



The Hero of the Siachen

*Interview with Captain Bana Singh
February 23, 2007*

Claude: Tell us where are you born, when did you join the Army?

BS: I am born in 1949 in Kadyal district of Jammu province. My father was a farmer though many of my uncles had joined the Army. My father used to tell me that Army life is a very prestigious one. He also wanted me to join the Army because a farmer's life is very harsh. Personally I always wanted to do something for my country.

Q: Before being posted on Siachen glacier, did you practice mountain climbing?

BS: I was trained with my battalion at the High Altitude Warfare School in Gulmarg. Though the altitude is not as high as in the Siachen area, we learnt mountain warfare, how to climb, how to fight in the snows, how to move on a glacier.

The mountain training is imparted to formations from all over India, but more particularly to the Mountain Brigade, specially established by the Government of India to look after the Siachen glacier. It was also for us an opportunity to acclimatize at a relative high altitude.

Then we moved to the base camp No 1 camp on the glacier which is located at 18,000 feet. It takes 7 days to be fully acclimatized, during this period we went to the base camp during the day and came back the next day.

Q: When you got posted on the Siachen in April 1987, was the Quaid Post already occupied by the Pakistanis?

BS: Yes, they had occupied it earlier. Around that time, the Pakistanis started firing on our patrols and helicopters from the post.

My Commanding Officer (CO) decided to send a patrol to find out the position of the Pakistanis and how many of them were manning the post.

On May 29, a patrol of 8 J&K Light Infantry (8 JAK LI) was sent for a reconnaissance of the possible approaches to the Quaid Post. The patrol leader was Lt. Rajiv Pande. He had 12 men with him.

Unfortunately, they were sighted by the Pakistanis commandos. Ten of them, including Rajiv Pande were killed. Three only survived.

Q: Why this post was called the 'Quaid' Post

BS: This is the name of Mohamed Ali Jinnah, the father of Pakistan. This is the most important and highest post in the area. From the top you can see 80 km around. You can see the entire Saltoro range and all the other posts which have to be supplied by choppers. If you control this post, you can prevent the supply of all these posts. That is why it had such an importance for Pakistan (and why they named it after Jinnah). [After they started firing] my CO had to prepare a secret plan to recapture the post.

Q: How did the Pakistanis capture the Post?

BS: I do not know. It must have been captured long ago. The Pakistanis started occupying the glacier in 1984. When I arrived in 1987, it was already occupied.

Q: When was a second patrol sent?

BS: It was in June. It was not a patrol. It was troops for fighting purpose, to capture the Post.

Q: How was the approach route to reach the Post at 21,000?

BS: There was a 90° climb on a distance of 1,500 km and ice walls. Lt Pande had managed to fix ropes, but due to heavy snow fall, the rope had got completely lost, they had to fix them again. In the meantime, to divert the attention of the Pakistanis, Indian troops had been firing at the Post.

Q: Tell us about your operation, it was the third attempt?

BS: A total of 62 people participated in the final operation. Two officers, 3 JCO and 57 jawans were selected. The operation was conducted in three phases on June 23, June 25 and June 26, 1987. A first platoon was sent on 23rd but unfortunately they had to come back. Two soldiers were killed.

The second platoon with 10 jawans made an attempt on June 25. At that time due to some communication gap with us, the mission had to be aborted.

The next day, on 26th, I got the green light to go ahead.

Q: Tell us now about your assault? Could the Pakistani Commandos see you?

BS: Though it was day time, because of the heavy snowing we could not say if it was day or night.

The Pakistanis must have been knowing that something was going on because our troops were firing at them from the base camp (to divert their attention).

When we reached the top, there was a single bunker. We had been trained for such a fight. I threw a grenade inside and closed the door. At the end, a total of six Pakistanis were killed. We brought back their bodies which were later handed over to the Pakistanis authorities during a flag meeting in Kargil.

Some must have escaped towards the Pakistani side, perhaps over the cliff. I think that I have bayoneted three or four persons, I don't remember now.

A: Were you cold or tired?

BS: In these conditions, when you face death, you do not feel cold, you don't feel fear. You don't think that you are going to die.

I must tell you, a strange thing happened one day before the assault. I was feeling depressed when I heard the voice of Guru Gobind Singh who said: "I was only testing you". My depression disappeared. It is the first (and last) time that I had such an experience.

Q: When silence fell back on the Post, what happened?

BS: All the officers started congratulate me through wireless: "You have done very well, Bana, congratulations".

Q: Three months later there was a major Pakistani attack on the Bilafond; they had apparently been very upset to lose the Jinnah Post. Did you participate in the defense of Bilafond?

BS: Yes, it was in September. I did not participate because I was not posted in this area. But about 1000 Pakistani men must have died. General Musharraf was then the Brigade Commander [of the Special Security Group]. He had himself planned the operation.

Q: Do you receive threats from the Pakistani side.

BS: Sometimes I have received, but I have two PSOs protecting me.

Q: But you are stronger than your own PSOs.

BS: Yes, in any case I am not worried about my life (laughing)

Q: I understand that you had a good offer from the Punjab Government?

BS: The Punjab Government has a deep respect for the Indian Army. They have offered me Rs 25 lakhs, a monthly allowance of Rs 15,000 and a 25 acre plot if I accept to move to Punjab. But I refused.

Q: Why?

BS: Because I consider myself a State subject of Jammu and Kashmir. My own State gives me Rs 160/month only as an allowance for having won the Param Vir Chakra, the highest bravery award. It is the way we are treated in Jammu and Kashmir.