

Unprotected on the front

If only the country would foster a culture of respect for the soldier
M.P. Anil Kumar, July 26, 2013 5:16:24 am



The sniffer-dog squatted on its haunches. Lieutenant Manish Singh sensed the dog couldn't scent the spoor of blood anymore. He signalled his troops to crouch and scan sharply for their quarry a terrorist who escaped after being shot by a squad of the Rashtriya Rifles (RR) as one could easily hide in the terraced maize fields of Rajwar (Kupwara district). Gunfire rang out; he sighted the Afghan spraying bullets. As the six commandos returned fire, Singh felt the shooting pain of a bullet piercing through his lumbar and his legs went numb. Disregarding his state, he let off a burst from his gun and felled the quarry. Seeing his bloodied back, his men rushed to his side, but he ordered them to ensure the terrorist was dead.

He was evacuated to Srinagar. Severe blood loss and multiple organ failure had him on the ropes but he recovered remarkably. But the bullet smashed his spinal cord, paralysed him from the waist down, and condemned him to lifelong wheelchair mobility. He was decorated with the Shaurya Chakra for his bravery on September 25, 2012.

What rankled his parents most was the indifference of the government and the media. Instead of recounting what our son did, rats biting off his toe made front-page news, they resentfully lamented. A stray

bullet hit a commando on the head in the same operation; the helmet yielded, the nerve damage he sustained has enfeebled an arm.

I asked Singh whether he wore a flak jacket. He said no, as the ordinary bulletproof jacket with its 8 kg metal plate not only encumbered but weighed you down as well. What if he had worn the lighter, more ballistic resistant Kevlar vest? He said it might have prevented the spinal injury.

The flak jacket and combat helmet examples show how remiss the government is in not providing the troops engaged in counterinsurgency operations (CI ops) with the best protective kit. Singh and his buddy are from the Special Forces. So you can imagine how badly neglected the RR and regular troops deployed for CI ops are.

Kevlar body armour is rated as bang for the buck but the excuse trotted out is trite the prohibitive cost. If you trawl the internet, you'll find that these are produced in Kanpur, too, and its affordable. One per cent of the defence budget can kit nearly three lakh troops with both vest and helmet. In fact, ex-Kanpur stuff protects the forces of the UN and Nato.

Though they shot him, the RR could only hurt the Afghan terrorist. The reason is that we use 5.56 mm ammo. The basis for switching from 7.62 to 5.56 mm calibre was strategic; it was argued that the 7.62 mm round had overkill capability, apart from being relatively heavy. With its lower killing power, 5.56 mm bullets were likely to injure the enemy, thus necessitating the employment of more soldiers to evacuate the wounded, resulting in the insidious depletion of enemy fighting strength. The idea originated in the West. Their armies made the transition and we followed suit.

But this make no military sense for us. Why not shift to bigger calibre weapons for CI ops?

The armed forces are generally hurrahed, but this is episodic and does not translate into real regard for their wellbeing. Indeed, soldiers are venerated during wars and disasters and tolerated in peacetime. The apathy towards accounting them with proper safety gear shows that we deem them to be mere cannon-fodder. If only the country would foster a genuine culture of respect for the soldier. While the soldier has kept his terms of the contract, the state has let him down time and again, even for something as vital as essential equipment. Since the Indian Parliament was dreamt up as a clone of Westminster,

let me cite an example to paint a contrast between their conduct.

In July 2009, Lieutenant Colonel Rupert Thorneloe, the commanding officer of 1st Welsh Guards, and a trooper were blown up by a roadside bomb in Afghanistan. Lt Col Thorneloe was the most-senior-ranked officer casualty in Afghanistan. The air was thick with recrimination, then Prime Minister Gordon Brown barely fended off the salvos, but what glittered vividly was the cut and thrust of parliamentary debate, accountability and full-throated concern for the soldier.

Our Parliament often gets overheated but, alas, never for the Indian soldier. You don't have to be clairvoyant to foretell that Pakistan-abetted militancy will gather tempo once the US-led forces quit Afghanistan. Which calls for equipping troops with apt outfits and arms. Will Parliament compel the government to do so and show it truly cares for the soldier?

The writer is a former fighter pilot