

Mission Overseas: Daring Operations by the Indian Military, by Sushant Singh, New Delhi: Juggernaut, 2017, pp 193, Rs 299

*Ghanshyam Katoch**

Military history has four main genres. The first is the ‘official’ military history, or a military historian’s narrative. It is a narration of facts given as accurately as possible, written in an academic manner with maps and sketches. These are difficult to follow by non-military readers and, for that reason, are almost never read by them. The second category are reminiscences (autobiographies or biographies) of those who took part in wars—mostly in important and commanding positions. They can be interesting when written by a talented writer; however, tend to give a one-sided picture of events. The third genre is military history written in a racy manner, with first person accounts and human-interest stories. These make the books interesting to read. They are written more often by military historians who are journalists and are, therefore, attuned to narrate history in flowing prose and a gripping-story manner. Lastly, we come to the fiction-novel history genre, where a fictional story is meshed in with the history and descriptions of campaigns and battles.

Sushant Singh’s book, *Mission Overseas: Daring Operations by the Indian Military*, falls in the third category. The author, a journalist who was formerly in the army, has picked out three operations conducted by the Indian Army that could be termed as ‘Out of Area’ operations. The author covers three different operations, of which two were successful and one was not. This is laudable, since any analysis of failure that would

* Lt. Gen. Ghanshyam Singh Katoch (Retd.), PVSM, AVSM, VSM is a veteran Infantry Officer and an Associate Member of the IDSA.



bring out useful lessons is generally avoided. With his soldier/journalist/scholar credentials, Singh is ideally suited to write this book. His aim, as he states, is to re-live India's overseas operations, because, as India becomes a great power, the Indian military may have to operate overseas again and must therefore be prepared for it.

The first narration is that of 'Operation Cactus'. This was an air-landed operation carried out by a Parachute Battalion in the Maldives in November 1988. The Indian troops intervened to thwart an attempted coup against the incumbent President Maumoon Abdul Gayoom who had appealed to a number of countries for help, including India. While the event took place 30 years ago, the actors involved and equipment used would not be alien to the reader today. This is because we still use the IL-76 and AN-32 aircraft which were used in the operation, even as modernisation has taken place via the introduction of the C-17 and C-130 aircraft. The Navy still has the Godavari class guided missile frigates which figured in the operation. In the 1980s, increasing US and Chinese presence in the Indian Ocean region had forced India to consider a doctrine which stated that interference by any extra-regional power in the perceived Indian sphere of influence was harmful to its national security, and must be countered. The basis of our interventions in Sri Lanka and the Maldives lay in this doctrine.

'Operation Cactus' was undoubtedly an Indian success. It was launched to crush a coup by mercenaries of a Tamil group, the Peoples Liberation Organisation of Tamil Eelam (PLOTE). The success was crafted through quick decision-making and close coordination between the external affairs and defence establishments. This was possible because of the clear articulation of priorities by the Prime Minister. This enabled all agencies to work in unison to plan and launch a hazardous operation, with practically no concrete information about the topography of the target area. Also unknown was the strength of the PLOTE adversary (the attempt to overthrow the government of Maldives had been planned, funded, and launched by disgruntled Maldivian expatriates). The speed of decision-making and reaction can be gauged from the fact that the first report of shots being fired in Male, the Maldivian capital, was received by the Ministry of External affairs (MEA) at 6 am on 3 November 1988, and the aircraft with the paratroopers on board took off 11 hours later at 5 pm. The force was on the ground 2,700 km away within a mere 16 hours of the call for help. Though the adversary was comparatively weak, their numbers were equivalent to the initial troops which landed there.

Even when the landing took place, there was still an element of doubt whether Hulhule airfield, where they landed, was in friendly hands.

The author walks the reader through the events, with personal narratives by the force commander Brigadier Farooq 'Bull' Balsara, his staff officer Major Vinod Bhatia, and a few others. The sterling role played by A.K. Banerjee, the Indian Ambassador at Male, who providentially was in India because of President Gayoom's proposed visit to New Delhi, has been well highlighted. He was asked to fly in with the paratroopers and could brief and guide them in a situation where the task force only had tourist maps to rely on.

The Indian troops broke up the coup attempt overnight. A few of the top PLOTE mercenaries escaped by hijacking a merchant ship from the harbour; they had on board a number of important hostages. The mercenaries were apprehended a day later by the Indian naval ship INS Godavari after it had been tracked down by an Indian naval maritime reconnaissance aircraft. In hindsight, one can say that there were many factors which helped the operation; the prime factors being the clear political mandate, good inter-service coordination, motivated troops, and daring leadership.

The second narration is about the debacle at Jaffna University in Sri Lanka where under prepared troops were hastily launched on a poorly planned raid. This was undertaken immediately on switching from peacekeeping operations to offensive operations by the Indian Peacekeeping Force (IPKF). The raid was planned for midnight 11/12 October 1987. The author writes that the task itself was unclear and appeared to be a show of force with an alternate task to raid the LTTE HQ in Jaffna University. The plan was for a company of 10 PARA (Commando) led by Major Sheonan Singh to be heli-landed to secure a Landing Ground (LG) on a football field in the University campus. They would be followed by a company of 13 SIKH LI (Light Infantry) who would take over the LG, and hold it till the rest of the SIKH LI troops landed. The first wave of 40 men of 10 PARA landed without opposition in total darkness. By the time the second pair of Mi-8 helicopters came, LTTE fire greeted them. The paracommandos, who too were under heavy fire, could not mark the LG. The pilots could not make out the LG amidst the multiple tracers criss-crossing the sky, aborted and returned to Palali. The first pair (Wing Commander Sapre and Squadron Leader Vinay Raj)—who were now familiar with the LG—picked up 40 more commandos and, braving ground fire which was hitting the helicopters,

landed them. When they went back they came to know that the second pair had not landed. However, since Sapre had given his word to Sheonan to get more of his men, he and Vinay Raj made one more trip along with the other two helicopters. By now the helicopters had suffered multiple damage and RPGs and machinegun fire was being encountered. Thereafter, any other attempts to heli-land were ruled out. A total of 103 para commandos and 30 SIKH LI men had been landed.

On the ground, the men of 10 PARA had suffered some casualties; but they made their way into the university buildings around the football field. They asked the SIKH LI under Major Birendra Singh to get into the cover of the buildings. However, the SIKH LI did not move out as they were expecting more of the battalion to be landing soon, including their Commanding Officer (CO). They did not know that no one else was coming. Their radio set was shot to pieces. The Paras themselves made a fruitless search for the LTTE leadership and then set up a defensive perimeter to wait for the relieving column. By this time, it was daylight and Birendra Singh and his men, who were out of ammunition, had been cut to pieces in the open football field.

On 13 October, the relieving column led by the CO 10 PARA, Colonel Dalbir Singh, which had been greatly hampered by improvised explosive devices (IED) in their move to the university, hit upon the stratagem of driving three T-72 tanks over a railway line coming to Jaffna. The column managed to link up with the paratroopers who came out with only six fatal casualties. Unfortunately, 13 SIKH LI lost 29 men out of the 30 who had landed on that bullet swept LG, including the company commander Major Birendra Singh. One man was taken prisoner by the LTTE.

The final narration is of 'Operation Khukri'. This operation was a difficult operation carried out under the UN flag in Sierra Leone. It was conducted on 15 July 2000 to rescue 223 troops of a Gurkha battalion who had been besieged by superior rebel forces for 75 days. The task was carried out by commandos sent from India, on a mission planned and conducted by the Indian Force Commander of the United Nations Mission in Sierra Leone (UNAMSIL), Major General V.K. Jetley. Operations such as these are undertaken without clear instructions as well as rules of engagement. Failure can lead to a great diplomatic loss of face besides the human loss. They require diplomacy, tact in planning, and a strong face in execution. The account reveals the dangerous and difficult situations that our troops deployed in UN missions have to

deal with. Such missions are often seen by the rest of the country—except those in the know—as pleasure trips. The narration brings out the prestige our country earns after the successful conduct of precarious missions under the UN mandate.

Here again, the author weaves in first person accounts by some actors, notably the company commander of the 2 PARA Special Forces Battalion, Major Ajoy Mukerjee, into the narration. The political and diplomatic confabulations which are part and parcel of such operations are brought out in great detail. The operation was a success, and established the professional competence of the Indian Army and Indian Air Force in an international setting.

In all three narratives, Singh writes without any attempt to paint heroic pictures or melodrama. He very insightfully conveys and explains the logistic challenges and organisational complexities of such operations. Reading the book reinforces the thought that the Indian establishment needs to bring out the official histories of these events—these have still not been written. In particular, the reluctance to study the Sri Lanka experience needs to be overcome, and an official history of Op Pawan needs to be made public so that the lessons from our only major overseas Tri-Service operation can be studied. Only then can we be confident of emerging victors in similar situations in the future.

The book is a very readable compilation of India's overseas operations. It is recommended for those interested in this facet of Indian military history which is so often overlooked. It is especially recommended for the non-military reader. One hopes that this book will motivate others into writing detailed histories separately for other individual operations in the same genre.

In the class of military history of this genre, the trilogy by the Irish journalist and author, Cornelius Ryan, clearly stand out. His three books—*The Longest Day*, *A Bridge Too Far*, and *The Last Battle*—are classics, and eminently readable military histories because of the extensive inter-weaving of first person accounts by protagonists from both sides. One looks forward to the emergence of that class of writing on Indian military history heralded by *Mission Overseas*.

