



Pulwama and After

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At least 44 personnel of the Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) were killed and 70 injured when a Maruti Eeco car laden with explosives rammed into a CRPF bus—part of a massive convoy—in Awantipora town of Pulwama District in Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) on 14 February, in one of the deadliest terror attacks yet on government forces in J&K. The incident took place at Lethpora, about 30 km from Srinagar on the Jammu-Srinagar highway around 3.15 pm. The scene of the attack is not very far from the CRPF Commando Training Centre at Lethpora, which was stormed by Jaish militants on December 31, 2017, killing five personnel. This was the first suicide car bomb attack in Kashmir since the 2001 strike on the J&K Legislative Assembly in which 41 people, including three suicide attackers, were killed.

The responsibility for the attack was claimed by the Pakistan-based Islamist militant group Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM), who said it was a fidayeen attack carried out by a local youth. Police identified the terrorist as Adil Ahmad Dar from Kakapora in Pulwama. He joined the JeM in 2018, as PTI quoted the officials as saying.¹²

A targeted operation was launched by the Army three days after the incidence on night of 17 February on a tip-off that three Jaish terrorists, including the handler of the Pulwama suicide bomber, were hiding in the Pinglan area. A joint team of the Indian Army's 55 Rashtriya Rifles, the CRPF and the Special Operation Group of the J&K Police launched a cordon in the wee hours on Monday. The search operation triggered a gun battle early on 18 February morning, which continued intermittently till the same evening. The encounter took place about 12 km away from Lethpora where the dastardly attack on the CRPF bus took place on 14 February.

Three militants affiliated to the extremist group were killed in a 17 hour gun battle with security forces. Two terrorists have been identified as Pakistanis. All the three killed terrorists were affiliated with JeM and were wanted in a series of terror crimes including attack on security establishments and civilian atrocities. One of the Pakistani terrorists identified as Kamran had taken over as operational commander of JeM after Mufti Waqas who was killed in an encounter in February last year. Kamran was a key aide of Jaish chief Masood Azhar. He, the mastermind of the Pulwama terror attack and top commander of Jaish, remained active in Pulwama and Awantipora since 2017 and had a history of terror crime records. He was responsible for the recruitment of people into the terror fold and several terror crime cases were registered against him. "Kamran's role in the February 14 suicide bombing of a CRPF convoy was under the scanner of investigators," a senior police official said. The second one was an IED specialist, Gazi Rashid, an Afghan national. The third terrorist identified as Hilal Ahmad, was a resident of Pinglana Pulwama.

The top leadership of the outfit in the Kashmir Valley was eliminated within 100 hours of the attack. However, the Army has paid a heavy price for this success. Soldiers killed in the operation belonged to the 55 Rashtriya Rifles (The Grenadiers). Major Vibhuti Shankar Dhoundiyal, 34, was from Dehradun. The others killed are Sepoy Hari Singh, 27, Havaladar Sheo Ram, 37, and Sepoy Ajay Kumar, 27. A head constable of the J & K police, Abdul Rashid, was also killed. One civilian got killed in the cross fire. Brigadier Harbir Singh, the brigade/ sector commander, Shri Amit Kumar, the Deputy Inspector General of South Kashmir, and others were hit with bullet injuries. In addition, it is believed that three officers and four Other Ranks of the Army were also injured with gun shot injuries and are under treatment.

Lt Gen K J S Dhillon, a tall, tough and earthy soldier from Rajputana Rifles with 35 years of experience, has commanded his company, battalion and brigade in J&K and had been Brigadier General Staff (Operations) at Chinar Corps Headquarters at Srinagar. He had just taken over as General Officer Commanding (GOC) of the Chinar Corps on 8 February. He had five tenures since 1988 in J&K. He told reporters in Srinagar, "Brigadier Harbir Singh, who is among the injured, was on leave at home. When he realised at midnight that the operation has started, he cut short his leave voluntarily and rejoined. He (Brigadier Singh) came back to Kashmir and went straight to the operational site. He was leading his men from the front. DIG Amit Kumar (who was also injured) again was leading his men from the front, and you would see from the injuries to our officers, it shows our commanders were leading the operation from the front and we were able to achieve nil civilian casualties," Lt Gen Dhillon said. He said the Army officers will continue to lead from the front during operations in future as well.

Asked about the high number of casualties in the operation, Lt Gen Dhillon said the security forces wanted to avoid any civilian casualties. He said, "There were two to three main reasons for it. We did not want civilian casualties. As you are aware, other than one civilian casualty, which happened due to terrorist fire in the initial stages itself, not a single civilian has been injured in this operation that lasted 17 hours. That is the risk we took, we took it on our chin".

By all accounts this is a very heavy price we paid. One can well imagine immense zeal on the part of the unit to get hold of the terrorists who were responsible for the dastardly act and the injured pride as to how can this happen in their area of operation.

Counter Insurgency and Counter Terrorism Operations are always fraught with danger. The advantage is with the terrorists all the time. They can pick and chose the target, time and place to attack. The guard cannot be at the highest all 365 days, 24x7. It is humanly impossible. Terrorists need just one opening to strike.

The Indian Army is officer led. The Indian Army does not preach "Follow Me", they do it every single day. No officer passes any order to his subordinates which he cannot do himself. Invariably the officer takes the position in the most critical and dangerous area of any operations. For example, let us have a look at Counter-IED Operations. It is one of the most dangerous and sensitive action that is undertaken. Two days after the attack on CRPF convoy at Pulwama, Major Chitresh Bisht was leading a bomb disposal squad team for sanitisation when mines were detected on 16 February on a track in the Naushera Sector. The officer and the team defused one of the mines successfully but while neutralising another mine, the device got activated and Major Chitresh Bisht suffered grievous injuries and attained martyrdom. Lt Col Niranjana E. K. of Bomb Disposal Unit of the National Security Guard (NSG), on 3rd January 2016, during 'Operation Dhangu Suraksha' at Air Base Pathankot (Punjab), was removing and recovering live grenades, shells and dead bodies of terrorists as part of sanitization operation. He effectively removed two dead bodies of the terrorists and successfully neutralized the booby trapped IEDs attached to the bodies. Keeping in mind the safety of his team, he did not care about his own and led the recovery of the body of the third terrorist. While doing so, a concealed booby trap grenade blasted and he sustained severe multiple splinter injuries and later martyred.

Both the officers were from Army's Corps of Engineers.

There are only about 10 officers posted in an infantry battalion of 800 odd soldiers. But look at the percentage of our officers of casualty in operations. Over the years there has been many casualties of Colonel and above ranks. Compare this with, say, US Army. As of July 27, 2018, there have been 2,372 U.S. military casualties in the War in Afghanistan. How many deaths in Colonels and above? NIL. That is the difference.

This has been the case all through. In 1993, there was an encounter at Old Baramulla. Those days it required permission to open fire with higher caliber weapon like Medium Machine Gun or Rocket Launcher. Handing-taking over of Colonel General Staff (Col GS) was going on. Both the Col GS and the GOC of Dagger Division, Major General Inder Verma, went to the area where operations were going on. It was a congested place. Suddenly one of the windows opened and a burst of fire came. The incoming Col GS was killed on the spot. The GOC was injured. There was great difficulty in extricating the GOC. No night flying of helicopters was possible those days. Evacuation to Srinagar had to be by road. Those familiar with Gun Shot Wounds would know when a main artery gets ruptured what happens, blood transfusion can only happen in Srinagar Base Hospital. Maj Gen Rostum Nanavatty took over the Dagger Division thereafter.

In 1995, there was an IED blast to a convoy of an artillery regiment which was going ahead of Uri. It was around 10 O' Clock in the morning. Hearing the news, Brig Sridhar, an extremely smart Guradsman who had been Adjutant at Indian Military Academy, was commanding the Uri Brigade. He commandeered his Quick Reaction Team and immediately started to go the site of the incidence with his education officer who was also officiating as his Intelligence Officer. Then the second blast took place. Brig Sridharan died on the spot.

There are such instances galore. On hind sight, one can always say that some Standard Operating Procedures to follow, we should be more careful, losing of men is not worth it, we will get the terrorist later, where can he go, etc. That is all true. But please think of those brave men in uniform. They are the most battle hardened soldiers on the planet. They know what is to be done, they are well honed mean fighting machines. Anybody who has faced bullets fired in anger would know what it takes to stand up when bullets fly. Still they are willing to put their life on the line of duty.

It is said, these are tactical level operations. These should be handled by the junior level officers and senior officers should remain away. True. Counter-Insurgency and Counter-Terrorism Operations are fought at the most at company level. However, one has to see this from the senior officers' perspective. Please remember all the senior officers here have years of service in Counter-Insurgency and Counter-Terrorism Operations. He wants that his experience be used so that mistakes are not made. They know well what is required to be done. Most of them never interfere in the operations. They are there to facilitate operations in case the men in line of fire need any specialist help or support which can be made available by the senior officers present there.

Indian Army cannot afford to lose officers and men. If an unit loses men, let alone officers, its morale gets a hit. Nobody wants that. But one should always remember that these operations in extremely congested built up areas are awfully dangerous and risky. Intelligence can never be so specific that you can target an objective ab initio. Terrorists can always change location. When probing by the Army, the advantage is with terrorists. The initial bursts can cause casualties to the exposed soldiers. You never know which door or window would suddenly open up to bring down lethal effective fire. We are dealing with well trained, well armed and very motivated adversary. They also know that once Indian Army has located them, they have no avenue to escape. In those cornered condition, even a dog fights fiercely. One has to take split second decisions. Under fire and immense pressure mistakes will happen. We will have to hold the hands of our brave officers and men who are putting their life on line of duty. No amount of praise is sufficient.

After all find one country who has so many success stories in Counter-Insurgency Operations as India has. We do not use higher caliber weapons, artillery, armoured fighting vehicles, helicopter gunships, armed UAVs or Air Force unlike other armies of the world. To avoid collateral damage and loss of civilian life and property we take unacceptable casualty on our chins. The people on ground - security forces, intelligence agencies - are professionals of the highest order, they know their job. The needful will be done.

Salute the brave and wonderful men and women who ask for nothing and give everything including their lives for the motherland. No amount of praise is enough for them. India need not worry as long as they are there.

References:

1. Shaswati Das, 44 CRPF jawans killed, 70 injured in Pulwama terror attack in J&K, 18 February 2019, Livemint, available at [:https://www.livemint.com/news/india/pulwama-terror-attack-death-toll-rises-to-40-jem-claims-responsibility-1550143395449.html](https://www.livemint.com/news/india/pulwama-terror-attack-death-toll-rises-to-40-jem-claims-responsibility-1550143395449.html)
2. For a detailed account of JeM please see Ramanand Garge & C D Sahay, Rise of Jaish-e-Mohammed in Kashmir Valley - an Internal Security Perspective, Vivekananda India Foundation Brief – January 2018, available at [:https://www.vifindia.org/sites/default/files/rise-of-jaish-e-mohammed-in-kashmir-valley.pdf](https://www.vifindia.org/sites/default/files/rise-of-jaish-e-mohammed-in-kashmir-valley.pdf)