A True Soldier

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Background

The origin of this narrative took shape in my mind some time ago while I was going through a 'Compendium of Gallantry Awards' that this grateful Nation has bestowed on its brave and heroic sons from 1947 onwards. While thumbing through the pages containing 'Citations of Awards for 1971 Operations', my eyes got riveted to a familiar face. Yes, it was the photograph of Lieutenant Colonel NN Rawat, VrC, Commanding Officer 166 Field Regiment supporting our Brigade (67 Infantry Brigade) in 1971 War in the Fazilka Sector. I was then posted as Ground Liaison Officer (GLO) with the Brigade Headquarters (HQ) along with an Air Force fighter pilot to direct air strikes. The action which resulted in Rawat getting his Vir Chakra took place on 14 December – almost immediately after my team was called back to the Brigade HQ from the scene of bitter fighting as the proposed air strike on the enemy did not materialise. It was late afternoon when our troops, due to intense pressure from the enemy counter attack, started falling back and that too in a disorganised manner. He, along with the Brigade Commander was standing on an embankment nearby witnessing the depressing situation developing. Someone reported to the Brigade Commander that the withdrawing troops had left behind an anti-tank RCL gun. The Commander flew into a rage and wondered aloud if anyone could do something about it. Rawat said, "at least an effort could be made to get it back." Then he collected about 10 men from the withdrawing battalion and a platoon of 3/11 Gorkha Rifles and personally led the charge on the enemy, heading his small party. This attack, coming from the flank was so fierce and sudden that the enemy which had a short while ago overrun the position, was thrown into confusion and fled from that area. The RCL gun was retrieved and brought back.

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A few months after the 1971 War, I left the Army and then lost all contact with Colonel Rawat. Someone mentioned a few years later that he had become a Brigadier and was posted at a Corps Headquarters. I chuckled silently. He hated a chair-borne job and despised all those who occupied such posts. Now, I wished I could meet him in his office to see how he was doing. Pressures of my new Service and the distance involved prevented our getting in touch.

After going through his Citation, I tried to check on his whereabouts. Surely he must be leading a quiet retired life somewhere, I had visualised. But it was not so. Rawat had died, I was told by a common friend, a few years ago. The news of his death filled me with grief. He was no relation of mine, I could not even call him a friend as we had never served in the same unit. Still I mourned his death in a quiet and silent manner befitting a war hero – the status he had come to acquire in my esteem, right from the early days of the war, following an incident which involved my closest brush with death.

The real baptism of a soldier, it is said, takes place under fire in the battlefield and Rawat presided over that ceremony, in my case. That winter afternoon, in the soggy cotton fields being sprayed with bullets and with shell splinters flying around I jettisoned lingering traces of fear from my being. By personal example, he also taught me about the ultimate bond that exists between soldiers transcending the rank structure, class composition and regimental spirit et al. The incident needs narration to as large number of persons as possible because it symbolises the strength of the officer-man relationship in the Indian Army and also provides a clue to the enigmatic phenomenon which makes a soldier lay down his life. For Rawat, though, the whole thing was nothing out of ordinary and he never mentioned the incident again. I am certain he would not even have spoken of it to anyone else. He was made that way.

Little over a year before the 1971 War started, I was posted as GLO 67 Independent Infantry Brigade HQ, of which his regiment was a part. His regiment was located at quite a distance from our HQ and therefore my interaction with him was not frequent – limited only to official gatherings and formal Officers Mess functions. He never discussed his personal life, nor ever asked me about mine, except on two occasions.

Once while emphasising that soldiers should be straight forward and truthful, he narrated how in 1962 War with China one officer of the Division HQ had reported to his seniors that he had seen Rawat being shot by the Chinese, just to prove falsely that the informant was also in the thick of action. The news was duly conveyed to his family causing avoidable distress all round (may be his dislike of staff officers was rooted in that incident). On another occasion, just before the war started, he confided in me that during their first meeting he had told his wife that being married to a soldier she should be prepared to hear about his death anytime. By and by, he rose in my esteem and I started admiring his personal and professional qualities. Towards the close of the year when mobilisation had taken place and outbreak of war seemed imminent, his unit had won confidence and appreciation of the Brigade Commander as well as the battalion commanders.

In Fazilka Sector, the war started with shelling by the Pakistanis around 1800 hrs on 3 December 1971. Rawat came to our Operations Room, established in Fazilka town, after midnight. I had just finished my round of duty but had stayed back to help the Brigade Major and my reliever in recording the messages that were pouring in and plotting them on the Situation Map. We were trying to sort out early confusion of the battle and it appeared that things were developing unfavourably for us. He gave us his assessment of the situation based on the information of his battery commanders and his personal visit to the critical area. As usual his mannerism and voice did not betray any cause for concern or despondency, though the rest of us were extremely worried about what was happening.

Pakistanis had successfully executed a well thought out plan and managed to breach our main defence line based on a ditch-cum-bund (DCB) system. Within first few hours the enemy had captured some portion of the DCB on both sides of an important bridge. This bridge could carry the load of tanks. Thus the Pakistanis had established a bridgehead which could be enlarged for launching major offensive by armour and infantry. We also knew that a major enemy armour concentration was located not far away from our defences. The situation was critical not only for us but for the entire sector. Our orders were very clear – to throw back the enemy from the bridgehead he had established, at all costs.

All through the night vigorous efforts were made by our forces, including unorthodox use of some weapons and equipment, to dislodge the enemy from the Bridge Area. The enemy, also realising the importance of their foothold, held on resolutely to the gain. By the morning of 4 December, having failed to push the enemy back, the next best alternative was adopted. Both ends of the breach in the defence line were connected by a new set of hurriedly dug defences in an area of few hundred metres diameter, thus attempting to foil any attempt by the enemy to enlarge his bridgehead. These new defences were located in the cotton fields, behind the DCB, with full grown crop providing an excellent camouflage to the troops. The plan was to consolidate this defensive position during day time and attempt clearing the ingress during the night of 4/5 December. The task was given to 4 JAT and the attack was launched during the night. Two companies pushed through the defences and, accompanied by artillery support, launched a fierce attack on the Bridge Area. The valiant Jats fought hard, even hand to hand, and almost captured their objective, but at a crucial moment lost their brave Company Commander who was leading them from the front. They suffered a number of casualties and fell back. The CO of the Jats sought permission to try another attack the next night.

On the afternoon of 5 December, I had just returned after directing a ground attack by our planes on the enemy forces in a different area and was having lunch with my colleague from the Air Force. It was a successful strike and both of us were happily discussing the achievement. As we were nearing the end of our meal, Colonel Rawat emerged through the door. He reciprocated our greetings, sat down on one of the chairs, declined our invitation to lunch, but agreed to join us for the sweet dish. The discussion naturally revolved around the current military situation in our area and spectacular advances of our forces in East Pakistan. We informed him of our air strike and expressed concern over the previous night's failure in the Bridge Area. He said something was being planned for the coming night and he had been asked to personally brief the CO of the Jats about the plan and attendant details. Then suddenly he asked me, "What are you doing after lunch?" "Nothing much", I replied. "There are no air strikes planned and no urgent request is expected. In any case after sometime the light would also start fading. I am practically free for the day".

"Then why don't you come with me. I would have some company and you can also see the ground situation yourself. It will help you in directing air strikes in that area whenever required". I readily agreed. The temptation to be in the hottest sector of the Brigade got the better of me.

Soon we were headed towards the Jats battalion, few kilometres from our location. Rawat was on the wheel, without any personal weapon, as usual. I was next to him carrying my Sten Gun. In the rear sat his wireless operator and driver. Two things appeared odd to me, there was no other vehicle carrying troops for his protection. Such protection is necessary while visiting forward areas and more so in that sector as there were rumours of some enemy guerrillas having been air dropped behind our front line. Also, it appeared strange that instead of sending Operational Orders through a messenger, these were being carried by the CO of the Artillery regiment. However, I did not probe him for answers. We drove mostly in silence and encountering few shells bursting around our jeep, but none near enough to cause damage. The sound of small arms fire became almost continuous and clear as we approached the front line.

About five hundred metres behind the DCB was a big drain (Sabuna), which had at that time very little water in it, almost mud filled bottom. There was a bridge over the drain, which was considerably higher than the road surface on both ends. To reach our destination, we had to cross this bridge on the drain, then turn right and drive over a dusty track for about six hundred metres. Because of the height of the bridge, any vehicle over it could be seen and accurately fired upon by the enemy. Similarly, driving on the kacha track would kick-up a cloud of dust behind the vehicle thus betraying its position, making it almost a sure target to get shot by the enemy force. Therefore, we left our vehicle little short of the drain bridge, crossed over it in a crouched position and got on to the track on the right, whereafter, thanks to cotton fields, we could walk without being seen clearly from the Pakistani occupied area of the bund. We were now in the active part of the front. The sounds were mixed, small arms fire of both sides, whine of some bullets passing close by and intermittent whistle of shells going overhead. Suddenly a loud whistle sound, almost shrieking, came from very near. Instinctively I hit the dust barely seeing Rawat and his operator doing the same. Almost simultaneously there was a

deafening blast very near. The earth under us shook and we were sprayed with mud. An enemy shell had just landed about 20 metres away from us in the drain. We were lucky. But for the drain, all of us would have been blown up by the projectile. I got up, shaken by a close shave, shook as much dust and mud off as possible and resumed journey with the other two, reaching the trench of the Jats CO, without another close encounter.

We found the CO sitting in his trench and munching a chocolate. He shared it with both of us and explained to Rawat what had happened during the attack previous night. Both of them discussed in detail the proposed attack during the coming night. While the two colonels were engrossed in their discussions, I had a good look around. This trench was almost at the bottom of the semi-circle defensive position that had been thrown around the enemy bridgehead, connecting two points on the bund with our forces. Behind us was the drain and right in front I could see, not the bridge but its location indicated by a depression in the skyline of the bund which was clearly visible from our position. The trenches of our troops were concealed reasonably by cotton plants, but still movement was made by use of communication trenches or crawling behind the slightly raised edges of the fields. The firing from both sides was moderate, becoming intense only when a target was sighted by either side, which meant a careless or over confident soldier throwing caution to the winds and exposing himself to the enemy observation.

Sometime later we started the return journey, half crouching or walking on the edge of the track without disturbing the cotton plants. Half way through we heard a faint moan coming from the right which froze us. Carefully entering the field, we saw a soldier in supine position moaning with pain irregularly. On closer examination he turned out to be a Havildar of the Jats. Both his knees were bandaged and he appeared to be in agony and too weak to even talk. We sat down around him, Rawat making efforts to hear what he was trying to say in a whisper. The Havildar was part of the attacking force previous night and they had fought through the first few trenches and bunkers of the enemy. Suddenly he was hit by a burst of machine gun in both his knees and fell down. Two of his companions had quickly dragged him to the nearby field and put the field-dressing on his knees slowing down the bleeding. He had asked the jawans to join back the attack,

leave him there and he would try to crawl back to safety. That was the last he saw of his comrades. After being left alone he tried to slowly crawl back to the rear but soon fainted due to loss of blood and pain. Through the rest of the night and the day time he had been trying to reach back to his unit by crawling whenever he regained consciousness. By now he was almost dead, as loss of blood, excruciating pain, lack of food and water for almost sixteen hours, had all taken their toll.

Rawat spoke gently to him and assured that we will see him out of trouble. He was given some water to drink, after which he appeared to be in a slightly better shape. One of us held him from the shoulder and the other from the thighs, lifted him from the ground to bring him out of the field on to the track. Legs below his shattered knees kept dangling making this movement even more painful. His body became stiff and gurgling spasms indicated the agony it caused him. With difficulty we brought him on to the edge of the track, put him on the ground and gave him some more water to drink. We still had three to four hundred metres more to go before the vehicle could be used and it was not possible to carry the seriously wounded soldier, who was just about alive. Some other method had to be adopted to take him to safety.

After some thought, Rawat spoke to me, "My wireless operator is the sturdiest amongst us. You take his set and the two of us will try carrying him on the back". I adjusted the set on my shoulders and Rawat gently turned the Havildar on his belly and helped him piggy ride on the back of his operator, a well-built Sikh soldier. While the operator moved gingerly, Rawat supported carefully the bottom of the wounded man, who still appeared in great pain. Hardly had the party gone twenty paces ahead, when his body started serious convulsions due to unbearable pain, his face distorted and with unusual strength he pushed forward the operator and fell back. We watched him apprehensively lying almost still on the ground. His eyes had rolled up, froth appeared on one corner of his mouth and he was gasping for breath. I thought he was just about to die. Slowly the breathing became more regular and with effort he said, almost inaudibly, "Saab, you very kindly tried your best but I can't be carried, the pain is unbearable. Please do me a favour and shoot me". I froze, avoiding even contemplation of what he had said. And yet there was no way to help him. Could we just go back and inform the Jats about their NCO. They would

be happy to take care of him. But then he needed expert medical help at the earliest which would not be available in the unit. For that he had to be evacuated. But how to carry him? It was a dilemma. I looked at Rawat, he was deep in thought and looking intently at the wounded man. Then he quietly said, "There is no alternative but to put him in the jeep" and turning towards the operator asked him to get the vehicle.

To me this appeared almost suicidal. The jeep would be seen crossing bridge over the drain and continuously give its location by the cloud of dust which it would kick up while approaching us on the track. The resultant fire brought down on us by the enemy would almost certainly kill all of us including the man he was trying to save. Doubtfully I looked at Rawat, he probably read my thoughts and said something which I will never forget. He said, *"I expect this soldier to die for me and hence I should be prepared to risk my life to save him. We will either take him to the hospital or all of us will die here".*

I heard him silently and understood the essence of what he had conveyed. A strange sense of calmness was enveloping my entire being driving out even the last traces of fear and instinct of survival so basic in all living beings. We waited for the jeep which appeared on the scene after a few minutes, turning from the metalled road on to the track. The driver drove very fast and took a sharp about turn near us, kicking up a lot of dust on the entire trail in an effort to conceal the actual location of the vehicle. By now the enemy fire had picked up indicating their awareness of our presence in that area. The whining of bullets very close suggested their firing was not wide off the mark. Quickly we put the injured man in the jeep and drove off fast on the bumpy track, on to the road and over the bridge. The intensity of enemy fire was continuously increasing. I thought I heard sounds of bullets hitting metal parts and ripping through the tarpaulin. When the jeep was beyond danger zone, I looked around, and found all four of us without an injury. The Havildar had again lost consciousness.

We drove straight to the Field Hospital near the Brigade HQ, where the casualty was quickly taken to the Operation Theatre which had been informed of the patient's condition on wireless enroute. Rawat spoke to the officer in charge briefly and then dropped me near my bunker before driving off to his own location.

I controlled my curiosity to count the number of bullets that had hit the jeep. It really did not seem to matter. Rawat never spoke of the incident again. Knowing him I am certain nobody around him ever came to know of it.

I checked up after the war. The Havildar survived after undergoing amputation of one leg at the knee. The last I heard of him, he was recuperating in a Command Hospital.

Narender Rawat is no more. He was my ideal as a soldier and provided me a good measure of inspiration and guidance. The incident of 14 December 1971, for which he got a Vir Chakra, and the one I have narrated were both not out of the ordinary for him. What mattered was a soldier rising to the occasion. On a different plane, he undertook extremely hazardous tasks which were beyond the call of his duty. For one he got decorated with a gallantry award. The other gave him the satisfaction of saving the life of a comrade-in-arms. What he did on the cotton fields of Fazilka on the 5th of December 1971, would not find a place in a citation. Such deeds, in fact, cannot be measured by any yardstick, even that of gallantry. These belong to the realm of traditions. Rawat added yet another chapter to the glorious traditions of the Indian Army.

"No campaign can be understood, and no valid conclusions drawn from it, unless its logistic problems are studied as thoroughly as the course of operations"

M Howard,
The Forgotten Dimensions of Strategy, Vol. 57, No. 5, Summer 1979, p. 976 (Taken from the book *Gallipoli,* Edited by Ashley Ekins, p. 445)