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Army Through
the
Decades

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Abstract

The **1962 defeat by China** deeply traumatised India's army, political leadership, and public. The military leadership, feeling national shame, attributed the loss to employment of soldiers on nonprofessional duties, inadequate training, and political interference. Thereafter, determined to redeem the honour, the army prioritised rigorous **training, professionalism, and unit fighting spirit**—and the army rapidly expanded.

Within three years, the transformed Indian Army **defeated Pakistan in 1965**, despite Pakistan possessing superior US-supplied weaponry. The same leadership inflicted a significant blow to China in **1967** at Nathu La and, in a unique military feat, helped Bangladesh (then East Pakistan) to become a separate nation **in 1971** within 16 days. Since 1971, the army's work culture, training, and leadership's age profile have undergone immense changes, prompting a need to re-assess these transformations?

Keywords: India-China Relations, Transformation, Indian Armed Forces, Preparedness, India-Pakistan Relations

Introduction

Like any other institution in a democratic setup, army is no different. It also needs review of its current state of professionalism, competence of its leadership at all levels, seriousness in training, ethos and officer-men relationship.

Combat competence, ethos and esprit-de-corps among men engaged in non-combat duties, both within and outside the units, are likely to get diluted making them professionally weaklings in the unit.

We are a command oriented Army which should be young, professional and devoid of feudalism inherited from British.

Redemption of National Honour

The defeat in the 1962 war left a deep scar in the minds of soldiers. During our first interview with the Commanding Officer, he told us that ‘his generation had brought shame to the Nation by losing the 1962 war with China. He further told us that it was up to our generation to redeem the lost honour’. What a generation of soldiers who were feeling pain of the defeat!

Hence, the future forces trained rigorously without losing an inch of time. Those days, priority was training hard. Liquor was banned to be served in the officer’s mess during lunch. That leadership, motivated and led us to clinch victories in both 1965 and 1971 wars against Pakistan, having religious zeal, superior weapons, equipment, tanks and aircrafts from the US. Thus, the honour of the nation was redeemed.

Our seniors used to talk that one of the reasons of our defeat in 1962 was troop labour employed in making houses in Ambala under Amar Jyoti project at the cost of professional pride and training, besides complete politicisation of the armed forces. Even today, things are no different as far as politicisation and employment of soldiers in non-professional duties are concerned.

Introduction of Emergency Commission

While in IMA, in January 1963, cadets selected for emergency commission arrived. Due to shortage of accommodation, we were told to pair up in one room. Names of our companies changed to numerical figures. Kohima Company was named number 5 company.

These cadets were to go through 6 months of training. Many of them were already married and had children. They found difficulty in passing the PT tests. Many joined the army after leaving lucrative jobs— each one of those was full of high spirits and patriotism to serve the mother land.

Lack of physical fitness was also seen as one of the causes for the loss in 1962 war. Hence, in IMA, academic classes were completely shut down and priority was given to long route marches, weapon training and tactics. Number of outdoor camps increased. It was told to us that, our personal belongings should never exceed more than one steel box and a bedding. This advice was followed for considerable length of our service, till the army increased number of dresses in 1985 or so. Pak army is still having wonderful all purpose ‘walking out dress’ which we have discarded. Hence, focus was more on sustainability in dire situations.

After the 1965 war, the Indian Government was very harsh on these emergency commissioned officers; did not value the battle experience that these officers had gained. They were subjected to second Services Selection Board test. Approx 40% cleared this retest. Those retained, lost 18 months of seniority. Those who left, were absorbed in para military forces which were under expansion— they immensely contributed by means of inducting army culture, war experience and methods of training .It would have been better if they were retained

Work Culture and Training

Below our post in Uri sector, J&K, there was a local primary school. One day we heard the teacher teaching his class, “Hindustan Hamara Parosi Mulk Hai. Iske Prime Minister Nehru ji Hain. Hamare Prime Minister Sheikh Abdulla Hain”. (The name of our neighbouring country is India whose Prime Minister is Nehru Ji. Our Prime Minister is Sheikh Abdulla). That was 1964— no wonder this generation of children were ready to participate in separatists’ activities in 1987-1988.

Thereafter, massive expansion of infantry took place. Every regiment got 6-7 additional battalions. Practically, entire infantry arm as such was new, headed by young officers varying 1-4 yrs of service. Those with minimum of 6 months service were promoted to Acting Captains and those with minimum of 2 yrs of service were promoted as Acting Majors.

The Border Security Force was yet to come in to existence, hence the ceasefire line (CFL) and critical portions of the international border were held by the infantry. CFL in entire J&K was very active especially in Chhamb-Jaurian sector, which is partially hilly and partially plains. This is the only sector along entire CFL now (LAC) wherein armour can be employed. That is why this sector saw PAK offensive with armour in both 1965 and 1971 wars.

Domination of area across the CFL, at all cost, was the standing orders from higher headquarters .Raids and counter raids were order of the day. These were led by young officers of the Battalions. Today, to avenge attack on the Uri Brigade, surgical strike at national level has to be planned and executed. The Infantry in many sectors, had dominated the area to an extent that villagers across the CFL, many a times, protested against their Army for not providing them enough safety and security from our raids. Area domination was effective to an extent that, if our cattle had gone across, there used to be request from other side for a flag meeting to return our cattle.

Some reflection on work culture and training of those days which raised the operational capability of the units to a level that barely after 15 months of expansion, infantry came out with flying colours fighting many successful battles, at places Battalion vs Battalion in 65 war

Training and physical fitness became the only passion. One company by rotation always used to be on training for 10 weeks, even by those Battalions which were deployed on the CFL. This period was devoted for individual and collective training. Finally, the company used to be tested for offensive operations by the commanding officer himself. During this period, the company commander was not permitted in the officers mess and was living with his troops in a tent.

During one of the company test exercise, there were 19 cases of heat stroke in a single day in our Battalion in Chhamb – Jaurian sector. They were evacuated to Jammu Military Hospital. There was a message from higher HQ to terminate the exercise. The Commanding officer refused and replied back, “will you tell me to terminate operations in similar circumstances in war too”. No reply came, and the exercise continued.

Every month leaving, aside bare minimum strength for the protection of the base, entire manpower i.e. Battalion HQ and training company used to be led by the commanding officer on a 15 Km of route march. That was the style of that generation of leaders to assert themselves and to be in direct touch with their command. This style was termed as ‘Demonstrative Leadership’.

Those days, young officers were exhorted to take independent decisions. They were told that initially their 99% decisions will be wrong and 1% will be right; later 99% will be right and 1% wrong. They were also told that they get 10% of pay to give orders and 90% for checking implementations of their orders.

Battle inoculation used to be conducted religiously every year for each Battalion under live firing of artillery, mortars and machine guns. After preparing company defences, in 1967 at high altitude in Arunachal Pradesh, the then GOC wanted to test if the bunkers prepared could withstand artillery fire—the soldiers were placed in the bunkers having overhead protection, to give them feel of the artillery fire which they would have encountered in real war. Artillery fire was brought down. Unfortunately one shell landed through the loop hole causing death to its occupants. There was no commotion or witch hunting/ blame game.

Definition of welfare of a soldier was to 'Train Him So Hard That He Can Save His Life in the Battle'. Paper and staff work was minimum —most of the issues with the Headquarters were sorted out on phone and personal visit. Mistakes were accepted by seniors in right spirit with no vindictiveness. Role and interference of auditors and legal branch was negligible.

There used to be no commotion or going overboard in rendering hospitality to the senior officers during their visits to the units. Senior officers visiting the units during exercises carried their own haversack lunch /dinner as per the timings of their visits. Use of crockery, cutlery during exercises used to be objected by the senior officers. Only enamelled mugs and plates were carried in field areas /exercises.

Period Post 1971

Post 1971, the Army felt no challenge. The crop of commanding officers who delivered victories to the nation in 1965 and 1971 wars had either retired or moved on to staff assignments. A new pattern of selection under quantified system was introduced wherein integrity, as an expected quality, was to be graded in the scale of 1-9. This quality either is there or absent— How can it be scaled? For courses and their gradings extra marks were included to draw merit list for promotion. Promotion naturally became based on personal performance rather than collective performance of one's command under him.

System of test exercise with troops at, Battalion and Brigade level once a year, part of Annual inspection erstwhile followed religiously, before 1971, had gradually petered out. Command tenure became short (minimum 18 months) due to increased vacancies of staff appointments.

Vacancies on Staff College and for foreign courses (mostly in UK, USA and Australia) were increased. Officers from Artillery and Armour were inducted in infantry units since there was stagnation in their respective Arms for promotion. Majority of them commanded the infantry units.

Command of infantry Brigade was opened for officers from Artillery, Armour, Signals and Engineers. Majority of them rose to command Corps and Army— at one time, almost 80% corps and Army commanders were from these Arms. Change in style of command and work culture was clearly visible at all rungs of the command.

Sizeable number of officers from these Arms were commanding infantry/ mountain Brigades and Divisions. Besides this, officers from other Arms, having no experience of

mountain warfare, were sent on graded staff Appointments in the headquarters of these formations

College of combat came into being. Officers from other Arms were posted as instructors in Junior and Senior command wings which till then, under Infantry School, was purely domain of Infantry officers who had ground experience of infantry tactics, close combat and its work culture. Infantry Officers who had potential for further promotion, was also the criteria for posting as instructors in these two wings.

Higher command LDMC and NDC courses were introduced. Along with PSc, these courses were given added marks while drawing the merit list for promotion to command unit and above. Officers with long regimental service with troops, under trying conditions lost out to these officers in promotion Boards at every level due to these add-ons

Many new courses for officers, below 5 yrs of service, were introduced. Units found problem to subscribe; at times, officers attended 2-3 courses in a year, hence missing major battle experiences in their formative years.

Many a time, unit had barely 4/5 officer in peace stations. Same was situation with section and platoon commanders as for them also new courses were introduced. It all amounted to Army Head Quarters taking responsibility to train the officers and junior leaders at the cost of hand on training with troops under the able guidance of their respective commanding officers. Prior to 1971, compulsory courses were Weapons and JC only.

Post 1971, authorisation of officers to an infantry Battalion was increased substantially to 21 officers as against 11- the authorisation with which infantry units fought both 1965 and 1971 wars. Appointments erstwhile held by junior commissioned officers were authorised to be held by a commissioned officer. It created sizeable deficiency of officers at junior level which is continuing till date.

In infantry unit, its clerical staff, officers mess staff, non-combat staff and tradesmen were backbone of the unit as they remained in the same unit till they retired. They used to move out on promotion only if the vacancy in their parent unit did not come up. They were institution by themselves. A bar waiter knew as to how much liquor an officer could hold. Post 1971, their inter battalion rotation commenced, thus losing benefit of their vast continued unit specific experience.

Large scale mechanisation of the Army took place with complete disregard of their restricted employability in obstacle ridden terrain (DCB& Canals) including density of built up area across the IB. Responsibility to provide Bridge Head across these obstacles for break out of these forces fell on Infantry, who was meant to man carry approx 800 Kg of BAUT, walk 1200 yds through the mine fields and 10 men sitting duck in these BAUTS while crossing the water obstacle.

Offensive mindset of the political leadership in 1965 and 1971 and that of Army leadership petered out gradually post 1971. No error syndrome among officer class set in. This encouraged Pakistan to indulge in covert warfare in J&K and Punjab. Till today, infantry has lost men, killed and wounded in CI operations far more than it suffered in 1971 war.

We had botched up Blue Star, URI, Pathankot, Kargil and Galwan. One must give credit to Musharraf for surprising us by inducting a Brigade size force in our territory with impunity. How confident he would have been of our absence of any kind of response across the international borders.

Officers who conducted Blue Star and were surprised in Kargil had attended Staff College, HC, LDMC, NDC. Few of them among them had attended courses in foreign countries too.

For debacle in Uri, Mr M D Nalapat wrote in Sunday Guardian, 2 oct 2016 edition that its Brigade commander was more interested in laying Golf course than his prime responsibility – safety of his men. It was painful to read.

Today our officers take pride in becoming strategists rather than tacticians. Because to become tactician one has to sweat and make his command to sweat too. Result avoidable casualties in CI operations and in hastily planed operations e.g Galwan, Blue Star and many not coming to light.

Conclusion

In our enthusiasm to modernise, we have forgotten that finally boots of a foot soldier will be needed to confirm the victory, unlike OP Sindoor where both sides are claiming victory.

A soldier employed on non-professional jobs like running commercial shops, attachments away from his unit as sahayak ,errand and working like labourer in Golf courses- give him impression that he is meant for such mundane tasks rather than training for war. There is saying in the environment that in peace station the Battalion goes to pieces

We also need to revisit the promotion policy of officer cadre which is based on individual performance with add on of courses rather than performance of his command under him. Policy of having residual service of 3/ 1.5 yrs for command of a Corps and Army respectively also needs relook. If the Chief Justice of India can have tenure of 6-8 months, why Army is having this illogical clause which is based most on date of birth rather than seniority and merit. Hence, there is a requirement for structural re-organisation.

With OROP in place there is case to revisit policy of up gradation, reemployment—which is purely welfare oriented rather than adding any value to the organisation.



About the Author

Major General CM Seth (Retd) was commissioned in 1963 and took part both in 1965 and 1971 Wars. An alumnus of Staff College, he held instructional appointments in infantry School, College of Combat and IMTRAT. Been Deputy Force Commander NSG, BGS and Chief of Staff of a Corps. He also commanded a division in mountains and retired from the post of ADG Territorial Army.



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