

# Battle Tales

Ms Rachna Bisht Rawat®

## Abstract

*The author has been chronicling wars for a while. She has found that the most fascinating part of the exercise has been the interaction with the magnificent soldiers who fought these wars and came back to us and can now tell us not just their own stories but also those of the braves who could not return. The article narrates some of those stories that she has gathered.*

## Introduction

Veterans are all very different from each other but what makes them stand together as a clan is the dignity, honesty and courage in their old eyes. I have sat with Subedar Kala Singh (who fought alongside Param Vir Chakra recipient Subedar Joginder Singh in 1962) on a cot pulled into the shade in the wheat fields of Chehalanwala village of Punjab, I have had coffee with Major General BR Verma, AVSM, who was battalion adjutant in the Battle of Dograi (1965) with Brigadier (then Lieutenant Colonel) Desmond E Hayde, MVC, I have had phone conversations with Colonel (then Major) SS Cheema, who fought shoulder to shoulder alongside Colonel (then Major) Hoshiar Singh, PVC, in the Battle of Jarpal, having received from him, more than once, a virtual rap on the knuckles for not being attentive enough. From these amazing soldiers, who walk with pride, who speak with sincerity, who, for me, are a class apart, I have heard some intriguing war anecdotes that are shared below.

### ***Karela, upar se neem chadha — “He was stricter than strict”***

Lance Naik Karam Singh of 1 Sikh not only received the Param Vir Chakra for the exemplary courage he displayed in the Battle of Tithwal in 1948, but he also already possessed a Military Cross awarded to him for his bravery in the Burma War in 1944 which

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®Ms Rachna Bisht Rawat is a journalist and writer with more than 20 years of experience. She has worked with newspapers including Delhi Middy, The Statesman, Financial Express, Indian Express, Deccan Herald and The Hindu, has been attached with the Leicester Mercury in the United Kingdom. She has authored five books on the Indian Army.

he fought under the British. Karam Singh was the first living soldier to wear a PVC on his shirtfront. He lived for 77 years, rose to the rank of Honorary Captain, and died peacefully in his home in 1993. Subedar Kala Singh, who was Karam Singh's *sahayak*, narrated an amusing story about him.

In the early 1960s, Karam was posted to the Sikh Regimental Centre in Meerut where he was asked to procure sugar for soldiers from a nearby mill. He soon discovered that the corrupt mill owner, who was well-connected, soaked the bags of sugar in water to make them heavier before they were being weighed to make a quick buck. Furious, Karam Singh declared that he will not pay for wet bags. The mill owner threw his high connections in Karam's face and pushed him, daring him to take action. Karam lost his temper and gave the man a sound thrashing. Upon the mill owner's complaint, Karam Singh was dismissed from service for beating up a civilian. Not one to take injustice lying down, he sought an audience with the President of India, marched there with all his war medals, managed to convince the President of his sincerity and was promptly reinstated. Much to the delight of the soldiers, a proud Karam Singh was back in uniform, twirling his lush moustache. *'Ek toh wo sardar tha, upar se uske paas medals thei. Karela wo bhi neem chadha, aisa tha Karam Singh saheb'* — He was a Sikh, and that too heavily decorated. He didn't just go by the book; he wrote the book. Such was Karam Singh saheb — the 81-year-old Kala Singh saheb told me, with a twinkle in his faded old eyes. Both of us sat together chuckling for a long time.

### **Major Shaitan Singh's Radio**

Subedar Ram Chander and Havildar Nihal Singh, SM, both in their late seventies, told me the heartbreaking story of Major Shaitan Singh, PVC. They were both in Charlie company of 13 Kumaon in October 1962 when their company — with a strength of 124 (of whom 113 eventually died in action) — put up 40-pounder tents on a deserted slope in Rezang La. These Ahirs from Haryana, who had never seen snow in their lives, were tasked with defending Chushul, 30 kms away, with no artillery cover, hardly any warm clothes and written orders from the Brigade Commander that 'they should fight to the last man and the last round if the Chinese attacked'.

What the completely isolated company did have was an old radio set and a quiet and gentle company commander who was completely opposite to what his name meant. *‘Unka naam Shaitan tha par woh devta thei,’* — his name meant demon/naughty, but he was an embodiment of god — is what Ram Chander saheb told me. The soldiers, he said, would shiver in the freezing winds with just cotton trousers, jerseys, and light coats to protect them. Most of them would suffer from splitting headaches and the nursing assistant would move from bunker to bunker handing out medicines. But in their free time they would sit down together and listen to the radio. ‘We would hear about attacks on other posts by the Chinese and we would boil in rage. Shaitan Singh saheb would be sitting with us listening quietly. We would tell him *‘Sahab hame ek baar mauqa mil jaaye toh ham bhi jam kar ladenge’* — Sir, if only we get the chance, we will put up a ferocious front. Saheb would just smile gently. But when the post was under attack, Major Shaitan turned into a fearless lion inspiring his men to fight. *‘Saheb ne kaha, aap veer Ahir hain. Jam kar ladne ka time aa gaya hai’* — Saheb told us, you are fearless Ahir warriors. It is time to prove your mettle (Ahir being the soldiers’ caste; it comes from the Sanskrit word Abhira meaning fearless, in Hindi). Even after he was hit by a shell splinter and his left arm was bandaged, Major Shaitan directed operations and moved from bunker to bunker, inspiring bravery. Of course, we all know the ultimate Major Shaitan Singh story where he told the two men carrying him to safety to leave him behind and save their own lives. *‘Ye meri company hai, main yahin marna chahta hun’* — This is my company, I want to take my last breath here — is what he said to his radio operator Ram Chander, one of the last people to see him alive.

Brigadier RV Jatar (Retd), also from 13 Kumaon, recounted another incident about Major Shaitan, this one from before the war, when he and another officer from 13 Kumaon were travelling by train and chanced upon an astrologer. Just for fun, they both asked him to read their hands. When the astrologer saw Major Shaitan’s hand, he appeared stunned but all he said was he saw great glory ahead. “If he saw death as well, we don’t know. He did not say it”, Brigadier Jatar remembered.

### **A Shared Toothbrush**

While recounting the Battle of Haji Peer (1965) Brigadier Arvinder Singh (Retd) of 1 Para, who was then a young company commander, narrated this interesting anecdote to me.

Of the five officers who participated in the operation, Major (later Lieutenant General) Ranjit Singh Dyal, MVC, was the only one carrying a toothbrush. One morning, when he was brushing his teeth, he noticed the other officers watching him wistfully. He generously offered his toothbrush to Major Arvinder, who brushed his teeth with it and then passed it on to Captain Vaswani and so on and so forth. Ultimately all five officers brushed their teeth with Major Dyal's toothbrush and then awaited some food. The starving jawans had managed to catch two goats which they cooked in paraats (deep plates) that they had found in a deserted animal shelter. They had also managed to find some salt but it wasn't enough for all of them, so the officers were offered the partially cooked meat with salt while the jawans ate it bland. Decent food finally came to them on the morning on August 31 when Flight Lieutenant LK Dutta (actress Lara Dutta's father), who happened to be Major Ranjit Singh's coursemate, came to know that the soldiers were stuck without food and he flew his helicopter there and though he could not land, he dropped packets of *puri-aalu* so that the hungry men could have a hearty meal.

Brigadier Arvinder recounted another amusing anecdote to me. During the 1971 war, his Delta company captured 14 Pakistani soldiers. When they were presented before him for interrogation, one of them asked him in chaste Punjabi, '*Saheb ji, tu 1965 mein Haji Peer pass te si?* (Sir, were you at Haji Peer Pass in 1965?)' When he replied in the affirmative, the cheeky POW jubilantly told him that he had been there as well and had been taken POW then too. '*Par tussi Major de Major hi rah gaye, main te Lance Naik te Havildar ban gaya*'. (But you are still a Major, while I was a Lance Naik then and now, I have been promoted to the rank of Havildar!)

### **The Bad Boys Who Slew a General**

This war anecdote comes from the Battle of Asal Uttar, 1965. I heard it from Lieutenant Colonel Hari Ram Janu (Retd), SM, of 4 Grenadiers, who was the company commander of Charlie company in the Battle of Asal Uttar. This also happened to be Param Vir Chakra CQMH Abdul Hamid's company. Grenadiers Shafiq, Naushad and Suleiman were notorious as the bad boys of the battalion, breaking rules and getting into trouble all the time. They now stand out in the military history of the world as the only three-foot soldiers who slew a General in battle.

On the morning of 10 September, around 11 am, the Pakistani General Officer Commanding came down the road (alongside which the soldiers of 4 Grenadiers were alert in their trenches) in a jeep driven by his Commander Artillery, with his Rover jeep following. Though the Grenadiers, who were hiding in trenches along the road, had been given orders by then Lieutenant Janu to lie low and not show themselves, Grenadier Suleiman (who was in a trench with fellow Grenadiers Shafiq and Naushad) disregarded them as always, and stood up to see who was coming. The GOC mistook him for a Pakistani straggler, stopped and called out to him. When he did not listen, the General stepped out of the jeep and walked across to the trench, reaching for his pistol. By then, Shafiq and Naushad also stood up, rifles pointed at the General and looking desperately towards where they knew their Company Commander was, waiting for orders to fire. Sensing the danger they are in, Lieutenant Janu — who had been watching — immediately called out ‘fire’ and a volley of bullets hit the bewildered General who collapsed on the spot. The Commander Artillery also received a burst of bullets to the forehead and slumped forward on the steering wheel. All those inside the Rover jeep were also shot except for the driver who managed to turn it and drive away. A few minutes later, a message passed on the GOC’s Rover was intercepted which said ‘*Bade Imam mare gaye*’ —The elder Imam (leader) has been killed. This revealed to Janu the identity of the officer his boys had shot down, which was later confirmed.

After ceasefire was declared on 21 September, Lieutenant Janu was surprised to see Pakistani soldiers approaching his location with a white flag. They had with them a lady dressed in white. Chairs were pulled onto the road and the lady was asked to take a seat. With tears in her eyes, she told Lieutenant Janu that she was the widow of the Commander Artillery who had been shot down by his men. She requested him for the body of her husband. Lieutenant Janu expressed his helplessness since the body had already been handed over to higher authorities. He assured her that her husband was a very brave soldier and that he had been buried with full military honours befitting an officer of his rank. He offered her his condolences and a cup of tea, which she graciously accepted and was then respectfully seen off.

### **‘Can’t Salute my PM’**

One of the most heartrending war stories I have heard is of Maha Vir Chakra recipient Major Bhupinder Singh of Bravo Squadron, 4 Horse. After an exemplary showing in the battle, having destroyed four enemy tanks, his tank was hit by a Cobra missile that blew up its gun while the tank driver was burnt alive. Though Major Bhupinder managed to pull out his loader, he was severely burnt and being treated in the Delhi Base Hospital when Prime Minister Lal Bahadur Shastri came on a visit to meet hospitalised soldiers. When he came to Major Bhupinder’s bed, he noticed tears in the officer’s eyes. He patted his head affectionately and said, ‘Major, you belong to one of the finest armies in the world. Tears do not become you’. To this the Major, who was almost completely covered in blood since his wounds could not be bandaged, and in intense pain, whispered, ‘Sir, I am not pained because of any injury. I am anguished because a soldier is not able to salute his Prime Minister’. The Major succumbed to his injuries after a few days. A deeply moved Prime Minister Shastri quoted this episode many a time in public gatherings.

### **Not Without My Golf clubs**

A 1971 war story that I heard from Mukesh Khetarpal, brother of the 21-year-old Second Lieutenant Arun Khetarpal of Poona Horse, one of the youngest Param Vir Chakra awardees, was about the time he was recalled from his Young Officers course at Ahmednagar as the war had just broken out. He and another unit officer, Second Lieutenant Brijendra Singh, were so excited at the thought of going to war that they both took the first train to Delhi, having managed seats in the pantry car, though they travelled without reservation. Once in Delhi, Arun unloaded his motorcycle that he had also brought back and rode it home promising fellow Second Lieutenant Brijendra that he would be back in time to catch the Punjab Mail. He returned as promised, happily lugging his Blue Patrol and golf clubs.

When Brijendra asked him why he had brought those along from his house, he cheerfully replied, ‘I will wear the Blue Patrol at the ceremonial dinner we will have after winning the war and I plan to play golf in Lahore’. One is well aware that he refused to evacuate Famagusta, his burning Centurion tank, in the Battle of Basantar, and switched off his radio set after famously saying,

‘No, Sir, I will not abandon my tank. My gun is still working, and I will get these bastards’.

### ***Zinda ya Murda, Dograi Mein Milna Hai* — We meet at Dograi, Dead or Alive**

The last story that I want to share is about the late legendary Brigadier Desmond Eugene Hayde, MVC who upon retirement settled in Kotdwar, the same hill town in Pauri Garhwal where my paratrooper father Brigadier BS Bisht, SM, VSM, also chose as his post retirement retreat. Every Garhwali knew the celebrated war hero Hayde was. Locals were initially surprised but soon got used to seeing him do odd jobs around the place. He could be spotted shirtless in the summer heat of Kotdwar, perched on the roof of his house, hammering a nail into a loose wooden board, or fixing a leak. He would often be found washing the rugs of his dogs in the small canal that wound past his house or walking around his estate with squirrels climbing in and out of his pockets (where he kept crumbs) or followed by some of the 45 stray dogs he had come to adopt. He was a dog lover. People would throw unwanted puppies across the boundary wall of his estate and he would unquestioningly adopt them too.

The delightfully grounded Brigadier was a fearless Commanding Officer as a young Lieutenant Colonel. He was an Anglo-Indian fluent in Jat bhasha and was highly respected by his troops with whom he spoke in their language. Just before the attack on Dograi in 1965, he warned his men to not act like cowards when they went for the attack. He told them that even if every single one of them ran away from the battlefield, he would continue to stand there facing the enemy alone. *‘Jab tum apne gaon wapis jaoge to log tum pe thukenge. Wo bolenge tum apne CO ko ladai ke maidan mein marne ke liye akela chor kar bhag gaye’* (If you run away from the battlefield, you won’t be able to face your neighbours once you are back in the safety your homes. They will say you abandoned your CO and left him to die at the hands of the enemy).

On the night of 21 September 1965 when the attack on Dograi was planned, he made only two demands of his men. The first *‘ek bhi aadmi piche nahi hatega’*—not one of you will retreat — and the second, *‘zinda ya murda Dograi mein milna hai’* — dead or alive, we will meet at Dograi. This was drilled into the soldiers’



heads so clearly that when Colonel Hayde asked a young soldier in a bunker on the eve of the attack: *'Susre, agar CO saheb zakhmi ho gaya toh kya karoge?'* — What would you do if your CO is injured during the fight? — without a second thought the young soldier replied, *'CO saheb ko utha kar Dograi le jaayenge kyunki CO saheb ka hukm hai ki zinda ya murda Dograi mein milna hai'* — I will carry the CO to Dograi because he has ordered everyone to get there, dead or alive! A pleased Colonel Hayde gave him a pat on the shoulder moved on to the next bunker.

## Conclusion

These were some of the amazing men who fought for us. Each time I hear or tell their stories, it fills my heart with pride. They were ready to give up their lives for us (as many of them did). And none of them wanted anything in return. All we can offer them is our gratitude and remembrance.