

## FOURTEEN



The library was my favourite haunt. While most GCs preferred the comfort of their beds to taxing their brains during free time, I spent a significant number of hours poring through books on various subjects – especially military matters. My project at the NDA had introduced me to the joys of reading on military history. Reading the details of the Second World War proved to be stimulating. The sinking of the Bismarck, the German battleship, the Pearl Harbour attack by the Japanese, and the retaliation in the form of the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki drew my interest and held my attention.

While Maachh and Porky spent almost all of their pocket money on food, Zora on shaving products and Sandy on music records, I spent mine on books. Besides reading up on the wars, I was keen to meet and speak to the instructors and officers at IMA who had taken part in wars. Our drill ustad, Subedar Uttam Singh from the Armoured Corps, was one such person. He had been awarded the Sena Medal for his acts of bravery during the Battle of Basantar.

Often, during our free time, I would seek out the valiant ustad to speak to him about his exploits. The Subedar was just too happy to share his experience with an eager cadet. He narrated snippets about unit life and also gave me sane advice.

One afternoon, I cornered him during his visit to the Meiktila Company. It was the tea break and a few GCs were loitering aimlessly. But a war story never failed to garner interest. We gathered around the Ustad as he narrated how Second Lieutenant Arun Khetarpal of 17 Poona Horse fought the Pakistanis in the 1971 war and managed to kill a couple of them despite being mortally wounded. The young officer was awarded the Param Vir Chakra for his courage and the supreme sacrifice of life. The Subedar's passion, as he narrated the incident, touched a chord.

His vivid description of the battleground captured our imaginations – 'I still remember the day. It was 16 December 1971. We were at Jarpal, in the Shakargarh Sector. While crossing the Basantar River, Second Lieutenant Arun Khetarpal and his troop came under fire from the enemy. Our brave soldiers destroyed ten enemy tanks. Arun Khetarpal was responsible for destroying four of them single-handedly. In the retaliatory fire, his tank was shot and it burst into flames. He was asked to abandon his tank but he realized that the enemy, though

badly decimated, was continuing to advance into his sector of responsibility, and if he abandoned his tank at that point, the enemy would break through. Although severely wounded, he told his commander – “No Sir, I will not abandon my tank. My gun is still working and I will get these bastards.” He fought on gallantly and destroyed another enemy tank, which was barely 100 metres away from his position.’

We listened with rapt attention as the Subedar’s eyes moistened. Adrenaline rushed through our bodies.

‘Just then, his tank received a second shot and the fearless, young officer succumbed to his injuries. He was just twenty-one. It was his bravery that won the day for us.’

There was silence as we experienced a range of emotions. I felt a lump rising in my throat.

‘I salute the hero,’ Maachh finally broke the silence. He stood up and saluted solemnly, and Porky followed suit.

After dinner that night, we assembled in Porky’s room to carry the discussion forward. All charged up with patriotism, we were an animated lot.

‘We shouldn’t have released the POWs (Prisoners of War),’ opined Maachh.

‘We should not have returned the territory gained during the war,’ said Porky. ‘Imagine how many soldiers and officers had laid down their lives to capture that piece of land.’

Subedar Uttam Singh’s vivid description of the battle had had a great impact on all of us. Overnight, we discarded all our idols and coronated Arun Khetarpal as our new hero. A few of us bought books on the war to know more about Khetarpal, while others put up his pictures in their rooms. Such was the impact that even a guy like Maachh began borrowing books about the 1971 war. He ranted and raved about newspaper reports about ISI activities on the Indian soil and vowed to wipe out the infiltrators as soon as he was posted at the border.

By now, our interest on wars had peaked. From the 1971 war, the charged up cadets ventured to read about the Chinese aggression and the subsequent war in 1962. We discussed the events at great length, dissecting each move – political

as well as military.

‘It’s a shame that we lost the war,’ said Porky.

‘We lost the war because of inadequate equipment; not because we weren’t brave enough,’ Zora opined. ‘In 1962, we were ill-prepared for a war at high altitude. Can you imagine the troops fighting in high-altitude areas in December, and that too in canvas shoes? It was cruel of the politicians to send the soldiers to war without proper equipment. Many of them died because of the cold. They had no boots and no warm clothes. Yet, they fought till the very end.’

‘The decision makers should be sent to the mountains in canvas shoes and insufficient clothing,’ Maachh ventured on a mutinous path.

‘My brother’s unit found a couple of frozen bodies of Indian soldiers at Kumratsar, north of Tawang, in June last year,’ added Sandy.

We all knew that Mandy had been posted at Tawang before he came to Dehradun.

‘I can’t believe it,’ mumbled Porky. ‘It is tragic that the soldiers should have frozen to death.’

‘Yes, they were frozen stiff in their canvas shoes and cotton uniform.’

‘Had I been there in 1962, I would have given a bloody nose to the Chinese. I would have destroyed the entire squadron and received a Param Vir Chakra,’ Maachh boasted.

‘You, and Param Vir Chakra? I am sure that you would have taken to your heels and run in the opposite direction the moment the first bullet was fired,’ Sandy laughed.

‘Mind your tongue, you rascal,’ the Bong was in his element. Mention of cowardice always got him into a rage.

‘It is a fact,’ Sandy needled him. ‘Everyone knows that Bongs can spout literature and sing Rabindra Sangeet but they can’t fight wars. That is the reason we had to help the Mukti Bahinis. In fact, most of the 96,000 soldiers of Pakistan who surrendered to India after the 1971 war were Bengalis.’

‘Don’t you dare...’ the Bong warned.

‘I dare. I stand by my statement – Bongs are cowards.’

Maachh was a staunch Bengali. He could not bear any insult to his ilk. Sandy’s statement was too much for him to bear. He moved like lightening and landed a powerful punch to Sandy’s face before anyone could intervene. The first punch landed on Sandy’s aquiline nose and he began bleeding. Not satisfied, the Bong punched him again before being overpowered by Zora.

‘Let’s take him to the MI Room,’ said Porky, disturbed at the sight of Sandy’s bleeding nose.

‘Don’t be stupid!’ shouted Zora. ‘How will we explain the injury? Maachh will be in trouble if we report the matter.’

By that time, the Bong had come to his senses. Contrite, he quickly rushed to the bathroom and brought out a wet towel. Wiping Sandy’s face, he said. ‘Buddy, if you think I am going to apologise, forget it. The next time you insult a Bong, you will not get away with just a bloody nose. Bengalis are a class apart. Have you forgotten Subhash Chandra Bose or the thousands of teenaged freedom fighters who laid down their lives during the freedom struggle? Find time to read up on the history of India’s freedom struggle and you will know the truth.’

‘I stand corrected,’ winced Sandy as Maachh wiped away the blood, gently. ‘Bongs are a class apart, I admit. And you are a specimen.’

‘You would do good to remember that,’ warned the Bong. ‘Also remember not to needle me, ever. Don’t go by my physique. I am a born fighter and have the courage to take on guys twice my size.’

‘I will remember that,’ promised Maachh’s strapping opponent. Pleased with the promise, the Fish gave him a friendly thump on the back as Sandy grimaced.