

**THIRTY-FOUR**



It was a bright morning but our mood was far from sunny. Anxiety gripped us as we walked towards the auditorium for one of our most stressful tests.

‘All good things come to an end,’ muttered Zora.

‘So do all bad things,’ endorsed Maachh. ‘The good thing is that we will soon be officers.’

The mention of the word ‘officer’ made Porky straighten up and look dignified. ‘I am impatient for the day when I will no longer be a GC. I will be happy to get out of here.’

‘Let me assure you that we will miss the academy, once we pass out,’ said Sandy. ‘I have no doubts about that.’

‘I will surely miss our midnight parties and pranks,’ I agreed. ‘Despite the strict regimen, it was good fun.’

The thought of being separated from each other, probably never to meet again, sobered the two clowns. ‘You are right, buddy,’ Maachh sighed. ‘It was good fun, in parts.’

Like all trainings, ours was nearing its end.

‘Whatever happens today will seal our fates forever, career- wise I mean,’ said Sandy.

He was absolutely right. The allotment of arms would decide what we would do for the rest of our lives in the army. A week ago, we had submitted our choices in writing, but no one knew what destiny held for us. We had to list our top three options; mine were paratroopers, engineers, and infantry. For Maachh it was Army Supply Corps (ASC), ASC, and ASC, since he thought he could revolutionise the supplies of the armed forces. He had also confessed that his choice had been based on the belief that the ASC guys got the best cuts of mutton.

It was ditto for Porky since he thought that the supply guys could have all the food choices they wanted. The two idiots didn’t care that it was considered bad

form for an ex-NDA guy to opt for these services. We were considered the elite and were supposed to opt for the fighting arms. Services like the ASC and the Ordnance were supposed to be options for those cadets who were in the higher age group and didn't want the glory of fighting an enemy. The technical GCs opted for services like Signals, Electronics and Mechanical Engineers (EME), and Engineers.

As expected, Sandy and Zora had opted for the Guards service. The Guards were considered an elite force and generally took on cadets who were tall.

'Why don't you opt for it, too?' he asked me. 'You are over six feet and will surely get in.'

'Guards are the cream of the crop,' added Zora.

But my heart was set on the Parachute Regiment. Besides, I wanted to be a commando, so I had opted for the Paras. Only those who considered themselves in good shape opted for the paratroopers. I was an athlete and in fine shape. The same held true for Joe, who had also opted for Paras.

Most cadets would draw either artillery or infantry since there were maximum vacancies in those two arms. Vacancies in Armoured, ASC, Ordnance, and the technical services were limited and those who got selected had to be either high up in the merit list, or have a godfather to pull the right strings.

The cadets who ranked high in the merit list had the advantage of opting for whatever arm they wanted. For the rest, it was a lottery.

It was a Saturday, and a whole new world awaited us. With the allotment of our regiments and units, we would be taking the first step into our careers. As we settled down, we realised that everyone was sweating with anxiety except for our two pals.

Maachh and Porky were carefree about the allotment of arms.

'It doesn't matter, really,' declared Maachh philosophically. 'We are the first in our families to join the defence forces. No one at home will know the difference. All they want is an officer at home. It really doesn't matter to anyone whether I get ASC or Artillery. I am fine with whatever comes my way.'

‘Same with me,’ agreed Porky. ‘How does it matter which arm you are allotted? Ultimately we will all be serving the nation.’

‘Jassi is sure to draw the Armoured Corp. His father is a commanding officer and has several strings to pull,’ said Sandy.

‘And Speedy’s father is a general and everyone knows the magic wand a general can wave. The guy has opted for Engineers and will surely get it,’ added Zora.

‘The lucky bastards’, I mumbled mulling over my chances of drawing the favoured service.

It was a hot morning and our anxiety made us sweat profusely. Dripping with perspiration, I waited for Lady Luck to smile at me. The allotment really mattered to me since I had to prove myself to my father, who had initially been against my joining the forces.

Our excitement grew in proportion to the passing minutes. Just as the din rose to a crescendo, Colonel Joshi, who had been detailed to announce the regiments, made his entry. He swaggered in importantly since he knew that he held our dreams in his hands.

As expected, the toppers in the order of merit were allotted their choice of arms. Ronny, an exemplary performer who had opted for Paratroopers, was allotted his choice. There goes one vacancy. My heart took a dip – each time a GC was allotted Paras, my chances grew dimmer.

Each announcement was greeted with strong emotions. There were groans of disappointment or whoops of elation depending on whether the cadet had been allotted his choice.

My ears perked up as Gary’s name was announced. I was next. The chap was seated by my side and twitching excitedly in his seat. He had been allotted the arms he wanted. I held my breath and waited – it was my turn next. My heart skidded to a halt as my name was called out. With a sinking spirit I heard the announcement that followed – I had been allotted Artillery.

I had company; both Maachh and Makkhi drew Artillery. Unlike me, they were quite happy with their allotment. Porky pirouetted and leapt like a talented ballerina. He had been allotted ASC.

‘It really doesn’t matter, Pessi,’ Sandy consoled me. ‘You will make an exemplary officer wherever you go. Besides, you can always opt for Para after a while.’

He had been allotted the Armoured Corp while Zora drew Rajputana Rifles. Both of them were ecstatic. Armoured had been Sandy’s second choice and Rajputana was Zora’s second.

‘Let’s celebrate,’ suggested Porky. ‘The allotment of arms is over! Even if some of us have not got what they wanted, at least the stress is over.’

‘Not that we were stressed,’ added Maachh.

Porky’s suggestion of a celebration drew enthusiastic approval from everyone. I was the only one brooding over my allotment. Not for long, though. It was impossible to remain gloomy when everyone around me was celebrating their happiness.

Bottles were uncorked, ditties were sung, and laughter rang through the corridors that night. For once, the instructors kept away. We were allowed to indulge in merrymaking. With just a few days left for the Passing out Parade (POP), we had earned some respite.