



The Tribune

Military Literature Festival

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CHANDIGARH

2018

The world & words of warriors

ROOPINDER SINGH

FEATHERS. Isn't it interesting that we see them in both — arrows and pens, arguably the first two long-range weapons that extended the range of the individual who wielded them?

While it took three or more vanes or feathers to make the fletching that gave stability to the arrow, just one feather made a quill and enabled the mind to focus on thoughts enough to express them with the expectation of a degree of longevity.

For as long as there have been wars, there have been discussions/debates/disputes about them — accounts of soldiers who fought, officers who led them, the victors and the vanquished, all make for a colourful spectrum of literature that has a definite niche of its own, even as it feeds the need among a broader audience to know more about that ultimate engagement that too often results in death and destruction.

While the debate about whether war is fundamental to human nature or a product of circumstances is an old and unresolved one, however, the actions of individuals faced with life and death situations that take them far beyond what they have experienced so far can be fascinating. Polemology or the study of war is an ancient and honoured pursuit.

India has a long tradition of war literature. Parts of the *Vedas*, the *Puranas*, the *Ramayana*, the *Mahabharata*, the *Bhagavad Gita* and the *Arthashastra* refer to war, its physical and moral dimensions, and weapons.

Many folk songs feature the distress of the damsel whose husband or loved one has gone into battle. *Prithviraj Raso*, an epic poem written by Chand Bardai (1149-c. 1200), is considered to be of the first works in the history of Hindi literature



PHOTO COURTESY: DRUMMERS CALL— ANTHOLOGY OF WRITINGS WHILE FOLLOWING THE DRUM BY LT GEN NS BRAR

which has accounts of war. Ramdhari Singh Dinkar and Subhadra Kumari Chauhan have written some of the epic *Veer Ras* poems.

The havoc caused, especially in Punjab, by the eager Indian princes drafting able-bodied men for World War I led to empty homes and literature of longing, expressed in folk songs, poems and prose in Punjabi and Urdu.

There have been other accounts and serious studies of war in various languages, including in English, which are more widely seen, discussed and feted than those in regional languages.

Chandigarh has one of the largest concentration of veterans in India, and it is

only fitting that it has become the venue of the Military Literature Festival. Preceded by the carnival that served a broader audience, the festival has an impressive line-up of speakers and will thus become the focal point of much discussion during and after the sessions.

The disciplined and distant world of the armed forces becomes intelligible through interaction with soldier-scholars. Indeed, the felicity with which some of them wield the pen may come as a bit of a surprise for those who have not previously interacted with them.

The mass movement of soldiers to far-away lands had to impact them in various ways. The exposure showed the Indian sol-

dier that he was not inferior to any, in fact, often he vanquished his counterparts. No doubt, they were part of the British Indian army which served the British Empire, but they had their own minds, and once they left the Indian shores, many spread out. Indeed, 90 per cent of the members of the Ghadar Party, established in 1913 to overthrow the "English Raj", were Sikhs from Punjab — half of them Army veterans.

Indian soldiers returned from wars, including the World Wars with battle scars and bright ideas that illuminated their quest for freedom against the colonial yoke. As they served their motherland, they gained more, and thus have more to share with us and teach us.

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Contributions of men in uniform have made military literature a treasure trove of the rich legacy of our armed forces

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Graphic exposure to skirmishes & soldiers

Comics with sagas of battles make for tremendous stories and are a good way to engage young minds

ROOPINDER SINGH

ACHTUNG! Nostalgia! School-children of a certain vintage, had more than a passing acquaintance with the battles and warriors of World War II, all thanks to often-forbidden, always-frowned-upon comics that brought alive the stories of courage, cowardice and camaraderie alive in our minds.

These school-days staples were profusely illustrated with pithy stories, told from the point of view of the Allied Forces. A convenient 7x5½ inch size allowed these to be portable; the standard 68 pages ensured a good read from a comic that did not bulge out inconveniently.

Commando Comics were often bartered, exchanged, begged for and even stolen. For school boys, these were the ultimate escape into a world of adventure and action that allowed them to break away from the mundane routines and the oppressive discipline that all public schools manage to impose on their students. The cover was well executed in colour while the rest of the comic was full of black and white line drawings that gave a foxhole account of soldiers in battle. The Germans, often derogatorily called Krauts, were a villainous lot, some were humane though, if the story demanded them to be so.

That comfortable world of black and white had — not a shadow of the greys of political correctness, sharply delineated character lines and easily identifiable enemies. We were

too young to know the difference, but the stories had a strange allure. It was only much later that the horrors of, say, the bombing of Dresden, came into our consciousness. *Commando Comics* eventually took up other wars, including World War I, Spanish Civil War, the Falklands War and the conflict in Korea and Viet-

nam. For aficionados of a certain generation, *Commando Comics* have a special significance. Likewise, *Tin Tin* was forever on one campaign or the other.

Near home, *Amar Chitra Katha* rose to the occasion, with stories of heroes from Indian forces. The Kargil and Siachen conflicts, too, had compelling stories of

courage, and became subjects of graphic publications. *AAN Comics* has published a number of these including *Siachen: The Cold War*, which Rishi Kumar wrote, and a series on Param Vir Chakra winners — Capt Vikram Batra, Lt Manoj Kumar Pandey, Rifleman Sanjay Kumar and Subedar Yogendra Singh Yadav. Aditya

Bakshi published *Yeh Dil Maange More!* on Capt Vikram Batra.

Sagas of battles make for tremendous stories, and comics are still a good way to engage young minds. *Commando Comics*, which date back to 1961, are still published regularly, and are now available digitally as well.





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