr Mokashi rounded up the ship's commandos and armed teams for a quick meeting. The men agreed. Getting any closer to Al Mukalla would heighten the possibility of a direct attack on the *INS Sumitra*.

With almost no intelligence about the capabilities of the terrorists who had seized control of the city and port, Cdr Mokashi would take no chances. The ship then received an input about another port town, Ash Shihr, about 63 km further north, with a PetroMasila oil terminal not far from the border with Oman. The company employed hundreds of Indians who also awaited rescue.

Unlike Al Hudaydah and Aden, where Cdr Mokashi and his crew managed with rudimentary maps to help them inch into unfriendly ports, they had nothing on Ash Shihr. Not a port for regular freight operations, it did not have a jetty, so berthing the ship was ruled out. *INS Sumitra* would therefore have to hold position a short distance off the coast. And in an extremely risky exercise, stranded Indians would have to be brought to the ship 1 boatload at a time.

The MARCOS team leader on board had his hands full that afternoon. His squad noticed a number of small boats in the sea not far from their ship as it arrived off Ash Shihr. Having done their homework about the area, they were aware that in 2002 in this precise area, an oil tanker, *MV Limburg*, chartered by Petronas, was attacked by Al Qaeda suicide bombers in a dinghy, killing 1 man from the crew and spilling a huge amount of crude oil into the gulf.

The Indian warship's crew knew that stopping or slowing down off Yemen's Hadhramaut region was possibly the most risky thing they could do in what was the world's most dangerous zone at the time. By now, the Indian Navy's rescue operations were well known around the world. Clear intelligence inputs warned the ship's crew that terror groups were almost definitely expecting them. There was no clarity about which of the many boats were friendly and which could possibly be carrying enough explosives to sink *INS Sumitra*, or at least paralyse her a very long way from home and turn her into a sitting duck for a bigger attack.

Over the next few hours, in one of the tensest humanitarian operations ever, 2 boats from *INS Sumitra* and 2 from the oil terminal delivered 203 Indian nationals to the waiting warship. A third boat carried the MARCOS and a fourth stood by for search and rescue with naval divers. Not for a second during those hours was a finger off the trigger of any of the weapons on board.

Boats neared *INS Sumitra* that day, but veered away. None came too close, saving the Navy men from having to use their weapons. Throughout the operation, Cdr Mokashi remained in contact with his headquarters in an effort to squeeze as much real-time intelligence as he possibly could for the

operation at hand. He knew he could leave nothing to chance. After many tense hours, the 203 Indians, including an infant, were safely on board. The ship couldn't have steamed out faster that night.

By the time *INS Sumitra* docked at Djibouti to deliver its third load of rescued Indians on the evening of 7 April, 2 more Indian Navy warships—frigate *INS Tarkash* and destroyer *INS Mumbai*—had arrived in the Gulf of Aden from Mumbai. While the burden of operations could now be shared by 3 warships, none of the ships could dock at Aden again. The situation there had deteriorated considerably. It had also been decided by this time that Al Hudaydah was logistically the most accessible port, both for the warships as well as stranded Indians spread across Yemen.

That evening in Djibouti, the crew of *INS Sumitra* got their first chance to speak with their families in India. Cdr Mokashi spoke to his wife and children, answering their anxious questions with the usual reassurances that are second nature to military personnel. His work wasn't over yet, and he wouldn't see them for the next 2 months.

INS Sumitra would conduct 2 more rescue operations from Al Hudaydah on 9 and 15 April, rescuing 349 and 403 persons on those final missions. In total, the ship pulled out 1621 stranded persons, which included over 600 foreigners from 26 countries. The Indian government had given *INS Sumitra* clearance to receive foreigners on board after being flooded with international requests following the first Aden rescue.

An elderly couple from Pakistan were among the foreign nationals Cdr Mokashi's crew rescued from Al Hudaydah. Cdr Mokashi remembers not knowing they were Pakistani until they introduced themselves personally to him in order to thank him. He was only doing his job, he told them.

Of the 9 rescue missions, *INS Sumitra* conducted 5, with 2 each by the other 2 Indian Navy ships.

On 16 April, after delivering their final load of Indian nationals to Djibouti, Cdr Mokashi and his crew, already heroes back home, got fresh orders. Seventeen days after they were diverted from their original mission in the Gulf of Aden, they were ordered to return to their anti-piracy patrol.

After 2 more months of securing ships and making its way up or down the gulf, *INS Sumitra* was summoned home to Chennai.

On Independence Day 2015, Cdr Mokashi was awarded with the Shaurya Chakra for ‘unparalleled valour, conspicuous gallantry, bold and daring decisive actions beyond the call of duty’. But Cdr Mokashi is uncomfortable with the individual decoration.

‘This operation wasn’t handled by me alone, or by one man. The success of the mission was by us as a team,’ says Cdr Mokashi, who was promoted shortly after his gallantry decoration to the rank of Captain. The government appeared to recognize the young skipper’s sentiment and *INS Sumitra* became the Presidential Yacht during the International Fleet Review and received a unit citation in 2016.

Cdr Mokashi’s father, who was seriously ill through 2015, tracked the brave operations under his son’s command through reports on television. In August 2015 when the government announced that his son would be decorated with the Shaurya Chakra, it became an overpowering wish for him to attend the ceremony and see his son receive the medal. But his health had dipped drastically. With great effort, the senior Mokashi was transported to Delhi for the ceremony on 22 March 2016.

He would pass away 20 days later.

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12

‘You Think It’ll Never Happen to You’

Squadron Leader Rijul Sharma

Jamnagar, Gujarat
1 June 2016

Sqn Ldr Rijul Sharma, 30 years old, woke up early like he always did. It was a warm Wednesday at the Jamnagar Air Force base in Gujarat’s Gulf of Kutch. A light breeze from the north-west whipped around the dusty skin of the station. If there was one thing Sqn Ldr Sharma knew as he squinted out of the window of his quarters, dressed in his shorts and T-shirt, it was that there couldn’t have been a better day for a flight.

The young pilot stepped into a patch of sun in front of his residence, stretching and twisting the sleep out of his bones. Like hundreds of other military aviators across the country that morning, he would be going through the paces of an exercise that keeps the Indian Air Force nimble, alert and ready for active operations.

But this was peacetime. The last time an Indian combat jet had been used in hostility was during the Kargil conflict 17 years earlier. Sqn Ldr Sharma had been 13 then, a boy who had just discovered his athletic gifts. He remembered the stories his father, a former Air Force pilot himself, told him

about Indian fighter jets cruising into hostile territory to blast away Pakistani intruders in Kargil. News channels, then in their infancy, beamed out grainy photographs and videos to a mesmerized Indian public. His father, who had flown DC-3 Dakota transport aircraft and Canberra light bombers in the restive North-east sectors decades before, was a living inspiration to the teenaged Rijul. The Kargil War merely sealed his fascination for flying.

Sqn Ldr Sharma had got married only a few months before. Pulling on a fresh T-shirt and jeans, he smiled goodbye to his wife, Deepika, and made his way to the operations briefing room at his unit, a MiG-29 squadron, about 3 km away. The squadron was constituted a year after the 1962 Indo-China war and code-named ‘First Supersonics’ because it was the first to operate supersonic MiG-21 jets. It has, since the 1990s, operated another type of aircraft from the same legendary Russian Mikoyan-Gurevich stable: the MiG-29 Fulcrum. It was the jet that Sqn Ldr Sharma flew.

The young pilot received his flying orders that June morning from his Squadron Commander. He was to conduct an ‘airframe and engine sortie’, a kind of torture test to ensure the aircraft is in top shape and capable of stretching itself to the physical limits it is designed for—a structured workout to keep the nuts and bolts humming, and pilots in sync with their machines.

Strapping a G-suit over his dark blue flight overalls, Sqn Ldr Sharma made his way out to the flight line to climb into the MiG-29 he would be flying that day. A final check of all systems and weather confirmed it was an excellent day to stretch the MiG-29’s limbs out over the shimmering Gulf of Kutch. He climbed into the familiar cockpit and strapped in, putting his helmet on. He would lower the visor later to keep out the harsh sun as he soared.

Power on, the cockpit came to life in a low wheezing hum as the MiG-29’s twin Klimov RD-33 jet engines were gradually brought to a ground idle position. Releasing the brakes, the pilot eased the jet out of its parking bay and taxied it on to the apron towards the end of the long tarmac. Sqn

Ldr Sharma sat in his cockpit, waiting for permission to take off. He glanced around, as he always did, at the base.

The Jamnagar Air Force station is an old, venerable combat base. It came up shortly after India gained independence, initially as a weapons training wing for pilots to hone their bombing skills. It was after Jamnagar proved enormously useful as a base to launch strikes into Pakistan during the 1965 and 1971 wars that it was upgraded to the status of a premier fighter aircraft base in 1979. In the early 1990s, the base received its first Soviet-built MiG-29 Fulcrums.

The Indian Air Force calls its MiG-29s '*Baaz*'—Urdu for 'falcon'. Sqn Ldr Sharma had been flying MiG-29s for years, and like his squadron mates, loved the eager agility the aircraft demonstrated in the air. Built as a highly manoeuvrable dogfighter during the Cold War, the jet had matured well across Air Forces, displaying a capacity for missions well beyond frenetic close combat. In Indian hands, the MiG-29s at Jamnagar proved worthy of a variety of missions, from defending airspace against testy airborne intruders from Pakistan to projecting power over the Arabian Sea armed with anti-ship missiles. Sqn Ldr Sharma and his jet had been scrambled several times before on such missions.

But on that June morning in 2016, there was no apparent threat. No intruders in the air or suspicious ships at sea to ward off. Just a clear, blue sky, and the comforting crackle of static in the earpiece embedded in his helmet. Sqn Ldr Sharma waited.

A few minutes later, right before 1000 hours, Jamnagar ground control gave him permission to take off. Sqn Ldr Sharma gently pushed forward the throttle, throwing the MiG-29 into a growl, then a steady roar, as the engine's afterburners created 2 licks of orange flame from the jet's twin nozzles, propelling the MiG-29 off the ground and into the air. He quickly put the jet into a steep climb to an altitude of 1000 metres, his peripheral vision under the fighter canopy noticing the base peel away from beneath and behind him.

Flattening out after his steep climb, Sqn Ldr Sharma did a quick systems check on the aircraft's airframe and twin engines. Then he fed the engines

some more fuel and steered the jet upward to an altitude of approximately 11,000 metres through a tenuous cloud deck that had blown in from the Gulf of Kutch. The Perspex glass of the fighter canopy glinted in the harsh sunlight at that altitude. Sqn Ldr Sharma levelled out his jet, bringing it into steady flight.

The test points he needed to achieve on that flight included stretching his MiG-29 to its limits in the ‘supersonic corridor’, where the aircraft would be flying at just over the speed of sound at that altitude, while executing a series of manoeuvres, all the while checking airframe response and engine performance. Sqn Ldr Sharma lowered his visor as the sun came up at him from the left. Several kilometres behind him, the Jamnagar airbase silently dropped away over the horizon.

Now cruising, the pilot increased throttle up to Mach 1.1 (1358 kmph), crossing the sound barrier, and proceeded to kick-start his routine of systems checks. The cockpit instruments beamed out their comforting figures, telling the pilot that all was well, and predictable. This is the one thing combat pilots love above all else: Predictability. Everything checked out.

About 110 km from base, just as Sqn Ldr Sharma was getting ready to begin his next set of manoeuvres, he noticed a whistling sound in the cockpit. it was a sound he had never heard before.

In a pressurized, air-conditioned fighter cockpit, a pilot only really hears 3 things: the steady hum of his engine, the radio voice from ground control and the sound of his own breathing, amplified by snug headgear designed to tune out any other sound. The sharp whistling sound immediately stood out as odd.

Sqn Ldr Sharma raised his tinted helmet visor and took a look around. As he did so, the whistling abruptly stopped. And then it happened again.

‘I looked up. The entire canopy had shattered and a part of it had blown off, with some parts crashing into the cockpit. I felt something smash into my shoulder and a sharp pain. It was a moment of shock. It took whole seconds for me to fully understand what had happened,’ says Sqn Ldr Sharma.

It was a situation that is as difficult to describe as it probably is to imagine. Sqn Ldr Sharma, still strapped into his cockpit, was flying at a screaming velocity in a jet that had no canopy. He was now totally exposed to a headwind that smashed him straight in the face, pinning him back in his seat with brutal force. And the terrifying roar of the wind at that speed brought with it a new evil—since he was still flying faster than sound, much of the sound was still ‘behind’ him. By now, only one thing had become totally clear to Sqn Ldr Sharma: he could barely move his right shoulder from the pain, and the rest of his upper body was quickly sinking into numbness from the sub-zero temperatures at that altitude.

Shaking away the shock, Sqn Ldr Sharma gathered himself and made a quick series of calculations, drawing on every bit of emergency training he had received as a flying cadet and rookie pilot, while his body steadily sank into a near-unresponsive state from the trauma and the temperature. He first did the one thing he knew he needed to before anything else: drop speed. The MiG-29 was still flying steady but shuddering now from the aerodynamic turbulence caused by the open canopy. It slowed down shakily as Sqn Ldr Sharma pulled back on the throttle.

‘Once I had gathered some of my thoughts, there was only one thing on my mind. I needed to recover the aircraft,’ Sqn Ldr Sharma says. ‘I remember thinking, “This is what we prepare and train for years. You never think it’ll ever happen to you. Then you realize why you learnt what you learnt.”’

The pilot continued to pull back on his throttle, hoping he could regain some of the physical faculties that had been rendered numb by pain and cold by this time. Slowing down to a subsonic speed, a loud, shuddering bang jolted Sqn Ldr Sharma, but also allowed him to push himself into a higher state of alert. Sound had now caught up with the jet. And it was ever more deafening. Cold and pressure crushed the pilot, hitting him in the ears, making him feel that painful pinch that only thin, high-altitude air can. His upper body was now completely numb, having been subjected to whole minutes of wind blast. His head was being thrown around in every direction

with every twitch of the jet, every whim of the air that roared into the cockpit.

(The Indian Air Force's formal description of the incident describes what Sqn Ldr Sharma went through at this time simply as 'discomfort'.)

Tumbling inside the cockpit and desperately trying to regain control, Sqn Ldr Sharma was now flying at about 500 kmph and had managed to descend to about 10,000 feet. He was still flying way too fast for comfort and there was literally nothing he could do about the cold—steady, insistent, like an icy sledgehammer against his face, neck and ribs.

Then, for the first time since the canopy blew off his jet, Sqn Ldr Sharma tried to make contact with ground control. There was no way he could have tried earlier. There was simply too much of a wind roar to hear anything else. Even at this slower speed, he could hear nothing, as he repeatedly radioed his controllers, relaying what had happened in a high-pitched scream, hoping to somehow convey his situation to anxious colleagues in the control tower. Over and over, Sqn Ldr Sharma bellowed into his radio talkie, screaming that he was returning to base for an emergency landing. The pain in his shoulder was now so severe that his right hand had become virtually useless. It hung limp, and there was little he could do with his fingers. Not one muscle would flex.

With his left hand, he continued to throttle down to 400 kmph and an altitude of a little less than 10,000 feet. Suddenly he realized he had another problem on his hands. The aircraft had proven capable of flying steady after the canopy blew off, but that didn't mean it was safe for landing.

Landing an aircraft puts a special toll on its airframe and metal skeleton. Sqn Ldr Sharma needed to be absolutely certain that the destroyed canopy hadn't damaged any other part of the jet, including its tail, wings and crucial movable control surfaces. There was no way he could tell for sure. It was impossible for him to twist around in the cockpit to take a look. He would have to take a chance, he told himself. What he didn't have to tell himself was that if something went wrong during the final approach or touchdown, he would have no time to punch out. Not a single moment.

At this point, the Squadron Leader could have taken a decision to eject from the damaged MiG-29. Ambiguity over whether the jet was safe for landing was solid justification to abandon the aircraft and punch out. Nothing is more important than human life, and pilots know that. Sqn Ldr Sharma tried once again to see if he could be a little more certain that his aircraft wasn't damaged. But he just couldn't do it. He waited 10 seconds, quickly rehearsing his next move. Then he made his decision—to stay with the jet.

With controllability checks barely complete, Sqn Ldr Sharma shaved the aircraft throttle back a little more. Ironically, slower and lower, the amount of discomfort and disturbance in the cockpit had only increased. The winds at this stage were more violent, the turbulence peaking near ground level as a result of denser sea-level air.

'I was slapped left and right in the cockpit by the turbulence. I couldn't hear much outside or on my radio talkie. I simply told ground control what I wanted to do,' he remembers.

The MiG-29, pretty much like a convertible now with its hood blown completely off, descended into final approach mode, the tarmac finally in sight. Sqn Ldr Sharma had begun to feel groggy from the pain in those final moments as he steered the aircraft into position for a landing. Miraculously, his yells from the wind-blasted cockpit had been heard, and airspace had been fully cleared around the normally busy fighter base that doubles up as a civilian airport.

At about 6500 feet, Sqn Ldr Sharma realized with no small measure of delight that he was able to get a burst of warmth when he flew through clouds. He did as much of this as he could before taking the aircraft down for its final approach.

As he came in to land, the ground controllers chimed in, informing Sqn Ldr Sharma that he would face 20 kmph head-on winds. 'Feels like 200 kmph straight on my face,' he screamed back at them, before lowering his wheels and executing a perfect landing on the Jamnagar tarmac. A rescue team and crash tender received him at the end of the strip, immediately pulling him from the jet and away from the area.

In his stretcher, Sqn Ldr Sharma glanced up smiling at the men who carried him away. Beyond their silhouettes was the still-glistening Jamnagar sky. The warm air wore the numbness off Sqn Ldr Sharma's injuries, bringing back a hot pain.

Straight to the base hospital, the Sqn Ldr was given a full medical check-up for concussion and his damaged shoulder. It was a blunt-impact injury with internal consequences, but no flesh wound. From his hospital bed, Sqn Ldr Sharma phoned his wife, Deepika, at their home on the base. Up until that point, she had had no idea what had happened—and he was thankful for that.

'She panicked. Anyone would. She rushed to see me. And it was only then that she knew everything was going to be okay,' Sqn Ldr Sharma says. The injured pilot called his parents in Delhi. His father, Wing Cdr Sandeep Sharma, and mother, Neeta, were shocked and anxious about their son's injuries, but they also hoped he would be able to fly again soon.

'I heard only a full hour after Rijul was back on the ground,' says the pilot's father. 'There was not a moment of pain or anxiety in Rijul's voice. He was totally cool and calm. He flies high but keeps his feet on the earth.'

His mother, Neeta, who had lived a life of anxiety waiting for her husband to return from his combat flights, braced herself before she spoke to her son.

'I know my son. When he's up there, he knows what he's doing,' she says.

'Rijul's mother is very brave. She reacted the same way I did. She was worried, but only I could see it. Nobody else could have said she was worried,' says Wing Cdr Sharma.

Back at the Jamnagar base hospital, Sqn Ldr Sharma's condition suggested that it might be a long stay in a recuperation ward. Amazingly, the young pilot proved fit enough to be discharged after only a few days. And a week later, he was back in a cockpit.

'The first sortie after I recovered was special. There was that overpowering feeling that I had just been through something. But then you keep talking to yourself. There's anxiety. But then you tell yourself it won't

be the same. And if it is, I'm trained for it. I've defeated it before,' says Sqn Ldr Sharma.

How did Sqn Ldr Sharma decide against ejecting from his stricken aircraft when the possibility of an unsafe landing was very real? A landing that could have killed him or rendered him incapable of flying for the rest of his days? Sqn Ldr Sharma is thoughtful. 'Ejecting could have been an option. I mean, it definitely was an option. But I wanted to first figure out if the aircraft was controllable. If I had lost control, I would probably have had to eject. I thought if I could save myself and the aircraft—that needed to be my priority.'

India's MiG-29 fleet is currently in a phased upgrade programme that makes the aircraft an ever more formidable multirole warplane. The aircraft that Sqn Ldr Sharma flew that day hadn't been upgraded yet. While safety is something the Indian Air Force takes very seriously, and spends enormous resources in zeroing in on the reasons for accidents, investigations are never simple affairs.

Sqn Ldr Sharma has a message for new pilots and those who aspire to join the Air Force.

'I have to convey a message to my younger brothers and sisters. I'd say that fighter flying is a wonderful profession, perhaps the best anyone can ever choose. There is an inherent risk that makes the profession challenging. Don't ever let a situation overwhelm you. You have been trained to tackle any eventuality. These are the times to put all those years of hard work and training to use. Even when I'm born again, I would like to be a fighter pilot.'

Sqn Ldr Sharma has been flying regularly since the incident. He was awarded a Vayu Sena Medal (Gallantry) on Republic Day for his courage, skilfulness and fortitude in the cockpit, saving not only his own life, but an expensive piece of national property—the MiG-29.

'I had no hesitation in jumping back into a cockpit after what happened,' says Sqn Ldr Sharma.

'As my father told me when I was joining the NDA, "Lead your life. Don't let life lead you."'

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Note: This chapter appeared first as a post on LivefistDefence.com

13

‘Every Chopper Pilot’s Worst Nightmare’

Squadron Leader Vikas Puri

Shillong, Meghalaya
12 March 2016

‘Her voice is soothing to the ears. But nothing she says is pleasant—especially if you’re airborne.’

At a height of 4500 feet above the Brahmaputra, Natasha’s voice pierced through the helicopter cockpit. Her tone was tailored to just the right pitch of matter-of-factness to not jolt the pilots, but with a polite insistence that could not be ignored. As the voice of the cockpit warning system built into the helicopter by its Russian makers, Natasha’s was the one female voice no pilot ever wanted to hear.

‘Service tank pump failed,’ the voice, inflected with a Russian accent, called out.

Sqn Ldr Vikas Puri, lead pilot of the Mi-17 helicopter, heard Natasha clearly. On reflex, he glanced down at his cockpit instrument panel for details about her warning. A pump feeding fuel to the helicopter’s 2 main engines had malfunctioned.

In a second, Sqn Ldr Puri had jogged through the flying manual in his mind, like all pilots do. Natasha was programmed to call out any problem the helicopter's systems encountered, big or small. And this was not a big one. The pilot knew that a service tank pump failure was not a major emergency that required drastic action like an emergency landing. Built with several layers of rugged safeguards, the Mi-17's engines had additional pumps to draw fuel in. Everything was okay. There was no need to worry.

That would change in the next 30 seconds. The warning he had just dismissed would escalate into a terrifying anomaly that would see the 13-tonne helicopter abruptly fall out of the sky like a stone, headed straight for the marshy Brahmaputra valley below.

It had been a perfect morning to lift off that Saturday, 12 March 2016. Sunny but mild, just after dawn, an uninterrupted, clear sky loomed over the Shillong airfield. The beautiful state capital of Meghalaya, also headquarters to the Indian Air Force's Eastern Air Command, is nestled in the Khasi Hills at an altitude of nearly 5000 feet. The weather that day could not possibly have been better for the flight bound to the North-east, to forward areas in the frontier state of Arunachal Pradesh and its long border with China-controlled Tibet. It was just another mission for Sqn Ldr Puri and his crew that morning, but their cargo, and intended destination, was anything but ordinary.

The man who was on board the Mi-17 that day was none other than the head of the Indian Air Force's Eastern Air Command. Air Marshal Chandrashekharan Hari Kumar was to be flown to 2 newly revived and rebuilt advanced landing grounds at Ziro and Along in Arunachal Pradesh to inaugurate them and declare them open for flying operations.

Having the Air Marshal on board that particular flight gave the helicopter its special radio call sign that day: EASTERN 1.

The 2 airfields on the China border in Arunachal Pradesh were among 8 that the Indian Air Force had identified in 2009 to bring back to life after they had fallen into disuse half a century before. Apart from giving military planners welcome additional air access to the North-east, the revival plan was also intended to be a direct counter to China's aggressive border

infrastructure build-up. A valuable benefit was that airfields provided new avenues for tourism into one of the most arrestingly beautiful parts of India. The Rs 1000-crore project involved giving the 8 defunct airfields new runways, air traffic control towers, buildings to handle cargo and passengers and other infrastructure for flight operations.

Air Marshal Hari Kumar, a highly qualified fighter pilot who had once commanded a front-line combat aircraft squadron, was fully aware of the significance and value of the inauguration he was to oversee that day. With him were his wife, Devika, and several officers from his staff, including Air Vice Marshal Manvendra Singh, a qualified chopper pilot.

Sqn Ldr Puri and his crew had risen early that day in Shillong, and headed straight for the airfield to prepare the Mi-17 before their VIP passengers arrived. A ‘ground run’ was conducted where the engines were switched on and the helicopter repositioned on the apron, ready for its guests.

‘The weather was great that morning. But we didn’t have a moment to lose,’ Sqn Ldr Puri remembers. ‘A violent western disturbance was likely to hit the Arunachal valley the following day, so we literally had only that day to carry out the commitment. If we missed the window, it was certain to be delayed by about a week.’

The workhorse Mi-17 successfully passed its ground tests, with all systems reporting normal and ready for flight. As the crew waited, Sqn Ldr Puri did a final check with the meteorological office at the Shillong base for a weather update along the path they would be flying to the border areas of Arunachal Pradesh.

‘Though the reported weather at our intended destination was still turbulent but improving, we decided to play it safe,’ says Sqn Ldr Puri, who briefed his crew and reported a final flight plan to the Shillong air traffic control. The Mi-17 would head towards Arunachal, but would make a stop at Tezpur in Assam along the way and wait there until the weather at the forward landing grounds had improved. This was as normal a ‘Plan-B’ as there ever could be for an air force fully used to contingency plans driven by fickle weather and terrain in their area of operations.

By 0720 hours, Air Marshal Hari Kumar, his wife and the 10-member staff boarded the Mi-17. Fifteen minutes later, the helicopter lifted off, climbing quickly to 6500 feet. It safely exited the Khasi Hills and arrived in the airspace over the plains of the Brahmaputra. Since this was an early flight and the airspace was largely clear, ground control in Assam cleared Sqn Ldr Puri and his crew to fly directly to Tezpur without any cautionary diversions.

The Mi-17 in military configuration is not particularly suitable for VIP transport. Rugged and functional, its large cabin does not shield its occupants from the steady roar of the main rotor or the intense vibrations that course through the machine during flight. But the Indian Air Force loves the Mi-17's toughness, a factor that has seen the government make this Russian-built machine the backbone of India's military chopper strength. With its familiar grey silhouette, the Mi-17 is deployed across the country and on every conceivable mission—from flood rescue in Srinagar to being used as a gunship for assault drills during military exercises and casualty evacuation operations in Maoist hotbeds. It has proven tough enough to even be deployed abroad for India's UN peacekeeping missions in Africa. The Mi-17 cruising that Saturday morning over the Brahmaputra was as reliable a chopper as they come.

'Everything was copybook perfect. I handed over controls to my co-pilot, Flight Lt. Adarsh Gupta, and picked up the map I had organized for the flight,' Sqn Ldr Puri remembers. It was a highly detailed map comprising a thick stack of laminated sheets of paper that opened out to the size of a bedsheet. It was far from handy.

In the cabin behind the cockpit, a member of Sqn Ldr Puri's crew welcomed the passengers on board and passed around bottles of water and Tetra Paks of juice. Noise from the rotor blades ensured that conversation of any kind was impossible in the cabin. The 12 passengers sipped water and juice, and periodically looked out of the Mi-17's blister windows at the glistening river 6500 feet below.

The helicopter had been airborne for 25 minutes and was flying above the river plains when Sqn Ldr Puri put it into a gentle descent to 4500 feet.

Almost immediately, the chopper flew into a pall of haze and visibility dropped drastically.

On the controls, co-pilot Gupta quickly checked with Sqn Ldr Puri if he could escape the haze by descending further. The request was immediately declined. There was a reason why Sqn Ldr Puri wanted to ‘hold height’ till the helicopter had crossed the Brahmaputra plains. Several reasons, actually.

Firstly, the higher they flew, the better their chances of being in range for radio contact. Sqn Ldr Puri wanted to remain in touch with Tezpur as much as he possibly could, since he was transporting the area commander and it was likely that ground control would want frequent updates. Secondly, higher flying altitude also had the benefit of greater airspeed and fuel efficiency. Finally, descending further would make the cabin uncomfortably warm. In the absence of air conditioning, the higher the helicopter flew, the cooler the cabin would be. Descent was therefore ruled out.

The Mi-17 was halfway to Tezpur and cruising comfortably at 4500 feet when Natasha broke her silence once more.

‘We were about 55 km from Tezpur, flying over marshy land and paddy fields south of the Brahmaputra, when the distress sequence started,’ Sqn Ldr Puri remembers. He had correctly deduced that the warning was not a grave emergency, but what happened next made it clear to him that the situation on his hands was what was classified in helicopter flying as ‘rarest of the rare’.

Sqn Ldr Puri instructed his flight engineer, Sergeant Surjeet Singh, to investigate the failed service tank pump to confirm Natasha’s warning. Just as he did so, Sqn Ldr Puri noticed that the helicopter was not flying steady and straight, but was slightly inclined to one side.

‘The artificial horizon ball (a cockpit instrument that reveals the aircraft’s orientation relative to the earth’s horizon) had jumped to the left at a steeper angle than normal. There was a feeling of being rotated to one side,’ Sqn Ldr Puri remembers. This was definitely not good. Quickly, he cautioned his co-pilot to steady the machine and fly straight so their passengers would not experience any discomfort.

The noise of the Mi-17's rotor might be too loud for any conversation that is not conducted through a headset, but it is also the most reassuring noise when you are suspended in mid-air.

'The noise made by the constant churning of 2 engines, the main gearbox grinding and the rotors beating the air into submission is deafening,' Sqn Ldr Puri remembers. 'But imagine being in a helicopter when all that reassuring noise suddenly falls silent.'

The silence arrived in a heart-stopping moment. Sqn Ldr Puri threw the map to the floor and stared down at his cockpit instruments in alarm. The main rotor's revolutions per minute had dropped below 88 per cent and the power generated by both the engines was rapidly winding down. In seconds, the helicopter would be stripped of all engine power. Sqn Ldr Puri had flown hundreds of hours in Mi-17s and other types of helicopters in service. He instantly knew what was coming.

'One of the worst nightmares for twin-engine pilots. That's what it was.'

Taking back control from his co-pilot, Sqn Ldr Puri pushed down the collective lever to his left. In a helicopter flight, lowering 'collective' would lessen the burden of staying airborne that is imposed on the rotors. With both the engines dying, the control input Sqn Ldr Puri had just provided pushed the Mi-17 into autorotation, a situation where the main rotor turns by virtue of the air moving up through it, rather than powered by an engine.

'For a fraction of a second, it was hard to believe that both the engines of our aircraft had failed and we were auto-rotating. It was something which happens next to never in a twin-engine aircraft. Both the engines going off together is perhaps the rarest of rare emergencies,' Sqn Ldr Puri says.

Jostled in the cabin with his wife and staff, Air Marshal Hari Kumar stepped up to the cockpit. A professional pilot himself, he was fully aware of what an in-flight emergency could be like. Cool but serious, he asked the pilots if everything was normal. Sqn Ldr Puri nodded back, but he knew that things were anything but. The other senior officer being flown that day, Air Vice Marshal Manvendra Singh, was a veteran Mi-17 pilot. Singh had been Sqn Ldr Puri's station commander at Udhampur in J&K and his

contingency commander during a deployment to the Democratic Republic of the Congo for UN peacekeeping duties.

The crew knew, therefore, that their passengers would be quite aware of how dire the emergency was. All-out panic appeared imminent.

Meanwhile, Flight Lt. Gupta, in disbelief, busied himself attempting to figure out if it was the autopilot that had malfunctioned to push the helicopter off its steady bearing. But if the 2 dying engines were not enough of a nightmare, the situation was about to deteriorate exponentially.

Two generators of the Mi-17, which drew power from the spinning main rotor, were now failing too. This meant that every instrument and system on board the helicopter would soon suffer the equivalent of being simply unplugged. Natasha chimed in with the inevitable announcement.

‘The cockpit voice warning came on announcing the failure of the first and second generators, with the chattering sound of warning lights flashing in the background. Autopilot had failed and our compass system had also switched off. Every system on board was dead,’ Sqn Ldr Puri remembers.

The chopper had begun to plummet through the sky at a rate of 10 metres per second. The steady death of rotor power made it an unwieldy, un-aerodynamic object that was jerked about by wind currents as it fell. Sqn Ldr Puri ordered Flight Gunner Ajeesh to ensure that the passengers were seated and secured as he decided on his next course of emergency action—a possible crash-landing in a paddy field. As he fought to steady the lopsided, falling Mi-17, he scanned the ground, which was now 3500 feet below, for a safe clearing. He knew that touchdown at this rate of descent would be violent, if not a complete disaster.

‘I hunted for a landing ground. We were flying over marshy land and flooded paddy fields. It had rained too. I could not identify any spot for an emergency landing,’ Sqn Ldr Puri remembers. The in-flight emergency had become a matter of life and death. Flying the ‘dead’ chopper now, he fought to keep it steady and in a gliding path for a few more kilometres in the hope that a clearing would present itself. He reduced airspeed to give him and his crew a few more seconds in the air as they fell towards the ground.

All preparations were being made on board for an emergency crash-landing. Flight Engineer Singh began turning off all systems to lower the chances of a fire breaking out on impact with the ground.

But Sqn Ldr Puri stopped him.

‘Hold on,’ the pilot called through his headset to his 3 crew mates. They stared at him. The Mi-17’s rate of descent had crossed 12 metres per second. Sqn Ldr Puri paused for a moment, running the scheme in his head once more before issuing the order. It was a huge risk, but it needed to be attempted.

‘Let’s try to relight and restart the engines.’

Drawing on years of training in the most critical in-flight emergencies, Sqn Ldr Puri was convinced that the Mi-17’s 2 engines had died from fuel starvation. He ordered the Flight Engineer to switch on the fuel bypass valve. But for the actual reignition of the engines, the crew would need a small on-board auxiliary power unit to be primed and ready—a process that would consume 30 full seconds, a frightful expense in the circumstances. The Mi-17, now at below 2500 feet, was falling so fast that it would smash into the ground in less than 90 seconds.

Those 30 seconds felt like the longest the crew had ever experienced as they waited for the auxiliary power unit to be charged and readied. Not a moment too late, Sqn Ldr Puri called out for the first engine to be relit and restarted.

The helicopter was now descending at an even more alarming rate. They were barely 600 feet above ground and less than 20 seconds from impact when they realized it.

Their plan had worked. The first engine had been successfully revived. In a flash, Sqn Ldr Puri ordered his co-pilot to pull up his levers to crank up power to the main rotor. Seconds later, the rotor began feeding on fresh power and spinning faster, rising to 98 per cent full speed. Raising the collective lever, the helicopter was now flying on a single engine brought back from the dead. Fifteen seconds from impact with the ground and near-certain death or crippling injury to all 16 on board, the Mi-17’s rapid descent was slowed down to a shuddering hover.

From the moment the engines died till the time the Mi-17 stopped falling, just 2 minutes had passed. In that time, the helicopter had dropped 3500 feet. Sqn Ldr Puri remembers being able to clearly see power lines and cattle grazing in fields from that height. But the emergency was not over yet —the helicopter's terrifying fall had been halted, but it was still only flying on 1 engine. Spotting a rice field that was flooded with water but clear of obstructions and power lines, Sqn Ldr Puri carefully manoeuvred the Mi-17 towards this possible emergency landing zone.

As the helicopter recovered delicately from its auto-rotating flight and began to hover, the second engine too came alive.

'On hearing the Flight Engineer confirm that the second engine had started up, I asked my co-pilot to neutralize the levers. We had just witnessed a miracle,' says Sqn Ldr Puri.

With both engines back to their steady hum and the reassuring roar of the rotors coursing back into the cabin, the Mi-17 slowly climbed back to 2000 feet.

'An emergency landing was still an option, just to be sure that nothing else happened to the helicopter. But I decided against it,' Sqn Ldr Puri remembers. 'My co-pilot had informed me that the nearest location was in fact our destination, Tezpur.'

Breaking their 120-second radio silence forced by the emergency, Sqn Ldr Puri and his crew now contacted Tezpur air traffic control, informing a dumbstruck officer at the other end that their Mi-17 had just recovered from a twin-engine failure. After a stunned pause, the officer asked if the Mi-17 needed assistance.

'I laughed to myself. What assistance could we get up there?' Sqn Ldr Puri remembers thinking.

The revived engines were spinning the Mi-17's main rotor at a reassuring rate. But the fuel bypass valve that Sqn Ldr Puri had ordered to be activated before the emergency recovery procedure had a disturbing effect. Aviation kerosene fumes were now billowing directly into the passenger cabin. This was a problem. With not long to go before they landed, Sqn Ldr Puri was dead against changing any of the emergency settings that had saved the

helicopter from crashing. And yet, he could not ignore the comfort and safety of his VIP passengers. Deciding against fiddling with the engine parameters, Sqn Ldr Puri ordered Flight Gunner Ajeesh to open some of the cabin's blister windows for ventilation. The roar of the rotors became even louder, but in came some welcome fresh air to dissipate the fumes.

Carefully controlling the Mi-17 at 2000 feet, Sqn Ldr Puri and his crew flew the helicopter straight to Tezpur, landing 20 minutes later safely amidst a ring of crash tenders and firefighting vehicles that had been deployed by the panicked ground staff.

Smiling and relieved, Air Marshal Hari Kumar, his wife and staff disembarked from EASTERN 1. While Sqn Ldr Puri and his crew sealed their helicopter and handed it over for a mandatory investigation by an Air Force inquiry team, the passengers proceeded to their destination a few hours later on board 2 Indian Air Force Dhruv helicopters.

Sqn Ldr Puri and his men would spend the rest of the day with bewildered officers at Tezpur, wondering how the crew of EASTERN 1 had saved an Mi-17 from twin-engine failure. The pilot's command and control over those 120 seconds would go on to become a legend, not only at his squadron, a helicopter unit at Mohanbari, Assam, but among the larger community of chopper pilots in service as well. It reaffirmed the Indian Air Force's flying training as being among the best in the world. And while a flight safety team from the Air Force would go deeply into the reasons why the dangerous failure took place at all, it would also ironically burnish the Mi-17's credentials as a machine rugged enough to return from the jaws of disaster.

Helicopters are not just tricky to fly; when they go out of control, it is virtually impossible to recover them. The fact that the crew was able to bring their chopper back just 15 seconds from a certain crash-landing was testament not just to the skill of those flying, but to the machine itself. The incident was therefore considered a vindication of India's decision to bet big on the lumbering Soviet-era design for present and future operations.

Those 120 seconds on EASTERN 1 would also be textbook material for the Indian Air Force flying cadets, a disturbing but powerful indication of

just how important their training could prove to be. For Sqn Ldr Puri, this was a poignant reminder. His own training had been anything but smooth.

As a young cadet at the NDA in 2000, shortly after the Kargil War, Vikas Puri had failed maths in his first semester. Certain that the cadet was headed for humiliation, Vikas's Divisional Officer, Maj. Sajan Moideen, had sent a letter to his father informing him that his son, with no real mathematical acumen, needed to switch from science to the social studies stream if he wanted to pass out with his batch.

Vikas's father, Vinod Kumar, was furious, but decided to respond to the letter. In a letter to Maj. Moideen, he began by saying:

> *Girte hain shahsawaar hi maidaan-e-jung mein*
> *Woh tifl kya girenge jo ghutnon ke bal chale?*
> (It is only those who ride a horse in the battlefield who fall How will they fall who crawl on their knees?)

It was a letter filled with hurt, but with a no-nonsense instruction. Quoted by Maj. Moideen years later in a blog post, Vikas's father had written,

> *My son has dreamt to become a pilot and by shifting his stream to social studies you are taking him away from his dream. Vikas may fail, but he will learn. I have handed my son over to you. Do what is required. You can kick him, kill him, but I want to see him as an air force pilot.*

His new licence to 'kick' Vikas into shape worked. Maj. Moideen applied an enormous amount of pressure on the cadet. It worked, but only partially. Vikas managed to barely pass his physical training tests, but his academic performance that semester was an unqualified disaster. He had failed completely. His marks in the mathematics paper were so low that the NDA decided to put him on a relegation list—equivalent to detaining a student for the semester.

Maj. Moideen received the news with horror. What would he say to Vikas's father? What explanation was possible, given that the man had put his son's future in someone else's hands? Maj. Moideen decided he could not see his cadet relegated. It would destroy whatever will he had to work hard. Every bit of work he had put into the young man would be a waste.

Mustering every emotion at his command, Maj. Moideen made a case for Vikas to be allowed to reappear for the exam instead of being held back for the whole term. The Academy agreed.

Vikas took the test again a few days later—and passed. He went on to graduate from the Academy 3 years later and proceeded to flying school, choosing to be a helicopter pilot. Vikas Puri would fly for 13 years without an incident before the death-defying mid-air encounter 4500 feet above the Brahmaputra.

Ten months after his leadership in the cockpit saved EASTERN 1, Sqn Ldr Vikas Puri was decorated with a Vayu Sena Medal for gallantry. The citation read:

In this fearless and courageous effort, he not only saved 16 invaluable lives but also a precious war waging asset. He showed exemplary valour, bravery, maturity, exceptional professionalism and situational awareness in tackling one of the gravest emergencies in a Mi-17 helicopter.

*

14

‘Could Taste the Blood on My Face’

Wing Commander Gaurav Bikram Singh Chauhan

Pokhran, Rajasthan
19 February 2013

Blood flowed down one half of his face from a deep gash between his closed eyes. He lay flat on a stretcher, his head tilted back by a neck brace that had been strapped on a few minutes earlier. Wading through a clutch of officers at the Jodhpur tarmac, Avantika Agarwal, 6 months pregnant, was calm in the only way she knew to be. As the Air Force personnel watched cautiously, ready to step in if she needed them, she made the final few steps to the stretcher, not pausing once. She would hold herself together in those minutes. And in that late winter dusk, through the bandages and blood, Avantika noticed something else. He was smiling.

Wing Cdr Gaurav Bikram Singh Chauhan had barely seen his wife that week. The Air Force station in the heart of the Thar Desert was in a high state of alert and activity. Combat aircraft from across the country had arrived there to prepare for a first-of-its-kind show of strength, code-named ‘Iron Fist’ a few days later.

Pokhran, the playground for the event, had been made famous by India's underground nuclear tests several years before. Iron Fist had nothing to do with nuclear weapons, but would involve an extended, relentless demonstration of brute air power that would include the use of real live weaponry. An audience comprising the country's leadership, diplomats from several countries and the global press had been invited to witness Iron Fist from a safe distance. The purpose was to serve a reminder to India's neighbours and the world that a peace-loving country could still wreak considerable damage on those who mistook that quality for weakness. If the exercise was provocative politically, as military drills often are, it was an enormous task for the Air Force. Over 100 aircraft were set to fly at Iron Fist in razor-sharp corridors that afforded crews zero margins for error.

Aircraft showing off their strength at the desert firepower show would include the MiG-21, Mirage 2000s from neighbouring Madhya Pradesh and Jaguar fighter bombers from Ambala. Raising the pitch at the exercise with a list of live precision bombing runs would be the Indian Air Force's most formidable front-line jet, the Russian Sukhoi Su-30MKI. It was one of these that Wing Cdr Chauhan and his flying mate, Sqn Ldr A.R. Tamta, strapped into earlier that Tuesday, 19 February 2013.

With Sqn Ldr Tamta flying and Wing Cdr Chauhan the designated weapons systems officer in the rear cockpit, the big fighter, India's largest, was fitted out with 18 100-kg bombs—6 on each wing and 6 slung on to hard points on the aircraft's belly. The 2 men had been cleared for a night training flight that involved a bombing run from an altitude of 7000 feet.

It was still cold in the Thar and the sun was almost out of sight when their jet roared down the main runway of Jodhpur's Air Force Station. At their home in the desert base, Gaurav's wife, Avantika, knew he would be flying that evening. He flew every day. Like most family members of pilots, she heard the roar of the Sukhoi's twin monster NPO Saturn AL-31FP engines and made a mental note that her husband was now airborne. A veneer of anxiety would creep in, and stay until she could hear the sound of the jet returning to base. This was routine.

In the air over the Thar, Wing Cdr Chauhan and his mate quickly put the Su-30 in a climb to about 6900 feet, their designated cruising altitude. As Sqn Ldr Tamta manoeuvred the jet from the front seat, in the rear cockpit, Wing Cdr Chauhan quickly programmed parameters for the bombing run. The drill would see the bombs released over the Chandan desert range.

The Su-30 wasn't alone over the Thar that evening. Other aircraft were also airborne, rehearsing for the final event 4 days later. Wing Cdr Chauhan knew that he was sharing airspace with 2 confirmed aircraft. One was a Jaguar, piloted by Wing Cdr Chauhan's course mate from the Academy, also on a bombing run. The other was the Israel-built Heron surveillance drone that had been deployed to film the bombing runs with its thermal night-vision camera and synthetic aperture radar.

Wing Cdr Chauhan used the aircraft's mission computer to select waypoints, giving the jet map markers to navigate through for the weapons release. The markers would be carefully chosen to account for the long arc the bombs would trace before hitting the ground. The navigation data punched in, the jet was switched to autopilot for the run. For the duration of the weapons release, the pilot, Sqn Ldr Tamta would be required to press the fire trigger on his flight stick. When Sqn Ldr Tamta pressed the button and held it, the first bombs should have begun to drop.

They didn't.

The Su-30 is a big truck of a jet. It doesn't shudder easily. But when Sqn Ldr Tamta pushed down on that trigger, Wing Cdr Chauhan experienced 2 things: (1) an extremely bright flash of light—bright enough that he could only see white when he closed his eyes for a moment; and (2) the heavy jet was jerked violently off its level course. It became instantly clear to both men that something catastrophic had just happened.

The bombs on the fighter's right wing had detonated without detaching, instantly destroying much of the wing and sending high-speed debris smashing at the fighter canopy and into the cockpit.

These few seconds would later be described by the Indian Air Force in a report thus:

> [This was followed by] the aircraft being engulfed in a large ball of fire and breaking up into several parts in mid-air. The explosion on the right wing caused it to be ripped off at the root and the aircraft viciously spiralled downwards in an uncontrolled trajectory with a very high rate of descent.

Wing Cdr Chauhan felt shards of the shattered canopy crash into his face. His helmet visor had shattered too, with a piece of it cutting him right between the eyes, but he wouldn't know it at the time. The thing that changed the most in the cockpit was the noise. Through the vortex of the fractured canopy, a deafening whoosh of high-speed wind made all communication between the pilots impossible. Sitting a few feet apart, the pilots could not talk.

As Wing Cdr Chauhan and Sqn Ldr Tamta fought to regain control of the Sukhoi, which had by this time begun to break up mid-air, something was heading straight for them through the darkness over the Thar. If there was one thing worse than sitting strapped into an aircraft that had just lost a wing and nearly all its structural strength, here it was: an aircraft, heading straight in their direction.

The two would later learn it was the Heron drone that was about to crash right into them. But before the drone overshot them, the Su-30 had lurched into a steep nose-down posture, turning in a loose rightward spiral, heading towards the Thar below. The wind through the canopy fracture brought with it the whiff of explosive—the first real confirmation to Wing Cdr Chauhan that the weapons had detonated on the aircraft.

By this time, Wing Cdr Chauhan had attempted at least thrice to punch out of the doomed jet. But the heavy turbulence and wind blast had put him fully out of reach of his ejection handle. The fighter had by now attained a dangerously high rate of descent. In a final effort, Wing Cdr Chauhan pushed with everything he had against the railing of the cockpit, burning hot at the time, and managed to pull the ejection handle. Seconds later, both pilots blasted out of the Su-30 in their NPP Zvezda K-36DM ejection seats, sideways and outward, their parachutes deploying instantly at that depleting altitude.

Wing Cdr Chauhan held on tight to his parachute cord, too shaken to even try shifting his position to locate Sqn Ldr Tamta who, as it turned out, was not far behind him and descending from a little higher. As they sank into the darkness over the desert, a fresh wave of fear engulfed them.

Wing Cdr Chauhan remembered the Jaguar his course mate was flying in the area at the time, and knew that it was probably just about primed for its own bombing run. He said a silent prayer, hoping that ground control had managed to figure out what had happened and instructed the Jaguar to keep its bombs and peel away from the area. Fortunately, officers on the ground had immediately latched on to the Su-30's catastrophic air incident and cleared airspace over the Chandan range. In his Jaguar, Gaurav's course mate, worried by what ground control had just informed him, returned to base without releasing his bombs.

The unmanned Heron had been a terrifying near miss, but was kept in the air, every single one of its cameras and sensors pointed straight at the crashing Su-30. From the darkness above the Thar, the drone had silently managed to film the terrifying incident: the blazing right wing, the Sukhoi in its howling downward spiral, the awkward ejection and, most disturbingly, the flaming debris that rained down around Wing Cdr Chauhan and Sqn Ldr Tamta as they parachuted downward, some of it dangerously close. One touch was all it would have taken to destroy the synthetic material of the parachutes.

Descending in the darkness with little or no depth perception to tell how far away from the ground they were, the 2 pilots separately and coincidentally recalled what they had seen the previous day during a 'paradrop' from a C-130J Super Hercules transport aircraft over Pokhran. The Army paratroopers had landed and quickly rolled over to the front to avoid injuries from the faster-than-it-looks descent. Both pilots decided that this is precisely what they would do. Except, they couldn't see the ground as it rose towards them from below.

As Wing Cdr Chauhan finally grasped depth bearings, he noticed a well bang in the middle of his descent path. The emergency parachute was a life-saving device and wasn't highly manoeuvrable. *Great!* he remembers

thinking, *I've punched out of a flaming Su-30, and now I'm headed straight for a well in the middle of the desert.*

He made a strenuous effort to coax the chute in a different direction. And he thought he was imagining things when he saw the well actually move with him. He was 30 feet from the ground when he realized what that well really was: the shadow of his parachute. Tamta would later confirm he had the precise same sequence of hallucinations. Both pilots rolled forward in the sand when they landed.

By this time, Wing Cdr Chauhan could taste the blood on his face. He did a quick check to make sure he was okay. No injuries to his limbs. His back was okay. No apparent compression fractures to the spine, a common effect of ejection from a fighter. He was, as they meaningfully say in the military, in 1 piece.

Wing Cdr Chauhan then pulled out a cell phone from the thigh pocket of his flight suit to quickly take a video of his face. Blood flowed from the deep gash between his eyes. His left hand was badly burnt, probably while holding on to an air scoop that was spewing burning hot air during the final attempt to eject.

Shaken and bleeding, but assured that he was safe and had survived, Wing Cdr Chauhan wanted to let his wife know. Hoping she would hear it from him first, he texted her: 'Ejected. Am OK.' In Jodhpur, Avantika hadn't heard. She called her husband back that second. Over and over she called his number, but Gaurav wasn't picking up. Out there in the desert, his phone's battery was low and he needed the light from his cell phone to signal to a rescue chopper that, with guidance from the Heron still buzzing above, had zeroed in on the pilots who had landed about 1 km apart.

Overshooting the 2 pilots a few times, the helicopter couldn't seem to zero in on their precise location. Wing Cdr Chauhan remembers standing in the desert rejecting a barrage of incessant calls—most of them from Avantika—so he could signal to the chopper. Exasperated by the non-stop ringing, he finally picked up. It was Avantika. She tried not to let the worry show in her voice, but remembers fighting hard not to break down. Her husband's message had pre-empted panic, but he was still out there. And

wasn’t safe just yet. At the other end of the line, Wing Cdr Chauhan gently told his wife that he was okay, and to *stop* calling!

The 2 pilots were picked up and transferred back to base on stretchers, where the crash had created an enormous buzz, coming as it had right before a nationally televised event of political and diplomatic importance. With only superficial cuts and burns to treat, the 2 pilots did not have to face the unthinkable of never flying again.

On Independence Day 2013, Wing Cdr Gaurav Bikram Singh Chauhan was decorated with a Vayu Sena Medal for gallantry. The award carried with it a citation that spared no description:

In face of such [*an*] *unprecedented situation wherein the aircraft bursts into flames with no warning of impending failure Wing Commander Gaurav Bikram Singh Chauhan displayed exceptional courage, situational awareness, uncommon reflexes, in extricating himself and crew member from a distressed aircraft.*

If anything could define the cliché of a life-and-death situation, an in-flight emergency in a combat aircraft would do it better than most things. Pilots like Wing Cdr Chauhan are thrust into situations where they have to make a choice in less than a few seconds. In a flaming jet screaming towards the ground, a decision postponed by milliseconds could make all the difference. Sqn Ldr Rijul Sharma fought a terrifying emergency in his MiG-29 to arrive at a choice that could have killed him. But he felt he was equipped with the instinct and skill to justify that decision. For Wing Cdr Chauhan, the choice to stay with the aircraft never came up. Facing a similar catastrophe, but with an aircraft that could in no way be saved, his decision was whether to submit to the situation and go down with the jet, or fight through a physically unimaginable position to depart from an aircraft headed for certain doom.

Gaurav and Avantika’s son was born 3 months after the accident. It would be many months before Wing Cdr Chauhan was cleared to fly again. It was a worrying time for the young fighter pilot.

‘I remember being surprised at how keen he was to get back into a cockpit again,’ Avantika remembers. ‘It was more than a year after the

accident that he was allowed back into an aircraft again. And he was so thrilled! I guess, once a fighter pilot, always a fighter pilot.'

The strain with which a pregnant Avantika held herself together to deal with the accident would have a lasting impact on her.

'I didn't think I was affected much by the accident. I only realized how much I was when the phone rang unexpectedly the first time Gaurav went night-flying after the accident. Palpitations and a cold sweat broke out. It was just Gaurav calling to chat because he hadn't gone flying. I remember telling him *not* to call me at a time I was expecting him to be airborne because I expected it to be bad news and I really couldn't handle the stress any more.'

The Indian Air Force court of inquiry would take years to figure out what went so catastrophically wrong over the Thar that night. While it was finally put down to a technical glitch, only the Indian Air Force would know just how close both men got to going down with a fighter on fire that moonlit night.

Avantika has advice for the families of pilots and warriors: 'Having seen how our fighter pilots function, the stress they work under, all I can say is that families need to be supportive and think positive. The usual rules don't apply to our fighting forces.'

They never do.

❋

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Glossary

2IC	Second-in-command
AQAP	Al Qaeda in the Arab Peninsula
Col.	Colonel
Gen.	General
IMA	Indian Military Academy
J&K	Jammu and Kashmir
LoC	Line of Control
Lt.	Lieutenant
Maj.	Major
MARCOS	Marine Commandos
MONUSCO	United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo
NDA	National Defence Academy
NSCN-K	Nationalist Socialist Council of Nagaland-Khaplang
Para-SF	Parachute Regiment (Special Forces)
PoK	Pakistan-occupied Kashmir
PONI	Posted out, not interested
QRT	Quick Reaction Team
R&R	Army Hospital Research and Referral
Sqn Ldr	Squadron Leader
Thoise	Transit Halt of Indian Soldiers En Route (to Siachen)
UN	United Nations
UNGA	United Nations General Assembly
Wing Cdr	Wing Commander
XO	Executive officer

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