

# **Award of the Macgregor Memorial Medal to Colonel Narinder Kumar, PVSM, KC, AVSM (Retd)\* Squadron Leader Rana TS Chhina (Retd)\*\***

In the Nineteenth century, Great Britain and Tsarist Russia were the two major power blocs that influenced world affairs. In 1885, the Panjdeh Incident or Panjdeh Scare, rekindled British fears of a Russian threat to their Indian Empire through Afghanistan.<sup>1</sup> Conflicting Russian and British interests in Central and South Asia for years had been the cause of a virtual cold war, known euphemistically as 'The Great Game'; and the Panjdeh Incident came close to triggering full-scale armed conflict between the two powers. Following the incident, the Anglo-Russian Boundary Commission was established to delineate the northern frontier of Afghanistan.

One of the aspects that troubled the authorities in India was the lack of reliable information about the vast tracts of uncharted territory that lay along the remote and inaccessible frontiers of their Indian Empire. The person who devoted his energies to filling this gap in his capacity as QMG and originator of the Military Intelligence set-up in India, was Major General Sir Charles Metcalfe MacGregor, KCB, CSI, CIE, who founded the United Service Institution of India in 1870. Therefore, shortly after he passed away in February 1887, the USI Council instituted the MacGregor Memorial Medal (MMM) in May 1887 to commemorate his memory.

The criteria for award of the MMM were laid out at a meeting held on 03 July 1888 at Shimla, presided over by the C-in-C General Sir FS Roberts, with the Earl of Dufferin, the Viceroy, being present as Chief Guest.

Initially, the award was to be given only for significant military reconnaissance or journey of exploration or survey in remote areas of India, or in countries bordering, or under the jurisdiction of India, which produced new information of value for the defence of India. The award was usually of a silver medal, but a gold medal could be awarded in place of a silver medal or in addition to it, for specially valuable work. During the period of the British Raj, the MacGregor Medal became the de facto award of 'the Great Game' and among its recipients were names such as Sir Francis Younghusband (1890) and Major General Orde Wingate (1943). The first Indian soldier to get the award was Havildar (later Subedar, IOM) Ramzan Khan, 3rd Sikh Infantry, PFF (1891).

Subsequently, as opportunities for journeys of reconnaissance or exploration declined, on 22 October 1986 the USI Council expanded the scope to include mountain/desert expeditions, river rafting, world cruises, polar expeditions, running/trekking across the Himalayas and adventure flights amongst the eligibility criteria. First priority, however, was to continue with military reconnaissance. This decision regarding expanded scope was again confirmed by the Council in its meetings held on 22/23 Dec 1994 and 11 December 1997.

Personnel of the Armed Forces, Territorial Army, Reserve Force, Assam Rifles, and Militias are eligible for the awards. Recommendations are received by USI through the Joint Planning Committee. However, for non military reconnaissance these can also be sent directly to USI. The award is decided by the USI Council.

So far 117 medals have been awarded - 7 gold medals to officers, 62 standard size silver medals to officers including 5 JCOS (one officer winning it twice in 1938 and 1946), and 48 reduced size silver medals to soldiers. The last medal to a soldier was awarded in 1944 and to an officer in 1997 (Investiture in 2001). Thirteen Indian Officers and a JCO have won the medal since Independence. These are: Maj ZC Bakshi (1949), Col IC Katoch (1951), Capt MS Jarg (1956), 2 Lt IB Goel (1956), Capt V Badhwar (1957), Capt SL Tugnait (1959), Brig ML Whig (1969), Maj Prem Chand (1970), Col CS Nugyal (1971), Capt Ravindra Misra (1972), Sub Bel Bahadur Pun (1972), Sqn Ldr RK Makkar (1986), Flt Lt Rana TS Chhina (1986) and Lt Col NJ Korgaonkar, SM (1997).

The obverse side of the medal has the effigy of Major Gen Sir Charles Metcalfe MacGregor, the reverse side depicts figures of Army personnel belonging to various races. The ribbon of the medal is composed of the colours of the Macgregor Tartan. The medal may be worn around the neck on uniform on ceremonial parades prescribed by the respective services.

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

*Down to Gehanna (Jahannum) or up to the Throne,*

*He travels the fastest who travels alone.*

The sentiment epitomises the spirit that infused most recipients of this unique award. They usually had a love of the outdoors and exulted in the wide open spaces in the deserts or mountains along India's vast and remote frontiers. None, perhaps better epitomised this spirit of adventure than the present recipient of the award, Colonel Narinder Kumar, PVSM, KC, AVSM (Retd) of the Kumaon Regiment.

Colonel Narinder Kumar was born on 8 December 1933 in Rawalpindi. He was the first Indian apart from Tenzing Norgay to cross 28,300 ft (8500 mtrs); only eight men in the world had then climbed higher. In 1965 he handled the logistics for India's first successful expedition to Everest, which placed nine men on the Summit, then a

record. He led the first successful Indian expedition to Nanda Devi, then the highest mountain in India and Chomolhari, highest in Bhutan.

In 1931, a German attempted Kanchenjunga from Northeast Spur: they reached the height of 25000 ft. The British Alpine Journal described the German attempt as a feat without a parallel in mountaineering history. It was awarded special gold medal at Los Angeles Olympics. Colonel Narinder Kumar's team succeeded in reaching the Summit of Kanchenjunga (28,208 ft, 8548 mtrs) from this difficult and dangerous route. This achievement was described by American, Japanese and Swiss Alpine Journals as "One of the greatest achievement in Mountaineering history...". The Himalayan Journal described it as "... more notable than that of Everest".

He was the first one to cross Siachen from snout to the source. He led the summit team to Sia Kangri (24, 350 ft, 7379 mtrs). At the age of 46 his team climbed Saltoro Kangri (25,400 ft), the highest in Eastern Karakorams. He was Principal, National Ski School and led the Ski Trishul Expedition in 1976, which skied down from 23,360 ft. to the Base Camp at 15,500 ft.

He has written six books on Mountaineering, Skiing and Rafting. In 1983 Films Division Government of India selected him, along with Acharya Vinoba Bhave and Nargis Dutt, to make a film on their lives. He has been awarded the Padma Shri, Arjuna Award and Indian Mountaineering Federation's Gold Medal in addition to Army decorations like PVSM, Kirti Chakra, AVSM. At present he is Vice President of the Indian Olympic Association and Managing Director of Mercury Himalayan Explorations, an adventure travel company, was declared by Government of India Tourism Department, as "most innovative adventure company of the year 2004".

The USI Council approved the award of the MMM to Colonel Narinder Kumar for valuable reconnaissances. The achievements of Colonel Narinder Kumar that led to this award are as recorded follows:

(a) IC 6729 Colonel Narinder Kumar, PVSM, KC, AVSM (Retd) led multiple expeditions in the Siachen Area between 1978 and 1981 and gained highly valuable terrain and enemy information which has been instrumental in safe guarding our borders in the Siachen Glacier.

(b) The expeditions were carried out in uncharted territory under extremely harsh weather conditions with minimal equipment and administrative support and at 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.

(c) For his stellar contribution in carrying out multiple expeditions and operational reconnaissance in remote and uncharted border territory under extremely hazardous terrain and climate conditions, Colonel Narinder Kumar, PVSM, KC, AVSM (Retd) is awarded the MacGregor Memorial Medal.

\*A brief on the Award of the MacGregor Memorial Medal and Presentation to Colonel Narinder Kumar, PVSM, KC, AVSM (Retd) at USI on 25 Jun 2010. He is a Fellow of Royal Geographical Society.

\*\* Squadron Leader RTS Chinna (Retd) is Secretary, Centre for Armed Forces Historical Research at USI. He himself is a recipient of the MacGregor Memorial Medal for the year 1986.

Journal of the United Service Institution of India, Vol. CXL, No. 580, April-June 2010.