

Short Reviews of Recent Books

K File: The Conspiracy of Silence. By Bashir Assad, (New Delhi; Vitasta Publishing), Page 237, Price – Rs. 495/-, ISBN: 978-93-86473-69-1

Bashir Assad is a Srinagar based senior journalist from Jammu and Kashmir (J&K). As an author he is able to provide a nuanced view from “the other side of the hill”. The book is laid out in 19 unnumbered chapters.

He starts off by addressing the issue of radicalisation and fundamentalism in Kashmir, which has been brought about by Pakistani manipulation of the *mullahs* and organisations like the Jamaat-e-Islami. The author explains how and why towering leaders were made irrelevant in Kashmir through political alignments and realignments. Therefore, trying to resolve Kashmir through application of electoral politics is not workable. Bashir Assad argues that the conflict in Kashmir is never going to be resolved unless three stakeholders – the Kashmiris, the Indian State and the political parties in Kashmir get together and negotiate with the militants to reach a solution acceptable to all. The militants will never negotiate if they are in a position of strength and therefore, their degradation militarily is part of the first step.

He delves deep into the transformation of Kashmiri society which now considers pluralism as a foreign imposition and identifies more with Arabic hard-line Islam. Militants in Kashmir identify with global Jihad and all militant groups in Kashmir are ideologically part of it. Therefore, an independent Kashmir is no longer their aim; in line with global Jihad their aim is a Kashmir ruled under Shariah laws.

The concluding chapters deal with the present complexion and psyche of the militancy in Kashmir. Assad states that the current phase of violence is no longer related to achieving *Azadi* and self-determination. The truth is that a radicalised Kashmir has scores of young people ready to die ‘in the glory of Islam’. The author goes on to explain how the Kashmir militancy also has a caste ridden nature where the rich and privileged ultimately fire their guns from the shoulders of the poor.

The language of the book is simple and short chapters give the book the character of a fast paced narrative. The situations

narrated are real life which enables the reader to get immersed in the flavour of insurgency and appreciate the schism which has developed both, in Kashmiri society and the rigidity in the thinking of those who strive to resolve the issue. The title of the book “the conspiracy of silence” alludes to the silence of the educated middle class which “runs with the hares and hunts with the hounds”.

The book ends with some ideas for change. These include the reality that the only option to resolve the issue is to talk. Bashir explains this succinctly by quoting John F Kennedy who had said, “Let us never negotiate out of fear. But let us never fear to negotiate”. He also advocates that a mutually acceptable third party (even a NGO) is a must for breaking the logjams for a political settlement without involving foreign state mediators. The book will be valuable to understand the situation in the Vale of Kashmir from the perspective of a ‘son of the soil’ for a realistic assessment of the chances of strategies being tried out for conflict resolution. The book is well edited with very few ‘printer’s devils’. The author does not indulge in self-aggrandisement though at times emotionalism does slip through.

Lt Gen Ghanshyam Singh Katoch, PVSM, AVSM, VSM (Retd)

India - The Future Of South Asia : Rise of the New Power of Peace. Edited by Karan Kharab, (Noida: Turning Point Publishers, 2019) Page 291, Price – Rs. 1195/- ISBN: 978-81-937831-5-3.

This volume is a compilation of interesting articles by established professionals, and thinkers, on the emerging new India under the dynamic leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi. Undeniably since 2014, there has been a sea change in our internal and external policies. These articles on the future of South Asia cover a wide canvas, much like the indescendent patterns in a kaleidoscope. To a perceptive reader, the interplay between seemingly differing points of issue like national security, regional cooperation, national interests, international relations, economy, industry, alliances, pacts, heritage, fault lines, national aspirations, Indo-Pacific and burden of past on carving out an overall grand vision will not be lost. Authors of each article have posted their considered views on various facets germane to the subject.

Some observations or deductions can, however, be contested. A suggestion that weak neighbours impact a country's growth or security is not really true. Equally, poor relationship with our immediate neighbours is a byproduct of inept diplomacy and a patronizing or lackadaisical approach. Liu Zongyi, Advisor to the Chinese Government, in his article is almost visceral and opines that the Doklam standoff reveals "India's strategic ambitions". Zongyi aggressively rails at Narendra Modi for opposing the Maritime Silk Road and the Belt and Road Initiative. He is disdainful of Indo-Pacific strategy and thinks that India is trying to punch beyond its weight.

Zongyi is quick to call reporting of Chinese incursions across IB/LAC by Indian media as a show of "loss of confidence", quite forgetting the frenzy Chinese official media goes into when any Indian/Vietnamese/Japanese/Philippine sea vessels even enter South China Sea. General Durrani, former National Security Advisor of Pakistan, is a votary of uninterrupted dialogue between India and Pakistan. He also recommends Musharraf's solution for Kashmir. Quick to point out our flaws; he turns a Nelson's eye to the active encouragement given to terrorist groups infiltrating in Jammu and Kashmir (J&K). Brigadier Bhonsle's suggestion to change thinking in the subcontinent from conflict resolution to conflict transformation and shift to a non-zero-sum approach though refreshing is unlikely to fructify as Pakistan military will not accept civil suzerainty in the near future. The Editor has done a commendable task in getting together views from thinkers of differing genre that is grist to a complex subject like the rise of a nation.

Maj Gen Ashok Joshi, VSM (Retd)

Crisscrossing Paths : Through Sorrow, Joy, Departure, Reunion. *By William Hawke (New Delhi : Gyan Publishing House, 2019), Page 310, Price – Rs. 1240/-, ISBN 9788121219662,*

A saga of four families, whose lives crisscross each other over the course of one hundred years through grief, joy, separations and reunions, this book is taut and very well written. It begins from the battlefields of the battle of Somme, 01 July 1916 and ends in 2018.

A beautifully woven factual fiction, spreading across Europe, India, Malaysia, Myanmar, Canada and over the high seas across the world it captures the essence of human strengths and frailties, love and sorrow, faith and devotion with an excellent weave of words.

Spread in two Parts over 21 Chapters, it is veritably a 'un-put-downable' read. The first builds the narrative till India's independence, weaving the lives of the four families, while the second follows the life of the main character through his childhood and his life as part of the royal Canadian Navy. The final reunion, for the trip to Dharamsala, where their grandfather spent three years recovering from 'Post Traumatic Stress Disorder' after his traumatic incident during WW I seems nothing short of a miracle.

Much of what is written would be of great interest to the uniformed people, as they would be able to relate to the facts and the fiction woven around it. A must for a libraries.

Maj Gen Rajiv Narayanan, AVSM, VSM (Retd)

The Bugle Calls : A Life in the Indian Army. By Lt Col Naresh Rastogi (Retd) and Shri Kiran Doshi, IFS (Retd) (Chennai: Tranquebar Press, 2019), Page 272, Price – Rs. 599/-. ISBN 9789388754484.

In this book Col Rastogi describes his life from childhood (1930s) to post-retirement (1990s). He gives tribute to Shri K Doshi, IFS (his golfing partner in Noida Golf Club), for inducing and encouraging him to write his experiences of Army life, which he had often narrated to him.

In short 30 chapters spread over 270 pages, the author has covered "How he was induced to join the Army", and his life thereafter, till he sought early retirement in 1970s, started his second career in Nigeria, and finally his present life amongst his old colleagues and friends in Naiad.

Chapters 1 to 3 cover a young boy enjoying games, studies and childhood impressions and experiences, which would remind the readers of their own childhood. The impressions and joy of having a joint family (as was prevailing in India during pre partition

days), the emphasis of his father (an officer in MES) on education (especially English language), traditional values imparted by his mother and other relatives, make very interesting reading.

How in 1953 he joined the Joint Services Wing of the National Defence Academy (then at Clement Town, Dehra Dun), moved to Khadakwasla in 1955, then in 1957 to Indian Military Academy, Dehra Dun, and got commission into Corps of Signals , are covered in Chapters 4 to 6. He narrates that when asking a porter at Dehra Dun Railway Station to return extra money, how proud he felt on being told by him, "Sahib, now you are an officer ". His experiences and impressions of military life, and emphasis of all training on moulding a young college boy into an "Officer and a Gentleman", ragging (including front rolls, wading through ice cold water streams), and living a Spartan life, will be enjoyed by all readers.

This is how the sounding of Bugle Calls -Reveille in the morning and Retreat in the evening, became a part of life of every cadet. This remained with Naresh for life time of soldiering.

Besides interest in sports and academic events, yearnings for friendship with young ladies, learning ball room dancing with male cadet partners, outdoor trips for fishing and hunting, and to Bombay and Poona are covered in a nostalgic manner. These will revive memories of events from the reader's life.

Next few chapters cover the training as a Signals Officer at Mhow, Poona and postings at Lucknow and Rajouri. In these he describes how he developed closeness with his soldiers, built team-spirit and learnt to administer his sub-unit. During this period he also met a charming girl Basanti ,at Lucknow and married her . Educated in IT College, Basanti not only complimented his military life but also became an anchor and source of strength to him. How she encouraged him to do Staff College, shared pangs of separation and other administrative hardships only known to military wives, are covered with interesting antidotes.

Year 1965 saw him being attached with a Brigade earmarked for operations in Khem Karan Sector of Punjab, during the 1965 Indo-Pak War. Next four chapters vividly cover events of the Battle of Khem Karan , as he saw the fighting at Asal Uttar . During this period of War, he worked very closely under Brig D S

Sidhu, a very bold, cool, brave and competent leader. As there was radio silence imposed due to operational reasons, Naresh as Sparrow (Signal's Officer) and Capt Khan, 4 GRENADIERS from Brigade HQs, were often tasked by the Commander to visit forward troops to obtain latest battle situation. They travelled extensively by day and night, from one front line to the other, came under Pakistani artillery fire, and saw the destruction of Pakistani armour and making of "Patton Nagar". The author describes how 4 GRENADIERS under Lt Col Farhad Bhatti held their ground and fought the action. The brave and historic actions of CQMH Abdul Hamid (Awarded PVC Posthumously), who destroyed 3 Pakistani Patton tanks which majorly contributed to destruction of Pakistani armour has been extremely well narrated. Having earned laurels for Victory at Asal Uttar, how the unsuccessful operation of 4 SIKH on 12 September resulted in blame –game, of Brig Sidhu being replaced, and pulling out of the Brigade to another sector. These events saddened Naresh and others, specially the moving –out of the brave and bold commander, have been well covered.

Events of period 1965-1970 have been covered in brief, including change over from Signals to Infantry (8 MADRAS), attending Staff College, and posting to Delhi and Lucknow.

During the 1971 Indo Pak War, the author again saw action, this time on the East Pakistan side, near Bongaigaon. Before the outbreak of hostilities, as 2nd In-Command of his unit, he interacted with Mukti Bahini, saw the safety and comfort of the helpless refugees streaming into India, and conducted visitors and reporters to the border areas. Once the hostilities broke out and his unit was given an offensive task to enter East Pakistan and capture Jessore and then Khulna, he was in the lead of his troops. He narrates how his troops negotiated paddy fields with knee deep water, came under Pak artillery and machinegun fire, and secured villages and buildings, and captured Pakistani soldiers. An eye witness account of surrender of Pakistani troops in Khulna on 17 Dec, their views and attitudes, and reaction of the locals, has been well covered.

Promoted Lt Col soon after the War, he covers his command tenure in Sunderbani, where he had served after Staff College.

How an act of indiscipline by his two soldiers (and his disagreement with higher authorities on the degree of punishment to them), resulted to stunt his otherwise rising career graph. This resulted in his being posted to NCC in Assam, which he felt was an indication that his future was “sealed”, thus he took pre-mature retirement.

Soon, a new avenue opened, and he got a job as a Manager in a factory in Nigeria, where Basanti was also offered a teaching assignment. Having spent a few years there (which included travel in Europe and connecting to pen-friends and a 1971 War reporter), Naresh and Basanti returned to India, to settle down in Noida, amongst their old colleagues.

The book is very well written and the author needs to be complimented for writing true events and observations in a simple language, from his heart. He has explained military terms , so as to assist non military readers.

The only shortcoming is, that there are no maps or sketches , hence following places like Teh Pannu, Burki, Asal Uttar, Jessore and Khulna, become difficult. Hence, the narration of events in Chapters of 1965 and 1971 War, is incomplete. It is suggested that this shortcoming be made up in the next print.

The book is recommended for libraries of units of the Armed Forces, Colleges, Clubs and Schools, as it is life-story of a young boy joining and enjoying a career in the Armed Forces, and beyond.

Lt Gen Y M Bammi, (Retd)

Major Tom’s War. By Vee Walker, (London, Kashi House CIC, 2018). Pages 438, Price – Rs.1868/- ISBN 9781911271147.

Major Tom’s War is an intriguing novel that spans the prelude and period of the Great War. The story is set in a chain of locations that include India, England, Wales, Scotland, Belgium, Germany and France. It is a story about war and peace, life and death, love and hate, hope and despair, joy and sorrow, but it is mostly about people and horses and the regiment to which Tom, the main protagonist belonged – the Central India Horse. The characters are memorable and brought to life by the author from the diary of her grandfather, Major Thomas Horatio Westmacott.

The story covers the saga of Indian cavalry units that were forced to fight dismounted in France and Flanders. It is, however, not a chronicle about battles fought by Indian cavalry units but rather about the people who were part of those times – British, French, Indian and German. The story weaves all these protagonists together assisting the reader to be a witness to those interesting times.

The narrative oscillates between the battlefield and family matters back home, between the people of France, who had to undergo the travails of German occupation, and the heroes from among them who fought for freedom from the Germans. It tells about life in the trenches and raids across no man's land where one gets the whiff of the deadly mustard gas that killed and maimed so many of the Allied troops, and of the improvised jam tin bombs that are a tribute to the innovation and imagination of the troops who made them. Hovering in the background are the sowars of the Central India Horse, led by their risaldars and the intrepid Risaldar Amar Singh who, true to his name, survived the war and was awarded an OBI second class with the title of Bahadur.

The description of the conditions under which the Indian Army had to fight in Europe is startlingly clear. Major Tom had kept a diary that describes in minute detail the events that he was involved in and his granddaughter Vee Walker, the author, has brought out a splendid narrative that brings the story alive in a labour of love that resurrects the faces of the characters of more than a hundred years ago.

'Major Tom's War' is a story that commemorates the life and times of a war that has close connections with India and should be read by all who have an interest in history and the part that India played in the Great War.

The story has an intricate plot and takes the reader through the twists and turns not only about the war and the resistance of the French to German occupation, but also of long distance love and romance till the final denouement of the end of the war and the Armistice that brings all the elements of the story to a happy conclusion.

Maj Gen Ian Cardozo, AVSM, SM (Retd)

The Forgotten Few The Indian Air Force in World War II. By KS Nair (Noida: HarperCollins Publishers, 2019) Pages 452, Price Rs. 669/- P-ISBN: 978-93-5357-067-5.

The Second World War remains one of the great markers of world history. Indian participation, the largest contingent from any country involved in the war, brought significant social and political changes within India, including the advent of Independence. And yet, the Indian contribution to the war efforts remains under documented and under recorded. Over 2.5 million Indians served in uniform as part of Allied armed forces during the War and yet, the Indian chapter of this global story is barely known. The Forgotten Few attempts to produce a historical narrative of contribution of the Indian Air Force (IAF) to the Air Force component of the World War-II.

The Indian Air Force was officially established on 8 October 1932. Its first flight, comprised six RAF-trained officers and 19 *Havai* Sepoys, came into being on 01 Apr 1933. The aircraft on inventory were four Westland Wapiti IIA army co-operation biplanes. By June 1938, No. 1 Squadron of IAF attained its full strength, and this remained the sole IAF formation when World War II began. The outbreak of World War II, and the leaning of Japan towards the Axis powers, led to the creation of the IAF as a self-supporting force for the South Eastern Theatre of War. During World War II, the British also realised the important role IAF could play to counter the Japanese aggression and this led to the rapid expansion of the IAF to 10 squadrons. Towards the end of the war, the prefix 'Royal' was granted to the IAF in recognition of its contribution during the war.

This book brings to light the lost stories of some of the Indian aviators of that era, who later built the foundations of the present day IAF, the fourth largest air force in the world. The book covers the period from 1930-39 to 1946-47 in ten chapters and has a foreword by the former Chief of the Air Staff, Air Chief Marshal BS Dhanoa. The first chapter is dedicated to the early years of aviation in India (1930-39), while the second chapter covers the war in Europe (1939 to 40). The next seven chapters, covering the period from 1941 to 1945, are devoted to the rise of IAF assets and its actions, mainly in the SE theatre of war. The last chapter covers

the post war happenings and actions in Japan and elsewhere in SE Asia.

The book is based on interviews with some of the Indian survivors of World War-II, and material from authentic war diaries. The author, KS Nair is a graduate of IIT Delhi and IIM Bangalore and has been a lifelong student of Indian aviation history.

Overall a brilliant effort, extremely well researched, simply articulated and easy to comprehend. The book exposes the reader to a thrilling and exciting account of the formative history of Indian military aviation, especially the IAF.

Gp Capt Sharad Tewari, VM (Retd)