

Operation Safed Sagar

The then Chief of Air Staff on Operation Safed Sagar, the May 1999 Kargil War

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Operation Safed Sagar, whatever in the world would that be?," is a possible reaction from some readers, including those that are regular followers of matters military. Operation Safed Sagar, was the codename that the Indian Air Force had given to its role in Operation Vijay, the Kargil War of 1999. It is expected that most lay people will not be able to relate it to Kargil. That is how it ought to be. It was not meant for public usage, but for reference within the service, and for maintaining confidentiality. Therefore, its purpose is better served by making it as incongruous as possible to the nature of the operation it represents. But later the name does serve to perpetuate the operation's legacy. When the name was first suggested, there were mild protests from within the air force 'operational planning circle' that it would not catch people's imagination! Not surprisingly, stronger voices from outside the air force, questioned the need for a separate code word, as Operation Vijay by itself was considered adequate to cover all facets of the operation!!

It is more than seven years since Pakistan's surreptitious designs on the icy heights of Kargil fell apart and the rabid hostility of those days is giving way to saner peace-making processes of today. The Kargil Review Committee Report findings have been accepted by the government long ago and the report has been made public, barring some deletions. Over the years there has also been fairly wide coverage by the media. Several books have been published. Air and Army headquarters have undertaken studies/reviews, concluded their findings, drawn lessons and hopefully have taken actions to rectify shortcomings. Under these circumstances, would a re-look at IAF's participation in the Kargil Operations generate public interest today?

Well, re-look is a common phenomenon and it is strange how re-looks get initiated. Whether a particular re-look generates public or professional interest is a moot point; its timing certainly has some influence in getting people to peruse more than its heading; possibly the author's name draws some readership, particularly if his authenticity is assumed *ab initio*! The writer hopes in this instance it would be accepted, as he headed the IAF during Safed Sagar. Strictly speaking, it really is not a re-look, but a first ever public account by the man who held the ultimate responsibility for Safed Sagar.

When is the right time for the then Chief of the Air Force Staff to give his account of the air operations? Difficult to have a specific answer; opinions will vary from immediately after the cessation of operations to never. I have accepted an invitation to write an article now. I can offer reasons, which I think have some validity: earlier this year General Ved Malik, who was the Chief of the

Army Staff during Operation Vijay, released his book, *Kargil: From Surprise to Victory*; this was followed by the publication of Shri Jaswant Singh's (who played a crucial role as a member of the Cabinet Committee on Security during Kargil) book *A Call to Honour: In Service of Emergent India*; and now the book, *In the Line of Fire: A Memoir*, by the 'villain of Kargil', General Pervez Musharraf. All the three authors held centre-stage to a varying degree of importance during Kargil and cover in their books the events of the time from their individual perspectives. As the then Chief of Air Staff, my perspective, I reckon, should also carry interest. However, my own story, *Up and Away into the Blue Yonder*, which will certainly cover Safed Sagar, is still in its nascent form to allow it to fall in quick enough succession to the litanies of these august persona. Yet, this is an opportune moment to get across the then air force chief's point of view. By one of those amazing co-incidents, editor of FORCE, Pravin Sawhney, expressed his keenness to have an article on Safed Sagar for the release of his magazine on the Air Force Day, October 8. I felt I should accept, and offer the treatise as a tribute to a valiant service on the dawn of its platinum year.

Army Needs Air Force's Help

If memory serves me right, it was probably on the 9th or 10th of May 1999 that the Air Force Vice Chief (VCAS), Air Marshal 'Ben' Brar, walked into my office for a cup of tea and a chat, just as we often did whenever we both happened to be in-station together, to talk-over issues informally. There was an uncharacteristic frown on his brow as he took a chair. "Sir," he began without a preamble, "Assistant Chief of Air Staff (Intelligence) tells me that the army may be in some sort of difficulties in the Kargil area." On querying what sort of difficulties, he explained he was not sure but there was reportedly unusual artillery firing.

I enquired whether he had any inputs from AOC-in-C Western Air Command (WAC) and the Vice Chief of Army Staff (VCOAS), who was also holding the army 'fort' as his Chief was away on a foreign tour. I asked my vice to find out if either of them had anything to say on the subject. AOC-in-C, WAC had later informed VCAS that Northern (Army) Command had not divulged anything to him and that his counter-part, GOC-in-C Northern Command was away in Pune; possibly to emphasise further that all seemed well. He had informed that both Northern (Army) Command and Western (Army) Command were greatly pre-occupied with preparation for the forthcoming tri-service, very complex, brain-storming exercise, 'Brahma Astra'. If Northern Command was facing difficulties it was hardly expected that Army Headquarters and these two command headquarters would wish to conduct the exercise in May, and a request for postponement would have been made to Air

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and Naval Headquarters. VCOAS was non-committal to VCAS.

A day later, because disturbing inputs continued to be brought to his notice by his staff, VCAS again approached the VCOAS to enquire whether all was well; the Army Vice Chief indicated that the army could handle the situation. The VCAS, however, also informed me that the ACAS (Operations) had received an input from Air Officer Commanding HQ Jammu and Kashmir (AOC J&K is co-located with HQ Northern Command and functions as a forward element of HQ WAC for day-to-day interaction with HQ Northern Command. He releases air effort to meet Northern Command's demands, from within the AF units placed in J&K to the extent possible and within the authority he is delegated), that HQ Northern Command had requested fire-support from Mi-25/35 helicopter gunships and armed Mi-17 helicopters to evict a few 'intruders' who had stepped across the Line of Control in the Kargil sector. AOC J&K had responded that the terrain over which the support was required was beyond the operating envelop of the gunships; for getting fire-support in the existing operating conditions HQ Northern Command needed to approach HQ WAC.

In light of ACAS (Op)'s input, this time I called up AOC-in-C WAC personally and enquired why he had not briefed Air HQ on what was happening. His response was that GOC-in-C Northern Command had still not approached him for any help and WAC had nothing to brief; I was also informed that the GOC-in-C was in fact not available at HQ Northern Command. I directed Air Marshal Vinod Patney (the AOC-in-C) to get 'hold' of his counter-part and get to the bottom of what was afoot.

Meanwhile, Air Marshal Brar (VCAS) had again enquired from VCOAS whether they needed help; VCOAS had expressed army's ability to manage, but was upset that AOC J&K had not acceded to HQ Northern Command's fire-support demand. VCAS explained that AOC J&K did not have the authority to do so and suggested that both of them discuss the issue with me. VCOAS did not consider it necessary at that juncture, but divulged that Northern Command was putting into action Army Aviation's Cheetahs mounted with a 7.56mm gun. 'Ben' Brar was a 'hands-on' VCAS who liked to take action fastest. He suggested that we offer armed Mi-17 helicopters to Northern Command immediately.

Now there was no doubt in my mind that the situation was desperate; using an egg-shell-strong Cheetah in offensive action against certain hostile fire was like presenting a chicken for 'sacrificial appeasement'! And my vice recommending use of Mi-17 in an environment where it would be under hostile observation and fire for several minutes before and after its attempt (I say attempt because I knew it would have been impossible to put in a successful helicopter attack without creating the necessary conditions for such an attack) at engagement. I directed VCAS to request VCOAS for a meeting with me and advised VCAS that to enable air force to provide fire-support we needed political clearance. Also, the manner and type of fire-support will be determined by the air force. I think at this stage Lt General Chandrashekhar (VCOAS) gave me a telephonic call. I communicated to him that I appreciated his predicament and was anxious that the air force does its bit soonest. But I was not successful in persuading him to accept the essentiality of government clearance. Lt Gen. Chandrashekhar said the

army will continue on its own.

I may be permitted a diversion at this stage, to give inputs that formed a relevant back-drop to my professional thinking and decision-making ways as chief of air staff and the ultimate professional authority of that time, on how air power should be used. Note the accent is on 'how', quite separately and differently from 'whether or not'; that indisputably, in India's civil supremacy tradition, I am proud to say, lies with the head of the government, duly assisted by the cabinet committee on security.

No head of an organisation is a 'know-all' fountain-head of that institution. He can not possibly have deep enough knowledge of everything within the outfit. The number of disciplines to which he has been exposed to and the extent of that exposure have a profound impact on how well he is able to evaluate experts' knowledge and advice, and over-ride it with conviction, when necessary. The most difficult challenge to a top man is to hold his ground when there is intense pressure from the top man, who is liked and respected, of a sister service, who is under even greater stress to get the former to do the opposite of what he thinks is right. A philosophical adage, I have tried to emulate through 60 years of 'greying' is, 'treat yourself with your head; treat others with your heart.' But at various strata of command, I have also realised that one's head must not allow the heart to let one get carried away emotionally.

I am a product of the National Defence Academy, with a poor academic record and a passable field performance. But I consider that I have imbibed well the central theme of NDA training: developing a strong *esprit de corps* and a fierce sense of loyalty. I hate friends to think I have let them down. NDA also taught me to respect capability, irrespective of rank. Most importantly, NDA exposure allowed me many opportunities to realise that if one gets over the initial bone-chilling dread of danger, the wrath of overpowering wrongful authority or the fear of being wrong-footed, one can stand his ground in the severest of challenges. It is satisfying to claim that my 41 years of air force service did not require me to modify the Academy's teachings.

After the humiliating fiasco of the 1962 Sino-Indian conflict, a practice had been initiated to send fighter pilots as Forward Air Controllers to Ladakh, to be attached to HQs of the two brigades, 70 and 114 under 3 Division for a period of four weeks. In mid-1963, as a flying officer, I was attached to 70 Brigade, where the stated four weeks got extended to 12. Instead of working in the Brigade HQ and staying in its mess, a tradition of sorts had been set, by the young, 'unhappy-to-be-away-from-the-cockpit' pilots attached to 70 Brigade, of allowing themselves to be hijacked by 9 Dogras for both occupation and sustenance/shelter. Within days, the initial unhappiness gave way to the joy of camaraderie that develops in a field area. It was wonderful to be a part of the army routine and experience its challenges, even if to a limited degree. I knew I was 'accepted' as a part of the battalion, when CO 9 Dogras made me his assistant adjutant! Required to be a part of the brigade HQ, even as a 'blue' subaltern I realised, that I could not ignore the other battalion. I went on a seven day reconnaissance patrol with 3/4 Gurkhas to assess the negotiability of passes ranging in altitude from a base-line of 13,000ft to over

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15,000ft. It was a point of honour to lead the sturdy Gurkhas, even though my flying boots failed to withstand the rigour of marching. When I visited the bunker defences, I was shocked to see their smallness. Later, when I got the odd opportunity to direct practice fighter attacks on them, it was frustrating that the pilots were spotting the 'target' just around their firing range. Yet, the crystal-clear azure-blue skies ensured that I never lost sight of the aircraft during its circular attack pattern. Throughout my fighter squadron service of more than 15 years, I loved participating in army-air force exercises, searching, spotting and attacking targets, whether it was in the plains of Punjab, the desert of Rajasthan or the high mountains of the North. And so it was with most other pilots. The tougher the assignment, the stronger the professional intent to succeed.

I was most fortunate to be assigned the post of AOC HQ J&K. Immediately after taking over I got myself qualified as a pilot on both the Mi-17 and the Chetak/ Cheetah. I flew extensively and familiarised myself with the terrain in the areas of responsibility of both 15 and 16 Corps. Besides both the Corps HQs, I visited the HQ of every division. I visited many brigade and group HQs, landed at tens of helipads, did heli-drops at several locations. I was lucky to be able to visit many forward posts. As the 102 Siachen Brigade offered the toughest tasks to the air force, I may have been partial to it with my time and concern. But I did have a couple of opportuni-

ties to visit 121 Kargil Brigade. I had covered the length of the brigade area several times by air and once by road. In short, I can claim I had developed a personal 'feel' of the area. This was reinforced later during my tenure of 26 months at HQ, WAC, first as Senior Air Staff Officer and then as AOC-in-C. I am deeply conscious that all this sounds too much like brazen blowing of one's own trumpet. But I consider it necessary to convince that my credentials for giving definitive judgement in the use of air power in the Kargil area, may not be doubted.

To come back to the narrative of the emerging situation in Kargil, on the 14th of May, Lt Gen. Chandrashekhar called on me at Vayu Bhavan. He came to the point immediately: army wanted fire-support by Mi-17 helicopters. Lt Gen. Chandrashekhar observed that the army was capable of throwing back the intruders on its own but it would take time; air support will hasten the process. He felt that political go-ahead was necessary only in case fire-support was being provided by fighters; use of helicopters, even in a fire-support role, was an in-house services' headquarters' decision. I was anxious to put him at ease; I attempted to extend my empathy and expressed my keenness to give support; for the moment he was my counterpart of the army (albeit acting) and an NDA course-mate. To be honest, I did not think I had succeeded in generating any confidence in him. Yet, I managed to convey to him my firm decision that government authorisation was mandatory; we needed to approach the *raksha mantri* together; I will support his demand for aerial fire-support. But it needed to be understood that the air force reserved the prerogative to give the fire support in the manner it considered most suitable. I explained that with the conditions obtaining in the problem area, helicopters will be sitting ducks. The VCOAS left soon after, without I having a clear indication whether he intended to approach

the government.

On the next day, 15th of May, I called the VCAS and his two senior assistants, ACAS(Ops) and ACAS(Int) for a situation-appraisal meeting. AOC-in-C also participated. The two ACAS gave a resume of developments over the previous five days. Reportedly, around 150 intruders had occupied some high points along the LoC ridge-line in the general area of Kargil sector. Director General Military Operations and ACAS(Ops) had conferred and reconnaissance missions by Jaguars and Canberras were launched. Air defence fighters were kept on ground-alert at Srinagar and Avantipur. Radars in Srinagar Valley were on 24 hours-vigil. Mobile Observation Posts

were deployed. An additional direction and control centre was established at Leh. Mi-17 helicopters based at Srinagar were tasked to carry out air-to-ground firing practices with guns and rockets at the high-altitude firing range. I was satisfied with the initiatives taken. I gave my assessment of the situation, followed by directions of what was required to be done immediately:

(a) I observed that the ground situation was grave. Army required air force help to evict the intruders. Army Headquarters was reluctant, possibly because it was embarrassed to have allowed the present situation to develop, to reveal the full gravity of the situation to MoD. Thus it was not amenable to Air Headquarters' position to seek government approval for use of air power offensively.

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(b) Consideration of the use of helicopters in offensive role was denied as they would be vulnerable to the extreme. This was to be projected at all levels of army-air force confabulations. The helicopters would, however, continue to carry out high altitude firing practices.

(c) Fighters deployed in the Valley were to intensify their high altitude air-to-ground firing practices. Fighter pilots manning the squadrons located/deployed in the Valley are to be given terrain-familiarisation sorties in helicopters, preferably accompanied by army officers familiar with the area.

(d) AOC-in-C, WAC was to activate HQ AOC J&K and all units in the Valley as per plans stipulated in HQ WAC Operational Instructions.

(e) AOC-in-C WAC to formulate contingency plans.

16th of May was a Sunday. Soon after my game of golf, my Air Assistant told me that the VCOAS desired a meeting with me. I directed the AA to organise the meeting in my office and request the VCAS and AOC-in-C WAC to be in attendance. After we had assembled in my office, had given VCOAS a brief resume of the situation obtaining in Kargil, Lt Gen. Chandrashekhar reiterated his request for offensive air support by Mi-17 helicopters. Air Marshal Patney recommended that I call a Chiefs of Staff Committee meeting immediately; Chandrashekhar was amenable to the suggestion. Without further ado, I telephoned Admiral Sushil Kumar, the Chief of Naval Staff, requesting an immediate COSC meeting; in the absence of Chairman COSC, Gen. Malik, Adm. Kumar would have to chair the meeting. Adm. Kumar, understandably, was mildly irritated that an *impromptu* meeting was being called on a Sunday. When I explained the situation, a time was set to meet in the Army Operations Room (AOR).

At the AOR, after a situation report, VCOAS expounded on the need for fire-support by helicopters. I tabled my reasons for considering authorisation by government a pre-requisite for releasing offensive air support: Unlike the practice of the army routinely resorting to firing when a situation demanded it, the air force fire power was not being used operationally in peace conditions; aerial action had far greater 'visibility'; response of the adversary to own air attacks was indeterminate, undoubtedly at this stage; there was a high possibility of the adversary raising the ante and we had to be prepared for it. (The reader might be interested to know that the rocket fire-power of the Mi-17 can be three times more than can be brought to bear by the MiG-21). The gathering generally expressed that it did not realise/consider the consequences of air action as outlined by me. Acting Chairman COSC enquired whether the army could continue on its own. As the given answer was in the affirmative, he ruled we maintain status quo for the present.

On 17th of May, without a fore-intimation of what was in offing by Army Headquarters or Chiefs of Staff Committee secretariat, a meeting was called at AOR, which, along with CNS, CAS and acting COAS, was attended by the *raksha mantri* Shri George Fernandes, the principal secretary to the Prime Minister, Shri Brajesh Mishra; secretaries defence, home and external affairs were also present. The army briefed, in greater detail than before, on the situation obtaining across the Kargil sector. In a brief-

ing which I gave personally, I covered the following aspects:

(a) If air power were used offensively, the escalation could be very rapid to any level and anywhere. The IAF needed to be prepared for every contingency.

(b) In the area under consideration and the air operating conditions obtaining there, the accuracy of air attacks would be comparable to that of the artillery.

(c) There was the possibility of own aircraft crossing the LoC during their attacks.

(d) There was possibility of fratricide if own troops were in close vicinity of targets.

(e) Helicopter survivability in an offence role would be very low.

(f) The IAF pilots have commenced air-to-ground firing practices at high altitude.

Shri Mishra said status quo be maintained. On 18th of May, the VCOAS and the DGMO briefed Prime Minister Shri Atal Bihari Vajpayee and members of the CCS. Present were home minister Shri L.K. Advani, *raksha mantri* Shri George Fernandes, external affairs minister Shri Jaswant Singh and principal secretary to the Prime Minister Shri Brajesh Mishra. Also in attendance were CNS, CAS, directors of Research & Analysis Wing and Intelligence Bureau. It was an exhaustive briefing. The VCOAS summed-up that the army was capable of bringing the situation under control, but required time. He assessed that offensive air support by helicopters will hasten the process of eliminating/pushing back the intruders.

I covered all the implications, as stated hitherto, and added the following:

(a) The IAF must have the freedom to use the fighters.

(b) Escalation, inclusive of pre-emptive hostile strikes, could take place suddenly anywhere across the Indo-Pak border/Line of Control.

(c) The IAF needed to take precautionary measures to enable appropriate response to any contingency.

(d) The IAF sought 24 hours to implement (c); if inescapable the time factor could be cut down by half.

The EAM desired to know what the army's assessment in respect of the enemy's intentions was. A satisfactory answer did not emerge. It was apparent the army had not applied its mind to this aspect; they were engaged in getting out the intruders without having quite established the nature of the intrusions or the identity of intruders. I felt strong sympathy for the Army Headquarters staff. Having been caught off guard in the field, they were unable to make up for their initial lapse, due to inadequate intelligence and possibly indifferent involvement from the command headquarters.

The EAM went on to observe that bringing in the air force would internationalise the issue and it would be preferable not to let that happen. He was scheduled to leave for international visits, these he felt should not be disturbed. While he was away, Army Headquarters could get on with the job of establishing enemy's intent. His recommendation: do not involve the Air Force yet. PS to PM made the final recommendations:

(a) For the present, air power not to be used.

(b) Hot pursuit by ground forces to be permitted in the area of present operation, no-where else in J&K.

The external affairs minister (Jaswant Singh) observed that bringing in the air force would internationalise the issue and it would be preferable not to let that happen



The Prime Minister nodded his approval. Earlier to the CCS meeting, on the same day, a contingency planning meeting had been held in my office with operations and maintenance staff of Air HQ and WAC. The state of IAF's armament holdings, self-protection devices was reviewed. Directions had been given for actions required to be taken to improve the modification states of aircraft for carriage of armament, EW and specialised equipment. Operational staff was required to tailor operating procedures specifically for the conditions under which we would have to support the army; training had to be intensified and suitably modified to enable pilots to operate at high altitudes, in restricted areas and engage ground targets much smaller than they were normally assigned. Maintenance staff was directed to accelerate activity to substantially improve availability of aircraft, radars, equipment and spares.

The most debated issue was in respect of strategy and tactics. The air force has long contended that use of air power in direct support of ground battle is its most inefficient utilisation; it should be used sparingly in this fashion, unless the ground troops are under intense pressure and the integral

artillery fire power is limited, ineffective or not in position. Spot targets obtaining within the ground battlefield are small, not easily sighted and vulnerability of aircraft is high. Air power has a more devastating effect when applied against logistics dumps and their lines of supply to forward posts/areas. In this case, it was pointed out that if there were restrictions on not being allowed to cross the LoC, toss/stand-off bombing was possible. My directions were: be ready to operate under the worst conditions, our attempt would be to get freedom of action to the extent possible. The final word was to prepare for a bigger conflagration.

Over the next few days, the air force, besides continuing with logistical support to the army in the form of air/heli-lifting troops and supplies, carried out photo-reconnaissance over operational area, undertook electronic reconnaissance missions to establish the deployment of Pakistan's ground radars in the POK and else-where. The air force was also on the look-out for unusual air activity. By now we had realised that, if and when the air force was given the go-ahead, our bombing techniques, the bombs, fuses and the aiming computers/sights would all require to be

There had been total lack of army-air force joint staff work. When the army found itself in difficulties, information had not been communicated by them, in any systematic manner to the Air HQ

adapted for the ultra-high altitude air-to-ground work. Both operations and maintenance staff had put on their 'thinking-caps' and rolled up their sleeves for finding ingenious solutions, and fast, very fast! Air Forces' think tanks at 'Tactics and Combat Development and Training Establishment' and 'Aircraft and Systems Testing Establishment' were tasked for over-coming specific problems.

On May 21, a Canberra on a photo-mission was hit by an air-to-ground infra-red homing missile, later identified as a Stinger. The pilot did a commendable job by recovering the crippled aircraft. Realising that Canberra reconnaissance missions were vulnerable to 'shoulder-fired' AGMs, due to their heights of operation being well within the kill-envelop of these missiles, we discontinued them. Later, we brought in the MiG-25 strategic photo-reconnaissance aircraft to do the job of the Canberra. It was not a question of just bringing in a different aircraft. Its operating parameters and photo equipment had to be modified to enable it to do what was considered not possible, in fact dangerous, by the experts on the aircraft. The credit goes to Air Marshal 'Jimmy' Bhatia, then AOC-in-C Central Air Command, for encouraging the unit and 'leading the way' by flying in the aircraft during trials.

I had to proceed to the Naval Academy to attend the valedictory function and review the passing-out-parade on May 21-22. As the COAS, Gen. Ved Malik, had returned from his foreign tour just the day before, I could not meet him before the 23rd.

The manner in which developments had taken place, from the time 'Ben' Brar gave me information of the army being in difficulty, troubled me. There had been total lack of army-air force joint staff work. When the army found itself in difficulties, information/intelligence had not been communicated by Army HQ, in any systematic manner to the Air HQ. There had been no call for a joint briefing, leave alone joint planning, both at the service and command headquarters; just repeated requests for armed helicopter support. Air HQ seemed to have more information than WAC. How were the helicopters expected to be used? What was the threat? What were the objectives? There are a number of issues that have to be considered by the army and air force, so that both sides appreciate the strengths/limitations of each other. Proper joint staff-work brings them out, allowing the decision-makers to give well-considered directions. There had been no joint deliberations at any level. As Ved Malik was not in Delhi, I put down my concerns in a letter to him on probably May 19. After explaining what caused me to write the letter, I made the following observations:

(a) Use of combat air power, inclusive that by helicopters is an escalation in the existing operations.

(b) Before/after political clearance, concerned army/air force command HQs to be directed to present joint plan. The same to be done by Joint Planning Committee at service HQs level. Both plans to be presented to COSC.

(c) The air force to have freedom in application of air power.

(d) To avoid 'being surprised', COSC to be briefed on J&K situation regularly.

On May 23 afternoon, Ved Malik requested Sushil Kumar and myself to join him in his office. Ved was very cordial and warm

through the meeting. I was happy that he did not look perturbed, particularly as he had reason enough to be, given the developments in his absence. His main thrust was that we needed to put up a united front to the CCS. Sushil and I had no difficulty in endorsing that. Ved said air force had to join in as the army was in a difficult position. I told him that there was no doubt of that and the air force was very keen to join in, my only reservation was in respect of the use of helicopters, they would be too vulnerable. Ved appeared to get agitated on my reluctance to use helicopters. I did not press the issue at that moment, it could wait till later.

On May 24, before proceeding for the CCS meeting, the three chiefs got together in the office of the CNS. I picked up the discussion about the use of helicopters with Ved Malik once again. I explained to him that in the Ladakh region, because of the pollution-free atmosphere the visibility is enormously better than what it is west of Zoji La. As the helicopters would have to approach enemy locations on the LoC ridge-line from the Kargil Valley, they would not be able to mask their approach and will be visibly picked-up by the enemy well before they come into firing range. The effective range of the Stinger missiles is much greater than that of the rockets being fired by the helicopter. Ved was in no mood for

any explanations. He shot back a question: did I think that in his 40 years of service he had not learnt about helicopter operations? Hoping to pacify him, I said even I do not think that I know all about helicopter flying. The effect was just the opposite of what I was hoping. Saying, "If that's the way you want it, I will go it alone," he stormed out of CNS' office. I caught up with him in the corridor and told him to cool off, he would get his helicopters. Wanting to save army-air force relations, I had given in against my better judgement!

At the CCS meeting, Ved Malik explained at length the difficulty of the situation and how essential it was for the air force to step in without delay. I stated as matter-of-fact

as possible, that the air force was ready. We needed 24 hours to get going; we could cut down to 12 hours the time for first attack. The Prime Minister said we could meet again the next morning. Back at Air HQ, VCAS, ACsAs (Ops&Int) were briefed that the army was on shaky grounds and needed air force support without further delay. We needed to ensure we will be ready to move in within 12 hours.

Early on May 25, the CCS convened again. The preliminaries were much shorter this time. The COAS was emphatic on getting air force support. I told the Prime Minister the army had to have air force support. We could commence operations within 12 hours, 6, if inescapable. All eyes were on the Prime Minister. In his characteristically laconic manner, he said, '*Theek hai, kal subah se shuru karo*' (Alright, start tomorrow morning). I asked for permission to cross the LoC while attacking targets on our side of the LoC. The PM straightened up in his chair and said firmly, 'Please don't cross the LoC. No, no crossing the LoC.' 'Sir' was all that was required of me. The PM and others stepped out of the conference room silently, in a pensive mood.

Operation Safed Sagar is Launched

On return to my office I shot out the following directions:

(a) The IAF will commence offensive air action after first light the

We were realising that the problems were intelligence on the location of targets and converting army map grids into air force map references.

If we had them right, we hit them straight

next morning.

(b) Air Defence in the area of WAC to be activated as per HQ, WAC Operational Instructions.

(c) HQ WAC to be given freedom of action, with the following proviso:

(i) Aircraft not to cross LoC during attack patterns.

(ii) Air Defence aircraft escorting strike aircraft or 'free-patrolling' parallel to LoC, if engaged in aerial combat with enemy aircraft, may cross LoC in 'hot' pursuit. (At the CCS meeting I had not specifically got this contingency authorised, it was not the right moment to do so. But I considered the 'liberty' an essential element for the success of the aerial air defence measures. In view of the PM's earlier 'nod' to the ground forces' hot pursuit, my conscience was not unduly burdened).

(iii) No sudden or mass movement of aircraft.

(iv) To the extent possible all fighters and helicopters employed in combat role to be fitted with infra-red self-protection chaff-dispensers.

(v) Chaff-dispensing operating procedures to be re-briefed to all aircrew.

(vi) It is to be assumed that all enemy positions have infra-red air-to-ground shoulder-fired missiles.

(d) Air HQ's Operational Order for Operation Safed Sagar be issued under my signature.

It would be close to 30 years since the IAF had fired a shot in anger. 'Real Combat' (too limited a skirmish to call it a war), as I said the words to myself, caused goose pimples to rise on my fore-arms. If this can happen to a grand-father, what would be the effect on young pilots, who still wondered whether the 'wings' that they wore on their uniform with an outward swagger, really belonged to them? Majority experience an adrenalin-pumping euphoria, some brace themselves with a professional 'let's get-on-with-the-job' attitude, some get sombre, a few might feel numbing fear. Both the extreme reactions need watching and counselling. There was a sudden, powerful urge to be with the guys, no, 'my boys'. But would it be wise? Confidentiality was essential for what was to happen on the morrow. Go, I had to, it would be good for the field to know their chief was with them. I summoned my air assistant, Air Commodore Ajit Bhavnani. He was to get an AN-32 to carry a 'special' load to Srinagar immediately. The nature of 'load' would be disclosed later; he could come to the 'Air House' when the aircraft was positioned at Palam.

Later, when Ajit Bhavnani came to the 'Air House', his jaw dropped to see me beaming broadly in my blue flying overalls, with wing commanders' tapes on my shoulders. "Lets go", I said to him. My wife, Molina, who had long taken in her stride my sudden 'comings and goings', was probably disappointed that I had not told her to pack a carry-on bag and come along, had not noticed anything unusual. The driver did not blink an eye-lid, he was looking straight ahead. He was possibly used to my some-time weird ways. His face was dead-pan when I told him I would be taking the stand-by 'Ambassador', and not the trade-mark 'Tata Estate' of the CAS. No flag, no plates. None of my cars were embellished with a red roof-top light. Ajit was told at the last second not to come with me. Staff officer was absent.

Normally, the CAS boards his aircraft at the 'VIP' Squadron dispersal and is received by AOC Air Force Station, Palam. The captain of an AN-32 would be waiting at the ramp. My instructions were to have engines' start-up commence as I approached the aircraft. As I strapped in to the captain's seat, the pilot would brief me, while the co-pilot and engineer continued with the start-up. The navigator managed the radio. I would be taxiing out within five minutes. As a prior take-off block was normally obtained, five minutes later we would be airborne. When a take-off time had not been 'blocked', the navigator would try to get priority for CAS, referred euphemistically as 'IAF VIP'.

Well, this time an AN-32 for the 'special load' would be waiting somewhere on Palam's large transit-aircraft parking apron. Fortunately, there was only one AN-32 aircraft; no need for a try-to-hit-the-right-aircraft-first-time anxiety. The driver was told to stop at the regulation point. I walked alone the distance to the aircraft. The captain was slouchingly resting against the aircraft. He eyed me casually as I walked up. As I caught his eye, recognition suddenly dawned upon him and he sprang to attention, fumbling with his cap. I sign-indicated to him to relax, but it was not easy for him. As I came within normal talking distance, with a broad and easy

smile I told him to relax. Putting my arm casually around his shoulders, as friends do, I told him to act normal and continue at the normal pace, following normal procedures meticulously. He was not one of the several pilots who had flown with me often. But I expected that he was aware his Chief, as a rule, liked to have his hands on the controls. I asked him if he would mind if I flew, I was a qualified AN-32 first pilot. He was hugely relieved; he must have been wondering in which bucket-seat he was going to place the chief. I requested the pilot to brief me on the flight profile, procedures and emergencies. I wanted the captain of the aircraft to be at ease with the full confidence that he was in command of the air-

craft. My only direction to him at this stage was to ensure that nobody got an inkling that I was on board.

As we approached Srinagar, I told the captain to inform the Air Traffic Controller that AOC Srinagar may kindly personally collect a special packet from the captain of the aircraft, as he himself was not able to leave the aircraft. There were the expected queries and re-queries. But as we taxied in, I could see the AOC standing akimbo, with his dog on a leash, a picture of local top authority. When I walked down the ramp of the aircraft, the AOC had walked around to the back of the aircraft, doing nothing to mask his impatience. If the situation were not what it was, I would have burst out laughing to see a figure of authority instantly transform into that of a subordinate. Senior air warriors are tough customers and the AOC recovered in seconds. As we walked to the waiting lounge, his dog had disappeared without my noticing.

Although it was evident to me that he had not received the 'balloon-up' communication yet, I had him confirm it. When I informed him that he was 'On' the next morning, he wanted to get on with his actions immediately. I told him to await the formal communication from his Command HQs. I could not possibly allow myself to give any conflicting information, leave alone direction. But I was happy I had beat the 'signal'. I knew Vinod Patney

The PM said, 'Theek hai, kal subah se shuru karo'.

I asked for permission to cross the LoC while attacking targets on our side of the LoC. He said firmly, 'Please don't cross the LoC'

was a thorough AOC-in-C. His preliminary orders were already with his stations; he would ensure that the 'begin operations' operational order would be comprehensively drafted before issue.

I met the squadron commanders and some of the aircrew, not to give a pep talk, but to express my confidence that when the time came, they would do more than the expectations of the higher-ups. They were straining at the leash to get going. Wishing them well and success, I returned. It was going to be a long night.

The Indian Air Force Strikes!

Came the 26th of May 1999 and the Indian Air Force launched its offensive solidly, attacking heavily with rockets fired from MiG-21s and Mi-17s going in waves. Imagine salvos and ripples of 192 rockets coming out of the 'blue' from one helicopter alone and they were four of them! Reports received from the Director General Military Operations (army) indicated that Tiger Hill and Tololing were engaged effectively. 'Saddle' attack did not appear to be as successful. There were ecstatic calls for more of the same. The initial euphoria is heady. Calmness is needed to avoid over-confidence. I was aching to send a word of caution not to get carried away. When the going is too good, my antenna tends to go into hyper-sweep. But I had to stay away, it was not my job to run the operation; I must give only broad directions. The people who were running the show knew their jobs well. If there are lessons to be learnt they will do that.

The First Air Casualties

The excessive rejoicing after the first day's successes turned out to be premature. Two waves of two MiG-27 aircraft each, with the necessary time interval between them were to engage the same target northeast of Batalik. The first section was successful in its mission and so reported it on their radios. The leader of the second section was unable to position himself for the attack and aborted it. Both attempted for the second time, but were again unsuccessful; however, the No 2 felt he had made a sighting of the target and made a third attempt, absolutely against the stipulated direction; such is young blood enthused with the determination to 'press-on' that they throw caution and the briefing to the wind! Apparently, he fired his rockets well outside the speed/'g' envelop stipulated for the weapon; as it is the aircraft were firing the rockets above the height to which they were cleared to be released. Wrongs do not add, they multiply. The engine could not withstand the abuse and flamed-out. There was not a chance to relight. But the ejection seat did its job well and saved the life of the pilot, Flt Lt K. Nachiketa. His capture and later release had been so widely and extensively reported by the media that it need not be covered here. Despite his over-enthusiastic stupidity, he is a brave air warrior. After giving him a rap on the knuckle, his courage needs to be recognised; of-course the

excess flow adrenaline needs to be controlled!

Squadron Leader Ajay Ahuja was tasked to do a post-attack target-damage photo-assessment. He had monitored Nachiketa's ejection call and knew his general location. Such is the bonding in combat that one instinctively wants to help a comrade in distress, unmindful of his own predicament. Sending back his wing-man to safety, Ahuja attempted to locate Nachiketa's place of landing. Heavy with fuel and tanks a MiG-21 Type 96 requires careful handling at altitude and low indicated air speed. Loss of height is guaranteed to maintain speed. Enemy on the ground had plenty of time and chances to succeed once the aircraft had dropped to within the Stinger's altitude envelop. 'It's good to treat others with your heart, but the head must not allow one to get carried away.'

Courageous Ahuja paid with his life for the folly of his misplaced kindness. Or is it a folly? Arjun needs the wisdom of Lord Krishna in the former's struggle with life and duty. I love Ahuja-the-man; I want to shake the bones of Ahuja-the-professional warrior. A stinger got this brave Indian; the ejection seat gave Ahuja a second life, but he needed a third to survive the butchery of the enemy. May his soul rest in peace.

At the CCS meeting at the end of the day, while reporting to the Prime Minister and his colleagues, that the IAF had lost two aircraft (the fate of the two pilots was not known at that time), I assured the eminent gathering that while I was sorry to lose two fighters, I was not overly worried. The air force knew what had gone wrong, and knew what was required to be done to ensure we did not repeat the mistakes. But I expressed very clearly my anxiety in respect of the vulnerability of the helicopters.



Here (Muntho Dhalo) 'smart' bombs were not used, but smart ideas were used. The telescopic capability of the laser-designating pod was utilised to locate the dump

Sadly The Anticipated Happens

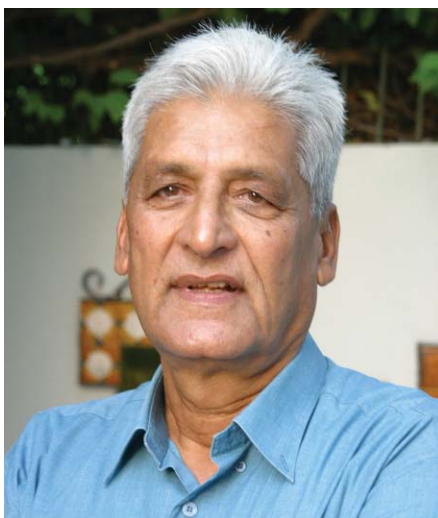
The Nubra River is one of the most beautiful carriers of water, although it carries more sand than water. Flying through its short valley from the snout of the Siachen Glacier, to its confluence with the Shyok River, its sheer-high-cliffed banks within the confines of the Karakoram Mountains on the east and the Soltoro Range on the west, one experiences a strange mixture of serenity with hypnotic eeriness. I have flown number of times through it, and the feeling has only intensified. I am somewhat embarrassed to disclose that I felt many times, that this is how it will be after one takes leave of Mother Earth.

On May 28, I got a call from MoD enquiring whether we had lost a helicopter. Nobody had even mentioned that a helicopter was missing. There was no information with Air Headquarters, HQ, WAC or AFS Srinagar. However, Srinagar reported that a four-helicopter-formation, with call-sign NUBRA was on a mission; it was yet to return. As radio silence is maintained by the helicopters from start-up to shut-down, the station would have the mission report only after NUBRA formation returned. In my mind's eye the Nubra River kept popping up as I awaited the fate of the formation named

after it. Later Srinagar reported that Nubra 4 had been brought down by a Stinger. Four gallant men, Squadron Leader Pundir (co-pilot), Flight Lieutenant Mohilan (captain), Flight Sergeant Prasad (flight gunner) and Sergeant Sahu (flight engineer) lost their young lives. Nubra 3 flight gunner had witnessed the downing. Such was the presence of the media in the battle area that one perhaps, more so the channels, was reporting an air force casualty even before anyone in the air force had authentic information. Nubra 4's helicopter had taken not been equipped with flare-dispensers. As the unit had not been able to bring on line four suitably equipped helicopters, they had assigned for the mission one helicopter without the dispenser.

At the beginning of 1999, the smart bomb was a rare commodity with the IAF. Every one of the 'heavies' in this category had a specific assignment, inclusive of the reserves, in the plans for the 'real' thing. There was no question of diverting it for any other purpose. The adaptation of the 'smart-kits' for the lighter bombs was under-way and required a lot of 'tweaking'. But even in this category, despite adequacy of reserves, the air force philosophy was to use them only if the 'dumbs' could not do it within a given probability. We were confident that we had developed an effective dropping pattern, adjusted sights/computers/GPS to suit our purpose. We would use the 'smarts' sparingly, having the confidence of knowing we could always fall back on them. We were realising that the bigger problems were about intelligence on the location of the targets and converting army map grids into air force map references. If we had them right, we hit them straight. If you had the wrong intelligence or reference, even the 'smarts' were not smart enough to put that right!

Tiger Hill has become famously synonymous both as the challenge of Operation Vijay and the dominance of Operation Safed Sagar. The photograph of the laser designator's cross on Tiger Hill and the laser bomb hitting the hill-top gives a very vivid impression what Operation Safed Sagar entailed: Peak of IAF's professional elan. Personally, I do not need the photograph. The real thing is indelibly imprinted on my mind. I had witnessed it first-hand. The Mirage 2000 mission tasked with engaging the enemy camp by a laser bomb, was accompanied by another Mirage 2000, a twin-seater, piloted by Wing Commander Sandeep Chhabra, to visually and photographically witness/ record the event. I used the opportunity to occupy the rear seat and get a feel of the attack. It would be a gross under-statement to say the experience was unforgettable! The time of flight of the bomb is quite long, and the target has to be kept illuminated until the bomb hits the target. The attack pilot gave call of 'tallyho' when he had acquired the target. There is some time lapse between 'tallyho' to 'splash', indicating bomb release; it seems much longer than it actually is, and one starts to wonder whether the attack pilot has lost the target. There is sense of relief when 'tallyho' call finally comes through. The



An off-the-shelf Sony hand-held movie camera was brilliantly used to study the terrain and locate the target. It remained a simple, but practical 'tool' throughout the Operation

relief is short-lived, for the suspenseful wait for the visual of target-hit gets you to grip something hard. You begin to wonder whether the bomb has missed the target. A hugely bright flash has your eyes transfixed on it. But you still wonder whether it's a bull-eye or just a very close thing. What a joy to get the report, 'bulls-eye'! Well done, mission accomplished!!

While Tiger Hill made the headlines, the mission that broke the enemy's back, was the demolition of its major supply dump at Muntho Dalo. Over a 100 casualties are estimated, total destruction of the shelters and a huge loss of supplies. Here 'smart' bombs were not used, but smart ideas were used with smart equipment. The very highly magnifying telescopic capability of the laser-designating pod was utilised to locate the dump and dumb iron bombs were dropped accurately with some superlative piece of flying.

Locating a target being a big problem has been said again and again. The IAF certainly demonstrated that necessity is the mother of invention. An off-the-shelf Sony hand-held movie camera was brilliantly used to study the terrain and locate the target. It remained a simple, but practical 'tool' throughout the Operation.

The innovation I consider as the biggest contribution to ingeniousness from Western Air Command was the use of the GPS for bombing under conditions that

prevented use of normal equipment. With this technique, bombing was possible in poor visibility conditions, with an under-cast of clouds, even at night. Simply brilliant!

Conclusion

In the final analyses, it was brilliant leadership at all levels that brought about success. The air-officers-commanding-in-chief set the pace and their subordinates rallied to the call. No difficulty was a problem, it was a challenge to be overcome; and over-come they did, and in the process had enormous fun. I salute them all. We must not forget those that sacrificed their lives for our security. We have a duty to take care of their families and let them know they belong.

Many awards were dispensed, but by no measure were they enough. Many deeds may have gone unsung. The awards represent recognition of not only the air warriors that got them, but of people who were associated with them. Air Marshal Vinod Patney, Air-Officer-Commanding-in Chief Western Air Command, was outstanding in bearing the IAF Ensign for all of the Air Force. Recognition of his service as that of the very highest order does the IAF proud; his Sarvottam Yudh Sena Medals are deserved many times over.

This article is essentially about the IAF. I seek forgiveness for not having the space or time (the deadline was over yesterday) to write about the Army. It was the army's leadership in this operation, we were only in support. Back to the Air Force then. Happy anniversary and welcome to the Platinum Year. ●