



MEMOIRS OF A BATTERY OFFICER

Lt Cdr Sumeet Sinha

On a cold damp day during a memorable Mumbai monsoon, I reported to INS Trata, a bag slung across my shoulder, one hand holding up a packed briefcase, the other clutching an appointment letter that I had received a few days back and which quixotically contained only a cryptic instruction - "Report to MMCB for duties". As much I admired it for its curt and crisp tone, I must confess, I felt myself being overtaken by a feeling of 'trepidation' - maybe a little 'alarm' - at this rather unexpected development. Considering that, by then, I was a veteran of almost seven years of service and had completed a Gunnery Officer's tenure onboard the

mighty INS Nirbhik, this was certainly a little surprising, if not dismaying. I loved being on a ship and just couldn't somehow get myself to abandon the notion that the Navy was only about the sea and crafts that floated over or under - and there wasn't any place for some land rover truck with missiles on it. I was 'wrong' terribly and grievously, but back then, in all my naivete, wasn't willing to renounce my righteousness. I had to convince myself that being an adventurous navy man, I must be willing to go with the flow. So there I was, ready for my 'baptism' as a 'Battery Officer'.

Deja-vu

I was first issued with a camouflage uniform, jungle boots and zap cap and I felt deep nostalgia sweep over me. This was like revisiting my NDA days, when much to my chagrin those wicked army instructors made us Naval cadets to forcibly change into army fatigues and partake in open air gymnastics. I had started wondering then whether I had applied for a change of service to Army. A similar thought crossed my mind, nearly fourteen years later as I changed into battle fatigues again.

Sounding the Bugle - Call to Arms

All lingering doubts were clarified with the mobilization of units for Operation Parakaram in Dec 2001. One fine November morning I found a battery of MMCBs lined up for duty. Accompanying them were about forty support vehicles. It seemed like preparations for some serious action was underway. Before I knew, the entire convoy had set off for the longest deployment ever undertaken by this unit. I peered out of my window and saw MMCB vehicles rolling on the roads in proper assigned sequence and with precise alignment. Man! Were they keeping proper station? I had seen this sort of thing at sea, but on the road - it was something else. I sure was impressed. These majestic vehicles despite being in their late teens were capable of giving ships a run for their place under the sun. Though it is true that long deployments, by themselves, are not a new phenomenon in our Navy, the reason why MMCB deployments must be highlighted is due to the very nature of the deployment and the manner in which vehicles are required to move for this particular operation - in tandem and for extended periods of time.

'Veer Tum Badhe Chalo'

This was a time when even the Indian Army was also getting mobilized for operations. There were times when our convoy conjoined with the army convoys and the line of vehicles got extended to

hundred plus! The public looked upon us with admiration and dare I say - an unmistakable feeling of 'awe'. It felt great to be cheered along by so many. The local 'dhabas' offered us free meals at most of the places en-route and we had great difficulty in convincing these restaurant owners to take money from us. I felt like having been cast in an Indian war movie - a la "Border" where the locals doted and fussed over the brave army men, who fought hard and died for the country. - Ah! That's one thing I sure didn't fancy myself doing, though I was quite okay with 'fighting hard'.

As the convoys moved, we felt like heroes in real life. The journey continued for three days and the conditions were nowhere akin to ship life. It was for the first time that I found myself thanking my 'heartless' army Instructors at NDA. Had it not been for the rigorous training that was imparted, it would have been quite another story.

Living on a Wing and a 'Prayer'

On reaching the deployment site, the men immediately got on with the job of tent pitching. In no time a number of twenty-men tents seemed to materialize from nowhere. It was done in quick time and with such clinical precision that it left me literally gaping. The campsite was now set up and the unit was fully ready for its operational role. I reflected upon my surroundings and realised everything around seemed to be so different from what I had experienced at sea. Right from sleeping in the tents to answering nature's call in the open with wild boars roaming in the vicinity, life had suddenly taken a 180-degree turn from that choppy sea life. It was dangerous, but was exciting. Like nomads we kept moving from one place to another, always concealed; always hidden; always out of sight but always in the hunt. We never lost track of our objective and never took our eyes off our mission - mission was our goal and nothing else mattered.

The Good Doctor

The lack of proper hygiene and clean drinking



water in the remote areas kept the unit's doctor busy. The doctor promptly came to the rescue of "stomach upset" cases by prescribing tablets as per the gravity or "grades" of the stomach problem. On being questioned about the "grades", he promptly defined Grade 2/5 Stomach upset as, "A condition where a victim goes to toilet and is in action for two minutes every five minutes. The remaining three minutes are of course spent on attempting various things but achieving nothing!! Nevertheless, the ships company of MMCB was in high spirits and braved everything with great zeal and enthusiasm.

Business with a Doze of Pleasure

In a few months time we had got so accustomed to this routine that we could beat anyone in that terrain as far as survival techniques were concerned. In the course of the deployment, various general ship activities were undertaken to build up morale of the ship's company and to induce cohesiveness at the working level. Games like volleyball and tug of war were organised at the site, to help relieve the monotony of daily routine. Competition like dramatics not only helped to bring out hidden talent amongst the men but also enthralled the audience especially during the New Year's Eve celebrations. On a more intellectual plane, professional quiz competitions were regularly organised. Gujarat being the 'Land of temples', our sailors also took the opportunity of the long deployment for pilgrimage to Dwarka and Koteswar where they were probably able to wash the sins that they had accumulated in

Mumbai.

The Last Standing Warrior - the Final Fighting Post

The unit completed almost an year of deployment in 2002. Our frontline ships returned home but the unsung heroes of this MMCB deployment continued to be deployed braving the hostile weather and terrain of the Kutch region of Gujarat for an entire year, standing firm in the line of their duty. This successful deployment of one-year by eighteen-year-old MMCBs, without any major machinery breakdown, spoke volumes of our maintenance system and support facilities. At the end, I felt obliged to do a 'hats off' to our Engine Room and Electrical team who refused to give up, and kept the engines turning and sensors ticking, on sheer will power.

In Conclusion

I had the privilege of being part of this MMCB deployment for four months from Dec 01 to Mar 02. A lot has been written and spoken about ships in the Navy, but this article is a small effort to pay tribute to this landlubber unit of the Indian Navy. Operation Parakaram saw the peak of the deployment in terms of time and deployment locations. Since their inception in to the Indian Navy, MMCBs have always been ready, and moved to locations on the call of duty with in a record time. We stay on land; dress like the army, move like the nomads, operate like foxes, but our hearts and souls are with the Navy.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Lieutenant Commander Sumeet Sinha is an alumnus of National Defence Academy Khadakwasla. He is a gunnery specialist. He is presently appointed at INS Trata (MMCB). His previous specialist appointments include Gunnery Officer onboard INS Nirbhik and SAM Control Officer onboard INS Ranjit. The officer was Training Coordinator and Instructor at INS Dronacharya prior to his present appointment. The author was battery officer in the unit during Operation Parakaram.

