

# Why they chose to go down with the ship

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AMEETA MULLA WATTAL

The dark night of December 9, 1971, is imprinted on my mind like a scar. Thirty-nine years ago during India's war with Pakistan, two vintage anti-submarine frigates that my father, the late Captain Mahender Nath Mulla, commanded, were ordered to hunt and destroy a Pakistani submarine lurking off the coast of Diu. The operation was doomed from the beginning. Like in Tennyson's poem "The Charge of the Light Brigade", the brave men went into the night as commanded.

One of the two frigates was torpedoed by the modern Pakistani submarine, the PNS Hangor. The INS Khukri sank, taking 178 Indian naval ratings and 18 officers including my father to their watery graves. It was reported that the captain of the ship showed extraordinary courage during those last minutes of his life, helping save as many of his men as he could and not abandoning his vessel. He went down with his ship, along with the other brave soldiers. A Mahavir Chakra was awarded to him posthumously.

I have often wondered what made my father decide to go down with his ship. Was it a quest for immortality beyond death? Or was it an old naval tradition? Or did he make the choice because he felt it was the right thing to do? My sister and I had come home on vacation before the war. The anti-aircraft guns that lit up the night of December 5 in Bombay were, for us, a display of fireworks. War and death were just fast-moving images of action movies seen in the security of the United Services Club from where we could make an exit. This innocence was torn apart on that December night. The torpedo that struck INS Khukri was not the screenplay of a film. This real-life battle had no exits. The news of the sinking of the Khukri was brought home to my mother along with weak assurances that the captain of the ship had been rescued. I recall that my mother felt a hopeless despair because she knew that her husband would not put his own safety before the safety of his men. The period immediately after the war was marked by euphoria and Indians drank, in the words of Ramachandra Guha, "the elixir of

victory”.

The loss of a ship was collateral damage in the theatre of war: an awkward event, perhaps best forgotten, especially because the larger war had been won. With the passage of time my mother became involved with the widows of the sailors. The Khukri story repeats itself in different ways. It is the grand narrative of national success and the achievements of a few that frequently submerge the narratives of small folk who live their lives battling unknown enemies and are often deprived of little compensations.

Why is it that the voices of widows and mothers of the “shahids” of Kargil or Kashmir remain submerged like that ill-fated frigate? Has our moral space become so limited that those who have been elected or selected to serve this nation have no need for ethical barometers? What a cruel joke it is when these protectors create an “Adarsh” (ideal) housing society on the foundations of a Khukri Park. My battle for life commenced after the 1971. The sinking of the Khukri was my leitmotif and I never transcended the ideals that my father lived and died for. I remember him telling me: “Never call your best action a sacrifice. If one fights for a cause, it is because one cannot live with the way things are”.

His sacrifice influenced me to be a teacher. It is a choice I have never regretted. On that fateful night, he helped as many sailors he could to the safety of lifeboats. When he had done his duty he took his decision to go down with his ship. I suppose he saw himself as the ship’s master, nurtured by his ideals. *He made the choice not because it was the right thing to do, nor because it was expected of him, but because knowing him as I did, it was the only thing he would do.* He was the first captain of independent India’s navy to go down with his ship and hopefully the last.

One such man is enough to bring honour to an entire nation for a lifetime.

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**A Letter written to Ms Ameeta Mulla Wattal by Capt (IN) Allan Rodrigues (Retd), who commanded three Indian Naval warships before settling down in New Zealand is re-produced below:**

23<sup>rd</sup> December 2010

Dear Ms Ameeta Mulla Wattal,

I am an ex-Indian naval officer who left the service honourably in 1994. I live in New Zealand, and work in Australia and New Zealand these days. This email refers to an article you wrote some five years ago very poignantly, on your father the Late Captain Mulla, pondering why he chose to go down with his ship. The article obviously struck a chord with many of your readers, and in the way of the internet, travelled the world before it entered my mail box a few days ago, via a social network maintained by the 42<sup>nd</sup> NDA and 51<sup>st</sup> IMA course.

I did not know your father personally, but I feel I have always known him and for what he stood for, all of my adult life. I missed the fighting in 1971 as I was a cadet in the NDA at the time, and only passed out and joined a warship at sea in June 1972, six months after the war ended. In the event I became an Anti Submarine specialist and along the way, I ended up commanding three warships including INS Himgiri (also an anti submarine frigate, although a more modernized version of the original Khukri).

Warships at sea in 1971 (and Captain Mulla in particular) would have been more than aware of these limitations. They would have known two simple facts:

- (a) That a submarine at sea would have already detected a surface ship long before the ship had even reached any kind of detection range;
- (b) That even if the warship did detect the submarine, it would be at the penultimate moment, when the submarine had already fired, (or was on the verge of firing) its torpedoes, giving the warship a few minutes at best, to take avoiding action, let alone counterattack.

The Pak submarine that sank the Khukri used its environment to maximum advantage. In hind sight and over the years, we developed better sonars and better tactics. We employed dedicated ASW aircraft with sonobuoys and magnetic detectors, helicopter with dunking sonars, and yes we spent a lot of time learning the harsh facts of the ocean environment we were forced to operate in.

This is the context in which ships put to sea in 1971, against an adversary who was well versed in using submarines to maximum advantage. Our own ASW ships had little in the way of riposte or as much experience we would have liked to have had before the war of fighting submarines. In the event every sailor at sea recognises a moment of truth, when all of his training and skills are put to the ultimate test. It is the moment when the ship beats to quarters and goes into action against an enemy in sight, or an enemy that has been detected. Khukri and Kirpan were operating in submarine infested waters. The ship would have gone to action stations against a submarine many times over, in the days and nights preceding the sinking of the Khukri, sometimes for genuine reasons, sometimes for false alarms. All of this would have exhausted the crew and formed the fog of war.

It takes a special kind of motivation to get these men to go down into the bowels of a fighting ship whilst in action against a submarine. They do so each time out of a sense of duty that the ship cannot fight without them and mostly because they recognise that one single unspoken truth...That their captain will not forsake them; that their captain will not leave them behind. That is the crux of the why, and the reason why captains at sea honour this unspoken agreement.

Captain Mulla would have known that many of his boys were trapped (but yet alive) in the bowels of his ship when it went down, in the few minutes after the torpedoes hit. He tried to help as many as he could, but I suspect he could not bring himself to save himself, whilst his boys were dying down below. That he chose to go down is a personal decision, perhaps even a moral decision; but it was a decision that set a standard that will save lives in future actions. It forced all of us who came after him, and who were privileged to command men in peace and war, to recognise that undeniable and unspoken bond between fighting men ... that you fight your ship against an enemy (or the ocean in a storm), with what you have, and to the best of your ability, and that come what may, you never forsake your troops or leave a man under your command, behind you.

What Captain Mulla did that fateful day has had an enormous and positive impact on the service he loved and on the men who continue to serve it to this day. It reminds every one of us chosen to command of the qualities of leadership needed under duress, and of the ultimate responsibility we have to the families of the men we command; „You never forsake your men – You never leave a man behind. I know that this hardly helps when trying to explain all of this to

the family of a captain who makes the ultimate sacrifice. Nor does it assuage the grief of a young girl trying to understand why her father chose to voluntarily die, rather than save himself. For a fledgling service post independent India trying to forge its own traditions independent of the Royal Indian Navy of yore, the impact was enormous. It was one of the many actions in the 1971 war that made us equal partners with the Army and Air force in the defence of independent India.

*I am reminded of the last few stanzas of Ronald Hopwood's classic poem, "Our Fathers" that I quote below:*

*"When we've raced the seagulls, run submerged across the Bay,  
When we've tapped a conversation fifteen hundred miles away,  
When the gyros spin superbly, when we've done away with coals,  
And the tanks are full of fuel, and the targets full of holes,  
When the margin's full of safety, when the weakest in the fleet  
Is a Hyper-Super-Dreadnought, when the squadrons are complete,  
Let us pause a while and ponder, in the light of days gone by,  
With their strange old ships and weapons, what our Fathers did, and why.  
Then if still we dare to argue that we're just as good as they,  
We can seek the God of Battles on our knees, and humbly pray  
That the work we leave behind us, when our earthly race is run,  
May be half as well completed as our Fathers' work was done".*

My wife Sharon and I wish you and your family a great Christmas and a happy and prosperous. New Year 2011. If you or your family do visit New Zealand do look us up.

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