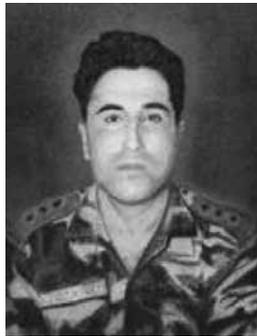


Vikram Batra, PVC

IAN CARDOZO



The Param Vir Chakra is India's highest award for courage in battle. Only an act of the most conspicuous bravery, daring, valour or self-sacrifice in the face of the enemy merits this award. Since its institution on January 26, 1950, only 21 persons have been given this award. Vikram Batra is one of them.

This is His Story

Vikram Batra was awarded the Param Vir Chakra for his outstanding contribution to the Kargil War of 1999. This war was fought at heights ranging from 15,000 to 19,000 feet, in a rarified de-oxygenated atmosphere. The troops had to scale near perpendicular walls, encumbered with heavy loads of arms and ammunition. The glaciated terrain was devoid of cover from the devastating fire from an enemy located at dominating heights. At times, the slopes were so vertical that their access required the use of ropes. The defending Pakistani soldiers were confident that they could beat back any attack by our soldiers, so great was their tactical advantage.

They, however, did not reckon with one factor in the Indian armoury: 'Courage'! Courage of the ill equipped infantryman whose bravery in battle must never be forgotten.

The media responded magnificently by taking frontline battles into every Indian home, thereby boosting the morale of the troops and encouraging them to even greater feats of daring. Media stories highlighted the fact that in no other war had young officers shouldered responsibilities well beyond their years. *However, from amongst them all, the one who captured the imagination of the public was young Vikram Batra.* His bold courage and the daredevil risks that he took in mission after mission filled the public with wonder and awe. He seemed to be invincible; and every time he sallied forth to meet new challenges and dangers, people prayed for his safe return. *His code name 'Sher Shah' soon became his nickname and even the enemy soldiers came to know of it.*

Vikram was commissioned as an officer of the Indian Army on December 6, 1997. On that day, he repeated the Chetwode Motto, that he would place the safety, honour and welfare of his country above all else, that he would place the safety honour and welfare of his soldiers next and that his own safety would be his last priority. It was by this maxim that Vikram Batra lived and behaved in peace and fought and died in war.

As young boys, Vikram and his twin brother Vishal used to watch the Param Vir Chakra televised series. These stories of courage ignited a fire in him that would never get quenched. However, in their wildest dreams neither Vikram nor Vishal ever dreamt that one day Vikram would win the coveted Param Vir Chakra.

Vikram and his twin Vishal were born in 1974 to Girdhari Lal Batra and Kamal Kanta in the town of Palampur that nestles in the shadow of the Dhauladhar mountains. The boys were nicknamed 'Luv' and 'Kush' but the Sanskrit meaning of the word Vikram means an abundance of bravery—a name that had a prophetic meaning.

Every night, Vikram would ask his father to tell him a story before going to sleep. His father, being a patriotic person, would tell the twins stories of India's great revolutionaries and freedom fighters. These stories of valour, patriotism and self-sacrifice became strongly imprinted in the hearts and minds of the twins.

Even while in school, Vikram's attitude and behaviour indicated his bold and fearless nature. One day, while going to school, the door of the school bus flew open and a young girl fell out of the bus. Realising that she could be run over by another bus, Vikram jumped out of the moving bus and pulled the little girl to safety.

In college, Vikram was adjudged as the best National Cadet Corps (NCC) Air Wing cadet in the North Zone and was selected to take part in the Republic Day Parade in Delhi in 1994. On his return, he told his parents that he wanted to join the Army. He prepared hard for the Combined Defence Services Examination and got through at the first attempt.

In July 1996, Vikram joined the Indian Military Academy and was commissioned as an officer of the Indian Army in the 13th Jammu and Kashmir Rifles (JAK RIF) which at that time was located at Sopore in the Kashmir Valley. After completing its tenure in the Valley, the unit was posted to Shahjahanpur and the advance party left for the new location under the second-in-command.

At that time, the Indian and Pakistani Prime Ministers were negotiating a peace settlement. However, unknown to India, the Pakistan Army, was at the same time, secretly pushing its forces across the Line of Control (LoC) and had occupied dominating locations along the Kargil hills. By early March, Pakistan had infiltrated troops from the Northern Light Infantry and commandos from the Special Forces Group and occupied large areas 4-8 km, across the LoC. Having consolidated their positions, the Pakistanis effectively dominated the Srinagar–Leh highway. It was part of their strategy to cut off Ladakh from the rest of Jammu and Kashmir.

The advance party of 13 JAK RIF was recalled from Shahjahanpur and the battalion was ordered to move to Dras on June 6. On June 14, the Brigade Commander decided to use 13 JAK RIF for the capture of Point 5140.

Point 5140 was the highest peak and an extension of the Tololing Ridge. From here, the Pakistanis had brought down an Indian helicopter with a Stinger missile. Unless Point 5140 was captured quickly, Indian helicopters could not fly in that area.

Lt Col Yogesh Joshi, briefed Capt Vikram Batra and Lt Sanjeev Jamwal for the capture of Point 5140. 'Delta' Company under Vikram Batra and 'Bravo' Company under Sanjeev Jamwal were to climb for the assault under cover of darkness and the companies were to attack from different directions. Both officers were given a free hand for their plans for attack. The only limitation given was that the feature needed to be captured before 'first light'. Both officers were asked to give their success signals. Jamwal said that his success signal would 'Oh! Yeah, Yeah, Yeah!' the slogan of Hunter squadron, his squadron at the National Defence Academy. Vikram Batra said that his success signal on the radio would be 'Dil Mange More!'

When daylight faded on the evening of June 19, the companies began their climb towards their objectives. They would receive artillery support from the Bofor guns that would attempt to keep the enemy's head down when the companies were approaching their objectives. The objectives had two bunkers on the top and five bunkers on the eastern slope. The enemy seemed to be aware of the movement of our troops and the darkness was punctuated with para flares followed by artillery and machine gun fire against 'Delta' and 'Bravo' Companies.

Capt Batra decided that he would attack his objective on Point 5140 from the rear, which would be an unexpected direction, with a greater chance of success. However, the approach involved a climb that was nearly vertical. By 3:15 am, both companies were close to their objectives and the fire of the artillery guns that were supporting them lifted. As soon as that happened, enemy fire recommenced, making further advance impossible. Both Company Commanders asked for the covering fire to continue till they were 100 metres from their objectives. This was dangerous, as the companies could suffer casualties from their own artillery but the young officers took the risk and the guns obeyed.

While 'Delta' Company was approaching the top, the enemy commander shouted, "Why have you come here Sher Shah? None of you will return alive!" Vikram replied, "Within one hour, we will see who will remain on top!"

Now there was no time to lose. Within an hour, the sun would rise at 4:30 am. They had just one more hour to complete their assault otherwise they would be 'daylighted' in the open and destroyed. Vikram Batra fired three rockets at the enemy bunkers. All three found their mark. Delta Company, with Vikram in the lead assaulted the bunkers and shouting "Jai Durga" fell upon the enemy. Six enemy soldiers were killed and three, while escaping, fell into a deep gorge and the rest ran away. Capt Jamwal announced the capture of his objective with his success signal, 'Oh! Yeah, Yeah, Yeah!'

At 4:35 am, just as the sun was lighting up the mountain tops, Vikram Batra radioed his success with 'Dil Mange More' and hoisted the Indian tricolour on the top of Point 5140. A cheer went up from the personnel of the Brigade Headquarters who were following the progress of the battle on the radio. What was exceptionally good was that the companies suffered no casualties. The capture of Point 5140 turned the tide of the battle in the Dras sector. After its capture, helicopters could land at Tololing top which had by then been captured by 18 Grenadiers.

After the capture of Point 5140, 13 JAK RIF was deinducted from Dras to Ghumri for rest and recuperation. From here, Capt Batra spoke on satellite phone to his parents, telling them of his success and that he was well. He was also able to speak to his girlfriend Dimple at Chandigarh.

From Ghumri, Vikram wrote to his parents:

Dearest Mom and Dad,

I am fine by the grace of God Almighty. I had come down from the top for a few days of rest and recuperation, but again moving up today for another offensive action. So, all set to go.

I had undertaken a very big operation also, in which I got 100% success and it was the biggest success in this sector. I had also received congratulatory calls from the Army Chief and other senior commanders from all over. Was also interviewed on line by the media.

Don't know when I will be moving down again. So, whenever I will get a chance, I will call you up. So, please pray for the success of my next operation....

On June 30, the battalion was moved to the Mushkoh Valley for the capture of Point 4875. It was a feature of strategic importance that dominated a stretch of the National Highway 1A for 30 to 40 km from Dras to Matayan. Effective fire could be brought on this road by an enemy observation post located on Point 4875 and helicopters could not land on the Dras helipad because it was a registered target.

On March 4, the Company Commanders, Maj Gurpreet Singh and Maj Vijay Bhaskar showed their 'O' Groups their objectives and at 8:30 pm the Company Commanders began their climb towards their objective. The night was pitch dark and the gradient was very steep. Covering fire from the Bofor guns commenced at 6:00 pm on July 4. Some 200 metres short of their objective, the companies came under very heavy fire at 4:30 am. The companies responded with their automatics but the enemy fire from Point 4875 was very heavy and the companies were in imminent danger of being 'daylighted'.

The enemy continued to bring very effective fire on the companies as it was daylight now and there was very little cover, except for the rocks and boulders. The Company Commanders spoke to the Commanding Officer (CO), Lt Col Joshi who decided to take control of the situation. He personally fired two Fagot missiles at the enemy bunker from which machine gun fire was emanating. Both were direct hits and the enemy was seen fleeing from the bunker which was holding up the attack.

Maj Gurpreet immediately assaulted the position and by 1:00 pm on July 5, 1999 'A' and 'C' Companies linked up on the objective. However, they realised that only part of Point 4875 had been captured. The enemy position had more bunkers in depth which continued to bring effective fire on the companies. The fire fight continued the whole night and by early morning of July 6, at 4:45 am, 'C' Company reported that it was running out of ammunition. 'B' Company which was in reserve quickly brought up the required ammunition and the fight continued.

On the night of July 6-7, close recce of the enemy position revealed that it had occupied a long and narrow ledge with several *sangars* echeloned one behind the other. Vikram Batra, with 'D' Company, was tasked to clear the position. Vikram was ill with fever and wrapped in a blanket but disregarding his fever, he volunteered to lead the attack. His CO hesitated to let him lead the attack but seeing the criticality of the situation, he allowed him to go. A message was passed to 'A' and 'C' Companies that 'Sher Shah' was on his way up to tackle the enemy position. Suddenly, Vikram was imbued with new energy. His fever vanished and he became a man with a mission.

Vikram spotted the bunker from where the machine gun was holding up the attack. Running from one rock to another, he closed in on the bunker, lobbed a hand grenade into it and destroyed it. Leading from the front, he ran towards the next bunker, and then the next, killing the occupants with his AK-47. At this stage, one of his *jawans* was wounded and calling for help. A Junior Commissioned Officer (JCO) volunteered to bring him back but Vikram pushed him aside saying that he was a married man and he himself would do the job instead. In the process of rescuing the soldier, Vikram was shot in the chest and fell. Enraged at seeing their leader fall, his soldiers charged the position and overran it, killing all the occupants, and Point 4875 was captured. All observation of the road and in the air by helicopters by the enemy was removed.

Capt Vikram Batra had, however, passed away. Many young officers and soldiers had contributed to this victory but the most impressive amongst them all was Capt Vikram Batra. Vikram's body was flown to Palampur where a crowd of over 25,000 had gathered to mourn the death of their young hero. They recalled his prophetic words: "I will either come back after raising the national flag in victory or return wrapped up in it; but I will come back for sure."

Capt Vikram Batra was just 24 years old when he made the supreme sacrifice for his country. He had continuously led from the front, displaying unparalleled courage, commitment and dedication to his task. His success signal,

'Dil Mange More' became his signature and his code name 'Sher Shah' became known to all, including the enemy. His image on TV screens caught the imagination of the people of India and the man in the street mourned his demise when he was killed in battle. His memory, however, will live on in the minds and hearts of the people of India and the message of his life will continue to motivate present and future generations.

Maj Gen **Ian Cardozo** was commissioned into the 5th Gorkha Rifles (FF) in 1958 and has taken part in the Sino-Indian War of 1962 as well as the Indo-Pak Wars of 1965 and 1971. Severely wounded in 1971 in East Pakistan, he overcame the disability of losing a leg and is the first war-disabled officer to be approved for command of an infantry battalion and brigade. He is the author of five books and presently he works for the welfare of the disabled, both military and civilian.