India's Bravehearts

A Note on the Author

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India's Bravehearts

Untold Stories from the Indian Army

Lieutenant General Satish Dua (Retired)

juggernaut

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To the brave Indian Soldier, who asks for so little,
yet is always willing and ready to risk his life
for the country

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Foreword

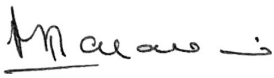
Lieutenant General Satish Dua is a comrade-at-arms and a dear friend with whom I have spent quite some time, on and off the beaten track. A leader of men, he has had an outstanding career commanding troops from the icy heights of Kashmir to the thick jungles of the Northeast where he has matched steel and wits with our adversaries, external and internal. It gives me immense pleasure to present his book *India's Bravehearts*, filled to the brim with memories and anecdotes, and an ode to the quintessential Indian soldier – a life lived extraordinarily.

The tales of bravery and bravado of Indian soldiers recounted in this book warm the hearts and steel the nerves. I hope they will ignite the minds of

all readers, especially our younger generation who look towards the Olive Greens for inspiration and guidance. For those already donning the colour and out of it, this is a trip down memory lane.

A better narrator than Lieutenant General Satish Dua could not have been found, and in this book he displays his writing prowess too. I wish him all the best for the success of his book.

Jai Hind.



(M.M. Naravane)
General

Preface

I was ten or eleven years old when I decided I wanted to join the army. At the age of sixteen I had already secured a seat in a medical college, when I got the call letter giving me admission to the National Defence Academy (NDA). So I did the first semester of MBBS, then came home and convinced my parents to let me switch. I have never regretted it.

I did reasonably well at the Academy, became a Commando Instructor and eventually retired as a Lieutenant General in the army, specializing in counter-terrorism. You may not know my name, but you would know of one of the last operations I

oversaw as Corps Commander – the surgical strike of 2016 in Kashmir, in response to the terror attack at Uri.

I gave the armed forces thirty-nine years of my life. I had my successes as well as my share of upsets in military operations. I had close shaves and survived, while sadly some of my dear comrades did not. And I made a village of close friends. This is the soldier's life. This is my story.

My story is also the story of an army officer who learnt how to live and train and go into battle with soldiers. Who learnt how to plan operations so that innocent bystanders didn't get hurt, lead troops boldly, take decisions even when there were no clear directions, deal with emotions and hide his own fears. As I always say, counter-terrorism is the trickiest operation – it is like playing chess with live bullets.

Every infantry officer aspires to command the unit he has been commissioned in and hopes to

get an opportunity to lead his soldiers in combat. I was fortunate to get to do both in the summer of 1998. That year I was promoted to the rank of a Colonel and was appointed as the Commanding Officer (CO) of my own battalion of the Jammu and Kashmir Light Infantry, 8 JAK LI (Siachen), which has the official honour of 'Bravest of the Brave'. Our unit was deployed in an operationally active area on the Line of Control (LoC) in Jammu and Kashmir (J&K).

This is a collection of stories mostly from my days as a CO – they are stories of operations, risks taken, lucky escapes, extraordinary colleagues; and of the unseen aspects of the soldier's life, from the rigorous training to the outstanding hospitals that ensure we can return to battle and serve our country again.

Those years in command taught me life lessons, tactics and empathy; they made me emotionally sensitive, and at times ruthless; they taught me to put faith in my soldiers and in God and recognize

the power of positive thinking. Above all, they taught me that when things seem uncertain and the path is unclear, one has to take a leap of faith and aim high. My officers, my soldiers and my gut instinct never let me down.

I hope you enjoy these stories.

Jai Hind!

1

Surgical Strike Across the LoC

Dawn was yet to break when the shrill ringing of the phone woke me up. It was the General Officer Commanding (GOC) of Baramulla Division. 'Our base at Uri has been attacked by terrorists, and I'm afraid, sir, that the situation is rather precarious.'

I was instantly awake. I didn't need to be told how serious this was. If terrorists attacked a military base in person, then they were likely on a suicide mission. And when a man comes prepared to die, he will cause great damage and heavy casualties before he does. The next phone call, a few minutes later, confirmed this.

Thirty minutes later we had all the information. Four suicide terrorists had blazed their way through

our base at Uri, very close to the LoC, and caused heavy casualties. During the firefight, a cookhouse also caught fire, which increased the death toll.

In the four decades of my career, I have faced a lot of tough situations, mostly in counter-terrorism. But the scale of what happened on that Sunday, 18 September 2016, was huge. We lost eighteen soldiers.

Eighteen young lives lost. And it happened on my watch. As I got ready to go to the helipad, the cup of tea that I had started sipping suddenly seemed tasteless. I left it and went out to the lawn just to be with myself before the chopper arrived. It was a bright, clear day, but for me it was a dark Sunday, the darkest ever.

The terrorists had chosen their target and timing well. A change of battalion had been in progress. A battalion can stay in a high-altitude area for only two winters. Heights above 9000 feet are considered high altitude, and most of our posts on the LoC

ranged from 9000 to 12,000 feet. Soldiers face several medical issues if they stay for prolonged periods at that height, mostly due to lack of oxygen in the air and extreme cold during the snow season.

So the battalion was in the process of moving out, with another one replacing it. During this period of transfer, soldiers of both battalions spend a couple of weeks together to familiarize the incoming troops with the terrain and peculiarities of the LoC. They conduct joint patrolling and lay ambushes together. At this time there are double the usual number of soldiers on all posts. At the Uri base too, there was a concentration of troops from both battalions, with some of them accommodated in tents.

The Uri base therefore proved to be a good target for the suicide terrorists. As they cut the perimeter fence and entered the camp, it was still dark. But they were detected soon and fired upon. Even as one terrorist died, the others dispersed and started

firing indiscriminately at sleeping soldiers and those stirring to wakefulness.

It was just before dawn. One of the biggest worries in such situations is coordination. We had soldiers from two different battalions who had not known each other for long. It was also unfortunate that an LPG cylinder exploded inside the cookhouse. The cookhouse went up in flames, which also engulfed a couple of tents.

The scene at Uri was grim. The firing had stopped but the fires were still raging. The casualties, both dead and wounded, had been moved to the field hospital. Sanitization operations to check for more terrorists in the nearby forest were under way. An occasional bullet or grenade would explode because of the heat from the fire.

Meanwhile, news came in that the defence minister, the late Mr Manohar Parrikar, was arriving in Uri that afternoon. 'Why now, why today?' I asked Mr G. Mohan Kumar, the defence

secretary, when he rang me up to tell me of the minister's visit.

So many things were happening that needed my attention: the operations in Uri, planning how to fly out the mortal remains of all those who had laid down their lives, the road journey to their home towns, the homage ceremony in Srinagar before their bodies were sent back. So many calls had to be attended to – from the Army Headquarters, the police, the civil administration, the chief minister, the governor. The Army Chief had already arrived. I did not need more VIPs on my hands on a day like this.

When the defence minister arrived, I was struck by the simplicity of the man. But I had to say no to his wish to go to Uri. The operation was still in progress and it was not safe for the minister to be there. He respected the decision. So from the airport we flew by helicopter to Badami Bagh Cantonment in Srinagar, where my headquarters was located.

It was impossible to talk in the noisy chopper. The short flight of ten minutes was the only time I had that day to be alone with my thoughts. It was easy to preach phrases like 'don't despair when there are upsets', 'look for opportunities in every failure', but the attack at Uri was beyond such sentiments.

What could be the hidden opportunity in an operation like this? They always send terrorists across the LoC and we are always defensive and reactive. Then it struck me that there is outrage in the nation, the country is incensed at Pakistan-sponsored terrorism, my soldiers want revenge and there is a bold leadership at the Centre. So why not plan for a strong riposte? Something that had never been done before? Something that can cause the other side hurt and pain in equal measure?

At my headquarters, I finished briefing the defence minister on a map in my operational room. The Army Chief, General Dalbir Singh Suhag, and the Northern Army Commander, Lieutenant

General D.S. Hooda, were also present. Kashmir was my area of responsibility. That is the reason I was doing the talking and briefings. The minister did not interrupt me even once. As I finished giving an account of what had happened so far, he asked, 'So what is the plan now?' I said, 'Sir, if you are asking me about what we can do, then I would like to brief you alone.' 'Yes yes, I would like to talk to you in your chamber,' he said. The officials accompanying the minister did not join as the minister, the Army Chief and the Northern Army Commander walked to my office.

The Army Chief and the Northern Army Commander spoke first. It was their role to work out the larger plans and possibilities at a national level. They talked about our preparedness to take any action and discussed the possibility of our response spiralling into something bigger – that would be beyond my level, as I was in charge of the operational domain only in Kashmir. Mr Parrikar

then turned towards me. 'What do you have to say?' I simply said, '*Aap haan keh do, main kar doonga, sir* (You give me the go ahead, and I will do it, sir).' I thought I saw a glint in his eyes, and I knew I had his full attention.

I told him that the Chief would take care of the big picture at the national level; once he gave the green signal, we would plan and execute a bold response on the ground. 'For years, we have been taking a hit when they send in terrorists, and we are unable to react in kind. We will do something which will create that hurt for them too. We will go across the LoC and hit the terrorists' camps inside their territory. But please leave the choice of targets and timings to us.'

For reasons of security, I cannot divulge the details of the operational discussion. What I can reveal is that the defence minister then asked me two quick questions. First, 'There will be no collateral damage, I hope?' I assured him that we

should be able to manage that by going through uninhabited areas. In any case, to maintain an element of surprise we would need to keep clear of inhabited areas.

The second was more of a wishful comment. 'There should be no casualties to our own soldiers.' I promptly replied, 'I agree, sir, we should have no casualties, but I cannot guarantee anything. This is war.' He paused for a moment, and my heart sank, thinking how hard a politician would find it to agree to such a thing. He said only one word, *'Barobar!'* This Marathi word has different meanings in different contexts. Here, to me it sounded like 'Great! Let's do it.' When I heard this, for the first time on that dark Sunday I felt a glimmer of satisfaction and relief.

The plan was simple and audacious. We would, in an unprecedented move, raid a few terrorist camps across the LoC, cause heavy casualties and hopefully return with all our men unharmed. Then we would

announce to the world and to Pakistan what we had done and why we had done it, unlike Pakistan which always denies that it sends in terrorists. After the minister left, it was agreed that I would discuss the options and possibilities with the Army Commander.

A couple of days later I went to the Command Headquarters to brief the Army Commander, Lieutenant General D.S. Hooda. It was very nice to meet an old friend, Lieutenant General R.R. Nimbhorkar, who was commanding 16 Corps to the south. We go back a long way.

It requires a great deal of planning and coordination for any operation to be successful, especially one as hush-hush and complex as this. The guidance of the Army Commander and his staff, as much as the operational coordination with my friend Nimbhorkar, would be crucial to the success of the operation. I am sure the Army Commander must have kept the Army Chief informed. That is the strength of the army – our hierarchy and chain of command.

The CO of the Special Forces (SF) Battalion was instructed to pick his best teams. That's the way it works in the army. You delegate. The CO knows his commandos best and would pick the right men for the team. For the next ten days we worked like men possessed – planning for various options, weighing the pros and cons of each move, calculating the chances of success against the casualties likely to be incurred, narrowing it down to the options finally adopted, sitting down with the leaders of the teams who would execute the plan and going through every small detail. We also began field training on mock-ups of the target area.

We had chosen terrorist camps that did not have any habitation close by. I recall a prolonged discussion regarding the route in one place where two options existed. I was insisting on the slightly longer route because the shorter option took us a little close to a village. 'The dogs will bark and it can break the surprise,' I said. A few others felt that the

village was too far from our route and I was being overcautious at the expense of prolonging our time in the enemy area, which would increase our risk.

I recounted to them my experience in an operation two decades earlier, where the mission was botched because the dogs barking at us from a couple of kilometres distance gave the game away. In a town, the dogs may not bark in the next street, but in the countryside, they will bark from even the next village. As it turned out, the team leader who had to execute this operation agreed with me on this.

On 18 September 2016, when our base at Uri was attacked, the United Nations (UN) General Assembly was in session, and the terrorist attack drew widespread condemnation globally. Pakistan was isolated. Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif's speech in the UN General Assembly was scheduled for 21 September. From that point of view, Pakistan's timing of the terrorist attack at Uri was flawed. There was international pressure on Pakistan to

stop supporting terrorism, with an active push from our diplomats.

Our foreign minister, the late Sushma Swaraj, was scheduled to speak on 25 September. We decided to let that day pass peacefully. We also ensured that we did not launch any operations on the next two days, in order to lull the other side into complacency. Meanwhile, during these ten days, we continued to show routine movements and operations all along the front.

We carried out our reconnaissance in the hours of darkness. Several deception measures were used over the next few days, but it would not be prudent to divulge these as then we will not be able to use such measures again. Suffice it to say that our efforts paid off, as the enemy did not have the slightest knowledge of our plans, targets or timings, despite being alert about a possible retaliation from us. If they had any suspicions, these were speculative and they couldn't point a finger to anything specific.

Secrecy is the key to any successful operation. If you catch the enemy unawares, more than half your battle has been won. This is especially the case in a surgical strike where you hit the target, achieve your aim and then have to get out alive. In fact, this is why surgical strikes are the toughest operations in the world. Terrorists infiltrate borders to enter our country. They don't have an exit plan. We had to go in, conduct an operation and get out, all at lightning speed. We had our job cut out for us.

Very few people knew the exact date for the launch of this operation. Everything was strictly on a need-to-know basis. I had expressly forbidden any PowerPoint presentations. If a diagram had to be drawn to explain something, it was to be made in free hand on the spot and destroyed after use. No paper was to be retained by anyone.

We did not even give a name to the operation, because sometimes giving a code name has the opposite effect as people start using the code name

and feel secure in their plans. On the day we launched our operation, a few reconnaissance parties had been sent out in advance. They thought that they were going to return at night, but when the operations were launched they were merged with the raid party and moved ahead with them.

Once the mission began, radio communication was kept to the minimum because it is susceptible to interception. I had issued strict instructions that radio sets only be used in an emergency, at least not till the first shot had been fired. Within the teams, however, they could use smaller walkie-talkie sets which have a limited range.

In any case, the commandos, who were highly skilled and seasoned, did not need to keep coordinating with each other. They had perfected this over years of training and working together in different operations. However, they did communicate in code words after crossing pre-decided landmarks known as bounds.

When our control room received a code word, it meant that the commandos had crossed that landmark. We did not ask them for any more details. It was purely one-way communication so that we could follow their real-time progress. Several unarmed vehicles (UAVs) were also used to monitor the progress of our troops. A UAV is a drone minus the weapons – it's a remotely piloted aircraft that can click pictures and videos of a target area and stream them in real time.

We spent an anxious night. I found myself praying more for the safety of our soldiers than for the success of the mission. But somehow I had a positive feeling throughout about this operation. Over the last few days, whenever any of my subordinate staff had voiced their concerns, I had tried to ease their doubts. I told everybody, 'Don't surround yourself with negativity; harness the power of positivity.'

The commandos' progress was slow, painfully

slow, because this was not an operation in the hinterland of Kashmir. They were walking inside enemy territory and faced a hostile atmosphere all around. In operations in the hinterland, hostiles are limited to just a cluster of houses or their hideouts. That was not the case here.

Terrorists' launch pads are usually one or more houses in a village right on the LoC from where they observe the movements of our patrols for a couple of days, familiarize themselves with the terrain and then launch an infiltration. However, the actual terrorist camps are a few kilometres inside. Here, the element of surprise was absolutely crucial to the outcome. Since our commandos were walking well inside enemy territory, they walked like ghosts so that, paradoxically, they could stay alive to fight.

The trickiest part was passing through their forward line of defence. Forward defences (group of posts) on both sides are protected by minefields. Landmines are buried in the ground to deter the

attacker or infiltrator. They also tend to get dislodged by snowfall and rain. It is these that cause maximum damage because their location is unknown.

On possible infiltration routes, trip flares are fixed which light up when touched and illuminate the infiltrator for half a minute. Night-vision-enabled equipment was also used at the posts to keep a vigil round the clock on likely routes of infiltration. And to make things worse, the soldiers manning the posts would let off a round of bullets now and then as deterrence. The commandos had to cross all these dangers and hurdles without being detected.

What helped us was the fact that the Pakistan Army was not prepared for infiltration because they didn't expect us to be carrying out any such manoeuvres. While the Indian side is trained to deal with infiltrators, and thus deploy ambush parties and use other such measures, the Pakistani side are a little more static and focus more on manning

the LoC posts. It gives me great satisfaction to observe that from 2016 they have also had to deploy soldiers to guard against a possible repeat of our surgical strike. The 'uncertainty' mode has been switched on.

The tension mounted in the early hours of 29 September 2016. We were to start the raids simultaneously after everyone was in position. Suddenly I was told that firing had started in one of the locations. I wasn't sure if our team had been discovered and the enemy had fired first or one of our teams had started the firing for whatever reason. Since the first shot had been fired, we decided to advance the launch by fifteen–twenty minutes.

Now that the raids had begun, the anxiety in the operations room ratcheted – would this turn out to be a calculated risk or a reckless gamble? Would we achieve success in the mission? What if there were heavy casualties? There were moments when I found myself extremely confident that all would

be well. I had taken a leap of faith, and I believe fortune favours the brave. Then the next moment I would find myself on pins and needles, thinking of everything that could possibly go wrong.

This was the first time I realized how difficult it is for someone who has been in operations to sit outside and control it. First, you miss the action and you want to be there in the middle of it – participating and directing. Second, sitting outside, far away in an operations room yet intimately involved in each and every step of the planning, you feel utterly powerless. Thank heavens my vacillating moods could not be seen by the brave soldiers conducting the operations.

At one of the terrorist camps, we got lucky. A huge petrol and diesel dump was hit by a handheld rocket launcher and caused heavy casualties. The explosion created a huge blast which could even be seen in the UAV footage. Although the blast could not be heard, the black cloud of smoke that rose in

the air obliterated our view of the drone footage. It seemed a fitting response to the fire that had engulfed the cookhouse and tents at Uri.

The strikes on terrorist camps across the LoC did not last very long. Ours was a swift operation conducted with precision, and while there was the temptation to stay on and cause more damage, the team leaders, as they had rehearsed, broke contact and withdrew rapidly so that they could easily escape back to our side of the LoC. Dawn was breaking.

Now was the crucial period of the whole operation – from the moment the soldiers began to exfiltrate to our side till the point the last man came back in. This is the period when the soldier has neither the element of surprise nor darkness to defend himself. Our anxiety in the control room reached a fever pitch at this point. Every time the phone rang, I would flinch, half expecting news of some casualty. At least to me, my sigh of relief was very audible every time it turned out to be some other news. And thankfully, it always was.

Within thirty minutes, our men were all back on the Indian side of the LoC. Not a single soldier had been injured during the raid. When I reported to the Army Commander that the operation had been successful and that all our soldiers were back safely, I could sense his relief across the line. We could feel this with whoever we spoke to on the phone after the mission, up or down the chain.

Army Headquarters had been informed. The leadership had been apprised by the Army Chief. Lieutenant General Ranbir Singh, Director General Military Operations (DGMO), told his counterpart in Pakistan over the telephone that the Indian Army had hit terrorist camps across the LoC because of the terror attack at Uri where we had lost eighteen soldiers. He also told him that we had no desire to escalate this any further. He was essentially saying that the ball was in Pakistan's court – if they wished to expand the conflict, the onus would be on them.

By mid-morning, the DGMO was ready to make a press statement and answer questions. The national media had been assembled, news had started trickling out and there was excitement in the whole country at the stupendous success of what came to be known as the surgical strike.

I spoke with the DGMO and told him to hold off the announcement till we took a full headcount of all soldiers returning after the ops. Everyone in Delhi wanted to start the press conference, but I insisted that we wait till we could confirm that every single one of our soldiers was back safely. This would have delayed them by about an hour. But it meant that we could announce that we had inflicted heavy casualties on the terrorists in their camps across the LoC for the first time and not incurred a single casualty of our own. As I said, fortune favours the brave.

It was around noon, if my memory serves me right, when the DGMO announced to the world

that we had hit terrorist camps across the LoC. He also announced that we had no desire to escalate the situation, and that the Pakistan DGMO had also been told this over the telephone.

The media used the term 'surgical strike', and the name stuck. It merits mention here that while there have been shallow operations across the LoC in the past from both sides, what was different this time was the scale and the depth of the targets. And the fact that we owned up to it proactively. It was also for the first time that we used diplomacy as leverage for an operation. We had, for example, built public opinion against the terrorist strikes at Uri by using the UN General Assembly as a forum.

Soon after the press conference, the team leaders were flown in by helicopter to my headquarters for a quick debrief. I could see that they were exhausted, but their faces were glowing, their body language was jubilant. When they saluted me and said 'Jai Hind, sir', I was filled with emotion. I returned their

salute crisply and said, 'Thank you, boys. Thank God you have all come back safe and sound. History will remember you for what you have achieved today.'

And then, before they could start discussing the operation, the boy who used to bring us tea entered with a tray. As instructed by me, instead of tea, the tray held a few bottles of Johnnie Walker Black Label. 'Normally this would be the time for beer, but today is not a normal day. It's not a day for beer; these tigers need something stronger.' That drew a lot of laughter. Everyone was in high spirits.

I then turned towards Brigadier Rana Kalita, Brigadier General Staff (BGS), and said, 'These SF guys are in the habit of eating whisky glasses, so I'm not going to risk it.' With that, I opened a bottle of Black Label myself and poured a decent slug into their mouths one by one. You know all about having a shot of whisky. Well, these guys were getting shot by whisky.

Then one of them took the bottle and said,

'Permission to give a shot to the Corps Commander, sir.' I opened my mouth and he poured in a generous measure. I thought I would get a kick and feel high after drinking straight from the bottle. But I was already on a high and so, I suspect, were all of them. I also realized that they must be really tired and the adrenaline rush couldn't carry them forever, so we rushed through a quick debrief and did a more detailed one the next day.

I received a phone call at around 3.30 p.m. 'Sir, the defence minister wants to talk to you.' His private secretary came on the line first and congratulated me. When the defence minister came on the line, he said only one word, 'Congratulations.' It was a little disconcerting as he didn't say anything more. I replied, 'Jai Hind, sir, congratulations to you too. Sir, this is your victory as much as of the soldiers who went across. Thank you for giving us the go-ahead to conduct this operation.' He replied, 'Yes, I'm glad that all our soldiers are safe. Thank you again.'

It was a stupendous operation, something that had never been done before. We had struck at terrorist camps across the LoC and eliminated a large number of terrorists. This surgical strike, in effect, set the stage for the Balakot air strikes when the terrorist attack happened at Pulwama a year and a half later. We had drawn new red lines and India had shed the soft-state tag. I had never imagined that I would get an opportunity to be capping nearly four decades of my service with a glorious operation like this.

One cannot overcome the grief of the loss of eighteen soldiers in Uri, but the surgical strike gave us a sense of closure. I salute the memory of the departed, and I salute the bravery of the bravehearts who executed the surgical strike.

Secrecy is the key to any successful operation. If you catch the enemy unawares, half your battle has been won.