



Arming the Army

The armed forces urgently need to modernise the weaponry



The Indian Army needs almost everything except courage

— Time Magazine, December 1962

Time magazine aptly summarised the operational performance and preparedness of the Indian Army during the 1962 conflict. That may not be true today for the armed forces, but may still hold good to a large extent for the Indian soldier and the infantry. Former army chief, General V.K. Singh, in a much publicised 12 March 2012 letter to the then Prime Minister, painted a grim picture of the operational capabilities of the 1.18-million-strong army. The critical voids highlighted in this letter included ammunition, artillery guns, obsolete air defence systems and above all a lack of adequate weapons for infantry and Special Forces battalions. A major concern expressed in the letter was, 'large scale voids in essential weaponry as well as critical surveillance and night-fighting capabilities in the over 350 infantry and Special Forces' battalions.'

After nearly a decade long of 'marking time' under the previous regime, defence minister, Manohar Parrikar has demonstrated an urgent and positive response to modernisation and a number of long pending defence acquisitions have been cleared. According to reports, in an unprecedented move, the Defence Acquisition Council (DAC), the apex body for capital expenditure, has approved projects worth Rs 178,036 crore (USD 28 billion) giving the much needed impetus to the modernisation of the armed forces. However, most of these are high-end, high-visibility projects with long gestation period. The urgency is to sanction long-pending acquisitions of the infantry, which directly enhances the fighting efficacy of the soldiers in contact, ensures success in operations and minimises casualties by provisioning basic small arms, protective gear, enhancing night fighting capability, surveillance and communication.

The Indian infantry is by far one of the most battle-hardened and combat rich

force in the world with the best soldiers and leaders at the fighting and functional level. However, it is also one of the most poorly ill-equipped force, lacking even a properly functioning rifle. The basic small arms held by the infantry are also authorised to army, the other two services and the Central Armed Police Forces (CAPF). Hence modernisation of infantry arms and equipment ensures enhanced effectiveness of the armed forces and the CAPF. The modernisation plans of the infantry have been included in the Long Term Integrated Perspective Plan (LTIPP) of the armed forces, the progress on procurement and acquisitions continues to be at a standstill for over a decade now. The infantry should be given at least the basic small arms to fight effectively ensuring operational readiness across the complete spectrum of conflict from counter terrorism to conventional and NBC.

The prevailing geopolitical scenario clubbed with the advancement in technology necessitates that the infantry

has to be prepared to fight in all types of terrain in the entire spectrum of conflict. In the Indian context, all disputed and sensitive borders are in the mountainous and high altitude regions with predominantly infantry deployment and employment. The 1947-48 Kashmir war, the 1962 Sino-India conflict and the 1999 Kargil conflict were mountain wars fought mainly by the infantry and artillery, of course duly supported by all combat support arms and services. The on-going counter terrorism (CT) and counter insurgency (CI) operations are infantry-based operations. It is imperative that the army focus should be on modernisation of the infantry.

Among the world's major democracies, India faces the most complex threats and security challenges spanning the full spectrum of conflict from small wars to collusive and hybrid wars to conventional and nuclear wars. Pakistan continues to wage a constant and continuous proxy war against India for over a quarter of century now in Jammu and Kashmir (J&K). The internal security situation remains a major challenge as terrorists now have access to state-of-the-art small arms, weapon systems and explosives, at times more advanced than those being issued to the security forces. The 4 June 2015 ambush of the army convoy which left 18 soldiers dead in Chandel district of Manipur is a stark reminder, if one was ever required.

Small arms are the personal weapon of a soldier, an appendage to his body and integral to his survival and fighting effectively. The 5.56 Indian Small Arms System (INSAS) needs urgent replacement, it has outlived its life and actually is a mere piece of metal as soldiers across the board do not have faith in this weapon. Many soldiers have lost their lives when an INSAS rifle had stoppages and would not fire when in contact in a do-or-die encounter. The situation is so desperate that a PIL has been filed in the Delhi high court by an army officer. In April 2015, the court asked the Centre to respond to a PIL seeking to replace INSAS rifles used by Indian Army and CAPF with modern firearms. A division bench of Chief Justice G. Rohini and Justice R.S. Endlaw asked additional solicitor general (ASG) Sanjay Jain to take instructions from the government and inform it on the PIL alleging that INSAS rifles were substandard. The situation has to be alarming for a soldier to go to court to move the government to issue an assault rifle which functions!

The infantry and the army need a

state-of-the-art assault rifle and close quarter battle weapon to fight effectively, succeed and survive. The army after due deliberations sought a multi-calibre, multi-role assault rifle with modular interchangeable parts, enhanced ranges and lethality in a weight class of 3.6kg, to enable effective execution in all types of terrain and in all conflict situations. This was based on the feedback and operational requirement projected by field formations and the concept of operations. The fighting rationale is simple and followed by most world armies; that is stopping power in CI/CT operations and maiming the enemy soldier rather than a kill in conventional war. An injured soldier is not only a long term burden for the adversary but also an immediate determinant to success of an on-going operation of war as injured soldiers need evacuation which reduces the bayonet strength and have a more demoralising effect on others in the battlefield. The general staff qualitative requirement (GSQR) was finalised after a number of iterations with all stakeholders which included the field force, heads of all arms and services, the Defence Research and Development Organisation (DRDO), Directorate General Quality Assurance (DGQA) and the Ordnance Factory Board (OFB). This was thereafter discussed by the Chief of Army Staff (COAS), all army commanders and principal staff officers in a specially convened meeting in 2011, with a single agenda of identifying the operational requirement of the future assault rifle of the army.

The November 2011 tender issued post detailed deliberations for the assault rifles requires the weapon system to weigh no more than 3.6kg, fire both the indigenously produced ammunition of 5.56x45mm calibre and 7.62mmx-39mm projectiles with a barrel and magazine switch for employment in a stand-alone defensive or suppres-

It is a sad story that the infantry modernisation programmes which impact the effectiveness of the complete armed forces have not made any progress whatsoever. The infantry continues to hold on to near obsolete weapons from small arms to hand grenades

sive fire role. Fitted with picatinny rail-mounted reflex sights, these are also required to be equipped with day scopes and 40mm low-velocity under barrel grenade launcher (UBGL). The multi-calibre assault rifle is not configured in the face of fire as some tend to believe, it is a task-oriented configuration and can be easily done within the unit by the soldier himself with a little training. A fully-loaded and configured light weight assault rifle as demanded by the infantry in the 2011 GSQR is a long term solution to a major weakness of the army. It is unfortunate that on account of our mind-set some serving and veteran officers do not comprehend the many advantages that accrue to a soldier fighting with a task configured weapon.

The procurement of assault rifles envisages direct acquisition of 65,000 rifles of the 1,85,000, from the selected vendor, at an estimated cost of around Rs 4,850 crore, to equip the 120 infantry battalions deployed on the western and northern borders. The OFB is to subsequently manufacture over 1,13,000 such rifles after transfer of technology (ToT) from the vendor. The competing rifles are Israel Weapon Industries (IWI) ACE 1, a variant of its ACE rifle; Beretta ARX 160 (Italy); Colt's Colt Combat Rifle (United States); and the Czech Republic's CZ 805 BREN. It was believed that the trials were completed early this year and the general staff (GS) evaluation was in progress.

It has now been reported in sections of the media, that the procurement of these assault rifles is in the process of foreclosure as in the meantime the DRDO/OFB has upgraded the 5.56 INSAS rifle, rechristened it as the 'Excalibur' and in concert with an ever-willing ministry of defence (MoD) offered for induction in the army. This will be a major setback to the operational preparedness and war-fighting capability of the infantry and the army.

The DRDO/OFB Excalibur assault rifle is only an improved version of the INSAS and does not in any way meet the future requirements of the infantry. This upgraded version of the INSAS was demonstrated to me in 2011, at Rifle Factory Ishapore when I was the director general of infantry (DGI). There is very little to choose between the in-service 5.56 INSAS rifle and the upgraded Excalibur. The basic design remains the same and if inducted the army will again be saddled with a useless rifle for the next 30 to 40 years. It needs to be con-



DEFEXPO 2014 Beretta stand at the exhibition

sidered that the original INSAS design of 1980, failed to meet the aspirations and confidence of a soldier, the Excalibur too will meet the same fate. The DRDO/OFB should be held accountable for being party to the GSQR when they had already upgraded the INSAS rifle and have waited four years to now bring it to the fore as a viable alternative. The present decision-makers well know that they would have long hung their boots and will not be held responsible for the disservice they do to their organisation and the soldiers in accepting a sub-standard basic rifle. For far too long the army has fought without a properly functioning and effective assault rifle. Units and troops deployed in CI/CT operations are fortunately issued a small quantity of AK-47 rifles, the preferred weapon of not only the terrorists but also the soldier. It is not uncommon in a unit and subunit to wait for a detachment to return so that the next body of troops moving out on operations can take the AKs rather than the INSAS. The army, realising the ineffectiveness of INSAS, was prudent enough to authorise the AK-47 rifles to Rashtriya Rifles (RR) units.

The 5.56 INSAS was conceived as a family of small arms to include close quarter battle (CQB) carbine, assault rifle and light machine gun (LMG), with interchangeable parts and commonality of ammunition. This never fructified as the CQB carbine project was unsuccessful and closed in 1999. The 5.56 INSAS LMG too has not been fully deployed what with over 9,000 of them still needing rectification, and the army continu-

ing to hold on to the 7.62 LMG, which was scheduled to be phased out in the Nineties. The army has been forced to go in for the next generation LMG with a 7.62 calibre for the fear of being saddled with the modified version of the INSAS LMG in case they decide on 5.56 mm bore. This, of course, is not the best way to upgrade the much needed weaponry, but this seems to be the only alternative to beat the system.

As the INSAS carbine project was foreclosed, soldiers continue to carry the obsolete and vintage 9mm CQB carbine. The replacement sought by the army is still to fructify. In December 2010, the army floated a global tender for CQB carbine. The carbine is to weigh less than three kg and be capable of a cyclic rate of fire of 600 rounds per minute with a range of 200 metres. The carbine is also to be equipped with Picatinny rail-mounted reflex and passive night sights, laser designators and detachable bayonets. The army requires approximately 3,85,000 numbers, with 1,68,000 CQB carbines and 2,17,000 protective carbines. The initial 45,000 CQB carbines fully loaded with holographic sights are to be procured at a cost of Rs 4,000 crores. The CQB carbines under trials and consideration are Israel Weapon Industries (IWI) Galil carbine, Italy's Beretta ARX-160, USA's Colt and Sig Sauer's M4 and SG516. The project also includes a ToT to OFB to thereafter produce the balance of 3,40,000 carbines for the army alone; a requirement which is likely to more than double giving the needs of the CAPF.

General Dalbir Singh as did General Bikram Singh on taking over as COAS have unequivocally stated that the focus is to modernise the infantry. It is unfortunate that not a single infantry procurement has fructified in such a long time. The decision-makers at the MoD and the army need to fully comprehend the advantages and the adverse consequences of negating the on-going procurement of assault rifles. The present GSQR has been through many deliberations, however, due to the long procedures, many in the present hierarchy may not have directly contributed to the futuristic requirements and may now feel that they have better ideas. The process of procurement will be pushed back by another decade resulting in the army being without a rifle, as the procedures do not cater for any transition management and on-going provisioning is stopped in anticipation of fresh inductions. Even so, what is the surety that the alternative being offered by the DRDO/OFB will be a success and meet the GSQR? It also needs to be factored that the OFB is a production agency and not a design and development organisation. The success of the OFB/ GCF manufactured Dhanush gun is a different story. It should be known that the Bofors had given the ToT to OFB as per the original contract and this had been lying 'un-actioned' since the mid-Eighties till Gen. Anjan Mukherjee, the director general, artillery, gave it an unprecedented impetus in 2012. The track record of the DRDO is well-known with poor designs and massive cost and time overruns. The DRDO-OFB-DGQA-MoD combine is known to stymie procurement projects at the final stages, and the army better be aware of this.

It is a sad story that the infantry modernisation programmes which impact the effectiveness of the complete armed forces and the CAPF have not made any progress whatsoever. The infantry continues to hold on to near obsolete weapons from small arms to hand grenades. The last major procurements for the infantry were during and post Kargil war and even now after 16 years, the army proudly calls these new generation equipment (NGE). It is for the army and the MoD to ensure that the soldiers are equipped with a functional weapon in which they have confidence and trust. ||

(The writer is former director general military operations, director general infantry and colonel of the parachute regiment)