



WHITE WATER RAFTING EXPEDITION

- Lt Cdr Srinivas Tata

Introduction

1. In continuation with the aim of fostering the spirit of adventure, camaraderie, team spirit and to provide an insight into the functioning of army in mountains, a forward area tour and Whitewater rafting expedition on Teesta and Rangeet rivers in Sikkim was organised by HQSNC from 24 Oct to 07 Nov 04. A 16 member team led by Cdr Ramendra Mathur, SEDO, ND School and consisting of 08 officers and 08 sailors undertook this tour.

Visit To Div HQs

2 . We assembled at New Jalpaiguri at 0700 on 27 Oct 04 and thereafter proceeded to 234 transit

Camp, located 05 miles from Gangtok. We visited the 17 Mtn Div HQs and local army units on 28 Oct 04, our team leader Cdr Mathur & 2i/c Cdr Banerji called on GOC-in-C & presented him with the SNC crest. We utilised the remaining time in acclimatisation at transit camp, which was situated at a height of 6,500 feet. Accommodation at transit camp was comfortable and the hospitality was heart warming.

Conquering the Hights

3. On 29 Oct 04, we commenced our journey to Nathula pass. En-route we halted for 02 hrs at 17mile transit camp due to heavy snowfall in the upper regions. The camp is located at a height of 10000 ft and has an en-route transit facility and an

acclimation center for the troops proceeding to high altitudes. Here our team had its first opportunity to see the splendor of the snow clad peaks of the majestic Kanchenjunga. The sight had many of us immortalizing the scene in our cameras for their albums at home. In the ensuing period, our team visited an attached Field Ambulance Unit which provides medical support to the Brigade. It had a fully operational ward consisting of 08 beds, an operation theatre and a dental centre to cater for the sweet tooth of the soldiers.

4. The climb to Nathula Pass was through cavernous and winding roads at the edge of cliffs and had many of us mutter a prayer and admire the will of the soldiers manning these heights, with a steely determination. Enroute, we passed by 64 Brigade Headquarters and the beautiful Tsmogo (Changu) lake. Time to time, we came across an odd mountain dog running across or an occasional porter. These porters are natives of the highlands and are well adapted to the climate. Despite the hostile conditions, these men of short stature possess an amazing ability to carry heavy loads at these heights, where breathlessness is a common phenomenon. The mules that they employ are a sight to watch as they obey their master to his last word. These events added to the barren beauty of the peaks and made us appreciate the day to day difficulties encountered by our comrades, manning these peaks.

5. At the Nathula Dwar, we were received by the Commanding Officer of 16th Dogra. The unit provided us three light vehicles for our ascent to Nathula Pass. A peculiarity about these vehicles is that they are fitted with chains on diagonally opposite wheels, to avoid skidding on snow.

6. As we arrived at Nathula pass we were offered warm grape juice, which livened up our spirits on the rather cold morning. The Nathula Pass is located on the axis of the old silk route to China and is the final frontier of the Indian territory and is

the only post where the Indians and the Chinese see eye to eye. This snow capped hilly terrain has observation posts littered all around, with Indian and Chinese soldiers keeping a close watch on each other's movements. Yet there is a sense of warmth and friendliness among the men across the border. To promote and further this environment, annual meetings are conducted on 15 May on Chinese side and 15 Sep on Indian side. In addition, there is also a weekly postal service between the two countries. It is infact interesting to note that, this very place was the scene of hostilities, during the ill advised Chinese incursion into our territory. The world has come a long way since then and so have the Sino - Indian relations.

7. We then descended downhill to Baba Harbhajan Mandir. Legend has it that the Baba, a serving sepoy in 23 Punjab, while escorting mules laden with goods across the steep slopes of this inhospitable terrain, slipped into a fast flowing stream and drowned. He is said to have appeared in the dreams of his comrades and wished a samadhi be built for him, at the very site of his drowning. Since then, it is believed the Baba stays in the samadhi and has blessed the soldiers in the area. It is customary for every soldier passing by, to pays his salutations to the Baba and the site has become a must see on the itenary of the tourists as well. It is these myths and legends which pep up the moral of men, while fighting the odds (with) nature and the enemies. As we imbibed some of these values, they were a source of inspiration to us during the later part of our expedition, while negotiating spine-chilling rapids on Teesta and Rangeet rivers.

8. On our return, we also halted at the picturesque Changu lake. This fresh water lake with crystal clear water at a height of 12,000 ft is a sight to behold. It is in the shape of our country and is frozen for major part of the year. It is a tourist attraction and provided a yak ride along its banks. Back at the



HQs after being hosted to a sumptuous lunch by the Brigade Commander, we experienced snowfalls at the transit camp, which was a novel experience for us.

Visit to Gangtok and Rumatek Monastery

9. Gangtok is the capital of Sikkim. It is a beautiful city tucked away high up in the mountains, with many interesting and historical places to visit. The most significant among them is the Rumtek Monastery located about 20 kms from Gangtok. It's an ancient monastery founded by Lama Karmapa and has great historical significance as a pilgrimage site for the Buddhists. It is well adorned by beautiful paintings and carvings and we were indeed lucky to witness a prayer meeting of the Lamas. A teaching institute located behind trains young followers / volunteers. The lamas are inducted at a very young age and follow a strict life of discipline and divinity. Yet, on occasions these lamas (especially young ones) break out of their seriousness and indulge in some fun and frolic. The monastery has a Golden Stupa which signifies discipline, sincerity, concentration, hard work and above all peace and a forgiving nature.

In the Lap of the Hills

10. After adequate acclimatisation and an educative forward area tour, we descended downhill to commence the rafting expedition. A campsite was organised on a small sandy beach on the banks of river Teesta, 5kms down stream of the town of Rangpo. We soon settled down to the rigours of outdoor living. The river guides and other staff briefed us on the aspects of handling a raft, behavior of the river under different conditions, terms used in rafting and safety precautions. On completion, we were divided into two groups. I was part of a team led by Cdr AK Banerji, which was aptly christened 'Harpoons' and consisted of 08 members. The other team under Cdr Mathur was named 'River Riders'.

Learning the Basics

11. The second day at the site was spent learning the practical aspects of white water rafting. A two and half hours practical session was undertaken in the forenoon and one and half hours session in the afternoon. During these sessions, aspects such as forward and back paddling, recovery drill for man overboard, recovery drill for a flipped raft, swimming in the river and handling of raft in a rapids were covered.

12. In the afternoon, an exercise was conducted where in rafts were flipped by the guides to give us a realistic experience of flipping and boarding a raft under strong current. In one such exercise, I had drifted away from the raft and was pulled towards a Grade III rapid. Some brisk swimming helped me get out of the current and reach ashore, not before a few anxious moments.

First Blood

13. As we set out for our first rafting experience, the teams were pretty excited and by then had a competition going amongst themselves. We were raring to go. The rafts were put into the water by respective team members, after some sloganeering and words of wisdom by the team leaders. We waded into the angry boiling waters of river Teesta and started with a bang, as a Grade III rapid was the first rapid to overcome. This was christened 'Tashi Rapid' after our organiser who had flipped inside it. Negotiating this tough rapid gave us the necessary confidence, as we propelled ahead and completed a total of 18 kms of river distance from Rangpo to Melli, overcoming three grade III, eight Grade II and seven Grade I rapids. A few of the interesting rapids were 'Good morning', 'Diver In' (where a diver from river rider team fell), 'Harpoons', 'Three channel' etc. The teams called off rafting for the day at Mellibazar and returned to campsite by Road.



Adventure Down Rangeet

14. Not content with the thrills of Teesta, we embarked to raft down the small but swift Rangeet River. We started early and reached Majitha by 0900 h. Disembarking the rafts and getting them to the river was an exercise in teamwork and adaptation. We had a quick bite, alongside the river and started our journey down the river. The expedition began with a grade V rapid, which was bypassed, as the difficulty level was quite high. We started downstream of the rapid and soon encountered a grade IV rapid. While maneuvering this rapid we were very cautious and for few seconds, were completely submerged in the water. On successfully crossing the rapid, our spirits soared and we were hungry for more challenging rapids. During the course of the day, we covered 31 kms of river distance and encountered one Grade V, four Grade IV, three Grade III, two Grade II and three Grade I rapids. Later, we disembarked for a while at the confluence of Teesta and Rangeet rivers. After a few snapshots, rest and egging each other, we commenced rafting down Teesta river and reached Teesta Bazar, where rafting for the day culminated.

15. The last leg of the expedition was rafting from Mellibazar to Sevok (Kalijhora). This stretch was a river distance of 29 kms and included 15 rapids with two grade III, eight grade II and five grade I rapids. Throughout the camp there was intense competition between the two teams and a lot of friendly banter. The evenings were spent playing beach volleyball and getting together, around a bonfire.

16. The food was good and the river guides were jovial. Our guide Mr. Praveen, a veteran on these rivers was a very lively person. He shared a lot of local slang with us, especially an interesting word called 'Momo'. His knowledge of the river and its behaviour helped us immensely.

17. On the last day a camp fire was organised at the base camp. Certificates were given and a variety entertainment programme followed. Thereafter the team disbursed to their respective units the following day.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Lt Cdr Tata Srinivas (04503-H) was commissioned into the Indian Navy on 01 Jan 96. He qualified as an Observer in 1999 and converted on Seaking helicopter in 2000. He is a Qualified Navigating Instructor and is currently serving in INAS 336, Garuda.



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