

TWENTY-ONE



Soon, the fun times were over. The days of leisure spent in Mussoorie became a distant memory as our training at the IMA became more taxing. The days melted into nights before we could even register the passing of hours. Despite the strict routine, every day threw up a new challenge, a new experience. No two days were the same.

Our exhausted bodies craved sleep, but slumber was a luxury that was hard to lay hold of. By now, many of us began wishing we had not opted for the army. In fact, I often wondered what made me choose to tread the path of a soldier; not a single person in my family had ever thought of the army as a career. In fact, a lot of cadets debated the attractions of the profession, given the hardships one had to endure. Even Maachh and Porky, the carefree ones, were forced to slog.

Exercise camps were held almost every month. Most of us liked the idea of getting away from the campus, but the complex exercises were not our idea of a leisurely getaway. Physically draining and mentally demanding, the camps took a toll on our already fatigued bodies. Pushing our somnolent brains to the brink was not an easy task.

We struggled to find our way out of dense jungles and arid deserts. Not just that, the task of constructing makeshift bridges over rushing streams of water was not something we enjoyed, just as we didn't love the idea of wriggling and crawling through impenetrable undergrowth, or for that matter, climbing and sliding down mountain cliffs – all this with impossible deadlines. These tasks designed to test human endurance failed to whip up enthusiasm in the exhausted cadets.

Pitching tents within five minutes was no longer considered an achievement, but a routine affair. What had once been a thrilling experience was now a pain. Living in tents by the side of a freezing river during the winter with the bare essentials didn't hold exciting possibilities for anyone.

At times like this, most cadets improvised and cheated. We soon discovered that the only place that offered brief respite from the ordeal was the Military Hospital. Although we would all like to have spent a couple of days relaxing on a comfortable hospital bed, and tended by pretty nursing officers, none of us was granted the luxury. The only guy who got lucky was Sharman Kulkarni, aka Sherry.

In the past few months, the guy had acquired a reputation as a good horseman. After winning a few laurels at showjumping and tent-pegging, he was considered the ace of our course.

It was a sunny morning when Sherry led his beautiful white stallion, Bahadur, out onto the polo ground. With a prestigious horse show coming up, it was essential to practice for the event. The guy was set upon breaking his own records and raising the bar.

‘When you are good at something, you better be the best,’ was his slogan.

What he didn’t know was that even horses experience mood swings and don’t necessarily oblige riders at such times. Bahadur, though a prized stallion, was a moody animal too. And that morning, the horse just wanted to be left alone.

It balked at Sherry’s command to jump over the barrier, which was considerably higher than anything it had ever vaulted over. Twice, the horse refused to oblige and came to a grinding halt as it approached the obstacle. The rider patted and encouraged it, but the horse refused to oblige.

We all knew that Sherry had an unreasonable and stubborn streak. We also knew that Bahadur was a perfect match to any rider’s obstinacy. On the third attempt, a resolute Sherry raced all the way prepared to take his mount through the barrier. Bystanders later declared that it took just a split second for the accident to happen. Instead of the horse going over the fence, it was our pal who flew over the barrier while the horse remained rooted to the spot. Bahadur tossed his rider and displayed a total lack of regret for the act.

The poor chap lay in agony for a while. He tried to stand up but his feet collapsed under him. Sherry was rushed to the hospital where the doctor declared that the flying feat had taken a toll on his shin. The chap’s broken bone was put in a cast, and he was admitted to the Military Hospital. The fellow was heartbroken. All his hopes of bagging a cup at the horse show came to a tragic end.

The next day, when we visited him to express our camaraderie, Sherry lay facing the wall, his face wreathed in sorrow.

‘Come on, cheer up, buddy,’ Zora patted him on the shoulder. ‘It happens to the best of us.’

‘Damn Bahadur!’ the guy replied dejectedly. ‘I lost a golden opportunity, thanks to that animal.’

‘Well, every horse has its blue days,’ Maachh shook his head philosophically.

‘Look at the positive side,’ consoled Porky. ‘You won’t have to endure early morning runs in freezing temperatures, nor suffer those unending classes on Mountain Warfare, Commando Tactics, Counter-Insurgency, Jungle Warfare et al. I would love to loll on this bed demanding attention from the beautiful nurses.’

That bit about beautiful nurses cheered up the patient noticeably.

‘There is a beautiful nurse here on night duty.’ Sherry’s face grew animated as he described the encounter. ‘I was in pain and couldn’t sleep, so I called out to the nurse and this vision suddenly appeared by my bed. Her smile lit up this dull room. I forgot all about my pain and stared at her. “Is there anything you need?” she asked. I mumbled that I was in pain. A minute later, she was back with some medicine but I didn’t want to sleep.’

‘Why?’ Maachh asked, his eyes brimming with mischief. ‘Were the mosquitoes bothering you?’

‘You rascal, only an idiot would want to sleep when such a lovely nurse is present around the corner. I hobbled over to her twice. Once to ask for water, which she reminded me was right there by my bed side. The next time I went to ask for something to eat. I told her I was hungry. She searched for a while and returned with a packet of biscuits.’

‘You scoundrel!’ exclaimed Porky.

There was a dreamy look on Sherry’s face as he recalled his experience.

‘I wish I could be admitted to the hospital for a few days,’ sighed Maachh. ‘I need a respite from the training and a healing touch from the lovely nurse.’

The Bong didn’t know that he was destined to have his wish granted, very soon.

Just a couple of weeks after Sherry’s accident, Maachh came down with jaundice. His love for street food got him into trouble. The Bong was thrilled to

be admitted to the hospital.

‘No more training, no PT, and no parade!’ he sang. ‘No ustaads breathing down my neck, no instructors to worry about; I will have complete rest with beautiful nurses for company. And who knows what may happen?’

He was clearly over-optimistic, nevertheless we envied him.

‘The only problem is that I have been barred from eating anything but boiled veggies,’ he complained when we paid him a visit.

Now we had two chaps to visit. First we checked on Sherry, who seemed to be in high spirits and reluctant to get well, although the doctor had pronounced him fit to return to his routine at the IMA.

‘I am not going to let them discharge me from the hospital,’ he said. ‘I will pretend to be sick for some more time.’

‘Try breaking some more bones,’ advised Zora. ‘Nothing else will work.’

Next we walked into Maachh’s room. There we found the Bong lying with furrows of sorrow etched on his face.

‘What happened? Why the morose look?’ enquired Sandy.

‘Don’t even ask,’ replied the chap, testily.

‘What’s wrong? Just the other day you were dying to get admitted to the hospital,’ said Porky. ‘What went wrong?’

‘Arre yaar, I am not allowed to eat anything other than boiled beans and carrots. I can bear with that, but it is the absence of the pretty nurse that upsets me.’

‘Isn’t she here?’

‘Sherry is lucky; that nurse is on duty in his ward,’ he sighed.

‘There must be other nurses,’ Porky consoled.

‘Wait till you see the nurse on duty.’

Just then, we heard a booming voice behind us. A hefty matron darkened the doorway.

‘What’s going on?’ Her rasping voice shook the walls. ‘Visiting hours are over. What are you doing here, GCs? Out, this very moment, the entire lot of you!’

We scrambled with our tails between our legs. The reason for Maachh’s misery was evident. He was stuck with a battleaxe instead of the Florence Nightingale he had imagined.

Suddenly, all those pining to get admitted to the hospital no longer wanted to be there... and those who were there, wanted to get out at the earliest.

Sherry being the only exception.