

The last letter

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For fifty years, I believed that my husband had gone missing or was still a prisoner in an Indian jail, as we never got his body back. It was not until April, last year in 2015, that I accidentally found a folder of my late husband's letters – close to one hundred of which that he had written to me during our three-year relationship, mainly through correspondence. The uppermost letter in the folder was the one that he wrote last, before he crossed the Line of Control into Indian Kashmir in July, 1965. The eight-page letter, painful as it is, also tells me what his mission was and where he was going. I had obliterated all details of the letter from memory, as I never reread it. This last letter and the others had travelled with me across the continents for fifty years wherever I studied or worked but I never reread them. I was angry with my husband for abandoning my daughter and I, especially as I did not want to have a child right away in our marriage and even more because he knew about the secret mission that he would be assigned to, in Kashmir. He never told me anything about it all.

I write this article as a prelude to a larger memoir project that I am working on, about Operation Gibraltar. During the course of this operation, my husband Captain Nisar Ahmed was killed in Indian-held Kashmir on August 13, 1965.



A childhood photograph of the author's daughter, Iram

| *Captain Nisar Ahmed, my husband, is a national hero in Pakistan*

My narrative develops from my husband's death in Indian Kashmir: an event that completely transformed my life over the last fifty years, and which eventually resulted in a life in exile in the United States for the past sixteen years.

Captain Nisar Ahmed, my husband, is a national hero in Pakistan. He was assigned to lead Operation Gibraltar, a guerilla action in Indian Kashmir. This is a disputed region between Pakistan and India since the British partitioned the Indian Subcontinent in 1947. The Pakistani military, to this day, has not owned up to Operation Gibraltar. As a result, I did not know exactly where my husband was killed and buried. For fifty years, part of me believed that he was missing in action or that perhaps he might even be alive in an Indian prison. I had no closure on my husband's death.

In order to deal with the trauma of my husband's death and the pregnancy that I was dealing with, I turned the switch off – on any memory of our short-lived marriage. So great was my grief. So great was my anger. However, with support from my family and friends, I rebuilt my life fast. Within weeks of widowhood I applied for a British Commonwealth Scholarship to study for a master's degree in England. I did indeed get one from the University of Leeds. Within three years of my widowhood I was on the path to a successful career as an educator in Pakistan and in international settings. Eventually, I also obtained a PhD in applied linguistics from the University of Texas at Austin. That further enhanced my opportunities in life, together with my daughter, who is now a successful certified public accountant and works for a *Fortune 500* company in the U.S.



A Pakistani soldier coordinates with Indian troops in the process of recovering dead bodies, 1965

Nevertheless, I did not let go of the anger toward my husband: despite the fortunate educational opportunities and a cutting-edge international career, the ride was bumpy. I had to deal with the militaristic Pakistani establishment and a society directed by patriarchs, foremost among whom were members of my own family. In 1999, I left Pakistan to go into exile in the United States because of a blasphemy *fatwa* against me by the state establishment there.

The discovery of my husband's letters in spring 2015 enabled me to let go of my anger, as he too seemed a victim of his circumstances. In his last letter, he says:

All this time I have hidden certain facts of my work – although you would have had your guesses and fears about it. But there was nothing certain about it for me to tell. Today when you read this letter I will be far beyond the reach of time and space, for I have told them that this letter should be posted to you only upon my death; along with the official intimation. But do not worry love I am just round the same corner of life picking up the straws of my spiritual happiness so that I may build a cozy little haven for us two – a love nest. For then we shall never separate ‘no moments of decision and indecision’. This final bond will be unshakeable.

My love, on the 3rd of Jun[e, 19]65 I was assigned to HQ 12 Div on a special duty i.e. to org and conduct the trg of certain Azad Kashmir soldiers and DAFA-MUJAHIDS. Later I came to know that I am under a new HQ set up for this purpose i.e. HQ L of C Sub Area Murree and that I will be required to go into Indian Held Kashmir on a msn to conduct cdo actions and organise Guerilla Warfare with the help of the local there.

On 11 July 65, the President of Pakistan gave his consent to this plan of operation i.e, our force shall infiltrate behind enemy lines into the SRINAGAR ad surrounding vallies [sic] and carryout cdo tasks initially and then organise the locals for Guerilla Warfare.

We received our final briefing on the ni and with it our action commenced on the night 29/30 Jul 65. However, the night for the Raid on targets was appointed on the 7/8 night. The area I was assigned was GULMARG and PATTAN where Brigade Headquarters were located.

Although the plan is not entirely according to the principles of an unconventional operation. Because this type of warfare has political implications and should never be started according to the conventional military concepts of concentration of deployment in the Force. The whole force becomes too vulnerable as it offers an excellent target to enemies counter action. These types of wars are very expensive and begin with a basic covert cell, that expands in size and activity first in a cellular form then when the enemies resistance wears out it assumes an overt military shape and maneuver. Knowledge of enemies moves and actions is of utmost importance to such a force and equally so is the denial of its own knowledge/information to the enemy. In our case we failed to acquire the first and did every conceivable thing to ignore the latter.

[...]I wish you every happiness and love that I wanted to give [...] God bless and farewell. [...]We shall meet again beyond the threshold of life – beyond all conflicts of time, wars, prejudices, vanity, jealousy, hatred, sense of right and wrongs; everything that man thinks is important to his worldly existence or name.



Wedding photo of the author and her husband Captain Nisar

Rereading the letters after fifty years was cathartic. Within weeks of reading the quintessential last letter that my husband Captain Nisar Ahmed wrote, I was researching at the archives of my alma mater, the University of Texas at

Austin. During the course of my subsequent research, I found, among other things, the following:

1. **A memoir written in Urdu** by a commando officer who survived Operation Gibraltar. The officer, a commando by the name of Alamgir, writes a field diary of Operation Gibraltar and gives details of my husband's participation in the mission, how he was killed and where he is buried: in village Khag in Kashmir. This is the only reliable account of my husband's death and burial. Commando Alamgir's memoir/field diary gives significant details about the mismanagement of the operation and the political realities of the Kashmiri people, who never wanted a Pakistani intervention. The memoir further describes my husband's talents that I never knew about: that he was a masterful tarot reader, as well as a singer. I hardly knew the man, as ours was a romance based on letters.
2. **Declassified CIA documents** in the Lyndon B. Johnson Archive in Austin that point to the role of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto – at that time in 1965, the Foreign Minister of Pakistan – and at whose behest Operation Gibraltar was undertaken. It was Bhutto who persuaded Field Marshal Ayub Khan and the Pakistani generals to capture Indian Kashmir. Operation Gibraltar was the Pakistan army's Bay of Pigs. Later General Zia-ul-Haq executed Bhutto when the latter was an elected Prime Minister. General Zia-ul-Haq led the successful U.S. intervention against the Soviets in Afghanistan in 1978.

Furthermore, I have created a photo archive from personal, official and internet sources, of Captain Nisar Ahmed – in the larger historical context of Pakistan's Special Services Group in

Cherat. I have conducted personal interviews with family members and friends in the U.S. and

in Pakistan to inform me of what happened immediately when news of my husband's death was conveyed. I was asleep that night when hell broke loose. My family told me the next morning.



Pakistani armour, accompanied by infantry, advances in a cloud of dust



Ayub Khan visits troops on the frontline

For fifty years, I thought he was missing in action or alive in an Indian prison

My research, in which my students at SUNY Purchase sincerely participated with me, gives great insights into the role of the Pakistan military in Kashmir. American aid given to the army for the Cold War against the Soviets was used to make inroads into Indian Kashmir. Pakistan's elite commando unit – that the U.S. set up in Cherat, Pakistan – bordered Central Asia. This then enabled the U.S. to keep an eye on the Soviets and Communist China. These Special Services Group units were further used in early 1978 to train the *mujahideen* (some of whom were precursors of the Taliban) when the U.S. was engaged in the region, to oust the Soviets from Afghanistan. The Pakistan Army under Zia-ul-Haq acted as a U.S. proxy. Badaber, the U.S. air force facility from which Gary Powers' U-2 plane took off in 1960 – and was shot down during a reconnaissance mission over the Soviet Union during Nikita Krushchev's premiership – was used as a prison by the *mujahideen* to hold opponents during the Afghan war in the 1980s.



Ayub Khan announces open hostilities between Pakistan and India, September 1965



Pakistani troops on the frontline, 1965



Zulfikar Ali Bhutto went on to reap great political rewards from his hawkish stance in the 1965 war

Commando Alamgir's diary details the mismanagement of the operation and the political realities of Kashmir

Additionally, I got insights into the nuclearisation of South Asia and the current U.S. engagement with the Taliban. All this fits into the Great Game in Central Asia where the key players now are Russia, the U.S., Great Britain, China, Saudi Arabia, Iran and India. Pakistan is a frontline proxy state in the game. As a result, my narrative further addresses Great Game theory. It is valuable for military studies, strategic studies and international relations with a focus on South Asia. Principally, it deals with American foreign policy. Thus, the larger narrative that I'm working on is also about the geography of religion as well as a text on postcolonial governance and sustainability. I try to address issues of gender, human rights and citizenship rights in postcolonial states like Pakistan, India and Kashmir.

Ultimately, though, my narrative is primarily a woman's perspective of a militarized, postcolonial state – where the personal interfaces with the international.

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