

The Night Before Our Hero Died

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Second Lieutenant Rajeev Sandhu, MVC (Posthumous)

Scene 1: Early life and Training, Timeline 1976-82

St John's High School, Chandigarh, is a well-known English medium, all boys' school, based in Chandigarh. The rank and stature of this school make it a prestigious and much sought after school in Chandigarh. A young boy, hereafter referred to as 'Our Hero', studied in this school from 1976 to 1982 from Classes 5 to 10. Our Hero was quite popular amongst his classmates and the common opinion about him was that he was a firebrand, enthusiastic leader and a perfect candidate to be an officer in the Army.

"It was in his blood; he could do anything since he had admirable will power" said Lt Col PK Jaitly, a classmate.

"There were three officers from our class. Only he was the fittest. He had the never-say-die spirit," said Col Michael James, another classmate.

His next alma mater was the DAV College, Chandigarh. The college has a tradition of remembering its students who laid down their lives for the service of

the nation. There are four pillars at the entrance of the Administrative Block which depict the names and laurels of the martyrs. Our Hero figures in that revered list. The Officers' Training Academy (OTA), Chennai, was the next step before joining the Indian Army. Located adjoining the Chennai international and domestic airport, its impressive gate carries a rather simple motto; but loaded with the spirit of sacrifice commonly found amongst the hundreds of Gentlemen Cadets commissioned from this institution: "*Serve with Honour*". Our Hero was trained in this reputed Academy for about a year and was commissioned into 7 ASSAM on March 05, 1988. He was pipped by his father, Mr DS Sandhu who had served in the Indian Air Force and mother Mrs Jayakant Sandhu, the first lady Senior Superintendent of Police (SSP) officer from the Provincial Police Services (PPS) cadre. After a short post-commission leave, Our Hero reported to his battalion which was deployed in Baticaloa district in Sri Lanka as part of the Indian Peace-Keeping Force (IPKF).

Operation Pawan: An Overview

It is 30 years since the IPKF launched Operation "Pawan" in 1987 to take control of Jaffna and other areas from the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and disarm the cadres as part of the Indo-Sri Lanka Accord. The Indian Army took control of the peninsula after two weeks of brutal fighting, something that the Sri Lankan Army had tried and failed to achieve for several years. The main task of the IPKF was to disarm the different militant groups, not just the LTTE. The force was initially not expected to be involved in any significant combat. However, within a few months, the IPKF became embroiled in a battle with the LTTE to enforce peace. The differences started with the LTTE trying to dominate the interim administration, and also refusing to disarm. Soon, these differences led to the LTTE attacking the IPKF, at which point the IPKF decided to disarm the LTTE militants, by force, if required. Given the LTTE's tactics in guerrilla warfare and its using women and child soldiers to fight battles, it soon escalated into repeated skirmishes between the IPKF and LTTE.

Scene 2: Village Pulumalai, Baticaloa District, Sri Lanka, Timeline July 1988

Baticaloa district is one of the 25 districts of Sri Lanka and is located in its Eastern Province. With a population of mostly Sri Lankan Tamils, it was severely affected by the civil war. My battalion, 13 MAHAR was deployed as part of the 'Red Shield Division' in Baticaloa district, with our posts spread all over the district and

the Battalion Headquarters located at Pulumalai, a nondescript village on the western fringe of the district. I was then a Captain, with about ten years of service and was performing the duties of Adjutant. We were deployed in Sri Lanka at a time when the duels between IPKF and the LTTE were at their zenith. There wasn't a single incident free day ever; the 'events' ranged from killing of innocents by the LTTE, ambushes and counter-ambushes by the IPKF and LTTE, heavy volleys of LTTE fire upon IPKF posts, LTTE militants engaged in fire fights with the IPKE, etc. These were routine incidents!

Scene 3: The Night Before

At about 9 PM, I was informed by the guard that a small convoy of 7 ASSAM had reached the gate, led by an officer. I instructed the guard to check out the credentials of the party, including the name of the officer and then let them in. About half an hour later, there was a knock at my door followed by a crisp, "Good Evening, Sir". I looked toward the entrance of my tented office and there stood a tall, handsome young Second Lieutenant (2/Lt) with a 9 mm carbine strapped cross his shoulder. I rose from my chair and said, "Welcome to 13 MAHAR, Rajeev". The youngster was astonished; "You know my name, Sir?" "Ah, I got it from my guard at the gate. I hope your boys are comfortable. I guess you are transiting through my battalion location." And that, dear readers, was Our Hero: 2/Lt Rajeev Sandhu.

Why would I call him a Hero? Rajeev hadn't performed any heroics. Well not just then. In about 14 hours, he would, and the nation would be witness to his guts and heroism. As Rajeev stepped in, he said, "Yes, Sir, we will be staying for the night in your headquarters and will be off tomorrow morning. My company has been placed under your neighbouring battalion and I have a task to perform tomorrow".

"Well, Rajeev, there is a hot meal waiting for you at the Officers' Mess and then you can proceed to my tent where you can knock off for the night."

"Thanks, Sir, but how about your dinner?"

"Not before midnight friend, since I've got to catch up with some work", I replied.

"Sir, there is no way that I will have dinner while you are slogging away in your office alone.

In spite of my best efforts to get Rajeev to break off for dinner and rest, he wouldn't budge. He insisted that we have dinner together. So, while I was still working on my files, we got into a conversation, thus:

“When did you pass out of the Academy, Rajeev?”

“On the fifth of March this year, Sir, from OTA, Madras”

“And where did you study?”

“St John’s High School, Chandigarh, Sir, and graduation from DAV, Chandigarh.”

“Well that’s a coincidence. I studied in St John’s High School, Bangalore”, I said.

Thereafter, the tone of our conversation changed from a ‘senior-junior’ level to a ‘school type’ level. The youngster looked more relaxed now that he was in the company of another ‘Johnian’, though he was conscious that he was in conversation with an officer with ten times his service. And that’s good breeding! I was quite impressed with this young officer; just four months into commissioning but brimming with confidence and well up with events. A quick dinner and then we walked across to my tent where Rajeev’s bed was already prepared, a field camp cot. There was so much that we discussed – from hobbies to games (Rajeev was a national skating champion for seven years), to life in the infantry to the insurgency in Sri Lanka, and more. Such an affable, well-mannered strapping young officer, full of life and mature much beyond his years.

“*Chalo*, Rajeev, you better knock off to sleep. When do you intend moving out?”

“Sir, I must leave by 5 AM since I have a fair amount of distance to traverse.”

“Fine, I will see you off.”

“No Sir, that’s not required, you don’t have to trouble yourself.”

“Rajeev, as a rule, no convoy moves out of this headquarters until briefed by the Adjutant since we are in an operational area. So, my dear, I really do not have much choice.”

“Well Sir, in that case it will be an honour to be briefed and seen off by you” said Rajeev and soon he was asleep. Rajeev woke me up at 04:30 AM on that fateful morning and we quickly got ready, jumped into our combat dress and walked up to the gate together where his small team was waiting in two vehicles. He briefed his boys first and I did so thereafter, cautioning them to be fully alert since the LTTE cadres were quite active on the route that they were to traverse. At 5 AM sharp, the party was ready to move and the youngster gave me a smart salute and said, “Thank you, Sir, looking forward to meeting you again!”

“Me too, Rajeev. Be careful and all the best!” I said as I shook his hand.

I liked this youngster. I think I said a silent prayer for his well-being. Any move in that LTTE infested area was fraught with danger. I waited at the gate until the tail light of the rear vehicle dimmed out. Around 9 AM, I received a radio call which confirmed that the 7 ASSAM convoy had crossed my unit area of responsibility and was now transiting through the neighbouring battalion area. A little while later, I got yet another call from a radio operator who said, “*Saheb, LTTE ne 7 ASSAM convoy par ambush kar diya.*” I was stunned, to say the least. I tried not to think that something had happened to Rajeev. My best efforts to get more details of the ambush from the nearby posts drew a blank. Radio communications in those days weren’t the best and left much to be desired. I thereafter called up the Adjutant of the neighbouring battalion. My worst fears were confirmed when he said, “Yes, Sir, there has been an ambush by the LTTE. The youngster from 7 ASSAM is no more. He put up a brave fight and succumbed to his injuries.”

Oh God! Rajeev was gone. It was difficult for me to come to terms with this. This braveheart was with me just a while ago. I never imagined that it would be his final adieu. I was given a first-hand report of the action by that Adjutant. Rajeev succumbed but not before he put up a brilliant fight. Fate can be cruel, but such is life. In his death, this young hero, with just four months of service, left behind a legacy of courage, honour, extreme heroism and supreme sacrifice. 2/Lt Rajeev Sandhu was the youngest Indian Army officer to be honoured with the Maha Vir Chakra (Posthumous). The event that took his life can be best explained by the original citation that is reproduced below:

On July 19, 1988 2/Lt Rajeev Sandhu was leading a convoy from Madurankenikulam to Markni post for collection of supplies. At about 09:10 AM when his jeep reached near a track junction amidst the jungle, LTTE militants laying an ambush, suddenly opened heavy volume of fire with Rifle propelled Grenades, AK-47 and 7.62mm Rifles. The protection party was killed instantly; the driver was critically wounded and incapacitated. Both the legs of 2/Lt Rajeev Sandhu were completely mutilated due to a direct rocket hit, the heavy volume of small arms fire found its mark at numerous places on his body. Totally crippled and bleeding profusely, he tumbled out of the Jeep with his 9 mm Carbine and crawled to a firing position. Presuming everyone in the vehicle had been killed; one of the militants came out from hiding and approached the jeep to pick up the weapons of the slain soldiers. But all was not over yet for 2/Lt Rajeev Sandhu.

Despite his legs being totally smashed and his body perforated with bullets, he still had his wits about himself. Sensing the intention of the approaching militant, 2/Lt Rajeev Sandhu in an act that defies description and goes beyond the realms of

imagination, lifted his carbine with blood soaked hands, sprayed a volley of bullets on the militant and dropped him dead. 2/Lt Rajeev Sandhu, gallantly blunted every effort of the militants to come anywhere near his fallen comrades and their weapons. 2/Lt Rajeev Sandhu displayed conspicuous courage and valour fighting the militants and made the supreme sacrifice of his life keeping up the highest traditions of the Indian Army. For his unparalleled act of courage and valour 2/Lt Rajeev Sandhu was posthumously awarded the MVC.

Tributes to the Hero

A room at his Sector 45 residence is dedicated to Rajeev. Memorabilia of all kinds which were part of his life are displayed – from photographs to sports medals to his regimental accoutrements; in fact, everything that would remind the parents, relatives and friends of their beloved son, from his childhood till his martyrdom. “My son was commissioned in the Army on March 5, 1988, and lost his life while fighting the LTTE on July 19, 1988, in Sri Lanka. We could not see his body, but he will always live with us. I still wear his chain, ring, watch and bracelet,” said Mr Sandhu in a recent interview.

Rajeev’s name is also etched on the Martyr’s Pillar at the Terraced Garden in Sector 33, Chandigarh. The Pillar has been constructed most aesthetically and serves as a constant reminder of the valour and sacrifice of soldiers hailing from the region in various wars. The ‘Rajeev Memorial Park’ has been constructed in the Assam Regimental Centre, Shillong, to honour him. A beautiful memorial constructed in Sri Jayawardenapura Kote on the outskirts of Colombo to honour the 1,200 IPKF soldiers prominently carries Rajeev’s name as well.

Ever since Rajeev attained martyrdom, it was on my mind that I must pay a fitting tribute to this braveheart. Fortunately, I got an opportunity when, in 2010, I was given the command of the Red Shield Division. The headquarters of this division is located in Leimakong, in Senapati district of Manipur. 7 ASSAM was part of this formation in Operation Pawan in 1988 in Sri Lanka. I asked the firebrand Commanding Officer of 165 Territorial Army (Home and Hearths) battalion (Assam Regiment) to develop the park within the garrison and explained to him the theme upon which the park should come up. Today, an artificial lake, a beautiful fountain and a statue of the martyr forms part of this wonderful park.



The Rajeev Memorial Park was inaugurated on March 24, 2012, by Mr and Mrs DS Sandhu, the proud parents of Rajeev who flew into Manipur from Punjab for the occasion.

On November 29, 2017, a statue of 2/Lt Rajeev Sandhu was unveiled in the premises of St John's School. What a wonderful way to honour THE HERO of the school. During an interview, the School Principal said, "The motto of the school is '*Pro Deo Et Patria*' which means 'for God and for Country'. If anybody ever lived by both these pillars of St John's, it was that young man. To sacrifice one's life at such a young age shows courage and loyalty that goes beyond comprehension. He was a young man when he died but he lived life to its fullest. We, in St John's, are so proud of him. He set an example that few have."

In Conclusion

"Did you hear it? It is the drums of victory being played from the heavens by our martyrs". Rajeev, you will always be remembered as Our Hero, for you are the bravest of the brave. Your name has been scripted in gold in your battalion, your regiment, the Army and our nation. You will live in our hearts forever.

The Spirit of Supreme Sacrifice is Ever Abiding!

This poignant narrative has been contributed by Maj Gen Binoy Poonen, AVSM, VSM (Retd).