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Shrouded open secrets

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The armed forces have a mystique of their own. Colourful uniforms, amazing weaponry, interesting games like squash and polo, and fascinating club-life, all contribute to it. In addition to all this, there is yet another aspect to this mystique. It is the "Open Secrets". To start with, let me share a few of the common ones that appear in the press with regular irregularity.

- Somewhere in the Rajasthan desert, the Prime-Minister witnessed the trial of state-of-the-art tanks to be procured from a friendly country.
- At a forward air-base in J & K sector, Chief of the Air Staff addressed the commanders.
- On board a destroyer, somewhere in the Arabian sea, Raksha Mantri witnessed the war games.
- Somewhere in the Western sector, Army Chief inaugurated a golf-course.

There is something interesting and eye-catching in all such news-items. Definitely not about the news per se, but almost always about the place where the event takes place. The secrecy attached to it even after the event is over, is what grips the attention. The exact location where the event is held in fact is never a secret. The troops as well as the local population knows about it. The press is aware of it. Even the enemy would know about it. Yet the name of the game is to keep it a secret. In this case from the literate readers. In other cases, well, it depends.

My baptism into this game of open secrets took place more than 25 years back. I was newly married and was posted to a fighter squadron based at a forward air-field in the Northern sector at Halwara near Ludhiana. One fine winter afternoon, as I came home for lunch, my wife asked: "Are you also going for the exercise?"

"Which exercise?" was my natural counter-question.

What followed next was the seeding of first clouds of suspicion and mistrust between two educated individuals, who, just three months back, had tied the nuptial knot and had vowed to share everything, hiding nothing from each other. My answer irked her and she thought that being a "fauji", I was keeping my impending movement a secret. But the fact that I was really not aware of it, was not accepted as an honest confession. The only alternative was to have a quick lunch and go back to the squadron, assuring her that I would check it out and positively let her know if the squadron was indeed going for an exercise and if I too were to be a part of it.

During the games in the evening, I tried to find out from my colleagues. None was aware of it. Thus, sweating but confident, I entered home and told her that her information was wrong and that no exercise was in the offing. But no, she would have none of it and stuck to her position, maintaining that I was not confiding in her. Not only that, she even cautioned me that I was starting my married life on a wrong note by not sharing all information with my life-partner. Still taking it to be a joke of some kind, I asked her laughingly: "Where from have you come to know about it? Has Chief of Air Staff given you a ring personally?". Ignoring my light-hearted banter, her simple answer was: "No, the milkman told me."

Yes, it turned out to be true. The squadron was to go for an exercise a week later. Since the exercise was to be for 15 days, the wife of the commanding officer decided to go to her parents' house. Thus she had told the milk-man and the newspaper boy not to deliver the goods during that period. And it was the same milk-man who had asked my wife innocuously if she too was going to her parents' place when the sahib went for the exercise!

Even today such exercises and movements remain a secret, "officially at least", for quite some time. Most of the details, however, are known to most of the people since the channels of confirmation of these open secrets are numerous.

During a recent Reunion of the squadron old boys, I tried to find out the reasons for such open secrecy. The responses were many and varied. To confuse the enemy, said the ex-boss. There have to be a few things kept secret, said another. "The commanding officer must have the privilege to spill the beans as and when he deemed fit" was what the majority thought. "The thrill to unveil the shroud from open secrets and keep the charm of the fauj alive, was what a loud voice said. What appeared to be the pick of the pack, judging from the cheers and jeers, however, was the comment: "To maintain the superiority of the mem sahib over the sahib".