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Col Narendra 'Bull' Kumar, who secured Siachen for India, no more

KALYAN RAY
NEW DELHI, DHNS

Had it not been for the short and stocky Col Narendra 'Bull' Kumar and a Himalayan expedition he led in the 1970s, Pakistan would have annexed the Siachen Glacier long back.

It all began nearly half-a-century ago when Kumar, one of India's best mountaineers, saw a map of north Kashmir in which the Line of Control was shown far east from its actual location. The map by a US agency ceded a large portion of north Kashmir, including Siachen Glacier, to Pakistan.

Sensing something was amiss, Kumar brought it to the notice of the army headquarters which sanctioned an expedition to the glacier for a reality check.

With students from the Indian Army's High-Altitude Warfare School, Gulmarg that he commanded, Kumar led the first Indian expedition to what would later turn out to be the world's highest battlefield.

Kumar returned with Pakistani cigarette packs, food cans and climbing gears as evidence of Pakistani soldiers' regular presence on the glacier.

He also captured photographs of Pakistani jets flying overhead.

Based on the evidence he collected, the army headquarters later asked Kumar to create a map of the glacier from the snout to the Chinese border. He also received permission to write a popular account about his Siachen expedition, effectively staking India's claim on the glacier with the involvement of the army.

Almost at the same time, Indian intelligence agencies picked up information about Pakistan making bulk purchases of high-altitude cloth-



Narendra 'Bull' Kumar.

ing from foreign markets.

The government quickly understood the significance and ordered Operation Meghdoot under which troops from 4 Kumaon regiment led by Capt Sanjay Kulkarni were heli-dropped at Bilafond La on the Siachen Glacier on April 13, 1984, outsmarting Pakistan.

Since then the Indian Army has been in control of the glacier and the surrounding dominating heights. "If it was not for his expeditions to Siachen Glacier and Saltoro Range Pakistan would have annexed Siachen Glacier. Based on his reconnaissance reports the Indian Army launched Op Meghdoot to capture the main passes and ridges along the Saltoro Range," said an army officer.

"A mountaineer par excellence, he was the first Indian to climb Mt Nanda Devi. He climbed Mt Everest in 1965, Mt Blanc (the highest peak in the Alps) and later Mt Kanchenjunga (from the toughest North-East spur). He climbed up all these peaks despite losing four toes due to frostbite in earlier expeditions," he added.

Kumar passed away on Thursday at the age of 87.