

## THIRTEEN



For the GCs at the Indian Military Academy, if there was a bigger pain than the academics, it was the Sand Model Exercises (SME). Even the brainier ones floundered while dealing with the mind-boggling possibilities of SME. For lesser mortals like Porky and Maachh, hovering on the fringes of insanity, confusion was the usual outcome. Naturally then, cheating became an accepted part of the rigmarole.

However, just like everything else in the army, there was a set procedure for the SME. The setting of the exercise, which included a list of resources like troops, weapons, and equipment available for planning the solution, was provided to the GCs a day prior to the actual exercise. For some strange reason, this list was known as the 'Whites'; and the 'Pinks' were the correct solutions to the exercise. The Pinks were kept in safe custody with the instructors conducting these exercises, and remained a secret till we finished our work and presented our strategy.

One thumb rule followed in the army for all exercises was that the enemy always belonged to the 'Red Land', and the defenders were from the 'Blue Land'.

On the designated day, we trooped nervously into the hall, the voice of our seniors ringing inside our heads.

'Beware of the SME,' we had been warned. 'It is the most important facet of war planning and ranks high in importance. A bad performance here can ruin your chances in the final reckoning. A lot of cadets have missed the Sword of Honour only because they didn't perform well in this exercise.'

Divided into small syndicates of six members each, we occupied three sides of the hall while the instructors sat alongside the fourth. The dreaded sand model sat in the centre. My eyes strayed time and again towards it.

Once the problem was assigned, each syndicate had to work out the solution in detail. This involved an in-depth analysis of the problem, recounting details like how we planned to deploy our troops and weapons, and also the strategy we could use to overcome the enemy. Most of the GCs looked baffled and feared the outcome of the exercise. Only a few ambitious ones, who had prepared well, appeared overexcited. Our foreheads beaded with perspiration, our hearts hammered with anxiety, and we waited for the problems to be doled out to us by

the stern-looking instructors.

I looked around and spotted my dear pals, Porky and Maachh looking relaxed as though they were on a picnic.

They were the real winners, I realised. Keeping calm in crises is the first step to becoming a great soldier, and they were doing just that.

The first exercise was called Sam Bahadur. It was an exercise with the Kashmir Valley as background. The solution to a hypothetical enemy attack in the mountains had to be worked out. We were issued details about the setting (Whites) soon after lunch, and we had time till the next morning to prepare our solution.

The countdown had begun!

As soon as the Whites were distributed, the GCs went into a tizzy. Like a clutch of frenzied chickens, the GCs ran around looking for answers. The solution could undoubtedly be found in the PCK (Previous Course Knowledge). These were the readymade solutions to the exercises. The SMEs, like test papers for most examinations, were usually repeated after every few years. Most of them had already been solved by the cadets who had graduated before us. Maybe it was the lack of creativity which made it impossible for the instructors to come up with fresh ideas every other term.

‘It is like the solved answers you study while preparing for competitive exams,’ Maachh explained to Porky.

Catching Porky’s confused look, he elaborated – ‘Arre yaar, the one in which the previous year’s questions have been solved. It makes life easier for all successive courses. All we have to do is find a PCK and we can sleep in peace.’

His assurance wiped out all signs of stress from Porky’s face and the two idiots took off, arms linked, in search of a PCK.

Those who had contacts with previous batches managed to get the solutions from them. If someone had a brother, father, or relative who had gone through the training at IMA, he would have good access to PCK.

‘Didn’t your brother graduate last year?’ one cadet asked another.

‘Come on buddy; share the PCK with us,’ requested a third.

Everyone knew that a brother or a friend who had graduated earlier could make or break the jinx of the SME.

My only solace was that I had Zora and Sandy in my group, although the inclusion of Maachh was causing us a lot of anxiety. The opposing syndicates were delighted. They were banking upon him to botch up the chances of our group. Thankfully, Porky had been assigned another syndicate. It would have been impossible to endure the two jokers in our group.

Although Sandy’s brother had handed over the PCK to him after graduating from the academy, the stupid fellow had misplaced it.

‘What kind of an officer will you make?’ Maachh chided him sternly. ‘You have lost the most precious thing. You should have guarded it with your life.’

He clapped his forehead dramatically and sighed. ‘If not for your foolishness, we would have been the winners.’

‘I will definitely make a better officer than you,’ retorted Sandy.

‘Stop bickering, you idiots,’ interrupted Zora. ‘You are just wasting time.’

And so Sandy, Makkhi, Zora, and I slogged the entire night to work out a solution, while the irritating Bong needled us with the most ridiculous plans. His fertile brain seemed to be hit by brainwave after brainwave; all of them ranging from comical to ridiculous.

He spent close to half an hour pacing the floor instead of working on the problem.

‘Stop pacing,’ Zora yelled. ‘You will wear out the floor.’

‘Why don’t you just sleep?’ I suggested. ‘You will wake up refreshed.’

‘My brain is actively engaged in the task of finding solutions,’ the Bong replied as he resumed his pacing. ‘If you guys can keep awake, so can I.’

Suddenly, he halted and clicking his fingers dramatically shouted: ‘I’ve an idea;

I'll sneak into Joe's room and steal the solution. That chap is very intelligent and hard working. He must surely have worked out the right solution. All I have to do is to steal it, copy it, and put it back while he is asleep.'

Everyone knew that Joe was the brains of our course and he was sure to have come up with the right solution, but the idea of stealing it from his room was not acceptable to us.

'NO,' we shouted in chorus, aware that such a foolish plan could jeopardize our reputation beyond redemption.

It was past midnight when Gary, the sixth member of our syndicate, walked in casually.

'Where the hell were you?' Maachh leapt around like a monkey with a singed tail. 'We have been slogging all night for the solution while you were enjoying yourself. Have you forgotten that you are also in our syndicate and have some responsibilities?'

The sturdy Sikh ignored the Bong's outburst much like a lion ignores a jumping primate. Smiling victoriously, he pulled out a tiny scrapbook from the nondescript bag he was carrying.

'Contrary to what this idiot thinks, I have been busy. What's more, I have done whatever needed to be done,' he flashed the scrapbook at us.

'Fucker, you were hoarding the PCK while we were breaking our head over the exercise,' cursed Maachh, who had done nothing but pester us with his idiotic ideas.

Relieved smiles broke out and we hugged each other, confident of victory. It was a cakewalk to replicate the solution. Close to midnight, convinced that our solution was the right one, we walked into the sand model room. Maachh smiled smugly at the other syndicate members and stuck his thumb up while handing over the solution to the instructor. The brilliance of his smile could have dimmed a floodlight.

Come morning, representatives of the other syndicates also submitted their solutions to the team of instructors and the suspense began.

A huge sand model sat in the centre of the Sand Model Hall depicting the exercise setting. Fighting anxiety attacks, we stared at the instructors. This was the moment when they would pick one of the solutions submitted by the syndicates. They would then zero in on the chosen syndicate and subject its members to merciless grilling.

My heart skipped a beat when the instructor picked up our solution and asked us to make a presentation. Although we had tutored Maachh painstakingly through the night, we weren't sure if he could stand up to the rapid-fire questions put forth by the team of instructors. Keeping our fingers crossed, we hoped that the instructors wouldn't pick on him to explain the solution. We would be doomed if that happened and if the silly chap had to deal with the queries.

Perhaps our fervent prayers saved the situation. The instructor picked out Sandy to explain the strategies. After this, they picked on me to reply to a complex set of queries. Sandy did a fantastic job and we were applauded for an excellent solution.

There was jubilation in our syndicate. Not a single GC believed that we had won due to our merit. They knew we had found a PCK to help us solve the problem. This was true, of course, but we were not telling anyone. Thanks to Gary finding the PCK, it had been a cakewalk for us.

As we filtered out of the hall, Joe walked up to Maachh and asked: 'Come on Bong, spill the beans. How did you do it? Where did you guys find the PCK?'

Maachh feigned innocence, scratched his head and asked, 'What is a PCK?'

The guy was a born artiste. We were happy he didn't go around boasting about the PCK. That didn't stop him from demanding that we celebrate the event, which we did on the very next day of liberty. We left it to him to plan the details of the celebration. As usual, he came up with a host of silly ideas, but for once we did not object to his plans.