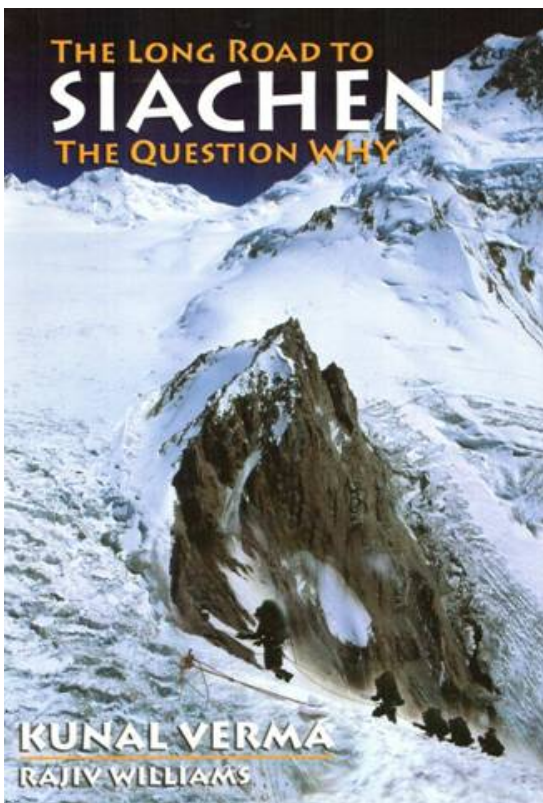


Book Review: The Long Road to Siachen - The Question Why

Written by Kapil Chandni

Wednesday, 12 January 2011 16:27

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Authors: Kunal Verma and Brigadier Rajiv Williams

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In the 60 years since Independence, entire generations of Indians have seen their country locked in conflict with both Pakistan and China, invariably over the so-called Kashmir problem.

The strategic significance of Kashmir (including Jammu and Ladakh) is not a modern day issue but dates back 200-odd years to the beginning of the Great Game whose ramifications were felt by England, Russia, France, Tibet, China and shaped events in the subcontinent.

The Long Road to Siachen: The Question Why' is a recent book by Kunal Verma and Brigadier Rajiv Williams that takes the reader through an incredible journey that presents a comprehensive picture of the events through the ages.

Published by Rupa & Co. the major part of the book is authored by Kunal Verma who is well known for his path breaking documentaries on the Indian Air Force, the Kargil War, and the film on the National Defence Academy (Standard Bearers). Drawing on the vast exposure he has had with all three Services of the Armed Forces, he has adopted a unique style of telling the story; sometimes even writing in the first person which makes the narrative engaging.

The reader is drawn into the vagaries of the terrain in Jammu, Kashmir, Zaskar and Ladakh at the very onset as Verma talks of his early days as a trek manager with Tiger Tops Mountain Travel in the 1980s. His chance encounter with a French tourist after crossing Umasi La in 1981 that resulted in his obtaining USAF maps which depicted the entire region north and east of Tortuk as PAF overflying areas and the subsequent events makes the entire book part memoir, part history lesson, part analysis and his ability to take stunning photographs, part photo essay!

The narrative goes back and forth as present incidents are linked to the past to provide the reader with an appreciation of the entire chain of events. It indeed is a Long Road to Siachen as Kunal Verma traces the history of various exploratory expeditions launched in the region during the 'Great Game years' and then subsequently the post Partition and Independence era, when various mountaineering forays from the Pakistani side.

The Indian side of the story unfolds as Colonel Narendra 'Bull' Kumar's attempts are documented along with other major expeditions.

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The subsequent race between India and Pakistan to be the first to establish their dominance over the region provides an exciting edge.

The intricacies of Geo-Politics, alas so rarely understood by Indian leaders, then unfold as Vermagets into the nitty-gritty of hard-core Military History, starting with the broad Indian canvas which narrows down on Kashmir. The emergence of the Sikh Confederacy under the legendary RanjitSingh; Gulab Singh's establishing of the Dogra Empire and the role played by Hari Singh and the Congress Party are looked at minus the Anglo-Saxon spin on the events and personalities which we in India have generally inherited unquestioningly.

Hari Singh, the last ruler of Kashmir, for example, so often branded a villain for his dilly-dallying in 1947, comes across as a thoughtful personality who derailed the British plans during the Round Table Conference by giving voice to what at best can today be described as 'Indian ambitions'. The so-called heroes of India's freedom movement, more often than not oblivious of the larger strategicpicture, often come across as unthinking puppets dancing to a preordained script written by the British. That Ambedkar first talked of dividing India on caste lines during the Round Table Conference even before the Muslim League got into the act of promoting the 'Two-Nation Theory' are important events which help unravel the complex jigsaw of the political machinations of those times.

The author also dwells at length on the creation of Pakistan, analyzing the deliberate strategy of the British to look after their own strategic interests post World War 2. The meeting between Churchill and Roosevelt that sealed the fate of British Colonialism, the relationship between Churchill and Jinnah, the evolution of Indian Military Intelligence agencies are important pegs in the book. Even the first Indo-Pak war of 1947-48 is dealt with in some detail, especially the fighting in Poonch.

In the main, the book time and again brings out the disconnect between the early political leadership in India on the one hand and the military and strategic think-tanks on the other. The appointment ofBaldev Singh, an industrialist, as India's first Defence Minister by Nehru for political expediency tells its own story.

This alarming situation continues to haunt us even with the Kargil War of 1999. Kunal Verma was involved in filming the conflict for the Indian Army and he puts forth his opinions and

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insights on the operations from the privileged ringside view that he had. Photographs pertaining to the war, especially those of General Budhwar (GOC 3 Division) and Brigadier Devinder Singh (Cdr 70 Brigade) have added significance in view of the Armed Forces Tribunal recently ordering a re-write of the official Kargil history.

There is an important chapter on two lesser known battles of the conflict: 27 Rajput at Tortuk and 14 Sikh at Chorbatla. Both these sectors were sandwiched between the Kargil and Siachen regions and consequently were beyond the reach of the media during the war. These are tales of great courage and valour which only the Indian Army could have managed. Imagine a battalion of Rajputs recruited from the Jodhpur area, men who had not seen anything higher than a sand dune before joining the Army, now being pushed by a Manipuri Commanding Officer to launch an almost vertical assault at an objective at 18,000 feet.

The entire book is richly illustrated by photos taken by the author over the years, plus other images obtained from various archives.

Photographs of the raider columns in 1947 as the Pakistanis pushed into Kashmir should forever bury the ghost of 'non-state actors', the smoke screen fine tuned and patented by the ISI for decades! There are maps and illustrations, all of which combine to make it an extremely readable tome. One can see the photos of the terrain and admire the cold remote beauty created by Nature. One marvels that an heaven on earth can become such a battlefield but it has.

Brigadier Williams as a young Company Commander watched from Sonam Post his battalion, the highly decorated 8 JAK LI, defend Bana Top as the Pakistani Army launched a major attack. His documentation of both OP RAJIV and OP QIADAT bring out in graphic detail the bitter, horrific fighting in 1984 that saw a post on the Glacier actually change hands. He then dwells on the logistics/supply lines involving IAF fixed wing transports and Army and Air Force helicopters which ensure a permanent link to the Glacier with the rest of the country.

To be honest, a book on Military History is hardly likely to be on the average reader's "must read" list. But the Long Road to Siachen has successfully traversed across that line by linking the past with the present in so many different ways. This is a much needed book which should be made compulsory reading for our people - the citizen and the policy maker alike!

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Sample images from the book:

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Aerial shot of Siachen – credit Dipti Bhalla Verma

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MiG-29 (NATO: FULCRUM) along with the author prior to a fighter sweep over the Zaskar Range

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mountain peaks and glaciers. The view from a MiG 29 somewhere over the Zaskar

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celebrated with Pakistani and Muslim flags and songs and prayers were presented in the

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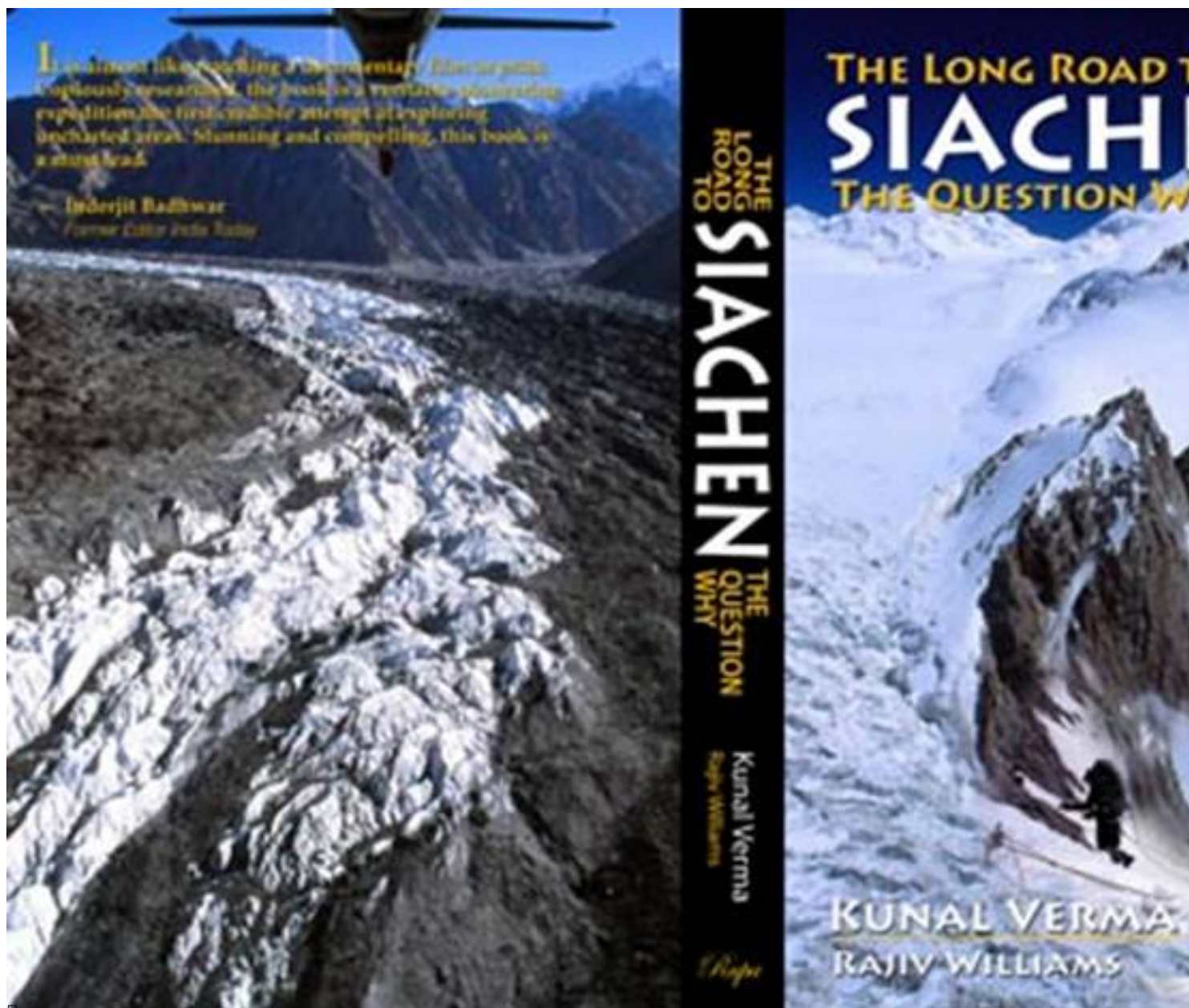


Principal Advisor Singh (Cdr 70 Brigade) and Major General IV Singh (6063 Div)

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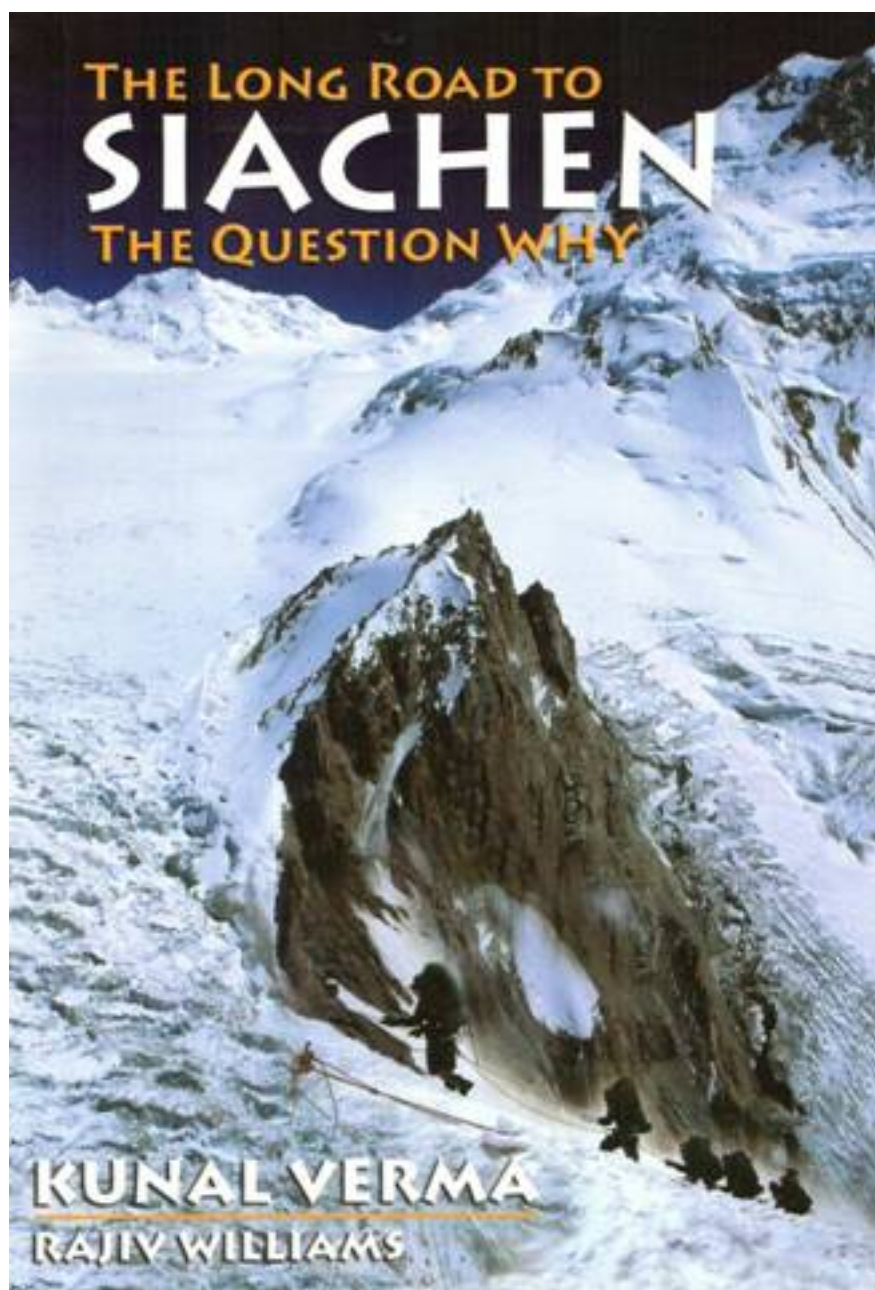
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The Question Why

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THE QUESTION WHY

SIACHEN

Fantastic Read. Fabulous photographs.
— Maj Gen S Thapliyal

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