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Men of the hour

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An ill-equipped and ill-prepared bunch of police personnel managed to resist the well-armed terrorists for several hours.

RAJANISH KAKADE/AP



At the funeral of Hemant Karkare, chief of Mumbai's Anti-Terrorism Squad.

"Before the Navy commandos, the NSG and the Army came in, it was we who entered the Taj and Oberoi hotels," said a police sub-inspector who was stationed at the Oberoi hotel for three days during the siege. "We held off the terrorists for at least five hours before the other security forces came in. The carnage would have been far worse had the local police not reacted the way it did."

Fourteen police personnel, including three senior officers, died in the terror attacks in Mumbai. Opinions differ on the police force's role in the incident. While the police too acted with courage during the crisis, there are many who say that had the force been more vigilant and better equipped, an attack on this scale would never have happened. Some family members of those who died also pointed to the callousness with which the police handled information during those three days.

An officer's tale

As the dust settles, stories of fearless acts by men in uniform have started circulating. The men at the D.B. Marg police station, who used *lathis* and pistols to kill one terrorist and capture another, have earned high praise from one and all, as have the policemen at the Chhatrapati Shivaji Terminus, who pitted their rifles against

the AK-47s of the terrorists. There are also accounts of the policemen who risked their lives to save people during the three days of gun battle and grenade attacks between terrorists and security forces.

Vishwas Nangre-Patil, Deputy Commissioner of Police (DCP), Zone One, was the one who led the charge in the Taj Mahal hotel. Until 2 a.m. nobody knew whether Nangre-Patil was still alive. He and his team finally emerged from the besieged building at about 7 a.m. on November 27 after combating four terrorists for nearly six hours.

Nangre-Patil has shown CCTV (closed circuit television) footage of the initial part of the operation at the Taj Mahal hotel to the media. Although he has blocked out parts where images of the terrorists appear, the footage clearly shows the police taking on four terrorists who had stormed the hotel and killed nearly 40 people.

The southern part of South Mumbai comes under Zone One. Vishwas Nangre-Patil told *Frontline* that he was on his night rounds when he got a call saying there was firing at Leopold Cafe. By the time he reached the spot, he got another call saying suspected terrorists had entered the Taj Mahal hotel. He said he and his team reached the hotel and immediately started battling the terrorists:

"We chased them up to the sixth floor and held them in combat until 11.30 p.m. During that time the hotel staff had managed to evacuate some of the guests. But there were still hundreds held up in the big halls.

SHIRISH SHETE/PTI



The D.B. Marg police inspecting the car that two terrorists hijacked in Mumbai on November 26 night. The police shot dead one of the terrorists and captured the other, later identified as Mohammed Ajmal Amir Iman.

"I believe they must have thought there were many more policemen because we were firing continuously. They went on the defensive and during that time they were just trying to hide. They did seem to know the hotel well. Finally, I went to the CCTV room on the ground floor and tried to track their movements from there. Meanwhile, they began throwing grenades from the sixth floor. From 3 a.m. onwards it was complete bombing.

"I can safely say that had we [the police] not kept up the firing or held them in combat for so long, the number of casualties would

have been much higher. As soon as the commandos came, we began evacuating people. By early morning most of the people trapped in the rooms, halls, shops, kitchens and restaurants had been removed from the premises."

Nangre-Patil believes that Mumbai's police force must be commended for the way it reacted to the crisis. "We did not have sophisticated weapons but we took them head on," he said.

A relative of a woman who was shot at the Oberoi hotel gave the police credit for their response but said that "the way they treated us outside the target areas was inexcusable". He added: "We kept asking for information because we were anxious. Perhaps they had none. But the officer outside the hotel started becoming rude and obnoxious as the days wore on. You cannot behave like this in times like this."

There was no helpline for a long time and the control room was totally inefficient. They were just not prepared for such a huge crisis, he said and asked: "Why did they take the tip-off on the possibility of a terror attack so lightly?" The lack of a system and method of handling such situations seemed so evident, he added.

The sub-inspector who was holed up in the Oberoi hotel said: "It is easy to blame the police in times like this. Yes, we do need a better system, but I know we did our best."

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