

The Adventures of Surabhi the Soldier

#1: *Shit Happens*

Jalpaiguri Army Base, Indian Bengal

Until the ambitious Colonel spoiled things by making him into a hero, Private Rana Surabhi had been perfectly content with army life. He had been sitting in the shade of the ramshackle barracks of West Range, Jalpaiguri army base (currently home to the 10th Gugarati Infantry), idly taking stock of life. Jalpaiguri was the armpit of India, a narrow join hemmed in by China, Nepal to the north and Bangladesh to the south, it linked the North East States to the rest of India. One glance at the map told you it was strategic as hell, and the area was peppered with army installations. West Range was the slum section of what was otherwise a model base. Whilst the rest of the base was all spick and span white concrete bungalows, the money for West Range had somehow run out, or run into someone's pocket, leaving Surabhi and his comrades in wooden huts with corrugated tin roofs. The barracks nestled between the noisy Darjeeling road and a river that stank. The river stank because it was full of rubbish and there was no water. There wouldn't be any water until June when the rains came. Then there would be water everywhere.

There was nothing to do in Jalpaiguri except wait for the Chinese to invade. The Chinese has last invaded in 1962, before Surabhi was born. They showed no signs of doing it again, which was fine with him. Waiting for the Chinese to invade was a good solid job. You could be in Kashmir instead, hunting terrorists whilst dodging the artillery barrages which Pakistan periodically fired in a neighbourly way. Or back in the village with its menial work and menial cruelty and the things that had happened which were too big to mention.

Life was pleasant. The troop's only duty was to attend endless marching practices so that they would make a good impression if the Chinese should invade. However faced with a persistent lack of invasion, the parades had become a slack, almost enjoyable, affair. Then there were the mountain trips he took whenever his friend Private Singh could wrangle a jeep from Quartermaster Singh, with whom he claimed some family relationship though there was little resemblance between them. Quartermaster Singh was a chubby awkward man with a weakness for soft milky Bengali sweets. Private Singh was a tall easy-going man with a weakness for tearing along mountain roads scaring Surabhi witless. The roads were dangerous, with potholes, tight corners and vertigo-inducing steep ravines waiting to claim the jeeps that rattled along a foot from the edge. Singh loved them. Even when the mist came down cutting visibility to a few treacherous metres, he barely slowed.

"Actually you should be happier now Rana," he would say "You can no longer see the drop." And nonchalantly throw the jeep round a corner that had materialised in front of them, sending Surabhi into a fit of heartfelt prayers. Singh only ever slowed down to offer lifts to passing girls, undeterred by the almost invariable refusals.

But in spite of the mind-numbing, bowel-loosening terror of being Singh's passenger, Surabhi found their mountain trips an irresistible joy. Coming from the dusty flat plains of Gujarat, he had never imagined that the landscape could be so beautiful. Up they would go, above the dull routines of the base, climbing into crisp cool air. Palm trees gave way to bamboo groves until you hit the hill-top towns of Mirik, Kurseong or Darjeeling. There they would pick up a few beers and head out walking down wooded paths lined with orchids that opened without warning onto breathtaking views of the verdant green valleys below or the great white peaks of mountain ranges off in Nepal.

The sun was shining and Surabhi was just thinking how pleasant army life was, when the ambitious Colonel arrived and spoiled it. The first sign that the new Colonel was a bit too keen came during

that initial tour of the base. He took one look at the ramshackle buildings of West Range, wrinkled his nose at the smell of the river that stank, and declared "This Won't Do." Abruptly the old buildings started being torn down. "This Won't Do At All." he added, and proper army buildings, squat and solid started to appear, whilst work details were sent with shovels to keep the river clean. However this was initially seen as a sign of progress rather than recognised as an early warning of trouble.

The next thing anyone knew, there were rumours that the Colonel was lobbying to launch an operation against the rebel elements of the North East States. This, as everyone knew, was not possible and distinctly dangerous. Nevertheless, memos went out from the colonel's office with inspiring titles such as 'Strengthening India', and his batman overheard him talking on the phone of 'Duty' and 'Strength Being Forged Through Action', neither of which sounded like good ideas to Surabhi.

"He has too much energy," opined Singh (Private), "But he will soon settle down." Singh had enormous faith in the abilities of army bureaucracy. "Actually, nothing will happen." However Surabhi knew as soon as he heard the rumours that the Colonel would get his operation. The Indian soul was capable of being pragmatic about everything but outright lunacy. Moreover, ambitious young colonels have enemies; older men, superior in rank but not in energy and jealous defenders of their positions. They might realise that the best way to destroy the colonel was to give him his way.

And indeed the paint had barely dried on the nice new barracks before a cloud of dust pulled up at the base, settling into a fleet of drab green army trucks into which the 10th Division were packed. Off lumbered the convoy. From civilised peaceful Bengal, they passed through the tea plantations of Assam then turned south towards the hills and jungles of Manipur. Operation Forest Fire had begun.

Manipur

Manipur (land of jewels) is India's easternmost state, separating the country from Burma. Manipur is a verdant land, a land of hills, plateaus and large beautiful lakes that are dotted like gems in the thick green tropical jungle.

Surabhi hated the jungle immediately. Hated it with an instinctive fear, sharpened by the knowledge that no less than three dozen different guerilla armies called it home. The dark enclosing vegetation oppressed him. Unlike most of India, Manipur's jungles had not yet been tamed and cleared. Everywhere he looked from undergrowth to canopy, there were ferns, creepers, trees, vines, bromeliads, flowers and thorns bursting forth with intimidating density.

"This much greenery," he complained to Singh, "cannot be natural."

Then there were the mosquitoes - far more prevalent than in Jalpaiguri, and all ferociously thirsty for Surabhi blood.

Operation Colonel's Promotion dragged on for three weeks without event. Each day, the regiment struck camp, then cursed and sweated their way through the forest until it came time to pitch camp again. They passed through villages, encountering a bewildering range of ethnicities. The soldiers referred to them all as 'the natives', forgetting that this was still India and these natives were their compatriots. The army always received a cold reception. The villagers would turn out to watch them march in, and stare blandly at them until they marched out. The officers tried to engage the in conversation, to question them on rebel movements. But they got nothing. These were the families of the men they were hunting, and help was not forthcoming. Sometimes the villagers did not even speak Hindi, or feigned not to.

The troops trudged through the sweaty jungle days waiting for something to go wrong, and inevitably something did. In the third week, a patrol went missing. The colonel got very excited, but the rebels responsible just slipped away. No trace was found of them or the missing men. The expedition took on a new tone. Blood had been spilt - army blood.

Admittedly, army blood was spilt back in Jalpaiguri on a regular basis. Within that year alone, there had been a car crash (4 dead) and three fights that had turned violent (2 dead, 5 serious casualties). But this was different: previous deaths had been the inevitable accidents of fate. Whereas this was the work of an *Enemy*. A deliberate malicious and almost unprovoked attack upon the 10th Division. It made things serious.

The mood in the regiment felt ugly. Everyone wanted to fight, but there were no enemies except each other. Tensions rode high in the heat. The men glowered at their officers and gathered in small sullen groups to complain. The officers grew harsh and handed out punishment details at the slightest provocation. Morale, already low, now plummeted.

It was in a sour mood that the regiment set up a new base-camp near Chaton, a town near Nagaland. It was at this point that Surabhi saved the operation - something he would regret for a long time to come. He did so by going to the toilet.

The camp toilet was a trench, dug as far away from the officer's tents as possible. They had only been pitched at this location for a week, but already the first trench was almost full. Soon it would be declared closed, and a new one dug. When there were enough latrine trenches that the stench reached the officer's tents, then it would be time to strike camp and move on.

Surabhi's tent was in the Shit Quarter, as Singh called it, with the latrine just round the corner. Which stank, but it was convenient when you woke up in the middle of the night with a bladder full to bursting point.

"Ow! Watch where you're treading."

"Surabhi, is that you again?"

"Piss-filled bastard!"

"I warn you," Surabhi replied to the whispers, "The human being is 75% liquid and I am about to spray it all out!"

He slipped out and walked round the tent. Turning the corner he came to an abrupt halt. The latrine trench was a dozen yards in front of him, a dark slit in the ground giving off a foul odour. This was as expected, and in his current strained state the smell was almost welcome. What stopped him was the sight of the two men who were moving past it, heading towards the centre of the camp. Between them they were furtively carrying a large canvas bag. The men were dressed in home made camouflage; dark green shirts smeared with mud. One had an antique rifle slung over his shoulder. They were quite obviously not members of the 10th Gujarati Infantry. Intruders, Surabhi thought. Rebels. Somehow they've slipped past the sentries. And that bag. A bomb?

The men must have heard him for they turned round. For a brief eternal moment Surabhi and the strangers stared at each other. Then the trespassers dropped their bag and attacked. One of them leapt at Surabhi. The other fumbled with his rifle.

Adrenalin and army training kicked in. Surabhi stepped forward and landed a punch on the charging man that sent him reeling backwards. For a moment the man teetered on the edge of the latrine trench. But he managed to fall forward instead. The man with the gun lined up a shot. Surabhi dived to the left. The intruder pulled the trigger. There was a quiet click as the old rifle failed to fire.

Surabhi hit the ground hard. Instantly, both men were on him. Blows rained down on him. Kicks and punches to his stomach, his head, his back. Then there were hands around his throat. He was being strangled. He struggled, but without much conviction. He was running out of air, which is a bad thing to run out of.

Specks of light began to dance round the edges of his vision. His head pounded. Everything turned a violent shade of black. As the world faded out, Surabhi thought of the mountains: of the clear cold air and the god-like views. Then he thought of home, of the parched village he had left and would now never return to. With a final wretched gurgle, his eyes rolled back.

Then suddenly the pressure was gone. He drew in deep ragged gulps of air, lungs burning. His eyes watered, tried to focus. A blurred man had arrived and was waving a rifle. The blurred rebels were scrambling away. The newcomer raised his rifle and took a shot at the fleeing figures.

Surabhi realised that the bag with the bomb was right by his feet. A jolt of terror ran through him. Yelping, he kicked out at it, simultaneously scrambling to his feet. It was a good kick, and it connected firmly. Heavy though the bag was, it slid along a little, finally toppling into the trench which swallowed it with a soft gloop. Grabbing the soldier he sprinted a dozen metres before his legs buckled and he hit the soft forest earth. Surabhi's head sank to the ground. Everything was painful except breathing, which was agony.

His eyes cleared to find a concerned Private Singh looking down at him.

“Are you alright?” asked his friend.

“Acha; fine thank you,” Surabhi managed, “How are you?”

“Not so bad Rana.” Singh laughed heartily, and lit up a cigarette. “I missed.” he added with a shrug.

Surabhi lay back. He tried to take stock of the beating he had received. Singh sat by him, quietly smoking his cigarette. Around them the base was now a mad mass of activity. Singh's gunshot has raised the alarm, and soldiers were running toward them from all directions.

Questions came flying at them.

“What happened?”

“Who did it?”

“Were you fighting?”

“Why did you wake me up?”

The Colonel pushed his way through the throng to find Surabhi and Singh at its centre. Meanwhile various Sergeants started to impose some order, and their staccato commands filled the air like the birdsong of pterodactyls.

“Well?!” The Colonel demanded, “What happened here?”

Surabhi's account of the attack was perhaps not as clear as it could have been.

“Rebels sir, intruders. I was attacked I was going to the toilet and Singh came and they ran away. That way Sir. And the bag. They had a bag sir. I kicked it into the trench.”

The Colonel, who was fearless, headstrong and not entirely awake, followed the direction of Surabhi's finger and set off to investigate. Surabhi took advantage of this to lie back onto the soft kind earth. Calmer now, he reviewed the adventure. I saved the camp, he thought. Me and Singh. We saved the camp. There'll be medals for us. Medals, and a ceremony. Everyone will troop past in our honour. Even the top brass will thank us, and we'll get to try the good whisky.

Suddenly the bomb – for it was a bomb – went off. The noise – loud but squelching like the wet fart of an incontinent God – made Surabhi turn his head. Fortunately the trench had absorbed the force of the blast, but its contents were sent flying upwards in a putrid brown sheet. Up into the air went

the latrine contents, like a monster rearing up out of the earth. Beneath it, the Colonel and his aides dove vainly for cover. For a moment the sewage hung in the tender pre-dawn air, poised still at the top arc of its flight.

That image burned itself onto Surabhi's mind, replacing the visions of medals and honours that he was now destined never to receive.

Then gravity came into effect and the effluent began its inevitable downward journey.

THE END

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