

COMMAND OF A WARSHIP

A GRIPPING, FIRSTHAND ACCOUNT
OF ENCOUNTERS WITH SOMALI PIRATES

PRODYUT K BANERJEE

Former Stealth Warship Captain



Published by
Renu Kaul Verma
Vitasta Publishing Pvt Ltd
4348/4C, Ansari Road, Daryaganj
New Delhi-110 002
info@vitastapublishing.com

ISBN: 978-81-19670-17-8
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First Edition 2024

MRP ₹ 695

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Edited by Reena Singh
Layout and Cover by Somesh Kumar Mishra
Printed by Chaman Enterprises, New Delhi

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PREFACE

To quote Churchill, ‘Writing a book is an adventure, to begin with, it is a toy—and an amusement. Then it becomes a mistress, then it becomes a master, then it becomes a tyrant. The last phase is that just as you are about to be reconciled to your servitude, you kill the monster and fling him into the public.’

Commanding a frontline warship is wrought with a challenge of a different kind—being honest and forthright to the men under command with a deeply instilled sense of fairness coupled with fair deliverance of justice, while abiding with orders, verse and chapter from authorities ashore. It also entails welding the clefts in the human chain which binds the ship comprising officers and men, before the crack of dawn and have the ability to go quietly into the night.

Warships, unlike other maritime details, are manned by a crew, who are experts in multiple specialist domains. While most of these domains normally function independently, there are numerous situations in which cross-domain coordination becomes essential, especially in situations that involve the whole ship and during heightened states of readiness. For example, a gunnery expert exploits the fire control system of a warship to score a hit on a target, while the navigation expert looks at the safe navigation of the warship with the help of a

gyro-compass, radars, electronic charts, GPS receiver, and an echo-sounder, among other equipment. A ‘helo-controller,’ who specialises in helicopter operations is responsible for the helicopter launch, and tracks the helicopter’s flight during operational deployment and recover (land back) her on the helicopter deck located on the stern (rear portion) of the warship. The propulsion system for the ship described in this book comprises gas-turbines having a propulsion mode known as Combined Gas Turbine or Gas Turbine (COGOG), which gives it flexibility to operate both economically or at high speeds. These are operated and maintained by men with high technical expertise.

On another domain, the MARCOS (Marine Commandos) are specialists in multi-dimensional warfare comprising air, surface and underwater operations. The most benign yet the most sought after is the ensemble of musicians comprising a segment of our navy’s band. They are embarked onboard to regale audiences only during foreign deployments.

Most captains, especially while commanding warships, have written about their time in command, but very few have recounted their experience in the Indian context, particularly in counter-piracy operations. This book talks about a different kind of challenge, faced by the crew and her captain, from an Indian context. This is a story about the experience while in command—about countless gauntlets, numerous surprises and many successes, and the strength and fibre of the Indian soldier. I hereby refer to the Indian sailor as an Indian soldier so as to not make a distinction between the Indian land soldier, air warrior and sailor from their respective armed services. In the process of writing this book, I have focussed the discussion on three areas—senior leadership, command at sea, and the

indomitable spirit of the Indian soldier.

This story is about *Tabar*, one of the finest ships in the Indian Navy, then! It is about the many trials and tribulations, the shared joys and anxieties and the loneliness of a captain in command, which becomes both a virtue as well as what drives the warship under many mitigating situations. This story is also about the strong work ethics, keen minds, indisputable domain knowledge and the unwavering moral compass of the Indian soldier.

Richard Branson said, ‘Train your people so that they want to leave you, but treat your people so well that they do not want to leave you.’ Naval leadership is also about creating that sense of care, knowing fully well that soldiers will be willing to stay motivated only when they are treated well. In the navy, a lot of resources and time are invested to train our personnel and it is for the benefit of the personnel and the service that this trained human capital is not lost. With increasing turbulence in our neighbourhood, optimising the utilisation of our capabilities in the navy to its maximum potential by ensuring retention of trained manpower should be *de jure* if not *de rigueur*.

This book brings out this aspect of the Indian soldier, highlighting how care and tact can make our men work wonders. The men among our rank and file are simply fantastic and most reliable; and all they need is care and nurturing. And if that is ensured, the overall results will far exceed the expectations in most cases. Such an approach to combat enterprise management (in other words, HR) has worked as glue to stitch the canvas of a frontline warship, witnessed amazing camaraderie, and unfolded incredible results! There are innumerable instances of this reinforced by live examples

aboard the pristine grey hull christened *Tabar*. I have also tried to identify and enumerate the numerous authorities and senior leadership that an Indian warship has to coordinate with, and how this is interwoven with the activities while in command at sea.

This book has been written for an intended audience. For the casual reader, however, this book presents an interesting pageantry of day-to-day business in a warship. It has a treasure trove of information about the drills and evolutions which are carried out regularly, the command-and-control structure of a warship at sea vis-à-vis her shore establishments and, most importantly, how the interactions between different line functions on board a warship can synchronously come together to transform the warship into a very potent floating and moving platform ready to fulfil its multitude of assigned tasks.

For the Human Resource professional, this book exemplifies the need for the three basic requirements—respect, understanding, and affection for the ship’s company (the team). Humans being human, react differently and often unpredictably to different circumstances. However, there is one chord that is usually vibrant in most cases—the sympathetic chord. If men know that you have ‘time’ for their problems, you are well on the way to be the catalytic agent for their confidence; and this can turn around any entity.

For those interested in maritime history or in the maritime domain, especially anti-piracy operations in the Gulf of Aden, this book provides a clear picture of the events that unfolded at sea from the view point of an Indian Navy warship captain.

This book is dedicated to all Indian soldiers; may they grow from strength to strength.