



LINE OF FIRE

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MRP: Free

First Published in May, 2020

Mainak was not ecstatic at all. Though he had a first class train ticket and the compartment he was in was air-conditioned he still expected a little more approbation from his management. As a minimum he expected to have been given an airplane ticket instead of a train ticket. After all his position was that of a project manager. He is also one of the key member of the staff. He did bring it up with his upper tier management but to no avail. He was politely reminded of the on going recession and slump in economy as an obvious excuse. He failed to understand why businesses do not understand the value of time versus the outflow. A train ride may be cheaper but the valuable time that is lost for a person of his competence and stature should have been taken into account too before making such a rash decision like this. This is all the difference that makes between a degree in computer science and a degree in business administration. Before taking his seat and settling down he mutely cursed his corporate administration one more time. He opened his laptop and dedicated himself to provide the finishing touches of the residual portion of his power point presentation.

Mainak's concentration was broken abruptly when he noticed that a fellow traveler sitting right across him was inquisitively looking at his laptop and at him with admiration and veneration. He suspended his work and looked at the man across him with bemused mixture of apprehension and poise. The young man felt uncomfortable at Mainak's stare but brought the situation under control right away.

“Please accept my humble apology Sir. I am extremely sorry, if I have offended you in any way. I couldn't help myself. You must be someone who belong to the revered IT industry or someone who knows a lot about computers. You guy's are real genius. You can do whatever you want with a computer. You are the savior of the world. I admire persons like you from the bottom of my heart.”

Mainak eyed the man in front of him with buoyancy. Sitting in front of him was a boyish looking handsome young man, not more than twenty-five years of age, of excellent radiant health. Mainak immediate assertion was that the boy must be an athlete of some kind, who managed to obtain a job in the railway company through his athletic ability or through nepotism or belonging to an affluent heritage. Mainak hated citizens who took advantage of the state of affairs without going through the hard labor of educating themselves like him. How else would a boy of this age afford to travel in first class air conditioned

coach? Mainak dread to think of traveling in first class at his own expense. He felt an indignation building within him.

“Thank you” replied Mainak.

“It is heard to believe that sitting at your desk and chair, in an air-conditioned chamber, you all can change and make so many things happen by writing a few lines inside that box. Unbelievable, it is simply unbelievable. “

This is the problem with this generation. They all think that computer programmers make easy money by sitting at their desk and writing a few lines here and there. Mainak was tempted to tutor the kid on the subject of computer from its birth, its renaissance all the way to its modern augmentation. Nobody understands how intricate it is to write a complete program- the routines the subroutines the do loops the logic and above all the accompanied anxieties of meeting schedules, frustrations and sleepless nights. What is the use? The boy will not understand a bit of it anyway. At the same time he felt he should not let it go without a protest either.

“It is really not as simple as you think. There’s a lot more to it than just writing a few lines. You have to have the apposite knowledge and understanding to write those lines. In fact it is very difficult; I wish I could explain this to you. Unfortunately I will not be able to make you understand at your level in such a short period of time.”

“I agree wholeheartedly with you sir and that is the reason why you all are complemented with such deservedly high salaries. “

“There you go again. Most of you look at our high salary only. Nobody can comprehend the hard work, the brain power that goes into each program we write. Believe me, we too have to toil hard, we too have to spend our blood sweat and tears like everyone else. Actually this type of job is much more difficult than any other desk job you can think of.”

Mainak paused for a moment contemplating whether he had said enough. No on the contrary he really had to teach this brain dead kid a lesson.

“Let me give you a very simple example. We both are traveling on the same train even though we bought our tickets from different places and at different times. Is it not? More so, it is not just us, there are more than five hundred persons on board this train at this moment. Not a single person has the same ticket. Not over booked or under. To keep track of how many seats are

available at any point of time is not a matter of joke. It is not possible for even the brightest person in the world. But this is possible at the click of a button. Don't you think this sounds like a miracle? Did it ever cross your mind that this is possible only because of our software and our coding? Writing the software is probably the easy part, to make it security proof so that it is impervious to breaking in is even more difficult.

The young man was listening attentively.

“You guys are really something. Honestly I am at a loss. Are you really capable of writing software like that?”

“When I first started my career I used to, not anymore. I am now a project manager. I have employees under me who does that. “Mainak’s sounded a little softer.

“Your responsibility is then a little less now than when you first started?” asked the young man.

This was enough to stir Mainak all over again. This young man is really asking for it. He could not hold himself anymore. He blurted out. His emotion was displayed in each and every word.

“Not really. On the contrary it is much more than that. Do you have any idea what is the responsibility of a project manager?”

Without waiting for an answer Mainak blurted out again.

“In these days of economic downturn, competition and cost cutting we are not allowed to hire experienced programmers. Accordingly not only do I have to manage the project from cradle to grave but also coddle these greenhorn programmers to write infallible software. If anything goes wrong the client will be unhappy and if the client is unhappy my manager will be all over me. Unmistakably I will be blamed for the failure. Needless to say my standing in the company, promotion and all other endorsements will be immobilized. One thing I worry about the most is my manager. He is unfriendly, very demanding, tough and very abusive. The word excuse is not in his vocabulary. I go through hell everyday. You won't even understand if I tell you what is meant to be standing **in the line of fire.**”

Mainak was happy that he finally burst it out of his chest. He finally felt relieved. He looked up assertively at the young man in front of him. He was taken aback to see the youngster gazing vacantly through the open window. He

appeared to be insensible to his surrounding as if Mainak did not exist, as if he is on some other planet. Mainak didn't say a word; he opened his laptop silently and turned it on.

“But sir I do know what it means to be standing **in the line of fire.**”

The words reverberate for a few seconds in the air before breaking the still silence inside the compartment. Mainak felt as if the words were coming from a distant place and not from the lips of the youngster sitting in front of him. Mainak lifted his eyes from the laptop without uttering a word. The abrupt change in the tone of the kid's voice stunned Mainak. The firm voice was clipped with poise and conviction.

“When I joined the army, I used to find a lot of metaphorical resemblance as a participant in the game of cricket and as a combatant in the battle field. Both represented the confrontation of resolve. Partaker on both sides wanted the same thing but had to cause somebody pain in order to achieve it. The similarities however ended right there. A sportsman vied fiercely and proudly, by exhausting mentally and physically in the pursuit of victory, and then the victor and the bested walked off the field with a shake of hand and often with the understanding that no victory or loss is final. They will compete again tomorrow and there will be another shot at deliverance. However in a battlefield there will be no second chance there will be no hand shakes there will be no spectators to cheer you up or boo you down. Allied with nationalism, combatant warfare represents the true face of realism. To rejoice in victory is the utmost and only reward of a combatant. There is no dignity or grace in defeat.” The young man paused for a moment to recapitulate.

“Location of the conflict was 200 km from the nearest big city. It was under the foot hills of the Mountain range. Enemy controlled the peak and we were down at the foot hills. With tactically vital features and well-prepared defensive posts atop the peak, the enemy on the high ground enjoyed the advantages akin to a fortress. Apart from being equipped with small arms and grenade launchers, they were also armed with mortars, artillery and anti-aircraft guns. Any attack to dislodge the enemy from the high ground in mountain warfare required a far higher ratio of attackers and casualty. The difficulty was exacerbated furthermore by freezing temperatures. Use of aerial attacks were useless. We were losing the war. We were losing our soldiers by the hundreds everyday. There was no hope. We were dejected and defeated. We were thinking about retreat. Only a miracle could bail us out.” The young man rested for a moment.

“Only miraculous thing about a miracle is that it can happen. A ray of hope suddenly appeared from nowhere. It was late at night when the word came to us, exactly one hour before the mission. The mission was to climb the mountainous terrain in the cover of darkness from the east side, surprise the enemy, attack, and defeat and capture the peak. This was the only side that was invisible to the enemy but that was also the steepest. Fifteen of us had been hand picked for the mission and I was one of them. We were told that we were chosen because of our special skills and ability. We were also told that success of the mission was imperative and our country was anxiously waiting for our victory.” The young man stopped and was looking outside the window.

Mainak felt a sense of tension building up within him. He waited patiently for the finale.

“The night was covered with a blanket of darkness as if to support our exertion. The mist made the rocks slippery and the fog made it difficult to grasp. It was not an easy task but we were the chosen few. By God’s grace we were able finally to climb to the top, surprise the enemy, defeat them and conquer the peak that day. We hoisted our national flag on the peak. We all cheered at the top of our lungs. All but five did not cheer with us. They were killed in the encounter. They were all standing **in the line of fire**. We let their bodies to rest on top of the hill near the flag. We left them behind.” The young man turned his cheek away from Mainak. Mainak could sense that the boy was trying to avert the oncoming tears.

Mainak suddenly felt a deep sense of sorrow inside him.

“I always wish I was one of them that died that day. I don’t want to carry their memories for the rest of my life. They haunt me every day.”

Mainak kept silent, he had nothing to say.

The young man composed himself quickly and the familiar smile returned.

“I was awarded the highest medal of honor by the government for my bravery. I have been given a desk job since then. I never in my life have to go back to the battlefield again. I can travel first class whenever I want to and wherever I want to. I have been paid back in full for what I did for my country. I should be happy just like others, but unfortunately I am not. I keep thinking about my comrades who were standing **in the line of fire**. They were all my very dear

friends; some were like my brothers some were like my parents. Most of them had a family. Here I am enjoying my life. Do I really deserve all this? “The young man looked out of the window again in order to hold back his tears.

Mainak looked admiringly at the young man. The train was slowing down. A station break must be coming. The young man got up from his seat and started gathering his luggage. This is the first time Mainak noticed that the boy had only one arm. His left arm was severed from his elbow. Mainak could not gauge why he did not notice it earlier.

“I have to get off at this station. I am Rifleman Ranbir Singh. I came to visit the parents of one of the deceased combatants. I am on my way home now. It was a pleasure meeting someone like you Sir. It’s really an honor. “

The young man held out his right hand for a hand shake.

Mainak was taken aback. He looked intently at the hand in front of him. This is the burly hand that climbed the rugged slippery mountainous terrain. This is the unwavering hand that pulled the trigger of the rifle relentlessly at the enemy. This is the brawny hand that fought the enemy tooth and nail until they were defeated. This is the same hand that hoisted the country’s flag atop the hill. This is the delicate hand that buried the five fallen warriors. And all this happened while Mainak was writing software-program for his company. For the first time in his life, his profession felt so minimal. For the first time he felt so diminutive in front of this lad. He was ashamed that he was giving sermon to this boy about timeliness, responsibility, schedule and work ethics a few minutes ago.

Mainak hoisted himself from his seat with a jerk, slowly raised his arm and touched his forehead with his fingers. That was the closest he could come up with, in the form of a military salute. That he thought was the bare minimum he could do for the sacrifice of this young man, this unsung hero.

Ranvir Singh looked at Mainak for a moment, smiled admiringly and then obliged Mainak’s gesture with a return copy book army salute.

