

The First Param Vir: Major Somnath Sharma

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The enemy are only 50 yards from us. We are heavily outnumbered. We are under devastating fire. I shall not withdraw an inch but will fight to our last man and our last round.

These were the last words of independent India's first Param Vir Chakra recipient.

Maj Somnath Sharma, a name which has been permanently associated with the tenacious and crucial defence of the Srinagar airport in 1948, was born on January 31, 1923. The gallant actions of Maj Sharma and his men from 4 KUMAON successfully blunted the attack by the Pakistani raiders and provided the much needed time for the Indian Army to fortify defences around Srinagar, thus, enabling India to prevent Kashmir from falling into the hands of the enemy.

Somnath Sharma was commissioned into the 8th Battalion, 19th Hyderabad Regiment (later 4th Battalion, KUMAON Regiment) on February 22, 1942. He actively participated in World War II in the Arakan operations in the Burma campaign against the Japanese. One specific event during the campaign associated with Maj Sharma showed the hallmark of a dedicated professional. Bahadur, Maj Sharma's orderly, was badly wounded in action and was unable to walk. Maj Sharma carried his orderly on his shoulders and started heading towards the camp. Owing to his orderly's weight, he was lagging behind and was ordered by Col KS Thimmayya (later Army Chief) to leave Bahadur behind. Somnath retorted, "Sir, it is my own orderly that I'm carrying; he is badly wounded and bleeding, I'll not leave him behind." He eventually managed to carry Bahadur back, saving his life. The same spirit distinctly highlights the ethos of the Army even today as the Army never leaves any of its brethren behind in the battlefield.

Kashmir Operations

On October 22, 1947, Pakistan launched the tribal invasion of Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) named Operation Gulmarg. The intention was to grab the Kashmir Valley by force. Before the partition of India, the land route to Srinagar was from Muzaffarabad, Uri and Baramulla. The road from Pathankot was a difficult stretch, with a host of challenges. Till the road from Pathankot was improved, the only viable route to Srinagar was by air. Therefore, the airfield at Srinagar was of great strategic importance. Civilian aircraft were pressed into service and the airfield saw an increasing number of troops and equipment being flown in to tackle the emerging security threat to Kashmir. Realising the importance of the airfield, the raiders made the capture of the airfield a final step before capturing Srinagar and the valley. As the state became a part of the Union on October 26, its protection became the responsibility of India.

In order to arrest the advance of the invaders on the state, India dispatched troops to Srinagar. The first batch of Indian troops reached just in time on October 27 morning to stop the enemy on the outskirts of Srinagar. D Company of 4 KUMAON, led by Maj Somnath Sharma, was airlifted to Srinagar on October 31. Affectionately known as Somi, Maj Sharma insisted on being dispatched to Srinagar with his troops despite having a fractured arm and being technically "unfit for active duty in war". He argued that "he knew his men better than anyone else, and if they were going into action, they were not going in without him!". Before being flown to Srinagar, Maj Sharma joked to his close friend that

he would either die and win the Victoria Cross or become the Army Chief. True to his word, he won the first Param Vir Chakra and his youngest brother became the Chief of the Army Staff in 1988.

Despite being outnumbered, seven to one, Indians beat backed the invaders.

Battle of Badgam

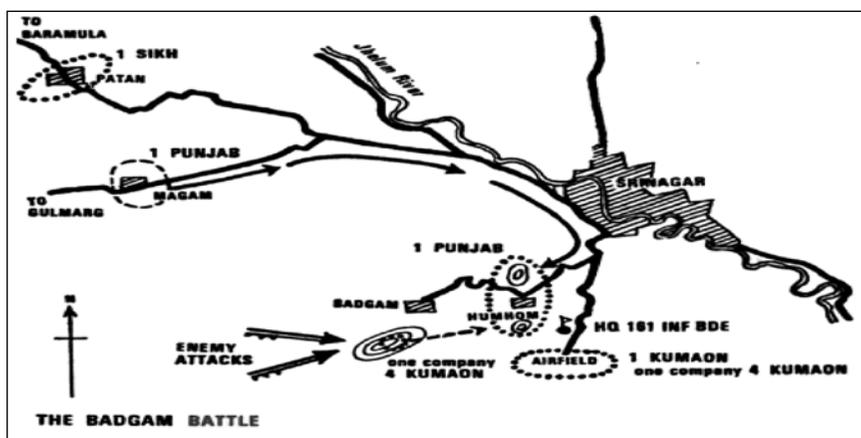
Badgam village is a mere 5 km from Srinagar airfield, and the high ground around it guards the prominent approaches towards the airfield. Thus, it was important for the Indian forces to retain control of the area in order to safeguard the supplies landing at the airfield. There had been persistent rumours of tribal movement towards Badgam and an enemy force lodged there could easily threaten it. The *lashkar* had been arriving in Badgam in small groups to conceal their movement. They had planned to attack Badgam when they reached a count of around 1,000 men, and then advance to Srinagar airfield.

A force consisting of two companies, Alfa and Delta of 4 KUMAON, under Maj Somnath Sharma, and a company of 1 PARA KUMAON, under Capt Ronnie Wood, was sent to Badgam in the early hours of November 03. A search of the village showed nothing suspicious, except for a group of what looked like Kashmiri refugees sheltering in a *nallah*. The situation was reported to the brigade. Captain Ronnie Wood was ordered to take his company over the area between Badgam and Magam and then get back to the airfield. Maj Sharma was also told to begin thinning out. But at 2 pm, when he had already sent back Alfa Company, he was told to hold on for another hour.² After Alfa Company left Badgam, the villagers grouped in the *nallah* began to disperse. While Sharma and his men thought they were returning to their homes, they were quietly positioning themselves around Delta Company. The Pakistani Major had decided not to wait beyond afternoon and as soon as he had about 700 men, he launched his attack. Sharma and his company, consisting of about 90 men, were the only ones left to fight the raiders. They were outnumbered seven to one.³

The attack began with sudden mortar and accurate light machine gun firing from close ranges. Just as the company began to respond, a large party of enemy launched an attack on their position from another flank. Maj Somnath Sharma understood the gravity of the situation and the imminent threat to both Srinagar town and the airfield was looming large before his eyes. Despite successfully repulsing the first attack, the enemy's numerical superiority threatened the company's defences. He lost his forward platoon localities but held on with his third platoon. With reinforcements taking a while to arrive, Maj Sharma ordered

air strikes on the enemy positions which were at close quarters. The brave officer himself took the initiative and laid out the ground panels to guide the aircraft to their target.⁴ The aerial attack was successful but failed to disturb the tempo of the tribesmen's attack to the extent desired.

Fig. 1



Source: L P Sen, *Slender was the Thread* (New Delhi: Orient Longman, 1969), p. 73.⁵

Eventually, the men started running out of ammunition. When Maj Sharma informed Brigade Headquarters about this, he was asked to pull back which he refused outright. Just a few minutes later, while he was crouched in a trench next to the Bren gunner, helping him load the gun, a mortar shell landed on the open ammunition box next to them. An eardrum-shattering blast rent the air, instantly killing Maj Sharma, his sahayak, the machine gunner and a Junior Commissioned Officer (JCO) standing nearby.⁶

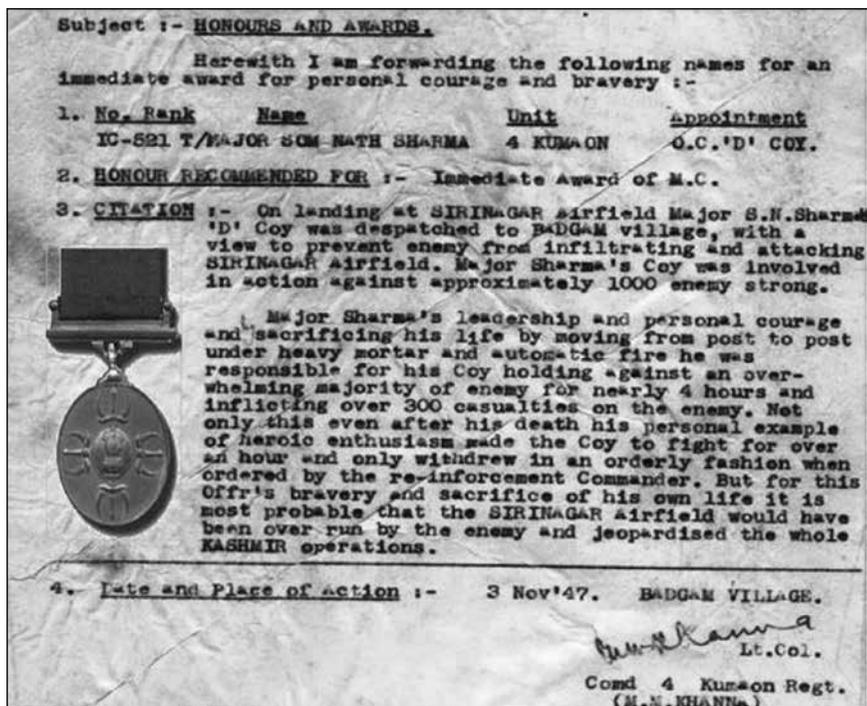
Despite the enemy's overwhelming numerical superiority, Maj Sharma's heroics motivated his men to an extent that they held on to their position for over six hours till the remnants withdrew after being surrounded on almost all four sides. This provided the much needed time to flow in reinforcements to get into position to stem the tide of the enemies' advance. By the time the reinforcements came in, the unit location had been overrun, and Maj Somnath Sharma, lay dead, fighting to the last. However, he ensured that the raiders suffered heavy casualties – over 300 of them were killed – and most important, it significantly slowed down their pace, thus, giving the much needed time for the Indian Army to fly into Srinagar, and ensure it did not fall

to Pakistan. His sacrifice was not in vain – he had saved Srinagar for India. For his act of conspicuous bravery, he was awarded the Param Vir Chakra. 4 KUMAON was later awarded the Battle Honour, Srinagar.⁷

**Somnath
Sharma's
heroics
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and fight.**

Later, on the morning of November 05, Badgam was counter-attacked by the Indian Army and captured. The bodies of 300 raiders were counted,⁸ which proved just how ruthless the fight had been. His citation spoke of his heroism, patriotism and courage under fire. The Param Vir Chakra awarded to Maj Sharma posthumously was ironically designed by his brother's mother-in-law, Smt Savitri Khanwilkar and was received by his father, Maj Gen Amarnath Sharma, on behalf of his son.⁹

Citation of Maj Somnath Sharma



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Notes

1. I. Cardozo, *Param Vir: Heroes in Battle* (Jalandar: Lotus Publisher, 2003).
2. Jasbir Singh, *Combat Diary: An Illustrated History of Operations Conducted by 4th Battalion, The KUMAON Regiment 1788 to 1974* (New Delhi: Lancer Publishers, 2010), pp.160-164.
3. Param Vir Chakra, Major Somnath Sharma (Posthumous), 4 KUMAON (1947) <http://indianarmy.nic.in/Site/FormTemplete/frmPhotoGalleryWithMenuWithTitle.aspx?MnId=ZcIvASWGq8dIdmrj6H4xQQ=&ParentID=Pk1aa4JFb17g7K5vgxP1Hg==> Accessed on January 27, 2015.
4. K C Praval, *Valour Triumphs: A History of KUMAON Regiment* (New Delhi: Thomson Press, 1976), p 167-169.
5. L.P Sen, *Slender was the Thread* (New Delhi: Orient Longman, 1969), p. 73.
6. "First Among the Braves", <http://www.tehelka.com/first-among-the-braves/> Accessed on January 29, 2015
7. J Singh, *Roar of the Tiger: Illustrated History of Operations in Kashmir by 4th Battalion: The KUMAON Regt* (New Delhi: Vij Books India Pvt Ltd, 2013), p.14.
8. n.6.
9. "Saluting Our Heroes: Maj Somnath Sharma, PVC", <http://satyameva-jayate.org/2009/11/03/somnath-sharma/>. Accessed on January 29, 2014.