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## Roll of honour



CHRONICLING COURAGE Rachna Bisht Rawat. Photo: Monika Rawat

**Rachna Bisht Rawat’s book, *The Brave*, chronicles the heroism of the 21 men awarded India’s highest military decoration for valour in the face of the enemy, the Param Vir Chakra**

Far away in snowbound Ladakh, beyond the cobalt blue Pangong Tso, stands a memorial inscribed with words from Lord Macaulay’s poem, *Horatius*.

*How can man die better/  
Than facing fearful odds/  
For the ashes of his fathers/  
And the temples of his gods.*

The memorial commemorates the heroic stand of Major Shaitan Singh, PVC, and the brave Ahirs of C Company, 13 Kumaon Regiment. In the dark days of 1962, Major Singh and his men, grossly outnumbered, were brutally massacred by the Chinese, and died following the orders, “You will fight till the last man and the last bullet”.

It is this enigma of war — what makes some run, others stand their ground, and a remarkable few display astonishing courage — that Rachna unravels in her first book.

When Penguin Books thought of this project, Rachna, an award-winning journalist and Army wife, fit the bill. “Men in olive green have been around me for a lifetime — my father and brother are proud paratroopers and my husband is an engineer,” she says in a telephone

interview. “This is about a medal that even the Chief of Army Staff gets up to salute, even if it hangs on the shirtfront of a foot soldier. So it was only natural that I was excited and eager to bring to life the stories of some of India’s bravest men.”

The book, which took a year to complete, saw Rachna journey to places that have literally fallen off the map. From the border town of Ferozepur to Bhatinda with its ripening ears of wheat, the lonely outpost of Tawang and the rose-scented hill town of Palampur, Rachna spoke to parents, siblings and comrades of these soldiers. “I wanted the book to be more than just a narrative of how these men fared in battle. As I got familiar with their names, their memory coaxed me to go see the hills they climbed, the roads they walked, the girls they loved...”

The book, divided into eight sections each underlying the wars and operations India fought post-1947, relies heavily on Army records. “Most of the information was classified and it was initially difficult to get access. But the Commanding Officers of these regiments opened up documents, citations and war diaries and introduced me to the families of these heroes.”

The passages describing the brutal hand-to-hand combat and the lonely deaths are movingly written, but it is in bringing alive the memories of these men that the book roars into life.

And so, the first recipient of the PVC, Major Somnath Sharma, 24, who died in November 1947 in Kashmir, is still remembered fondly by his 90-year-old brother, a retired Lieutenant General. Lance Naik Karam Singh, the first to receive the PVC alive, went on to live a full life and died peacefully at home. And so the stories roll — of Major Rane’s wife who reminisces being swept off her feet by the gallant officer as a 19-year-old, Naik Yadunath Singh who is still a hallowed figure in the history of 4 Guards, Captain Gurbachan Singh Salaria who died far from home in the jungles of Congo, Major Dhan Singh Thapa who came back from the dead after enduring torture in a Chinese PoW camp, Havaldar Abdul Hamid from a remote village who went on to become a ferocious tank destroyer, the 21-year-old clarinet-playing 2nd Lieutenant Arun Khetarpal, whose memory lives on in the parade ground of the Indian Military Academy, Dehradun, and the three living PVCs, Subedar Major (retd) Bana Singh, Subedar Yogendar Singh Yadav and Havaldar Sanjay Kumar, who every Republic Day don their best uniforms, pin their medals and lead the parade down Rajpath.

“It was difficult to be objective but these were stories that had to be told; men we should never allow ourselves to forget,” says Rachna. “We owe a debt to their families and the book attempts not to mourn their deaths but celebrate their sacrifices.”

Is there one story that is closest to her heart? “Captain Manoj Pandey’s. It was the first I wrote. He came from a very modest family, but perhaps was the only one to have actually voiced his desire to win a PVC when asked why he wanted to join the Army. A gentleman with a smiling face who always volunteered for every mission, Manoj, for me, was the bravest of the brave.”

His story also brought home a war from our times, Kargil, and the poignant tale of Capt. Vikram Batra’s girlfriend who never married.

The book reinforces the ordinariness of these men's lives even in extraordinary times and keeps the reader riveted, beyond the fight till the last bullet, the last man and long after the last page.