

Gone with the storm

SUNDAY, 6 JUNE 1993

1825 Hrs: Thundering dark clouds have filled the sky and are ominously hovering over Paraplegic Home, Kirkee, Pune. The easterly breeze has begun to intensify. We are no longer harassed by the blistering afternoon winds that had circulated just filth, dust and hot air. The sky awash with dark clouds is portending an imminent thunderstorm. Using the chin control, I position the electrically-operated wheelchair on the corridor to witness the impending spectacle — the year's first premonsoon showers.

1840 Hrs: The drizzle has already intensified into a 30-degrees slanting heavy downpour. My olfactory nerves sense the petrichor — the fragrance of parched soil getting soaked with raindrops after a dry spell. The thunderstorm has begun to gather momentum inexorably and hailstones begin to pelt the ground incessantly. It is a veritable exhibition of nature's fury. All of a sudden, the winds change direction to target me. Within seconds, I am engulfed by the irrepressible hailstorm. I am overpowered by a gnawing fear — the fear of getting tossed about in the whirling storm and getting airborne once again. I did not. I am not destined to... When I recover, I find that the storm has disappeared as swiftly as it came.

Fear! It could not have been the fear of getting airborne. Certainly not with the experience of 700 hours of jet flying behind me. And certainly not with 500 hours of flying in an irresistible flying machine called MiG-21. I had served in the Indian Air Force as a fighter pilot. That surge of fear, which chilled my inert spine few minutes ago, was something else; but it certainly had an element of déjà vu about it.

1930 Hrs: The western sky is still suffused with the incandescence of occasional lightning and ominous-looking clouds. An impromptu power cut has ushered in an early and eerie darkness. It is time for me to hit the bed. Tonight, my room is going to be the domain of bloodthirsty mosquitoes! As long as they arrive noiselessly to slake their thirst, I don't care a fig! In any case, I can neither swat them nor scare them away. Therefore, I have to take recourse to mosquito-repellent marketed as 'Good Knight'. In spite of its formidable title, an inspired lot always manage to penetrate the impregnable column of air, perhaps by using hitherto unknown stealth technology! With the passage of time, I've got inured to their furtive forays. By the way, what use is 'Good Knight' if there is no electricity? By 2000 hrs, I am surrounded by humming mosquitoes and haunted by my irreversible past.

As a kid, I thoroughly enjoyed alfresco baths. Perhaps, it is the best way to purge oneself in the purest form of water. In Sainik School, Kazhakootam (my alma mater), we students used to gambol about noisily in the rains, relishing the opulence of nature. We, invariably, attracted the admonition for breach of discipline from our House Master. We would always risk the consequences because the magnitude of our accumulated fun and frolic would outweigh the House Master's penalty, always and every time. At NDA, Khadakwasla, the senior cadets used numerous methods to discipline their errant juniors. Various forms of running, jumping and rolling over the undulating contours formed by the Western Ghats — in the garb of strengthening exercises — was one of them (eventually, the juniors would learn to endure these with an air of unfeigned indifference). During the rainy season, the wet ground, the innumerable puddles and the downpour provided additional excitement to these sessions. The joy of getting drenched made us forget the concomitant body-aches. These days, I have to be contented with recalling those nostalgic moments, with an air of wistfulness.

2230 Hrs: Tonight's power cut seems unending. The space inside the mosquito-net isn't the best place in the world for comfortable sleep. I decide to spend the rest of the night in the mosquitoes-infested open air. My medical attendants put me on the wheelchair and I am out of my room within couple of minutes. I am welcomed by a mild breeze — gentle enough to ruffle the leaves and strong enough to keep mosquitoes at bay. Mysteriously, the clouds have disappeared. The western sky is still being illuminated by occasional bursts of lightning. The omnipresent moonlight has slightly dimmed the radiance of ever-reliable Great Bear. The grandeur of the sidereal night is ineffable indeed. The reclining backrest of my wheelchair is lowered gradually by the attendants and its handgrips rest gently on the first step outside the first block of the Home. Meanwhile, the footrests of the wheelchair are raised by ninety degrees, getting it parallel to the ground. I'm now lain on the wheelchair and as snug as a bug in a rug. Incredible! I thank technology for this near-miracle. My transistor, tuned to *Vividhbharathi*, placed atop the second step is giving me company. Sachin Dev Burman's captivating music enforces absolute concentration and I lose my whereabouts unwittingly.

Suddenly, memories of a similar night come flooding in torrents and saturate my fickle mind.

“Weather warning for thundershowers extended upto 2200 hrs,” I relay the meteorologist's message to Squadron Leader Murlidharan, my flight commander. He calls off night flying immediately. Flight Lieutenant Sanjiv Yadav, taking full advantage of next day's late briefing time, invites all the bachelors for dinner. It is 28th of June 1988. My 26 days' temporary duty (TD) to HAL, Ozar has resulted in a massive backlog on the secondary job front. Since I am determined to finish part of it tonight, I promise to join them later. It had been another hot and busy day in Pathankot. Flight Lieutenant S Srivastava was seen off at the railway station by the squadron ladies and officers. In the morning, I flew couple of sorties as a wingman to Wing Commander R K Ghosh, my commanding officer and Squadron Leader A K Jain. Like an indefatigable jet engine, I beaver away at Log Book and Blue Book reports. It is plain drudgery! Drudgery is the other side of fighter flying.

Despite the workload, I find myself in a ponderous mood. I mull over the question: “What are the three qualities most essential for becoming a good combat pilot?” After a while, my mind gets deluged with an assortment of lucid answers. “Unequalled skills, unerring judgement (common sense plus intelligence) and unwavering dedication” — in that order and in abundance; I answer my query after awhile's rumination. It may be argued that these are the sine qua non of every profession. Absolutely true. But no other profession require these qualities in such enormous quantities as fighter flying does. That is why fighter pilots form a special breed of professionals. That is why they have an aura of invincibility about them. That is why fighter flying is an exacting and unforgiving profession. Certainly an unforgiving profession. Dangers lurk everywhere. Everywhere. Even on the ground.

The shock waves generated by a roaring thunder put an end to the brief spell of monomania. Meanwhile, the meteorologist's forecast has turned out to be a reality! The season's first premonsoon shower has transformed into a pelting hailstorm. Power cut, pre-empted to beat the gale, has plunged the Air Force Station into an indescribable darkness.

2230 Hrs: *I remember Sanjiv's invitation. After locking up the Squadron I kick-start my motorcycle and head towards the Officers' Mess. Soon I'm out of the Squadron area and driving onto the unlit taxi-track leading to the VIP dispersal. The ferocity of the storm has diminished somewhat but the terrifying eeriness continues unmitigated. I can discern an*

element of hostility in the thunderstorm and can also feel a repugnance towards the horrifying blackness. The thunder sounds similar to a series of bombs exploding at 30 seconds' interval. Carefully, I tread my way through waterlogged main road. The technical area gate is open. Strong headwind is splashing raindrops onto my face and hazes my vision. I have to strain my eyes hard to follow the headlight. Top to third gear, jab on the horn-button and I cross the gate uneventfully. The cloak of darkness continues to frighten my taut nerves. THUD. Unconsciously, an incapacitating fear runs down my spine. And the light went out.

A gust suddenly ends this phantasmagoria. The milieu of silence is being disturbed by my heavy breathing. On instinct, I attempt to get up. Futile effort. I cannot. How can I? I'm a quadriplegic!

1804 nights ago, at a similar time, I had made a similar attempt to get up. Unavailingly. Then, I had crashed onto a road barrier that was erected in my absence (during my 26 days' TD to HAL, Ozar) and lapsed into unconsciousness. The impact of my helmeted-head on the wooden bar wrenched my neck and irreversibly injured my cervical spinal cord. When I regained the briefly lost consciousness, I found myself tottering in the yoked world of quadriplegics. Now, I'm like a man fettered for life; unable to use my hands and legs, completely paralysed below the neck, incontinent, spoonfed and totally dependent. Ironically, the most painful aspect of quadriplegia is the painlessness. Willy-nilly, I'm now a part of the micro-world inside the macro-world that is strictly governed by Charles Darwin's tenet of *survival of the fittest*. I am a live vegetable since that cruel night.

The transistor is dead. The heartrending music is over. No, I can hear the hiss of static produced by the rumblings of distant thunder. Only intermittently. Curiously, the ever-haunting fear has vanished. Intermittent noise of static gives me unsolicited company.

"Am I afraid of that debilitating fear?" I asked myself repeatedly. NOT ANYMORE.

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