

A Tale of Veerta & Vivek

CLAWS RESEARCH TEAM

Good gestures endure on. Even today, India is riding on the goodwill of Col Ashok Kumar Tara (Retd.), who in a moment of great courage and valour saved the life of the future Prime Minister of Bangladesh, Sheikh Hasina. In recognition of his great deed, recently, Dhaka decided to confer on Col Tara the “Friend of Bangladesh” award. It is important to note that, the last Indian to receive this award was none other India’s late PM, Mrs. Indira Gandhi.

Col Tara was a young major during the 1971 Bangladesh Liberation War. His is a tale of extraordinary heroism of an Indian Army soldier, who fighting all odds not only managed to disarm Pakistani soldiers but also saved the life of Bangladesh’s future PM and her family. His is a story can serve as an inspiration to any soldier fighting to defend his country.

Col Tara vividly recalls the events of that tumultuous December of 1971. For two weeks he had gone from battle to battle ever since his unit, 14 Guards, was ordered out of Agartala to cut an axis to Dhaka. Having seen action in the 1965 war, he was a seasoned soldier and a company commander. In the war of 1965, he had been decorated with the Vir Chakra while leading the Alpha Company in the Battle of Gangasagar. In the same battle, Lance Naik Albert Ekka of his unit was posthumously awarded the Param Vir Chakra.

Now, let us rewind to December 1971 in Dhaka to learn how Col Ashok Kumar Tara really came to achieve this feat. It was past 9 in the morning of December 17, 1971. A day earlier Lt Gen A A K Niazi, commander of forces in East Pakistan, had surrendered to the Indian Army. Around this time, Tara’s unit, which was assigned by Divisional Commander Maj Gen Gonsalves to secure the main terminal of the battered Dhaka airport for VIP movement, was informed by a local political leader that Sheikh Mujibur Rehman’s family was in danger of getting wiped out

by Pakistani soldiers. Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's family, Sheikh Hasina Wajead, then 24-years-old and mother of a baby herself, among them, had been under arrest in that house for nine months and were now on the verge of being wiped out by Pakistani soldiers. On hearing this news, Tara's battalion commander, Col Vijay Kumar Chanana, asked him to head to Dhanmondi to secure Bangladesh's future first family. On receiving his senior's orders, Tara along with three soldiers headed for Dhanmondi which was 20 minutes drive from the Dhaka airport.

He was thoroughly mature and courageous in handling the precarious situation deftly. And that was history in the making, with diplomatic dividends oblivious to the gallant Major. On reaching the house, Tara surveyed the house to figure out his best option to save the family, with no damage. He figured that there was a sentry who had a clear field of vision posted on a sandbagged bunker on the roof with a light machine gun (LMG). One bunker was on the terrace, the others were on either side of the gate. A Pakistani flag flew atop the building. The Pakistani guards were relentless and would have fired at anyone trying to enter the complex.

There was no way Tara could charge with just three men; the price for such an action would be too high to pay. He handed his Sten gun to his JCO (junior commissioned officer), and began a slow walk to the gates, unarmed. The sentry on the rooftop warned him in Punjabi that he would open fire if he took another step. Tara, whose parents migrated to Delhi from Rawalpindi in 1945, understood his language. He told them that he was unarmed and tried to convince them about their Army having surrendered. He even asked them to confirm the news of the surrender with their higher ups but the soldiers replied that their means of communication were completely cut-off. A fact that was established later.

One must respect the ingenuity and dialogue skills of the Major. He showed them the Indian helicopters flying in the skies, Indian soldiers in the streets and even reminded them of their families back home. He guaranteed them a safe passage if they laid down their arms. During the conversation, he drew nearer to the gate when suddenly a guard in the bunker at the gates pointed the rifle at him. "I locked eyes with the shivering boy even as I was talking to the *Havaldar* on the rooftop," recalls Tara in an interview given to *The Telegraph*. It was a very serious situation when the cold steel of a barrel poked Major Ashok Tara in the chest. One false move and the nervous soldier, who was barely out of his teens, could squeeze the trigger by mistake. From inside the house, the family of Sheikh Mujib (Mujibur Rahman, himself was imprisoned in Pakistan and was to be flown to Dhaka, a few days later) was also shouting. "If you do not save us,

they will kill all of us, we know," a woman's voice wailed out to him. He removed the barrel from his chest as he completely commanded the attention of the sentry and did all it quite intuitively. Finally, the guards gave in. They left the complex and were given a safe passage, as promised. All the newspapers went gaga over the tact, daring and courage of the young Indian officer.

Begum Mujib had embraced Col Tara and said: "You are my son who has come as God to me." The Patrika quotes Begum Mujib in its December 1971 report. "Many a time I thought that neither I nor the Indian officer will survive this. It is a new lease of life for us." Sheikh Mujib's other daughter, Rehana, wrote to Tara for a long time afterwards. Nearly 41 years later, Sheikh Hasina invited Colonel Ashok Kumar Tara (Retd) to return to Dhaka for the nations' thanksgiving, to the unsung hero of the 1971 war. In praising Tara out of obscurity, Sheikh Hasina has acknowledged the role of India in the liberation of Bangladesh, something that her detractors have been seeking to erase.

With the passing of Tara's generation, that would become all too easy, lest New Delhi uses the past as the springboard for a renewed friendship. For the men in uniform, they must learn that a calm head over strong shoulders can overcome any situation. The stories of bravehearts like Col Tara need to be told again and again to inspire generations to come. Remember our heroes. Lest We Forget.

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