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## Flags of our fathers



### **Fifty years after the 1965 Indo-Pak War, families of war heroes talk about what it means to live with their legacy**

It's a quiet Sunday morning and Jamil Alam's voice crackles on the telephone line. Above the roar of trains crisscrossing Varanasi Junction, he tells me in a heartland Hindi accent the story of his grandfather, Company Quartermaster Havildar Abdul Hamid. A hero of the 1965 Indo-Pak War, he is a posthumous recipient of the Param Vir Chakra (PVC), India's highest military decoration awarded for valour in the face of the enemy.

Jamil, 27, grew up hearing about Hamid from his grandmother Rasoolan Bibi. He read about him in textbooks and at the Grenadiers Regimental Centre, Jabalpur, where his exploits are carved in stone and celebrated every year. But Jamil accedes that in the half-century since the War, Hamid's courage and those of the others who fought alongside him are fading from public memory.

Says Rachna Bisht Rawat, author of *The Brave* that chronicles the heroism of the 21 PVC awardees, "When I was offered the book, it was Abdul Hamid's laminated picture on Mall Road, Ferozepur that I first saw. It stayed with me through the writing of *The Brave*. Although I am

from a Services background and had heard of Hamid, I knew little about his act of bravery. Every man who fought these wars is a hero, which is why these stories must be told. For their families, life is never the same.”

Lt. Col. Ardeshir Burzorji Tarapore of the Poona Horse was also awarded the PVC posthumously for the 1965 War. The War was a fallout of Operation Gibraltar, that saw Pakistan infiltrate forces into Jammu and Kashmir and India reacted by attacking West Pakistan — the 17-day War ended with the signing of the Tashkent Declaration.

Commissioned by the Army to write a book on the War, Rachna says, “India was yet to recover from the debacle of the 1962 War with China where men lacked everything but courage. So, winning in 1965 was a defining moment; the country felt vindicated.”

The part-pictorial book, scheduled to be released in September this year, will look at five battles — Asal Uttar, Hajipur, Dograi, Phillora and Barki — and six heroes — Lt. Col. A.B. Tarapore PVC, CQMH Abdul Hamid PVC, Maj. R.S. Dayal MVC, Lt. Col. D. Hayde MVC, Maj. Bhupinder Singh MVC and Lt. Col. N.N. Khanna MVC. “The accounts are going to be based on interviews with soldiers and officers. Some of these stories are interesting — Sqn Ldr A.B. Devayya, an Indian pilot whose plane had crashed in Pakistan, was awarded the MVC posthumously 23 years later, when John Fricker, a British writer commissioned by the Pakistan Air Force, unearthed his act of bravery. It was also a people’s war — Punjab’s farmers opened *langars* to feed soldiers,” says Rachna.

The War saw some of the largest tank battles since World War II, in which both CQMH Hamid and Lt. Col. Tarapore (the oldest recipient of the PVC) laid down their lives. “*Dadaji* came from a family of pehlwans and he showed the same courage in the Sino-Indian War and the Battle of Asal Uttar (befitting reply),” says Jamil. Hamid destroyed four Patton tanks with only recoilless guns mounted on an open jeep and fought off an entire Pakistan armoured division. The locals named the area, where nearly 70 captured tanks lay, as Patton Nagar.

The gracious Pune-based Zarine Mahir Boyce, daughter of Lt. Col. Tarapore, speaks in warm, measured tones, of a father who “often took my brother Xerxes and me on tank rides, picnics and hunts to the great outdoors where he taught us fishing. It was a happy life...” Lt. Col. Tarapore died a hero in the Battle of Chawinda, taking a direct hit when standing in the open cupola of his Centurion tank, Khushab, named after a famed battle during Britain’s Persian campaign.

“I was 15 when he died and he was cremated on the battlefield. It didn’t hit us till they brought home his ashes. Time heals but the lost years always hurt. I’m terribly proud that his regiment still considers him a legend even after 50 years; there must’ve been something to him.” And so these men live on — in war trophies that stand in Army cantonments across India, in the sugarcane fields where they beat back intruders, in a memorial park in a village and in the proud reminiscences of a dearly-loved daughter.