



Book Review : Lt Gen John Ranjan Mukherjee, ‘A Soldier for Life – My Story’, Vij Books India Pvt Ltd, Delhi, 2021, pages 396, Rs 995/-, ISBN: 978-93-90917-72-3]

Maj Gen P K Mallick, VSM (Retd) August 8 , 2022

This is a story of the experience of one of the most illustrious General Officers of the Indian Army of recent time: the experiences in the Assam Regiment, India-Pakistan 1971 War, India's North East, Jammu & Kashmir and India's Tibet Border. The author has written the book encompassing his life experiences based on 44 years in uniform in a profession that he “enjoyed, loved and sometimes found extremely frustrating.”

The 396-page book is divided into six parts and 27 chapters.

Part I comprises 12 chapters and covers his early life till becoming a General Officer. It includes the General's experience in 1971 Indo-Pak War with 101 Communication Zone Area, with his unit at Fazilka and Ranchi, Junior Command Wing, College of Combat, Mhow, Imperial Staff College, Cambarley, UK, serving in Indo-Tibet border areas, raising of 9th battalion of the Assam Regiment as their Commanding Officer and General Staff Officer Grade I operations in a newly raised division at Bikaner, heading Indian Army Training team Botswana, Colonel Military Secretary at Military Secretary's Branch and Assam Regimental Centre.

The General commanded second time the 5th Battalion of the Assam Regiment in Arunachal Pradesh, had a tenure as Deputy Director General Discipline & Vigilance at Army headquarters, Brigadier General Staff (BGS) of 4 Corps, General Officer Commanding(GOC) 2 Mountain Division looking after Tibetan border, Major General, General Staff, Central Command handling Left Wing Extremism and UP Tibet border sector.

The General was posted to Headquarters 101 Communication Zone Area at Shillong as the Staff Captain Quartermaster Works and Planning in March 1970. He has narrated in some detail the activities pre, during and post-71 Bangladesh War. During this time, he also got married, which has been described with some amusing anecdotes. During the 71 War, the assistance to Mukti Bahini and their training, the logistics build-up, the operations, para drop at Tangeil etc., bring out some extremely relevant facts and lessons. The author rightly points out that the Bangladesh War was won largely because of the colossal effort of logistics support.

The then Captain was awarded a “Mention in Despatches” for looking after and training the Mukti Bahini, the conduct of their operations in Echo One sector and for logistics support to the formations of the North

East Region under 101 Area, no mean achievement.

The author was posted to his unit 3 Assam at Fazilka in early 1972. The battalion had suffered heavy casualties. He has narrated the battle of Beriwala. He writes that his tenure with 3 Assam in 1972 was one of his most painful career experiences. They had to dig up the remains of their fellow soldiers and re-bury them at the designated site of the planned war memorial. He had to conduct the reburial and formal conduct of last rites with full military honours for the late Major Khaingte, who was one of the Company Commanders in the battalion, his brother-in-law and best man in his marriage. Life is tough for a soldier.

The General was posted as an instructor at Junior Command Wing, College of Combat, Mhow as a Major, a prestigious appointment in those days. From there, he went to attend the Royal Staff College at Camberley, another feather on his cap.

Raising of 9 Assam, the exercise of Gaon Bura's Power, dealing with the death of his wife have been narrated with passion.

His observations after a tenure as Colonel Military Secretary is succinct: Army headquarters, due to power politics and parochialism, became a bloated organisation, an inefficient structure with a great deal of duplication. It needed restructuring and reform. Since those days of 1986, a lot of initiatives have been taken on this. One wonders how much the Indian Army has succeeded.

Gen Mukherjee Commanded the Shakti Vijay Brigade in Binnaguri. He had been involved in operations from Binnaguri, planning an operation as part of the division into Pakistan, Counter Insurgency Operations under Operation Bajrang in Lower Assam, border sealing operations in South Bhutan and commanded a military station under challenging conditions. His observation was that the repeated change of orders for the move of his brigade showed a degree of disorganisation and lack of planning at the Army headquarters, which should not have happened.

As Deputy Director General, Discipline and Vigilance (A) at Army headquarters, he was responsible for the discipline and vigilance of the entire Indian Army. The author took up a case for creating an investigating agency to support the DV Directorate as they did not have such an agency of their own.

Upon completing the National Defence College Course, the officer was posted as the Brigadier General Staff of Headquarters IV Corps. After that he took over command of the 2 Mountain Division. In an action-filled tenure, he personally led an extremely successful operation to conduct a raid on the National Security Council of Nagalim (Isaac and Muivah) Council Headquarters. It forced them to sue for peace, a cease-fire which remains in place.

He had a stint at Headquarters Central Command as Major General, General Staff. He participated in a very high-level war game at Delhi, where he was part of the Red Land syndicate. The Red Land plan of offence against India in J&K was startlingly similar to the actual plan of Pakistan in Kashmir, and the author wonders why we were so surprised.

Part II consists of chapters 13 to 18 covering Jammu & Kashmir, the Kargil War, his tenure as the longest serving General Officer Commanding of 15 Corps and his views on Kashmir. These chapters give a background to Jammu & Kashmir so that the reader may understand the possible ways to resolve the Jammu & Kashmir problem.

The chapter on the author's tenure as General Officer Commanding 15 Corps is a must-read for those who have and will be serving in the Valley. General "Johny" Mukherjee was personally selected to command 15 Corps by the COAS. His posting order read, "Posted as Chief of Staff Headquarters 15 Corps and to take over as General Officer Commanding 15 Corps in due course of time." In those tumultuous times of the Kargil War, he took over the duties of COS in July 1999 and subsequently as GOC in November 1999. He had been the longest serving GOC of 15 Corps and relinquished his command after two and half years. Those who were part of J&K during those days would know the long list of achievements the General had during his tenure as GOC, which he humbly had not mentioned. Suffice it to say the number of terrorists killed during his time, if that is any indicator, has never been matched. General Johny Mukherjee was awarded Param Vishisht Seva Medal for bringing the situation in J&K under control.

The reviewer feels it is too little, too less to recount his experiences in 15 Corps in 16 pages. His intelligence operations based on electronic intelligence, some 33 years back, is textbook lesson 101. The nation was lucky to have two of the finest soldiers commissioned post 62 war at the helm of affairs: General Rostum Nanavatty as Northern Army Commander and General Johny Mukherjee, both acknowledged experts in Counter-insurgency Operations. General Nanavatty, as GOC 19 Infantry Division during 93-95, was one of the main players in bringing back Valley under control. Both are strong personalities. One would have liked to know their interactions. However, one can understand as none of the senior leadership of the Indian Army has been discussed in the book.

Part III has two chapters. Here, the author covered the problems related to China and tried to explain why the dispute with China remains unresolved.

In Part four, issues plaguing India's North East states have been explained in great detail.

Being from Assam Regiment, commanding three battalions, commanded a brigade and a division in North East, been BGS at 4 Corps and COS at HQ Eastern Command, married to ladies from North East and above all for the love of the people from North East, it is widely acknowledged that General Johny Mukherjee is the foremost expert in the country on North East India. Anybody interested in India's North East MUST read these four chapters of Part four. He had orchestrated a highly successful operation as COS HQ Eastern Command remaining in the background, which he has not mentioned for understandable reasons.

Part V has one chapter which covers India's foreign relations with her neighbours and what needs to be done to improve them.

Part VI has two chapters which cover the author's perceptions and views on specific actions needed to resolve issues related to the Indian Army. Chapter 26, concerning issues that need to be attended to by India to make the Indian Army a more potent force, should be studied seriously. He has narrated some of his experiences as a veteran. As is his wont, the author has made some scathing observations and recommended remedial measures. His views on Ex-Servicemen Central Health Scheme (ECHS), some recent incidents of not allowing veterans to lay a wreath during Vijay Divas celebrations, veterans not being tapped for various important issues, Officers Annual Confidential Reports, selection of the Colonels of the Regiment, dealing with medical problems etc. need to be taken seriously in the correct perspective.

Gen Mukherjee had set up a Think Tank, Centre for Eastern and North Eastern Research Studies, Kolkata, focussing on Eastern and North Eastern India and Eastern Hemisphere with emphasis on strategic, geopolitical and financial aspects. This is an ideal example of how senior veterans can start Think Tanks outside Delhi and contribute effectively on national security issues.

General Johny Mukherjee had widespread experience in command and staff in North East and had little exposure in J and K. That did not stop him from performing brilliantly in the Valley as a Corps Commander. When today, the path to senior leadership in the Indian Army is generally through J&K, does his example gives any indicator? One wonders.

General Johny Mukherjee was known for his straight talking. He writes that it did not affect his career till he became a three-star. He states, as GOC 15 Corps, he had upset a number of people in the government and Army Headquarters. He saw arm/service parochialism at its extreme. It is well known that after his successful tenure as GOC 15 Corps, he was denied the promotion to Army Commander. Eastern Army lost one of its finest would-be Army Commander.

The author has described matter of factly, three helicopter accidents he had gone through where he had miraculously escaped, but the helicopters were completely damaged.

One thing becomes clear. As professionally competent soldiers are moved around from one hot spot to another, their families suffer the most. The children must constantly change schools affecting their education badly, staying in small below par accommodation, missing their father in the most formative parts of their lives. The ladies have to bear all the separation patiently, bringing up children in their teenage single handedly, no mean task itself. General Johny Mukherjee has endured extreme tribulations in his personal and family life. He stood steadfast with stoic dignity. The author has described these difficulties with honesty. He writes: We were not financially well off, having just gone through a daughter's marriage and maintaining so many establishments. Consequently, both the children were particularly tight on finances and pocket money. In those days, we were not as well paid as today. Since the high-end management institutes were expensive, he could not get his children admitted there and had to settle for lesser options.

The author had to endure medical issues in the family stoically. His first wife passed away at MH, Secunderabad, due to wrong diagnosis. He himself was diagnosed with cancer after retirement. He had three relapses, is immune to cancer drugs, and is now at stage four (terminal stage). His sister and two daughters have cancer at various stages. His first wife's mother and his grandmother also had cancer. He lost his son due to covid. He could not get a bed at Command Hospital, Kolkata, as his son was non-entitled when Raksha Mantri announced that civilians would be allowed in Army Hospitals due to a surge in such cases. By the time a bed could be arranged after requesting the Army Commander, it was too late, and his son passed away within 24 hours of admission.

Gen Mukherjee has covered an extensive gamut of issues concerning national security directly. Not many people can write with so much authority on J&K and North East. He has written this book as a labour of love. He has been upfront in his views with malice towards none. As they say, they don't make them anymore. This book is a must-read for all professional soldiers. Rarely can one find such a book that addresses the defence-related issues staring at our face with such clarity and forthrightness. Some maps or illustrations would have made the reader understand certain geographical matters better.

Recommended for every unit and formation headquarters library.

Attachment	Size
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