A Deathless Hero – 2/Lt Arun Khetarpal, PVC (Posthumous)

April 20, 2012

The Indian armed forces epitomise the ultimate symbol of national pride brought about by the valour and sacrifices of its sons. Continuing on the series of stories on bravehearts, Gen Raj Mehta brings alive the sacrifices of this brave son of India – 2/Lt Arun Khetarpal, PVC.

-Editors

2/Lt Arun Khetarpal, PVC (Posthumous)

Maj Gen Raj Mehta, AVSM, VSM (Retd)

What can one say of a shy, self-effacing, embodiment of the Chetwode motto who died? That he was disarmingly handsome and brave; that he was an inspirational leader and the Fakhr-e-Hind of his beloved country, India? That he was admired in death by his opposing number of the Pakistani Armoured Corps. That much and so much more can be said and written about this bravest of brave young officers, who willingly and selflessly gave up his tomorrow for the Indian Army’s priceless historical legacy of naam, namak and nishan. Go home therefore, dear reader, and tell them of him and say, with pride and with passion, that 2/Lt Arun Khetarpal, PVC, (Posthumous), by the manner of his military skills, deathless spirit and his death, brought rare honour to his distinguished cavalry regiment, The Poona Horse and to soldiering, even as his life blood left his shattered body after he had engaged and destroyed his fourth Pakistani Patton tank. He gave up his today for our tomorrow…

Born on 14 October 1950, in Pune, Arun Khetarpal came from a family with a long military tradition. His great-grandfather had served in the Sikh army and fought against the British at the close run battle of Chillianwala in 1848. His grandfather served in the British army during the First World War and Arun’s father, Brigadier ML Khetarpal, was a Sapper officer. Arun studied at the famous Lawrence School, Sanawar. He joined the National Defence Academy in 1967 (38th NDA course, ‘Foxtrot’ Squadron; he became Squadron Cadet Captain). He was commissioned into The Poona Horse on June 13, 1971. The unit was termed ‘Fakhr-e-Hind’ by Pakistan after its 1965 battle performance in the Sialkot Sector.

My association with him began in those early days in 1971, when we knew with certainty that we would go to war with Pakistan. I was then a young officer in 16 Light Cavalry, in 16 Independent Armoured Brigade. Just before we mobilized in late September for moving to the border in J&K, my Regiment played a closely contested basketball match with The Poona Horse. Playing for them was Arun. Still to do his Young Officers’ Course, he was an average player but a wonderful friend; shy, intense, very driven. Given his movie star looks, his tall, slim frame, his deportment and his pedigreed conduct, he endeared himself to all. That evening, we met at his Officers Mess bar. Arun surprised all the young officers present by suddenly announcing that, in the coming war; he would die and would be rewarded for
gallantry. An awkward silence followed but something in his quiet, convincing
demeanour and the intensity with which he made his remark made me believe his
premonition.

During the 1971 indo- Pak War, 17 Poona Horse was placed under command 47
Infantry Brigade of 54 Infantry Division in the Shakargarh Bulge opposite Samba, J
and K. It was superbly victorious in what we term as the Battle of Basantar and
Pakistan terms as the Battle of Barapind. The essence of what happened was that
the Brigade was tasked to establish a bridgehead on night December 15, 1971,
across the Basantar River, using The Poona Horse to provide its Infantry operations
and the attacking troops protection and later, spearhead its operations. The enemy’s
8 Armoured Brigade sensed the danger and chose to counterattack the bridgehead
post-haste, to deny the Indian Army further ingress along this axis that was headed
straight for Shakargarh town, the physical and psychological centre of gravity of the
Shakargarh Bulge.

At 0800 hours on December 16, Pakistani 13 Lancers equipped with the then state
of the art US made 50 ton Patton tanks launched the first of their counter-attacks
under the cover of a smokescreen at ‘B’ Squadron, The Poona Horse, at Jarpal. Its
squadron commander urgently called for reinforcements. Arun Khetarpal, who was in
‘A’ squadron and was stationed close by with his Centurion tank troop, responded
with alacrity, as did the rest of his regiment. The first counter attack was decimated
by accurate gunnery, coolness by our tank troop and individual tank commanders
from the iconic CO,Lt Col (later Lt Gen) Hanut Singh, MVC downwards to its dashing
troop leader, Arun Khetarpal. 13 Lancers desperately launched two more squadron
level counterattacks (see sketch below), but to no avail and at savage cost in men
and material to this otherwise old and well established cavalry regiment.

Pak 13 Lancers launched piece meal counterattacks and paid the price; losing its
organic cohesion as a tank regiment in the bargain

Arun destroyed three tanks, but was seriously wounded, along with the driver of his
tank, ‘Famagusta’ when firing at the third tank. When engaging his fourth tank
manned by then Major (later Brigadier) Khwaja Mohammad Naser, the opposing
squadron commander, his tank was hit for the second time. Deployed across the
Basantar River on December 16, 1971, a few kilometres away from his battle, I
heard his last radio message. Mortally injured and bleeding, he radioed his squadron
commander: “No Sir, I will not abandon my tank. My gun is still working and I will get
these ……" He did, dying as he knocked off his fourth Patton tank. He was awarded
the Param Vir Chakra posthumously. He was the embodiment of the spirit of Naam,
Namak and Nishan and of the Chetwode Motto.

Many years later, India and Pakistan established ‘people to people' contact also
known as ‘Twin Track Diplomacy’. In 2001, Brigadier Khetarpal felt a strong desire to
visit his birthplace at Sargodha, now in Pakistan. Twin Track Diplomacy and contacts
thereof ensured that the visit took place. At Lahore airport, Brigadier Khetarpal was
met by Brigadier Khwaja Mohammad Naser, who took it upon himself to be his host
and guide. Brigadier Naser really went out of way to ensure that Brigadier Khetarpal
had a satisfying and nostalgic visit to his old house. The hospitality of Pakistanis is
legendary, but Arun’s father sensed that behind the exceptional treatment he got
from Brigadier Naser and his family, there was some unusual motivation, but could not pinpoint it. Finally the stunning disclosure was made. On the eve of his departure, Brigadier Naser told him that “I regret to tell you that your son died in my hands. Arun’s courage was exemplary and he moved his tank with fearless courage and daring, totally unconcerned about his safety. Tank casualties were very high till finally there were just two of us left facing one another. We both fired simultaneously. It was destined that I was to live and he was to die”… The brave father realised that the Pakistani officer had, in confessing, paid a great tribute to Arun and, in so doing, put his own soldier’s conscience at causing Arun’s death at rest. Later, Brig Khetarpal received a letter from Brigadier Naser that said that Arun had “stood like an insurmountable rock, between the victory and failure of the counter attack by the ‘SPEARHEADS’ – 13 LANCERS – on December 16, 1971 in the battle of “Bara Pind’ as we call it and battle of ‘Basantar’ as The 17 Poona Horse remembers it…”

In 1981, I was shocked to receive my posting to the NDA as an Instructor. By an unwritten convention, only ex NDA officers are posted there. I was amongst the privileged few from the OTS who broke this convention as I was an “outsider”. I remember standing in front of Arun Khetarpal’s portrait in Sudan Block, where the bravest of the brave are eternally sequestered within frames of gold-rimmed portraits; testimony to the Academy’s motto of Service Before Self and a source of deathless inspiration. I took an oath then, that I would honour the NDA spirit in all I did in my military career. In subsequent command of my Regiment, a Rashtriya Rifles Sector in Kashmir, an Armoured Brigade, a Division on the Line of Control in Kashmir, I never forgot this pledge.

When I lay seriously wounded on the snow after an encounter with Pakistani terrorists in South Kashmir in January 1998 (I was then a Brigadier in command of a Rashtriya Rifles Sector in South Kashmir), I remembered Arun’s gutsy ‘spirit and slogged on, refusing pain killing morphine. Hours after I was wounded, we had shot three of the terrorists (we lost two soldiers) and it was only then that I allowed myself to be carried on a stretcher for evacuation by helicopter to Srinagar’s Army Base Hospital.

West Point, the United States Military Academy after which NDA is modeled, has a poignant unofficial motto: “Much of the history we teach was made by soldier’s we taught.” One realises how true the motto is for the NDA and, indeed, for soldiers and soldiering worldwide.

Much of modern India’s military history has been written by brave hearts like Arun Khetarpal who departed NDA’s portals carrying the torch held by Tanaji Malusare, the General who left his son’s marriage on Shivaji’s command to capture the strategic fortress of Sinhgarh that today overlooks the NDA campus and for whom Shivaji, in February 1670, paid the ultimate eulogy: ‘Garh Ala pan Sinh Gela’ (I have got the Fort but have lost my Lion). Indeed, the Sinhgad Fort today oversees the NDA spirit both physically and metaphorically. The 26/29 November terror strike at Mumbai yet again saw the NDA spirit on display in the ultimate sacrifice paid by young Major Sandeep Unnikrishnan, an ex NDA whose heroic death paved the way to the NSG’s success in a hugely complex and difficult operation that held the world’s attention riveted during its tenancy.
The Indian armed forces and certainly the Indian Mechanised Forces carry the flag once carried by 2/Lt Arun Khetarpal high, very high indeed. Whether NDA, Direct Entry or from the OTA; whether they are men or women officers or simple tank men; Arun’s tank ‘Famagusta’ now restored, is displayed at the Armoured Corps Centre and School at Ahmednagar. It is here that future Arun Khetarpal’s whether tank men or of mechanized infantry learn their profession of arms. Arun’s memorial remains a powerful, irresistible beacon encouraging new generations of soldiers and officers across gender to walk the extra mile; to embody the Army’s motto of ‘Service Before Self’ always and every time the need arises.

Captain Vikram Batra, PVC

*I’ll either come back after raising the Indian flag in victory or return wrapped in it.*

- Shaheed Captain Vikram Batra, PVC

Twin sons were born to the family of Mr Girdhari Lal Batra and Mrs Jai Kamal Batra, on 09 September 1974 at Mandi, Himachal Pradesh. The family had two daughters earlier and twin sons were a joyful addition to the family. The family nicknamed the twins as ‘Luv’ (Vikram) and ‘Kush’ (Vishal). Luv received his primary education from his mother, who herself is a teacher. He received his education up to Middle Standard at the D.A.V. Public School in Palampur and up to senior secondary stage in Central School, Palampur. Both his sisters are married and his twin-brother, Kush, is undergoing an internship training course as a Junior Executive with Tata Finance Limited. He was very brilliant, diligent, and active from the very beginning of his student life. He was very popular among his friends, students and teachers since, he was ever smiling and respectful to everyone. He was an all rounder, good in studies, always a first divisioner, equally good in sports and all other co-curricular activities. He always kept himself in first line and among the toppers in all the different fields. He was also a green belt holder in Karate. He always kept himself in first line and among the toppers in all the different fields. He used to sweep almost 75% of the prizes from the prize distribution table during his schooling. He participated in ‘national level’ table tennis (Central Schools) and represented the North Zone. He participated in a national youth parliamentary competition.

After passing his 10+2 in 1992 from Central School Palampur, he got admitted in D.A.V. College, Chandigarh in B.Sc where he was adjudged the best N.C.C. Cadet (Air Wing) in two zones. He was selected and underwent a helicopter flight course for 40 days at the Pinjore flying club. He was also selected for the 1994 Republic Day Parade at New Delhi. During his B.Sc. course in 1995, he was selected to join the Merchant Navy at a company in Hong Kong. However in the nick of time, he dropped the idea of joining the Merchant Navy due to his patriotic zeal to serve the Nation. As a true son and soldier of the motherland, he decided to join the Indian Army as a Commissioned Officer. He joined the Indian Military Academy (IMA) in June 1996 at Dehradun. After passing out in December 1997, he joined the army as a Lieutenant of the 13 JAK Rifles at Sopore, Jammu & Kashmir. Later he was sent for the Young Officer's Course at the Infantry School in Mhow, Madhya Pradesh.
where he was awarded alpha grading for his overall performance. Next, he attended a 35-day commando course at Belgaum, Karnataka in February-March 1999 where upon completion of the course, he was placed in Instructor's Grade.

On 01 June 1999, his unit proceeded to the Kargil Sector on the eruption of a war-like situation in Kargil, Drass and Batalik sub-sectors from where he was sent along with his company on the first strategic and daring operation to recapture the first peak of utmost importance - Point 5140, which was at an altitude of 17,000 feet. Upon reaching Point 5140, leading a company of troops, he encountered the commander of the Pakistani-backed terrorists on radio. The enemy commander challenged him by saying, "Why have you come Shershah (Vikram's nick name given by his commanding officer), you will not go back." Captain Batra, being the last person to back away from a fight, replied, "We shall see within one hour, who remains on the top." In a short while Captain Batra and his company of troops killed eight enemy soldiers and more importantly captured a heavy anti-aircraft machine gun, neutralising the advantageous peak. Mission Point 5140 was a success!

Re-capture of Point 5140 paved the way to the return of the rest of peaks and cleared the Srinagar-Leh highway which sat in motion of successes like capturing Point 5100, 4700 Junction, Three Pimples and the ultimate prize - Tiger Hill. Soon after capturing Point 5140, he radioed his commanding officer and said jubilantly, "Yeh Dil Mange More!" On the successful capture of the vital peak he was congratulated & graced by the Chief of Army Staff, General Ved Prakash Malik on telephone. After taking rest for 4 to 5 days he proceeded towards Point 4750, where he was challenged again by the enemy who said, "Shershah, nobody shall be left to lift your dead bodies," to which Captain Batra curtly replied, "Don't worry about us, Pray for your safety." He captured Point 4750 and hoisted the national flag. He also played a commendable role in the capture of Tiger Hill. He had dedicated himself and was determined for total victory.

Captain Batra was on a victory rampage, his heart asking for more honor and victory. He volunteered himself for a third crucial operation, recapturing Point 4875 which was at an altitude of 17,000 feet and had a gradient of 80 degrees. He attacked the peak along with his company and another led by Captain Anuj Nayyar, MVC. They gave the enemy a tough time, killed a number of enemy troops and re-captured the peak on 05 July 1999. The enemy counter attacked the peak on 07 July 1999, but he retaliated the counter attack with vigour. In the heat of the battle, one of his junior officers (Lieutenant Naveen) was seriously injured and he immediately went to his rescue. While dragging Lieutenant Naveen back under cover, he pleaded to Captain Batra to let him continue the fight despite his injuries to which Captain Batra replied, "Tu baal bachedaar hai! Hatt jaa peeche." (You have kids and a wife to look after! Get back). Destiny however had something else in store for him and during the rescue, the brave Captain was hit by a bullet in the chest. With the words Jai Mata Di on his lips, he fell down and was hit again in the waist by an artillery splinter. Before succumbing to his grievous injuries, this brave son of the motherland and a true lion of Bharat Mata killed another five enemy soldiers.

Captain Vikram Batra fought with exceptional bravery and magnitude, which is rarely seen. He has set an example before the youth of our nation, which shall inspire generations to come. In recognition of his gallant act, Point 4875 has now been
renamed as Captain Vikram Batra Top and has received all credit to capturing this vital peak by his Commanding Officer, Colonel Y.K. Joshi, 13 JAK Rifles. For his sustained display of the most conspicuous personal bravery and junior leadership of the highest order in the face of the enemy, Captain Vikram Batra was awarded the Param Vir Chakra, India’s highest medal for gallantry, posthumously. His father, Mr. G.L. Batra, received the award from the President of India, on behalf of his brave son.

Article © Mr Girdhari Lal Batra, father of Shaheed Captain Vikram Batra, PVC

**Param Vir Chakra**

Captain Vikram Batra was awarded the Param Vir Chakra, India’s highest military honor on 15 August 1999, the 52nd anniversary of India’s independence. His father Mr. G.L. Batra received the honor for his deceased son from the President of India, the late K.R. Narayanan.[1]

Captain Vikram Batra, 13 JAK Rifles, and his Delta Company was given the task of recapturing Point 5140. Nicknamed Sher Shah (‘Lion King’ in Urdu/Hindi) for his unstinting courage, he decided to lead the rear, as an element of surprise would help stupefy the enemy. He and his men ascended the sheer rock-cliff, but as the group neared the top, the enemy pinned them on the face of the bare cliff with machine gun fire. Captain Batra, along with five of his men, climbed up regardless and after reaching the top, hurled two grenades at the machine gun post. He single-handedly killed three enemy soldiers in close combat. He was seriously injured during this, but insisted on regrouping his men to continue with the mission. Inspired by the courage displayed by Captain Batra, the soldiers of 13 JAK Rifles charged the enemy position and captured Point 5140 at 3:30 a.m. on 20 June 1999. His company is credited with killing at least eight Pakistani soldiers and recovering a heavy machine gun.[2]

The capture of Point 5140 set in motion a string of successes, such as Point 5100, Point 4700, Junction Peak and Three Pimples. Along with fellow Captain Anuj Nayyar, Batra led his men to victory with the recapture of Point 4750 and Point 4875. He was killed when he tried to rescue an injured officer during an enemy counterattack against Point 4875 in the early morning hours of 7 July 1999. His last words were, "Jai Mata Di." (which means in Punjabi 'Hail to thee, the Divine Mother'). For his sustained display of the most conspicuous personal bravery and leadership of the highest order in the face of the enemy, Captain Vikram Batra was awarded the Param Vir Chakra.[3]

- Batra’s last words were the battle-cry "Jai Mata Di!" ("Victory to the Mother (Durga)!") in Sanskrit
- Batra’s *Yeh Dil Maange More!* (My heart asks for more!), erstwhile a popular slogan for a *Pepsi* commercial, became an iconic battle cry that swept across the country and remains popular with millions of Indians, invoked at patriotic
public events, in memory of the war and the soldiers, and as a symbol of the indomitable spirit of Indian patriotism and valor in face of future attacks.

- Upon reaching Point 5140, he got into a cheeky radio exchange with an enemy commander, who challenged him by saying, "Why have you come Sher Shah (Vikram’s nick name given by his commanding officer)? You will not go back." Captain Vikram Batra is said to have replied, "We shall see within one hour, who remains on the top."

- While dragging Lt. Naveen back under cover, Naveen pleaded to Captain Batra to let him continue the fight in spite the injuries to which Captain Batra replied "Tu baal bachedaar hai!! Hatt jaa peeche," ("You have kids and wife to look after! Get back!").

- "Ya toh Tiranga lehrake awunga, ya fir Tirange mein lipta huwa awunga zaroor, lekin awunga" (Either I will come back after hoisting the Tricolour (Indian flag), or I will come back wrapped in it, but i will be back for sure).

- "In reply to a Pakistani's taunt that they will leave Kashmir if the Indians give them Madhuri Dixit, a popular bollywood actress, Captain Batra gave him the reply, "Sorry, Madhuri is busy!". He then shot the taunter and said " From Madhuri,With love".

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**Bravery Personified: Lt Navdeep Singh, Ashoka Chakra**

February 11, 2012

Conferring the Ashok Chakra on Lt Navdeep Singh is the latest but not the last episode of gallantry in the long and chequered history of the Indian Armed Forces. His actions speak of military professionalism and placing duty, honour and selflessness above personal needs.

Maj Gen Raj Mehta (Retd)

A rookie Ordnance Corps officer on attachment to a fine Infantry battalion, 15 Maratha Light Infantry, Lt Navdeep Singh, lost his life in the high altitude, Gurais Valley in North Kashmir, in August 2011, while conducting a highly successful ambush. As many as 12 out of a group of 17 heavily armed Lashkar terrorists were neutralised by Navdeep and his Ghatak (Commando) Platoon, with two more being shot later. This stunning military success was the fallout of Navdeep’s classic interpretation of soldiering — placing duty, honour, selflessness and sacrifice above personal needs. Intelligent and multi-skilled, the lad was in love — with uniform, life and fiancée. And he sacrificed all three cheerfully — for the Idea of India.
His legacy is that he was doing a job that soldiers do night after night… an ordinary, routine job… However, when opportunity knocked on his doorstep, he was ready. He did an ordinary job with extraordinary zeal, fortitude and “follow me” traits. Navdeep died but remains deathless because his legacy lives on – applicable across age, gender and occupation, both military and civilian.

A Midnight Call

Lt Gen Syed Ata Hasnain, the iconic commanding General in Kashmir remembers that it was 2.30 AM on that dark, fateful night of 19/20 August 2011, when he was woken up by a strident, insistent ring. Instantly alert, he intuitively sensed something amiss. Lt Navdeep Singh; the peppy rookie officer he had complimented for his professionalism at the Corps Battle School for new inductees, had attained martyrdom at Bagtor, in the Gurais Valley while ambushing a “track” of Lashkar intruders. The stark, poignant epitaph that honours the dead Spartans of the Battle of Thermopylae in Greece in 480 BC; “Here we lie; having fulfilled our orders” was now his. His “Ganpats” (affectionate term for Maratha soldiers) had lost Navdeep in execution of the Indian Army tradition of Service Before Self.

Commissioned into the Ordnance Corps, young Navdeep died on the banks of the azure, Kishanganga (called Neelam in POK), flowing through the narrow picture-postcard Gurais Valley, which the Line of Control (LC) cuts across. He ensured, by his personal example, that 12 of 17 armed-to-the-teeth Lashkar terrorists were shot dead by him and his Commando platoon. In saving the life of his “buddy”, Sepoy Vijay Gajare, he was fatally shot at five meters, just above his bullet-proof “patka”- a typically Indian improvisation of a full-scale steel helmet that protects the forehead but leaves the head bare. Navdeep had no chance, dying even as he pulled his buddy to safety… he had shot his fourth terrorist before he succumbed.

Gurais Valley

Located on the erstwhile Silk Route, Gurais Valley at 9000 feet, is as much famous as the birthplace of Kashmiri civilization and the Sharda script, as it is for its pink trout, sapphires, friendly people as well as for the romantic, deathless story of Habba Khatoon; the ethereally beautiful Guraizi girl who loved and lost, pining for her beloved through her songs till her last breath. She lives on in Kashmir through dirges that speak of having loved and lost; The Scottish bard, Robert Burns captures her situation poignantly through his immortal poetry: “Had we na’er loved nor parted, we’d na’er had been so broken-hearted…”
Post his death, I did deep research and wrote extensively on his sacrifice. Determined to honour this lad at his place of death, I crossed the daunting Razdan Pass at about 12,000 feet to enter Gurais Valley before it got snowed in for six months. At the base, the road has ancient Kanzalwan village; its houses huddled together for comfort, with a shawl wrap of fog; part real, part cooking-fire driven. At Bagtor, the dynamic CO, Col Girish Upadhya, his key officers and Navdeep’s Ghataks were all there — proud, erect, happy that a retired veteran had come to salute one of their bravest sons. Firm handshakes with hard, calloused hands; the recessed smiles of brave, silent men given to letting their work speak for them and bear-hugs surrogated for mundane verbal communication.

The Briefing

I was led to a stunning vantage point where the village Bagtor cluster lay below, with the azure, crystal-clear Kishanganga swiftly flowing past the huddled villages. Towering menacingly above, were 6000 feet of vertical mountains with the security fencing separating India and Pakistan Occupied Kashmir clearly visible. Thickly forested till 12,000 feet, the mountains became gaunt and without forest cover as the eye went up to the jagged tops. On my right could be seen the dense Durmat forest across the Kishanganga — great place for terrorists to seek refuge or soldiers to lay deadly ambushes.

The briefing followed, proving the point that Op Bagtor had nowhere been as near picture-perfect and ideal as one might think. With time against him, the CO had actually improvised a plan by literally thinking on his feet. Lesser leadership or lack of support from his senior officers would have been devastating. He decisively seized the fleeting operational challenge when it came – and had rushed his men into battle, but with caution. An oxymoron, but then soldiers invariably live with stark contrasts.

To discover that, he drove me, with Navdeep’s Ghataks following, to the Bagtor village cluster. Upadhya explained with clinical precision how the intruders were sighted that dark night, and how before that, he had been sounded on “kuchh hone wala hai”. What the CO had really conveyed was that there was intelligence synergy and redundancy at work out there from those towering heights at 14,000 feet, through those increasingly thicker forests as one came down, right down to places of entry into the Paltan’s areas of operational responsibility. Sitting far away at Davar near the Habba Khatoon massif, the Brigade Commander and staff were also up, having enabled and networked these leads, as were the alert Division Commander at Kupwara and the Corps Commander in far away Srinagar.

The Ambush
The real conductor of this tiered orchestra of military capability was, of course, the astute and alert Upadhya. He and Navdeep were in the Officers Mess, after an exhausting 12 hours of working out contingencies, when the call came. The intruders had been spotted! He and Navdeep, he recalled, literally raced in the CO’s jeep to Bagtor, the four kilometer distance to his Tactical Headquarters seeming unending. It was, literally, a desperate, time-sensitive race to the swift...

Share the excitement, my dear reader! Imagine you are on a bucking, snorting, racing jeep, its headlights barely piercing the gloom, the forested darkness astride the dirt track. Listen with excitement as the CO changes gears with one hand while he barks confident, crisp orders to young Thomas, the Adjutant, on his radio, “Relocate. Redeploy. Get the men running to reach the new ambush site before the terrorists do. I want all 17. Hear me?!!” “WILCO!” yells the Adjutant. Hastening slowly – this article is loaded with oxymorons – the men redeploy on the run with caution...the enemy is too close. In the co-drivers seat, Navdeep speaks quietly, issuing instructions to his men. Disembarking at Tactical Headquarters, races off. At the ambush site, his men quietly point to the ghostly, looming shadows emerging from the inky darkness. There is only time for whispered consultations and readjustments by the young officer to ensure that the ambush is correctly sited. Navdeep then whispers, “Fire only after I fire,” as he cocks his AK with a soft, lethal click. The die is cast...

That chilly night, I’m in black dungarees and carry Navdeep’s AK – loaded. The CO and men are armed too. I lie down exactly where Navdeep had lain down, his buddy, Sepoy Vijay Gajare alongside me. The terrorist approach is played out with 17 Ganpats. With pride, I realise that when Navdeep finally opened fire, he actually waited to literally touch them, crowd them into a little rock-strewn slope from which it was death anyway by drowning or bullets or both. His buddy makes me half-get-up, as Navdeep did, to pull him in after he was hit. A Ganpat, who has taken position behind a boulder, simulating the terrorist who shot Navdeep, is just five meters away. This was the distance at which Navdeep was fired at while pulling in his buddy to safety as he fell dying. He had fired 81 out of the 90 rounds he was carrying. He died nobly.

Award of the Ashoka Chakra

On returning home on January 24, 2012, from a lecture-tour where I had delivered 15 talks to people across gender, age, social strata and occupation on the legacy of bravehearts like Lt Navdeep Singh, I spoke to Navdeep’s father; Hony Lt Joginder Singh. “Indeed, sir, my son is getting the Ashoka Chakra. We await the honour on 26 January 2012...we are proud of what Navdeep did, sir, and of the Army where father and son
served.” The Ashok Chakra is India’s highest military decoration awarded for the most conspicuous bravery or some daring or pre-eminent valour or self-sacrifice in peace.

Fathers are trained by genetic engineering and social custom to be stoic, to hide their true feelings. Navdeep’s brave Mother, sister and brother sat in the audience, crying their hearts out, as Navdeep’s sterling citation was read out. The father, escorted to the President by CO 15 Maratha LI, Col Girish Upadhya, tried his best to hide his loss; his tears of pride … he almost succeeded.

Navdeep’s immortal Legacy

The Indian Army was born in battle in 1947 and remains in battle in the defence of India – quite disregardful of the supreme indifference of its political masters. “Martyrs, my friend, have to choose between being forgotten, mocked or used. As for being understood: never”, a cynical Albert Camus has written. This hurts because it is so true.

Navdeep was a wet-behind-the-ears whipper-snapper; a rookie still in “Boot Camp” but, drilled, because of grave paucity of officers, by his famous paltan and his Ordnance lineage, into a potentially world-class soldier. This, even before he was detailed on his mandatory, coming-of-age Young Officers’ Course. Navdeep brought to the table, in the prescient words of Lord Moran, cold courage as a moral and physical choice, an act of renunciation that he knew could result in his death. His men knew this as well, but were fired up, ignited by his grit and daring. Add to that, the other ingredients of transformational leadership; creative intelligence, physical fitness, junoon, grit and selflessness and you have his legacy. With an MBA and a Hotel Management degree behind him, he was Ivy League and could have gone into safe, well-paying jobs, but obviously that wasn’t the case. Like deathless 2/Lt Arun Khetarpal and Capt Vikram Batra, both PVC’s (Posthumous) before him, he too scorned death, exchanging it for mission completion. I am dead certain Navdeep did not want to die. No motivated, gifted, loving, young person does. He had it all — a potentially brilliant career, loving parents and siblings, peer respect, capability and capacity. He was in love, with a beautiful girl, with life, with Gurais, yet, he discarded it all — for mission completion.

Navdeep’s deathless legacy is applicable pan India and across gender, age, social status and occupation. In the prescient words of Lt Gen Gautam Moorthy, Colonel Commandant of the Ordnance Corps, it is the ability to do the routine in an extraordinary manner, and as a matter of course, not as an exception. The India of our dreams does not need cynicism but self help
as contained in this practical, yet demanding legacy. It could be India’s “Mind Map” to excellence.

The writer has commanded a Rashtriya Rifles Sector and an Infantry Division in the Valley

Ashok chakra

I The Ashok Chakra is India’s highest peace time decoration for gallantry, and is awarded for the “most conspicuous bravery or some daring or pre-eminent act of valour or self-sacrifice other than in the face of the enemy.”

I Its wartime equivalent is the Param Vir Chakra, awarded for gallantry in the face of the enemy. Two other awards in the Ashok Chakra series are the Kirti Chakra and the Shaurya Chakra.

I The award was instituted in 1952 and has been conferred on about 60 persons, including armed forces, para-military and police personnel as well as civilians.

**Au Revoir, Lieutenant Navdeep Singh..**

January 27, 2012

By: Major General Raj Mehta AVSM, VSM (Retired)

Lieutenant Navdeep Singh – The Braveheart

While writing my tribute to late Lt Navdeep Singh, titled “The Anatomy of Cold Courage”, I had taken an oath that I would visit his place of martyrdom at Bagtor, in the Gurais Valley in North Kashmir. With facilitation provided by the iconic, “Dil Se”, professionally driven Corps Commander, Lt Gen Syed Ata Hasnain, UYSM, AVSM, SM, VSM**, I started on the final leg of my journey from the Officers Mess at Bandipora for Gurais, at dot 7 AM on a grey, early October morning. With a military convoy scheduled to depart at 7.15 AM, I really had no choice. No one with high altitude driving experience will want to overtake a winter-stocking laden military convoy on an ascending, mountain trail, with construction tippers coming careening down from the opposite direction… No wonder when my Ganpat (affectionate name for soldier) from Navdeep’s Paltan; 15 MARATHA LI said that the 90 kilometers to Bagtor would take four hours, I unquestioningly accepted his pronouncement. In the Himalayas, you learn fast – or lose out.
I needed to get my mind off the young man and his monumental sacrifice. Less than two months earlier; on the dark, velvety night of 19/20 August 2011, this charged young lad had died while performing his duty to Paltan and Nation in the finest traditions of the Indian Army…His commando (Ghatak) platoon boys, aided by additional soldiers, had, under his unrelenting, lethal “fire only after I fire” command that almost certainly guaranteed his death, shot dead 12 terrorists; all “ace” killers determined to succeed and trained in both shooting and survival skills against all odds. In his moment of victory, however, death had laid its sure, icy hands on him, that chilling night astride the swiftly flowing Kishanganga River…Partly getting up to pull in his wounded buddy, Sepoy Vijay Gajare, young Navdeep was dead before he fell down, shot through his skull, just above his bullet proof “patka” (the steel half-helmet that protects one’s forehead against a frontal hit…Nano seconds after shooting his fourth terrorist, the brave lad lay dead, his life blood oozing out on the pristine sand and stone bank of the tempestuous river.

Let us praise the Indian Army unreservedly; The Army that was born in battle in 1947 and still remains in battle in defence of the Union of India – quite disregardful of the supreme indifference of its political masters; the Government of the day. Lt Navdeep was a young ‘un; a wet-behind-the-ears whipper-snapper; a rookie still in “Boot Camp” but drilled, out of sheer necessity (grave paucity of officers) by his famous Paltan and his Ordnance lineage, into a potentially world class soldier. Note that all this happened in the killing fields of GuraisValley, and, before that, at the Corps Battle School, Khreuh, even before he had been sent on his mandatory, coming-of-age Young Officers Course.

Let me get back to my journey…To get my mind off the mental rigours of visiting his place of martyrdom, I did not want to discuss Navdeep. Instead, we discussed the flora and fauna…While on top, at the 11, 672 feet high RazdanPass, we bowed our heads at the mazaar of the Gurais fakir who means so much to Gurais and to all travelers on this breathtaking mountain road.

Descending down mountains is always easier than climbing up is. At the base, the road has ancient Kanzalwan village; its houses huddled together for comfort, with a shawl wrap of fog; part real, part cooking-fire driven. The Valley floor is narrow but ethereal, colourful; replete with sparkling water, fruit trees, handsome people and small homesteads. At Bagtor, the dynamic CO, Col Girish Upadhya, SM **, his key officers and Navdeep’s Ghataks were all there; proud, erect, happy that a retired veteran had come to salute in location, one of their bravest sons. It is surprising how effective unspoken hugs can sometimes be over voice communication, which seems unnecessary, affected and put on… So it was on this occasion: Firm
handshakes with hard, calloused hands, recessed smiles of brave, silent men given to letting their work speak for them and bear hugs that would make even the Russians proud.

Past the weapon display of the 12 dead terrorists; their poignant personal effects in terms of diaries, letters that would never be delivered, pics of loved ones balanced by the cold impersonality of weapons, grenades, ammunition, grenade launchers, ciphers, satellite radios, first-aid kits, dried fruit/candy bars sachets with Urdu text, I was led to a stunning vantage point where the village Bagtor cluster lay languorously below us, with the Kishanganga slinking by sinuously with an angrai. Towering menacingly above, were 6000 feet of vertical mountains with the Indian security fence separating India/ POK clearly visible. Thickly forested till 12,000 feet, the mountains became increasingly gaunt and without forest cover as the eye went up to the jagged tops. On my right could be seen the dense Durmat rain forests across the Kishanganga; the term employed as an analogy to describe their thickness. Great place to slip in for terrorists; greater place for soldiers to lie in wait for intruders…

The briefing followed, relating the hachured one-dimensional maps to what had happened. In that bright morning sun, made more pleasant by hot, sweet langar tea and hot chilly pakoras, it was easy to get led away by how simple yet ingenious the operational plan of Op Bagtor appeared and how copy-book the responses by the just-inducted Burj Paltan. Backed by enlarged sketches of the area of operations, clear vision for kilometers around, the television presentation of pics taken pre/ post operations, and the alert, confident faces around me, one could be fooled into thinking that Op Bagtor had been a lark. Not so. It was nowhere near picture-perfect and ideal as one might think. With time against him, the CO had actually improvised a plan by literally thinking on his feet. Lesser leadership or lack of support from his senior officers would have been devastating. He decisively seized the fleeting operational challenge when it came – and rushed his men into battle, but with caution and feeling for the subtle folds of the ground. Oxymoron, right?! Soldiers invariably live with stark contrasts.

To discover that, he drove me, with Navdeep’s Ghataks following, to the Bagtor village cluster. It was great to see the salaams; approving smiles and positive body language he got from women, teenagers, school kids. Red cheeks and chocolate sweets go together as does tousled hair, and so it was, through the one street village and beyond…Upadhya explained with clinical precision how the intruders were sighted that dark night, and how, before that, he had been sounded on “kuchh hone wala hai” (something big will happen shortly). To remain alert even after you get such warnings so often, is of course the essence of soldiering on the Line of Control (LC)…
We saw everything, that fine morning; Saw where the Lashkar terrorists had debouched assembled their dinghy, crossed over and then walked single-file, along the river, keeping sleeping Bagtôr village aside. We saw the well located ambush site. I mentally saluted Navdeep and his bravery; his men’s bravery. We saw where his parties had deployed and where he fell...Deeply moved. I promised to return that night in uniform to pay him homage. I did.

What the CO had really conveyed was that there was intelligence synergy and redundancy at work out there; from those towering heights at 14,000 feet, through those increasingly thicker forests as one came down, right down to places of entry into the Paltan’s areas of operational responsibility. Sitting far away, at Davar, near the Habba Khatoon massif, the Brigade Commander and staff were also up, having enabled and networked these leads, as were the alert Division Commander at Kupwara and the Corps Commander in far away BB Cantt, Srinagar.

The real conductor of this tiered orchestra of military capability was, of course, astute and alert Upadhya. He explained, how, pulses racing and with unconcealed excitement, the first sighting was reported to him ... “17 terrorists, sir! Armed to the teeth! All in black! They are setting up, inflating something...A rubber dinghy! They are crossing over. Should we fire!!! The CO was a veteran. He knew that the opening burst by his three man party that was in contact wasn’t enough. Dropping three or four out of 17 hardened, well trained killers in the opening burst would allow the others to escape; come back another day. All or nothing was his firm decision. He and Navdeep had been having a chhota peg (small tot) of rum in his “Officers Mess”, after an exhausting 12 hours out working out contingencies. The CO and Navdeep had slogged to tie up plans, telling soldiers affected what needed doing and where. The Bar was where the call came. The intruders had been spotted! He and Navdeep, he recalled, literally raced in the CO’s jeep to Bagtôr; the four kilometer distance to his Tactical Headquarters seeming unending.

Not surprisingly, the enemy had done something unexpected and might get away completely if the deployed troops weren’t repositioned faster than the terrorists were moving. It was, literally, a desperate, time-sensitive race to the swift...

It is midnight and biting cold. The valley at 9000 feet sleeps – most of it anyway – Share the excitement, my dear reader! Imagine you are on a bucking, snorting, racing jeep, its headlights barely piercing the gloam; the thickly forested darkness astride the dirt track. Listen in with excitement as the CO changes gears with one hand while the other holds his walkie-talkie, as he barks orders to young Thomas, the Adjutant, on his walkie-
talkie. Relocate; redeploy, get the men running to reach the new ambush site before the terrorists do. I want all 17 terrorists, hear me?!!! WILCO! Comes the adrenalin-driven, confirmatory roar comes from the Adjutant. Hastening slowly – this article is loaded with oxymoron’s – the men redeploy on the run with great caution…the enemy is too close to risk yelling. In the co-drivers seat, Navdeep speaks quietly, issuing final instructions to his men. Disembarking at Tactical Headquarters, Navdeep races off. As he arrives at the ambush site, his men on their surveillance devices quietly point to the ghostly, looming shadows emerging from the inky darkness. There is only time for whispered consultations, readjustments and professional reassurance by the young officer that the ambush is correctly sited. Navdeep then whispers “Fire only after I fire” as he cocks his AK rifle with a lethal click. The die is cast…

That chill night, I wear my black dungarees (I am a tank-man) and carry Navdeep’s AK. It is loaded. The CO and men are armed too… This is a war zone. I slip noiselessly into the ambush mode. The CO whispers that ALL he had was 40 minutes between spotting the terrorists; their surprise diversion from the route he thought they would follow, and his frenzied redeployment to trap them. I lie down exactly where Navdeep had lain down, his buddy, Sepoy Vijay Gajare alongside me. The terrorist approach is actually played out with 17 Ganpats. With a shiver of pride, I realise that when Navdeep finally opened fire, there was no way the terrorists could have got away. He actually waited to literally touch them, crowd them into a little rock strewn slope from which the only choice was death by drowning or by bullets. His buddy makes me half-get-up, as Navdeep did, to pull him in after he was hit on his cheek. I do. The soldier, who has taken position behind a boulder, simulating the terrorist who shot Navdeep, is just five meters away. This was the distance at which Navdeep was fired at, pulling in his buddy to safety as he fell dying. There could not have been a nobler death. Let us join in saluting this bravest of brave men who gave his today for our tomorrow.

I did at Bagtor. You should salute him, man or woman, from wherever you are.

“I Will Open Fire First”

April 8, 2012

By Major General Raj Mehta AVSM, VSM (Retd)

The Inspirational Life and Times of Lt Navdeep Singh, AC, (Posthumous) – and his Deathless Legacy
What can you say about Lt Navdeep Singh; a 26 year old, iconic, handsome, charismatic, driven, gutsy third generation Army officer who died? That he was hopelessly in love with the Army as a profession; with life; his family and his fiancée? That he was multi-skilled; having completed an MBA and Hotel Management degree before opting for the Army? That he was a rookie officer; not yet qualified in his coming-of-age Young Officers course, yet was selected as the Commando (Ghatak) Platoon Commander by his twice war decorated Commanding Officer who saw a spark of rare talent in the lad? Saw that he had the dash, courage, fortitude and follow-me leadership to deliver in a very intense war zone at Gurais Valley, North Kashmir, in high altitude terrain? What can you say about a young man, who, with a world of achievement, happiness and love in front of him, cheerfully gave it all up to die a glorious death in consonance with the finest interpretation of the Chetwodian Motto – The Indian Army Honour Code under which the Safety, Honour and Welfare of the Country and the soldiers you command precedes a soldiers own ease, comfort and safety; Always and Every Time.

Proudly commissioned into the Army Ordnance Corps (AOC), Lt Navdeep Singh was, as per current Indian Army regulations, attached to an Infantry Battalion on commissioning; in his case, the battle hardened 15 Maratha Light Infantry (Burj); committed operationally along the sensitive Line of Control in North Kashmir. Barely into his fifth month of service, Lt Navdeep Singh, lost his life in the high altitude, Gurais Valley in North Kashmir, on the dark night of 19/20 August 2011, while conducting a highly successful ambush. As many as 12 out of a group of 17 heavily armed Lashkar terrorists were shot dead by Lt Navdeep and his Commando Platoon, with two more being shot later.

This stunning military success was the fallout of Lt Navdeep’s classic interpretation of soldiering – placing duty, honour, selflessness and sacrifice above personal needs. Placing his men in positions of relative safety along the south bank of the deep, fast flowing mountain stream; the Kishanganga River (called the Neelam River in Pakistan Occupied Kashmir, because of its blue waters), the officer chose for himself and his buddy, a position that afforded scant cover but gave him a commanding view of the approaching terrorists as well as his men, whom he deployed on either side of his position.

Aware that his chosen position was fraught with mortal danger once the ambush was sprung, this superbly motivated officer disregarded the danger and, instead, whispered his last command to his men; “I will open fire first”. When he knew for certain that the terrorists had entered his killing area, Lt
Navdeep Singh opened fire, killing three terrorists with his initial burst. Minutes later, he shot dead a fourth terrorist at barely five metres. This terrorist had wounded his buddy, Sepoy Vijay Gajare, and would have shot him dead but for Lt Navdeep’s fearless intervention. In so doing, Lt Navdeep fell; a bullet piercing his head. He had sacrificed all — for the Idea of India.

On Republic Day, 26 January, 2012, the Supreme Commander; the President of India, awarded Lt Navdeep the nation’s highest gallantry award in peace time, the Ashok Chakra (AC) posthumously. The award was received by Honorary Lt Joginder Singh, (Retd) his proud Father, watched by his equally proud Mother, sister, Navjot, and brother, Sandeep.

Commandant CMM and the Colonel Commandant of the Army Ordnance Corps, Lt Gen Gautam Moorthy, VSM, is on record for saying that Lt Navdeep Singh was, in the final analysis, simply doing a job that soldiers do night after night...an ordinary, routine job. However, when opportunity knocked on his doorstep, he was ready. He did an ordinary job with extraordinary zeal, grit and “follow me” traits. Navdeep died but remains deathless because his legacy lives on – applicable across age, gender and occupation; military, civilian, academic...whatever...The deathless legacy of doing ordinary, routine work with extraordinary zeal, skill and passion...

Those who are privileged to visit the Lt Navdeep Singh, AC, Memorial at the CMM Museum; take pride in recalling the famous words cast in granite that celebrate the deathless Greek (Spartan) defence of the mountain pass at Thermopylae in 480 BC, against the invading Persian hordes.

“Go tell the Spartans,

You who read...

We took their orders

And lie here dead.”

Lt Navdeep Singh, AC, did not take the counsel of his fears. Instead, he placed country and soldier above himself and cheerfully paid that price ...with his life.

India has 300 million young men and women; the largest availability of young people in the world and a source of National Power as no other. Passionate application of Navdeep’s legacy by them can take India up the hierarchical ladder of top nations – a position where India deserves to be. Do not follow the cynicism of Albert Camus, when he stated bitterly that,
“Martyrs, my friend, have to choose between being forgotten, mocked or used. As for being understood: never”.

Located very close to the geographical centre of India, near Katangi Village just 30 kilometers from CMM Jabalpur, do your bit – for the Idea of the India of your dreams!

[The author has documented Lt Navdeep Singh’s life and sacrifice extensively in the print media and through motivational lectures. In October 2011, he visited Gurais Valley and researched “Operation Bagtor” painstakingly on the ground, accompanied by the CO and Ghatak Platoon of 15 Maratha LI (Burj).

SAM MANEKSHAW- A LEGEND

Col PK Mallick

The recent media reports of illness of field marshal SAM manekshaw, MC the most famous, charismatic, flamboyant and successful soldier the Indian army has produced, caused anxiety to all concerned. The field marshal is well into 90s. We all hope and pray that the living legend crosses century and continue to be an icon for all serving and retired soldiers.

It will not be out of place here to highlight some interesting anecdotes and facets of his personality. Sam was a Lt Col in Military Operations Directorate during partition, was promoted to the rank of Col at that time and there after promoted as Brigadier in March 1948. He never commanded a battalion in his career!¹

Pupul Jaykar has described an interesting anecdote about the then Prime Minister Mrs. Indira Gandhi’s interactions with COAS Sam Manekshaw.²

“Indira’s intelligence agencies reported the possibility of the Army staging a coup. Gossip was rampant in Bombay, Delhi and Calcutta that such a coup was imminent. General SHFJ Manekshaw, then Commander in Chief of the Indian Army commented that everywhere he went, he was being asked, “When are you taking over?” Among those asking the question were some of Indira Gandhi’s ministers. One afternoon General Manekshaw got a telephone call. It was the Prime Minister
on the line, “Sam, are you busy?” He was a friend and joked with her on the telephone. She asked him to go over and he did. “I had known her for a long time”, he said, “She was a supreme actress. I could see that she had assumed a role to meet me. She was sitting at her kidney-shaped table, with her hand supporting her head. I asked, “What is the problem, Prime Minister, you look very harassed?” “I have so many problems,” she replied. “What are your problems?” I asked “Why don’t you cry on my shoulder and tell me?” She looked straight into my eyes. “You are my problem.” “Oh” I said, “Now what I have done?” “Are you trying to take over from me?” That shook Manekshaw for some seconds. Recovering he walked across and faced her. “What do you think”, he asked. “You can’t,” she said. “Do you think I am so incompetent?” “No Sam, But you won’t,” She replied. Manekshaw then said: “You know I have no political ambition. My job is to command my army and see that it is kept as a first rate instrument. Your job is to look after the country.” “My ministers are saying that a military coup will take place.” “You appointed ministers. Get rid if them. You must have trust in me. If not, find someone else. I am not here to be bullied.” “Who bullies you?” she asked. “No one does, but…”

Former Foreign Secretary J N Dixit recounts another interesting incident. One incident reflects the spirit of quite confidence and humour that characterised the Indian military high command at the beginning of the conflict. I have mentioned Mrs. Gandhi going to the Operation Room for a military briefing at midnight on 3 December. I was told by some colleagues who were in attendance that as she entered the Operation Room, she noticed a bottle of scotch and a couple of bottles on the table. Fastidious as always, there was a frown on her face and she directed an enquiring look at General Manekshaw. The story went that General Manekshaw said to Mrs Gandhi:

“Madam, the brand name of that whisky is Black Dog. It’s the whisky that Yahya Khan drinks. I am quite sure that I shall outdrink him and outfight him; so please do not be angry.”

The Field Marshal was magnanimous in victory. He carried out a dispassionate analysis of strength of opposing forces in the then East Pakistan and told Maj K C Pravel in an interview the following:

“We did well. We had to do well. What did the Pakistanis have? A demoralized force surrounded by all sides by India couldn’t get out. I had put in almost four times their strength, a four to one superiority. In some things it was ten to one … I won’t say that the campaign went badly. In fact, it went very well. I give one hundred percent marks to General Aurora and his commanders.

But to say that it was something like what Rommel did would be ridiculous. It had to happen. The result was foregone conclusion. I agree that we went quickly. Again, that’s what we wanted. That’s how it should have gone. The troops were well trained,
the troops were motivated and the Pakistanis put up a reasonable fight. They couldn’t have fought any better. I think the outstanding thing was the planning before the campaign, and the manner in which all the commanders from the Army Commander down to the brigade commanders and the battalion commanders carried out orders.”

71 war was our finest hour. Starting from the Prime Minister down the line the country had the right persons at the right places. By some quirk of fate Air Chief Marshal PC Lal also was at the receiving end of Krishna Menon’s wrath. Like Sam he got his due, kind courtesy 62 debacle at the hands of Chinese. The nation was singularly lucky in having such a great airman and visionary in Air Chief Marshal P C Lal at the helm of Indian Air Force during the 71 war. A strong personality himself, Air Chief Marshal PC Lal had some interesting observations on Field Marshal Manekshaw as COAS and Chairman, Chiefs of staff committee.5

“from the way manekshaw carried on 1971 and in the publicity that was showered on him during the war and after, the impression was created that he was, in fact, operating as a de facto chief of defence staff even though he was at the time chairman of the chiefs of staff committee (cosc) in which capacity he was one of the three equal partners. in our daily meetings his behaviour and conduct was friendly and cooperative, though he tended to ask for more information about the other two services than he gave out about the activities of the army and he often made demands upon the air force without offering full justification for the diversion of efforts from one target system to another, giving the impression that he was more concerned with using the other services to his own ends rather then collaborating with them. but both nanda (the navy chief) and i recognized the demands made upon the army and the stress and strain through which manekshaw was passing. so we did not object to the way he did his work. thus our questions about the progress, or lack of it, on the western front, in the punjab sector, brought forth little useful information, nor could we elicit any alternate plans that the army might have had to break the deadlock. at times it seemed that the army could do as it wished and the navy and the air force could just have to help as best they could. that we did, in full measure, for personal feelings were not allowed to interfere with the conduct of the war; the army’s commitments were our commitments and we accepted them and acted upon them to the best of our abilities. manekshaw’s mannerisms, as we took them to be, were not to be allowed to interfere with the work in hand.

Manekshaw carried a somewhat heavier burden then Nanda or I during the War, for as Chairman of COSC he not only presided at the daily meetings of that committee, but also represented the Chiefs at meetings of the Foreign Policy Planning Committee headed by DP Dhar. He also took it upon himself to be the COSC spokesman, a task that naturally brought him into the limelight. But apart from the publicity that it gave him, these additional duties did not, and could not, change the nature of the COSC and the manner in which the three services worked. For the
service that he rendered to the military establishment and the nation he fully deserved the recognition given to him by his appointment as a Field Marshal. If ever a military officer deserved such rank it is he, for he combines a quick intelligence and ready wit with a remarkable capacity for hard work and the ability to quickly grasp the ramifications of a situation.” No wonder that official history of 71 war states.” It is interesting to learn from him (Sam) that he received total cooperation from one service chief and not from the other”.

In fact some feel Sam contributed a little bit towards today’s inter arms/services rivalry. Lt Gen SK Sinha, PVSM writes ,”The entire army looks up to the Chief as its leader and it will be most unfortunate if the Chief is seen to be partial to any one regiment or corps of the Army. That would be most detrimental to the morale and discipline of the Army. The old tradition of the Army was that on becoming a substantive Colonel , one dropped all regimental or corps affiliations in one’s uniform except the lanyard. Officers from rifle regiments who wear black badges of rank had to change over to the standard brass badges of rank. Field Marshal Manekshaw introduced a change in this. He continued to wear black badges of rank and even regimental belts and caps, after he attended senior rank. Contrary to past tradition, he choose to wear black badges of rank even as a Field Marshal. The practice of senior officers writing IA against their name to signify that they belonged to the Indian Army as a whole rather than any regiment or corps ,had generally stopped”.

With eight years of service as Captain Sam Manekshaw won a Military Cross at Burma. Lt Gen M.Atiqur Rahman, a respected Pakistani General whose book on Surprise and Deception is available in almost all military libraries, was the Adjutant of Sam’s battalion during the incident. Lt Gen M Atiqur Rahman has mentioned about this gallant deed, though not in any great details, in his autobiography. A copy of the same has been donated by Sam to Defence Services Staff College library. Can anybody dig out the exact citation of Sam’s MC winning gallantry act?

Though Sam never served with Gorkhas, never commanded an infantry battalion, he was made Colonel of the Eight Gorkha Rifles, an appointment which he held with great aplomb. It would be interesting to learn how from his previous experience of company commander of Sikh troops he could successfully be so famously popular with Gorkha troops.

Sam, after his gallant performance in Burma, never took any active part in independent India’s operations starting form 48 Kashmir operations, Hyderabad action, Sino Indian war of 62 and Indo Pak war of 65. That did not deter him from brilliantly orchestrating the Indo Pak war of 71. The government manipulated by giving extension to Sam as Eastern Army Commander and made him the Chief on the sound advice of general J N Chaudhury. Though Sam took no nonsense from any body. However, the same government a couple of years later took the same method of extending the tenure of the Chief to deny the post of COAS to one of the
finest soldiers Indians Army has produced – Lt Gen Prem Singh Bhagat, PVSM, VC.

By a remarkable coincidence Lt Gen Bhagat won the Victoria Cross, the highest gallantry award of British Army, took no active part in all the operations of independent India, had excelled in all his appointments, became Colonel of the Sikh Light Infantry Regiment being a sapper and did yeoman’s service to the Sikh Light Infantry Regiment. The rumours at that time were that Lt Gen Bhagat was too strong for the liking of the government.

Today Maj Gens who are being promoted are all commissioned after 1971. For all of us commissioned after 1971, Sam in an icon. His brilliant orchestration of the lightning campaign has made him a legend in his lifetime and he is part of the folklore. It was indeed our finest hour.

On behalf of all post 71 commissioned officers one would like to request the Field Marshal for writing his memoirs. There are number of issues which merit further discussions. Large number of senior officers who took part in 71 war have written about the war. However, there is no better person than the Field Marshal to give the overall view as obviously the others were not privy to the complete overall picture. Some of the issues which immediately come to mind are :-

- What happened in Chhamb, where history repeated itself? 20,000 hectares of fertile agricultural land was lost permanently. Was the communication through the chain of command lacking? What was the role of Brig. Mathur, a LO, specially sent for giving a direct feedback to the Chief?

- Performance of our Strike Corps. I Corps had traversed seven miles in 21 days in 65 war. They did marginally better in 14 days war of 71. They moved eight miles. Was it too much decentralisation?

- “After the 71 conflict when time came for appointment, two Corps commanders who had lost vital territories of Chhamb and the Hussainiwala enclave and a third with nothing to show in his favour were elevated as Army Commanders, while the best field Corps Commander and the man mainly responsible for the fall of Dacca was sidetracked in promotion and finally retired.”

- Unfortunately very less has been written about our best field Corps Commander Lt Gen Sagat Singh who has expired. Were you too lenient to your formation commanders even if they faulted badly?

- 2 Corps was most suitably poised for Dacca yet it missed the bus, went towards Khulna and Chalna ports whereas adequate river transport was available and lined up in Farakka for a riverine dash towards Dacca. What was the problem?
The brilliant and mercurial Chief of Staff of Headquarters Eastern Command the then Maj Gen JFR Jacob whom SAM himself picked up for the most difficult job of 71 operations writes⁹ “We had won a decisive victory in the marshes and rice paddies of Bangladesh. We had taken some 93,000 prisoners. Yet, at the negotiating table at Simla we were unable to obtain a permanent settlement of outstanding issues with Pakistan. The advantages gained on the battlefield were fritted away at the Simla Conference. Unfortunately, Manekshaw had no say in the negotiations at Simla where it appears the decisions were determined by political expediency.

Army Headquarter’s aim and presumably the aim given by the Government was to liberate as much territory as possible to set up a Provisional Bangladesh Government. The importance of Dacca, the final objective, was not even considered by the Chiefs of Staff at Delhi. They were more concerned with the capture of towns and territory. Manekshaw’s strategy, endorsed by Aurora, however, was designed to capture maximum territory to include what he termed the ‘entry’ ports of Khulna and Chittagong. Dacca was still not included in this list. Perhaps Manekshaw felt that we should take as many towns as possible in case the Security Council imposed a cease fire.

Air Chief Marshal PC Lal in My years with IAF writes: Here I must clarify one doubt that has existed in my mind and also in the minds of others as to what the objectives of the 1971 war were. As defined by the Chiefs of staff and by each respective service Chief, it was to gain as much ground as possible in the East to neutralize the Pakistani forces there to the extent we could and to establish a base as it were for a possible state in Bangladesh. The possibility that Pakistani Forces in East Pakistan would collapse altogether as they did and that Dacca would fall and that the whole would be available to the leaders of the freedom movement in East Pakistan was not considered something that was likely to happen.”

In Bangladesh, initially the aim was not Dacca, but to reach riverline and establish an independent Bangladesh government. With the advantage of hindsight and knowing fully well that Dacca was the Centre of Gravity was it possible to put the aim as liberation of Dacca at the initial stage itself?

More then 34 years have passed since the 71 war. This is time for retrospection and taking a dispassionate view. One is sure that the Field Marshal would prove Lidded Hart wrong, when he decides to wield his pen as Liddel Hart said, “Great commanders have mostly been dull writers. Besides lacking literary skills in describing their actions, they have tended to be cloudy about the way their minds worked. In relating what they did, they have told posterity little about how and why?”

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Siachen – Bravery Beyond Compare

April 19, 2012

As the sub continent heats up the debate over vacating Siachen, a candid peek into the struggles, sacrifices and heroism that have made history – a history soaked in a strategic perspective blended by saga of untold courage which can’t be frittered away for narrow gains. Pragmatic realism should dictate our future course of action.

-Editors

Maj Gen Raj Mehta, AVSM,VSM(Retd)

The true, heart warming story of the capture against impossible odds of the Pakistani post, Quaid, the world’s highest battlefield post at 21153 feet (6749 metres) above sea level, from personnel of its elite commando force; the Special Services Group (SSG) by Naib Subedar
It was in the autumn of 1987 that I came in touch with the then Commander of the Siachen Brigade, the taciturn, supremely fit, wiry, sun-burnt Brig CS Nugyal (later Maj Gen CS Nugyal, PVSM, UYSM). We had assembled at the Rajputana Rifles Centre in Delhi Cantt to correct the tactics paper of the Army’s Promotion Examination Part ‘D’ that he had set. There were 12 of us; all Staff College qualified; young and high on self-esteem because we had been handpicked by Army Headquarters for this prestigious assignment. On top of that, we had, as Chief Examiner, a famous commander who was in the national news for masterminding the capture of a murderously effective Pakistani Post on the icy Saltoro Ridge called Quaid; a post that had caused us savage losses in lives and in infrastructure support.

We found soon enough that Brig Nugyal wasn’t easy to talk to. Reserved, dry, very Olive Green (OG), thorough and painstaking in all he did (to explain the correction process to us and oversee our work); this SIKH Regiment officer nevertheless commanded our collective awe and respect. In precise, surgical language he made it clear that he expected the highest integrity, professionalism and application of mind from us. We started off silently, determined to come up to his stringent expectations. It was only after several days that he unwound a bit, to talk about Naib Subedar Bana Singh and how Quaid got converted into Bana Post. He had got along an hour-long video cassette shot in VHS format which realistically replicated how the operation had taken place. He had just come after showing it to the then Raksha Mantri and Army Chief. We were held spell-bound watching it; stunned by the super human feat of arms in a manner that left us humbled by the daring and courage of Bana and his handful of deathless brave hearts.

In 1999, I was commanding a Rashtriya Rifles Sector in the Valley. The Kargil War was on, and, every few days, intimation would come to the Valley formations to send representatives to the JAK LI Centre to say farewell to the Kargil dead who were being airlifted to their
homes. The dignified, pleasant Sub Maj Bana Singh, PVC, who was then posted at the Centre, was always present on the dozen odd occasions that I attended; solemn occasions which saddened all of us; even as we accepted that the loss of the soldiers was a price which the Army had to pay for preserving the country’s freedom. Back in the Valley in 2003 as a Division Commander, I invited Sub Maj Bana Singh to address the Division’s officers at Baramula about his death-defying feat on the icy wastes of the Saltoro Ridge. This slightly built, humble and charismatic man was heard with pin drop silence and deep respect.

Let us then examine what this extraordinarily courageous, god fearing JCO did to write the history of extreme high altitude warfare afresh in a manner that Pakistan for certain will never forget and military professionals laud for eternity.

See the illustration below. The name Siachen, in Balti, refers to a land abundant with black roses. Siachen glacier is located in the eastern Karakoram Range of the Himalayas, near the Line of Control between India and Pakistan. India controls the whole Siachen glacier complex. The main glacier is sandwiched between the Saltoro Ridge to its west, (occupied by India) and the main Karakoram Range to its east.


The Siachen glacier is 76 km long, with its width varying from 1000-2500 metres. It falls from an altitude of 18,875 ft (5,753 m) at its head at Indira Col, down to 11,875 ft (3,620 m) at its terminus. The average winter snowfall is 35 feet, with temperatures in the upper reaches ranging from minus 30 degrees to minus 80 degrees centigrade. The crest of the dominating Saltoro Ridge which the Indian Army holds, and where Bana won his PVC, ranges in height from 17,880 to 25,330 feet (5,450 to 7,720 m). The major passes on
this ridge are Sia La, Bilafond La and Gyong La. The Indian Army pickets are reachable only after a murderous climb and then a suicidal frontal assault, a near-hopeless task in such rarified, oxygen depleted air.

Another view of the Siachen battle area indicating the river connectivity with the Siachen glacier complex; the Siachen Base Camp and the Shaksgam Valley, illegally ceded to China by Pakistan.

Let us now speak of our hero. Bana was born on 6 January 1949 into a Punjabi Sikh family, at Kadyal, a border village located in RS Pura, the famous Basmati rice-growing belt outside Jammu. He enrolled in the Indian Army on 6 January 1969 into 8 JAK LI. He was considered a keen and enterprising, intelligent soldier by his officers, handling diverse responsibilities such as being company clerk and handling quarter master duties as an NCO normally tenable by a senior JCO. He had also been trained in mountain warfare by the High Altitude Warfare School in Gulmarg and Sonamarg and was eminently combat fit; in other words he was, at a young age, an all round combat soldier whom his officers and peers respected; the peers and immediate seniors albeit with some form of healthy competitive envy.

On 20 April, 1987, Bana’s battalion was deployed, after due acclimatization, in the Siachen area. In a later interview with the famous author and Tibetologist, Claude Arpi, Bana stated that Quaid Post was already under occupation of the Pakistanis when the battalion arrived in the glacier. Named after Mohamed Ali Jinnah, the father of Pakistan, it was the most important and highest post in the area; one of the few occupied by Pakistan during it’s all out assault in 1987 on Saltoro Ridge under the command of then Brig Pervez Musharraf (later President of Pakistan), before they were beaten back from all but this post.

From Quaid Post, as the Indians would later find out, one could see 80 km around; indeed, almost the entire Saltoro Range including Indian posts like Amar and Sonam, which could only be supplied by helicopter. The Pakistanis could therefore prevent the supply of these posts as well as interdict any movement by accurate fire. In fact, on
18 April, 1987, firing from Quaid resulted in the death of a JCO and five soldiers at Sonam. It wasn’t just that. Sensing that a new battalion had come in, the Pakistanis carried out incessant shelling, causing casualties to the battalion in terms of precious lives lost. It thus became necessary to capture this post for the safety of our men and supporting helicopters.

The CO of 8 JAK LI, Col AP Rai, UYSM, (now deceased) proactively decided to send a patrol to find out the strength and disposition of the Pakistanis. On May 29, a 10 man patrol under the extraordinarily brave, resourceful and gutsy 2/Lt Rajiv Pande departed. Facing this dynamic young officer was a 90 degree climb on slippery ice walls that were 1500 feet in height which had to be negotiated to reach Quaid Post. On top of that, the weather was abysmal and visibility more so. This young man’s bravery has never really been given its military due. It was his tenacity, cold courage, high morale in sub-zero conditions where every step was an ordeal, especially when it came to fixing ropes against a vertical ice wall under intense shelling; surviving for over 48 hours without water and food, that really laid the foundations of the success that eventually followed. Unfortunately, nearing Quaid, they were detected by the SSG commandos and eight, including Lt Pande and his JCO killed. The officer was posthumously awarded a Vir Chakra.

Though the death of 2/Lt Rajiv and his men was tragic, the CO was now even more determined to succeed. What rankled the officers and men of the battalion was that the bodies of the dead lay for three weeks in front of them; unrecoverable because of the shelling and Pakistani visual domination. In effect this desire for revenging their death acted as a key spur in launching (with the approval of Brig Nugyal), “Operation Rajiv” to capture Quaid Post. A total of 62 people participated to the final operation; two officers, three JCO’s and 57 jawans. The operation was conducted in three phases on 23, 25 and 26 June, 1987. The platoon sent on 23 June under Major Varinder Singh, Bana’s aggressive and bold company commander, had to unfortunately come back half way, losing two soldiers in the bargain. Lt Pande had managed to fix ropes, but due to heavy snow fall, the
ropes were not traceable. The ropes had therefore to be fixed all over again. The second platoon led by Subedar Sansar Singh with 10 jawans, made an attempt on 25 June. This time, there was no problem with the ropes, but due to a communication gap with the controlling headquarters; the mission had to be aborted. Col Rai, determined to succeed at all costs, had conveyed his determination to his command: “I don’t care what sacrifices we have to pay, but Quaid will be captured!” Naib Subedar Bana Singh, hand-picked by his CO for the challenging assignment, led the last attack, along with Riflemen Chunni Lal, Laxman Das, Om Raj and Kashmir Chand. It was exactly at eleven minutes after noon on 26 June 1987, when this final phase of “Operation Rajiv” was launched in heavily snowing conditions and gathering darkness.

Painting of Naib Subedar Bana Singh, PVC

In personal interaction with Honorary Captain Bana Singh, PVC, on the sidelines of a well attended public function organized at Jhansi on 16 April 2011 by the Society for Valour and Cultural Renaissance (SVCR); the brain child of a 75-year-old fiery lady nationalist-cum-author called Ms Shyam Kumari, this writer, who was also invited (he was wounded as a Brig in an encounter with Pakistani terrorists in South Kashmir in January 1998), Bana recalled the complete operation with exceptional clarity, humility and warm recall of his subordinates, peers and seniors. He remembered that, tossing and turning in uneasy sleep, because of the losses the paltan had suffered, and because he had to succeed in his mission, Bana suddenly sat up bolt upright from his troubled sleep, with his mind and body strangely charged for action. He felt he had heard Guru Gobind Singh say to him, “Bana, I want to test you” That was all the inspiration that this deeply religious man needed to go ahead. His soldiers were equally inspired and determined to win all or lose all: The die was cast. There would be no turning back.

Another incident he recalled involved his much respected company commander, Maj (later Brig) Varinder Singh, had been shot through the chest and stomach in the earlier phase of the operation and is
believed to have resisted evacuation. (He received four bullets and was later awarded the Vir Chakra). He advised Bana to capture the Pakistanis alive when Quaid was attacked. Bana vehemently disagreed, saying in choice Punjabi, “Sir, eh… (edited) meri maasi de putt thori na haege! (Sir, these… [Edited] chaps are hardly my blessed aunt's children!). Bana recalled that Virender's face broke into a broad smile, in spite of all the prevailing tension.

All the starting signs of the final portion of “Operation Vijay” were of grim portent. It was literally darkness at noon, Bana recalled. The heavy, persistent snowfall and the poor ambient light conditions made you wonder if it was day or night. On top of that, the Pakistanis knew something was going on because of the artillery shelling that we had started from the gun areas in the base camp to make them put their heads down and also to divert their attention. Quaid, as Bana and his men well knew, was an impregnable glacier fortress with ice walls 1500 feet high on two sides. Naib Subedar Bana Singh led his men through an extremely difficult and hazardous route, climbing in near darkness through a snowstorm. He inspired them by his indomitable courage and leadership. Every pore of his body strained and yearned to reach that single bunker at the top. He was, after all, under test; a test pitched at the limits of human endurance and set by his beloved Guru Sahib. His men; inspired his raw determination and never-say-die spirit, followed their leader.

There was a single, deep bunker on the top, Bana recalled. The Pakistanis must have become complacent because of the foul weather; the heavy snowfall; their success in warding off the previous two efforts by the Indians to capture the post, and, not the least, the psychological feeling of superiority that the Pakistani soldiers, particularly the SSG under their boastful Brigade commander had come to believe in, that they were ten feet tall. He and his men were therefore able to close up to the bunker. Bana opened the entrance door, threw his grenades inside and closed the doors… His men set up their Light Machine Gun on single shot. In that extreme climate, the automatic weapon could fire only single shot… After the short but intense close quarter battle that took place, a total of six Pakistanis
were killed, with two or three having been bayoneted. Perhaps there were more SSG personnel who may have fallen to their deaths in their effort to escape the Indians bullets, grenades and bayonets. Too much was happening for anyone to have a clear recall. What Bana recalled with a personal sense of loss still readable on his face 21 years after the operation, was that the Pakistanis, on realizing that the post was lost, started shelling it with their viciously effective air-burst ammunition. One of Bana’s brave hearts, Sepoy Om Raj had his hand blown off; surgically amputated by the shelling In spite of Bana’s best efforts to save his life, bad weather and visibility as well as the intense shelling colluded. Sepoy Om Raj passed away, being awarded a Vir Chakra posthumously. Bana recalls that, following the protocol and ethos of the Indian Army towards the dead, the bodies of the six SSG personnel were brought back by him and later handed over to Pakistan during a flag meeting at Kargil.

On the morning of 27 June 1987, the Brigade Commander, Brig CS Nugyal who had intimately been involved with the planning and execution of the operation, arrived by helicopter at the battalions launch base. Fiercely hugging Bana and his soldiers, he announced that hereafter, the 21153 feet (6749 metres) above sea level post so brazenly taken away from Pakistan by Naib Subedar Bana Singh and his men, would be called Bana Top in his honour; a decision that a grateful nation and a very proud Army indeed, have accepted for posterity.

Naib Subedar Bana Singh was awarded the Param Vir Chakra, the highest wartime gallantry medal in India, for conspicuous bravery and leadership under most adverse conditions. “Operation Rajiv” overall resulted in award of one MVC (for Subedar Sansar Singh), seven Vir Chakra’s and one Sena Medal, besides the PVC. The CO and the Commander were awarded UYSM’s. 8 JAK LI and 102 Infantry Brigade had reason to be proud; very proud indeed, for their stupendous skill at arms in the toughest high altitude terrain the world has ever known so far.
THE VICTOR OF “QUAID” POST – NAIB SUBEDAR BANA SINGH, PVC, 8 JAK LI.

Citation

NB SUB BANA SINGH, 8 JAK LI (JC-155825)

Naib Subedar Bana Singh volunteered to be a member of a task force constituted in June 1987 to clear an intrusion by an adversary in the Siachen Glacier area at an altitude of 21,000 feet. The post was virtually an impregnable glacier fortress with ice walls, 1500 feet high, on both sides. Naib Subedar Bana Singh led his men through an extremely difficult and hazardous route. He inspired them by his indomitable courage and leadership. The brave Naib Subedar and his men crawled and closed in on the adversary. Moving from trench to trench, lobbing hand grenades, and charging with the bayonet, he cleared the post of all intruders. Naib Subedar Bana Singh displayed the most conspicuous gallantry and leadership under the most adverse conditions.

In March 2008, the son of Honorary Capt Bana Singh, PVC, passed out from the JAK LI Regimental Centre, with his proud father watching.

Srinagar: Two decades after his inspiring heroism in the shuddering heights of Siachen, Subedar Major (Honorary Captain) Bana Singh, Param Vir Chakra (PVC), of the 8th Jammu and Kashmir Light Infantry (JAKLI) has sent his son to defend the frontiers in Kashmir.

Subedar Major (Honorary Captain) Bana Singh was awarded the PVC for his heroism in the recapturing of a post from the Pakistan Army on June 23, 1987, in the Siachen Glacier (Jammu and Kashmir). He was a Naib Subedar at the time of the military operation.

The post was named after him as Bana Post and now he is his son’s idol as the 18-year old, Rajinder Singh, gets ready to defend India’s border.
And Subedar Major (Honorary Captain) Bana Singh, PVC, was present at his son’s passing out parade at JAKLI Regimental Centre on the outskirts of Srinagar.

“If you serve the nation with aan, baan and shaan (honour, pride and distinction), you have made the cut. I told my son, Rajinder, to join the army and serve with honesty and dedication, and I am glad he did,” was the statement made by this bravest of brave men. Rajinder will, in the coming years, no doubt look to redeeming his iconic father’s faith and pride in him.

Siachen has taken many lives of brave soldiers of the Indian Army in this highest battle zone in the world. An inscription on the memorial for the war dead at Siachen Base camp reads:

“Quartered in snow,
Silent to remain,
When the bugle calls,
They shall rise and march again”…

India has enough brave hearts like Honorary Captain Bana Singh, PVC, to make sure that, whenever the Bugle calls, soldiers like him will indeed rise and march again.

Beyond The Last Blue Mountain

April 5, 2012

Maj Gen Raj Mehta, AVSM, VSM (Retired)

Remembering the saga of Air Commodore Mehar Singh, MVC, DSO

Baba Mehar Singh

The Chambers Dictionary defines a maverick as a ‘determinedly independent person; a nonconformist’. Through the run of history, mavericks, (call them pioneers if you will), have had problems with conforming. Often on their way to success, they have created their own methods of work or dream execution and have rebelled when restrained. A maverick, a path breaker, thus has a persona not necessarily appreciative of contrary viewpoints. The search for excellence is so demanding on their
psyche, that he/she tend to become loners; at times abrasive, impatient with those in authority who do not share their world view, their vision, their insatiable curiosity of what lies beyond the last Blue Mountain…

No. 1559, GD (P) Air Commodore Mehar Singh, MVC, DSO, one of the bravest, most daring, free spirited, fearless, tempestuous and, yes, abrasive pioneers of the Indian Air Force (IAF) was one such maverick. He set standards in flying diverse aircraft, in sheer pilot skills, personal courage, and in his quest to single mindedly reach beyond the last Blue Mountain of flying challenges that are held in awe and reverence in Air Forces of Britain, India and Pakistan till today. Had we a military writer of the class of a BH Liddell Hart or a JFC Fuller, ‘Baba’ Mehar as he was irreverently known, would have had the same visibility as Charles Lindbergh (nicknamed “Lonely Eagle”), the American civilian who made the first solo airplane flight across the Atlantic Ocean. He flew from Roosevelt Airfield in New York on 20 May 1927, piloting a single engine, high wing, fabric covered Ryan NYP monoplane named The Spirit of St. Louis, and landed an astonishing 33 1/2 hours later, on 21 May at the Le Bourget Airfield in Paris, to a hero’s welcome, permanent international fame and a retiring rank of an Reserve List Air Commodore. He also won the $25000 Raymond Orteig prize for being the first to fly across the Atlantic. When Lindbergh flew across the Atlantic, cooped up for almost 34 hours alone in that little plane, the New York Sun wrote an editorial:

“Is he alone at whose right hand rides Courage, with Skill within the cockpit and Faith upon his left? Does solitude surround the brave when Adventure leads the way and Ambition reads the dials?”

In my perception, Air Commodore ‘Baba’ Mehar Singh was in Lindbergh’s class. Entirely. The details that follow explain why.

Born in a well-to-do family of Lyallpur District (now in Pakistan) on 20 March, 1915, Mehar Singh was selected for the RIAF in 1933, when studying in B Sc. A journalist, P.S. Chanana, who wrote a commemorative article on him in The Tribune titled “Remembering the Air Fighter Who Knew No Fear” in 2003 in the Tribune, notes that during his nearly three years of training at the prestigious RAF training academy in Cranwell, England, (later the alma mater of Marshal of the Air Force [MIAF] Arjan Singh, Padma Bhushan, DFC as well), he impressed the college authorities by his single-mindedness, discipline and spirit of comradeship. His Commandant, Air Vice Marshal H.M. Grave wrote about him: “Keen, cheerful, hardworking and popular. His work compares favorably with that of English cadets. A creditable effort! An exceptionally good pilot, keen on games and has represented the college at hockey of which he is an excellent player.”
Mehar Singh was commissioned as a Pilot Officer in August 1936 and posted to No.1 Squadron, then the only squadron in the Royal Indian Air Force (RIAF). It had been raised on 01 April 1933 at Drigh Road, Karachi and was equipped with 4 Westland Wapiti aircraft. The Indian element consisted of 6 officers and 9 technicians then known as ‘Hawai Sepoys’. Mehar was amongst the first 6 pioneering officers who joined the squadron. Flt Lt CA Bouchier, DFC, an officer of the Royal Air Force (RAF) was the first Commanding officer of the Squadron. The squadrons history records that, over 26 years later, in September 1959, Air Vice Marshal Sir Cecil Bouchier was to recall that “The Indian Air Force is what it is today because of one thing only – the imagination, courage, loyalty and great quality of the first little pioneer band of Indian officers and airmen, for they were the salt of the earth. They have built up a great fighting service and I am proud to have been associated in this wonderful achievement, if only for a little while”. When Mehar joined, the squadron was in the North West Frontier (NWF), deployed in its primary role of Army Co-operation. He went into action on arrival against the rampaging tribesmen. His flying log book records one month in which he flew 100 hours.

The squadron’s history goes on to say that the courage and initiative of the Squadron pilots is evident from the legendary ‘Baba’ Mehar Singh’s escape from the hostile tribesmen in 1937, when he was attacking them in a valley near Shaider, a place which had not been visited by the Army since Lord Kitchener’s expedition in 1890. During the attack, the fuel tank of his Wapiti was hit by ground fire. Every second increased the risk of fire which finally resulted in the crash of the fragile Wapiti in rocky terrain. Fortunately, the bombs on the aircraft did not explode and Baba and his air gunner crawled out of the wreckage safely. Thereafter they successfully evaded the hostile tribesmen till darkness came to their rescue. As dawn broke, they reached an Army Tochi Scout post. With his indomitable spirit, Baba not only rejoined the squadron immediately but also was airborne the very next day.

Chanana, in his article, records that in 1942, the AOC-in-C presented Mehar Singh a Commendation Certificate in recognition of his operational flying in Sind during the Hur disturbances in that province. A few months later, Mehar Singh accomplished a feat which, as per the AOC-in-C, “Any air man of any Air Force in the world would be proud to accomplish.” Details are regrettably not available of what this flying feat involved, but it probably had something to do with his never-say-die, intrepid spirit and ability to take risks that would deter all but the most daring pilots.

In December 1942, Squadron Leader Mehar Singh was selected to raise No. 6 Squadron RIAF at Trichnapally, now Tiruchirapalli. The squadron’s history records that the squadron was raised as a fighter-reconnaissance
unit with Hawker Hurricane aircraft. In November 1943, No. 6 Squadron moved to Cox’s Bazar as a part of RAF Third Tactical Air Force (Third TAF), for the Second Arakan Campaign. During this campaign, No. 6 Squadron was the only specialist reconnaissance unit available to support and the Fourteenth Army, on this front, earning the name “The Eyes of the Fourteenth Army”. They were also dubbed “The Arakan Twins” for flying in the approved Tactical/Reconnaissance pairing of Leader and Weaver. Returning from his Arakan Front visit in mid-January 1944, General Sir William (later Field Marshal) Slim, GOC Fourteenth Army, wrote in his masterly memoirs, “Defeat into Victory” how impressed he was with this reconnaissance squadron. “I was particularly impressed with the conduct of the squadron (No. 6 Squadron, RIAF) led by a young Sikh squadron Leader, Mehar Singh”. Coming from the normally taciturn and quiet Slim, universally considered one of the greatest captains of war in the 20th Century, this was high praise indeed.

On 28 March 1944, the richly deserved award of Distinguished Service Order (DSO) was announced for his remarkable performance; the only such award ever made to an Indian officer of the RIAF/ IAF. The citation read:

“This officer has completed a very large number of operations, and has displayed great skill, courage and determination. He is a most inspiring leader, whose example has been reflected in the fine fighting spirit of the squadron. This officer has rendered most valuable service.”

About this period of his career, it is in order to quote two veterans who saw Mehar at close quarters. One is MIAF Arjan Singh, Padma Bhushan, DFC, ex Chief of Air Staff from August 1964 to July 1969 and himself a living legend the country especially every one in uniform is proud of. He says, “Our fighting on the NWF prepared us for the fight against the Japanese. Mehar Singh distinguished himself both in the NWF and against the Japanese…. Two of our best fighters, in fact, were Air Commodore Mehar Singh, MVC, DSO, and Wing Commander KK Majumdar, DFC and Bar.” The other veteran is the liberal minded Air Marshal Mohd Asghar Khan, who became Pakistan’s first Air Chief (1957-65) and also it’s youngest, at the age of 36. He is the son of Brigadier Thakur Rahmatullah Khan Bahadur. Asghar Khan was educated at the Doon School, and the Prince of Wales’s Royal Indian Military College, Dehradun. He joined the Indian Military Academy in 1939, was commissioned into the Royal Deccan Horse (9 HORSE), a famous cavalry regiment of today’s Indian Army. He was seconded to the RIAF in December 1940. He commanded a flight of No.9 Squadron RIAF in Burma in 1944-45 and took part in air operations against the Japanese. About Mehar he recalls: “With the solitary exception of Squadron Leader Mehar Singh, a pilot of outstanding ability, no one else
was able to inspire confidence amongst us. He was the only man who measured up to my expectations,” referring undoubtedly to his flying experiences under ‘Baba’ Mehar Singh.

Soon after World War 2 ended, Mehar Singh was called upon to assist in the task of reorganization of the RIAF and training of its personnel. In 1947, when a Wing Commander, he was appointed a member of the Armed Forces Nationalization Committee and Deputy President of No. 7 GHQ Officers’ Selection Board, Dehra Dun. Promoted as Air Commodore in November, 1947, he took over Command No 1 Operational Group in Jammu and Kashmir. Brig CB Khanduri, in his book, “Field Marshal KM Cariappa – His Life and Times”, records that under Mehar, the IAF was the master of the skies during the 1947-48 Kashmir War with Pakistan. Apart from the dramatic fly in to Srinagar using Air Force and chartered Dakotas on 27 October 1947 (following the signing the Instrument of Accession by Maharaja Hari Singh) to bring in elements of 1 SIKH under its brave CO, Lt Col Dewan Ranjit Rai, MVC (Posthumous), the IAF provided close air support effectively. IAF fighters and bombers struck at Gilgit, Chilas, Skardu and damaged the Domel and Kishanganga bridges. A great spirit of camaraderie existed between the Army and IAF, writes Brig CB Khanduri.

During the 15 months of the War, the IAF lifted troops, mortars, ammunition, casualties, refugees and even animals. Working under AVM Subbroto Mukherjee, OBE, (later Chief of Air Staff), Air Commodores AM Engineer (later Chief of Air Staff) and Mehar Singh, the author says that the IAF delivered results seldom surpassed in history. They lifted 6000 of the 10000 refugees from Poonch and maintained the besieged garrisons of Poonch and Skardu, including the use of Dakotas to carry out bombing on enemy positions, using 500 pound bombs with jugad (improvisational) skills. Then General “Kipper” Cariappa remarked to the author that “Operation Rescue was the first operation our Army and Air Force were called upon to undertake after we got our Independence. Almost every one of the officers there had little or no experience of the high commands they held… but every one rose to the occasion and did their job splendidly”. Air Commodore Mehar Singh, who, as OC 1 Operational Group was responsible for air transport operations in J&K, emerged, in the words of the author, as the “most dare-devil Air Force officer of the War. He showed unflagging enthusiasm for transport operations despite opposition from his superiors for risking the crew and machines to increased dangers from ground fire”. He took Mukherjee in a Beech craft to assess the feasibility of landing Dakotas at Poonch. His subsequent night landing at Poonch in a Dakota packed with howitzers is the stuff legends are made of.

With the tragic fall of Skardu and the Pakistani presence at Zoji La forcing a battle for its clearance by the Indian Army for the road to Leh to be opened,
Cariappa was a deeply worried man, as was his ground commander, Maj Gen KS “Timmy” Thimayya, DSO, (later Chief of Army Staff). Brig Khanduri records that the situation at Leh had become so precarious that it was a matter of ‘touch and go’. Thimayya had no choice but to request the OC 1 Operational Group to commit what was almost professional hara-kiri. The book records that over strawberries and cream, Thimayya broached the subject with Mehar Singh. “I am ready to go” the flying Sikh is reported to have responded without flinching, “but what about the Dakota? It has no de-icing facility or pressurization”. Thimayya responded by saying he would go with him. “Oh, well then, we’ll go!” said the fearless Mehar and so they did. In so doing on 24th May, 1948, Mehar entered the Aviation record book of the world’s then highest landing at 11,540 feet ASL. The book records that, flying over Zoji La and Fotu La at 24000 feet, the aircraft began losing height. Mehar was tempted to turn back but courageously went on to land at Leh after Thimayya reminded him of his promise. The possibility of air transport of troops thus opened up and resulted in moving a company of 2/4 Gurkhas led by their CO, Lt Col HS Parab to Leh. The rest, as the book says, is history.

Establishments the world over are rarely well disposed or tolerant towards mavericks who, on account of being mavericks, end up cocking a snook at them. The relationship between the RIAF and later the IAF and Air Commodore Mehar Singh was no different. For quite a few years, Mehar had had a deep resentment building up inside him that his worth and achievements had been given short shrift. He also had serious differences with his seniors on a host of flying, management and administrative issues which he felt were irreconcilable. Consequently, he chose to resign from the IAF on 27 September 1948, at the age of 33.

The attitude of the RIAF and later the IAF towards this uncompromising maverick is best reflected in the words of Air Chief Marshal PC Lal (July 1969-January 1973) who has written that “Mehar Singh was conscious of his own rare abilities and unique contribution. But all this made him uncompromising, a born dictator… he felt he was not being fairly treated”.

Brig CB Khanduri records in his book that it was only on then C-in-C Indian Army General Cariappa’s persuasion that the Air Force hierarchy relented and, post his retirement put him up for award of a MVC. A grateful nation thus awarded the first MVC won by the Indian Air Force to one of its bravest and most daring sons, on 26 January, 1950. His citation reads:

“Throughout his tenure as A.O.C. No. 1 Group controlling operations in Jammu & Kashmir, Air Commander Mehar Singh displayed great devotion to duty at personal risks and set an example to those serving under him. He was the first pilot to land an aircraft at the emergency landing ground at
Poonch and at Leh. These tasks were not part of his duty but in view of the fact that these were hazardous tasks, he was first to carry them out to give confidence to his junior pilots".

Air Commodore Mehar Singh was never ungrateful, as behooves a man of honour and pedigree and was passionately attached to the IAF. Chanana, in his article, records that Mehar Singh remarked that the Air Force had taught him to fly, made him an engineer, gave him administrative experience, taught him to fight and fly with colleagues in good and bad days, made him humane in his effort to understand their problems and difficulties and resolve them.

Flying remained central to his life though. Post retirement, he became personal adviser to Maharaja Yadvindra Singh of Patiala, in his capacity as Raj Pramukh of PEPSU. He flew the Maharaja for his engagements and it was on such duty, when he was flying from Jammu to New Delhi, that he was caught up in a thunderstorm on the night of 16 March 1952, and crashed. A legend had come to an untimely end, a few days before his 37th birthday.

RM Lala has written a masterly book on the life of JRD Tata, the famous Industrialist from the house of TATAS and an Air Commodore though Honorary in the class of Mehar Singh and Charles Lindbergh titled “Beyond the Last Blue Mountain”. In his Preface, the author records the prescient remarks of MV Kamath, the well known journalist. He wrote in a eulogy after JRD’s death, that “In his life what JRD did was what a pilgrim might have wished to do: go always a little beyond the last Blue Mountain, wishing to know what lay there”. JRD was a gutsy pioneer, a flyer, who, in 1929, gained international fame by flying in a Gypsy Moth from Karachi to London, in response to a competition announced by the Aga Khan to fly from London to Karachi or vice versa within 6 weeks (Tata lost by a whisker to Aspi Engineer, who later joined the RIAF and rose to become Chief of Air Staff of the IAF (Dec 1960-July 1964).

Doubtlessly, all three Air Commodores, one a combatant, the others Honorary or on the Reserve List, were mavericks of a rare order; each filling the qualitative requirement of being declared a maverick admirably. The contribution of Lindbergh set the aviation world ablaze. JRD Tata is credited with being the Father of civil aviation in India, besides being an enormously successful, principled Industrialist. Air Commodore Mehar Singh, MVC, DSO, can be impartially credited with being one of the sterling pioneering spirits who have given the Indian Air Force its current reputation of being one of the most professional Air Forces in the world. He stretched the boundaries of what is achievable throughout his distinguished 12 year combat flying career by always wanting to go beyond the last Blue
mountain; the last Blue mountain of courage, true grit, spectacular achievement and fearlessness against overwhelming odds. It is perhaps not coincidental that Lindbergh, JRD and Mehar were essentially lonely people at the pinnacle of their careers. They shared some outstanding values in common with each other – values captured so accurately by the New York Sun editorial quoted at the start of the article: Courage, Skill, Faith, Adventure and Ambition.

Mehar Singh di Kothi, in Mehar Singh Colony on the Patiala – Sirhind Road, outside Patiala, where his ashes lie interred, should have been a national memorial of courage and deathless sacrifice, not just for men in uniform but an entire grateful nation of a billion plus. Its current abysmal state of neglect and upkeep indicates that, as a Nation, we really do not have a sense of history; nor are we grateful or care for those in uniform who sacrifice everything for the National good. We distinguish ourselves, though, in making grandiose promises, generating empty goodwill and mouthing meaningless platitudes on select commemorative occasions. Let us not lose heart, though. There is a solution at hand.

The Indian Air Force, the Indian Army and the Indian Navy should, across the Service divide, set a handsome precedent and join hands; synergize their efforts to honour their brave dead; their deathless air, land and sea warriors; honour men like Air Commodore Mehar Singh, MVC, DSO, and his numerous counterparts in the Army and Navy who have, by their achievements and selflessness set standards of excellence for future generations of Indians across all leanings and across gender, to follow.

**Captain Courageous – Captain MN Mulla, IN, MVC (Posthumous)**

April 4, 2012

Maj Gen Raj Mehta, AVSM, VSM (Retd)

The starkly told, heart breaking and moving story of the only Captain in Indian Naval history that chose to go down with his stricken ship, INS Khukri…

“In each ship there is one man alone who in the hour of emergency or peril at sea can turn to no other man. There is one man alone who is ultimately responsible for the safe navigation, engineering performance, accurate gunfire and morale of his ship. He is the Commanding Officer. He is the ship”. Excerpted from the book Command at Sea, by Captain James Stavridis and Vice Admiral William Mack. US Naval Institute Press.
Capt Mahendra Nath Mulla, IN, MVC (Posthumous)

What can you say about an iconic, tall, 45 year old Naval captain who died? That he was charismatic, handsome, professionally brilliant and Royal Navy trained. That he was a good bridge player. That he had a sharply honed sense of humour. That he was a great husband, a thoughtful provider; a considerate though strict father to his daughters. That he loved music. That he could use colourful Urdu and elegant English and sometimes did, while interacting with his command. That he had a strong sense of values and ethics. That he was an inspirational leader whose officers and men worshipped him. That, on that tragic dark and tragic, stormy Sea State 4 night of 9 December 1971, when his ship, INS Khukri, was fatally torpedoed by an enemy submarine, he coolly and calmly saved 67 members of the ship’s crew by directing them to available life jackets and life boats. That he did right in going down with his ship – in line with the Navy’s greatest and most demanding tradition - simply because it was the most ethical thing to do on a ship; a fast sinking ship where many of his officers and crew did not have life jackets, buoys and life boats… Read on.

Adequate, independently researched documentation is available on the net from official Naval records and gazettes; peers, INS Khukri survivor accounts, researchers, family, Pakistani sources as well as critics that serves to establish the irrefutable validity of the heroic Mulla legend and the circumstances surrounding his ship being torpedoed and, within minutes of being hit, sinking 40 nautical miles off Diu Head.

Captain Mahendra Nath Mulla, scion of an established Kashmiri family of lawyers from Kulam, Sonamarg, was born on 15 May 1926 and served the Navy with distinction from 1948 to 1971. Ms Sudha Mulla, his gracious, soft spoken and fiercely proud wife recalls in a recent video interview available on utube that he was a loved Captain who was also a devoted father who doted on his children; called a spade a spade, was fair, just, ethical and believed in the “follow-your-conscience” dictum of Vivekananda, his role model. Strict but considerate, his men doted on him. Ms Mulla recalls (Video here) that she had many happy moments in 16 years of marriage, the foremost being his UK tenure as Naval Adviser at the Indian High Commission in London and his family orientation. Commodore AK Dhir (Retd) recalls his sense of humour during the visit to Training Ship INS Kistna of the first Naval Chief, Admiral Katari, way back in May 1961, when then Lt Cdr MN Mulla, the ship’s Executive Officer, saw the funny side of an unintended faux pas by trainee cadets during the landmark visit and cheerfully laughed it off.

In his short but brilliant career, the strapping Capt MN Mulla, an Anti Submarine Warfare (ASW) specialist and amongst the last of India’s Royal
Navy trained officers, had, in command of INS Khukri, his second command after the destroyer INS Rana. He was earlier the second-in-command on INS Krishna. Mulla was tasked to lead the 14 Frigate Squadron of ASW frigates; INS Khukri, Kirpan and Kuthar on a hunter-killer submarine hunt for Pakistani submarines clogging the sea lanes used by Indian submarines and missile boats off Kathiawar, soon after the 1971 Indo-Pak War broke out.

INS Khukri (F-149) along with its two sister frigates, Kirpan and Kuthar, was constructed by ship builders JS White and Co Ltd, UK. Its keel was laid on 29 December 1955 and the ship commissioned on 20 November 1956. The ship was classified as the Type 14, Blackwood class. 15 such frigates were built; 12 for the Royal Navy and 3 for the Indian Navy. The Royal Navy considered them “second rate” anti-submarine (A/S) frigates, hastily designed and built to cope with the threat posed by Soviet Union submarines in the Atlantic Ocean. Meant to complement the expensive Type 12 frigates, the Type 14 had light armament and weak hulls. Learning from this experience, the British admiralty decided to ensure that quality would henceforth not be compromised. The Type 14s' limited size (94 meters) and structural weaknesses led to their rapid decommissioning in the UK. In India, however, the 1200 ton INS Khukri and its peer frigates went to war.

Commodore Ranjit Rai (Retd) writes in A Nation and its Navy at War that on the eve of the Khukri going down, the war at sea was going well for India. The destructive missile boat attacks on Karachi harbour; the self-actuated sinking of the Pakistani Daphne class submarine Ghazi off Vizag harbour and the exploits of the Vikrant had created a tremendous sense of confidence in the Navy.

B Harry, writing on the loss of INS Khukri, states that the Pakistan Navy’s strength during the 1971 Indo-Pak war was in their three French Daphne class submarines. The first, PNS Hangor, was spanking new. These submarines were qualitatively much better than the Indian Navy’s inventory. Hangor sailed from Karachi on November 22, later heading for the Kathiawar coast. The Indian Navy obtained D/F submarine intercepts on December 7/8 in an area southwest of Diu Head. Diu was the assembly area for the missile boat attacks on Karachi harbour and 14 Frigate Squadron was moved on 8 December 1971 (without any ASW aircraft support) to counter this threat, even though the sonar range of the Daphne’s was twice that of the Type 14 frigates. PNS Hangor picked up two frigate contacts on her passive sonar on the morning of December 9
when she was off the Kathiawar coast. By evening she was able to make out that the ships were carrying out a predictive rectangular anti-submarine search at slow speed. At 1915 hrs, Hangor went into attack mode closing on to 9800 meters. Captain Tasnim Ahmad, the CO, fired his first L-60 torpedo at 55 meters at INS Kirpan but missed. A second torpedo was fired, this time at INS Khukri, which exploded under the Khukri’s oil tanks, causing the ship to start going down almost immediately. Exiting with speed and skill, PNS Hangor survived the Indian retaliatory action termed Op Falcon for days, arriving in Karachi on 18 December 1971. Captain Tasnim Ahmed was deservedly awarded a bar to the Sitara-I-Jurat, Pakistan’s second highest gallantry award; equivalent to the MVC, which was equally deservedly posthumously awarded to his dauntless victim, Captain MN Mulla.

Commodore Rai states that, as INS Khukri started sinking off Diu Captain Mulla did not try to save himself. He went down with his ship, observing the greatest tradition of Navies world-wide and certainly the Indian Navy. He was on the bridge, the highest part of the ship’s superstructure and could have saved himself easily. On the completely blacked out ship which had only two exits, he was aware that the majority of his officers and men were trapped below deck and were desperately trying to revive the stricken ship. Perhaps some young, inexperienced crew felt safe within the steel walls as opposed to survival in a dark, stormy sea. Captain Courageous, in those critical minutes, displayed remarkable leadership. He consciously chose not to abandon ship. On the contrary, he correctly put Service Before Self and, ordered his second-in-command, Commander KK Suri, to oversee the casting of boats and life buoys into the sea. Mulla also personally oversaw the abandonment and together with Suri, guided 67 ship’s company (6 officers, 61 sailors) to safety before calmly electing to go down with 194 (18 officers, 176 men) crew. One survivor, Lt Manu Sharma, tells us of the final moments of Khukri and its valiant commanding officer: “Captain Mulla pushed Lieutenant Kundan Mall and me off the bridge. Failing to persuade him to join us, we both jumped into the sea from the starboard side.” Swimming to safety, Sharma recalls his last glimpse, of the Khukri: “The bow of the ship was pointing upwards at an angle of eight degrees and sinking slowly. I got a glimpse of Captain Mulla sitting on his chair, smoking a cigarette…” Survivors recall that when they offered him a life-jacket he said, “Go on, save yourselves: do not worry about me.” One is reminded of the way our later Army bravehearts; Captain Vikram Batra, Lt Arun Khetarpal and Lt Navdeep also scorned death, placing Service Before Self...

In a later, heart rending poem, “The Khukri is no more”, Lt Sharma, the Khukri survivor ordered by Mulla to abandon ship and now in USA, concludes:
“They all lie some forty nautical miles from Diu
Undisturbed till they are picked up.
And only a wreck marks that special danbuoy stave* (a minesweeping float)

Till another Khukri rides India’s waves.”

The loss of INS Khukri along with its brave Captain and 194 officers and crew took some of the sheen off the Indian’ Navy’s commendable success, both planned as well as unintended (the sinking of PNS Ghazi with its full complement of crew) during the 1971 Indo-Pak War. 14 Frigate Squadron led by Capt MN Mulla lost one of its three frigates, INS Kuthar shortly after sailing out from Mumbai on 8 December 71. It had to be towed back for a boiler room explosion and disablement thereto, by INS Kirpan. The decision of sending dated, poorly designed frigates, launched into hunter-killer role without ASW aircraft support (these were available but deployed elsewhere) to enhance the frigate’s submarine pick up ranges, against technologically far superior enemy submarines of the Daphne class has come under savage criticism by experts.

The actions of Khukri’s accompanying frigate, INS Kirpan, have also come under scrutiny. Complimented for evading one; probably two torpedo attacks by taking smart evasive action, some Khukri survivors as well as some professionally respected all ranks of the Naval hierarchy – from retired Chief’s down to lower ranks – have, over the years, questioned the propriety of INS Kirpan not halting to either make its life saving equipment available, or picking up survivors, but leaving the stricken Khukri to fend for itself, probably for fear of being hit itself.

Khukri survivor, Artificer Apprentice Chanchal Singh Gill, has moved the Chandigarh bench of the Armed Forces Tribunal (AFT) alleging a cover up. The main allegation of 58-year old Gill — who was on duty on the fateful night of December 9, 1971 — is that the record prepared by Naval Headquarters pertaining to INS Khukri is "far away from the truth". Gill claims that actually three torpedoes had hit Khukri and instead of joining action to counter the attack, INS Kirpan “fled away”.

A blog, India Defence Update, however carries a reasoned argument that seems professionally tenable. “Kirpan’s Captain RR Sood faced a dilemma. If he slowed down or stopped to rescue the survivors of Khukri, his ship and crew were a sitting duck for the Hangor…He saved his crew as his chances of getting PNS Hangor were few. However…INS Kirpan should have lowered its boats and left them there with all life jackets”. Rear Admiral Sood, now settled in Bangalore, and awarded a VrC for his actions, refuses to comment, as reported in a recent newspaper interview. Asked
why he did not join the battle when Hangor had struck Khukri, he says: “We all know what to do when there is an attack. There is a reason why Kirpan did not come to the rescue of Khukri. The day the Naval HQ allows me to divulge the reason, I will do so…” The AFT has now given notice to the Defence Ministry asking it to file its reply before 25 March 12. Commodore Rai, says that Sood made a signal to the Western Naval Command after Khukri sank, with his recommendations and request for help. In the rescue operation that followed, INS Kadmatt and INS Kripan arrived the next morning and carried out rescue operations.

The perplexing question still remains: Should the captain go down with his ship? According to current maritime law, a Captain doesn’t literally have to “go down with the ship,” but he should be the last one off after ensuring the safety of others. He is responsible to make sure everyone possible gets off the ship before he moves to safety. Legal requirements aside, is there an ethical obligation for a captain to risk life and limb to stay on board until the last passenger and crew are off? “Yes,” says Dr Chris MacDonald, a renowned educator/consultant in ethics.

Let us recall that Captain EJ Smith of the Titanic chose to go down with his ship when it sank after colliding with an iceberg at 1140 PM on 14 April 1912. He helped 705 passengers/crew escape in lifeboats and rafts but 1,522 passengers and crew went down with him…Coincidentally, the Titanic too had a weak hull and grossly inadequate life saving equipment like boats, life jackets/buoys and rafts…Very recently, on 13 Jan 2012, Captain Francesco Schettino of the stricken Italian cruise liner Costa Concordia was accused of abandoning his ship without first evacuating his passengers after the ship smashed into rocks off the Italian island of Giglio. The jury is still out on the ethics of a captain going down with his ship, though, for a military mind; Captain MN Mulla followed his conscience and did right. A future generation is likely to do the same.

Honour has followed in the wake of the INS Khukri’s loss. At Diu, a memorial in the shape of a full-scale model of Khukri encased in glass exists atop a hillock facing the sea. On India’s Golden Jubilee as a republic, the Department of Posts issued a stamp to pay tribute to Captain Mulla’s valour and sacrifice. The real honour to him and to the bravehearts of the Navy will always be from the survivors who watched Captain Courageous go down with yogic calm and repose…No better salute to the Service Before Self credo of the forces exists…

**A Forgotten Soldier – Brig Pritam Singh, Military Cross (MC)**
April 6, 2012

Maj Gen Raj Mehta, AVSM,VSM(Retired)

“…It is an irony and a matter of grave concern that the Indian nation does not even recognise the man we worship…The people of Poonch still recall the services of the gallant Brig Pritam Singh, MC, during the Pakistani siege of Poonch in 1947-48…He was a great man. We owe our lives to him” said 80-year-old Muneer Hussain of Loran villa, 35 kilometres north of Poonch town, at the foot of the Pir Panjal Mountains. “Brig Pritam Singh gave us salt,” said another grateful resident… “Restore his honour”; say these impassioned men and women. “Let posterity judge him for his matchless defence of Poonch…”


The Saviour of Poonch; Brig Pritam Singh, MC

An Overview

Brigadier Pritam Singh, MC, earned the sobriquet ‘Hero of Poonch’ and ‘Sher Baccha’ (Young Lion) when the picturesque, foot hills and historic border town of Poonch which is located in a bowl, was under siege by Pakistani Army irregulars and well armed tribal lashkars (battalions), and for all purposes, given up as lost by prevailing apex level military advisers. Poonch is a small town in Western Jammu. In September 1947, it was the seat of the Raja of Poonch, who was a vassal of Maharaja Hari Singh of Jammu and Kashmir. Prior to 1947, communications with Poonch were through the (now Pakistani Punjab) town of Jhelum; towns in the east such as Rajauri, Naushahra and Jammu being connected only by fair-weather tracks.

In the opening phase of what is now termed the first Indo-Pakistan War of 1947-48, the Pakistani raiders had sited themselves in strength with a plethora of heavy supporting weapons on the dominating heights surrounding the town. After participating in the climacteric battle of Shelateng; a bloody and victorious battle that saved the Kashmir Valley for India, Lt Col Pritam Singh, MC, who was commanding 1 KUMAON, the Parachute Battalion of the KUMAON Regiment, was diverted to the relief of Poonch. He reached the town just in time on 21 November 1947, after wading across the rising Chhanjal Nala, near Kahuta, a few kilometres north of Poonch. Its wooden bridge had been mistakenly blown up by the
harried and outnumbered J and K state troops then defending Poonch, fearing that the troops approaching it in the gathering darkness were Pakistani lashkars. Nothing daunted, Lt Col Pritam Singh, took charge and safeguarded Poonch town, using ingenious methods for administratively and operationally maintaining its teeming population. In order to synergise the military effort better, he was shortly thereafter promoted as Brig. Poonch was at that time, swollen by refugees who had streamed into the town in their thousands to escape rapine, plunder and massacre by the Tribal (Kabaili – from Kabul) marauders unleashed by the Pakistani Government under Operation Gulmarg. A pre conflict population of 8000 was now in excess of 40,000; a five fold increase spread over a tightly packed town area of barely 16 square kilometres.

Brig Pritam Singh, against all odds and gloomy professional predictions, kept the marauders away for one full year; protecting the town against savage and repeated attacks from the enemy. The bloody siege came to an end only after a dramatic linkup with the relieving forces of the Indian Army codenamed Operation Easy took place at Danna Ka Pir, 18 kilometers south of Poonch, on 21 November 1948. On 22 November, the relieving forces entered Poonch town, bringing a stirring chapter in the saga of the Indian Army, Indian Air Force and the people of Poonch to a happy end. Today, 21 November is celebrated with fervour each year by the Poonch Brigade, the civil administration and grateful generations of “Poonchies” as Poonch Day.

Against all odds, Poonch had been saved for India and for posterity, largely due to the resolve and grit of one man; two premier uniformed Services; the Indian Army and Air Force, and the deathless spirit of the inhabitants of the beleaguered town. Poonch was then referred to as the “Tobruk” of Kashmir, though, unlike its famous North African city of World War 2, Poonch never fell. This article examines the sterling military feats of the key protagonists led by Brig Pritam Singh, MC, as also the ironies, petty jealousies and fragile egos that have led to this bravest of brave and capable of soldiers dying unwanted, reviled and castigated by the vicissitudes of time and tide.

Early Exploits of Brig Pritam Singh, MC

Born to farming parents in village Dina in Ferozepur District, Punjab, Captain Pritam Singh, who was then in 5/6th Battalion of the Punjab Regiment was wounded in 1942 during World War 2, in the Battle of Singapore and later escaped from the notorious Nee Soon Prisoner of War (PoW) Camp. A recent book by Brig Jasbir Singh, SM (Retd), titled “Escape from Singapore” (Lancers Publishers, New Delhi. ISBN: 978-1-935501-206) tells the story of the daring escape from the PoW camp by three young
Indian Army officers, Captain (later Brig) Balbir Singh the author’s father, Capt (later Col) GS Parab of 4 Kumaon and Capt (later Brig) Pritam Singh of 5/6th Punjab. The three officers(Capt Pritam chose to make his way alone) escaped from Nee Soon and made their way through Malaya, Thailand and Burma, reaching India, after over six months of life threatening experiences. In so doing, they traveled thousands of kilometres through enemy territory on foot, boat and train. Capt Balbir and Capt Pritam Singh were later awarded the coveted Military Cross for exemplary courage and resolve. Though the escape focuses on the exploits of Capt Balbir and Capt Parab, the reader will get a fair idea of the challenges Pritam overcame during this dash to freedom.

Pritam gets into Kashmir

Given the circumstances under which he thrived, it would not be unfair to say that Brig Pritam Singh was “born for battle”. The story goes that he was on leave and visiting the military Operations Directorate in Army Headquarters, Delhi, in end October 1947 when the Kashmir crisis occurred. He volunteered to lead troops to Kashmir even if they were not his own Punjabis. Placed in command of 1 KUMAON (Parachute), he took off the very next day. Within days of landing, the battalion was pitched into the “make or break” Battle of Shelateng, during which his battalion put up a stellar display. As the reader now knows, he was diverted for Poonch under the command of the Uri based 161 Infantry Brigade, the designated relief force. Delayed in departure till 20 November, ambushed after crossing the Haji Pir pass and faced with the blasted bridge at Chhanjal Nala, its resolute Commander, Brig LP Sen, nevertheless accompanied Pritam’s unit on foot for the relief of Poonch, assessed the situation, placed Pritam firmly in command of Poonch Garrison and thereafter headed back the next day as Uri was itself under serious tribal counter attack. The rest, as they say, is history.

Topography, Land use and Pre Independence History

At this stage, it is necessary to give the topography, land use and pre Independence history of Poonch leading to the Poonch conundrum, for the reader to understand why Poonch got into the eye of the storm the moment Independence was announced for India and Pakistan.

The mighty, snow clad Pir Panjal range of mountains separates Poonch valley from Kashmir valley. It forms the natural watershed for all rivers flowing westwards, particularly the Suran River and the Betaar Nala, which join at Poonch town. Across this watershed lies the famous Gulmarg bowl in Kashmir. Poonch is the smallest district of the state of Jammu and Kashmir. The district is bound on its north by the districts of Pulwama and
Baramula. Rajauri district bounds Poonch on the south and Pakistan Occupied Kashmir (POK) to the north west. The total area of is 1,674 square kilometers. The district has a single town, Poonch. Its villages are located in the Shivaliks while the rest of the district is occupied by mountains. The chief occupation of the people is agriculture and fruit farming. Poonch (population 23,434) at nearly 1000 meters ASL is bowl shaped, with hills almost 1000 metres high dominating it. The historic town is located astride the famous Mughal Route, now rapidly coming up as a National Highway.

In 1947, when the issue of Poonch came up seriously, the population of Poonch principality was 4.36 lacs which included 76,000 Hindus and Sikhs; the rest being Muslims. Pakistan had purposely targeted Poonch district, which had a large population of Muslim serving and retired soldiers, as an important operational objective. The Pakistani forces comprised regular soldiers, ex-servicemen and Pashtun Tribals, along with Muslim Poonchies inflamed by reports of massacre of Muslim refugees during the communal violence of the partition. Poonch principality had thus become the centre of disturbances immediately after 15 August 1947.

Sardar Mohd Ibrahim Khan, started underground activities against Maharaja of J and K in June 1947. Initially he organized about 60,000 ex-servicemen of Poonch principality against the scattered forces of the Maharaja operating in Poonch principality. In August 1947 Ibrahim Khan went to Pakistan to seek armed help against the Maharaja’s forces. The Pakistani government not only provided him arms and ammunition, but also allowed about 30,000 tribesmen overall, officered by Pakistani Army regulars to participate in the carnage that followed in Jammu and Kashmir.

Strategic Deliberations Preceding the Political Decision to Defend Poonch

After the successful defence against the invading Pakistan sponsored and led Tribals in mid November 1947, the emphasis shifted completely to the Jammu Province and Poonch in particular. According to General ‘Tariq’ Akbar Khan, (codenamed after Jebel Tariq, the Moorish General who invaded Spain in 711 AD) the GOC of the invading force: “We overwhelmed the garrison at Bagh and took control of the tehsil. We sent lashkars to surround and isolate Poonch from Srinagar. We captured Kotli, Mirpur, Beri Pattan and the whole area astride the road between Jammu and Poonch...”

On 16 November, Maj Gen Kalwant Singh, GOC, J&K Division, ordered the relief of Naushahra, Jhangar, Kotli, Mirpur and Poonch. The Poonch link-up plan meant that the thrust of 161 Brigade, then fighting near Srinagar would be diverted to Poonch over the Haji Pir pass while 50 Para Brigade was to
fight its way from the south. General Roy Bucher, the Indian C-in-C, considered the plan ‘dangerous, foolhardy and risky’. The Pakistani invaders, by this time, were on the dominating mountain tops and incessantly harassing Poonch town. Lt Col Pritam Singh, who had inveigled himself and 1 KUMAON into Poonch on 21 November, was ordered to abandon Poonch but refused.

At the crucial Defence Committee meeting on 3 December 1947, Nehru unequivocally stated that Poonch must be defended at all costs. Mountbatten had a different view, while the C-in-C wanted the final decision on Poonch to be taken by Lt Gen Russell, the Army Commander, who, for well considered tactical and logistic compulsions, wanted to pull out. On 6 December 1947, the PM met Gen. Russell at Jammu, and the final decision to defend Poonch was taken. On that day, Lt Col Pritam, MC, the Poonch Garrison Commander, was promoted as Brig. The die was cast.

The Prevailing Grim Situation in Poonch

Serious readers of the Poonch battle in 1947-48 would do well to read the short but riveting account of this momentous struggle by a military officer who was an eye witness; the intrepid signaler, Lt Col Maurice Cohen. Titled “Thunder over Kashmir”, the book covers the Poonch siege in the larger context of the war in graphic detail.

At that time of the Poonch crisis, there were only two battalions of Dogra troops in Poonch principality. One unit was at Bagh under Colonel Hakal and the other one was stationed at Palandri under Brig Krishan Chand. Both were low on ammunition; were militia troops hardly suited for fierce fighting and did not have their battalion support weapons as was the norm for regular Infantry battalions. Both units retreated under the intense pressure to Poonch town and were planning a breakout when Pritam arrived. He recalled that it took some doing on his part to get them to stick it out and fight.

The over 40,000 people, the major part being refugees who had come ill prepared for a long stay and with whatever cattle they could muster, were now in the grossly over crowded town. They were all badly demoralized. All the government and non-government buildings were fully occupied by them, with thousands of people and animals without shelter. Administration, basic services, hygiene, sanitation and food supplies had all broken down, compelling Pritam to start strict rationing. Apart from the food grains there was acute shortage of cloth, grocery items, salt, medicines, milk, oil, with even a basic need like salt selling at an exorbitant Rs 20 per seer (kilogram) or 1 Pound Sterling, its normal price being about one Anna (1/16th of a Rupee). The 6,000 milch cattle were no better off.
Brig Pritam approached his task with sense and sensibility as well as his trademark dynamism. He established a strong defensive perimeter and, at the same time, set up administrative systems and processes that brought order and control over the town, without compromising on its defence. He did all this by a “hands on” approach, by being present everywhere as well as by sensible decentralizing of authority and responsibility, once he had set up the systems.

Air Bridge to Poonch

With the road link to Jammu as well as from the Kashmir side cut off, the only option left to Brig Pritam was the establishment of an air bridge to Poonch. The non availability of a landing ground simply meant that one had to be created. Six thousand refugees volunteered and worked day and night under intermittent enemy fire and constructed a 550 x 30 metre Advanced Landing Ground (ALG) at 1100m ASL in a record time of six days, with IAF fighters providing overhead cover. AVM Subroto Mukherjee and Air Cmde Mehar Singh landed the first Dakota aircraft on the newly constructed airstrip at Poonch on 8 Dec 1947. The landing and take off at Poonch was not easy as the ALG was surrounded by streams from three sides and the approach was extremely steep. Despite these difficulties and against heavy odds, Air Cmde Mehar Singh created a record by landing a Dakota with three tons of load against the normal rated load of one ton. In the first flight, Sheikh Abdullah and Gopala Swami Ayer visited Poonch, met people, heard their problems sympathetically and reassured the people. In a span of six days, No 12 Squadron RIAF carried out 73 sorties, averaging more than two sorties per aircraft per day, carrying more than 210 tons of supplies to Poonch and evacuating hundreds of refugees during the return journey.

On 13 December it was realised that the raiders had moved up field guns and by the evening had the airfield bracketed by mortars and field artillery. The RIAF courageously flew in 3.7" howitzers from the 4th (Hazara) Mountain Battery (F.F.) at Pritam’s request. The counter bombardment by the garrison reduced the frequency and effectiveness of the enemy shelling.

No.12 Sqn RIAF had by then come under the operational command of No.1 Operational Group with its headquarters at Jammu. ‘Baba’ Mehar Singh, a man larger than life, setting an example in almost everything he did, commanded the loyalty of the pilots in a manner that few men could ever hope for. On the other hand, Brig Pritam Singh was ‘a tough guy’, and one who was to display remarkable courage and determination right through the siege. Pritam Singh and Mehar Singh were symbolic of the determination and courage of the Armed Forces to save Poonch. The synergy between
the two Services did not stop there. Around Poonch, the Indian pickets were well sited to meet the threat of the raiders from all sides. Based at Jammu, RIAF Tempest fighter bombers and Harvards attacked enemy positions. On 4 December Tempests subjected enemy positions north-east and north-west of Poonch to 20mm cannon fire and again on 7 December, enemy positions in the immediate vicinity of Poonch were subjected to rocket attack and strafing. On 8 December, an improvised Dakota aircraft bombed enemy targets north of Poonch by live fused bombs being rolled off the open tail gate. Such was the courage and enterprise of the Air Force pilots and crews.

Operation “Grains”

Realising that grains would have to be provided for to sustain the garrison far beyond what the air bridge could bring in, Pritam decided to carry out raids in “enemy occupied” country. With a force of a battalion minus bolstered by Poonchi civilians acting as scouts and porters, he set a precedent by carrying out weekly forays in villages held by the raiders, snatching grains; even harvesting ripened grains and getting back the “loot” to feed his teeming thousands in Poonch town. He was never short of civilian volunteers in carrying out such risk laden but necessary operations. He also ensured that the Army was more than generous in sharing its rations with the besieged inhabitants.

Military Training

Realising that he had militia troops who needed tough training, Pritam started realistic, risk laden exercises to bring up their fighting standards. One feared exercise was for an officer to pick up a live hand grenade whose safety pin had been removed dropped next to him, and, within four seconds, run, pick it up and throw it beyond a wall before it burst. A fumble would result in certain death. Another was to ride the local ponies bareback. The methods may have been ad hoc but re-energised the militia. Pritam also raised two J and K militia units from local volunteers, who later acquitted themselves honourably.

Setbacks

There were problems too, whose full impact was borne by Pritam as the siege advanced. 1 KUMAON (Parachute), later known as 1 PARA, was placed under command of his second in command, Major (later Lt Col) Dharam Singh. He was involved in unsoldierly conduct when an attack by the Unit on Khanetar Ridge, from which the raiders were causing severe dislocation to the garrison, was routed, with the CO and his Adjutant returning without their weapons. The command and control arrangements
were ambiguous, creating an (unsubstantiated) feeling that Lt Col Dharam Singh was responsible for operations and Pritam for administration of the Unit; something totally unprecedented and against conventional military ethos.

The situation came to a head, leading to induction by air of a relieving battalion, 3/9 GURKHAS; Pritam getting wounded in battle and a wild rumour circulating that he had died. The Brig felt that the best answer to the demand from his Brigade that he pull out, lay in showing himself to the despairing garrison in full uniform, and, somewhat later, recapturing Khanetar Ridge from the raiders with 1 PARA and militia troops. In April 1948, Sheikh Abdullah and Bakhshi Ghulam Mohammad visited Poonch. They had to be unceremoniously bundled out of Poonch in a Dakota by Pritam, to escape a restive mob that was baying for their blood. This, after a thoughtless remark by Abdullah about killing of Muslims by Hindu refugees inflamed the crowd. Change of command in May brought in Maj Gen Atma Singh as GOC 26 Infantry Division, who, as Pritam’s superior, had little time for him. Lt Gen KM Cariappa also took over at about the same time as the Western Army Commander. Both these appointments were in the chain of command that led to Brig Pritam Singh’s ignominious and savage career setbacks due to circumstances that were already under creation.

Ongoing Operations

Notwithstanding that his personal difficulties were increasing by the day, Pritam continued with his basic approach of proactive defence and, with his regular Army as well as militia units, ensured that he was either in possession of, or dominating critical positions around Poonch town. 1 KUMAON had de-inducted but Pritam managed just as well with the new unit.

Officers of the Poonch Garrison, June 1948. Brig Pritam Singh, MC, is seated third from the left.

A Court of Inquiry (C of I) is Ordered against Brig Pritam Singh, MC

Reacting to a letter from the Army Commander that some effects of the Raja of Poonch may have been stolen, Pritam ordered the luggage of his departing battalion, 1 KUMAON (Parachute) to be searched. Nothing was found but the battalion’s izzat (self esteem) certainly was. There was already the problem of operational versus administrative command and control with the same unit and it’s CO. Other allegations pointing to conduct unbecoming of a senior Army officer – most of them unfounded, as it later turned out – led to the ordering of a C of I against this doughty soldier. The
Presiding Officer, a Maj Gen Khanolkar, assisted by Brig BM Kaul amongst others, ended up with 26 charges against Pritam, ranging from murder, fraud, to stealing carpets. The C of I was ordered after the Army Commander had initially advised Gen Atma Singh against it, bringing out instead, that Pritam had done a brilliant job as Poonch garrison commander and deserved better. After subsequently telling Pritam as much, including making a statement that he would recommend him for a high award, Gen Atma had still gone ahead with the C of I.

Operation Easy; Poonch link-up

While these heart breaking activities were on, the defences of Poonch were strengthened by the day. Army Headquarters finally decided to launch Operation Easy (so codenamed to make the complex task look easy). A relieving force under Brig Yadunath Singh was assembled at Rajauri, which eventually grew to be division-sized, comprising 5 and 19 Infantry Brigade as well as “Rajauri Column” with supporting field artillery and two troops of Sherman tanks of the Central India Horse. Operations commenced on 1 November, 1948. The forces of Poonch garrison under the command of Lt. Col. Chandan Singh commenced a fighting break out from Poonch town towards Pir Topa on 19 November and after crossing Panj Kakrian Ridge reached Dhanna Ka Pir on 20 November. On 21 November 1948, link up was achieved. Poonch had been saved.

The Battle Casualties (BC) of the Azad Kashmir Regiment during 1947-1948 were 7301 as per Pakistani documents. The break down is: Killed: Officers 17, JCO’s 100, OR. 2516. Wounded: 4668. What is revealing is what the statistics reveal about the intensity of fighting in Poonch. As per the Pakistani web site of the Azad Kashmir Regiment, the District-wise breakdown of killed in action was: Muzafarabad 129, Poonch 1771, Mirpur and other Jammu districts 733. Figures for Northern Areas are not available. Source: History of the Azad Kashmir Regiment, Volume 1 (1947-1948).

General Courts Martial (GCM)

Post recording of the Summary of Evidence (S of E), the charges were reduced from 26 to 6, the rest being proved frivolous including the charge of murder. The GCM was presided over in early 1951 by Maj Gen JN Choudhury (later Chief of the Army Staff). Brig Pritam was found guilty of fraud of a small amount of money but absolved of the other charges. He lost his Independence Medal, his rank (he was only a temporary Brigadier, whereas an officer tried by GCM is tried in his substantive rank; in this case, the rank of Lt Col). His appeal against the award went unheard. It is believed that in later years he shifted to Panchkula. He died in 1978 at
NOIDA, unknown and unlamented, except in the hearts and minds of the people of Poonch.

A Plea to those who sit in Power

Brig Pritam Singh, MC, like most great men who have adorned the pages of history, was a maverick. He was brave, selfless, a man who loved his country and its freedom above all. A stern, strict man who led by example, he placed himself at the service of the people of Poonch above all other considerations. 64 years on, the inhabitants of this town still remember with pride that when it was time to stand up and be counted, Brig Pritam Singh, MC, was unflinchingly their man. It is not without reason that his picture adorns every house in Poonch and those who lived through that year long ordeal and had a glimpse of soul, his resolve, courage and love for the country have passed on their deathless feelings for the man and his calling to the generations that have followed. Maybe the Supreme Commander of India’s Armed Forces can take the Mercy Petition of the people of Poonch to heart and reinstate Brig Pritam Singh, MC, in death, to the honour he so singularly deserves. Shrimati Pratibha Devisingh Patil, the Hon’ble President of India can forgive the officer his trespasses and reinstate his honour for posterity, for the people of Poonch and for India.
2nd Lt. Arun Khetarpal, who was in "A" squadron and was stationed close by, responded promptly, along with the rest of his regiment after the commander of the squadron urgently called for reinforcements. 2nd Lt. Khetarpal alone in charge attacked the incoming Pakistani troops and tanks taking down an enemy tank in the process. However, Pakistani forces regrouped and counterattacked. Later 2nd Lt Arun Khetarpal became the posthumous recipient of the Param Vir Chakra, India’s highest military decoration for valour in face of the enemy. Famagusta tank. Tribute. 2nd Lt. The Housing project of Arun Vihar in Noida was named after Second Lieutenant Arun Khetarpal PVC. Citation. Second lieutenant arun khetarpal poonahorse (IC-25067). 2/Lt Arun Khetarpal PVC (P) Poona Horse. They saved the day for the Indian army, with Second Lt. Arun Khetarpal and other Indian tanks attacking the enemy and had the enemy on the run. One tank commander laid his life. Later, the enemy regrouped and attacked on the sector which was under Second Lt. Arun Khetarpal, three tanks facing 15 enemy tanks. From there it was a furious gun battle, 10 Pakistani tanks were destroyed and India’s two tanks were casualties. Second Lt Arun Khetarpal’s tank was hit and he was asked to abandon the tank. Arun Khetarpal was conferred with the Param Vir Chakra for his valor in the Battle of Basantar. Son of Lt. Col. M.L. Khetarpal (who later went on to become Brigadier), Arun Khetarpal was enrolled into the 38th Course NDA in 1967 and subsequently joined the Indian Military Academy before being commissioned into the 17 Poona Horse. Gearing up for an epic battle. Fond of swimming and playing saxophone, the suave Army officer with dashing ethos was ordered to march with his regiment towards Shakargarh sector in December 1971 while he was undergoing Young Officers Course in Ahmednagar. Advertisement.