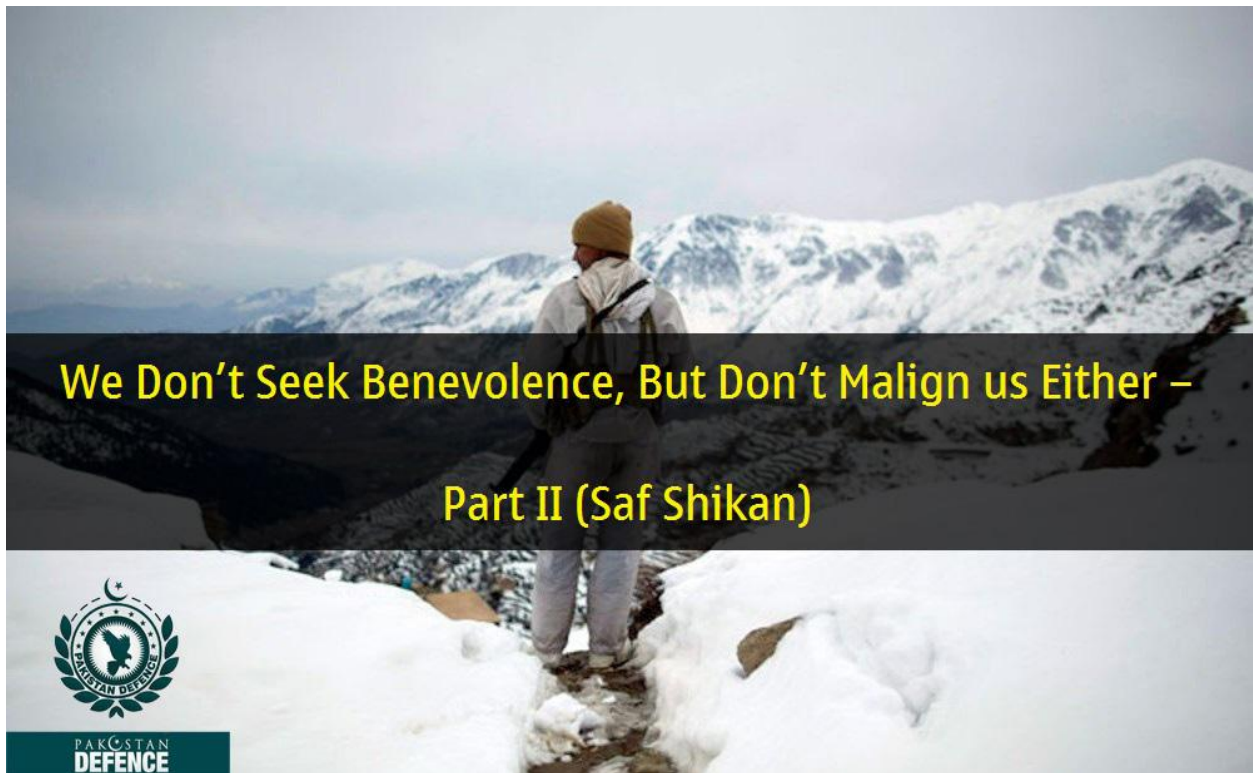


We Don't Seek Benevolence, But Don't Malign us Either – Part II (Saf Shikan)



The Saf Shikan

Saf Shikan Post is one of the few posts at the Siachen glacier which is inaccessible by animal-transport. Hence, all the dumping of ammunition and food items is done through man-portering. Mostly, because the gradient of the post is un-traversable by mules, but primarily because the approach to the post is over looked by the enemy sitting just a few meters away. Saf Shikan is located above 18000 feet AMSL at a gradient of approximately 30–40 degrees. An Officer's 6 x 3 x 4 feet (L x W x H) igloo, men's shelter made out of discarded jerry-cans and PSP sheets, and a 9 x 6 x 5 feet shell-proof bunker makes up the Saf Shikan Post.

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Not that we couldn't build more igloos or bunkers there, but then the area (approximately 25 x 10 feet) occupied by these three compartments is all that is livable at that height – a bit further away from these locations and it's either a sheer fall into the abyss or an enemy sniper's bullet will get you. The movement to and from a bunker / igloo to another one is also interesting – a High-Altitude Rope runs along all the three housings which is to be held during ascend or descend even within the post due to the sloping ground.

This is Saf Shikan Post which houses Officer (s) and few men for the next two months of their life. With this short premise, I shall now share an experience which I had while I was there as an Artillery Observer. Saf Shikan is an important post. The why, I would not explain, but as it was important, it couldn't stay out of communication for long periods – a phenomenon which is common at Siachen due to avalanches and other auxiliary issues that come with High-Altitude camping.

Hence, it was decided that the old telecom wire utilized for line-communication would be replaced by a better and more robust cable which can sustain the harsh weather and frequent slides. Resultantly, a five-men-party was tasked with the uphill task (excuse the pun) of laying the cable over a stretch of approximately 35 kilometers. In the rear areas, where the enemy couldn't watch, they moved during day, and then during nights as they neared the post. It took them almost a month to reach the base camp from where it would take another week to reach Saf Shikan. Just to put things in perspective, at Siachen you measure distance in terms of time and not lengths. The air is so thin that you can't drink water immediately after getting up as you feel short of your breath. Even walking takes great effort; climbing a mountain while carrying weight is altogether a different story.

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If fired upon, instead of running to take cover, it's better to stay and duck wherever you are, as you might get lucky and dodge the bullets, but running can cause your brain / lungs to suck upon its own fluids ([HACE](#) / [HAPE](#)) and cause sudden death. So, the men would carry a bundle of cable weighing around 25 kilograms for a couple of kilometers, dump it there and then go back to fetch another one to dump it even further, so on and so forth. After a colossal effort, the cable had now reached the foot of the mountain upon which sat Saf Shikan.

Till here, the enemy couldn't see our movement, but beyond it move had to be carried out on a moon-less night that too during bad weather (fog and blizzard) as the non-availability of moon light and heavy snow fall blinded enemy's NVDs, (Night Vision Device) who otherwise would pick up our movement and targeted us with small arms and artillery. Already, twice in the previous three weeks our move-parties had been fired upon by the Indians. So we waited. Then came the night when it snowed like hell and the cable-laying party was told to climb Saf Shikan. As was the norm before any movement to Saf Shikan, all the neighboring posts were made stand-to with weapons hot to counter any engagement by Indians, we too stood alert.

I, on the other hand sat outside my igloo with my rifle and an NVD looking down struggling to find the approaching men amidst the snow storm. The party gave us a test call from the mountain base and I instructed them to keep on relaying their location as they climb. After four hours, I began to see some movement down the slope through the eye-piece of my NVD. The party was just a few hundred meters from us, yet it took them another two hours to reach us as the gradient short of the post was the steepest.

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While watching those men struggle through the storm and amidst the fear of becoming a sitting duck if the enemy picked their movement, those two hours passed in a blink of an eye. Then came the feint shouts of *"Allah – ho – Akbar... Allah – ho – Akbar"* from both sides, as was the norm when a party was about to reach. As I saw the lead-man, I extended my arm out to pull him up. He held my hand, but surprisingly he was so heavy that I almost flung off the post. So I placed my rifle and NVD down and pulled the guy up with my both hands. It took me my entire strength to do so. *"Shabash! Shabash....bus pohanch gaye...pohanch gaye...Zaindabad,"* I said as I hugged him and patted his back, (Well done, well done, you have done it, Zindabad) He was panting badly. In return, he whispered something which I couldn't understand. The blizzard was still strong and everything was hazy. I too was chilled to my bone. So I placed my ears near his lips.

"Mera pait...Sir...mera pait...mera pait Sir," he whispered again. (My stomach, Sir, my stomach) My eyes widened, and as a reflex action my hands went towards his stomach, and all of a sudden I was struck by horror – he had tied the cable to his stomach and the entire weight of its hundreds of meters of length was resting on his stomach!

Approach to Saf Shikan Post is a roped-climb – How can you carry a cable when both your hands are struggling to keep you on your feet? I then immediately held the cable tied to his stomach to give him some relief, but the counter pull was so great that I slipped off my feet. So I called for help. It took three men to untie the knot and hold the cable.

Again, just to put the things in perspective, we tied the cable to the 200 - liter barrel we used to keep topped up with snow to be later used for melting into water, and even that flipped. We then tied the

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cable to something as strong as the will of the soldier who had carried it. So people, such are the men we command – dedicated, motivated, self-less and brave. And it's an honor. I can just imagine the agony those men and especially that soldier had been through while they carried that cable to Saf Shikan Post through the wilderness of Siachen Glacier. Not because your taxes were short or as the rhetoric goes, the leadership 'failed' them, but because it had to be done, and well-done within the allocated time and resources. The tired and fatigued they were, but they had to travel back to the base camp the same night.

I requested the sector commander to let them stay but it was not allowed. Primarily for two reasons; One, Saf Shikan like other posts was already cramped up due to lack of space. Two, God knows when the combination of a moon-less night and bad weather would grace us so that we could have movement again. So the men went back and reached the base after a hike of another four hours. Still, you know what, they gave much less than what their counterparts are sacrificing today in the

Operation Zarb-E-Azb

Post Script

- Name of the post has been changed and certain details omitted for the obvious reasons.
- NVDs are an acronym for the Night Vision Devices.
- Igloos are shelters built for arctic conditions.
- The pulley system previously installed at Saf Shikan didn't work.

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- Those planning to have a field day about 'Jernails' over this piece, should understand that these men came from the same Pakistani lot who have ruined PIA, Pak Rails and Pak Steel, and just yesterday had killed three Ahmadis. Remember, it's the leadership that makes the difference.

Part-1 of this blog entry can be reached at following links.

<http://xerics.blogspot.com.au/2012/11/we-dont-seek-benevolence-but-dont.html#.U9hxHu0Sz5q>

<http://defence.pk/threads/we-don%C2%92t-seek-benevolence-but-don%C2%92t-malign-us-either-%C2%96-part-i.216475/#post-3555840>

This blog is the part two of a squall which is being published at defence.pk. A follow up entry will also be published on authors own blog and on defence.pk

About the author

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