

THIRTY-THREE



This was the last and most important camp of our training. It played a major role in our grading. Known as the 'Mother of All Pains', this exercise was the last hurdle to be crossed before the POP. It involved crossing the nearby forests, on foot. From time immemorial, GCs had been taking shortcuts to avoid trekking through the jungle, but the ustaads were no novices. They knew each and every trick up our sleeves.

The obstacle course was rough and the number of hurdles to be crossed were many. Numerous stories circulated in the academy about the hazards of the exercise. Maachh knew them all.

'During the last exercise, a guy was attacked by a leopard,' he told us. 'Not just that, I have heard that cadets have also encountered herds of wild elephants.'

'Stop gossiping like an old woman,' scolded Sandy, who was already stressed about the exercise.

Although no one was willing to admit it, we were fearful about the possibilities and wanted to silence the Bong.

'Whether you believe it or not, it is entirely up to you guys. As you all know, I am from Sainik School and many of my seniors have been through this training. They warned me about the dangers, and I am just conveying what they told me.' Clearly, Maachh was hurt that we refused to believe him.

His seniors had also tutored him on the ways and means to avoid hardships in the academy, and he followed their instructions to the 'T'.

It was pitch dark when we were let off from the south of the Shivalik ranges, and were instructed to cross over to the north before reporting back to the academy. For those with short stature, it was a tough call. Height mattered a lot since it programmed the length of a person's stride. Being a six-footer, I had a distinct advantage, and was generally way ahead of the others.

Unfortunately, I had been included in Maachh's group. It was double trouble since Porky was also in our team. With the two of them around, it was impossible to have an uneventful journey. Sandy and I crossed our fingers and prayed.

We had hardly moved a couple of kilometres when Maachh came to a sudden halt. He opened his rucksack and pulled out a lungi, kurta, and a wig.

‘I am dressing up as a Sardar and taking a lift in one of the trucks bound for Dehradun. At least I can grab a good night’s sleep that way,’ he announced.

We were sceptical about his plan. ‘What about the rifle? How do you propose to carry it?’ asked Sandy.

Throwing us a disdainful look, Maachh tapped his cranium and began dismantling the weapon. He then proceeded to stuff it in his rucksack. When the Bong was finished with his disguise, we had to admit that he really looked the part.

There was nothing for us to do but to wish him well. He waved cheerfully and vanished under the cover of darkness. Even if the plan seemed foolish, we couldn’t help but admire his courage. It took a lot of guts to execute a stupid plan like that. Dressing up as a sardar or a sadhu to avoid the struggle was a perennial favourite among the cadets, one that had been tried through the ages. It amused the ustaads who had handled enough of the IMA sardars and sadhus to last them a lifetime.

Since the journey was long and arduous, we tried to travel as light as possible. With an abundance of rivulets in the mountains, it seemed pointless to carry the heavy water bottles so we dumped them. The next to be thrown were the food packets.

‘It is better to carry dinner in your belly rather than on your back,’ declared Porky, tucking into the contents of his food packet. His swollen belly revealed that he had enjoyed a hearty meal unlike the rest of us, who had consumed a light meal so that we could walk fast.

With Maachh’s departure, our group of five had reduced to four. Porky, as usual, was a big pain. His bloated belly made him slow and lethargic. He called for frequent breaks as the weight in his belly was heavier than the one on his back. We had hardly walked an hour or so when we heard a shuffle in the bushes up ahead. Expecting wild animals to emerge, we crouched and waited – our hearts thumping with fear.

A minute later, much to our surprise, a dishevelled Maachh emerged from the

bushes. His lungi had several holes where the material had been caught in the bramble and his turban had unravelled enroute. He looked like a clown who had escaped from the circus. The chap had lost his way in the forest and was going around in circles.

It was a bit too late for him to march back to the road so he joined our group again. We moved in a single file along a beaten track. Thambi, who was good at map reading, was leading the way and the group was confident that he would take us on the right path.

Two hours later, we reached a rivulet. The climb so far had been steep and slow. Winded by the effort, we wanted to rest for a while. The sight of the gurgling stream and its welcoming banks tempted us to take a break. We unlaced our shoes and dipped our feet in the cool stream. I was at the point of drowsing, when a series of trumpets shattered the quiet of the forest. The trampling sounds alerted us that an elephant herd was somewhere close by.

We had been told that they wouldn't bother us if we didn't needle them. Yet, the very thought of facing the wild creatures was daunting. We abandoned all thoughts of rest and quickly scrambled to our feet again.

After about twenty minutes of walking, Thambi discovered that there were just four of us marching in a single file. Someone was missing from the group. The march came to an abrupt halt.

A quick check told us that Porky was missing. It was impossible for him to have strayed or lost his way since he had been just behind us. One by one, we called out his name, but there was no response. Worried, we debated on the course of action.

Trying to hunt for Porky meant that someone had to go back to look for him. No one wanted to go back. It involved almost twenty minutes of walking back and forth, and we were already fatigued. But the chap couldn't be left in the jungle. Besides, we couldn't report back at the academy without him.

Sandy and I decided to walk back and look for the joker. It took us barely five minutes to locate the idiot. His snores, loud and clear, could be heard from a distance in the stillness of the night. It was a wonder that the wild animals didn't make a meal of him.

We cursed and abused the chap till we had exhausted our vocabulary. A lot of time had been wasted in searching for him, and the temperature had begun to dip. We would have to move faster if we were to reach the academy before we froze to death. Pushing him before us, we made our way back to the others.

‘No more stops, we have to move fast. We have already lost valuable time hunting for Porky,’ declared Thambi.

We quickened our pace to boost our body temperatures. A few minutes later, we ran into another group that was resting near a glade. Fighting the temptation to halt for a break, we forced ourselves to move on.

The sacrifice paid off when we finally reached the academy. Ours was the third group to complete the exercise.

As we made our way to the barrack, we spotted two of our course mates – Speedy and Archie – running around the ground, their rifles held high above their heads. They had been caught sleeping in the local night bus by the ustad. The two would have succeeded in getting past the ustad had it not been for a minor slip-up. Speedy, disguised as a sardar, had fallen asleep in the bus and his turban had slipped. The telltale haircut was a clear giveaway. The duo was unceremoniously hauled back to the academy and punished.

It was not a good night to be a fake sardar.