

USI MacGregor Memorial Medal – A Legacy

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Abstract

The USI of India's MacGregor Memorial Medal (MMM) is one of the most prestigious medal awarded to defence personnel for military reconnaissance, mountain/desert expeditions, river rafting, world cruises, polar expeditions, running/trekking across the Himalayas, and adventure flights. The USI Council instituted the MacGregor Memorial Medal in May 1887 to commemorate the memory of Colonel (later Major General) Sir Charles Metcalfe MacGregor, KCB, CSI, CIE, the founder of the USI. It is the only non-presidential award permitted to be worn in uniform.

Introduction

MacGregor Memorial Medal (MMM) was instituted to commemorate the memory of Maj Gen Sir Charles Metcalfe MacGregor, KCB, CSI, CIE, and the founder of the USI of India (Established 1870).

Scholar of military history, Adrian Preston has called Maj Gen Sir Charles Metcalfe MacGregor the father of the school for the scientific study of Indian defence policy. In his journal, 'Sir Charles MacGregor and the Defence of India, 1857–1887' Preston writes, "Almost single-handedly, he [MacGregor] began to create the machinery within the Indian Army establishment — the special departments, professional institutes, journals and literature — to stimulate a greater awareness of the special and peculiar nature of Indian defence problems that this new role involved, and to encourage an iconoclastic re-examination of prevailing defence assumptions".¹ During the heydays of Great Game in Eurasia, conduct of intelligence missions beyond strategic frontiers was a key element of statecraft.

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When Maj Gen Sir Charles Metcalfe MacGregor passed away on 5 Feb 1887, the USI Council decided to commemorate his memory. At a preliminary meeting held at USI on 20 May 1887 presided over by General Sir Roberts, the C-in-C and about forty officers, it was decided to commemorate the memory of Maj Gen MacGregor. Many suggestions were discussed, but reconnaissance and exploration being dear to him, the decision to institute a medal for this was taken. The criteria for award of the medal were laid out at a meeting held on 03 July 1888 at Shimla, presided over by the Commander-in-Chief (C-in-C) General (later Field Marshal) Sir FS Roberts, with the Earl of Dufferin, the Viceroy, being present as Chief Guest.²

The USI council in its meeting held on 22 Oct 1886 decided that the first priority will continue to be for military reconnaissance or journey of exploration of the year. However, in the absence of any individual eligible for the military reconnaissance or journey of exploration, mountain/desert expedition, river rafting, world cruises (like the Trishna), polar expeditions, running/trekking across the Himalayas, and adventure flights, including flights by light/micro light aircraft, be considered eligible for the medal. It is the only non-presidential award permitted to be worn in uniform.



The Obverse and Reverse of the MacGregor Medal



MacGregor Medal with Ribbon

Pre-independence Awardees

Before independence, amongst the galaxy of proud recipients is Capt FE Younghusband (1890). He was from 1st Regiment, the King's Dragoon Guards. Capt FE Younghusband conducted a recce in 1889 in Chinese Turkestan (currently the Xinjiang) and to Kashmir via Karakorum. Major FR Rennick of the 40th Pathans was awarded MacGregor Memorial Medal in 1905 for his recce of Burma (Kentung Province)/Thailand/French Indo-China borders in 1903-1904. His work led to realignment of boundaries in the river Menam basin which was confirmed by the Anglo-French treaty of 1904. Maj Gen Charles Wingate for 1st Chindit operations in Burma was the recipient in 1943. He received Gold medal for setting a new standard in warfare and reconnaissance. The first Indian soldier to get the award was Risaldar Shahzada Ahmad Mir from the 36th Jacob's Horse. Shahzada Ahmad Mir under Lieutenant Landon was detached to the Seistan Boundary Force in 1904

where he made reces in the area collecting information on the routes and movements of local tribes.³

Post-independence Awardees

After independence, it was decided to award the medal for extreme adventure activities as well. The medal among others was awarded to Major Z.C. Bakshi, VrC for his important strategic military recce in 1949. Major Z.C. Bakshi, VrC was from 2nd battalion, 5th Gorkha Rifles (Frontier Force). In 1949 he went from Nathu La in the Chumbi Valley to Gyantse and Lhasa over high passes, covering a distance of over 400 km in 80 days.

Col Narinder Kumar, PVSM, KC, AVSM was awarded the medal for his multiple expeditions in the Siachen area, between 1978 and 1981. He gained highly valuable terrain and enemy information which has been instrumental in safeguarding our borders on there. The expeditions were carried out in uncharted territory, under extremely harsh weather conditions, with minimal equipment and administrative support and grave risk to life and limb. The results achieved in these expeditions were spectacular and formed the bedrock for the subsequent launch of Operation 'MEGHDOOT'.

Sqn Ldr Ram Karan Makar & Flt Lt Rana TS Chhina were awarded Macgregor Memorial Medal for their helicopter recce in Karakorams in 1986. Wg Cdr Rahul Monga & Wg Cdr Anil Kumar won the medal for world expedition in a microlight aircraft in 2007. The expedition flew 10,529 km, landed at 85 destinations in 19 countries and created a new world record of circumnavigating the world in 80 days, battering the previous world record of 99 days. The mission was flown in a single engine unpressurised aircraft weighing less than 300 kg, without any redundancy features.

Cdr Dilip Donde was awarded the medal for Solo circumnavigation of the globe in yacht in 2010. Lt Cdr Abhilash Tomy won for Solo and non-stop circumnavigation of the globe under sail in 2013. During the expedition, he sailed non-stop covering all three major Capes viz., Cape Leeuwin off Australia, Cape Horn at the southern tip of South America and Cape of Good Hope.⁴

The 2018-2021 Award

The USI of India organised the prestigious USI MacGregor Memorial Medal ceremony at the USI on 08 March 2022. General MM Naravane, PVSM AVSM SM VSM ADC, officiating Chairman Chiefs of Staff Committee (COSC) and Chief of Army Staff presented the medal to four awardees; two from the Indian Army and one each from Indian Navy and Indian Air Force, for their outstanding achievements in operational reconnaissance and extreme adventure sports. At the ceremony, the awards were for the year 2018 and 2019, which were for extreme adventure activities, whereas awards for the year 2020 and 2021 were for military explorations. Since inception 122 medals have been awarded. As per the current policy, citations duly recommended by the Vice Chiefs for acts undertaken in last three years were asked for selection of awardee by the USI council. The medal is open to all ranks, serving and retired, of the Indian Armed Forces, Territorial Army and Assam Rifles. The award ceremony was attended by the Indian military top leadership including Chief of Integrated Defence Staff to the Chairman Chiefs of Staff Committee (CISC) Air Marshal BR Krishna, PVSM, AVSM, SC, and other officers from the three Services, President of the USI Council, and serving and elected Council members.



The Awardees with COAS

Speaking on the occasion, General Naravane complimented the USI for their great contribution to India's strategic culture and professional grooming of future military leaders. He also appreciated the role of USI in carrying the legacy of military explorations and extreme adventure sports. He congratulated the awardees for their exceptional talent, grit and determination. He said that Indian Armed Forces are endowed with exceptional talent and the feats of the awardees will inspire and motivate others to emulate their example to bring laurels and glory to the organisation and India.⁵

Maj Gen B.K Sharma, AVSM, SM** (Retd), Director USI in his remarks called MacGregor a visionary military leader who was endowed with key insight of political geography of India and Eurasia and had reconnoitered on horseback land routes from India through Iran, Afghanistan right up to Herat and Amu Darya. Director USI also underlined the fact that awardees belong to the three Services represents the true spirit of jointmanship that the USI symbolises and represents since its inception in 1870.

The Awardees and the Citation

The brief 'Citations' of the four awardees are as below:

- Sanjay Kumar, Chief EA (P), of Indian Navy, during 2018 – 2019. He participated in La Ultra 111 km, toughest race including crossing of Khardungla Pass in Aug 18. He secured 1st position in Navy Team in Solang Sky Ultra (60 km) in Sept 18 and secured runners up in 12 hours Stadium Run (110Kms) in Dec 18. He also won High 5 Format of Hell Race (211 km) in June 19 and set new India Book of Records in Mumbai – Goa Ultra Relay (563 km) in Aug 19.
- Hav (Opr) (now Naib Subedar) Sanjeev Kumar of Army Adventure Nodal Centre (Hang Gliding), School of Artillery, Devlali created a new world record in powered harness hang glider on 12 Dec 2018 by staying aloft for 8 hours & 43 minutes, from Suratgarh to Barmer, Rajasthan, over a distance of 465.33 km. His achievement has been recognised by Limca Book of Records, India Book of Records and Asia Book of Records; breaking the previous record of 313.13 km.
- MWO Anshu Kumar Tiwari of Directorate of Adventure, Indian Air Force was tasked to check feasibility of parachute

landing at Khardungla pass (17982 feet), to demonstrate the airborne capability of Indian Armed Forces. In that, he undertook the jump successfully from 24000 feet on 8th Oct 2020, thereby establishing the operational validity of this critical parachute system first time ever in international history.

- Maj Ajay Kumar Singh of a Para Special Forces Battalion, planned, trained and successfully led a 1660 km long ARMEX 21 (ski expedition) from Karakoram in Ladakh to Uttarkhand, across 26 rugged passes above 18000 feet in “the great Himalayas” for 119 days during winters. The exploration has led to better understanding and capabilities for military operations in super high-altitude terrain.



The Awardees

Conclusion

Major Bob Hammond starts his book on the history of the MMM with a quote from Kipling's poem *'The Winners'*:

"Down to Gehenna or up to the Throne, He travels the fastest who travels alone."

The MacGregor memorial award celebrates the same spirit and determination of the officers of the three armed forces. It also

is reflective of the fact that sports and adventure activities are integral to the overall development of the armed forces. Recognition of deeds of valour, human endurance and high-risk taking are bound to inculcate leadership qualities, promote jointmanship and spirit of adventure in the present and future generation of military leaders.

Endnotes

¹ Preston, Adrian (1969). IV. Sir Charles MacGregor and the Defence of India, 1857–1887. *The Historical Journal*, 12(1), 58–. doi:10.1017/S0018246X00004106

² Sqn Ldr RTS Chhina, “The MacGregor Memorial Medal” *Journal of the United Service Institution of India*, Vol. CL, No. 622, October-December 2020. https://usiofindia.org/publication/usi-journal/the-macgregor-memorial-medal/?sf_paged=6

³ Robert Hammond, *History of the MacGregor Memorial Medals 1889-1989*, Spantech & Lancer (1994)

⁴ PIB, ‘President will Visit Mumbai Tomorrow,’ President’s Secretariat, 05, April, 2013 <https://pib.gov.in/newsite/erecontent.aspx?relid=94498>

⁵ Macgregor Memorial Medals Presented by Officiating Chairman Chiefs Of Staff Committee, Ministry of Defence, 08 march 2022. <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=1804010&s=08>