

Seven Heroes of 1971

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Stories of Courage and Sacrifice

Man Aman Singh Chhina

 juggernaut

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For Ranjeeta, Adesh and Jastej

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Introduction

The India–Pakistan war of 1971 was short but very intense. Though it lasted just thirteen days, it took a heavy toll on the Indian armed forces – nearly 3900 lost their lives and around 10,000 were wounded.

Those thirteen days between December 3, when the war began with Pakistan’s attack on Indian airfields, and December 16, when it ended with the surrender of the Pakistan Army at Dhaka, saw countless acts of heroism and sacrifice from the Indian armed forces. An unprecedented number of gallantry awards were given to those who took part in that war: four Param Vir Chakras, seventy-six Maha Vir Chakras, and 513 Vir Chakras.

On the fiftieth anniversary of that war, this book recalls the stories of seven heroes. There were, of course, many more heroes of 1971. Among them are several

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whose valour on the battlefield may not have been recognized with a gallantry award, but their deeds live on in the collective memory of their regiments, battalions, squadrons and ships. We should remember, too, those who were severely wounded yet displayed heroism every single day of their lives after the war, refusing to allow their crippling disabilities to quell their indomitable spirit as they strove to live full and meaningful lives. And, of course, who can forget the forces of the Mukti Bahini and Mujib Bahini who fought so bravely alongside their Indian comrades to liberate their country, and about whom new books will surely be written in Bangladesh to mark this important anniversary.

The seven heroes who feature in this book represent different ranks of India's three armed forces – the army, navy and air force – as well as a 'mystical warrior' who led a covert force, sometimes described as a 'phantom army', which never received public acknowledgement for the crucial role they played in the liberation of Bangladesh.

These seven heroes fought in various theatres of the war – in the plains and hill tracts of Bangladesh, in the Kashmir Valley, the Punjab–Jammu sector, Ladakh

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and the Arabian Sea. Three of them received their Param Vir Chakras, India's highest gallantry award, posthumously for carrying out their missions in the face of certain death.

Fifty years since the war, the lives of these seven heroes remain an inspiration, and their deeds the essence of patriotism, courage and sacrifice in the line of duty. I hope this book will help keep their memory evergreen in the heart of every Indian.

1

Lance Naik Albert Ekka,
Param Vir Chakra (Posthumous)

As a child growing up in the village of Jari in what is now Jharkhand, Albert Ekka became adept at the traditional skills of the Oraon tribal community to which he belonged. He grew into an expert marksman with the bow and arrow, and he learnt to move stealthily through the jungles near his home as he tracked deer, quail or hare. And he became agile, able to clamber swiftly up a tree or a hill, cross a fast-flowing rivulet or jump into a deep hollow, to pick the wild fruits and herbs of the forests.

In December 1962, at the age of twenty, physically superbly fit and with a spirit of adventure hungering for bigger challenges, he joined the Bihar regiment of the Indian Army, later transferring to the 14 Battalion of the Brigade of Guards. Just nine years later, on

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December 3, 1971, his heroism in battle at Gangasagar, East Pakistan, would silence Pakistani guns, save the lives of dozens of his fellow soldiers and enable the Indian Army to take control of the strategically crucial junction at Gangasagar. At the end of the battle – one of the bloodiest battles of the 1971 war, fought in hand-to-hand combat – the gravely wounded soldier died on the battlefield. Lance Naik Ekka was the only jawan (non-commissioned officer) awarded the Param Vir Chakra in the 1971 war. He was also the only one to be awarded the Param Vir Chakra in the eastern sector in that war.



When the Bangladesh war began, Albert Ekka's battalion, which had earlier taken part in anti-insurgency operations in the Northeast, was moved near Agartala in Tripura, close to the East Pakistan border, under 4 Corps led by Lt Gen Sagat Singh (see chapter 6).

One of the primary tasks given to Ekka's battalion, right at the onset of the official hostilities on December 3, 1971, was the capture of Pakistan Army positions at Gangasagar in East Pakistan's Brahmanbaria district,

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just 7 km from Agartala. This was crucial for the 4 Corps' advance towards Akhaura, which would then clear their way towards the capital of East Pakistan, Dhaka. Gangasagar was a major railway junction, well fortified and defended by the enemy. Various accounts of the battle confirm that two companies of 14 Guards were tasked to capture the railway station where Pakistanis had dug-in defences fortified with heavy machine guns and reinforced bunkers. Albert Ekka was part of the group which was assigned to clear the Pakistani defences.

A detailed account of the battle at Gangasagar written by Col V. Ganapathy (Retd), a senior fellow at the Centre for Land Warfare Studies (CLAWS), recounts that the Pakistani defences were mainly based on the high ground around the railway station and the built-up areas near it. Much of the surrounding area was marshy while the rest was heavily mined and surrounded by concertina wire.

On the night of December 3–4, 1971, as Lance Naik Albert Ekka and his company moved towards the Pakistani defences, they came under heavy mortar shelling and gunfire. Then, they found their advance stopped by constant fire from a machine gun targeting

the Indian troops with alarming accuracy. The minefields and concertina wire were already slowing down the advance of the Indian troops while the machine gun was pinning them down.

Lance Naik Ekka realized that the machine gun would have to be tackled and, Col Ganapathy writes, 'he began the slow and dangerous advance towards the enemy gun position. Crawling carefully and methodically towards the enemy position, Ekka advanced to around 100 metres from it. And then decided to surprise the Pakistani soldiers manning the machine gun by charging at them . . .' Shouting the battle cry of the Guards, '*Pabla Hamesha, Pabla Hamesha*' (always first, always first), he lobbed a grenade at them, bayoneted two of the soldiers and took control of the machine gun. In the process, he was wounded.

But he didn't allow his injuries to stop him – he kept on clearing one bunker after another in the same manner, until heavy machine gun fire began from the top floor of a building. Ekka now 'coolly analysed the situation', records Col Ganapathy, and crawling towards that gun position, he lobbed grenades at the crew. When the machine gun continued to fire, he clambered

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over a wall, jumped into the machine gun position and killed the soldier firing the gun with his bayonet – all this while coming under a hail of bullets himself and bleeding heavily from his wounds.

At the end of this battle, Ekka succumbed to his injuries, but, writes Col Ganapathy, ‘the task he had helped achieve for his battalion was immense. Gangasagar had been captured and cleared of Pakistani presence and the road lay clear for further advance.’

Eleven men from Ekka’s company died in this battle, but they had killed twenty-five Pakistanis and captured a huge store of their arms and ammunition.

Lance Naik Albert Ekka’s Param Vir Chakra citation reads:

Lance Naik Albert Ekka was in the left forward company of a battalion of Brigade of Guards during their attack on the enemy defence at Gangasagar on the Eastern Front. This was a well-fortified position held in strength by the enemy. The assaulting troops were subjected to intense shelling and heavy small-arms fire but they charged on to the objectives and were locked in bitter hand-to-hand combat. Lance

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Naik Albert Ekka noticed an enemy light machine gun inflicting heavy casualties on his company. With complete disregard for his personal safety, he charged the enemy bunker, bayoneted two enemy soldiers and silenced the LMG [Light Machine Gun]. Though seriously wounded in this encounter, he continued to fight alongside his comrades through the mile-deep objective, clearing bunker after bunker with undaunted courage.

Towards the northern end of the objective, one enemy medium machine-gun (MMG) opened up from the second storey of a well-fortified building inflicting heavy casualties and holding up the attack. Once again, this gallant soldier, without a thought for his personal safety, despite his serious injury and the heavy volume of enemy fire, crawled forward till he reached the building and lobbed a grenade into the bunker killing one enemy soldier and injuring the other.

The MMG, however, continued to fire. With outstanding courage and determination, Lance Naik Albert Ekka scaled a side wall and entering the bunker, bayoneted the enemy soldier who was still firing and thus silenced the machine-gun, saving

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further casualties to his company and ensuring the success of the attack.



Lance Naik Albert Ekka, who was twenty-nine when he died, was survived by his widow, Balamdina, and son, Vincent. More than forty years after his death, Lieutenant Colonel Quazi Sajjad Ali Zahir (Retd), a decorated Bangladeshi war veteran, visited Ekka's widow and son at their village home. Lt Col Sajjad had been an officer in the Pakistan Army's 14 Para Brigade, serving in Sialkot, Punjab. When he heard of the atrocities being committed in his home province of East Pakistan, he left his post and was subsequently sentenced to death as a deserter. However, he managed to escape to India, where he established contact with the Indian Army. He was then sent to a secret camp in Sylhet, East Pakistan, where he started training the Mukti Bahini in guerrilla operations.

Lt Col Sajjad never forgot the sacrifice of Indian soldiers in liberating his homeland and wanted to do whatever he could to ensure their contribution was remembered and honoured in Bangladesh (in

recognition of his efforts India awarded him the Padma Shri in 2021). It was as part of the research for the book he was writing on the liberation of Bangladesh that he decided to visit Lance Naik Ekka's village.

Writing for the *Daily Star* newspaper of Bangladesh in March 2012, Lt Col Sajjad left a poignant account of his meeting with Balamdina and Vincent in a remote corner of Jharkhand.¹ 'Curious villagers walked by my side as I approached his home,' writes Lt Col Sajjad. 'His elderly widowed wife, Balamdina, hurriedly came out to greet me, leaning on her walking stick. By her side was her only son, Vincent, who was one year old when his father had joined the war for Bangladesh's independence in 1971.' When Balamdina told him that she had heard about a place called Gangasagar in Bangladesh where her husband was martyred, Lt Col Sajjad showed her photographs of Gangasagar, the Pakistan defence positions and the location where her husband was killed. 'She touched the photographs gently . . . and held them close to her chest. She cried softly, the tears trickling down her wrinkled cheeks . . . she tried in vain to dry her face with the edge of her saree.'

Lt Col Sajjad's account continues: 'Balamdina

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touched my hand gently. It was the first time she had ever seen a Bangladeshi. She held on to my hand, and Vincent held the other, as if we were connected at that moment, by a lifetime of bloodlines and memories.’ The three of them stayed like that, silently holding hands for a long time, until Balamdina asked Lt Col Sajjad to tell her about her husband’s last battle. He told her how bravely Ekka had charged towards the enemy lines, destroying bunker after bunker, despite being gravely wounded, and Balamdina and Vincent listened engrossed. ‘Finally, Balamdina asked, “Did he put up a good show? Did he die well?”’

Balamdina told her visitor how, four or five days after Ekka’s death, a group of soldiers had come to her house to break the news to her. They had consoled her by telling her how his act of heroism had saved the lives of his unit soldiers and brought pride and glory to his country. Ekka’s battalion remained in constant touch with the family, and the army honoured Ekka’s memory every year on the anniversary of the Battle of Gangasagar, she said. On the 50th Republic Day, the Indian government had issued a postal stamp in Albert Ekka’s memory. Agartala, the city from where 14 Guards began their offensive towards Gangasagar, named a

public park after him. And the major intersection on the main road in Ranchi, Jharkhand's capital, has been named Albert Ekka Chowk.



Albert Ekka's heroism had been fittingly honoured by his country, but Balamdina wanted to honour him as a beloved husband and father too. Her greatest wish, she told the colonel, had always been to visit Gangasagar, to see with her own eyes the place where her husband fell and bring back some soil from there to her home. But she did not have the means to make this pilgrimage.

The colonel assured her he would make every effort to arrange her visit to Gangasagar. 'I thought that I should undertake this task with humility, urgency and a profound sense of gratitude for a man who sacrificed his life for my country,' he wrote. Lt Col Sajjad kept his promise. He was a member of Bangladesh's national committee for honouring foreign heroes of the Liberation War – he recommended that Ekka's widow and son be invited to Dhaka to attend the ceremony honouring these foreign nationals.

On October 18, 2012, Balamdina and Vincent

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arrived in Dhaka and attended the ceremony at which Lance Naik Albert Ekka was bestowed the posthumous honour of 'Friend of Liberation War' by the Bangladesh government. The Bangladesh authorities had made arrangements for the two of them to visit Gangasagar, along with Colonel Ashok Tara, Vir Chakra, who had also fought in the battle of Gangasagar as company commander. At Balamdina's request, Lt Col Sajjad accompanied them.

When they reached Gangasagar at noon after a five-hour journey, she and Vincent went to the spot where Ekka's blood had mingled with the soil. There she knelt, prayed and wept silently for a long time as a large crowd gathered to witness this moving scene. 'On the long journey back to Dhaka, she did not utter a single word,' remembers Lt Col Sajjad. 'The memory of Albert Ekka's sacrifice has dimmed with the passage of time, but Balamdina's sorrow did not evaporate with time.'

The next morning, before leaving Bangladesh, Balamdina told the Bangladeshi colonel that visiting Gangasagar and praying there had brought her great comfort.

But Balamdina was still looking for closure. And

this time the Indian Army came to her aid. In 2016, four years after her visit to Gangasagar, Balamdina went on another pilgrimage, in search of her husband's grave. Ekka, a Christian, had been buried in the village of Sripalli near Dhulki in Tripura, and his comrades who had fallen with him were also cremated there. Accompanied by members of the Jharkhand Tribal Advisory Committee, she arrived at Dhulki to find a memorial at the spot where the soldiers had been cremated, all their names carved on it. But there was no trace of Albert Ekka's grave. She then learnt that the land where he had been buried had subsequently been allotted to some villagers who had built houses on it. None of them knew that a hero's grave lay on that land. Balamdina then gathered some soil from the ground near the memorial and brought it back to her village. The army presented a guard of honour as the urn containing that soil was brought to her house in a grand procession. Some forty-four years after his death, Balamdina had finally brought her husband, the great Oraon warrior Lance Naik Albert Ekka, home.