Twitter Thread by Shalini Singh Sengar



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Remembering Colonel Anil Kaul, VrC (Retd) on his 3rd Death Anniversary.

“It was October 12, 1987, exactly 5:55 pm as I was… coming out of the cupola of my T-72 tank on a steamy evening in an unknown place called Kokkuvil in the Jaffna district of Northern Sri Lanka.+



I froze in that confined space at what I saw. An LTTE militant stood at 60 meters aiming his rocket-propelled gun at my tank.

In a flash he fired. Probably having lost his nerve he aimed too low. The projectile hit the left mudguard of the tank, but for some inexplicable reason+



did not explode. It then hit the side of the main gun and then exploded on top of the turret, all in a fraction of a second. Before I knew, it seemed I had received a straight right punch so to say to my chin. I saw some blood appear on my left hand and there was a sharp drop in+

my eyesight.

Lt Colonel (now Lt Gen) Dalbir Singh, then Commanding Officer of 10 Para Commando, who was standing on the engine deck said to me, “Yaar what a close shave.”

He suddenly saw me and the look on his face told me that something was very very wrong with me. In that+

fraction of a second, as if it was a rewind of my entire life, thoughts raced through my life as to how and when I had landed myself in such a situation…

I asked my gunner to pull out a first field dressing (FFD) which is standard equipment in a first aid box carried in each+

tank. To my horror, he replied that there was none. A roll of rifle cleaning cloth was pulled out and wrapped around what was once a perfect left hand.

“My towel was used to tie up the remnants of where my right eye once was. This having been done I slid back into the+

commander’s cupola, from where I conducted the rest of my part of my operation through the eyes and the voice of Lt Col Dalbir Singh.

“We soon got out of the precarious location we were in, made contact with the 13 Sikh Light Infantry battalion that we were to rescue in the+

first place, and then moved to an abandoned house near (the) Kankesanthurai (KKS)–Jaffna railway line.

The next few hours were spent in retrieving the Para Commandos from the Jaffna University where they had been surrounded by the LTTE.+

Sometime during the night Kaul was given a morphine injection. He drifted into a disturbed sleep. “I dreamt of the days in the salubrious environment of Srinagar in my grandfather’s lap and drove down the route of my journey to the battlefield… over the last thirty years.”+

The IPKF’s presence in Sri Lanka was largely the result of Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi’s inexperience and Sri Lankan President Junius Richard Jayewardene’s canniness. His logic was that since India had, in a way, instigated the Tigers to violence during Indira Gandhi’s second+

tenure (1980-84) as prime minister, it was her duty to rein them in. The Indian force landed in Sri Lanka in October 1987, (over) confident that the Tigers would surrender in a matter of days. The Indian contingent was hardly prepared even in terms of basic supplies, to fight+

the LTTE on its own terrain. Neither the army nor the air force had been aware of the Tigers’ strength. Nor were they prepared adequately to take them on. The IPKF thought they were going to deal with a bunch of amateurs who could be routed easily. +

The force’s problems were exacerbated when the Sri Lankan Army, after having promised full support and co-operation, was confined to the barracks.

My gunner explained that we had joined up and relieved 13 Sikh LI battalion and along with them moved to the university area+

after I got hit, and recovered most of the Para Commandos, dead, wounded or alive.

Having extricated whoever we could we moved back to an abandoned house on the railway line only to realise that out of my three tanks, one had been left behind as it got bogged in the clayey+

soil obtaining there. Having offloaded the wounded. the other two tanks went back and pulled the third one in a recovery operation even the best of specialists will hesitate to undertake in daytime, let alone when we did it, in the middle of the night

and under intermittent fire+

of the LTTE.

Dalbir and I remained on the tanks as he was my eyes and ears, but orders to the tank crews were still originating from me.

Of the many incidents in his experience, he retails two.

“One was the raising and training of the Citizens Volunteer Force (CVF) in+

May-June ’88 in IPKF-held areas and arming these cadres with AK-47 rifles against the 7.62 held by the IPKF. Both the trained cadres and the weapons passed on to the LTTE.” In other words, no one had bothered to do a background check on the trainees.+

“The second (instance) of logistic importance was though a sea landing was contemplated at Trincomalee, the Landing Ship Tank (LST) INS Maggar could not accommodate the T-72 tank. Trials carried on even as late as 1989, when it was time to return.+

In October ’87 the loading of the T-72 in the IL-76 was an exercise in patience and perseverance of both the tank and aircraft crews. To say the least, without our Indian acumen for jugaad this would not have been possible.” In a Peter Sellers comedy, it would be riotously funny+

In real life it was one more nail hammered into the force’s coffin.

And then there’s the point that the military had LTTE supremo Vellupillai Prabakaran in its sights more than once. “Four times the man went through our lines,”.+

But they could not touch him or take him, a telling commentary on the unreal nature of the war they were fighting. The leader of the guerillas the army was fighting had immunity!

Stories about the logistical quagmire are seemingly endless. After the Jaffna operation, Kaul was+

trying to cope with the situation and his life-threatening injuries.

He discovered that, “The Air Force had refused to fly its helicopters as some had been damaged during the landings in the university and the spare parts were only available in Chandigarh, which was quite a+

distance from the battlefield to say the least, and the Army ironically did not have any ambulance vehicles to carry its wounded to the forward aid posts or the field hospitals.

I decided that a decision was the need of the hour and informed the Brigade Commander that my tanks+

were leaving for Palali, as I had completed the task assigned to me. He was welcome to put any number of casualties for their evacuation rearwards. I would also take the responsibility of running the gauntlet of the 15 km distance infested with LTTE militants. 43 wounded+

personnel and 15 bodies were carried in three tanks.

They were those who once wore the regimental colors of their respective regiments with pride: Specifically 4/5 GR (FF), 13 Sikh LI and 10 Para Commando. Three tanks with a severely injured officer, a severely shaken up JCO+

and a determined crew made the run of 15 km in approximately four hours and by 2 pm were back at our base in Palali, the same base we had set out of 36 hours ago.

The loss of sight in the right eye and partial amputation of his left wrist due to the outset of gangrene from+

lack of even a first aid box did not end his army career. The Vir Chakra did come his way, but at enormous cost to life and limb, as in the case of his comrades.

One operation of just 24 hours yielded 10 gallantry awards, four of them posthumous.+



As a remembrance I would like to mention their names… Dalbir Singh, Sheonan Singh, Deepak Gardener, Inder Bawa, Virender Singh, Subedar Sampuran Singh, Subedar Prem Thapa and Lance Naik Ganga Ram.+

His war was over. He had landed on October 12, 1987, and was out a couple of days afterwards. Kaul was evacuated to the Southern Command Military Hospital in Poona (Pune).

Kaul’s permanent duty station was Babina, a cantonment near Jhansi in central India, where he lived with+

his wife Rekha, daughters Gitanjali (10) and Aradhana (6), and Fluffy the Pomeranian. Rekha taught at the local army school and the girls studied at St Mark's Convent.

Probably the first sign that all was not well was when Fluffy started "whimpering and whining uncontrollably".+



The date was October 12. The Pomeranian apparently sensed that the master, so far away, was in grave danger.

As soon as she heard the news, Rekha set out on the long, nerve-wracking journey, accompanied by Regimental Dafadar Bhim Singh. Gitanjali and Aradhana stayed behind with+

their aunt, the CO's wife, in Babina.

In Bombay, she was escorted to a train that got to Poona later that night. The trip was fraught with uncertainty as information

systems did not have any updates on my state and location.+

Though one commonality felt by her with immense pride and gratefulness was the reaction and attitude of unknown strangers, co-passengers and the general public to assist in whatever manner they could to alleviate her state of mind. In Poona, she was met at the Railway Station+

and taken straight to the ward where I was." Rekha was at his bedside constantly after that. A third generation soldier, Kaul had married, inevitably, into another "army" family, virtually on orders from his father, Brigadier Kishen Kumar Kaul.+

It took him two months to recover and return to Babina. Soon after, during their daughters' winter break, the family went for a two-week vacation to his parents' place. On the train, a stranger who had read his story in Society magazine asked for his autograph, which he gave.+

More interestingly a ticket checker, who had refused to give Kaul and family seats six months earlier, recognised him and was ashamed.

He vowed never ever to refuse a seat to a man in uniform however jam-packed his coach may be. I realised that war and its after effects leave a+

profound impression on ordinary humans, both in and out of uniform.

Anil Kaul met Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi and his wife Sonia on April 2, 1988, at the tea that followed the presentation of gallantry awards at Rashtrapati Bhavan. President R.+

Venkataraman pinned the Vir Chakra on his chest. It filled the young officer with pride. Rajiv asked him, "What do you feel about our going to Sri Lanka?"

Kaul looked to his chief General Sunderji for help, but none came. He answered as best as he could, "Sir, I have no+



feelings. I just went where I was ordered to go.”

Not convinced, the PM persisted, “I am sure you must have felt something.”
No longer able to contain himself, Kaul said, “Sir, I have no feelings, but I have an opinion and that is our going to Sri Lanka as I saw it was a+

complete Balls-up.” He had no hesitation telling Rajiv Gandhi that “there were no maps, no radio sets, no intelligence briefings worth the name, rifles that were outgunned by the LTTE, and to cap it all no evacuation of the wounded, not even a first field dressing for immediate+

use.”

Rajiv suddenly said, “We have all got to move for the customary group photograph. After that I would like to talk to you in detail.”

The photographs taken, Kaul moved towards the PM to resume the discussion but security personnel and advisers whisked

Rajiv Gandhi away.+

Sunderji, then Army Chief, remarked, “You don’t mince your words, do you?”

At first, the accolades kept coming. But after the celebrations in Babina, Kaul was ushered into the office of the CO, who happened to be his brother-in-law, at midnight.+

That worthy lectured Kaul on how he should have conducted himself during operations and later.

Kaul suggests, “This had possibly been a direct fallout of his own guilt in deserting me at a crucial juncture, his own shortcomings, and finally his way of telling me that he would+

get back at me by some devious means or other.”

(Source: Better Dead than Disabled by Col Anil Kaul(Retd)

https://t.co/xZGs9FJHIr)