

Brig Mohammed Usman, MVC

The Lion of Naushera

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“Those Whom the Gods Love, die young”

Brig Mohammed Usman was only 12 days away from his 36th birthday when he laid down his life for the motherland. But in his short lifetime, he achieved more than most mortals who live twice as long or more.

Brig Usman’s valour, courage and tenacity against fearful odds played a crucial role in 1948 when a newborn nation faced its first test in battle. His deeds are now part of the legends of Naushera and Jhangar.

Early Life

Usman was born on 15 July 1912 at Bibipur in Azamgarh district of erstwhile United Provinces (now Uttar Pradesh). His father, Kazi Mohammed Farook was a police officer and went on to become the Kotwal of the main police station in Banaras. (Varanasi). One of Farook’s two brothers, Gufran was a Brigadier in the army.

Courage came to Usman at a young age, when at the age of 12 he jumped into a well to save a drowning child. His father wanted him to join the civil services, but due to a speech defect, he tried the police but failed as his tutor thought he was mocking him. Nevertheless, he did not give up and tried for the army.

He was enlisted along with 10 other Indians in the last batch of Indian officers to pass out of Sandhurst. Among 45 cadets, he came 30th in the order of merit. Incidentally, Sam Manekshaw was three days junior to Usman as the British preferred to give seniority to the King's Commissioned Indian Officers (KCIOs) rather than the first batch of cadets from IMA Dehradun which included Sam Manekshaw, Smith Dun and Mohammed Musa, who went on to command the armies of India, Burma and Pakistan respectively.

Usman went on for his mandatory one year attachment with a British Regiment. He was commissioned in 5/10 Baluch (Jacob's Rifles). After some regimental and staff duties, Usman found himself with 16/10 Baluch in the Arakan (Burma) towards the end of the second world war. Here, he served as the battalion's 2IC along with Zoru Bakshi, who later became one of the most decorated General of the Indian Army.

Zoru Bakshi had led a Dogra company in attacking a hill feature in Arakan. He had recommended Usman who was officiating as the CO, the name of Bhandari Ram for the highest award of Victoria Cross. Usman's citation was however downgraded by Lt Col LP 'Bogey' Sen who had just joined the battalion as the CO and was reluctant in recommending for the highest award. But, Usman did not give up and took up the matter with the Commander 51 Brigade. It was to his credit and determination that Bhandari Lal was finally awarded the Victoria Cross.

51 Brigade formed part of 25 Indian Division, which was disbanded after the War but raised again post-Independence after Brig Usman's sacrifice at Jhangar. Incidentally, this division is responsible for the same sector which Usman had reclaimed for the nation in 1948.

After the war, the Indian Army raised two Parachute Brigades, namely 50 Para Bde and 77 Para Bde. Usman underwent the qualifying jumps at Chaklala and enlisted for Parachute duties. Brig Mohammed Usman commanded 77 Para Bde and was dispatching troops to Multan, Jacobabad, Lahore, Rawalpindi to contain the communal storm that was building up towards the partition.

The 1947 Kashmir Invasion

Meanwhile, the situation in J&K had turned grim following the tribal invasion supported by regular Pakistan Army troops. By October-November, Indian troops air dashed into Srinagar were chasing the tribesmen from Badgam, Baramulla, Uri, Zojila and Kupwara. In the Jammu division, 50 Para Bde had relieved Kotli but Mirpur fell to the invaders. 400 soldiers and 10000 refugees had flocked to Jhangar.

50 Para Bde was holding on to Jhangar and Naushera. At this time, the command of 50 Para Bde passed on to Brig Usman from Brig Paranjpe who had to be evacuated due to medical reasons. Jhangar which was being held by 1 Rajput less a company was soon overrun by the invaders. 1 Para (Punjab) suffered 55 dead and 46 wounded in defending Jhangar. By January 1948, the enemy was dominating all the four roads leading out of Naushera.

The Capture of Kot

Gen KM Cariappa who was then commanding the DEP (later Western Command) landed at Naushera air field and remarked at Brig Usman that he wanted Kot as a present from him. Kot, situated 9 kms to the North-east of Naushera was the highest feature in the area and dominated the Naushera defences. Brig Usman launched 'Op Kipper' (Kipper being the nickname of Gen Cariappa) on 31 Jan/1 Feb 1948.

3 Para (Maratha) captured Pathradi and Uparla from the right while 2/2 Punjab took Kot from the left. 7 Cavalry and a company less of Mahar Medium Machine gunners were in supporting role. The enemy suffered 156 dead and 200 wounded. This was the first major reverse suffered by the enemy. Several enemy counter attacks on Kot were beaten back due to a clever positioning of troops by Brig Usman.

On 6 February 1948, a major enemy offensive against Tain Dhar comprising some 11000 tribals and another force of 5000 attacked Kangota and Redian. The attack on Tain Dhar was bravely beaten back by 1 Rajput and 3 Para (Rajput) which had reinforced the feature. One picket of 1 Rajput lost 24 of its 27 men. It was in the actions at Tain Dhar that Nk Jadunath Singh won his Param Vir Chakra (PVC). After this action, the tribal invaders lost their will to fight and were replaced by regular troops.

Jhangar is regained

50 Para Bde and 19 Infantry Bde launched 'Op Vijay' on 14 March 1948 to capture Jhangar from two axis. 19 Brigade took the North axis while 50 Para Bde consisting of 3 Para (Maratha), 3 Para (Rajput), 1 Patiala and one company of 3/1 Punjab attacked from another direction. Prior to the attack, Brig Usman had issued a Special Order of the Day exhorting his men into battle. A brief extract of the Order is placed below:

.....The eyes of the world are on us. The hopes and aspirations of our countrymen are based upon our efforts. We must not falter, we must not fail them.....

To every man upon this earth

Death Cometh soon or late
And how can man die better
Than facing fearful odds
For the ashes of his fathers
And the temples of his gods
... So forward friends, fearless we go to Jhangar. India expects everyone
to do his duty.

Brig Usman had worked out a very intelligent Artillery fire plan for the battle of Jhangar. He had brigaded all the 24 field guns and the Mortars of the three battalions. He had concentrated them on a limited front targeting the highest point of the feature, which was attacked first. Once the barrage lifted, the troops were already at the enemy trenches taking them by surprise.

3 Para (Maratha) secured Pir Thal Naka on 17 March 1948 and Uparli Karhali on 18 March and then pressed on to Susloti Dhar along with a company of 3 Para (Rajput). Brig Usman soon followed up with his HQ.

3 Para (Maratha) and 1 Patiala advancing on a two battalion front secured Pt 3399.

19 Infantry Brigade had already entered Jhangar and 'Op Vijay' was complete.

50 Para Brigade secures Jhangar

19 Infantry Brigade withdrew to Naushera and 50 Para Bde was tasked with holding Jhangar. Several enemy counter attacks were beaten back in the next three months, two major ones on 16 April and 10 May, 1948. An attack by 3 Para (Maratha) and 2 Rajputana Rifles on MG Hill (from 19 Inf Bde) suffered reverses due to faulty intelligence on enemy strength on that feature.

Like Rana Pratap, Brig Usman had taken a pledge in December 1947 that he would not sleep on a cot till he had avenged the loss of Jhangar. For three months he slept on the floor which was cold in the winter months. Now for the first time, he slept on a cot borrowed from a nearby village.

In June 1948, own aerial reconnaissance observed manned gun positions to the south of Jhangar. HQ JAK Force issued instructions to 50 Para Bde to provide overhead protections to the bunkers and trenches. But this warning was not taken seriously as the enemy had never shelled Jhangar after it was recaptured. The Brigade HQ was nothing more than a series of tents.

Brig Usman had restored the low morale of 50 Para Bde after the fall of Kotli and Jhangar. The battles of Naushera and Thal Naka bear testimony to his dynamic

leadership and charismatic personality. He was very popular with both officers and men. He had a delightful sense of humour, and could remain cheerful even in the most trying circumstances.

He was quick to reward a person for his good deeds and bravery but was also a hard taskmaster. He could not stand men who failed to perform to their optimum levels. Still, he gave a fair hearing before reprimanding a person. He believed loyalty was a two-way street and always stood up for his subordinates. In one such instance, his Brigade Intelligence Officer had sent a signal to the HQ JAK Force giving the six-figure map reference of one of our own positions which was later shelled by the enemy. A signal from HQ JAK Force demanded the Captain's skull on a plate for his carelessness. A weary Captain SC Sinha (who was on attachment with the Brigade from 3 Para (Maratha) walked into Brig Usman's office with the signal. Brig Usman without speaking a word and looking at the BIO, scribbled a note and handed it over to the officer. The reply to Division HQ read: "A six-figure map reference of our own position in question may have been news to the JAK Force HQ, but I assure you it was no news to the enemy". This was the last that was heard of the matter.

3 July 1948: The Lion is Martyred

Brig Usman held a meeting every evening at 5.30 in the sand model room which was nothing more than a couple of tents rigged together. On 3 July, he held the meeting half an hour earlier and it was over by 5.30. The enemy shelled the tents at 5.45 PM. Four 25-pounder shells landed about 500 m north of the crossroads. The shelling was countered after Brig Usman located and directed fire on the enemy OP located at Pt. 3150. Brig Usman was taking a walk in his HQ when one of the enemy shells hit a rock near the Signals room. This is how the lion of Naushera and Jhangar made the supreme sacrifice in defence of his motherland. The rock stands testimony to his sacrifice and a memorial has been built over it at Jhangar.

The funeral of Brig Usman was attended by Prime Minister Pandit JawaharLal Nehru, the Governor General Lord Mountbatten among thousands of civilians. His body is interned at the campus of Jamia Milia University in New Delhi.

Such was the aura of Brig Usman that Jinnah had offered him to switch over to Pakistan promising perks and promotions. Pakistani newspapers regularly carried incorrect news of his death to demoralise Indian troops. One such news report was carried by a Pakistani daily in late June prompting his brother to inquire from HQ Western Command about his safety. Brig Usman's reply to the

signal from HQ Western Command read: "I am fit and flourishing- still in the world of the living."

Ironically, Brig Usman died a few hours after this message reached HQ Western Command.

Brig Usman was somewhat of a showman but yet a simple and down to earth person. Serving with the Dogras in Burma, he had turned into a vegetarian. He exhorted his men to keep a fast on Tuesdays so that the food could be distributed to the villagers. A bachelor, a bulk of his salary was spent in providing education to poor children.

He was religious yet a staunch loyalist. On receiving reports that 50000 tribal marauders had taken refuge at a mosque near Naushera and that our troops were hesitant in firing at the religious structure, he reached there personally and ordered fire to be opened stating that the place no longer remained religious as it had been occupied by marauders.

Brigadier Mohammed Usman, one of only 18 Brigadiers in the Army at the time of Independence was posthumously awarded the Maha Vir Chakra for his gallant leadership and command of 50 Para Bde at Naushera and Jhangar. It is to the credit and courage of such fine officers the country owes its freedom to. A true patriot and war hero, his name will always be enshrined in the annals of the Indian Army.

On 3 July 2006, the nation remembered Brig Mohammed Usman whose courage and leadership continue to inspire men-in-uniform, generation after generations. A day-long martyrdom function was organised at DRDO Auditorium in New Delhi to mark the 58th death anniversary of the war hero.

To commemorate the martyrdom of Brig Usman, a series of special functions was organised including a wreath-laying ceremony at his grave in Jamia Milia, felicitation of his family members and screening of a film based on his life. Among those who were present on the occasion included Defence Minister, Mr Pranab Mukherjee, Army Chief, Gen JJ Singh, Vice Chief of the Army Staff, Lt Gen S Pattabhiraman and Colonel of the Parachute Regiment, Lt Gen Nirbhay Sharma.

Reference: Leadership in the Indian Army: Biographies of twelve soldiers by Lt Gen VK Singh, PVSM (Retd)