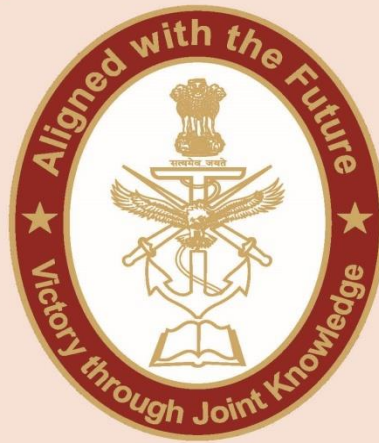


# CENTRE FOR JOINT WARFARE STUDIES



## CENJOWS

### VIJAY YA VEERGATI: THE ETHOS THAT DRIVES THE PARA SPECIAL FORCES (SF)



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Two incidents in recent days caught my imagination, both related to Para SF, the elite forces of Indian army: The first was an encounter along the line of control (LC) in J &K, where in an extraordinary close quarter fight, 5 fully armed terrorists were eliminated; alas we also suffered the loss of five Para SF soldiers in the encounter, all belonging to 4 Para SF, which had also undertaken the famed surgical strikes across the LC in Sept 2016. Second was the poignant demise of brave heart, Col Navjot Singh Bal, Shaurya Chakra, ex CO of 2 Para SF, on 9<sup>th</sup> April 2020, who even in the ultimate test, stoically faced his fate, smiling, like the "Warriors of Yore". Many thoughts traversed my mind; what was that special ethos that motivates these boys of the SF to make the ultimate sacrifice without any hesitation whatsoever !! Also saddened by the loss of five brave hearts, I did ask a few

SF Officers if the operation had proved rather costly, shouldn't we ensure that our casualties are minimized.

Col Saurabh Shekhawat, KC, SC, SM, VSM, India's highest decorated serving soldier replied cryptically: **“Sir we do our best to minimize casualties through intense training and planning, but once the battle is joined, its Vijay YaVeergati“.**

Having had the good fortune to have some of the finest SF units under my Command, also the Para Centre at Bangalore, one has a very good idea, what goes into the selection and making of a Para SF leader and Soldier. This article is more a tribute to these extraordinary bravehearts, who put their lives on the line, time and again, to protect India. This article, in no way diminishes the gallantry and achievements of other units and regiments who are part of the Indian Army, but aims to understand and **highlight the unique ethos of the Para SF, signified by their Balidan badge.**

### **Key Motivators**

There are many motivators, but the main ones could be identified as:-

- Strong belief in himself and his team, based on very rigorous and realistic training, as also high motivation and morale.
- Unconditional ownership of the operation, including success or even failure.
- Superlative leadership.
- The spirit of Balidan and the ethos –Vijay YaVeergati.

### **Raison d 'etre**

Every Nation needs to decide, what its special forces are meant for. According to Stephen Cohen “The task of special forces is the proxy application of force at low and precisely calculated levels, the objective being to achieve some political effect, not a battlefield victory”. As Lt Gen P C Katoch, a highly regarded War Veteran of the SF states, “In sharp contrast, in India, we have been simply looking at battlefield victory. SF units are deployed more on tactical missions rather than the broader, strategic and unconventional missions that should be their charter”. Rahul Bedi also echoes the same in an article in the Citizen, that the SF have often ended up as substitutes for conventional forces in counter Insurgency operations, for tasks that could be equally undertaken by regular infantry.

Since the aim of this article is to dwell more on the ethos of the SF, one cannot blame them for training for the kind of role they are being employed for. And let's admit, this training is vigorous, sustained and effective. More important, the training aims to instill in the individual soldier, a sense of belief, not only in himself, but a superior belief in the team he is part of.

As far as equipping is concerned, the India Para SF are equipped reasonably, but not with what latest technology has to offer. It is high time, we offer them the latest and the best that today's revolution in military affairs offers, including drones of all types, space and cyber based applications. More on this later in the article.

The Team is the centre of the SF trooper's existence. We are in this together, and together we will emerge victorious is the ethos. In the recent encounter in J & K whilst one squad tumbled over a slope and landed in the

midst of the hiding terrorists, the second squad in the split second, had no hesitation to jump in, otherwise the results may have been disastrous.

### **Unconditional Ownership**

Combat has always been and continues to be most brutal, challenging, unforgiving and the ultimate test of the human spirit, specially at the cutting edge. This is also the *raison d'être* of the special forces, for they exist only for special missions and combat. To face these challenges, calls for a very high level of individual proficiency in the skills peculiar to the SF, but more than that, it's the combined combat capabilities of the Squad/Team that matter more. This calls for very high levels of trust and unconditional ownership of the plan and the follow up action. Anything less would not do; trusting your life with your buddy/squad and ownership of both success, also failures, for no plan survives the first contact. Infact, there are more lessons to be learnt from the not so successful actions.

**The book “ Extreme Ownership”-** on how US Navy Seals lead and win was presented to me by Industrialist Mr Naveen Jindal, followed by many intense sessions on various facets of this book, which are not only relevant for the SF but can be equally applied in all walks of life. The Principles are simple and easy-taking extreme ownership of the challenge, the plan, the action and the result is the essence. The Indian Para SF are synonymous with this ethos of unconditional and extreme ownership!

Trust of course is the glue that binds the SF together, trust that has been earned and created through living and training together under most severe conditions for prolonged periods, analyzing and constantly improving themselves. Innovation, ingenuity, boldness and risk taking ability are key facets of this ownership.

## Leadership – The Ultimate Force Multiplier

Superlative leadership, specially at the Officer's level is the acknowledged hallmark of the Indian Army, so is the case with the Para SF, but because of the decentralized nature of their operations, leadership at the JCO and NCO level becomes equally important. And these leaders have to deliver, for they are conscious of the fact that in the ultimate analysis what matters is the success of their mission. The SF junior leaders have to not only be masters of their trade, but also have the sharpness of intellect and battlefield intuition to put their finger on the right course of action, under severely stressful and time constrained operational situations.

The SF Officers are a breed apart, single minded in their devotion to their profession, almost to an extreme. A large number have risen to high ranks, but some have also paid the price of not being able to adjust to life outside the uniform, when they call it quits. And this is not peculiar to the Indian Para SF, but a phenomenon seen across the special forces in many nations. Lt Gen Vinod Bhatia, a para officer of repute and erstwhile DGMO sums it up in a lighter view – **“A bunch of misfits who fit well together.** For the hazardous tasks they are called upon to undertake, they have to be special in all respects”.

## The Spirit of Balidan

If one was to identify the most critical and heroic quality- it is the spirit of 'Balidan', the ultimate sacrifice !! This is what propels these special force warriors to undertake the seemingly impossible tasks with a smile. There are numerous examples one can quote, but the recent one of late Col NS Bal, SC, ex Co of 2 Para SF would suffice. Maj Gen Raj Mehta has captured it so beautifully in the eulogy he wrote in the Tribune recently, captioning it: **“Always master of his fate, Captain of his Soul.”**

When you dig a little deeper, one realizes how this spirit of **Balidan** or the motto.

**Vijay yaVeergati** is cultivated right from the time the officer/soldier volunteers for SF. Drawn from all across the Indian Army, the success rate for volunteers is around 20 %. It is by far one of the toughest probations and those who survive these 6 months stand a chance of selection. All those selected have the option to opt out by simply signing a NPV (Non Para Volunteer) form.

In the words of Lt Gen Vinod Bhatia, volunteers are more adventurous, attracted by a challenge to be part of the elite and the honour to don the Maroons and the Balidan badge. Like the Cavalry, the Para SF are also closely knit, knowing that their lives depend on each other. The ethos and the spirit is to constantly prove themselves in the most challenging operational tasks, never satisfied with the success of the last one.

### **Optimising the Para SF**

Most Para SF Officers recognize that in peacetime, employment of SF in counter insurgency/counter terrorism(CI/CT) tasks gives them valuable combat experience; but constant and continuous employment also detracts and is detrimental to the combat edge, attitude and training required for the very specialized tasks at operational/strategic levels in War. I would tend to agree, that short term focus should not govern the deployment and employment of SF in peacetime. This is a very precious force multiplier and should be used judiciously. However, we have to be also mindful that such operations, even though at the tactical level, provide the Para SF with

valuable combat experience and enable them to hone their skills under live operational situations.

Another major concern is the equipping of the Para and Para SF units. In a very detailed article on Special Operation Forces in July'17 for the Force magazine, Lt Gen Vinod Bhatia bemoans the poor equipment, with critical deficiencies in fire power, communications, surveillance, insertion capabilities and mobility. Am sanguine the hierarchy is conscious of this and are doing their best. The bottom line is that the country must provide the SF, all that they need and more. The DPP must make a special provision for the SF. Anything less would be unacceptable dereliction on the part of those responsible. The SF should be provided the highest priority under the charter of CDS/DMA. And the equipment must be top quality whether indigenous or from abroad. May I also suggest that during the current pandemic crisis, where all procurement has been put on hold, the SF procurements should be allowed to proceed on fast track. The financial outgo would be limited.

The creation of the **Armed Forces Special Operations Division (AFSOD)** is a good first step to capitalize on the SF capabilities for strategic-politico- military tasks including out of area contingencies under the mandate /aegis of CDS (Permanent Chairman Chiefs of the Staff Committee), as approved by the highest political authority/CCS (Cabinet Committee on Security). Whilst some dedicated allocations have been made from the SF of the three services, its still a work in progress and needs careful nurturing, as also support from the three services, specially the Army. Ofcourse in War, the AFSOD would also be utilized for operational level tasks, may be under a Lead Service concept. The AFSOD has great potential to fill the existing gap at the politico-strategic-military level and needs to be so nurtured. The importance of providing it dedicated assets (including aircraft), Intelligence on a continuing basis and a SF



Advisor of appropriate rank cannot be overstated. In peace time we should also provide them discreet exposure in countries of interest.

### **Minimising Casualties**

A very sensitive issue, for perspectives differ based on experience and the level at which it is sought. Most analysts tend to avoid this, not wanting to question the professionalism and sacrifice of officers and soldiers including in special forces. Based on my own convictions, whilst in service and even now, I am quite convinced that the Indian Army is losing more soldiers in CI/CT operations than is desirable and maybe, some steps can be taken to minimize our casualties. To get a correct understanding lets look at two perspectives in respect of the Para SF. The first is that at the unit/lower level, where the ethos is Balidan and Vijay yaVeergati. It is not possible for the CO of the unit to lower this very high bench mark and combine it with caution because, as any SF Officer will tell you, once battle is joined the focus is on getting the job done, efficiently and with a ruthless streak to eliminate the target. The SF have undertaken large number of clean operations with no casualties also, but the risk is ever present and part of the hazard of belonging to the SF. My concern is mostly at a higher level, where tasking is done and requisite support provided. It is for the senior leadership to ensure that the SF are used only for critical missions, and once the tasking is done, they are allowed to complete the task as they know best, without undue pressure of time/ deadlines. This is a truth that needs to be acknowledged at the highest level and rectified. Like a Senior SF Officer told me, losing a valuable Officer or trooper in CI/CT operations is always painful, and it is for the senior officers to be mindful of this. Once the target/ terrorist is locked on, we will get him, tomorrow, if not today.

The other onus on senior leadership is to provide the best technology in terms of UAVs/Drones and other surveillance, with a continuous live feed



to the team undertaking the operation. This will certainly reduce unnecessary casualties. I am of the firm belief that gone are the days when a senior leader's focus was "Mission at any cost". **Today we need military leaders who will accomplish the "Mission at least cost"**.

### **Conclusion**

The Indian Army boasts of the most battle hardened and outstanding units in very large numbers. The Para SF, I have no hesitation in acknowledging stand at the very top, having proved themselves in some of the most daring and challenging operations, based on their spirit of Balidan and the ethos "Vijay yaVeergati."

To para phrase an illustrious military leader Raj Mehta – "Take care India, take care Govt and Citizens, do not let the bravery and sacrifice of these brave hearts remain unrequited, for they represent the acme of manhood we all strive for". So to sign off, one would just reiterate to all citizens, **look after the soldier in life, death and in retirement, for they gave their best years in protecting you.**

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**Disclaimer:** Views expressed are of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of CENJOWS.

