

September 21, 2015

Updated: September 24, 2015 16:15 IST

Fields of glory



As soldiers pass on a road in Punjab, people from nearby towns and villages rush out to give them a rousing cheer. Some came with flowers, some with offerings of snacks, some with hurrahs; men and women, boys and girls, vie with each other in expressing their affection for the brave defenders of the nation. Photo: The Hindu Archives



Indian jawans standing guard at the Police Station, Barkee, in the Lahore sector. The Indian tri colour is seen flying over the station in Pakistan. (29/09/1965) Photo: The Hindu Archives



Rachna Bisht Rawat

Rachna Bisht Rawat's 1965: Stories From The Second Indo-Pak War commemorates five of the grittiest battles fought by the Indian Army

It is the night of September 21-22, 1965, and the pillboxes in Dograi on the outskirts of Lahore are blistering with Pakistani gunfire. In the pock-marked fields surrounding it are the soldiers of India's 3 Jat battalion. Amidst the blaze of artillery shelling, the Commanding Officer, Lt. Col. Desmond Hayde has only two demands to make of his sturdy men from the Hindi heartland. An Anglo-Indian, he spells them out in his clipped Haryanvi, but the concise message filters down the ranks — 'Not a single man will turn back' and 'Dead or alive, we have to meet in Dograi.'

That night, one of the bloodiest infantry battles of the 1965 War is fought — every house and lane is taken by the Indians with only guns, grenades and guts. By the time L/Nk Om Prakash raises the Tricolour on the Ichhogil Canal, 3 Jat has been awarded three Maha Vir Chakras, India's second-highest military decoration for gallantry in the face of the enemy. Lt. Col. Hayde is one of the recipients, and the only military leader to be sketched on the battlefield by the iconic M.F. Husain.

This evening, 50 years to the day, Rachna Bisht Rawat's *1965: Stories From The Second Indo-Pak War*, (Penguin) will be launched in Delhi. An authoritative narrative in collaboration with the Army, it celebrates a War that has slipped from our clutch of memory, sandwiched as it is between the disastrous Sino-Indian War of 1962 and the triumphant Indo-Pak War of 1971, both of which have been analysed to exhaustion.

With a foreword by Defence Minister Manohar Parrikar, the book has archival maps and rare pictures sourced from the Ministry, the Army and personal albums of the officers interviewed. It also has a list of military terms that helps the lay reader navigate through the battles it describes — Haji Pir, Asal Uttar, Phillora, Barki and Dograi — without taking away from the gravitas of the drama on ground.

Says Rachna, "In May, the Army decided to come up with a book for the 50th anniversary, and I had roughly four months to read, travel and interview veterans. The Army pulled out all the stops — my research was done at the United Service Institution library and the accounts of the battles

are based on those who fought them. The Army even allowed me to include incidents where we were attacked by our own tanks in the fog of war; in that sense, this is a realistic version. Those who fought these battles are fading away, taking with them their stories; stories that need to be documented before they are lost forever.”

This book does not glorify war, but glorifies those who fought it without question. It is descriptive in the way it details the battles, and moving in how it highlights the lives of the heroes. “In each operation, so many units were involved; we focussed on those which played more dramatic roles,” says Rachna, who writes without burnishing the horrors of war.

The pages stage an unforgettable tableau of the Indian Army’s trajectory of victory, from the cold windswept slopes of the Haji Pir pass in Kashmir, to the riverbeds and sugarcane fields of Punjab, where some of the largest tank battles in history were fought.

When Lt. Col. Hari Ram Janu (retd.), SM, 4 Grenadiers, speaks from Jaipur, his crisp tone belies his age. Then, Lt. Janu was 22, newly married and company commander of CQMH Abdul Hamid, PVC, the tank destroyer of the Battle of Asal Uttar. “Hamid was a hardworking chap who rose to the occasion. We realised we had shot some enemy officials only later. In all these years, I’ve never thought of the gravity of our actions. One just follows commands, and is thankful to be alive and whole.”

It is the book’s smaller details that linger — the joys of eating a hot meal peppered by the acrid smell of shelling, the tale of a toothbrush, the graveyard of Patton tanks, the story of 2Lt. Ajit Singh and his son, and how Hayde married a local lass and went on to become a legend in the Pauri Garhwal.

The book should be read as much for the battles as for the men who fought them. And also because it is a fitting epitaph for those who fell, whose evanescent memory we, as a nation, have lived so long with.