



Somnath Sharma

Fifteen minutes early for my appointment with Lieutenant General (retd) Surindra Nath Sharma, former engineer-in-chief of the Indian Army and younger brother of late Major Somnath Sharma, I settle down to wait in the lobby of his

tastefully done up house in Defence Colony, New Delhi. The slim and remarkably fit 90-year-old Sherwoodian walks in almost immediately. He dazzles me with his memory, his firm grip on names and dates, his British accent, his delightful wit and his old-world courtesy that includes holding doors open and walking me down to my car when the interview is done.

When he recounts tales of his brother's bravery, there is pride in his voice; when he speaks about how the schoolboy Somi would march the kids in the neighbourhood up and down, he smiles nostalgically. And when he tells me about Somi's infatuation with a very young girl when he last came to meet the family in Rawalpindi in 1947, he chuckles like a schoolboy, refusing outright to tell me more.

‘We don’t discuss ladies,’ he says gallantly. I am disarmed with his charm, but what impresses me most is the lucid manner in which he recounts the Battle of Badgam and makes Somnath Sharma and the ‘47 war with Pakistan come alive in front of my eyes.



Badgam, Jammu and Kashmir

3 November 1947

Resting his plastered left arm on the edge of the trench, Maj Somnath Sharma raises his head and squints at the sun; it has moved west but there are still a few hours of daylight left. He has to move his company soon and if they make good time, they can be back at the Srinagar airfield by night. It has been a tense and gruelling

morning, but now he is feeling quite relaxed.

At first light that day, a fighting patrol comprising A and D Companies of 4 Kumaon (under Somi) and one company of 1 Para Kumaon (under Captain Ronald Wood) had been sent to Badgam after intelligence reports had warned that a 1000-strong lashkar of Pathans, led by Pakistan Army regulars, was heading towards Srinagar. Their aim, the reports had said, was to take over Srinagar airfield and thus handicap the Army by cutting off their supplies. The fighting patrol's job had been to search for the raiders and engage them at Badgam, a small village three to four miles from the Srinagar airfield.

Early morning, Sharma had reported that his company was positioned on a hillock west of the village and that they had dug trenches there.

1 Para Kumaon had established themselves southeast of the village and had reported that the village was quiet and peaceful. Sharma had also reported that the villagers had been going about their chores quietly though they looked scared. He has also noticed that some of them were clustered in a nala where they seemed to be taking shelter. Since Badgam appeared peaceful, 1 Para Kumaon was ordered to 'circle east and search; and then return to the airfield after making contact with 1 Punjab'. They did so, and were back in Srinagar by 1 p. m.

Since Badgam is quiet, Sharma is also ordered to start pulling his companies out. At 2 p. m. he reports that A Company, which had been ordered to circle to the west, had done so and was also on its way to the airfield. Somi plans to keep D Company in

Badgam till late evening and then withdraw to the airfield. His decision is supported by Brig. L. P. Sen, DSO. The two know each other well from battles in the Arakan in 1944-45. The soldiers are just biding time since there are only a few hours to go.

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The general stops for a breather and a sip of the lemonade that has appeared by our sides and then shakes his head gravely. ‘The people Somi had mistaken for villagers in the nala were in fact Pathans dressed as Kashmiri locals with weapons hidden under their loose chogas,’ he grimaces.

The lashkar was arriving in Badgam in bits and pieces to conceal their movement and it was led by a Pakistani major, who was hatching a crafty plan even as he watched

the soldiers of the Indian Army patrolling the village. He had asked his men to mix with the locals and wait for the rest of the Pathans, who were quietly making their way to Badgam after slowly trooping in through the gap between the ranges at Gulmarg. He planned to attack Badgam when they reached a count of around 1000 men and then advance to the Srinagar airfield. Pakistan's plan was to attack the airfield, cut off the Army's access and then takeover Jammu and Kashmir.

'It was a great plan,' the general acknowledges grudgingly.

Around 2 p. m., well after A Company left Badgam, the villagers grouped in the nala began to disperse. While Sharma and his men thought they were returning to their homes, they were quietly positioning themselves around D

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.



Wrinkling his forehead in an effort to remember, Lt Gen Sharma says it was around 2.30 p.m. that Somi and his men were taken by surprise when gunfire started coming at them from the village. Soon, they were receiving machine-gun fire as well. Somi reported to his brigade commander that his position was under attack. He added that he was apprehensive about returning fire in the direction of the village because he could hurt innocent peo-

ple, including women and children. By then, the raiders had started coming up in large numbers from a depression in the west.

‘There were hundreds of them, and they started targeting Somi’s company with mortar and automatic fire,’ says Lt Gen Sharma. ‘Since the Pathans were not trained soldiers, every 100 men were commanded by a Viceroy’s Commissioned Officer (VCO) while every 10 men had a regular Pakistani Army soldier with them who inspired them to fight.’

Lt Gen Sharma says he heard from soldiers of 4 Kumaon who returned alive from the battle how Somi encouraged his men to retaliate and, completely unmindful of his own safety, rushed from one trench to another urging them to fight back bravely. Such was the grit and

determination of the men that the first few attacks, which came from different directions, were successfully repulsed.

The Pathans, however, drew strength from sheer numbers and began to increase the pressure. Soon they had surrounded D Company from three sides and started climbing up the hillock where the trenches were. They came in hordes, brandishing automatics and shouting Allah ho Akbar!

Somi knew he was outnumbered. He called the brigade commander and asked for ammunition and reinforcements. He was told that 1 Punjab was being sent for their support but Somi realized they would take time to get there since they had to move in battle formation. He also understood how important it was to hold back the enemy till reinforce-

ments could be sent to close the gap leading to Srinagar. If that was not done, the raiders could advance right up to the airfield and take over Srinagar.

Somi decided to hold back tenaciously and urged his men to fight to the last. It is to their credit that they did, despite the fact that they were completely outnumbered and their 303 rifles were no match for the enemy's medium machine guns.

'Somi knew his company would not be able to hold out for long but he did not let his men lose confidence. With complete disregard for his own safety, he rushed across the open ground in full view of the enemy and went about encouraging his men. When the heavy casualties started affecting the men manning the light machine guns, Somi himself went around, using his good

hand—his left arm was in plaster—to fill magazines and hand these over to the light machine gunners. He would tell them when and where to fire.

“Idhar maro, udhar maro,” he would say, and the battle raged for almost five hours,’ the general tells me. ‘That was precious time for the Indian Army, since the raiders were being delayed and they were getting time to plug the gaps as they built up strength with Indian Air Force planes flying in more troops.’

Eventually, the men started running out of ammunition. When Somi informed brigade headquarters (HQ) about this, he was asked to pull back. He refused outright. ‘The enemy is only 50 yards from us. We are heavily outnumbered. We are under devastating fire. I shall not withdraw an inch but will fight to

the last man and the last round,’ was his last message to the HQ.

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. ‘It blew up Somi, his sahayak (an officer’s helper or man Friday who looks after his uniform and turnout), the machine gunner and a JCO, who was standing nearby,’ recounts Lt Gen Sharma, his voice gentle.

For Somi, who had insisted upon leading his company to Kashmir despite having his arm in plaster, it was all over. But it is considered a credit to his leadership that the men under his command kept his word. The non-commissioned officers (NCOs) of the company decided to

fight on, and they managed to hold back the raiders for another hour even after Somi had died.

In fact, as the ammunition became desperately short, another hero emerged. Lt Gen Sharma talks with great respect about Lance Naik Balwant Singh of D Company, who took a brave initiative when most of the soldiers were left with just one round or two. ‘He asked them to collect whatever rounds were left with them and hand those over to him. He then loaded his gun with these two or three magazines and told the rest of the men to retreat while he held up the enemy. “There is no point in everybody dying,” he said. “I will hold them back for the few minutes you need to disappear into the fields.”

‘So he and three others stayed back to battle the raiders while the

rest left the hillock from the back. Shooting the last of their rounds, these four bravehearts got out of their trenches and charged at the enemy. They were killed but they helped their comrades survive,' recalls the general.

Overall, the brave action of D Company resulted in the raiders being delayed by close to six hours by which time the Indian Army had managed to get into position and block the enemy advance to Srinagar airfield. As aircrafts continued to fly in with more and more soldiers, the airfield defence had become strong enough to stop any attack.

On the morning of 5 November, Badgam was counterattacked by the Indian Army and captured. The bodies of 300 raiders were counted, which proved just how ruthless the

fight had been. The retaliatory fire had been so harsh that the Pathans had not been able to pick up their dead. Since they were not trained soldiers, they were not used to losing men in such a big way. The big losses broke their resolve and they started pulling back. When the Army took over Badgam, they found the Pakistanis retreating. ‘When a man’s will is broken, he cannot fight,’ says Lt Gen Sharma.

In the battle of Badgam, 4 Kumaon lost Maj Somnath Sharma, Subedar Prem Singh Mehta and 20 other ranks. Twenty-six people were wounded in the operation. For his gallantry, tenacious defence and exemplary leadership that inspired his men to fight the enemy, in spite of being outnumbered seven to one, Maj Somnath Sharma was awarded the Param Vir Chakra (PVC) posthu-

mously. It was the first PVC of independent India.



We have come to the end of the interview and, as I switch off my Dictaphone, the general stands before a beautiful oil painting of his brother, which hangs on the wall. The late Maj Somnath Sharma of D Company, 4 Kumaon, is standing in his uniform, ribbons on his chest. He looks handsome and proud.

Lt Gen Sharma turns away with a distant look in his eyes. ‘Somi died. He was not there to die, he was there to kill. A job had to be done. It was his job and he did it,’ he says. There is steel in his voice.

Somi doesn’t answer. A half smile plays on his lips.



Maj Somnath Sharma was born on 31 January 1923, in Jammu. His father, Amarnath Sharma, was a medical corps officer, who rose to the rank of major general. Of his two brothers, Surindra Nath, better known as Tindy in Army circles, went on to become the engineer-in-chief. The youngest, Vishwa Nath, joined the armoured corps and went on to become the Chief of Army Staff in 1988. Of his two sisters, Kamla joined the Army as a doctor and married an Army officer, who also rose to the rank of Major General; the other, Manorama, also married a brigadier in the Army.

When Tindy was four years old, his father was detailed to do a medical course in England and decided to take his wife along. Somi and Tindy, who were about one year apart, were put in Hampton Court

Convent in Mussoorie. Though Somi was older, they were put in the same class and made a good team. The two remained boarders there, happy to be in the same dormitory.

‘We got kicked around by seniors, but Somi was my protector because he was tougher and bigger than me,’ remembers Tindy. ‘I was the brains behind the pair, I was very good at math, and he was more into outdoor stuff. Other than history and general knowledge, Somi was just not interested in studies.’

The deal between the brothers was that while Somi would protect Tindy from the bullies, Tindy would finish all the homework in the evening so that Somi could get up early and copy it. Both went on to study at Sherwood from where Somi, who always wanted to join the Army, applied for admission to

the Prince of Wales's Royal Indian Military College (now Rashtriya Indian Military College), Dehradun.

After passing out in May 1941 he joined the Indian Military Academy (IMA) where he did exceptionally well. By then the war had started and IMA training was cut short. After about nine months of training, Somi became a commissioned officer in February 1942. He was just 19 when he joined the 8/19 Hyderabad Regiment, now 4 Kumaon, as a second lieutenant. He faced action in Arakan where one of the toughest battles of the Burma War was fought with the Japanese on the Arakan coast where three Indian battalions landed, along with one battalion of British commandos.

That was where Somi saw a wounded Kumaoni soldier sitting against a tree. He asked the man to

run but when he replied that he was not be able to stand up, the tough and battle-hardy Somi carried the man on his back, right through Japanese crossfire, laughing all the way, and bringing him back to safety. The two were not shot, possibly because the Japanese respected raw courage.

Returning to India as a major and the adjutant of 4 Kumaon, Somi got busy in internal security duties in various parts of Punjab and helping the police and civil authorities in controlling civil disturbances in 1947. Many educational institutions in Delhi still talk of his great powers of organization in arranging supplies of rations and safe movement of people from one locality to another. He was made in charge of a flying squad of men with jeeps, who would assist the police in con-

trolling civil disturbances in Delhi. His amicable but firm command instilled confidence and discipline in many difficult situations.

The same was tested when hostilities broke out in Kashmir in 1947, and India decided to send her troops to save Kashmir from the Pakistani raiders. Though Somi's left arm was in plaster due to an old wrist-fracture suffered doing gymnastics, he insisted on going with his company. As he was so keen to go, the commanding officer finally agreed and ordered him to fly in and command two companies of 4 Kumaon tasked with the protection of Srinagar airfield. There are some priceless black and white pictures of him with his arm in a cast, taken at Safdarjung Airport, where he is grinning broadly, no doubt happy

with the thought of being with his men in war.

When Somi landed in Srinagar in late October, the raiders were closing in on Baramulla with Badgam on route. That was where a bloody battle would be fought and the brave young officer would bring home the first Param Vir Chakra of independent India.

Somi's life story is often quoted in books and Army messes. It is a tale of sheer courage and glory. The example set by him is recounted with a lot of respect and he is fondly remembered not only by 4 Kumaon but the entire armed forces. To ensure that young soldiers continue to be inspired by his bravery, the training ground at the Kumaon Regimental Centre in Ranikhet has been named Somnath Sharma Ground. A beautiful red brick gate-

way called Somnath Dwar leads to the perfectly maintained parade ground, flanked by the snow-capped Himalayas. The ground has seen the sweat and toil of thousands of young boys, new recruits of the Kumaon Regiment and the Naga Regiments, who take their first step as young soldiers here.

Sahayak: