

NIGHT THAT LIT THE SKIES FOR INDIA

In 1971, the Indian Navy attempted one of the world's most daring war strategies to attack and destroy the Karachi port in a night swoop, breaking Pakistan's backbone. The day is celebrated as Navy Day. Forty years later, MAJOR AKHILL PRATAP narrates the operation as told to him by his father who was on board the INS Nipat on that dangerous night

As a boy, I was narrated stories only once in a blue moon, especially when it came to my father. This one he did on the eve of the day I was to be commissioned as an Officer of the Indian Army. He zeroed in on me that day due to two reasons. One, he feared he might lose his memory by the time I hung up my boots. Second, and more importantly, he did not want to lose me in the service of the nation without me knowing that story. Thankfully, neither did I lose his story nor my benchmarks. It was from the horse's mouth — a true story that has been waiting to be told to the world. This is how it goes:

The year was 1899. Kanhaiya Lal was not that Indian film actor of yore, infamous for his trouble monger roles. He was the Diwan (Chief Minister) of His Highness Maharaj Rana Sir Bhawani Singh Bahadur of Jhalawar; the knighted king of the princely State.

His Highness Maharaj Rana Sir Rajendra Singh Dev Bahadur succeeded his father three decades later. It was during his rule that Diwan Kanhaiya Lal passed away after passing on the baton to his son Gaya Prasad.

Hukum (as royalty is referred to in Rajasthan), apart from having served as an officer in the British Indian Army, was a keen photographer and a poet. He wrote Hindi poetry under the pen name of Sudhakar and *shaayri* under the title of *Makhmoor*. The multi-faceted ruler introduced Prem Shankar, one of the six sons of Diwan Gaya Prasad, to literature and encouraged him to take it up as a career. Prem Shankar was chosen to carry forward the literary heritage of the princely State and sent to the United Provinces for higher education in those measured times.

Shankar was also excited at the prospect of reconnecting with his long lost childhood friend Rabindra, who was then based out of the erstwhile United Provinces. Rabindra, he and Uday were born to Pandit Shyam Shankar, Diwan of the Royal Family of Jhalawar and the peer of Diwan Kanhaiya Lal, Prem's grandfather. By and by the world would know these brothers as Bharat Ratna Pandit Ravi Shankar and Padma Vibhushan Pandit Uday Shankar.

Later, the 13 Gun Salute State of Jhalawar was integrated into the Union of Rajasthan and merged with the Republic of India, in time. It was March 30, 1949. The transitional period lasted for another decade or so.

It was 1956. His Highness Maharaj Rana Sir Harish Chandra Singh Dev Bahadur, who had taken over from his father during those trying times, was constrained to relieve the royal loyalists. The last command of *hukum* was that at least one son from each of the future generations serve in the armed forces of Independent India, as his forefathers and children had or would.

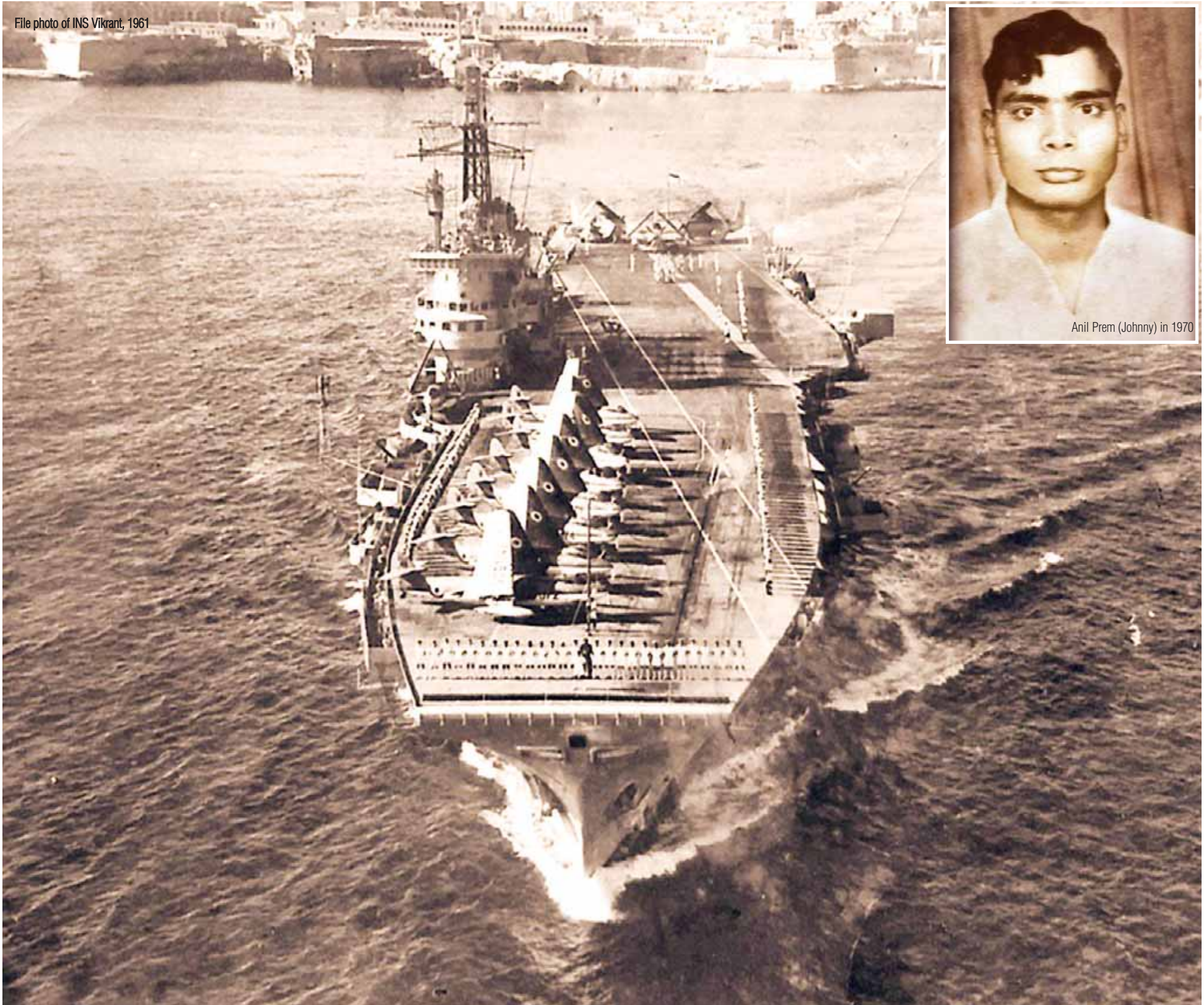
Shankar did not know that one of his 11 children had taken this as scout's honour. Anil Prem was too young, impatient and imprudent to understand the consequences of his actions, at that time. All he knew was honour and loyalty. With the fervour to abide by the words of Rana *saa*, he did not wait to attain adulthood. He joined the Indian Navy as one of its youngest recruits.

Anil Prem (nickname Johnny) followed the sea as a duck takes to water and in his first posting, the teenager found himself atop the first aircraft carrier of the Indian Navy — the majestic Indian Naval Ship (INS) Vikrant.

A couple of years down the line, during a brief posting at Indian Naval Air Squadron (INAS) 300, Goa, Johnny received an order to report to INS Angre. Angre was named and commissioned after the notable Maratha Naval Chief of the 18th century, who was undefeated in his lifetime. A *bête noire* of the Europeans, Angre was fondly regarded as their pirate.

A hand-picked team was trained at INS Angre on Russia, Russian and the Russians for three months ending June 1970 following which they found themselves seated in an Antonov AN-12 which took off from Palam and landed at Moscow. Before they could squeeze in their 40 winks, Johnny and his fellows were moved to Vladivostok. It was a Bladi vostok for them. Thirteen months training on missiles without the medium being English or Hindi! They had only two choices. Silence or Russian. Were the Russians unrelenting hard-task masters? They very well were.

Cut to India. A few months later, as the guided missiles were being tested, one fine day an open jeep halted at the dockyard of Western Naval Command,



Bombay. It was the dusk of November 30, 1971. Johnny turned as he heard a commanding voice asking him if they were ready to fire off those missiles 200 miles across Bombay. He saluted, smartly and replied in the affirmative.

Twentyfour hours was his response when the next question was fired on the expected time of delivery of goods.

The Officer-in-White started counting on his fingers, murmuring. He stopped at December 3. Before Johnny could figure out, he looked up at him, smiled, patted his back and zoomed off in the jeep.

It was the Cheetah Camp where the top-secret Alpha-Kilo (A-K) Project of the Indian Navy was underway. The project, named after Admiral AK Chatterjee, was about to charter a course — the course which would change the history of the Indian sub-continent forever. The Alpha-Kilos left Bombay in due course. Johnny was on-board.

As Pakistan was done with *jummah*, India was done with Pakistan. It was Friday when India woke up to the voice of its Prime Minister declaring the dreaded W. The war cry had been made!

Johnny was on his toes, aboard INS Nipat, eager to set the target when he was reminded of the lesson of his lifetime — Don't cock your weapon if you don't know the drill. There's a high chance of getting laid or losing your kill!

Lieutenant Commander Bahadur Nariman Kavina, Commanding Officer, was as cool as a cucumber and the INS Nipat a patient bird. The white knights awaited the dark nights. The D-Day was closing in. The Nipat kept observing the other missile boat, the INS Nirghat. Bahadur was warming up to the waters. The wall of silence surrounded a pregnant pause when Christmas came early.

The Nirghat kissed the Pakistan Naval Ship (PNS) Khaibar. The groom



was too macho, probably. It was the kiss of death. The first night tastes blood. This one did, too. The first dance was over before the reception. Before the attack could sink in, PNS Khaibar sunk — lock, stock and barrel! Operation Trident had well and truly been launched.

Kavina grinned from ear to ear. They had sea legs and they began to float. The INS Nipat did the rest and the rest, as they say, is history.

The first missile scored a hit. A second missile followed suit. They saw a huge flash going up to about twice the height of the ship when it was hit. The Pakistani ship was seen on radar to have broken into two and it sunk in less than eight minutes, about 26 miles south of Karachi. The post-war analysis said that this chartered ship MV Venus Challenger had been carrying a near full load of US ammunition from Saigon, for the Pakistan Army and the Pakistan Air

Force. In addition to the ship's crew, the ship was reported to have had on board a number of Pakistani naval officers and sailors for communication and ordnance duties.

The Karachi harbour was bombed the same night by the A-Ks who officially came to be known as the Karachi Strike Group, later. Three ships, two vessels and a multitude of oil storage tanks were blown up. Pakistan must have taken 10 times the time than the entire duration of the Indian attack, to know the number of their soldiers killed. Innumerable they were. The Karachi Harbour was in a shambles and Pakistan's backbone had been broken. It looked like the biggest bonfire in all of Asia.

As the INS Nipat retreated assuming the mission had been accomplished, the crew heard deafening roars of fighter planes overhead. They froze. A few hours ago they were regretting to have

missed a Huevo de Chivo with their estranged neighbours and now, they were probably facing doom. Johnny knew that some days you get the bear, other days the bear gets you but Nariman knew his onions.

The engine was switched off and off went the communications with the command. It was not silence or Russian, this time. It was silence or silence. Temporary or permanent, none knew. The Western Command was in denial that they had lost their baby. The night was long. The baby was not calm but composed, yes.

At an opportune moment, the baby begin to trawl and crawl towards Okha. The command is always right. Isn't it? By the way, the fighter planes which the Nipat bumped into that fateful night were our own Canberra Bombers, on a mission to raid our neighbours.

One single operation and one Maha Vir Chakra, four Vir Chakras and a host of medals awaited the Men-In-White. It was December 4, 1971. India celebrates its Navy Day, annually, on the same day to mark this operation.

After a week or so of the most successful operation in the history of Indian Navy, Johnny and his comrades of the Karachi Strike Group were asked to report to the Naval Club at Colaba, Bombay, one evening. The war was still on.

A jeep stopped, followed by an entourage of senior naval officers and civilians. The woman in the middle was in a white saree with a red border. Before Johnny and his comrades could believe their eyes, she congratulated the entire team on a job well done.

She wore an innocent smile on a tough exterior, as she expressed her pleasure on a task which was not handled badly, not too bad at all. She presented each one of them a twill cap as a token of appreciation and announced that they

would, henceforth, be known as the Killer Missile Squadron. The cap was crested with the word 'Killers' in bold.

During the repartee with the senior most admiral there, the young guns gathered that he had spent his childhood near the port of Karachi and had even worked there. Their action took the admiral back to the point of his action which, as he said, just destroyed his memories. This had them all crack up.

In times to come, the legendary words of that old man were to go down in the history of Indian Navy as golden words. He was born in Karachi, he bombed Karachi. He had once said.

Johnny had met this Admiral earlier, one time. On November 30, 1971. The same man was in the same jeep, today.

The short commendation ceremony was followed by high tea, at the end of which the lady and the gentleman shook hands with all, showered them with praises and left as quickly as they had arrived.

The man was the Chief of Naval Staff, Admiral Sardarilal Mathradas Nanda. The lady was former Prime Minister the late Indira Gandhi.

Having displayed unique leadership qualities during wartime, Johnny was subsequently honoured and approved as a Commission Worthy (CW) Officer of the Indian Navy and it was time to go home.

It was the same day of March 1972, when Rajasthan said *Khamma Ghani* (greetings in Rajasthan). March 30. It was the Rajasthan Diwas (Day) when Johnny came marching home.

It was Rajasthan Diwas 2018, when I was in the august company of Maharaj Rana Chandrajit Singh Dev Bahadur, in Defence Colony. The words Defence and Maharaj come together in a strange coincidence. He is my royal and I remain his loyal.