

TWENTY-EIGHT



We were now in the second term and it was time for the camp. As camps go, one would expect them to be enjoyable experiences, but NDA had taught us that harbouring such expectations was foolish. This particular camp was a big pain for the overworked GCs. Apart from all other routine parades and exercises, it involved a strenuous scaling of the hills in Mussoorie while carrying all kinds of equipment and accessories that the sadistic instructors could think of.

Although we were accustomed to early rising, the day began a trifle too early for our comfort. Dawn had yet to break when we clambered into one of the two dozen trucks, which in all fairness, should have been retired a decade ago. Sighing, we settled down for a bumpy ride. The convoy left the main road and wound its way through mountainous terrain, with the loose parts of our vehicle making a racket.

The journey to the campsite was long and bone-rattling. Our bodies bounced as though we were on a trampoline. Loaded with an early breakfast, our bellies were not suited for the torturous drive. We had started singing songs and cracking jokes, but the enthusiasm petered off as the journey progressed. Silence descended, broken only by an occasional grunt or a curse. Soon, we lost track of time and distance.

Most army drivers give a damn to the conditions of the road and the vehicle; their goal is to reach the destination, come what may. We tried hard to keep ourselves upright. The smarter cadets were already spread-eagled on the floorboard. Porky sat holding his aching belly. The dozen sandwiches, half a dozen boiled eggs, a few bananas, and two large mugs of tea were churning inside his cavernous abdomen, waving a banner of dissent. The guy believed in loading up his tank at every available opportunity, for who knew when the next meal would come.

The road eased a little and we began nodding off, swaying in rhythm with the movement of the vehicle. The GCs who had managed to make themselves comfortable on the floorboard were snoring as though they lay on thick mattresses. The ex-NDA cadets had mastered the art of catching their forty winks under all conditions; hospitable and inhospitable.

The truck lurched over a huge boulder and came to a grinding halt. Stretching

and yawning lazily, we stood up and surveyed the scene. We were many kilometres away from the city. The mountains and the verdant valleys brought out the poet in me. I would have given anything to live in the wilderness forever, but my poem was cut short as somebody pushed me from behind and I jumped out of the vehicle.

The ustaads had all arrived. Herding us like sheep, they pushed us towards the trucks laden with the stores. For the next forty minutes, we worked like coolies as we unloaded the heavy stuff and placed them in the designated areas.

We pitched our 180-pounder tents on the slopes of a hill located not far from a village. These tents housed eight cadets each, and the seven chosen to be housed in my tent were – Maachh, Porky, Zora, Sandy, Makkhi, Mooli, and a DE called Ratty. The cramped space was soon littered with our sleeping bags and paltry belongings.

The sun was dipping rapidly, almost as though it was late for a rendezvous. The sky was splashed with vivid colour. Tired and dusty, all we wanted to do was hit the sack. The thought of bed accelerated our pace and we worked harder. The sooner we finished the tasks, the more time we would have for rest. It was late evening by the time we managed to bring a semblance of order to our surroundings. Tents pitched, beds unrolled, we put up our feet.

‘All I need is a bath and some food,’ I said.

‘And then some sleep...’ added Makkhi.

‘A lot of food and sound sleep; the perfect recipe for happiness,’ Porky mumbled.

The wish list was lengthening.

‘And some nice music...’ said Ratty, the DE. ‘And I will be in seventh heaven,’

‘Don’t even mention that,’ shouted Maachh.

The mention of seventh heaven never fails to invoke painful memories in the ex-NDA cadets. To them, the two simple words signified a journey through hell and back, maybe twice over. (Seventh heaven is a favourite punishment meted out by seniors in the NDA, where one had to hang from the sharp edged seventh

horizontal wire of the mesh that covered the ventilator).

‘Sorry, I shouldn’t have mentioned seventh heaven,’ Ratty apologized. It was not his fault, really. Since he was a Direct Entry, he had no idea about our agonizing association with those words.

‘It is so peaceful here,’ remarked Porky, who had dug deep into his sleeping bag and was preparing for a blissful snooze. With his belly still burdened with the food he had tucked in, he could afford to wait for another hour for the next one.

As if on cue, the ustaad entered the tent and Sandy, who was lolling in his bed just near the entrance, was sent off to get water. Last spotted, the guy was clambering onto a water tanker with a scowl on his face.

It was getting dark and we were famished. As soon as the water tanker arrived, huge canvas tubs were filled with water. The sight of clear water in the tubs drew us like bears to a honeycomb. Soon, we were splashing water all over our bodies to wash away the muck and grime. Refreshed after the bath, we enjoyed dozens of puris for our dinner.

Shortly after, we hit the sack. We had barely slipped into a dreamless slumber when Paltu arrived, unannounced.

‘What have we here?’ he said, his voice saccharine. ‘My, my, sleeping beauties, and eight of them at that!’

The very next moment, his yell had crossed 110 decibels – ‘And who do you think is going to dig the snake pits, you lumps of lard. Get the shovels and prepare the pits. NOW! ON THE DOUBLE!’

In a trice, we jumped out of our beds and began digging. It was a mandatory requirement which we had disregarded, hoping no one would notice. Since our tent was located at the very edge of the camp, far away from the others, we didn’t think it would be inspected at night. To be fair, we intended to complete the task in the morning but Paltu’s visit had jeopardised our plans.

It is incredible how quickly a guy will finish a task when he wants to catch up on his sleep. We finished digging in ten minutes flat, and were back in our hastily made beds. Minutes later, a discordant orchestra of snores resounded through the silent night.

I had barely gone to sleep when I felt the few drops of rain land on me. Shouting that the tent was leaking, I sprang up to discover that the drops were coming from Mooli's dripping underwear. The idiot had strung a rope across the tent and hung his wet underwear on it, and the water from it was dripping right over my bed. I cursed the chap and threw the offensive bit of clothing on his bed. The guy seemed immune to all disturbances, and continued to snore without any sign of discomfort.

The next morning, we were up at the crack of dawn to improve the layout of our tent. We straightened our beds, lined up our boxes, strung up strings, and neatened the interiors. Satisfied with our handiwork, we turned our attention outside the tent. Laying out the pathway, cleaning up the surroundings, and setting things in order in the camp took away an hour, after which we rushed for an early breakfast.

It was going to be a hectic day with an outdoor theory class followed by a practical exercise. A dummy village had been set up a few kilometres away for the purpose.

We were assigned the task of cordoning off and searching the dummy village to flush out the militants who were hiding in it. The GCs were to be divided into two groups. While the cadets in one group, along with ustaads, would playact as militants who occupy the village and defend it, the other would act as the search party responsible for attacking and capturing them.

After the theory class, the ustaads arrived and asked for volunteers for both the groups. Sensing that the GCs who volunteered to attack the mock village would have to march a long distance in the dark, accompanied by the ustaads, not many hands went up to volunteer. The volunteers for the group that was to occupy the mock village were many. These guys had the easy job of waiting in the dummy huts after they were transported to the village in trucks. Not keen on being singled out for the attack party, many GCs slunk to the back rows, trying to make themselves invisible. The ustaads were familiar with the tricks used by the cadets.

'Gentleman Cadets, all those standing in the back line will be in the attack party,' ordered the Ustaad.

'Koi volunteer?' asked another ustaad.

A few of us took the honourable way out of the situation by opting for the attacking team. After slight hesitation, Porky and Zora also volunteered for the attacking team. Split in smaller groups, we were to march through mountainous terrain to reach the point of rendezvous. Maachh and Sandy lingered and managed to get themselves selected for occupying defensive positions in the mock village. Once the teams had been finalised, the defending party was transported to the village in a truck.

‘Bloody malingerers,’ muttered Zora as Maachh and Sandy waved from the truck.

‘That’s not fair,’ Porky rose to the defence of his pal. ‘Someone has to volunteer for the defending party.’

Our platoon of thirty-six GCs marched silently through rocks and brambles with heavy equipment slung on our shoulders. Only those who have marched through rough terrain, dressed in battle dress and weighed down with backpacks, will know what an ordeal it can be.

With the sun beating down ferociously, a long march is anything but enjoyable. Our tongues hanging out like dogs in the desert, we marched in the heat. The moment a break was announced, we headed for the nearest patch of shade, removed our backpacks, and lay down for a couple of minutes. Some of us even managed to catch a nap and could be heard snoring.

Climbing the hill was bad enough, but carrying the deceptively- named Light Machine Guns (LMG) was a real pain in the ass. Quite literally! The GCs, however, are an inventive lot. We had our own ways and means to wriggle out of such situations. In this case it was the GPS.

For some people today, the acronym stands for Global Positioning System, but in our time, it translated into Gujjar Positioning System. Aware of the hardships the cadets had to undergo, some enterprising Gujjars (shepherds) loitered around the hills during the camping season. Their services came at a steep price – guiding us through the hills cost 100 bucks, carrying the LMG was 100 bucks, and for every other extra pack, it was 50 bucks.

Even the hardest of us didn’t mind scratching the bottom of our scanty resources to lighten the burden. The Gujjars were smart chaps. They knew the exact location where we had to report. Without their help, it was near impossible to

find the route. We could be roaming endlessly around the forests. They knew each and every shortcut through the forest. They also knew where the instructors were waiting for us. Once we neared the location where the instructors were waiting, money and equipment would change hands. The Gujjars would pocket their fee, hand over our equipment and disappear. At this juncture we made full use of our acting skills as we panted up the hill with our back packs and pretended to be extremely exhausted.

Using our Gujjars, we marched towards the dummy village. Dusk was setting in by the time we reached the fringes of the village. We decided to wait for a while before launching the attack, since we were sure that the GCs in the half a dozen huts of the mock village would soon fall asleep. Tired and sweating after the arduous march, we crept in the shadows, waiting.

An hour later, with the ustaads breathing down our neck, we decided to launch the final assault. The ustaads warned us to be careful since the terrorists in the mock village would be ready and waiting for us. They would have a well-planned strategy for a counter-attack, he told us.

Stealth and surprise are important, the ustad whispered. Take them by surprise, don't allow anyone to get away, we were instructed. Victory will be yours!

With Maachh around, the terrorists were not likely to have a plan, we were confident. He was sure to goof up things with his impractical ways.

It was absolutely dark when we began moving towards the village. Cautiously and stealthily, we crept closer to the huts in small groups, intent on startling the fellows. I burst into one of the huts standing in the shadows and was greeted by loud snores. Groping in the dark, I stumbled against one body and then another. Maachh and his gang were fast asleep.

I wasn't surprised. What I did not know was that the ustad had followed me into the hut. I located and kicked the Bong, who turned on his side.

'Wake up you idiot and fight,' I whispered in the dark.

The crazy guy muttered sleepily: 'Pessi, don't trouble me. Go to sleep.'

I went around, kicking all the sleeping GCs, trying to wake them up. In the meantime, the furious ustad shook Maachh.

The stupid fellow, mistaking the ustaad for me, mumbled sleepily: ‘Shhhh... Don’t disturb. Just lie down and sleep.’

What followed was straight out of the Sad Sack comics. It was not something Maachh was likely to forget, ever. The irate ustaad shone his torch into the Bong’s face and yelled at him. Rubbing sleep out of his eyes, Maachh stood meekly awaiting his doom.

One by one, the ustaad roused the sleeping cadets and ordered them to line up.

As a punishment, the group was ordered to march back to the camp while the attacking party got a ride back to the camp. We had the last laugh as we watched them toiling up the hill with their equipment and backpacks.

Cursing their luck, Maachh and his gang marched through the brambles and rocks for the rest of the night.

The only saving grace was that the ustaad didn’t report their un-officer like conduct to CoCo.

This was the very first exercise and Maachh was losing out on his OLQ (Officer-Like Quality). OLQ holds an important part in the making of an officer, and the repentant guy was now determined to make up for lost ground. He decided to impress CoCo with his OLQ during the next exercise, which was supposed to be a mock-up attack in the mountains.

We had never seen him work so hard. Diligently, he mugged up the orders for the attack and practiced them repeatedly. We encouraged the Bong and helped him work out a fool-proof strategy.

At the last minute, when it was time to volunteer as a leader, he developed cold feet and lurked in the background. All our efforts to tutor him came to a naught.

‘You have let us down at the last minute,’ Zora scolded. ‘Why didn’t you volunteer to lead the attack?’

‘I can’t do it,’ he replied. ‘I am not confident about the strategy.’

‘You have lost the opportunity to prove yourself. It was your only chance and you screwed it up.’

‘Fate knocks twice,’ Maachh justified. ‘The first time it knocks and the alert ones hear the knock. The next time it knocks for the lethargic. There is no third time, of course. Don’t worry, I won’t miss the knock next time.’

True to his words, opportunity knocked on his door a couple of days later. This time he didn’t ignore the knock. This time, bent upon proving himself, the brave Bong volunteered to lead the attack.

CoCo thumped his shoulders encouragingly, delighted at the transformation in the slacker.

It was a night attack and the group, led by the reformed Fish, set out to attack the opponents. Shouting the commands he had practiced carefully, Maachh led his brave men into the fray.

‘Don’t let a single enemy slip out,’ shouted Maachh. ‘Get the entire lot of them.’

Motivated by their enthusiastic leader, the cadets unleashed their fury on the enemy.

Expecting laurels, Maachh and his men marched back to the camp. Instead of rewards, they found themselves facing a frothing and fuming CoCo.

‘You are a terrible failure,’ CoCo ranted. ‘You don’t possess a single drop of OLQ.’

Maachh was aghast. As far as he knew, he had done a fantastic job and returned victorious.

The instructor continued to scold. ‘You bloody idiot, have you lost all sense of direction? You marched in the wrong direction and led an attack on your own troops entrenched in the bordering area. You were supposed to attack the enemy, not your own team. Thanks to your blunder the entire exercise was a total flop.’

There was no redemption for Maachh. The guy had managed to ruin the entire exercise.

‘How was I to know that a part of our troops were lying in wait close by? I thought they were the enemies,’ he ranted in the privacy of our tent. ‘Why does it happen to me? No matter what I do, things always manage to go wrong.’

That day Maachh resolved never to volunteer to lead an attack.

‘It is better to forget about leadership and lurk in the background. At least no one blames you if things go wrong.’

For once, we had to agree that the buffoon shouldn’t be allowed to make crucial decisions.