

When Yusuf Crossed the Line

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A true story from the midst of madness and bloodshed, the 'Kargil War'.

The early morning calm was rudely shattered by numerous blasts that rang out in quick succession. The sound was akin to repeated hammering of a wooden mallet on Corrugated, Galvanised Iron (CGI) sheets. Soldiers sprinted hither and thither to find some cover while Pakistani artillery shells rained down on them and burst with ear shattering explosions. The intense Pakistani artillery barrage continued for about half an hour. When it ended, there was a sudden silence and troops waited inside their bunkers for another half hour or so before they tentatively emerged from numerous hiding places and went about their routine morning chores.

The loud explosions woke Brig Jasbir Singh SM (Jas), Commander of a brigade in the Chhamb-Jaurian sector, with a start. He sat up on the bare camp cot, coughing and sneezing because of the dust and debris that filled his underground fortified bunker. It was still dark and he groped around for his mobile to check the time. Deep within the bunker, he could not hear the whistling noise as the shells went overhead.

The Pakistani heavy artillery bombardment had just taken place on the line of bunkers located on a '*bund*'(raised ground). The *bund* ran along the Line of Control (LoC) at Pallanwala. Operation 'VIJAY' (Kargil operations) was in full swing between India and Pakistan, and the intruding Pakistani forces were being physically removed from the rocky heights that they had surreptitiously occupied

in Kargil, at the northernmost end of the LoC. The difficult operations in Kargil and Tololing were in full media glare and a shocked nation watched troops battle it out on the high mountains, on their TV sets, right in their bedrooms. But elsewhere in Pallanwala, in the Chhamb-Jaurian sector, out of the media glare, there was another incredible drama unfolding.

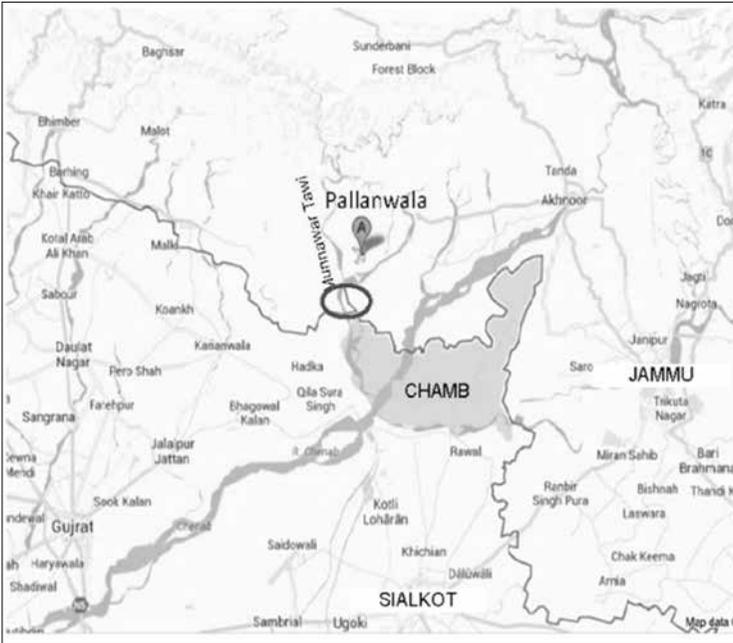
It was a clear morning at the southern end of the LoC where Jas was located. Puffs of a few white clouds dotted the blue sky. After the mortar bombardment ended, he could hear the light-hearted banter of his troops. They chatted and joked with one another as they spread their sleeping bags and clothes to dry in the warm sun. Occasionally, a loud peal of laughter could be heard as troops stretched themselves in the sun. The radio sets crackled with the Brigade Net operational natter, the voices sombre and full of static.

Suddenly, there was a yell from inside a nearby concrete bunker, in which a day sentry manned a Light Machine-Gun (LMG). He was peering through a loop-hole at the flat land in front of the bunker. The flat land extended for about 200 m and sloped into the Munnawar Tawi river, along the centre of which ran the LoC. The flowing water in the river was only about half a metre at its lowest point.

On hearing the sentry's alarm, troops rushed into their bunkers, expecting another round of deadly enemy barrage. Looking through the loopholes, they were surprised to see the figure of a small boy, 10 or 11 years old, splashing through the river towards them. Field telephones were rapidly cranked and before the little boy had waded across the river, reports of this most unexpected event was flashed up the ladder from the company and battalion headquarters, right through to Jas. Jas instructed the troops to hold their fire and guide the boy through the minefield adjacent to the river. The Platoon Commander, followed by some soldiers, climbed to the top of the *bund*. They stood in full view of the Pakistan defences across the river and shouted directions to the child, on how to negotiate the minefield. A wrong step here or there could have blown up the child or maimed him. Laboriously, as if in a daze, the child followed the instructions with hesitating steps. Soon the child arrived at the bunker's entrance. He was dressed in a dark-grey coloured kurta-pyjama suit and had his pyjamas rolled up to his thighs. He seemed quite unperturbed though he had a serious expression on his face. He was made to sit under a large tree and gently questioned by the Platoon Commander. Speaking in Punjabi, the boy gave his name as Yusuf Mohammad and said he belonged to the large village across the river. When asked where he was going, he shyly related that his father had been extremely annoyed to see his poor Class IV results. He had scolded the boy volubly and even

told him to leave the house. Upset with his father's reprimands, Yusuf had left the house and walked towards the fields adjoining the village. He had continued to walk through the fields, crossed the river and wandered into the Indian Army post.

Fig 1



Yusuf was quickly bundled into a ‘Gypsy’ and driven to Brigade HQ at Pallanwala where he met a lanky, affable Sikh with a luxurious white beard, attired similarly in kurta pyjama, much like a Pathan. Jas made him as comfortable as he could on a camp style folding easy chair. Since the boy said he had not eaten since the previous afternoon, Jas offered him a hot meal of rice, dal and vegetables. Jas chatted with him with paternal affection. From the answers Yusuf gave Jas, it became apparent that he did not know he had crossed the LoC. During the gentle prodding, Yusuf proudly said that his father was a retired *fauji* who would soon become the *lambardar* of his village. Since the artillery bombardment had taken place while the boy was walking to the river, he was asked if he had heard any loud bangs as he had approached the river. The observant boy thought for a while and brightly remarked that he had passed a grove of large trees where *faujies* were gathered and there had been explosions from tubes placed on the ground.

With a smile he added that *faujis* had been scampering about in a funny manner but he had avoided going near them.

When the child was told he had crossed over to India, he became visibly scared and even began to tremble in fear. After instructing his men to look after the young boy, Jas rang his General Officer Commanding (GOC) in Akhnur and told him about the Pakistani boy who had strayed across the LoC. Perhaps there were more important things on the General's mind and Yusuf was quickly brushed aside. "Send the rascal back", the General said gruffly and began to discuss other more pressing military matters. Jas sent the boy back to the Battalion HQ in-charge of the spot where the boy had crossed the river and ordered them to look after the boy, but to send him back to the other side of the LoC first thing in the morning.

With an unobtrusive guard outside the room, Yusuf was allowed to relax and given a Hindi movie to watch on TV. After he had happily watched the movie, Yusuf innocently told the astonished Junior Commissioned Officer (JCO) who was stationed in the room, "*Eh picture teh main pehle vekh chuka haan!*" The boy became a subject of great attraction and many soldiers peeped into the room to catch a glance of the Pakistani child. As the evening progressed, Yusuf began to miss his mother and tearfully told the JCO he wanted to go home. He was reassured that he would be sent home safely in the morning. After the uneventful night, Yusuf was again taken to see Jas. Jas told him to be a good boy, study well at school and never again defy his father and walk out of home, despite what his father said in anger. Yusuf solemnly agreed with what Jas asked him to do and nodded repeatedly in agreement. He was given a small packet of sweets for his parents, two CDs of Hindi movies and a fountain pen to take back with him. Jas gently patted him on the cheek and asked the JCO to see that the boy was safely sent through the minefield and to the river. Yusuf was told to shout loudly to the Pakistani soldiers, while he was crossing the river and then follow the same track through the Pakistani minefield across the river.

Yusuf was taken ahead of the forward defences once again in a Gypsy. Here, he alighted from the vehicle, carrying the small bag containing his presents. He walked back the way he had come the previous morning. The JCO and others watched the small boy move slowly along the narrow foot-track in the minefield till he reached the river bank. At the river bank, Yusuf stopped and bent over to roll up his pyjamas. Before he stepped into the cold waters of the Munnawar Tawi, the Pakistan child turned and waved at the Indian soldiers waiting near the Gypsy. They smiled and waved back at him, silently wishing him luck. In

such a short time a strong bond had developed between the child and the Indian soldiers. Perhaps they were reminded of their own children at home, and they hoped the boy would safely complete his hazardous return journey and reunite with his parents.

The soldiers watched Yusuf's slender figure get smaller and smaller as he crossed the flowing waters and went further towards the Pakistan defences. All the while, they could hear loud shouts from the boy to warn the Pakistanis of his approach so that they did not open fire. Soon, they happily saw Pakistan soldiers come out of their bunkers and get atop their *bund* to guide Yusuf through their minefield. Then, the Indian Army soldiers returned to their defences and reported to Jas "Mission Accomplished".

After allowing enough time for Yusuf to be interrogated by the Pakistani soldiers and moved to the rear areas, it was back to business for the Indian brigade. Jas ordered a devastating barrage of mortar fire on the enemy's gun positions hidden in the grove beyond the Pakistan forward line of defences. Soon, the complete grove was obliterated. It was business as usual for the two opposing armies, each trying to kill the other with everything they had. That night, both sides relaid the minefield where the boy had crossed, as clear passage through the minefield which the child had crossed had been noted by either side.

Jas soon forgot about Yusuf and immersed himself in his routine operations, trading bullet for bullet and shells for shells. Barrages of mortar bombs exploded among the defences, while ambushes, raids and intense small arms fire caused numerous casualties. The wounded were promptly evacuated to rear areas while machine-gun fire swept the line of defences on both sides. Soldiers hid in their bunkers or used crawl-trenches to move about. Climbing atop the *bund* was akin to committing suicide and it became an activity of happier times of the past.

After a few days, Jas got a call from the GOC. The GOC told Jas that Yusuf was the son of a retired Pakistani Army JCO whose ex CO was then the Pakistani Director General of Military Operations (DGMO). When the ex JCO and his wife failed to find the boy, they had enquired from villagers. They were shocked when they came to know that Yusuf had been seen fording the Munnawar Tawi and walking towards the Indian defences. In sheer desperation, the ex JCO rang up his old CO (the Pakistan DGMO) and narrated his tale of woe. The Pakistani Army General had sympathised with his old JCO, as any General would, and amidst the numerous daily telephone calls related to the ongoing operations in Kargil, he had informed his Indian counterpart DGMO about the lost child. The Indian DGMO had informed Northern Army Commander and the information

ultimately trickled down to the GOC of the infantry division holding Chhamb-Jaurian Sector.

“Where the f*** is that Paki rascal?”, he asked.

“Hopefully back at home with his ruddy parents”, Jas informed him, matter-of-fact.

Soon the information was relayed back from one DGMO to the other.

Amidst intensive firing across the LoC, a few days later, Jas received a strange message from one of his COs. The CO told him that a forward post Commander had reported that the Pakistans, just 25 m away, had yelled over the sound of firing and asked for a temporary ceasefire to deliver a letter for the Brigade Commander. They had been told to await further instructions. Jas, overcome with curiosity, ordered the CO to accept a temporary ‘ceasefire’ for 10 minutes and to accept the letter from the enemy side. The CO reported to Jas that the Pakistan soldiers had tossed across an envelope affixed to a small stone with a rubber band.

The letter was brought to the Brigade HQ and opened by Jas. The letter from his Pakistani counterpart, said that he had been directed by his GOC to convey sincere thanks for returning the little boy in a safe and sound condition. While Jas was reading the letter, he heard a distant rattle of machine-gun fire. The sharp sounds came from the direction of the Indian Army post where the letter had been thrown across the LoC. He smiled wryly to himself. He hoped that Yusuf by now would be safe at home with his parents. Hopefully, one day Yusuf would remember his brief encounter with the Indian Army and grow up to be a fine young man.

Jas cranked the field telephone, got across to his Brigade Major (BM) and ordered 100 rounds of retaliatory fire with the heaviest calibre artillery weapons that he possessed. It was not for him to reason why Pakistanis and Indians fought continuously, but to do and die. An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth. But Yusuf, well, he was not an enemy. He was a young child just like all children, the future of Pakistan. Jas hoped that one day Yusuf would grow old enough, and be a better man, to perhaps help stop the madness and bloodshed that still continues on the LoC.

Wg Cdr **Unni Kartha** (Retd) writes on contemporary issues.