

Give the military veterans their due

March 5, 2011 09:57 IST M P Anil Kumar

Any nation that yearns to fulfil the aspirations of its people needs two emotional nutrients: Sense of pride and sense of shame.

Wonder whether the sight of military veterans protesting governmental injustice will prick the national conscience, asks M P Anil Kumar.

I had just landed at the base camp of Siachen Glacier for my stint as the Forward Air Controller. A subedar hustled to the captain of the helicopter, implored him to evacuate a havildar in his early thirties to the army hospital at Leh. The bawling of the havildar was intermixed with howls of him seeing only white all around.

I learned from the medic later that his terrible condition was caused by overexposure to the combo of intense ultraviolet rays at high altitudes and glare rebounding off the snow. He added the havildar was lax in protecting his eyes with goggles, he could not be evacuated in time because of inclement weather, and he thought the retinal burn had become irreversible.

Two weeks later, I temporarily shifted base to Kumar -- named after the veteran alpinist Colonel Narinder Kumar. Another jinx: A pallid, wan major was being evacuated to the base camp. He and his detachment were manning a crucial 21,000-foot-high post

on the Saltoro Ridge. Elemental fury claimed all his three subordinates, but the helicopters could not make it because of impenetrable clouding.

By the time he was rescued, frostbite had laid waste his hands and feet, starvation had enfeebled him and the loss of his men had transformed him into a wreck. His expressionless face said it all. All his frostbitten fingers and toes would be amputated at the Leh hospital.

It was February 1986. Since neither could continue in service because of physical disability and blindness, both the major and the havildar would be discharged from the army on medical grounds some time in 1987. That meant another battle, a lifelong one, with life itself.

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