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100 lives and my last operational flight

Indian Parliament was attacked by gunmen in December 2001 .. The pak sponsored terror angle was deeply being investigated and the government of the day warned the armed forces to be ready for any eventuality . 1/n

This was the period when my release from service had come through and I was getting ready for civilian life , with no idea where to go and what to do . I was in Sena bhavan trying to register with DGR for jobs having done a course in industrial security . 2/n

I was within 2 kms of parliament when it was attacked and still remember the news being played out on the radio of the shop where I stopped to grab a sandwich after all the running around , which many ex servicemen will easily relate to 3/n

In a few months , I would be an ex serviceman . The thought would often cross my mind but the decision was made and I was on my way out ! The heart therefore was heavy while I was busy conducting my last few heading a two helicopter dett . In Srinagar 4/n

Flights in my favorite bird the Mi-171vs was heavy I was trying to soak as much of Kashmir where I spent 6 long years navigating the mountains would soon fade into a memory. I would be out in the rough and tumble of the civilian world of which I had no idea at that point 5/n

The future was uncertain . I was saying my good byes at Srinagar. Few friends had organized weekend brunch . We all sat and chatted at Srinagar officers mess . Some of the conversation was of a unit move to a forward location . Having spent most of my career 6/n

In J&K , the young officers had few questions about the route to take towards poonch, Rajauri area . They had been told to mobilize at short notice a radar unit of more than 100 odd men . We all went our separate ways . I finished my last task in the valley and was eager 7/n

To go back to my home base which was Jammu . The afternoon as we were getting ready to depart for Jammu , a message was received from Srinagar ATC to return to our parking spot as the AOC (Air Officer Commanding) is coming to meet me . A moment of quiet anticipation passed 8/n

When a senior officer wants to meet you , .. I quickly ran through the events of the past few days . Hope I had not made any mistakes .! We shutdown and waited for AOC . Who arrived and looked in significant worry ! He called me to his gypsy spread out a quarter inch map 9/n

He drew a circle that was easily about 15-20 kms. He said he had lost contact with the unit that moved to the forward area and the unit set course to a cordinate very near to the LOC near Poonch sector . It was almost 100 men . He feared for the worst 10/n

As the last message received from the unit was that the school compound they set up camp and radar had suspicious movements through the night . Some AirForce guards spotted armed militants circling near the camp at night with weapons .The area he showed me was a treacherous 11/n

With no army unit in the vicinity . In the hurry to deploy the unit was not carrying enough weapons to even decently defend themselves to survive a second night . Most probably the previous night was a reccee carried out by militants in all probability planning to strike 12/n

As me and the AOC spoke , a large truck full of weapons mostly assault rifles , grenades and basically whatever Srinagar airbase could spare . It was all loaded on the helicopter. We quickly refueled . I asked the captain of the second helicopter to join me in the mission 13/n

I wanted someone with good map reading skills and trusted him as I had trained him before . A quick assessment was carried out . The AOC jumped in with us into the helicopter stating he wanted o meet his boys out in the field 14/n

My mind was where to look for this minuscule radar unit that would be camouflaged in any case deployed near the LOC . Almost like looking for a needle in a haystack as the probably area given to me was about 10 nm radius .15/n

There was no time to really think and plan . All weapons loaded we started the helicopter and were airborne from Srinagar . Me and Rags kept playing all the probable routes these men would’ve taken .i suddenly remembered telling the young officers to route via Riasi 16/n

Just on an absolute hunch , I decided to follow the road from banihal to punch .The likely route they must’ve taken . I told the co pilot and the AOC not to leave sight of the road as it waxed , waned and weaved through the mountain . My eyes was scanning the skyline 17/n

Frantically , for any military structure . Back of kind I knew that we were in deep militant infested terrain and could get a few bullets coming at us anytime . There was no army unit to be seen . As my heart started to sink as we were approaching fuel minimums to get back 18/n

As I did a turn , I caught a glimpse of what looked like a radar antenna . We headed that way for a closer look and when we did the low pass tree top level , I saw some men on IAF fatigues run out waving 19/n

The joy of spoiling our men soon evaporated on me at the thought that there was no landing spot to fit in a 12 ton helicopter in the vicinty as it was full of trees . I looked at the AOC and Co pilot . I found a spot next to the road where the main part of the helicopter 20/n

Could fit in .Most of the helicopter would hang out onto the road .With the tail rotor spinning over the road . Managed to land . I saw smile on the officers and men .Not sure ,if I spotted a grateful tear , for we had given those men a chance to defend themselves that night 21/n

We flew back . As we passed Vaishnodevi on the way back to Srinagar , I bowed my head in silent prayer for those 100+ men as they should get through that night till re enforcements arrived . Shared this story today as it is birthday of the lead officer of that contingent . 22/n

My witness to that landing from the ground .. HAPPY BIRTHDAY @Navanalyst1 !!! Love you brother . Wish you a long and healthy life . Jai Hind ■■■■