

Capt. M.S. Kohli: Profile of a Summiteer

RUCHI SRIVASTAVA

THE HIMALAYAS IS HIS FIRST LOVE, his *joie de vivre*, his *metier*... It will neither "melt" nor be "swept away". The euphoria he and his mates experienced on 29 May 1965 is still fresh, as fresh "as a rose in June." It was a historic feat. Nine men, all holding Indian tri-colours, set foot on Mount Everest - a world record. It was for the first time that so many people from a country had reached the highest point on earth!

Captain MS Kohli is called the 'Vesuvius' of Indian mountaineering. And you know why! He received the country's top awards - Padma Bhushan, Ati Vishisht Seva Medal and Arjuna Award - and adulations for his brave heart and huge feats. The Everest expedition which Kohli led was, by all accounts, "by the Indians, for the Indians and of the Indians". Their countrymen rejoiced at their glory.

Kohli truly had a date with the mountains. He got through the IPS but 'destiny' had in store for him something "higher". Soon he got a call-up from the Indian Navy as well. There was not much to think after that, let alone dither. He chose to join the latter, for he thought it would enable him to "see the world".

After training a Kochi, Kohli was posted at what is considered the highest quarter of the Indian Navy, INS Shivaji at Lonavala, situated over 2,000 metres above the sea level and surrounded by forts built by Maratha warrior Chatrapati Shivaji. Since he had the Scout Master's training, Kohli was made in-charge of the Deep Sea Scouts. "The Commanding Officer gave me the charge of the trek. Thus, every Saturday, I would climb up the fort and spend the night there. This went on for 200 weekends for nearly four years! And the best part is that the Scouts became so physically strong that they all became officers soon. Thus, I got interested in mountaineering," he reminisces.

"After Edmund Hillary's climb in 1953, the Himalayan Mountaineering Institute was set up in Darjeeling and Tenzing Norgay became its head. Luckily, I was picked for its first course, for the Saser Kangri Expedition in Karakoram. That is how my serious mountaineering began. Also, my father was an adventurous man himself. And he always encouraged me in such activities."

In 1955, on his first naval holiday to Pahalgam, Kohli accepted a stranger's invitation to join him on a trek to Amarnath cave. He completed the trip, which was pretty difficult up to 15,000 feet without woolens!

In 1959, he led an Indian Navy team's expedition to Nandakot. "That's when I became an established mountaineer. I was in the second summit party. But bad weather came in the way. The team had to return only 200 metres from the peak. In 1963, there was another "attempt". I was the leader of the team then. This time, we missed by only 100 metres. We spent, the night at 27,650 feet... a traumatic time," he recounts.

But Kohli was made of different stuff. "We reached the summit on 29 May 1965, and that was it! Getting to the top is the ultimate. There you face life and death together. All of us were on top of the world. It was absolutely out-of-the-world experiences. But the real celebrations started when we returned to the base camp on 1 June 1965," he says.

“Standing at the height, you feel you are in the sky looking at the universe. I felt I was close to God.”

Was it *nirvana*? Salvation? Attaining truth? “I don’t know. But it was a heavenly experience. Suddenly you realise you are purged of all the bad things that obscure your soul - jealousy, meanness, greed, violence ... A huge relief,” he adds.

When Kohli landed at Palam airport, Gulzari Lal Nanda, then the acting Prime Minister, was there to felicitate his team. “Instead of going to them, I went the other way round and touched my father’s feet,” he says. Nanda appreciated Kohli for upholding Indian values.

With 14 major expeditions to his credit, Kohli had 17 narrow encounters with death! The Indian Navy’s ascent of Annapurna III in 1961 again met with success under this “climbing Sikh’s” dynamic leadership.

Kohli has also authored 20 books relating to his sojourns in the Himalayas. His recent book, co-authored by Kennet Conboy, *The Spies Himalayas*, deals with the secret Indo-American intelligence operations in the Himalayas from 1965-67 to keep a tab on China’s missile developments.

He says: “After returning from Everest expedition, I was asked by the Indian government to lead an Indo-American expedition. The objective was to instal sensors on Nanda Devi and Nandakot summits. There was nothing secretive about it. A committee of scientists had been appointed by Prime Minister Morarji Desai. Atal Behari Vajpayee, Foreign Minister then, had made a statement in Parliament. The device could monitor the missile launches in China. It could detect any movement in the region. I was ready to do anything for my country! But when we went back to the same spot, they could not be found! They must have been gobbled up by snow.”

Kohli belongs to the exclusive band of three climbers, who in 1962 survived six days in the death zone of Everest, above 26,000 feet, most of the time without oxygen.

He had a distinguished career in the Indo-Tibetan Border Police as Commandant. A fiery adventurer, Kohli collaborated with Sir Edmund Hillary in 1977 in “From the Ocean to Sky Jet Boat Expedition up the Ganges”. He introduced aero sports in India by organising the first International Hand Gliding Rally and founded the Himalayan Environment Trust along with Sir Edmund Hillary.

Climbing for him is a great mental endeavour. He says, “Carrying the ice-axes, weighing 15 pounds and the heavy oxyge cylinders. required a superhuman effort. You have to exert the last ounce of your energy.”

And that’s not an uphill task for Capt Kohli, Man of the Mountains.

□

Tejpal Singh, United States Attorney

TEJPAL SINGH WAS RECENTLY appointed Assistant U.S. Attorney from the District of Columbia. With *kes*h and turban, Tejpal is the first Sikh attorney appointed by the Department of Justice (DOJ). DOJ appointments are highly coveted and very prestigious.

Born in Philadelphia, Tejpal Singh graduated from Boston University with a bachelor's in Political Science and Philosophy, *magna cum laude*. He went on to receive a law degree from George Washington Law School, with honors, in 1998. After graduation, he joined Crowell and Morning LLP, where he specialized in government contracts and general litigation. As part of his practice, Tejpal worked on complex commercial litigation arising in federal and state courts, and has particular expertise in the areas of telecommunications and international litigation.

The U.S. Attorneys are the vehicle by which the United States acts in court. They execute all the laws of the United States and prosecute anyone who violates those laws. Cases taken up by the U.S. Attorneys range from terrorism (terrorism against Americans abroad is prosecuted in the U.S.) and espionage to fraud and cybercrimes.

The reason why the U.S. Attorney's office is difficult to get into is because of the prestige of prosecuting high profile cases. The attorneys represent the U.S. government in court and they bind the government when they prosecute federal law violations. For example, when the government goes after terrorists or mobsters, the U.S. Attorneys are the ones who prosecute them.

Each state has a U.S. Attorney. Larger states may have more than one. U.S. Attorneys are normally appointed by the President and confirmed by Congress. The U.S. Attorney of each district then appoints Assistant U.S. Attorneys. Tejpal Singh was appointed by the U.S. Attorney from D.C., Roscoe C. Howard. There are approximately 2,000 Assistant U.S. Attorneys across the country.

The position is highly competitive. Only one in ten applicants for Assistant U.S. Attorney is granted an interview, and of those, about half are offered a position. An appointment as Assistant U.S. Attorney provides an excellent opportunity for young lawyers to gain valuable litigation and trial experience in front of judges and juries.

In Washington D.C. where Tejpal Singh practices, they are responsible for local law enforcement as well - felonies, murder, rape. D.C. has the largest office in the country with 340 Assistant U.S. Attorneys. They also prosecute federal hate crimes. The U.S. Attorney's office has a Bias Crime Task Force which was established well before 9/11. Tejpal says that the objective of the task force is to reach out to the affected communities and to prevent and prosecute potential hate crimes. Part of that role is to go into the community and inform them of what hate crimes are and to let them know that the government will prosecute them. One case that Tejpal worked on with SMART before entering the office was the Gurdwara incident in D.C. in which the temporary building/trailer at the construction site was vandalized shortly after 9/11. Tejpal represented SMART in the task force and continues to sit on the task force and work on hate crimes, although it is not his primary job.

Whether the D.C. U.S. Attorney's Office gets involved in hate crime cases depends upon which jurisdiction that crime occurred. In other words, the D.C. office is only responsible for hate crimes that occur in D.C., and normally hate crimes are prosecuted by local law enforcement first, but under extraordinary circumstances the federal government can intervene and take over these cases.

In March 2003, Tejpal Singh left private practice and resigned from SMART as a requirement for appointment at the U.S. Attorney's office. Tejpal is currently working in the Appellate Section of the U.S. Attorney's Office representing the United States

on criminal appeals before the D.C. Court of Appeals and the U.S. Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia.

Tejpal Singh served as Civil Rights Counsel and a Board of Directors to the Sikh Mediawatch and Resource Taskforce (SMART). He worked closely with broad and diverse national coalitions to prevent hate crimes, protect civil liberties and promote diversity, and was a frequent guest speaker before national organizations on issues related to hate crimes and religious discrimination. In the wake of 9/11, Tejpal frequently met with senior officials from the Department of Justice, Department of Transportation, and the FBI on matters related to the reduction and prevention of hate crimes and improper religious and racial profiling. In 2002, Tejpal was named one of the "Top 30 Most Influential Asian Pacific Americans Under 30" by the online magazine Politicalcircus.com.

Tejpal Singh is an active member of the D.C. Bar Association, the Asian Pacific American Bar Association (APABA), the South Asian Bar Association, and the Sikh Bar.

"The fact that there has never been a turbaned Sikh in the Department of Justice before is significant," says Tejpal. "Diversity is very important, particularly in the context of getting good policy and prosecution practice. Just by having a presence in the office, one can have an affect on policy. With experience and moving on to senior levels, one can actually make policy - when and who to prosecute, determine the proper types of investigation, and dictate how those investigations should progress."

Tejpal Singh firmly believes that "It is important to have as many Sikh Americans in political and non-political positions as possible - to have a diverse political and executive branch of government. It gives people opportunities and opens doors that would not otherwise be open." When he was interested in law school, Tejpal says he was discouraged from going into the field because of the discrimination he might have to face. **But now, he says, there are a growing number of successful Sikh American lawyers who are making a positive contribution to society.**

□