

Bravery beyond Comparison: Hony Capt Bana Singh, PVC

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It was in the autumn of 1987 that I came in touch with the then Commander of the Siachen Brigade, the taciturn, supremely fit, wiry, sun-burnt Brig CS Nugyal (later Maj Gen CS Nugyal, PVSM, UYSM). We had assembled at the Rajputana Rifles Centre in Delhi Cantt to correct the tactics paper of the Army's Promotion Examination Part 'D' that he had set. There were 12 of us; all Staff College qualified; young and high on self-esteem because we had been handpicked for this prestigious assignment. On top of that, we had, as Chief Examiner, a famous commander who was in the national news for masterminding the capture of a murderously effective Pakistani Post on the icy Saltoro Ridge called Quaid; a post that had caused us savage losses in lives and warlike material.

Brig Nugyal wasn't easy to talk to. Reserved, dry, very Olive Green (OG), thorough and painstaking; this SIKH Regiment officer nevertheless commanded awe and respect. In precise language he made it clear that he expected the highest integrity, professionalism and application of mind from us. We did not let him down. It was only after several days that he unwound a bit, to talk about how Quaid got converted into Bana Post. He had got along an hour long video cassette which realistically replicated how the operation had taken place. We were held spell-bound watching it; stunned by the super human feat of arms by the daring and courage of Bana and his brave-hearts.

In 1999, I was commanding a Rashtriya Rifles Sector in the Valley. The Kargil War was on, and, every few days, we assembled at the JAK LI Centre to say farewell to the Kargil dead being airlifted home. The dignified Sub Maj Bana Singh, PVC, who was then posted at the Centre, was always present on the dozen odd occasions that I attended. Back in the Valley in 2003 as a Division Commander, I invited Sub Maj Bana Singh to address the Division's officers about his death defying feat on the icy wastes of the Saltoro Ridge. He was heard with pin drop silence.

The name Siachen, in Balti, refers to a land abundant with black roses. Siachen glacier is located in the eastern Karakoram Range of the Himalayas, near the LC between India and Pakistan. India controls the whole Siachen glacier complex. The main glacier is sandwiched between the Saltoro Ridge to its west, (occupied by India) and the Karakoram Range to its east.

The Siachen glacier is 76 km long, with its width varying from 1000-2500 metres. It falls from an altitude of 18,875 ft (5,753 m) at its head at Indira Col, down to 11,875 ft (3,620 m) at its snout. The average winter snowfall is 35 feet, with temperatures ranging from minus 30 to minus 80 degrees centigrade. The crest of the dominating Indian held Saltoro Ridge holds ranges in height from 17,880 to 25,330 feet (5,450 to 7,720 m). The major passes are Sia La, Bilafond La and Gyong La. Our pickets are reachable only after a murderous climb. Capture thereafter demands a suicidal frontal assault.

Let us now speak of our hero. Bana was born on 6 January 1949 into a Punjabi Sikh family, at Kadyal, a border village located in RS Pura. He enrolled in the Army on 6 January 1969 into 8 JAK LI. He was considered a keen and enterprising, intelligent soldier by his officers, and willingly accepted additional responsibilities. Trained at the High Altitude Warfare School in Gulmarg/Sonamarg, he was eminently combat fit and a perpetual volunteer for any task.

On 20 April, 1987, Bana's battalion was deployed in the Siachen area. In a later interview with the famous author and Tibetologist, Claude Arpi, Bana stated that Quaid Post was under occupation of the Pakistanis when the battalion arrived in the glacier. Named after MA Jinnah, the father of Pakistan, it was the most important and highest post in the area; one of the few that remained occupied by Pakistan during its otherwise unsuccessful all out assault in 1987 on Saltoro Ridge under the command of then Brig Pervez Musharraf (later President of Pakistan).

From Quaid Post, one could see 80 km around; indeed, almost the entire Saltoro range including Indian posts like Amar and Sonam, which could only be supplied by helicopter. The Pakistanis could therefore prevent the supply

of these posts as well as interdict any movement by accurate fire. In fact on 18 April, 1987, firing from Quaid resulted in the death of a JCO and five soldiers at Sonam. It thus became necessary to capture this post for the safety of our men and supporting helicopters.

CO of 8 JAK LI, Col DS Rawat, proactively decided to send a patrol to find out the strength and disposition of the Pakistanis. On May 29, a 10 man patrol under 2/ Lt Rajiv Pande departed. Facing this gutsy officer was a 90 degree climb on ice walls that were 1500 feet high and which had to be negotiated to reach Quaid Post. On top of that, the weather was abysmal. Unfortunately, nearing Quaid, they were detected by SSG commandos and eight, including Lt Pande and his JCO killed. Pande was posthumously awarded a Vir Chakra.

Though these deaths were tragic, the CO was now even more determined to succeed. With the approval of Brig Nugyal, "Operation Rajiv" was thus launched. A total of 62 people participated; two officers, three JCO's and 57 Jawans. The operation was conducted in three phases on 23, 25 and 26 June, 1987. The platoon sent on 23 June under Major Varinder Singh, Bana's company commander, had to unfortunately come back half-way, losing two soldiers in the bargain. Lt Pande had managed to fix ropes, but due to heavy snow fall, the ropes were not traceable. The ropes had therefore to be fixed all over again. The second platoon led by Subedar Sansar Singh with 10 Jawans, made an attempt on 25 June. This time, there was no problem with the ropes, but due to a communication gap with the controlling headquarters; the mission had to be aborted. Col Rawat conveyed his determination to his command: "I don't care what sacrifices we have to pay, but Quaid will be captured. Naib Subedar Bana Singh, hand-picked by Maj Virender and held in reserve for the challenging assignment, led the final assault along with Riflemen Chunni Lal, Laxman Das, Om Raj and Kashmir Chand. It was exactly at eleven minutes after noon on 26 June 1987, when this final phase of "Operation Rajiv" was launched in heavy snow and poor visibility.

In personal interaction with Honorary Captain Bana Singh, PVC, at an war veterans ex Servicemen parade, this writer, who was wounded as a Brig in an encounter with Pakistani terrorists in South Kashmir in January 1998), was narrated the complete operation with exceptional honesty, glitches and all, and warm words for his subordinates, peers and seniors. He remembered that, tossing and turning in uneasy sleep, because of the losses the Paltan had suffered, and because he had to succeed in his mission, Bana suddenly sat up bolt upright from his troubled sleep, with his mind and body strangely charged for action. He felt he had heard Guru Gobind Singh say to him, "*Bana, I want to test you.*" That

was all the inspiration that this deeply religious man needed to go ahead. His soldiers were equally inspired and determined to win all or lose all: The die was cast. There would be no turning back.

Another incident he recalled was his much loved (now deceased) company commander, Maj (later Brig) Varinder Singh, who had been shot through the chest in the earlier phase of the operation (he was awarded the Vir Chakra), advising him to capture the Pakistanis alive when Quaid was attacked. Bana's earthy response: "*Sir, eh... (edited) meri maasi de putt thori na haege... (Sir, these... [edited] chaps are hardly my blessed aunt's children!)*" forced the serious Maj Virender to break into a broad smile... The issue was closed.

The start of the final portion of "Operation Vijay" was grim. It was literally darkness at noon, Bana recalled. The heavy, persistent snow fall and the poor ambient light conditions made one wonder whether it was day or night. On top of that, the Pakistanis knew something was going on because of the artillery shelling that we had started from the gun areas in the base camp to make them put their head down and also to divert their attention. Quaid, as Bana and his men well knew, was an impregnable glacier fortress with ice walls 1500 feet high on two sides. Naib Subedar Bana Singh led his men through an extremely difficult and hazardous route, climbing in near darkness through a snowstorm. He inspired them by his indomitable courage and leadership. Every pore of his body strained and yearned to reach that single bunker at the top. He was, after all, under test; a test pitched on the limits of human endurance set by his Guru Sahib. His men; inspired his raw determination and never-say-die spirit followed their leader.

There was a single, deep bunker on the top, Bana recalled. The Pakistanis must have become complacent because of the foul weather; the heavy snowfall; their success in warding the previous two efforts by the Indians to capture the post, and, not the least because the Pakistani soldiers, particularly the SSG under their boastful Brigade commander had come to believe that they were indeed ten feet tall. Bana and his five men were therefore able to close up to the bunker. Bana opened the entrance door, threw his grenades inside and closed the doors... His men set up their Light Machine Gun on single shot. In that extreme climate, the automatic weapon could fire only single shot... After the short but intense close quarter battle that took place, the Pakistanis were killed, with two or three having been bayoneted. Perhaps there were more SSG personnel who may have fallen to their deaths in their effort to escape the Indians bullets, grenades and bayonets. Too much was happening for anyone to have a clear recall. What Bana recalled

with a personal sense of loss still readable on his face 21 years after the operation was that the Pakistanis, on realizing that the post was lost, started shelling it with their viciously effective air-burst ammunition. One of Bana's brave-hearts, Sepoy Om Raj had his hand blown off; amputated with almost surgical precision. In spite of Bana's best efforts to save his life, bad weather and visibility as well as the intense shelling colluded. Sepoy Om Raj passed away, being awarded a Vir Chakra posthumously. Bana recalls that, following the protocol and ethos of the Indian Army towards the dead, the bodies of the six SSG personnel were brought back by his men and later handed over to Pakistan during a flag meeting at Kargil.

On the morning of 27 June 1987, the Brigade Commander, Brig CS Nugyal who had intimately been involved with the planning and execution of the operation, arrived by helicopter at the battalions launch base. Fiercely hugging Bana and his soldiers, he announced that hereafter, the 22143 feet (6749 metres) above sea level post so brazenly taken away from Pakistan by Naib Subedar Bana Singh and his men, would be called Bana Top in his honour; a decision that a grateful nation and a very proud Army indeed, have accepted for posterity.

Naib Subedar Bana Singh was awarded the Param Vir Chakra, the highest wartime gallantry medal in India, for conspicuous bravery and leadership under most adverse conditions. "Operation Rajiv" overall resulted in award of one MVC (for Subedar Sansar Singh), seven Vir Chakra's (including one for Maj Varinder) and one Sena Medal, besides the PVC. 8 JAK LI had reason to be proud; very proud indeed, for their stupendous skill at arms in the toughest high altitude terrain the world has ever known so far.

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