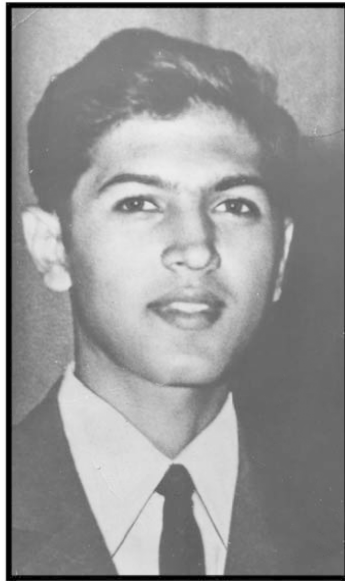


The Confession[#]

Rachna Bisht Rawat[@]

Abstract

This is a human-interest story woven around 2nd Lieutenant Arun Khetarpal, his family, his life, the action for which he was awarded the nation's highest gallantry award — the Param Vir Chakra — and above all a confession. The confession in this case is of a retired Pakistani brigadier made to the father of 2nd Lieutenant Khetarpal on 01 March 2001. This story puts the reader at the heart of the events and enables him/her to relate to the life of a hero extraordinary.



Second Lieutenant Arun Khetarpal

[#]**Chapter 'The Confession'** reproduced from the book "1971: Charge of the Gorkhas and Other Stories" by Rachna Bisht Rawat, with permission from Penguin Random House India. The book will be published in December 2021. All pictures are courtesy Mukesh Khetarpal.

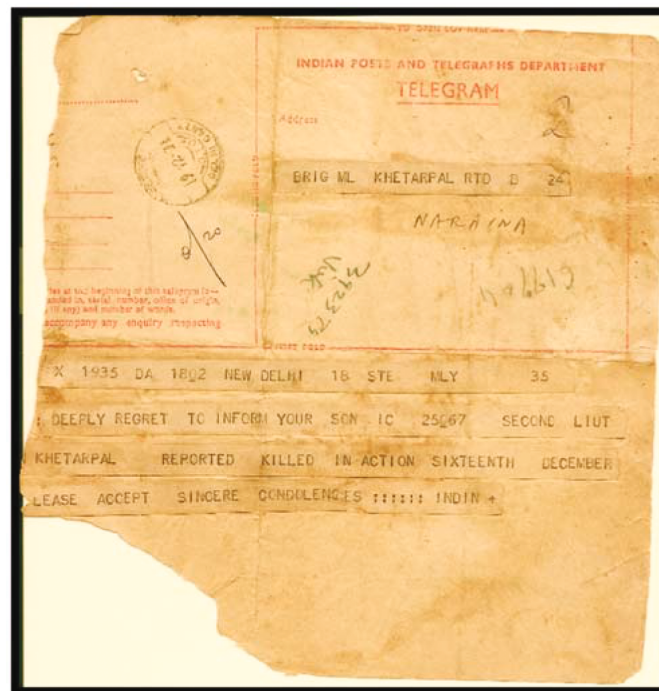
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19 December 1971
0745 hours
B-24, Naraina, Delhi

Brigadier KL Khetarpal is in his dressing gown, shaving, when the bell rings. Running his razor along his foamy chin, he hears the soft scrape of his wife's slippers against the floor and her footsteps leading to the front door. The latch clicks and the door creaks open. There is a hushed conversation. He hears the distinct rustle of paper changing hands. And then a scream and a dull thud. His wife appears to have fallen down. His face still soapy, Brigadier Khetarpal rushes out of the bathroom.

He finds Maheshwari Khetarpal collapsed on the floor and a postman at the door. In her hand there is a telegram. Gentle, soft-spoken Mukesh, the Khetarpals' younger son—barely twenty and a student of IIT Delhi—is home too. He also hears the noise and comes out of his room, still in his pyjamas. As Brigadier Khetarpal bends down to assist his wife, Mukesh takes the piece of paper



**The Original Telegram informing about the martyrdom of
 2/Lt Arun Khetarpal**

from his mother's loosely clasped fingers. Tears spring to his eyes as he reads the telegram and then wordlessly passes it on to his father. 'Deeply regret to inform your son IC 25067 Second Lt Arun Khetarpal reportedly killed in action sixteenth December. Please accept sincere condolences', it says.

May 2020

**The Khetarpal's bungalow
Forest Lane, Ghitorni
Delhi**

Fifty years have passed. Mukesh Khetarpal is now seventy years old, while his elder brother, Arun, who smiles rakishly from a portrait on the wall, dressed in army fatigues, is an eternal twenty-one. Mukesh points that out himself. 'I have aged but Arun never will,' he says, his eyes crinkling up at the corners as he smiles. He says he clearly remembers the cold Delhi winter of 1971 when he was studying in IIT Delhi and Arun's Young Officers course at Ahmednagar had been interrupted by the war. Arun was recalled to his unit like all the other officers, and he had taken a train to Delhi, travelling in the pantry car since he could not get a reservation at such short notice. He had carted along his beloved Java motorcycle, a gift from his dad. Since there were a few hours before he had to catch the Punjab Mail to Jammu, he had unloaded his bike at Delhi and decided to ride it home. 'I was home that day,' remembers Mukesh. 'Arun parked his bike and walked in, looking extremely handsome in his black Armoured Corps dungarees. I was so envious, particularly of his uniform. He was in the peak of his physical health, just as most young officers are after their intensive physical training, and he knew it. He had the lithe body of a panther, a confident prowl, and he was so extremely proud of his uniform, his regiment, his country, that it showed.'

Arun had reluctantly handed over the keys of his beloved bike to Mukesh and told him to look after it. 'He told me to keep revving up the engine from time to time so that the battery did not cease', says Mukesh. Mukesh had obediently nodded, pocketing the keys to the bike. 'We were so young then. I never once thought that Arun might not come back. For me, he was just going on an adventure.' Arun had packed up his golf clubs and his Blue Patrol uniform, explaining to Mukesh that he planned to play golf in Lahore and that he would need his ceremonial dress to attend

the dinner night that would surely be held after the war was won. The Khetarpals had an early dinner, and it was at the dining table that Mrs Khetarpal said to Arun those famous words that would become part of army folklore. Recounting to him how his father and grandfather had both fought in wars, she had said, '*Sher ki tarah ladna, Arun, qayar ki tarah wapis mat aana.*'¹ Arun had looked into her eyes and smiled.

Later in the evening, Brigadier Khetarpal had taken out his grey Standard Herald car and, giving a warm hug to Mukesh and his mother, Arun had got in. 'Mom stood at the doorway, waving him goodbye. She was very concerned about him, but she was also very sure that her son would live up to what was expected of him,' Mukesh recalls. Arun, sitting next to his father, had pushed his head out of the car window and saluted his mother as she fought back tears and the car sped out of the driveway. Early December went by in a haze. 'We had an imported Hitachi transistor. We would carry it around and spend all our time listening to Radio Ceylon, which was reporting the war in detail. Sometimes the signal was good and sometimes we could hardly hear anything, but we all sat around with our ears glued to it,' Mukesh remembers. On the evening of 16 December, Radio Ceylon reported that a massive tank battle had happened in Shakargarh. 'We knew Arun's regiment was in that area and our hearts sank. There was a dreadful stillness in the house all evening. In our hearts there was this terrible fear about Arun's wellbeing, but nobody wanted to say it out loud.'

The very next morning, there came the announcement that Prime Minister Indira Gandhi had declared a ceasefire. The war had finally ended. 'It was such a relief to us,' Mukesh recalls. 'We started smiling and talking once again. My mother got Arun's room cleaned up and we started looking forward to the day he would be back home, recounting stories from the battlefield.' And then, on 19 December, the bell rang, and his mother opened the door to the postman.

Thirty years passed as the Khetarpals slowly accepted their loss and came to terms with their grief. Mukesh studied at IIT Delhi, found a job, got married and had a daughter, though he continued to stay with his parents. And then one day, he and Mrs Khetarpal were surprised to see Brigadier Khetarpal smiling again. He looked happy. 'He said he was going to Sargodha, his ancestral

place in Pakistan where the family had lived before Partition,' says Mukesh. 'It had been his long-standing desire to revisit the place where he had spent the early years of his life, and he had now decided to go ahead and do it.' Both Mukesh and Mrs Khetarpal tried their best to dissuade Brig Khetarpal, but he would not hear a word from them. "You are eighty-one. Where will you go?" we asked him, but he dismissed all our pleas. "It is decided. I am going," he told us. "Don't argue with me."

Brig Khetarpal told them that an old-boys reunion had been planned at Government College, Lahore (where Brigadier Khetarpal had studied as a young boy). He said he would be in Pakistan for three days and would take a taxi and make a day trip to Sargodha before returning to India. Mrs Khetarpal's worries about where he would stay were dispelled. 'I am staying with another graduate of our college, a Pakistan Army officer who lives in Lahore,' he told her. 'That reassured us a little, and finally, when the day arrived, we drove him to the airport, where he got on to the Air India flight and waved us a happy goodbye. He was as excited as a schoolboy,' says Mukesh.

Brigadier Khetarpal called his family from Lahore. He told them that his host was a perfect gentleman who had come to receive him at the airport and was taking very good care of him. "*Bahut badhiya log hain. Meri bahut achhi dekhbhaal kar rahe hain,*"² he told us,' reminisces Mukesh. Three days later, it was time for Brigadier Khetarpal to return, and Mukesh drove to the airport to pick up his father. He found in him none of the excitement with which he had gone. 'Papa appeared very quiet and withdrawn. When I asked him if he was well, he assured me he was. I just thought the trip had tired him out and told him to rest. Even at home he wouldn't talk to us about the visit, which surprised us. Once again, he stopped going out of the house, keeping to himself most of the time.'

A week later, the Khetarpals were visited by 1971 war veteran Major General Ian Cardozo, who was releasing a book on Param Vir Chakra award winners. Since Arun's story was also in the book, he had come to invite Brigadier and Mrs Khetarpal to the launch at the Ashok hotel. Brigadier Khetarpal agreed, and both he and Mrs Khetarpal went to the function on the assigned date. After the event was over, Brigadier Khetarpal was surrounded by reporters who wanted to ask him questions about Arun. A week

later, Mukesh was reading India Today magazine when he came across an article that talked about his father's Pakistan trip and his meeting with the Armoured Corps officer who had been the cause of his son's death. A shocked Mukesh read it and then went looking for his father. 'I confronted him and asked if what I had read was true. He said it was. When my mother and I asked him why he had not shared this with us, he said what could he have told us. It was not a pleasant episode.' And that was when a shocked Mrs Khetarpal and Mukesh heard what had transpired in Lahore when Brigadier Khetarpal had been a revered guest at Brigadier Khwaja Mohammad Naser's house in Lahore.

1 March 2001

Lahore

Brigadier Khetarpal dabs his mouth with a napkin and is pushing his chair back after having finished dinner when he catches his host's eye. The retired Brigadier Khwaja Mohammad Naser, the Pakistan Army officer who has volunteered to be his host for the three-day Lahore stay, has a hesitant smile on his weather-beaten face. '*Mausam achha hai, brigadier sahab, Insha Allah kuchh der bahar bageeche mein chal kar baithen?*'³ he asks. It is day three of Brigadier Khetarpal's Pakistan visit. He has just returned from Sargodha and is tired, but is also touched by the fact that Brigadier Naser has gone out of his way to make the trip comfortable for him. On his request, the Pakistani officer had even organized a videographer to document his visit to his ancestral home. Ideally, he would have liked to get to his bedroom and sleep early, especially since he has a morning flight to Delhi, but being the perfect gentleman, he does not have the heart to refuse his host's request. He is overwhelmed by the love and respect shown to him by the entire household.

'*Kyun nahin!*' Brigadier Khetarpal says, smiling back. '*Kal subah toh main nikal jaunga, phir aapse baat kahan ho payegi.*'⁴ The gracious Brigadier Naser opens the door to the veranda of his beautiful house and leads his guest outside, where easy chairs are laid out on the lawn. Brigadier Khetarpal is surprised to notice discomfort in the Pakistani officer's eyes. He is reminded of the compassionate glances he had found the ladies of the household exchanging at dinner time. Brig. Naser is looking at the grass. He looks up to find Brigadier Khetarpal's eyes on him. '*Main kuchh quboolkarna chahta hun, brigadier sahab,*'⁵ he says softly.

'Kahiye, beta, main sun raha hun',⁶ Brigadier Khetarpal replies, looking affectionately at his host who is younger than him by around thirty years. Brigadier Naser clears his throat. 'Sir, there is something I wanted to tell you for many years, but I could not get the opportunity,' he says. 'I too participated in the 1971 war. I was then a young major, squadron commander of the Pakistan Army's 13 Lancers,' he says. Brigadier Khetarpal is surprised — 13 Lancers is the same regiment which had exchanged its Sikh squadron with the Muslim squadron of Poona Horse (his son's regiment) during Partition in 1947. On 16 December 1971, in a sense, the Indian and Pakistani soldiers had fought their old regiments. 'We fought Poona Horse in the Battle of Basantar,' says Naser, 'Sir, I am the man who killed your son.' A speechless Brigadier Khetarpal listens quietly.

'On the morning of 16 December 1971, I was leading the counter-attack of 13 Lancers against the Indian bridgehead at Basantar,' Brigadier Naser recounts. 'Your son was on the opposite side, standing there like a rock. In the battle, tank casualties were high. He destroyed many of our tanks, and finally, it was just the two of us left facing each other with our tanks just 200 m apart.' We both fired simultaneously, and both our tanks were hit. It was, however, destined that I was to live, and Arun was to die,' Naser says. 'Your son was a very brave man, sir. He was singularly responsible for our defeat.' Stunned, Brigadier Khetarpal can only ask, 'How did you know it was Arun's tank?' Naser tells him that ceasefire was declared the next morning (17 December), and with that the war ended. When he went to collect the bodies of his dead comrades, his arm in a bandage from the injuries he had suffered in the battle, he also checked on his damaged tank. That was when he saw Indian soldiers trying to extricate the tank he had battled with a day before. Curious about the identity of the brave man who had fought him so fiercely, Naser walked up to the soldiers and inquired who had been commanding the tank. He was told it was 2nd Lieutenant Arun Khetarpal of Poona Horse. *'Bahut bahaduri se lade aapke sahab. Chot toh nahi aayi unhe?'*⁷ he asked the soldiers. They told him that Arun was martyred on the battlefield. *'Sahab shaheed ho gaye.'*⁸ A crestfallen Naser returned to his tent.

Brig Khetarpal is listening in complete silence. Naser tells him that he realized much later, when Arun got the Param Vir

Chakra and became a national hero, how young he was. 'I didn't know he was only twenty-one, sir,' he says. 'We were both soldiers doing our duty for our nations. I salute your son for what he did. I salute you too because I now know where he received his values from.' The two officers sit quietly under the moonlight for some time. Then Brigadiere Khetarpal slowly gets up from his chair. Naser springs to his feet as well. The two stand together in an awkward silence, the moon lighting up Naser's grief ridden face. Brigadier Khetarpal looks at his moist eyes and moves forward to gently hug the man who killed his son. He then crosses the lawn and walks back to his bedroom.



Brigadier KL Khetarpal (Left) with Brigadier Khwaja Mohammed Naser (Retd) of Pakistan Army

The next day, just before Brigadier Khetarpal is to leave for the airport, photographs are taken. Brigadier Naser escorts him to the airport and sees him off respectfully. Two weeks later, Brigadier Khetarpal is reading the newspaper in his Delhi house when he gets a parcel. It has come from Pakistan and contains photographs of his Lahore visit. Among them is a picture of him and Brigadier Naser standing next to each other. They are both dressed in dark suits. Brigadier Naser has an arm around his honoured guest. Behind the picture is a handwritten note. It says:

To,

Brigadier M.L. Khetarpal, father of *Shaheed* Second Lieutenant Arun Khetarpal, PVC, who stood like an insurmountable rock, between victory and failure of the counterattack by the 'SPEARHEADS' 13 Lancers on 16 December 1971 in the battle of Bara Pind, as we call it, and Battle of Basantar, as 17 Poona Horse remembers.

Brigadier Khwaja Mohammad Naser, 13 Lancers
2 March 2001, Lahore, Pakistan

The family never spoke about the meeting again, Mukesh says. 'It was a trigger for painful memories from the past to come back and haunt us.' Sometime later, Brigadier Naser toured India as manager of the Pakistani hockey team. He wanted to meet the Khetarpals, but Mukesh says none of them encouraged it. 'The past was not a place that we wanted to revisit. We just wanted to forget what he had told my father and move on in life.' Brigadier Naser's confession might have broken Brigadier Khetarpal's heart but when he was interviewed about it by India Today, he appeared calm and composed. There was no rancour for Naser. 'I'm an old soldier, I know the feeling. It's a will to dominate on the field,' he said. 'Naser is a soldier, and he was doing his duty towards his country.'

16 December 1971 Battle of Basantar

On the battlefield of Bara Pind, 40 km into Pakistan, 2nd Lieutenant Arun Khetarpal is crouched inside the cramped interiors of 'Famagusta', his Centurion tank which is named after a port in Cyprus. He is watching the enemy tanks in front of him. Most of them are wrecked and burning, the flames filling the sky with

billowing grey smoke. The dead, the dying, the wounded are lost in the screams of shells. Ten Pakistani tanks have been destroyed, of which Famagusta has smashed four. However, it too has been hit and is now on fire. Arun knows this. He has switched off the radio set because he is being asked to pull back. His gun is still firing. He knows changing his position will give the enemy an opening. He will not let that happen.

Tank driver Prayag Singh is pleading, 'Sahab, let's move back and douse the flames.' Khetarpal's face is as dark as the grey smoke emerging from the carcasses of Pakistani Pattons burning furiously on the battlefield. 'No!' he says, his voice cold and firm. 'We will not pull back an inch.' In his dark dungarees, gunner Nathu Singh takes position once again. In front of him the air is dark with fumes. Mingled with the heat from the flaming tanks is the stench of burning flesh. Right behind him stands his tall and handsome young commander, dark stubble covering his gaunt face. He is shouting: 'On tank, Nathu.' Nathu Singh aims and fires. Arun is trying to judge the trajectory of the shot. He will know if it has hit home because the moment a tank is hit, the Pakistanis raise their guns and run out. Their religion forbids them a death by burning. A vein is throbbing madly in Arun's neck. If he manages to get this one, his tally will be five. At that moment, the Pakistani Patton tank he has targeted fires back too.

There is a deadly whistling sound as a shell shoots in through the cupola of Arun's tank. The massive Centurion shudders. The loader's head is sliced off in a split second and Arun doesn't realise that the same shell has ripped his stomach. He is surprised when the confined interior of the tank fills with the acrid stench of burning flesh. By then the shell has smashed into his thigh. It has shattered the bone and bent his leg at an angle that traps it under the seat of his tank. Bleeding profusely and in intense pain, all he can whisper hoarsely to Nathu, who has managed to exit the tank and is trying to pull him out, is: 'I won't be able to do it.' With that, he closes his eyes for the last time. The time is around 1015 hours. Arun Khetarpal, breathing his last, is only twenty-one.

Endnotes

¹ Fight like a tiger Arun, do not come back like a coward.

² They are very good people. They are looking after me very well.

³ The weather is good brigadier sir, God Willing should we sit for some time in the garden.

⁴ Why not, I will be leaving early in the morning tomorrow and will not get an opportunity to chat with you thereafter.

⁵ I have a confession to make brigadier sir.

⁶ Do tell son, I am listening.

⁷ Your officer fought very well. I hope he was not injured?

⁸ Our officer has been martyred.

