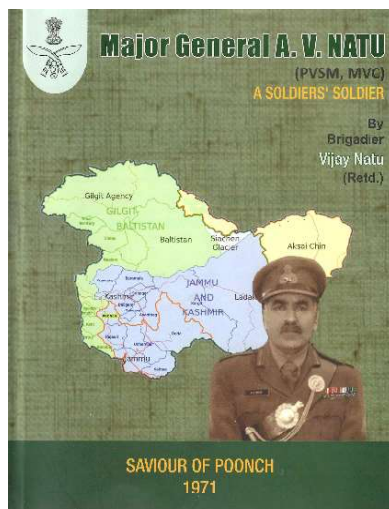


Review Article

Major General AV Natu, PVSM, MVC A Soldier's Soldier: Saviour of Poonch 1971



Brigadier Vijay Natu (Retd)

Introduction

Major General AV Natu, PVSM, MVC; 'A Soldier's Soldier: Saviour of Poonch 1971' is an excellent biography written by his son Brigadier Vijay Natu (Retd). In this inspiring account the author has recalled the important events in his father's life and talked about how these impacted him and shaped his personality.

A weak boy at a boarding school in Akola, Maharashtra, Anant showed signs of leadership at a very young age when he challenged an older bully at school to a wrestling bout and beat him. He, thereafter, became fearless in life and this character trait remained with him. Having joined the Ramakrishna Mission to be initiated as a monk, in 1945, he could not resist the uniform calling and left the *Belur Math* to join the Army. He was then commissioned into the 13 Frontier Force Rifles in Oct 1946, after passing out from the Officers Training School at Belgaum. Post-partition General Natu was transferred to the 9 GORKHA RIFLES and he served in challenging appointments in operational areas,

participated in wars and held important command and staff appointments.

In the 1950s, he also had two very fulfilling innings in Nepal that were historic, where he contributed to reorganising the training of the Royal Nepal Army and in his second innings, he contributed vastly to the Ex-Servicemen Welfare, which included setting up seasonal pension paying camps and a hostel for the wards of Gorkha ex-servicemen at Kathmandu. Students from this hostel excelled and went on to tenant appointments in the Nepalese Army, administration and other professional fields.

The Author

Brigadier Vijay Natu, the son of Major General AV Natu, MVC did his schooling from Daly College, Indore and graduated from Fergusson College Pune. Commissioned into 4th Battalion the 9 GORKHA RIFLES in Aug 1975, he went on to command the battalion, which his father too had commanded and in which his nephew Major Varun Vaidya is presently serving. He has served in various operational areas including Sri Lanka and Siachen and has attended the Higher Command Course. He retired in 2007 and is settled in Chalisgaon, Maharashtra where he has been involved in Ex-Servicemen Welfare.

About the Book

The book can be divided into three parts, the first is his early years and the second part is General Natu's service in the army and finally his post-retirement years. Apart from dwelling on each of these parts of his father's life, it is the wonderful manner in which Brigadier Vijay Natu has captured the effect General Natu had on the various people with whom he came into close contact with and most particularly the unit bonding and esprit de corps when he discusses the family ties that existed between him and Colonel Nasib Singh as well as the ethos of the 9 GORKHA RIFLES.

Since a unit is the most important part of one's service there was an instance, when Second Lieutenant Natu was going on leave from Abbottabad in May 1947. He had accompanied Captain Usman Shaikh from his battalion, when their bus was surrounded by an unruly mob of Muslim League supporters at Attock, who

wanted to pull out and slaughter all Hindus travelling to Punjab and beyond. It was at this stage that Captain Usman kept quiet and did not reveal his religious identity thus saving him 'from lynching and certain death'. The 'camaraderie and bonding' endured.

Joining 1/9 GORKHA RIFLES post-independence, he saw action in 1947/48 in Naushera, Jammu and Kashmir. It is here that he served with Major Eric Vas, who later rose to be an Army Commander, whom he described as 'a straight forward and courageous man'. Eric once submitted a report to the division headquarter on a '*chapatti*' and when asked to explain the unusual behaviour sent a classic retort; he said "I regret the use of my stationery but *atta* is the only commodity I have for fighting, feeding and for futile correspondence". He was the brainchild behind setting up the Higher Command Course at the College of Combat; one of the most incisive courses in the Army. Anant looked 'up to Major Eric Vas as a friend, philosopher and guide' throughout his service and even later in life.

Posted to 4/9 GORKHA RIFLES on the raising of the battalion in 1960, he was the Second in Command under Lieutenant Colonel Nasib Singh in Dehradun. In Jun 1962, the Battalion was moved to Ahlihal in Himachal Pradesh and was later airlifted to Bomdila in Oct 1962. During the move one aircraft flew a platoon to Bombay which was promptly deployed for airport security.

Post-war the battalion was involved in a series of exercises where the commander of 77 Infantry Brigade, Brigadier Sartaj Singh, was greatly impressed by his professionalism. Incidentally, General Natu served under him while commanding his battalion when he was General Officer Commanding (GOC) 5 Mountain Division and later as Commander 93 Infantry Brigade when he was GOC 15 Corps. General Sartaj's professionalism, values and conduct left a deep impression on him.

Nasib, who raised 4/9 GORKHA RIFLES had joined Hodson's Horse as a *Sowar* in World War II and General Messervy, who was their Commandant 'saw a spark' in him and groomed him to become an officer. He laid the strong foundations for the battalion. General Natu considered him his 'professional *guru*'. Later, Nasib was selected to be part of the raising of Indo Tibetan Border Police. Incidentally, the sons of the first three Commanding Officers

(COs) of 4/9 GORKHA RIFLES, Colonel Rajinder Singh, Brigadier Vijay Natu and Major General Kishen Singh, the son of Lieutenant Colonel (later Brigadier) Hari Singh who took over the battalion from General Natu all joined 9 GORKHA RIFLES while Major General KVS Lalotra, the younger son of Nasib joined 11 GORKHA RIFLES. As per Lieutenant General Anil Bhatt PVSM, UYSM, AVSM, SM, VSM, (Retd) who also belongs to this battalion, the tradition still endures and, he said that General Natu's grandson Varun Vaidya also joined the battalion and was his ADC.

General Natu's best came when he went on to win glory for India in Poonch during the 1971 Indo-Pakistan War. The author has captured the events and memoirs very well by those who served with him during the defence of Poonch for which he was awarded the Maha Vir Chakra, the second highest gallantry award in India.

He had prepared the formation extremely well by not only physically visiting each post since taking over but also by rehearsing the drills and putting his formation through a two-sided exercise. In a novel step he ensured that he was 'party to the process of distributing compensation to the civilians whose land had been appropriated for security reasons', by accompanying the District Collector he instilled a 'sense of trust about the Army'.

During the war though attacked by superior strength, his battalions of 6 SIKH, 1/4 GORKHA RIFLES, 8 JAT and 11 J&K Militia stood firm and repulsed the attacks, 13 MAHAR and elements of 9 PARA (Commando) also successfully counter-attacked Thanpir, a location that had been captured taking the Pakistanis by surprise by attacking along a 'precipitous slope'.

He also heeded the advice of his Brigade Major then Major (later Brigadier) AK Sahni, for not executing an offensive plan initially and for waiting for artillery build up and for the situation to stabilise before he launched 21 PUNJAB and C Company 9 PARA (Commando) to capture a Pakistani post successfully.

His meticulous preparations involved studying Brigadier Pritam Singh's battle for Poonch in 1947/48, his perseverance, diligence and ability to motivate his subordinates and stand by them. Major (later Lieutenant General) VM Patil, who was posted as his Brigade Major recalls his initial briefing in which he said 'his command is based on team work, trust and transparency'.

No wonder, Field Marshal Sam Manekshaw at the Investiture Ceremony remarked to his wife “Silu do you remember the young Captain from 1/9 GORKHA RIFLES from our days in Ferozpur in the early 50’s. Here he is, a decorated soldier. I knew he would not let me down when I selected him to command the strategically important 93 Infantry Brigade at Poonch”.

On promotion General Natu went on to command 4 Infantry Division at Babina and here too he left his mark. This is where he instituted the concept of divisional battle schools which though not appreciated at that time has gone on to become an ‘important facet’ of most divisions.

In Dec 1975, he was posted as Chief of Staff of 16 Corps at Nagrota. The Corps Commander was Lieutenant General KV Krishna Rao, who went on to become the Army Chief. In this appointment he had to resolve a sensitive incident that occurred on the line of control in the Rajouri Sector.

An officer in a unit had overstayed leave, but the CO had overlooked it. However, a Non-Commissioned Officer (NCO) in the same unit was punished for a similar offence. The company commander of the NCO protested to the CO for applying two different yardsticks and sought the intervention of the brigade commander who took no action. Deeply offended, the company commander asked his company on the post to revolt. The situation escalated as the company commander refused to back down and a neighbouring battalion was being asked to ‘assault and capture the post’. General Natu intervened, and he drove up to the base of the post against all apprehensions and then walked to the post and with a loud hailer, talked to the officer and told him that the officer’s elder brother had served with him during his previous tenure. When the officer admitted that he was ‘fearful that he would be killed if he surrendered’ he assured him of his physical safety but told him he would face disciplinary action. The officer and NCO then surrendered. This ‘prevented an ugly scenario’. There are many lessons that stand out in this episode including the fact that an officer was willing to go to any lengths to look after his men.

Fond Reminisces

Major (later Lieutenant General) YM Bammi, who was a company commander in Poonch recalls General Natu allowing the officers to speak frankly and give out their views to the Corps Commander who was a hard task master during his visit and operational discussion and recalls that; 'due to his initiative the visit went off well'.

Lieutenant General Inder Verma, who served with him in Kathmandu says; "an important part of his personality was his humility and kindness, his feet firmly on the ground". General BA Karriappa as GOC Maharashtra and Gujarat Area recalls an incident in which General Natu asked him to help out a widow with her emoluments and once he had got her dues released, General Natu brought the widow and her children to Mumbai so they could thank him.

Colonel Balbir Singh Purewal recalls an incident during grenade training when General Natu was the CO and Havildar Min Bahadur had passed away. This was due to an 'innovative method of training' but the GOC, General Sartaj Singh, gave a '*shabash*' for trying this method of grenade throwing. Such were the leaders at that time, willing to stand by their orders and for their subordinates.

General Natu was deeply influenced by Swami Vivekananda and the Quit India Movement and stands tall as a great patriot and a brave 'Soldier General'. He contributed post superannuation to nation-building through social service.

Conclusion

This book is remarkable in many ways because it not only talks about the contribution of General Natu but also throws light on a very important period of the history of our army from partition to post 1971. How the army was shaped by the debacle of the 1962 War, and it imbibed the lessons learnt and went on in 1971 to attain a decisive victory in the war with Pakistan by concentrating on professionalism. The turnaround in those nine years which included the 1965 War with Pakistan was exceptional.

A large part of this success can be attributed to the leaders in the army, men of integrity who stood tall and firm, confident and

supportive, some of whose personalities have been covered in this book. What also stands out in the book is our regimental system, where 'the unit is a family', and deep relationships endure. The bonding is tremendous, and the ties within this family persist.

There is no doubt that this book should be widely read not only in the forces from a professional perspective but also by others as it provides an insight into the ethos and values of the army and a unit which is the foundation and the manner in which it shapes one's character.

Major General Jagatbir Singh, VSM (Retd)

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