



## **The Victoria Cross: A Love Story**

*Ashali Varma*

Pearson Publisher

243 pages, Rs 375

Review by Vivek Verma

### **Saga of Love: Moving Tribute to a Legend**

Ashali Varma is the daughter of India's legendary soldier Lieutenant General Prem Bhagat, PVSM, VC and his wife Mohini. 'The Victoria Cross – A Love Story' is a moving tribute by a daughter to her parents and provides a rare glimpse and insight into the lives of her parents. It is a poignant love story, spanning six decades, from across the battlefields in Africa during World War II, to India during independence and beyond. The fortitude, love and reverence displayed by the lady in spreading her husband's legendary epitome, despite her bout with painful terminal cancer, unflinchingly prove that 'behind every successful man is a woman'.

The author has beautifully captured the moments of love and courage throughout the narrative. The story starts with the gaiety and fun of cantonment life in 1940 at Poona where Prem, as a young officer is seen courting Mohini to the battlefields in Africa and Italy during World War II which was more of a "camping holiday rather than a war". He returned home a hero, winner of Britain's highest award for gallantry – The Victoria Cross, for his sheer cold courage but thought lightly of it. He valued far more obtaining Mohini's hand in marriage.

Ashali's account beautifully portrays General Bhagat's feeling for an independent India and the pangs of partition. It outlines vividly the journey of Prem and Mohini, carving out a niche together, whether as a Commandant of Bombay Sappers, Commander of an Infantry Brigade, Corps Commander, Army Commander or as Chairman of the Damodar Valley Corporation (DVC). The book enchantingly explores all forms of love; love for the country, for the men under command and love for the family and brings out clearly why Prem was considered a Soldier's General and why the legend of Prem Bhagat will live on.

Personnel anecdotes such as the construction of a Bailey bridge in two days to keep the artery to Jammu and Kashmir open during the entire 1948 campaign or the diversion of military hardware needed by Indian Army for 1948 operations from going to Pakistan including orchestrated derailment of trains and subsequent ordering of Court of Inquiry enrich and enliven the account.

Other personal accounts are of the General confiding in his daughter the sceptic attitude of Jawaharlal Nehru towards him and General Thimmaya, triggered largely by the Prime Minister's fear that the General would stage a coup, not really understanding the apolitical nature of the Army and the fact that such an act was abhorrent and deplorable to a soldier. Also, the General's account of the September 1959 "Intelligence Appreciation of Situation" against China when he was Director, Military Intelligence, "The Henderson Brooks/ Bhagat Report" on the 1962 Sino-Indian conflict and finally his supersession – are fascinating reads and make history come alive. His brief stint as Chairman of DVC was illustrative of a man with a mission, showing up his deep sense of responsibility and belongingness to the organisation and people. A great leader indeed!

The chapter, 'Mohini: Life after Prem' is a touching tale of a mother and a wife. The journey of 30 years has been traversed in one small chapter but it brings to life the character and charisma of the lady. She was wedded to 'olive green' and devoted herself towards the rehabilitation and welfare of ex-servicemen and war widows.

'The Victoria Cross – A Love Story' is indeed a fascinating memoir written by Ashali Varma. It is a well researched book written with candour and verve. The narration is touching and makes fascinating reading. In the words of Jug Suraiya, this is "indeed a story of love, lovingly told". This memoir will provide inspiration to the new generation and is a must read for all personnel of India's Armed Forces and their families. It must also be read by all those who are involved in nation building and policy making as well as academics and scholars.

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