

Humour & Courage

HIMMETH SINGH

Soldiers like all humans experience fear. Some handle it better than others. Those that do can divert their minds from fear. Such men normally, I have found, have a pronounced sense of humour. The realisation came to me in the Bangladesh war of 1971. Let me share the experience with you.

I was commanding 4 Guards, the unit I was commissioned in and proud to be leading in war. We were part of an infantry brigade. For the first operation of the War, in our Sector my Battalion was tasked to cut off the withdrawal route of the enemy from the border railway station, Akhaura, in Bangladesh. It was held by Pak 13 Frontier Force with its brigade headquarters at Brahman Baria, a little over 20 km in the rear. Even in December, with the monsoon long gone, much of Bangladesh is still water logged restricting movement along bunds. An infiltrator to succeed, perforce, has to move through the water logged terrain.

In the east the sun sets early, and more so in winter months. We commenced infiltrating soon after five in the evening. Harassed by enemy fire, both direct and indirect, and unforeseen difficulties we arrived in our general area of deployment by six the next morning, hours behind schedule. We were tasked to go into company size blocks all within spitting distance of the enemy. This would have been impossible but for a heavy fog that screened our movement from the enemy. By the time it cleared we were well dug in. The only lot that was not in position were our supporting amphibian tanks and the Battalion anti-tank guns, ridding piggy back on the armour. The soft terrain had them beat within minutes of crossing the border.

One of the strike rifle companies was commanded by Paunchy Chandrakant. Born a Rajput he nearly had the shortest of army careers ever. Inducted during the mass officer in-take soon after the China debacle, he was posted to the

Army Service Corps on commissioning. Hugely disappointed, he told the Authorities he would resign, if not posted to a fighting unit. Though changes are rarely forthcoming, fortunately, his posting was altered to 4 Guards, an infantry battalion. Raised as a part of the Bengal Army in 1798, it has a heritage of honour and valour.

Soon after arriving in the unit, Paunchy and 4 Guards were seconded for service with the UN at Gaza. For an Indian tenure it was a shopper's paradise but Paunchy bought little spending what he could spare from his Lieutenant's pay on travel and monastery liquors. The liquors were superb, the best I have ever tasted.

Paunchy, now a Major, reached his designated area of deployment. The position dominated the Akhaura-Brahman Baria railway line, the main enemy withdrawal route. A platoon sent out on reconnaissance was surprised by enemy light tanks and decimated. Two lads returned to tell the sorry story. For the next three days, Paunchy's Company was hit with everything the Pakies could muster: they were physically assaulted, engaged by artillery, fired at point blank range by tanks and even strafed by enemy air until I thought they could not take anymore. Late on this second night, speaking on the wireless to my Brigade Commander, I told him we were asking too much from Paunchy and his men and requested for their withdrawal the next day. I was told not to act prematurely. The final decision was mine, he said, but I should take it after meeting Paunchy.

The next morning near ten as I was approaching Paunchy's locality it came under immense artillery fire. It lifted as I reached his defences. Looking around I saw Paunchy striding towards us from the right and a little outside the Company's perimeter. On reaching us he wished me with a chuckle and said, "Sir, these Pakies have terrific noses". Seeing me perplexed he continued, "the first day I went to bog round seven in the morning and no sooner I had got my pants down the enemy artillery opened up. Yesterday, I went out near eight and the same thing happened. Today I thought I would flummox them by going later and went to bog minutes ago and they still caught me with my pants down". I was amazed at his flippant remark and that after over 72 hours in near hell. And then I realised humour was Paunchy's way to take his mind away from the horrors of war and death.

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In the final analysis it is the mind that decides the winning and losing. Paunchy and men like him, you can kill but never defeat. As for his company or what remained of it there was no question of pulling them out. If you tried they would probably refuse. Recommended for the Param Vir Chakra, the highest gallantry award in the country, he was given the Vir Chakra.

Editor's Note: *This letter was written by Lt Gen Himmeth Singh to Brig Desmond Hayde on 12 September, 1997. Brigadier Hayde was an iconic figure in the Indian Army and his book "The Battle of Dograi" gives a vivid account of that part of the 1965 Indo-Pakistan War. Maj Chandra Kant, VrC (Paunchy) was commissioned in February 1964 and took premature retirement in 1978. He is a noted writer and speaks extensively on defence and other issues.*

The background to the letter is given in General Himmeth Singh's words... "Desmond was shattered when I declined to write up service experience for a book he was working on. Later had second thoughts and wrote this for him, a man amongst men that he has always been. I was a Course behind Desmond at the Academy and in those days seniors were demigods. They ruled the juniors totally and mercilessly. Desmond, however, was different. Then I did not know if his benevolence was laziness or unconcern. Over the years one came to realise he was what he was because of caring heart. Desmond was my section commander and we both played in the Company hockey team. A team short on talent but high on belief. A belief both he and Captain Tommy sponsored, which won us the intercompany tournament. This same belief in the men he commanded won him the Mahavir Chakra in the Battle of "Dograi".

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