

Home / Opinion / Reminiscences of Siachen: When ice was on fire

Reminiscences of Siachen: When ice was on fire

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With Chinese forays into the Depsang Plateau and the construction of roads into Shaksgam Valley, barely 50 km from Siachen, the two-front threat is a stark reality in the Ladakh region. In this context, the world's toughest battlefield still remains utmost relevant strategically



Siachen often came under scrutiny for its strategic importance and high cost of maintenance. PTI file photo

It was in April 1984 when the Indian Army undertook an unthinkable mission, 'Operation Meghdoot'. It entailed securing the Siachen Glacier, which lies between the strategically important Salto Ridge subrange of Karakoram to the west and the main Karakoram to the east. It literally drove a wedge between Baltistan, Pakistan-Occupied Kashmir (POK), and Shaksgam Valley (ceded by Pakistan to China in 1963). In a virtual photo finish, the Pakistani Army was beaten narrowly.

While in Balti language, Siachen means 'land of roses', in actuality, it is the coldest place outside the polar region, referred to as the Third Pole. Now it has the distinction of being the highest battlefield in the world, dotted with army posts at heights varying between 18,000 and 21,000 feet, with the median temperature hovering around a negative 40 degrees Celsius. Never in history have humans fought in such an extreme environment.

Some three decades back when I moved in to take over the command of a battalion that was due for deployment in Siachen, I was looking forward to be back on the home turf, being a trained mountain trooper and having done two tenures in the Ladakh region earlier.

During the winter, the only way one can access Ladakh is by air. It was early February 1991 when I landed at Leh from the Air Force IL-76 transport aircraft. The bone-chilling air and thick snow-covered peaks appeared to be a familiar sight. The sudden feeling of breathlessness was a terse reminder: "Never try to be Gama in the land of Lama."

Being the first battalion from the JAT Regiment to take field on the Northern Glacier, there were apprehensions about the troops from the plains to adapt to extreme high-altitude conditions. However, rigorous two-month pre-induction training alongside meticulous preparations ensured a flying start, with the crucial induction phase going through smoothly. Ironically, the tenure commenced on a calamitous note, with my prefabricated shelter going up in flames due to a freak accident. The division commander went on to assure us that it was a good omen. From here on, there was no looking back.

Over a period of time, a kind of pattern emerged. During the days when weather was fair, the enemy resorted to heavy artillery fire to effectively interfere with their own supply chains as all our posts were air-maintained. From the dropping zones or the helipads, stores were ferried by manpack. Consequently, all the movement had to be at night, which meant a change in the body clock. Call it providence, Sundays turned out to be the most challenging, marked by skirmishes, fire accidents, and mishaps. Hence, "forewarned is forearmed" became the mantra-heuristic approach to handling crisis situations.

As Pakistani posts and gun areas were closer to the roadheads, logistics support, especially ammunition, was never a problem for them. On the other hand, in our case, every round had to be airlifted. The enemy guns at Gyari were the most active, and it was only when our own Bofor

Guns deployed in depth areas resorted to counter-bombardment that these went silent. Coincidentally, in April 2012, an avalanche struck Gyari, and 140 people got buried, proving to be the worst disaster for the Pakistan Army.

During the bad weather, marked by intense snow storms that lasted for days, the enemy frequently made stealth attempts to grab our positions, resulting in violent exchanges of fire at close quarters. At one location, the opposing posts were literally at a handshake distance. This was the most contested real estate, with a history of many bloody engagements. There existed an unwritten code—a brief pause was observed when fingers were off the trigger to allow the evacuation of casualties.

VIPs made snap visits, landing on the forward helipads for a few minutes when the weather was conducive. Then Defence Minister Sharad Pawar visited twice, the second time along with a group of ‘Members of Parliament’ (MPs). Many went hysterical about getting the first-hand feel of extremely hostile conditions. On seeing the tail signs of craters due to heavy artillery shelling, someone remarked, “It appears that ice is on fire.” As a token of appreciation, Siachen’s monthly allowance was doubled to Rs 900. Some foreign dignitaries who were briefed at the base camp wondered how the Indian soldiers did such arduous tenures without the ‘rest and recreation’ holidays that are so prevalent in the Western Armies.

Interestingly, besides the soldiers, there were three other inhabitants. A couple of posts had local dogs who would accompany the link patrols. Rats had a marked presence, their size vindicating the good quality of rations. Crows too were around, flying at will across the ‘Actual Ground Position Line’ (AGPL) to taste the Pakistani delicacies.

There were many extra-ordinary feats. Our infantry mortars often took on enemy artillery, especially when some of our guns were under replacement. The aviation pilots routinely took extraordinary risks to pick up casualties in the face of hostile fire. Due to the delayed relief, the battalion did four extra weeks and suffered just two fatal casualties during its nearly seven-month tenure, thus setting a record and demolishing the myth of high casualties in Siachen.

A team of psychologists had come to evaluate the impact of the extreme high altitude. The study had to be called off as its members could not sustain beyond three days of suffering from hypoxia and hallucinations. Even a medical study to gauge the effect of prolonged deployment in

an extreme high-altitude environment was inconclusive, as the findings were weird and inconsistent.

Over the years, the ground situation has changed significantly. Communication and data connectivity have improved immensely, enabling real-time situational awareness. With the internet and mobile facilities, the troops are connected with their families. During our time, due to adverse weather conditions, the mail could not be delivered to the forward posts. Hence, quite often, the letters were read over the telephone from the base camp. The news of my father's demise reached me after almost 24 hours.

The logistics have now vastly improved with the introduction of All Terrain Vehicles (ATVs), versatile helicopter fleets, including Chinooks and C130/C17 heavy lift transport aircraft. With the establishment of telemetry nodes, the medical facilities at the forward posts have been augmented, which is indeed critical given the constraints of evacuation due to unpredictable weather conditions.

In 2003, with the signing of the ceasefire agreement, the guns fell silent on the Siachen; 110 km (AGPL) went quiet. This notwithstanding, Siachen still remains the toughest battlefield where human endurance is tested to the extreme; each breath is accounted for. It takes a heavy toll on an individual, both physically and mentally, due to loss of appetite, insomnia, and a high risk of pulmonary oedema. Soldiering in Siachen stands as testimony of camaraderie, joint manship, and the spirit of 'do and die'; to defend every inch of this piece of barren land.

Siachen often came under scrutiny for its strategic importance and high cost of maintenance. There were even talks of demilitarisation, which were aborted as Pakistan refused to accept the status of AGPL. Today, given Chinese forays into the Depsang Plateau and the construction of roads into Shaksgam Valley, barely 50 km from Siachen, the two-front threat is a stark reality in the Ladakh region. Hence, strategic foresight in undertaking 'Operation Meghdoot' stands well vindicated, as do the supreme sacrifices made by over a thousand of our brave hearts.

The writer is a Bangladesh war veteran and has commanded a battalion in Siachen, a brigade in the Kashmir Valley, and a division in the North East. The views expressed in the above piece are personal and solely those of the author. They do not necessarily reflect Firstpost's views.