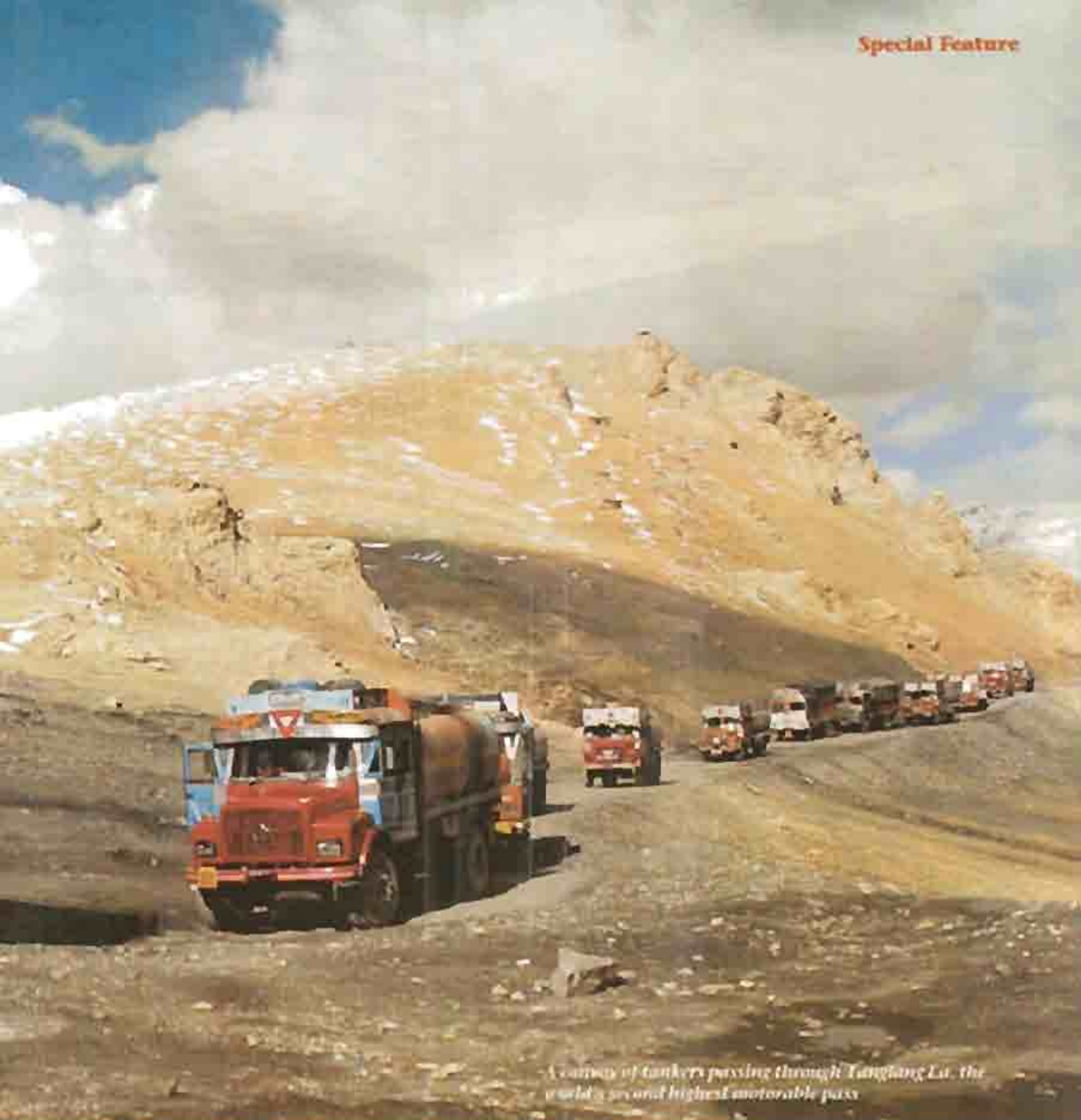


WHERE EAGLES DARE

Come mid-October and the roads leading to Ladakh, the land of high passes, shut down for nearly seven months due to heavy snow fall. Winter sets in much earlier than in the plains down south. Life in the cold desert is harsh, particularly in winter, when temperatures can dip to as low as -40 degree Celsius. Foodstuff, clothing, medicines, fuel,... everything has to be stored in advance to support the three lakh Ladakhis and the army personnel stationed round the year in the high mountains, overlooking both Pakistan-occupied Kashmir and China. Palashranjan Bhaumick captures the images and tells the story of how fuel is stored for the bitter cold.



A convoy of tankers passing through Tanglang La, the world's second highest motorable pass

It is hot and humid under the September sun at the Indian Oil Corporation's filling terminal on the outskirts of Ambala, Haryana. This terminal, the largest in northern India, serves the needs of Haryana, Punjab, Rajasthan, Himachal Pradesh and Jammu and Kashmir. Right now, the priority is the high altitude frontiers. ioc officials are busy stocking up for the winter requirements of the army, air force, civil airlines, and the people of Ladakh.

Terminal manager Sudhakar Parasari and his team are racing against time, ensuring the required oil supplies reach Leh

in Ladakh before the passes are blocked by snowfall that is just weeks away. The preparations are akin to getting ready for battle: the difference being that the 'soldiers' are 650 brave tanker drivers and their helpers. The task is to carry 50,000 kilo litres of petroleum products from Ambala to Leh. And while the distance is just 850 kilometres, the terrain is difficult winding roads through some of the world's highest mountains.

On this particular day in the second week of September, ioc has to dispatch 90 tankers for Leh. Time is short. Phone calls are being made back and forth between Parasari and his





1. Ambala: the filling hub for winter stocking 2. An electronic entry pass; the passport to the terminal 3. *Bidi mat jalatye* (Do not smoke) 4. On-the-spot manual purity check of ATF 5. Clinical check of the fuel 6. The drivers good hands are always there 7. Waiting to hear their names called out 8&9. The long and short of the locks and keys 10. Picturesque Tanglong La pass 11. Life in a community tent 12. An LPG depot in Leh 13. Offloading time: the main fuel depot in Leh 14. A perfect match: IOC and the Indian air force in Leh 15. Stringent checks 16. An army field depot somewhere in Ladakh 17. (Next page) Army personnel in action 18&19. On the top of the world! The world's highest depot and petrol pump

counterparts and the army field depots' officials, updating themselves on the tankers' movements. All the terminal's 22 fillers are engaged, filling up the tankers even as 50 more wait in queue with hundreds more outside the terminal complex. The tanker drivers wait anxiously for their names to be called out over the loudspeaker. Jagjit Singh, a young Sikh driver in his mid-twenties, is sitting in his truck cab, hearing *Bidi jalat* he from the music system. He is happy because he has been called in to fill up. This will be his eighth trip to Leh in the last three months, which means a lot to Singh who has just

become a father. Every extra trip will bring in much-needed additional income. Armed with his electronic entry pass and his tanker filled with 9,000 litres of aviation turbine fuel (ATF), he sets off for Leh. As he steers his tanker towards the main gate, he quickly switches off the music system! It is almost as if even the word 'Fire' could cause a fire in the highly inflammable terminal. In fact, the first lesson that the drivers are given by the security personnel is about fire safety. No one is allowed to carry a match box, torch, lighter, cameras with flashguns, or even a cell phone! Smoking is strictly



prohibited and the whole terminal is under electronic surveillance round the clock.

Filling up the tankers is a sensitive operation. First, the drivers go through a strict security screening. IOC issues every driver eligible to ferry its products a photo-ID. Along with his current consignment's electronic entry pass and a detailed receipt, the driver enters the terminal. Once he is cleared by the security, he drives his tanker to the filling bay. His papers are checked by IOC officials once again. If they are satisfied with the papers, then he is allowed to place the tanker at the filler.

The filling is done by a computerised process system. Not a single drop of extra fuel can flow out. The consignment information is sent to the receiving end instantly. Once the filling is done, the tanker is locked with special tamper-proof locks by the IOC officials. The locking of the tanker plays a key role to this whole operation to ensure that no pilferage takes place at any given point of time. Each key has a counter key kept at the destination. The tanker can only be opened by an authorised IOC personnel or a field depot army officer. The locks are checked again by the security. After the security is satisfied with the locks, the tanker is allowed to leave the terminal.

Now the driver is ready to set forth. It will take him three to four days to reach Leh, assuming the weather is fair. On the way, the drivers prefer to eat and spend their nights at the *dhalsas* only. Many drivers avoid driving the tankers at night on the treacherous route. Once the tanker reaches its destination, a thorough checking of the papers, locks, measurement of the consignment and a purity check is done again in front of the authorised officials. All the parameters have to match with the origin of the consignment and only then will the driver be allowed to offload his fuel. A detailed report is exchanged with the main terminal instantly. After the offloading, while coming out of the depot, security guards recheck the tanker to make sure it is completely empty.

Though the tankers look quite ordinary, they are specially built depending on the products they carry. The trucks are modified to take the continuous shock of the uneven mountainous roads. The drivers of these tankers are highly skilled in

high altitude driving. For instance, at 18,500 feet, a tanker filled with petrol or like fluid, while taking a sharp turn on an uneven road can have a fatal accident by just a sway here or there. Then there are places where the trucks traverse roads not far from the Pakistani border. A few years ago, shelling from across the border was quite common; thankfully, such shelling has stopped now.

A great fear among the drivers is of landslides, which are quite common in these areas. In case of a landslide, the army's high altitude road construction outfit 'Himank' is pressed into action.

In the end, though, the weather is the villain. Coupled with biting cold and the lack of oxygen in these high altitude passes, life can be extremely difficult, even fatal. For that, the army has emergency medical camps all along the route.

Yet, in the whole operation, the most interesting aspect is the active participation of the tanker drivers. They are involved in every stage from the filling up to the offloading stages, working in tandem with the IOC officials and army officers. The drivers take full ownership of the consignment. They are the real heroes who battle all the odds to go only where eagles dare!

So why do the drivers risk their lives to take the tankers all the way up to Ladakh. Is it for the extra income that they get for putting their lives at risk? At an army field depot somewhere in Ladakh, when this question was put to a seasoned elderly driver, he replied, "Nahi saahiji, agar hamare jawan desh ke liye jaan de sakte hain, hum unke liye itni taah kar sakte?" (No sir, if our soldiers can give their lives for our country, can't we do just this for them?).

Historically, the people and army in Ladakh share a special relationship with IOC. Today, due to its uninterrupted supply of fuel, cooking gas and kerosene, particularly to the far-flung villages during the winters, IOC has helped the local economy grow considerably. Now the roads have been widened, strengthened and travel time has been remarkably shortened. Leh, the district headquarter is well connected with Air Deccan, Indian, and Jet conducting regular Leh-Delhi flights.

In recent years, tourism has propelled the economy of Ladakh. Hundreds of thousands of tourists flock to the mountains of Ladakh every year, often during summer. And thanks to the easy availability of fuel, many hotels remain open during winter. Not so surprising then that even when it is freezing cold in Ladakh, hundreds of Indian and foreign tourists fly down to Ladakh to enjoy its breathtaking beauty. ■

