

Battle for supremacy

At 20,000 feet plus, Siachen Glacier — where the rarest commodity is oxygen — is the highest battleground in the world. The Indian soldier is ready to sacrifice his life for the protection of this patch of earth, writes Major-Gen G. G. Dwivedi (retd)

THE area is absolutely white, with visibility almost zero. In the literal sense, the right hand does not know what the left is up to. Thick snowflakes, like bird feathers, have been falling non-stop for the last couple of days. The thin, skinny ridge, Salto, with a thick coating of fresh snow, looks, indeed, gorgeous. At 20,000 feet plus, Siachen Glacier is closest to heaven.

The temperature hovers around minus 40 degree Celsius (pronounced as the coldest place outside the polar region). Human body efficiency drops down drastically, and the rarest commodity is oxygen. Visiting dignitaries, especially senior defence officers from foreign countries, are awestruck as they humbly share the fact that the highest mountain peaks in their countries are dwarfed by the height of this battleground. How soldiers can deliver under such conditions, without incentives like a periodic "rest and recreation" holiday, intrigues them.



Each soldier in the land of Siachen Glacier is an unsung hero Photo: Manoj Mahajan

Amidst the above setting, soldiers of India and Pakistan are continuously at a tug of war, to hang on to the Ridge Line, under all odds. At one particular stretch, the opponents are separated by barely half the length of a soccer field. My team at this spot has an advantage of around 150 height differential. This gives us a formidable edge. The piece of earth here, laden with heavy layers of snow, is most valuable to both sides. They will not part with even an inch in lieu of the world's gold, and can make extreme sacrifice, without qualms, to defend or gain just a few feet.

The severity of the inclement weather personifies this land and offers ideal setting for the "cat and mouse" game. Both sides make the best of such a situation to stock up, as also undertake surreptitious attempts for gaining the upper hand. This results in a sporadic, violent exchange of fire. Adversaries are locked in a near bear hug due to the close geographic proximity. Understandably, only small arms can be effectively employed. The lethal effect of the short engagements is known only when there is a bit of commotion, or

radio intercepts, signifying some catastrophic situation. The game has its own set of unwritten rules. If either side has a casualty, evacuation is permitted. The two observe a brief truce, which may last just a few minutes, when the fingers are off the triggers of their weapons.

Intermittently, the weather does clear out. On such a bright day, activities are dead still, as any movement, or the slightest sound is sure draw to a volley of fire. Everyone waits for darkness to set in so that routine activity can be resumed. Consequently, the body bio clock has been fine-tuned; breakfast in the evening, lunch at midnight and dinner at the crack of dawn.

During my frequent visits to this post, I share an ice shelter with a dozen other men. As Commanding Officer, the only luxury I enjoy is my three feet of space on the long skid board, a makeshift sleeping platform. However, I have to accept my share of bumping, jostling and, of course, community snoring.

Interestingly, besides humans, there are three other co-habitants for company, who have also dug in their feet here. These are dogs, crows and rats. The former are the most faithful and remain confined to the post, but are always alert. Canines dutifully accompany the link patrols and are a great asset in direction keeping and warning against crevices. Crows and rats enjoy absolute freedom of action. These creatures have an amazing sixth sense. They can anticipate fire duels and head for safe spots promptly. Both cross over, at will, the imaginary Actual Ground Position Line (AGPL), separating the two belligerent nations to savour the cuisine of the either side. Their loyalties are dubious. The crow is the size of an owl, and the rat is as big as a rabbit. It is evident that both sides are logistically well sustained. Who says you can't have bread buttered on both sides?

Over a two-month cycle, when an individual goes for a short break, he is lighter by a few kgs due to the effect of the acute high altitude. With flowing beards (as shaving is impossible) and unwashed bodies, everybody looks lean, mean and ferocious. Each man here is an unsung hero. He is ready to come back to complete another 60 days' cycle, purely for the love of his buddies and nostalgia for the land of Siachen Glacier.

One often wonders why does a soldier always stands apart. Well, it is because of the unparalleled solemn commitment. He will never ever let go of this patch of earth, the so-called "No Man's Land," and for its protection, he is ready to sacrifice his life.