

Letters from Kargil

Letters from Kargil

The War through Our
Soldiers' Eyes

Diksha Dwivedi

 juggernaut

JUGGERNAUT BOOKS
KS House, 118 Shahpur Jat, New Delhi 110049, India

First published by Juggernaut Books 2017

Copyright © Diksha Dwivedi 2017

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, transmitted, or stored in a retrieval system in any form or by any means without the written permission of the publisher.

The views and opinions expressed in this book are the author's own. The facts contained herein were reported to be true as on the date of publication by the author to the publishers of the book, and the publishers are not in any way liable for their accuracy or veracity.

ISBN 9789386228437

Typeset in Adobe Caslon Pro by R. Ajith Kumar, New Delhi

Printed at Manipal Technologies Ltd

If I die in Combat Zone,
Box me up and ship me home,
Pin my medals all over my chest,
Tell my mom I did my best.

– William Timothy ‘Tim’ O’Brien

Contents

Welcome to My Life	1
1. Dear Daddy	15
2. The Beginning	23
3. A Battle of Restraint	31
4. The Big Revelation	41
5. Comfort Me with Lies	55
6. Victory or Death	83
7. The Last Goodbyes	115
<i>List of soldiers mentioned in this book</i>	135
<i>Military terms referred to in the letters and text</i>	139
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	143

Welcome to My Life

In 1999, a war was fought at your doorstep. You may have barely felt a tremor of it. But in the dangerous mountain frontiers of our land, our men in uniform picked up their battered rucksacks and walked right into hell to save it from breaking loose. They were ordinary men like you and me, yet full of extraordinary courage.

I was eight years old that May, getting set to begin a fun vacation, like other Indian kids my age. But my father, fortunately or unfortunately, was one of those men called to the front lines to fight in the Kargil war against Pakistan.

Like you, I just wanted my dad to myself during the summer holidays. Instead we got only twelve hours with him. That May my mother, my sister and I had gone to see Daddy in Kheru, Srinagar, where his unit, 315 Field Regiment, was posted.

But he was given deployment orders just as we arrived. We never saw him again.

Had we known that those were the last twelve hours we would be spending with him, we would've done so much more with that time than just eating and sleeping with him before he put on his uniform early in the morning and left, forever.

Despite his cheerful exterior, he secretly regretted not seeing us for longer just as much as we did, or probably more. He wrote to Mummy:

Even though the meeting was short, only twelve hours, it was really nice seeing you. I'll see you guys soon.



It was 2 July, and it had been more than a month since Daddy had been in Dras, Kargil. We had spent the rest of our holidays with our family in Siliguri, West Bengal, and were returning to Delhi from where we were going to take a bus or cab to our home in Meerut – our last family accommodation with Daddy. To our surprise, the

whole family came to pick us up from the train station in Delhi.

I was told the news later that day. I remember that scene clearly. As I walked into the bedroom full of adults, I saw the shadow of loss reflected on everyone's face. I was a child, but I knew something was wrong and immediately turned to look at my mother.

She was sitting on a chair under a bright window, looking haggard. Her face was covered in her palms and her hair was uncombed. She was sitting crouched, her knees held tight against her. She looked like an abandoned child, someone I was about to feel like the very next second. That day I saw my father for the first time on TV – but it wasn't my Daddy, just his passport-sized photo displayed with pictures of other war martyrs in uniform. Since then, the closest I have come to feeling his touch is through his torn combat uniform and the black badge with his name imprinted on it in white – Major C.B. Dwivedi – in English and in Hindi.



The next few days passed in a blur. We were flown to Patna from Delhi and my mother's brother, also an army man, travelled with us in uniform. At the airport, we waited for Daddy, who was flying with us one last time, his body wrapped in the tricoloured flag. For the first time in our lives he was our responsibility, instead of the other way around.

We had to take him to his birthplace, Chandiha village, where his whole family would be waiting for him. Lieutenant Sanjeev Hariyal, a young officer from his regiment, assisted us, as did some reporters. In Patna we were greeted by the press and the chief minister, Lalu Prasad Yadav, and his wife Rabri Devi. The next day, we were again flown in a helicopter. This was the last leg of the journey for Daddy and us as a family of four, together.

We soon reached his village. I had never seen so many people at one place in my life. My father's five-foot-eleven-inch-long body was placed carefully in the gallery in front of his father's room. This was the last time we were going to be able to feel his skin, see his face.

I couldn't go close to him. As soon as the plastic

Letters from Kargil

sheet around him was unwrapped, I glimpsed his face from afar. It was covered in white powder, which made him look ghostly. Terrified, I ran to another room. That's the last memory I have of seeing my valiant father, my hero. I didn't salute him, I didn't try to stop him from being taken away; I simply found an escape. This eight-year-old coward was a soldier's daughter. I have never forgiven myself for that day. While my twelve-year-old sister was giving interviews wearing a brave face, I had run away from saying goodbye to the most important person in my life.

Soon it was time for his cremation. In the village, women were not allowed to attend it, and so we didn't. That's another thing I'll never get over – we didn't get a chance to light his pyre, because we were not given a choice. I know if my sister were asked, she'd grab the opportunity.

The news of his death, the media hype, Daddy's cremation . . . all of it happened in a span of three to four days, before we were left to ourselves to figure things out.

And then it began . . . the rest of our lonely lives.
My mother was thirty-one and clueless about

Diksha Dwivedi

many matters, but nothing could stop her from working towards the best future for her daughters, just as she and her loving husband had planned. In his letters he'd often write to her about how she could help their older daughter Neha feel secure after I was born. He'd say, 'After all, she's our first daughter.' He made sure he personally took part in our upbringing, even if it meant distance learning.

16 July 1998

My Dear Neha and Diksha,

I am fine here and hope the same with you all. I have not received any letters till date from you, but I know it is due to postal strike. Very soon I will get all your letters and you will get mine.

You know how I pass time? I pass my time thinking about you – your days when you were small kids, hardly able to walk or speak – then slowly growing and reaching where you two are today. It is nice to think about it all. If you want to revise your memory, go through the album – you will remember a lot.

How are your studies going and also the fights?

Letters from Kargil

Take care and do well.
Rest in the next letter.
With love,
Your daddy.

Through his letters, he held our hand every step of the way, he taught us to create memories and hold on to them while he was away. Now Mummy had to make both Neha di and me feel safe, all on her own. In those days, you'd often find her awake at night, sitting in the drawing room, holding Daddy's framed picture close to her heart, whimpering, as if she were talking to him to make a mindful decision.



The victory of the Indian army in the Kargil war in 1999 was based on a foundation of four factors – courage, determination, junior leadership and destiny. Everything else worked against them – from their positioning to their timing and preparations. Had it not been for the willingness of soldiers like my father to die for their country,

Operation Vijay, as the war was also called, would not have been a success. For years I blamed my father for choosing the country over us. It is only recently that I have learnt to accept his sacrifice as a blessing.

It has been eighteen years now. His ashes have washed away and his tales of valour are forgotten. Like most of the 527 martyrs of the war, barring a few, who gave their life to the country. Over the years I would wait for someone to write about my father, but it never happened.

I had stuck Daddy's badge on to my noticeboard in front of my study table. From time to time, I'd spend several minutes staring at it while I worked. Every time I saw it, it made me restless and angry. It made me wonder if my father's sacrifice was any less than the heroic sagas that were thrown at me every day on the Internet. That he wasn't alone in this made me even more upset. It wasn't just my father whose story was untold. There were 500 heroes from the Kargil war whose stories were yet to be told.

And so, I decided to write this book. I wanted to make you dip into the minds of those selfless

Letters from Kargil

men in uniform who wake up every morning so you can sleep peacefully at night. The best way to do this would be through the soldiers themselves, by using their own words and voices. With this in mind, I began to search for their letters and diaries.

Initially I was hesitant. How was I going to find their names? How was I going to get in touch with them? Would their families be pleased to hear from me? It wasn't going to be easy to make a martyr's family remember details about their son, father, husband, brother, opening fresh wounds. I know it because I've been through it. Reading those letters makes you want to tear right through the eighteen years, to that fateful summer of May–July 1999, and stop them.

My visit to Kargil in July 2016 for the Kargil Vijay Diwas gave a kick-start to my research. The memorial hall in Dras reminded me of what we were really missing about the heroes of Kargil – their voices. I returned feeling energized and determined. I read every article available on the Internet about the war. Then I tried to buy some of the books written on it during that period. None of them were in stock! Eighteen years had seen a

curtain fall over the war. It seemed like a forgotten event. I finally got my hands on *The Heroes of Kargil*, which was put together by Army Headquarters, and *Dateline Kargil* by Gaurav C. Sawant.

I then went to my mother for help. She is a powerhouse of contacts when it comes to the Indian army. This book wouldn't have been possible without her. Call after call, story after story, one name led to another. I got more and more names, and more and more information.

But the deeper I went, the more challenges I faced. Many of those 527 soldiers' families live in villages, without access to the Internet. It's next to impossible to reach them. There was a time when I thought of giving up, daunted by the immensity of the task.

And then I stumbled upon a letter that reminded me of the very reason why I had started on the project. In that letter Daddy had called me a 'brave girl'. I felt a gush of pride, but it was immediately clouded by a sense of shame at the memory of my behaviour during his last rites. He was right – I was brave, despite my behaviour. And this was my chance, my chance to prove it.

Letters from Kargil

8 July 1998

My Dear Diksha,

I am fine here and hope the same with you all.

It was nice talking to you on the phone yesterday. I know you are a brave girl and will help mummy and didi in their work. How is your ear now?

It is nice that Mausaji and Mausiji are coming to meet you all. Do call nanaji also.

I am sure, you must be preparing well for your classes.

With love,

Your daddy.

So I decided to go ahead. I reassessed my approach to this book. Instead of telling the stories of 500-plus soldiers, I would focus on a smaller cast of characters and make them come alive, narrating the story of the war through their eyes. I'd like to think that although this book does not mention every hero who sacrificed his life in the Kargil war, it represents each one of them.

The heroes of Kargil had a lot more in common than what met the eye. They talked, walked and

breathed the same language and thoughts. Indeed, the letters and journal entries that I read often seemed as if they were written by one person. Their love for their country, their ties to their families, their constant efforts to protect their loved ones from feeling nervous, the absence of regret about their decisions, their complete focus – these were the distinctive preoccupations of the soldiers that come across in the letters you are about to read.

A war like the Kargil war will not be fought again. The Indian army will probably not be so surprised by and so underprepared for mountain warfare ever again. Through this book, the story of that war and its heroes will be told to you, now by me. And this time, you won't be able to forget that story, because it's the heroes themselves talking to you.