

A Military Colossus: Major Parkash Singh, Victoria Cross (VC)

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The first Arakan campaign was fought in the Mayu Peninsula, Burma (now Myanmar), during World War II between the Japanese and British-Indian forces. It was a bitterly fought, bloody campaign between two formidable Armies; neither of which were willing to renege on their by now well established professionalism and focus on winning at all costs or give an inch of territory or tactical advantage to the other. This recall is about the amazing feat of arms of an Indian Non-Commissioned Officer (NCO) who, by his deeds, set unprecedented standards of bravery and courage under fire that earned him the award of the first Victoria Cross (VC) that was earned in Burma.

Parkash Singh was born on March 31, 1913. He enlisted in the Indian Army in 1936 and joined service on the active and dangerous North-West Frontier of India. During World War II, he saw action in the winter Arakan campaign of 1942-43; termed in retrospect as the bloodiest ever in the Far East. In January 1943, the Indian 14 Division was trapped between the sea and the jungle at Donbaik on the Mayu Peninsula. Havaldar Parkash Singh, 3/8 Punjab Regiment, was the second-in-command of a Bren-gun carrier platoon. He risked his life at Donbaik Beach on several occasions to rescue his comrades and get them out alive under very heavy enemy fire. On January 06, 1943, he drove his carrier forward and rescued the crews of two other disabled carriers. Again, on January 19, 1943, in the same area, he rescued the crews of two more carriers which had been put out of action by an enemy anti-tank gun. He then went out yet again and brought to safety another disabled carrier containing two seriously wounded men, thus, saving them from certain death. He was awarded the Victoria Cross for these widely separated, repeated acts of sterling and selfless courage under murderous fire; a second award (a rarest of rare honour) having been considered a distinct possibility to honour this amazing NCO's grit and raw courage by his British Commanding Officer (CO). His citation, as published in *The Official London Gazette* of May 13, 1943 read:

Parkash Singh earned the VC for repeated acts of selfless courage and bravery.

On the 6th January, 1943, at Donbaik, Mayu Peninsula, Burma, when two Carriers had been put out of action, Havaldar Parkash Singh drove forward in his own Carrier and rescued the two crews under very heavy fire. At the time, the crews of the disabled Carriers had expended their ammunition and the enemy was rushing the two disabled Carriers on foot. This NCO's timely and courageous action, entirely on his own initiative, saved the lives of the crews and their weapons. On the 19th January, 1943, in the same area, three Carriers were put out of action by an enemy anti-tank gun and lay on the open beach covered by enemy anti-tank and machine-gun fire. One of these Carriers was carrying the survivors of another Carrier in addition to its own crew. Havaldar Parkash Singh, on seeing what had happened, went out from a safe position in his own Carrier, and with complete disregard for his own personal safety, rescued the combined crews from one disabled Carrier, together with the weapons from the Carrier. Having brought the crews to safety, he again went out on the open beach in his Carrier, still under very heavy anti-tank and machine-gun fire and with the utmost disregard for his personal safety, dismounted and

connected a towing chain on to a disabled Carrier containing two wounded men. Still under fire, he directed the towing of the disabled Carrier from under enemy fire to a place of safety. Havaldar Parkash Singh's very gallant action, entirely on his own initiative, was an inspiration to all ranks both British and Indian.



Major Parkash Singh's medals on display at the Imperial War Museum, London.

The VC is the fourth medal in the line-up from the left.

The officer's family has loaned the medals for public display.

The VC was introduced on January 29, 1856, by Queen Victoria, to reward acts of valour during the Crimean War. It is Britain's highest and most prestigious award which is given to British and Commonwealth forces personnel across gender... *"For most conspicuous bravery or some daring or pre-eminent act of valour or self-sacrifice, in the presence of the enemy"*. Since its inception, the medal has been awarded 1,356 times to 1,353 individual recipients. The Original Royal Warrant states that the Victoria Cross "shall consist of a Maltese cross of bronze". Nonetheless, it has always been a pattée (a cross with triangular shaped arms), the discrepancy with the Royal Warrant having never been corrected. The colour of the ribbon is crimson. Indian troops became eligible for the award in 1911. Thirty Indian soldiers were awarded the VC: 11 in World War 1 and 19 in World War II. The Indian Army was 2.5 million (25 lakh) strong when the Great War ended, with 87,000 Indian soldiers dying during it. These stark statistics underscore the great respect that should be attributed to the 30 bravest-of-brave Indian soldiers who earned the VC during its tenancy.

Havaldar Parkash received his VC from the Viceroy of India, Lord Linlithgow, at Delhi in July 1943. He was 29 years old when he got his VC. By dint of his hard work, ability and potential to rise in the rank hierarchy, this humble, unassuming but focussed soldier rose to the rank of Major, being seconded to 16 SIKH on partition (8th Punjab Regiment was allotted to Pakistan, later

becoming the Baluch Regiment). His daughter, Alep, recalls with pride how happily married her father and mother were, throughout their lives. Humble, socially well adjusted and loving to a fault, Maj Parkash kept his wife and his four daughters uppermost in his priorities. Post retirement, he became a leading potato farmer in the Jalandhar area, and counted prominent citizens and intellectuals amongst his close friends; the famous writer Khushwant Singh being amongst them. He also gained a deserving reputation as a philanthropist who went out of his way to help the needy and dispossessed. In ruddy health for most of his life, Maj Parkash died of heart failure that developed inexplicably from a badly treated dental infection, leading to cardiac complications. He died on March 23, 1991. He was 72.

Alep recalls that when asked what his greatest assets in life were, he would proudly point towards his daughters. He spared no expense in educating them in the UK, letting them follow their chosen paths in their professional and personal lives. All this, she said, was captured in a seven episode, moving documentary film titled *For Valour* commissioned on Maj Parkash Singh and his family by Thames Television. It was sensitively directed by the late John Percival and aired at prime time on Britain's popular TV Channel 4 in July 1985, to critical and popular acclaim. Alep recalls that the TV crew shot part of the film in India. The 1984 riots, however, put paid to its completion in India and the balance shooting was done in London, with the film company graciously hosting the Parkash family there. She also recalls the huge public respect that her father and family commanded because of his VC. The award was, and continues to be, their passport to Britain's pedigreed social circles, from the Buckingham Palace downwards. War heroes of the first level (as also their dependants) command great official, social and public respect and interest in the UK. Alep recalls that one of Britain's leading newspapers, *The Guardian*, wrote a lead story on her father, shortly before he died.

Mrs Raminder Parkash Singh continued her husband's enviable legacy in her elegant and warm-hearted manner for the 19 years that she outlived her husband. Ms Alep recalls with affection her mother's droll, light-hearted outlook; her matter-of-fact way of looking at life and her great relationship with her daughters, treating them as friends from the moment they stepped into adolescence.

In India, we often hear of tales of iconic heroes that make for grim and soul wrenching reading. This is so because, unlike Britain, we do not respect our heroes the way we should. We pay them token regard after the short-lived

Institutional weakness of not respecting war heroes needs a monumental change.

adrenalin driven recognition of their feat; a happening that gets reduced to gross neglect within years if not months of the deed having been recognised or honoured. We, thus, recall their deeds fitfully; often with bad grace, as if performing an unpleasant, wearisome duty. We need to correct this institutional weakness in our national psyche and outlook.

In Maj Parkash Singh, VC, we have an example worth emulating of a man who dared death several times to give the invaluable gift of life to his stricken, wounded colleagues. For them, he faced *“fearful odds, for the ashes of his fathers and the temples of his gods.”* Beyond his deathless bravery, he also lived an impeccable personal life, leaving a legacy that coming generations of soldiers and citizens alike can indeed be very proud of. Soldiers like him deserve to be respected and lauded but in India this, regrettably, is not the norm; quite the reverse is; and therein lies a tale that needs serious review and a far happier ending.

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