

Indian Armed Forces-An Enigma

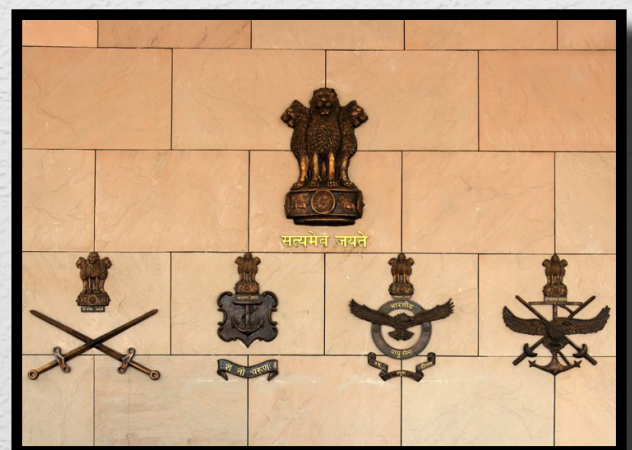


Maj Gen P. K. Saighal (Retd.)



Today, The Indian Armed Forces are amongst the most revered, venerated and admired Force in the world and the guardian angel of India's homogeneity and integrity. Our Army's transformation from pre-independence to post independence is truly remarkable. Prior to independence for a full 1000 years we suffered the ignominy of defeat-defeat and defeat. India was the only nation of such huge size which was plundered, ravaged and savaged, maimed and shamed virtually at will by any number of raiders, marauders, the Mughals and a host of other countries: Dutch, Portuguese, French and the British.

Mohammad Ghazni came time and again with just a few hundred horsemen and took back with him tons of gold and silver. The menfolk were slaughtered, while our mothers and sisters, wives and daughters were taken back for his harem and daily abuse. Our Armed Forces were weak and were roundly defeated each and every time. Our women committed jauhar again and again to save themselves from his debauchery and ruthless exploitation.

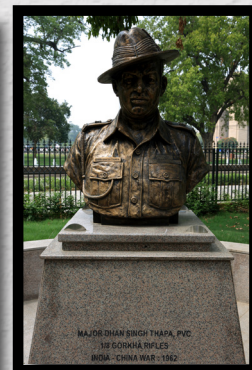


Post-Independence, we fought five wars; one against China and four against Pakistan. The 1962 war against China was lost because of political and bureaucratic hara-kiri rather than any under-performance on the part of the Army. In all the wars that we fought against Pakistan be it 1948, 65, 71 and 1999 the enemy stood humbled, stunned and shocked at the licking that he received at the hands of the Indian Army.

In the 1965 war he was better equipped in terms of tanks, guns and aircraft vis-à-vis us. His Air Force was qualitatively far superior. He had the American Star Fighters, Sabres and Super Sabres while we had the World War II vintage Canberras, Mysteres, Vampires and Toofanis. As far as tanks were concerned, he had the state of art Patton tanks while we fielded the outdated Centurions, Shermans and Stuarts. In Artillery too we were out-gunned and out-numbered. In spite of this we beat him because the man behind the machine on our side was more professional, had greater grit, better morale and superior leadership. Pakistan was humiliated and humbled.

In the 1971 war despite a pre-emptive strike by the Pak Air Force against twelve of our frontline airfields, the Indian Army achieved one of the greatest victories in the history of warfare. A new nation: Bangladesh was created in just 14 days. 93,000 Pakistani troops surrendered despite having the wherewithal to hold out for another six months. In the annals of warfare there is no instance of a similar capitulation. In the entire war The Indian Armed Forces stood out for their compassion, discipline, sensitivity, character and integrity. There was not a single instance of loot or rape.

As far as the Kargil war is concerned, we had to contend with a deceitful enemy, a hostile environment and horrendous terrain. Pakistani defences were well prepared and robust. I had the privilege of operating there for three years. The slopes leading to his posts were impossible 30 degrees at the lower end and going up to 60 to near 90 degrees at the top. Temperatures were in the region of -10 degrees to -20 degrees centigrade and the winds howling at 30 to 40 nautical miles. No Army in the world could have dis-lodged the Pakis without the use of mini-nukes or chemical weapons. It was the sheer bravery of our officers and men who without caring a fig for their personal safety vanquished the enemy and ensured that our flag flew at Tiger Hill once again. It was a story of unimaginable heroism, motivation, commitment and love for the nation.



1947-48

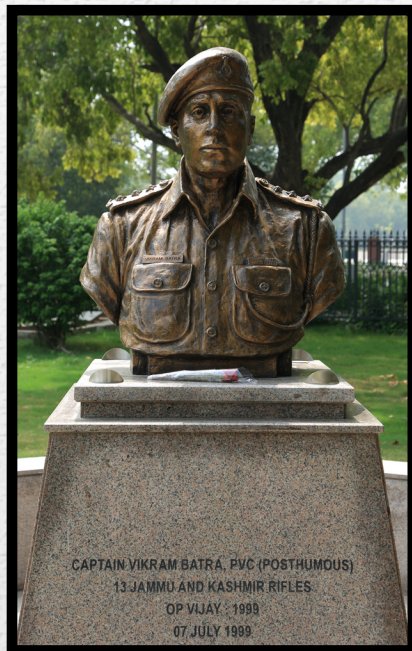
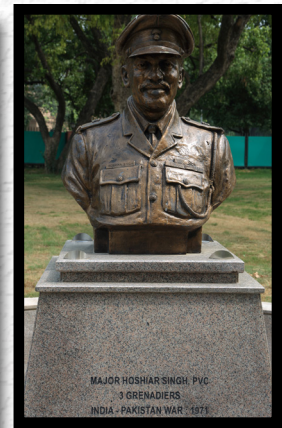
1962



1965



1971



1999

This was the Army that I had the honour and privilege to be a part of for over four decades. During my innings with it, I participated in several wars and a host of anti-insurgency operations against the Naxalites, the Bodos, LET, Jaish and Sikh militants. In addition, I operated in some of the most excruciating environment of Siachen, Kargil and North Sikkim besides the searing heat of Rajasthan and Gujrat. This notwithstanding, at 79 years of age, I still feel like a young man with tons of energy and enthusiasm.

Though the main role of our Armed Forces is to protect the nation against external threat; they are increasingly being used to tackle all calamities, both natural and man-made such as: earthquake, tsunami, cyclone, floods, avalanches, landslides, forest fires, law and order, bomb-blasts or even children falling in bore-wells.

During the devastating floods and landslides in Uttarakhand, The Armed Forces rescued over a hundred thousand people in flat 15 days. This was the largest ever helicopter evacuation anywhere in the world. I have flown in similar valleys. Even in fair weather not more than one helicopter is operated at a time because of their constricted nature. This notwithstanding up to 10 helicopters were pressed in round the clock. Similar energies were on display during Kashmir floods, the Nepal earthquake, the Chennai floods and evacuation of our diaspora from Iraq, Syria and Ukraine.

What happened in Haryana a couple of years back had left the nation shocked, bewildered and ashamed. 56,000 Haryana policemen and 5,000 para-military force personnel suffered a catastrophic collapse in the face of civic disorder resulting in large scale looting, gang rapes, molestation of women, destruction of property and loss of 40 precious lives. This sort of chaos is normally not seen even during war; and what a pity, it continued for full ten days. However, when the Army was called in, roughly 5,000 of its troops moved in with great rapidity and restored order in less than 24 hours. What distinguished the Army from the Police and the Para-Military Force was self-evident. Its professional conduct, apolitical demeanour and a no non sense approach inspired awe and respect. It being the last arbiter of our nation's destiny meant business. Had the situation demanded, Army personnel were willing to put their lives at risk to uphold the authority of the state and sanctity of the mother-land.

Our officers always lead from the front and have a most enviable motto which states, 'The safety, honour and welfare of your country comes first, always and every time. The honour, welfare and the comfort of the men you command come next. Your own ease, comfort and safety come last, always and every time. We, in the Army are like one big family where people of all caste, creed, colour, region and religion live and operate happily. Our mutual love and trust is to be seen to be believed. In a world that is increasingly being torn asunder The Indian Armed Forces stand out as a shining example of secularism and harmony. Whether you are an officer or a jawan each stands by the other even at the cost of their own lives. A few examples will highlight the mutual bonding that exists between the officers and personnel of our Army.

The first example dates back to an incident in 1974. At that point of time, I was in command of a Helicopter Flight at Srinagar. One evening, well past the pack up time we got a request for urgent helicopter evacuation. Some of our men in Gurez sector were critically wounded because of sudden, un-provoked shelling by the enemy. This place was 150 Kms North-East of Srinagar amidst thickly forested mountains. The mission entailed night flying into an area where no flying is permitted after 12 O' clock because of exceptionally hazardous weather. The helicopter is tossed around like a piece of paper with the pilot being reduced to a mere spectator. Besides in 1974 our helicopters did not have the requisite instrumentation for night flying. In spite of these constraints,

The Army Commander wanted volunteers to undertake this highly dangerous and near impossible mission. I and Col Thadani volunteered. He was a bachelor while I was married and had two young daughters. Both of us had the highest instrument rating of Master Green. Interestingly, I had never flown into this area even by day.

By the time we reached Gurez, darkness had engulfed the entire area. We just could not spot our post and requested our troops to fire coloured smoke to home us in. The enemy smelt a kill and started shelling the entire area with Artillery backed up by intense machine gun fire. It was almost impossible to approach the site. In view of the very grim situation, Col Thadani asked me as to what were my orders as I was the Mission Leader, being the senior of the two. I said, "I am going ahead. His response was equally brusque. He said, leave place for my helicopter, I am following. Because of limited space in the helicopter we could only pick up four casualties at a time; two in each helicopter. Hence, we had to go back the second time which was even more risky, to pick up the rest. Ladies and Gentlemen, by 9 p.m. we had successfully evacuated all our personnel. Our Armed Forces firmly believe in the Shakespearean dictum that "cowards die many times before their death; the valiant never taste of death but once". On landing back, we noticed that each of the helicopters had taken several hits. We were fortunate that the bullets did not hit us or any sensitive portion of the helicopter.

In the second incident a jawan of our Army accidentally fell into the enemy territory at night at Bana Post in Siachen. This post is named after Sub Bana Singh who through exceptional dare-devilry captured this post. The post is at a height of 20,000 feet and the temperature was -40 degrees Centigrade. His Company Commander without bothering for his own safety, slid into the enemy territory and after a gruesome struggle lasting 4 hours, he managed to bring him back. The sepoy was evacuated to Military Hospital Srinagar. I met him a month later. He had lost both his arms due to frost-bite. In spite of that he was cheerful. He was happy that he had not fallen into enemy's hands as Pakistanis have a dubious distinction of sodomising even the dead bodies of our soldiers. He told me that he was certain that his Company Commander who was a young Major, would retrieve him at all cost, even at the risk of his own life. In no other walk of life do you see such faith and trust.

In yet another incident, I evacuated two of our soldiers from Marpola, 10 metres from the Pakistani post in exceptionally trying conditions. The temperature was -63 degrees C. There was 175 feet of loose snow. And there was no road, track or helipad. I don't recall any other mission which was even half as difficult or suicidal anywhere in the world. Ladies and Gentlemen, this is what the Indian Armed Forces are all about. I assure you we are not fool-hardy. The mission was planned with great precision and deliberation including a flag meeting with the Pakistanis.

This innate bonding between the officers and their men is visible almost every other day in anti-terrorist operations in J&k, Punjab and the North-East. While terrorists are creating increasing mayhem all over the world, we are eliminating them by the dime. LET, Jaish-e Mohammad, JUD, Al Quaida, Taliban and even the ISIS have not been able to stand up to the Indian Army. Donald Trump, erstwhile US president had stated that the only Army that can vanquish the ISIS is the Indian Army. The statement is turning out to be prophetic.

In the Army the love for the nation is profound. We have great pride in our uniform and regimental traditions. The spirit de corps and camaraderie is unbelievable. Phenomenal emphasis is laid on discipline, professionalism, character, morality, ethics, soldierly behaviour and integrity. We have regular bilateral exercises with several Armies including the US Army. Our troops have invariably held their own against the very best. The Americans consider our troops to be phenomenal and the Indian Army officers incredible. Similarly in bilateral and multi-lateral air to air exercises our pilots have always emerged victorious. We have invariably achieved kill ratios as high as 9: 1. In Naval maneuvers too we have repetitively proved our mettle.

Since the end of the World War II, ours is perhaps the most seasoned army. We are tested virtually every alternate day by the Pakis and quite frequently by the Chinese. Slowly and steadily the entire world is beginning to acknowledge the confidence and professionalism of the Indian Army. In every Peace-keeping mission across the globe, our Army's image has been sky high. The transformation from a weak, listless Force to one of the strongest and best led Force is a truly phenomenal transformation. Sooner or later, this amazing turn around will be a subject of study in leading Institutions across the world.

Every officer in the Defence Services, irrespective of his rank, has a huge responsibility on his shoulders. Even a small mistake can lead to a catastrophe. A colonel commanding a regiment has approximately 1,000 personnel and a variety of sophisticated and expensive weaponry under his command. An Air Base Commander has two to three squadrons at his base along with the necessary support services, variety of arsenal and manpower of around 2,000 personnel. Each squadron has 16 to 18 aircraft. Each aircraft costs between 100 to 200 crores depending on its type. The ammunition dump at the base has missiles and bombs worth several hundred crores. Imagine the catastrophe that would have taken place had we lost some of these assets at Pathankot. Similarly a naval Commander has under his command a vessel that costs anything from a 1000 crores to 15,000 crores depending on its type, has on-board weaponry worth several hundred crores and manpower assets of 500 to 2000. The vessel packs a punch that could literally wipe out Pakistan should it be carrying nuclear tipped missiles. In no other profession would you ever have such manpower, material, and financial resources at your disposal at a young age of around 35 to 40 years.

It is unfortunate that all this notwithstanding, we continue to have yawning deficiencies in the ranks of Capts and Majs and their equivalents in IAF & Navy. Officers of this rank constitute the core cutting edge of our Armed Forces and invariably operate up-front. Such a large deficiency is extremely worrisome and is impacting our operational capability and preparedness. The Govt and the Civil Society are both letting down the nation. While the Govt hasn't given to the defence services their due importance, our youth are taking up easy-going careers preferring money and false pride over national security and national pride. This could sound the death knell of our aspirations to become a global power.

In stark contrast to the other professions, Army is a way of life; which cannot be measured in terms of Rupees and paise. It entails a kind of discipline and commitment that is sacrosanct and unquestionable. It requires dedicating your life to the cause of the nation. It is a profession whose principal virtues are image, respect, camaraderie and mutual trust. In the Armed Forces, enrichment of your personality, confidence and self-image is a continuous on-going process.

Defence services equip you for taking on positions of great responsibility, authority and power. 31 of the 46 US Presidents were from the Armed Forces: George Washington, Eisenhower, Roosevelt and Truman etc. Similarly many an officer from the Armed Forces went on to become Prime Ministers and Presidents of their countries. Sir Winston Churchill of U.K and Gen De Gaulle of France being the most widely known. Officers from our Armed Forces have gone on to become Chief Ministers, Cabinet Ministers, Heads of the corporate world, the industry, chancellors and vice-chancellors of universities and research institutes. What is interesting however is that no civilian has ever been considered competent to command even the smallest of the sub-units of Air Force, The Navy or The Army which consists of only 10 persons, irrespective of their status, experience or expertise?

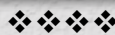
Defence Services provides you an opportunity to see, understand and experience the amazing beauty of India. You are privileged to operate in areas which were traversed by colossal like Guru Nanak Dev, Swami Vivekananda and Shri Aurobindo. Their pristine beauty lifts your soul; the mountains literally talk to you and share their secrets with perceptive minds. It was in the Himalayas that they got the inspiration, through which they impacted human kind for all times to come.

In the Armed Forces even after your retirement you continue to be respected and regarded as a family member and most of the perks remain applicable, such as the canteen facilities and medical. An Officer's responsibility towards his Men, unlike in other professions, does NOT end with his retirement; it is a lifelong commitment. Officers owe it to their Men, for having had the honour & privilege of leading them, while in service. In our Armed Forces, officer's wives too make a huge contribution in

improving the prospects of jawan's families. Such a support system is non-existent in any other profession.

Incidentally, around 16 Miss India's and Miss Universe hail from defence background including Navneet Kaur Dhillon. They are: Priyanka Chopra, Lara Dutta, Celina Jaitley, Neha Dhupia, Sushmita Sen, Pooja Batra, Gul Panag, Manpreet Brar, Nikita Anand, Ankita Shorey, Kanistha Dhankar, Hasleen Kaur and Sobhita Dhulipala. Let's see what they had to say about the Defence Services. Sobhita said, 'The defence background gives people multi-dimensional personalities. My dad was in the Navy. I travelled to many countries and imbibed bits of their culture, which have added to my growth from an early age. She was the first runner-up in 2013. Gul Panag (2002) had this to say; 'As an Army kid, you learn to adapt to any new environment with ease. It's one of the major traits that make you stand out as a winner. We have grit and determination to be out there and get what we want. We are confident of our turf.'" All others said the same things; but in so many different words.

India is at an historic check point. Great opportunities are opening up. We could soon occupy our rightful place in the United Nations Security Council in conformity with our, geographic, demographic, economic and military might. Our Generation Next will be the ultimate arbiters of our nation's destiny. The Armed Forces need young men and women with the highest qualities of head and heart as against those who join Armed Forces as a career of last resort. There is a huge need of wizards in space based systems, cyber warriors, robotics, 3 D printing, Computing and Cryptography, AI, etc. There is a need to change the locus and focus of our national thinking on defence if India has to emerge as a super power. All of us in this could act as harbingers of this change.



All Pictures Clicked by Dr. Peeyush Jain at National War Memorial, New Delhi