

VALOUR AND PRESTIGE — THE WORLD OF SPECIAL OPERATIONS

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'While the crew on these missions were awarded for their professionalism and gallantry, what needs to be appreciated too is the aircrew selection and their special training' | Photo Credit: PTI

The [evacuation of 121 Indians from Wadi Seidna](#), north of Khartoum in Sudan, in the dead of night, using an Indian Air Force (IAF) C-130J Super Hercules, has been lauded all round. The IAF's press release is an understatement of the stupendous task done on the night of April 27-28, but is a subtle shabash to the personnel involved. And let us not forget the steed they flew, the C-130J, and the foresight of the IAF and national leadership in the beginning of the century which, considering the growing stature and responsibilities of the nation, had planned the purchase of this aircraft, an outstanding capability enabler. One also needs to acknowledge the acquisition of the other aircraft for the IAF, the C-17 Globemaster heavy lift aircraft.

The Wadi Seidna mission will soon be forgotten and it is only right that the reader is able to have some idea of how special operations capability has progressed, and what should be kept in mind as it is developed further.

During the 'Kandahar' incident of December 24, 1999, when an Indian Airlines flight IC-814 was hijacked while on a flight from Kathmandu to New Delhi — it ended on December 31, 1999 — I happened to be with Air Chief Marshal A.Y. Tipnis on December 24 in Israel when the chief's mobile phone rang; the Vice Chief was on line with the news that IC-814 had been hijacked and had landed at Amritsar, a civil airfield. We all know how standard operating procedures did not work thereafter and the plane eventually landed at Kandahar in Afghanistan, leading to the release of dreaded terrorists.

Could India have done a rescue like the famous Israeli rescue at Entebbe, Uganda in July 1976? Here, Israeli commandos flew all the way to Uganda and stormed a hijacked Air France jet in trying circumstances. The will is sure to have been there but for two big impediments — the presence of Pakistan whose territory could not have been overflown and no IAF aircraft that could carry out a very risky mission avoiding Pakistani airspace, entering Afghanistan from the south and returning without refuelling.

Enter the C-130J in the IAF's inventory, and we now have this capability if the political leadership decides to intervene in such a critical situation where national interests and reputation are at stake. Before the Sudan rescue there have been two other such missions that

are known in the open domain. The first was the evacuation of Indian Embassy personnel from Herat, in Afghanistan in April 2020. The aircraft flew from India and had its engines running even after landing; the IAF's Garud commandos stood guard while the diplomatic staff emplaned.

The second mission, on August 20, 2021 was an equally high risk one from Kabul; one had evacuation videos by the United States and the fiasco that unfolded going viral. The airspace was uncontrolled and the ground situation chaotic for want of a better word. There were a large number of aircraft in the air and the pilots had to avoid them and use night vision goggles while landing; the only call they received from the ground controller was the line, "Land at your own risk" (a phrase that is etched on the shoulder patch that squadron crew wear on their flying overalls).

While the crew on these missions were awarded for their professionalism and gallantry, what needs to be appreciated too is the aircrew selection and their special training.

In the case of the Sudan rescue, the crew faced many problems too. Intelligence was poor and the runway was rough with no landing aids. All they had was top-class onboard aircraft instrumentation such as synthetic runway generation on the head-up display, electro-optical night vision capability, night vision goggles, and of course, great confidence in their ability to pull it off.

Special operations are much more than stick and throttle operations, night vision goggles and dark nights. Every member of such a mission bears on his shoulders the weight of a nation's prestige. They are India's 'strategic corporals'. This term, coined by General Charles C. Krulak of the U.S. Marine Corps, denotes that in modern warfare, the actions of even the enlisted man on the front lines has a strategic effect on a nation's policies; and that institutional training should cater for this. When it comes to failure, the bungled hostage rescue attempt by the Americans from Iran in 1980 or the picture of Gary Powers in USSR custody when his U-2 was shot down in 1960 are reminders of the loss of face for the U.S. In terms of success, what brought laurels for the U.S. was the elimination of Osama bin Laden in a special forces raid. There is, thus, a non-military intangible element in every such operation that a young officer or a corporal, far removed from his base, has to accomplish. It is only right that this ethos and training in the IAF's special operations crew not be diluted by the lure of sending the versatile C-130s for routine tasks and VIP carriage.

The IAF's C-130J special ops squadrons (there are two) call themselves the 'Veiled Vipers' and the 'Raiding Raptors.' It is incumbent on the leadership to ensure that their sting stays potent.

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