

# Prem Bhagat: A Soldier's General

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**GERALD NAPIER**



Premindra Singh Bhagat, hereinafter referred to as 'Prem', was the product of a privileged Indian background. His father was an executive engineer in the United Provinces. Although they were Sikhs from the Punjab, Prem and his two older brothers were launched into a school career at the Royal Indian Military College (RIMC) whose ethos and structure had its origins in the British public school system. The RIMC was essentially a feeder for the Indian Military Academy (IMA) to which all three brothers duly went. Until the IMA was opened in 1932, the only route for an Indian to a King's Commission in the Indian Army was through the Royal Military College at Sandhurst which did not offer the appropriate training for officers destined for the Sappers or Gunners. At school, Prem was above average academically and showed signs of leadership but with a restless temperament. He was following in the footsteps of two elder brothers, the oldest of whom, NS Bhagat (Tony), had been outstanding in almost every field.

It was much the same story at the IMA from which Prem followed Tony into the Royal Bombay Sappers and Miners, forerunner of the present Bombay Engineer Group, gaining his commission two months before the outbreak of war. His base for the next 14 months was Poona, headquarters of the Bombay Sappers and destined to become Prem's spiritual home: he would spend some 15 years of his life there and it would become his final resting place. He joined 21 Field Company and, in September 1940, embarked for East Africa. He was the only Indian officer in the company. It has often been suggested that his outstanding

performance in the months of action that followed had much to do with the desire of a politically aware Indian officer to prove himself and his race in the eyes of both his British superiors and the Indian soldiers under his command.

5th Indian Division landed in Port Sudan in late October, two brigades strong (9th and 10th), a third (7th) being sent on to reinforce the meagre British force in Egypt, which the Italians had now invaded. It was not until December that, following the first stage of Major-General Richard O'Connor's brilliant desert campaign, Wavell was able to spare any troops to make offensive action into Abyssinia a feasible proposition. Meanwhile, General Piatt turned his attention to the possibility of recapturing Gallabat using Brigadier Bill Slim's 10th Brigade with 21 Field Company (OC, Major GEH Philbrick) under command. Gallabat lay on the southernmost of the two possible routes into the country from the Sudan. Piatt's main thrust was eventually to follow the northern route, from Kassala towards Asmara and so to the Red Sea port of Massawa, with diversionary operations around Gallabat, but at this stage, the northern route was far too strongly held.

Prem's first test came on November 05, when 3/18 Royal Garhwal Rifles under Lieutenant-Colonel SE Tayler advanced on Gallabat. The incident is recorded in the *History of The Royal Bombay Sappers and Miners 1939-47*. Lieutenant Patterson, the section commander, was mortally wounded when his carrier hit a mine. Second Lieutenant Bhagat, his section officer, took over command of the section. The enemy was well dug in and the final assault was held up by intense defensive fire and some troops started to retreat, but one Garhwal company and the Sapper section hung on. Lieutenant Colonel Tayler, standing firm where he could be seen by his men, although vulnerable to enemy fire, stopped the rot. He was joined by Second Lieutenant Bhagat who saw that Tayler's arm had been wounded by shrapnel and reached out to help him, but the Colonel ordered him to stay put and not let the men know that he (Tayler) had been wounded. He kept standing until order was restored and only then did he seek first aid. Bhagat, in his own words, was "... stunned with such cool bravery and total dedication." It, undoubtedly, influenced Bhagat's subsequent actions.

Although the fort was captured, further advance across the gorge known as the Boundary Khor to the next occupied position on the route, the village of Metemma, proved impossible; indeed, such was the intensity of the counter-attacks and sustained bombing that casualties began to mount and, with no possibility of digging in the rocky ground, the Gallabat ridge itself became untenable. A withdrawal to the fort's outpost line took place on the evening of

November 07, after the Sappers had destroyed as many of the usable buildings and stores as they could. Next day, the enemy, closely following up, had to be delayed at a culvert bottleneck. Two derelict tanks packed with explosives were fired but only one detonated, leaving the culvert partly intact. Under small arms fire and air strafing, Second Lieutenant Bhagat broke cover to reignite the failed charge and completed the destruction of the culvert. Major Philbrick witnessed this incident and recommended him for an Military Cross (MC), but it seems that it was subsequently revised to a Mention-in-Despatches which was notified after Second Lieutenant Bhagat's immediate Victoria Cross (VC) award two months later.

10th Brigade was now relieved by 9th Brigade (Brigadier AGOM Mayne) but 21 Field Company remained in the area. As well as this dramatic work in support of their brigades in the field, the Sappers had their normal tasks of route maintenance and development to cope with and the ever-present problem of water supply. The latter depended on their either finding existing wells or digging new ones after first locating sources by dowsing. But on the operational side, Prem again came to notice in December when he accompanied a raid by the 3rd Frontier Force Regiment on an enemy airfield near Metemma. Much damage was done and [he] ... distinguished himself in carrying out the demolitions regardless of personal danger. In mid-January, General Piatt, now reinforced by 4th Indian Division and a third infantry brigade in 5th Division, launched his invasion of Eritrea. This began the series of intense and mostly bitterly fought operations that took Piatt's force through the massive escarpment close to the town of Keren and eventually to Massawa. Although this was Piatt's main axis of advance he had ordered 9th Brigade to maintain the pressure on the enemy at Gallabat with the intention of deceiving them into thinking that this might be the main point of attack. Throughout December and early January, the Italians hung on stubbornly but on January 30, conforming to the withdrawal of their force on the Massawa route, they vacated Gallabat and its twin, Metemma. 3/12 Frontier Rifles, with a detachment of 21 Field Company under Prem, were despatched in pursuit. The route was heavily mined and it was now that Prem was to rise to the occasion with a display of such sustained gallantry that he was to earn the first VC of the war to be won by an Indian Commissioned Officer. As the citation records, for four days, he never let up while clearing the way through 15 minefields over a distance of 55 miles.

On two occasions, when his carrier was blown up with casualties to others, and on a third occasion when ambushed and under close enemy fire, he himself carried straight on with his task. He refused relief when worn out with strain and fatigue and with one eardrum punctured by an explosion, on the grounds that he

was now better qualified to continue his task to the end. His coolness, persistence over a period of 96 hours, and gallantry, not only in battle, but throughout the long period when the safety of the column and the speed at which it could advance were dependent on his personal efforts, were of the highest order. Eventually, the column commander ordered Prem back for medical treatment and, after completing a successful pursuit raid, the column returned to Gallabat.

Sappers Balakrishna and Ananda Padalkar, who were with Prem, were awarded the Indian Distinguished Service Medal (IDSM) and a *Jangi Inam* (a traditional reward in kind for distinguished service, normally a plot of land), respectively. In February, 21 Field Company moved with 9th Brigade, and Prem, now restored to fitness albeit with permanent damage to his ears, arrived back in March, in time to take part in the battle for Keren. It took 53 days and many casualties, including the death in action of Lieutenant-Colonel Tayler whom Prem had admired so much, before Keren fell on March 27. Massawa was then entered on April 08. Although Piatt's objectives in Eritrea had been effectively accomplished by early April, there was still some way to go before the Italians were ejected from East Africa. While Piatt was struggling in the Keren gorge, Lieutenant-General Alan Cunningham was advancing from Kenya into Italian Somaliland. Mogadishu fell on February 25 and by mid-March, Nigerian troops had crossed the Ogaden desert and entered Jijiga. Cunningham's force then closed in on Addis Ababa from the east and south as the Italians evacuated the city in order to concentrate against Piatt's force in northern Abyssinia. There they held out in the mountain stronghold of Amba Alagi until Cunningham's force reached them from the south and further resistance became impracticable. The war in East Africa was still not over, however – it was to take another eight months and cost more casualties than had been incurred to date finally to evict the Italians from East Africa.

As to Premindra Singh Bhagat, his great achievement was not gazetted until June 1941. In the same month, he was presented with the ribbon of his VC by General Wavell at a victory parade in Asmara. His company embarked at Massawa to continue their war in the Mediterranean area, not returning to India until well after the end of the war. Prem himself returned to India to a hero's welcome. He was lionised and feted by everybody. The laurels that he had won stood for far more than recognition of an act of rare courage. To his family, friends, and indeed, to the people of India, it meant that a 'native' son of the soil was second to none. He was invited to speak to the nation over All India Radio and the talk was billed "Our Hero". To the government in power, an alien government, he was

useful as a means of living propaganda in the recruitment drive for more troops for the war effort in the new critical theatre of war: Southeast Asia.

Two months after Prem had been presented with his VC, he married Mohini Bhandari, daughter of a Colonel in the Indian Medical Service. He remained in India almost to the end of the war, where he raised a new company, 484 Field Company, at Dighi near Kirkee. In his time with 484 Field Company, he developed the military personality that characterised his highly successful career in the post-Independence Indian Army. Two British officers serving under his command at the time testified to his strong personality (“the adjective ‘charismatic’ could have been invented to describe his leadership”). Prem was selected to attend the last war-time Staff College course at Camberley. He stayed nearly two years in England and while still there, wrote the first of his books, *My Land Divided*, reflecting his hope for a reconciliation between the religious groupings: “What greatness and power there is in store for us, the four hundred million people of India, if only we unite, yet we keep apart.”

Prem returned to India in time for Independence and its terrible immediate aftermath. He was appointed Commander Royal Indian Engineers in 4th Infantry Division, East Punjab Area, where they were in the thick of controlling the vast movements of population, later estimated at some 8.5 million, across the new border. The division was soon involved in the operations in Jammu and Kashmir to evict incursions of Pakistanis and stabilise the border area. In July 1948, Prem had a brief eight-month tour as GSOL at the headquarters of the Armed Forces Academy at Dehra Dun and was then posted as commandant of what was eventually to be, after India became a republic in November 1949, the Bombay Engineer Group and Centre, dropping its former Royal title. It was a seminal time both for the Group and for Prem during which he set the standards of training and established permanent traditions for the Bombay Sappers. He himself retained immense pride in his Bombay Sapper origins and a fierce loyalty for the corps.

However, his future lay in the wider Army and in March 1957, he was appointed to command 165 Infantry Brigade at Ramgarh. The steps in the rest of his career can be summarised: 1959, Director of Military Intelligence (DMI); 1961, National Defence College Course; 1962, Commandant, Indian Military Academy; 1963, Chief of Staff to Army Commander Eastern Command; 1964, GOC 9th Mountain Division; 1966, Commander XI Corps, Western Command; 1970, Army Commander, Central Command; 1972, Army Commander Northern Command; 1974, retirement from the Army, appointed Chairman, Damodar Valley Corporation.

During his time in Central Command in the 1970s, Prem was presented with a major Sapper challenge when the river Gomti flooded near Lucknow. His personal involvement in this affair and the energy with which he marshalled all available resources substantially contributed to the prevention of total disaster. For this work, he was awarded the Param Vashist Seva Medal, the highest military decoration for distinguished service outside the battlefield. When Prem left Central Command to take over the newly created Northern Command, many people thought that would be only a short tour, and that he would be appointed to the ultimate prize, Army Chief. It was not to be. For whatever reason, following an inevitably political shuffling of the top appointments, he was offered nothing after Northern Command. Instead, he was appointed to head the Damodar Valley Corporation. The corporation had been set up by Nehru as a showpiece development project in Bihar and West Bengal and had become the victim of paralysing bureaucracy and mismanagement. Prem, still with a few months to run as a serving General and with the moral authority that carried, swept in with all ceremony in July 1974. Within months he had, through the application of the principles of personal example, delegation of responsibility and trust of subordinates, turned the whole outlook of the organisation around and positive results were being obtained. Tragically, after barely a year in the job, he contracted some virulent fever and died in the Calcutta military hospital on May 23, 1975, at the age of 56. The funeral was held in Calcutta and among the rituals that took place after his death was, extraordinarily, a Requiem Mass held by Mother Teresa's Missionaries of Charity. The ashes were taken to Poona and ceremonially consigned to the river Moola.

**Editor's Note**

182 VCs were awarded for valiant acts of bravery during World War II. Out of the three VCs awarded to the Sappers, only one VC was for awarded for valour in a specifically Sapper role and it was awarded to Second Lieutenant PS Bhagat.

This article has been extracted from the book, *The Sapper VCs* written by Colonel Gerald Napier (Retd) of the Royal Engineers. It is published in *Scholar Warrior* with the kind permission of the author.