

## **India's Fighter Pilots in the 1971 War Daring and Devilry**

*Death Wasn't Painful: Stories of Indian Fighter Pilots from the 1971 War*

By Dharendra S Jafa;

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### **SK Sriharsha**

This book is a first-hand account of the war experiences of a fighter pilot of the Indian Air Force who had the privilege of serving the nation during the Wars of 1965 and 1971. I call it a privilege since soldiers who have joined the Indian Armed Forces in recent times (especially after the Kargil conflict) have rarely been tested on the soldier's true 'Karmabhoomi'—the battlefield. The book is a part of wartime history that depicts the tales of our heroes who fought for our motherland.

The author, Wing Commander Dharendra Singh Jafa VrC VM (Retd)(VrC—Veer Chakra & VM—Vayusena Medal) has lucidly narrated the events that shook our nation in 1971 leading to the birth of another (Bangladesh). He was taken a Prisoner-of-War (POW) when he had to eject from his aircraft over enemy territory. His experiences of being a 'guest' of the enemy evoke mixed emotions of being intrigued and moved at the same time. The book pays tribute to the rarely celebrated soldiers captured by the enemy under different circumstances, some who did return and some who never could. It speaks of their deprivations, longing for home and families and their interactions with Pakistani military personnel and civilians. The book reflects the author's insights into various individual's characters, and highlights the mental state of the captured soldiers in three different situations described in the chapters, *Courage and Cowardice*, *Daring and Devilry* and *Kala Sandhu*.

The Indian POWs were objects of great curiosity in Pakistan. People from various walks of life interacted with them in prison. An account of these intriguing conversations on religion, partition, politics and likely future relations between the two countries have been collated and presented in *The Times*, *They were Bad* and *The Great Homecoming*.

The book is a glowing tribute to those who go the extra mile; who take extra risks in battle. Some return and some are lost to enemy guns. Of the ones who are captured, some survive and some don't. This is a tale of the gallant few who survived.

The book begins with an account of history of the times, circa 1971, when India had to deal with two Pakistans, East and West Pakistan. The tussle between the Bengalis and Punjabis, the power struggle between Sheikh Mujib-ur-Rehman on one side and Bhutto and Gen Yahya Khan on the other, is briefly described. The exodus of refugees into India, Indira Gandhi's futile attempts to appeal to Pakistan and other nations to prevent the exodus, her support to the Bengalis resulting in the Punjabis of West Pakistan attacking India were the chain of events that led to the war.

### **The fighter pilot**

The Fighter Pilot of the Indian Air Force is the cream of the crop; often described as the "Fighting Teeth of the Air Force". These are men with sublime skills who fly the most sophisticated piece of machinery, the Fighter Aircraft, with an expertise that makes the machine an extension of their bodies. They train day in and day out to exploit every inch of technology available to them, to make the machine they fly the most lethal 'Weapon Delivery Platform'. They are also members of the one of the riskiest professions known to man.

As a tradition, all Fighter Pilots have nicknames. Fernandes is Ferdy, Gafoor is Goofy, Murganandam is Murgs, Kapoor is Kaps and Jafa is Jeff. As they grow in Service, the senior officers often are posted away from the Flying squadrons to enable them to get a grasp of the 'other side'. A life away from 'Stick and Throttle', as they say, to learn the nuances of managing the Air Force and its resources, both men and machines. They are posted to execute Staff assignments at Command Headquarters (Cmd) and Air Headquarters (AHQ). A few of them who are the very best are handpicked by the top brass to be their Staff Officers, also called as Aide- de-Camp or ADC. Wg Cdr DS Jafa was one amongst those who were chosen by none other than the Chief of the Air Staff (CAS) himself, Air Chief Marshal PC Lal, Padma Vibhushan Padma Bhushan DFC (DFC- Distinguished Flying Cross).

From a brief description of the events that led to the war, the chapter dives into the thick of one of the many Sukhoi-7 Strike Missions over Pakistan led by Wg Cdr Jafa (call sign Red One) of 26 Squadron. Strike Missions are ones in which strategic and tactical targets of the enemy are targeted and destroyed by aircraft using heavy bombs. Roads, railway lines, power supply installations, fuel and armament dumps, etc, form the bulk of such targets. Often these targets are protected by Anti-aircraft artillery (Arty) Guns that are the bane of all Strike aircraft. Wg Cdr Jafa's aircraft becomes the target of one of the Arty guns, and it caught fire prompting him to eject. The burning aircraft, the continuous barrage of bullets hitting the aircraft and the weightlessness felt when he ejected, made him feel that he died almost painlessly.

Upon realisation of having actually ejected over enemy land, Wg Cdr Jafa goes through the routine of disengaging the parachute, looking for a place to hide and planning an escape. But he realises that he is immobilised by a spinal injury. During an ejection, the pilot's seat is propelled outwards by small rockets fired on pulling the ejection seat handle. During this instant, the high acceleration experienced by the pilot causes compressions of the vertebrae of the spinal cord. Many a time, the ejections cause a permanent disability, or a partial one. Ejections for fighter pilots during old times meant that he is either grounded, or would never fly fighters again. It is only recently, in modern fighters, that the Ejections have been made safer. A pilot who ejects now can fly the next sortie after a routine medical check-up.

Wg Cdr Jafa is soon surrounded by the local villagers who rough him up and take away his belongings. He is 'rescued' by the Pakistani Army and treated as a Prisoner of War (POW) as per the Geneva Conventions. It is interesting to note the kindness with which a Pathan Soldier treats Wg Cdr Jafa by feeding him tea with his own hands and offering him a smoke. The gesture makes the author wonder; are they were actually enemies or has there been a misunderstanding?

In sharp contrast to the kindness shown by the Pathan Officer, the cruel ways of the Officers who interrogate him gives an indication of the difficult days ahead. An account of the interrogation, and the derogatory attitude of the officers in trying to break him, follows this. The interrogation techniques adopted by the Pakistani Officers to extract information from the Indian Officer are crude, but they do not resort to the third degree. Wg Cdr Jafa was privy to information of high value considering that he was the ADC to the CAS. Since he knew the extent of awareness of Pak Intelligence, it appears that Wg Cdr Jafa answered few questions correctly while falsifying a few. The inadequacy and lack of clarity in policies at those times concerning Pilots who eject over enemy territory and the evasive tactics of Senior Officers when faced with penetrative questions by the younger pilots is also succinctly described. In recent times, the pilots are thoroughly trained about the course of action to be adopted when they eject over enemy territory.

The pain of living in isolation especially as a prisoner, and in enemy territory, is enormous. These are the times at which military training comes to the rescue. However, the joy of meeting compatriots overcomes all pain and hardships, and gives confidence that things will turn out to be all right despite tall odds. Both the warring countries reached a cease fire. All the Air Force POWs were put in one prison. The camaraderie, exchange of tales of encounters, news from home from the latest members of their exclusive club, tales of happiness, of victory and tales of sadness of the passing away of near and dear; demonstrate the importance of the fulfilment of man's most important needs—those of a social animal.

### **The times, they were bad**

“The people were not evil. The atmosphere was bad”. From the dog fights and the thick of war, the book takes us on an introspective journey into the ethos of religion, history and the politics that determined the fate of three countries—India, Pakistan and Bangladesh. The book describes the visit of Pakistani Officers to the prison where the Indian POWs stayed, which resulted in illuminating and insightful discussions amongst mature individuals, who in spite of sustaining heavy personal losses during the Partition, discuss the causes and the effects of the darkest period of the sub-continent’s history. The author rightly summarises the enlightening conversation by stating that “it was individuals and always individuals who created countries and empires, democracies and dictatorships using differences in faiths, inequalities in wealth, or the arrogance of racial superiority to enthuse their followers and subjugate others”.

### **Freedom beckons**

The plans to escape take months to prepare, with the Pakistani guards somewhat loosening their hold. The POWs cleverly guard their preparations. Added to this, the political situation is changing and the exchange of prisoners is being discussed in the talks between the countries. The elaborate plans of the POWs—the positioning of those ready to escape in the select cells, feigned injuries, manipulating the acquiring of their cash entitlements, procuring books describing surrounding roads and terrain, constructing a home-made magnetic compass—the stitching together of the finer details of the plan are all described akin to a true prison break story book.

The presence of children and ladies in a POW camp takes the soldiers into a world of normalcy, where their own near and dear ones are present. The tearful interaction where even home cooked food is provided to the POWs by a Pakistani family is truly moving. The common people in Pakistan are shown as kind, lovable, empathetic and compassionate just like any others in our country. They are also cruel, selfish and greedy just like any others in our country. The difference then, is in the people who hold power. The demographics of the sub-continent are well described here. A thought-provoking detail is that most of the leaders, think tanks and policy makers of both India and Pakistan during those times were from North & South Central India. Those from border areas are usually the people who actually form the fighting force.

The last part of the book describes the release of POWs by Pakistan. The release comes as an anti-climax to the prisoners since the release is not sought by India. It is announced by Bhutto during his visit to the POW camp that the Prisoners are free to go back to India. The author says– “We should be going home at the behest of Indira Gandhi and not as Bhutto’s charity”. Although many talks occur at many levels between the nations, the issue regarding the lands to be given away to Pakistan are mainly on the agenda.

Repatriation of POWs is not discussed at all. The gains that the soldiers won during war are given away by the politicians during peace. The strange ways of politics are a mystery to a soldier. The lack of logic in the way successive leaders have dealt with Pakistan and Kashmir is obvious and is explained in no uncertain words. The frustration of not being able to do anything about it, by men in uniform, is also brought out.

And so, in the end it is with this sense of melancholy that the POWs come back to India through the Wagah. Ultimately, the homecoming is a happy event. The book ends with a sombre thought: the people who were welcoming them now were the same ones who once asked them to stand up for them in the face of the enemy, to take a bullet, to lose a limb, to lose a life; and if they would ever ask for it again, the soldiers will stand up for them—yet again, and always.