

## Seven Days Without Fire!

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### Abstract

*This personal narrative is about the author's experience in a super high altitude area, akin to the Siachen Glacier, while serving with the Ladakh Scouts. It brings out how in such areas even a seemingly minor issue like the inability to light a stove becomes life-threatening. To the extent that as in this case, superhuman efforts have to be made — to provide fire!*

**T**he other day I read a story of the Ladakh Scout 'Nunnus'

surviving on milk powder and will power in the Siachen Glacier<sup>2</sup>. This reminded me of another six Indian Army soldiers who held a post in the Siachen Glacier in a similar situation. It made me nostalgic. I could not help but share my reminiscence of those days, remember those gallant warriors, and an episode where for them it was, seven days without fire.

This happened in Sub Sector *Hanifuddin* (SSH), post the Kargil War. During 'Op Vijay' I was serving with Ladakh Scouts. At that time, Ladakh Scouts had two wings, called Karakoram and Indus Wings. I was posted with Karakoram Wing and we were all sent to *Turtuk* to relieve 11 Rajputana Rifles which had just recaptured some features there. We had a huge responsibility of holding the SSH in *Turtuk*. SSH was named after Major Hanifuddin of 11 Rajputana Rifles, who attained martyrdom evicting Pakistan Army from this sector. SSH was as tough as the Siachen Glacier. We ourselves had done some hard fighting and recaptured major peaks in the *Batalik* sector.

I had previous experience of serving in Siachen Glacier way back in 1992-93 with 20 Jammu & Kashmir Rifles. Due to shortage of officers, I was not only Company Commander but also Post Commander of a satellite post, at an altitude of 18500

ft, called *Saddle* captured from 3 Northern Light Infantry of the Pakistan Army.

In winters, movement becomes very difficult here. Move from Company Headquarters to platoon and section posts was on glaciers full of ice and crevasses. Blizzards and avalanches were frequent. It was so cold that limbs refused to work and frostbite was very common in spite of taking all precautions. All one saw was white, whether by day or night. The only noise one heard was of firing and wind. No amount of training can prepare you for this. It is sheer will power which pulls you through and one has to see it to believe it. No one had occupied these defences before, so we were using Pakistani bunkers to live in. This was the Indian Army's first winter in this sector and that is why the Karakoram Wing of Ladakh Scouts was inducted. Ladakhi troops were best suited for such a demanding and challenging role.

By the end of September 1999, the first sign of the incoming winter was obvious. The Karakoram Wing was frantically building tracks and dumping loads of food and equipment. As winter intensified, the area became even more prone to avalanches. I had seven super high-altitude posts under me and means of communication were very poor because of difficult terrain. Winter had set in early but we were prepared. We had stocked adequate ration, ammunition and other necessary stores. We also had enough captured weapons and ammunition of Pakistan, which we were using against them. The routine on these remote, inaccessible posts was to dominate the Line of Control (LoC) and keep the enemy suppressed. Living on top of a cliff is full of dangers and challenges. Everyone had a personal stove that was used to melt snow to provide water for all purposes including for morning ablutions. Open latrines were perched on a steep cliff. A fellow soldier always used to stand guard so that the person occupying the hot seat did not slip to his death. Eatables included items like cake, biscuit and chocolates, which were rock hard. To drink juice we had to spend much fuel, time and energy to melt it, as it was always frozen.

As Pakistan had held this post so the enemy artillery fire was always accurate. It turned the once beautiful white sheet of ice to black potholes and craters of different sizes. Shelling was a regular phenomenon. Whenever we heard the loud whistle of the first shell coming in, we used to rush and take shelter in ice caves. Shelling did little damage as often shells flew wide of their target and got buried in thick, soft snow. We were used to shelling as it happened every day.

There was a post called 'Rockfall' under my command, which was at higher altitude. It was commanded by a Junior Commissioned Officer (JCO), Naib Subedar (Nb Sub) Tsering Angchuk from Shey village in Ladakh. This post was isolated and got totally cut off during winters. Communication was through radio, which also got through with great difficulty. One day I got a message from Nb Sub Tsering that the post was without FIRE. They literally had no source to light up fire as one of the enemy shells had destroyed the reserve stores. An oil lamp, which was always kept lighted up, also smoked out. No matchbox or lighter was left. They had been without fire for the last two days. I informed my Commanding Officer (CO), Colonel Dinesh Naikwade, a Kargil war hero, about it. He assured me that he will do something about it by sending a helicopter and will get the required stores dropped.

In the evening report, I informed my post commander through radio that we were on the job and would do the needful in a day or so. On the third day, an army helicopter did make an effort to fly close to the post but was fired upon by the Pakistanis. The pilot had to return back without dropping the stores. Now we were in a precarious situation. I spoke to my CO and suggested to send a patrol as we had highly qualified mountaineers amongst us. We also had the best of the equipment.

Three days had passed and another few days were required to open the foot route to Rockfall. On the fourth day, a go ahead was given to us. I came down to the Company HQs, which was a five hours walk from my post. A fully trained team was already waiting. The CO had also reached there. We

hugged and exchanged our notes. A quick briefing was conducted. A team of seven qualified Ladakh Scouts *Jawans* was ready, fully geared up and equipped with all emergency items. On the fifth day (without fire), we left at three in the morning as it was a safe time and chances of avalanches were minimal. We set up on the scree with long line of men all roped up. We had sleeping mats, two-man tents, ice axes, ropes and crampons and survival rations. Thus, we started our long arduous journey carrying match boxes, lighters and some veggies for our buddies who were without fire at an isolated cut off post.

The climb was steep from the moment we started the ascent towards Rockfall post. We were climbing almost vertically, gaining in height with each step we took. There was no route as the existing one was buried deep inside the snow and pink markers were not visible. Our steps were slow as the leading scout had to find the route in dark, and beat the snow for the rest of us to follow. I was walking at the fourth place. The moment the scout was tired, the last man used to take his place. The going was slow but it got progressively worse. At one point, I realised that we were climbing virtually on the shoulder of the glacier. Rocks of the size of small huts were covered with snow and were not visible to us. Many of us slipped into these ice holes and were pulled out by others. Our move was further delayed as we had orders to camp the moment we got day-lighted. We were scared of avalanches as the complete route was avalanche prone. The moment we used to put weight on the snow, the ice under us used to crack and make ominous noises. We literally crawled up on our hands and knees. This way the weight of the body got divided and chances of triggering an avalanche was reduced. This was the safest way to move as taught by our *Ladakhi* troops. Thankfully, we had no wind that day. We set up our camp at the base of a cliff and this place provided marginal protection against the wind. We took all safety precautions and I informed my CO. We all were exhausted and we immediately crawled into our sleeping bags, to rest in our two man tents.

The next night, we started at the same time. We had prior information from the CO that the post had been contacted and they had been informed that a patrol, with the company commander, is on its way. Traversing through snow, and gaining altitude, we took almost three hours to reach the base of Rockfall post. This was also the half link. The link where patrols from both the posts used to meet, exchanged stores and returned back. We halted and created space for all of us to rest. We had our breakfast and one of the soldiers melted ice for making tea. We could see the crest on which was the 'post without fire'. The climb would take another two hours as we had to fix ropes. Alternatively, to save time we looked for the previously fixed ropes which were buried deep inside the snow. We had no luck in locating the ropes. New ropes were fixed to climb the ice wall. The moment we finished climbing the ice wall, we saw post commander Tsering Angchuk standing with his four men. He had descended down to receive all of us. We hugged and rested, exchanged all the stores which we had brought up for the post. The '*Nunus*' all looked fine. He gave me a report that all the men on the Rockfall post were in good shape and morale was very high, some of them just wanted some leave.

I inquired from Nb Sub Tsering Angchuk as to how did he manage the post without FIRE and how they survived? He said that they ate raw Maggie noodles, tinned food, biscuits, almonds and nuts. They also ate ice / snow as they couldn't melt it to drink water. They mixed snow with milk powder to get some taste and ate snow balls. They avoided eating tinned meat and egg powder. Frankly, they did not miss much because they hardly felt hungry and preferred to satisfy themselves with all the other options. I made the post commander speak to my CO on radio set. The patrol was to return back to base, so without wasting much time, I just hugged all the five soldiers and with the battle cry of "*Ki Ki so so Lahar gyalo*"<sup>3</sup> I said goodbye to the troops. I told them to preserve the radio set batteries which I had got along with me. We moved back to Company HQs after giving an 'all ok' report to my CO over the radio set.

All appreciated the way the post commander kept his cool, managed his men and did not have any casualty in such a hostile place without 'Fire'. The descent to the HQs was fast and easy. We had the route marked and we made it back in one day. We were exhausted, tired and frozen but extremely satisfied.

Sadly, three of the six later perished in an avalanche on 13 Jan 2000 on way down for leave.

Self and Sub Angchuk still meet whenever I am in Leh.

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> In Bodhi language means 'younger brother' and in Ladakh Scouts the term used to address soldiers.

<sup>2</sup> AVM Arjun Subramaniam (Retd), "Surviving on milk powder and willpower, six Indian soldiers held a peak on Siachen for half a year", The Print, Apr 13, 2018. <https://theprint.in/opinion/surviving-on-milk-powder-and-willpower-six-indian-soldiers-held-a-peak-on-siachen-for-half-a-year/49282/>

<sup>3</sup> This is a war cry of the Ladakh Scouts which can be translated as "victory to the gods".

@Colonel Buphinder Singh Shahi retired after 27 years of service with 15 & 20 Jammu & Kashmir Rifles, Ladakh Scouts and the National Security Guard. He is presently a Senior General Manager with Cox & Kings, a job which enables him to continue his passion of travelling to forbidding areas.

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