

BRAVEST OF THE BRAVE RAILWAYMEN OF INDIA WINNERS OF THE VICTORIA CROSS !

Before we dig out pages from the archives relating to the history of Indian Railways about the inspiring stories of railway men from India who won Victoria Crosses we must pause to know what the "Victoria Cross" is.

Victoria Cross is a small military medal in the shape of a Maltese Cross made of bronze. It is cast from a cannon captured at Sevastopol in South Crimea in Ukraine, then in the Russian Empire, and has the British Royal crown surmounted by a lion, under the famous motto, "For Valour". It is highly reputed throughout the world as the highest possible reward for heroism. It has been given not only to fighters of armed forces but even, though rarely, to civilians (under military command) for most conspicuous bravery "in the face of enemy". It has been awarded under every conceivable condition on land, and in the air, by day or in night in an armed attack or retreat. It can be awarded to a member of British and Commonwealth forces. Such is the glory of this reward that the bestowal of a Victoria Cross is considered a very high honour not only to the winner but to his country and even to his school/college, native village, town or city.

Constituted by Queen Victoria of Great Britain in 1856, the first Victoria Cross was won retrospectively by a British officer, Lieutenant Charles David Lucas, R.N. (Royal Navy) in Crimea while serving as a mate on the naval ship Hecla on 21st June, 1854. Till March, 2005, 1335 Victoria Crosses, have been awarded.

Just as an interesting aside, the honour to make the meticulously designed Victoria Cross medal has always been trusted to Messrs Hancock of Sackville Street, London ever since it was instituted.

Coming to the real story of Railway men of India, two names exist in history viz. Lieutenant Colonel Arthur Martin-Leake and Colonel William Spottiswoode Trevor both British who once served the railways in India. Let us see who they were and what they did to get this coveted honour.

Lieutenant Colonel Arthur Martin-Leake was born in Standon, Hertfordshire in England on 4 April, 1874. He qualified as a medical doctor in 1898 but joined Hertfordshire Company of the Imperial Yeomanry as a Trooper in 1899 as he could not find a job in his own profession. He was subsequently transferred to Baden Powell's Police and was commissioned in 1901 at the age of 27 years as a Surgeon Captain in the South African Constabulary, then Royal Army Medical Corps of the British Army. Later in 1903 he qualified as a F.R.C.S.

There was a bitter war, known as the Boer war, during 1899-1902 between South African Republic (Transvaal) and Orange Free State on one side against Great Britain on the other. The Boers (South Africans of Dutch descent) had long resented the British advance into South African territories and the hostility was inflamed after the discovery of gold (1886) brought a influx of British prospectors.

It was during the Boer War in a battle on 8 February, 1902 at Vlakfontein in South Africa, Martin-Leake as Surgeon Captain went out into the firing lane and attended a badly wounded soldier. There was a very heavy fire from about 40 Boers hardly 100 yards away. Then he went to the assistance of a wounded officer and while trying to place him in a comfortable position Martin-Leake was shot three times. He was wounded on the right arm and thigh with three

wounds but did not give in till he rolled over thoroughly exhausted .Nearby on the veldt 8 wounded soldiers lay and when Martin-Leake was offered water to help him he flatly refused till these men were served first. For this conspicuous bravery in the face of heavy enemy action he was given the highest gallantry award, the Victoria Cross. The award was gazette on 13 May, 1902.

Martin-Leake won his second Victoria cross as Surgeon Major an extremely rare feat as till today only three have done this - for most conspicuous bravery and devotion to duty throughout the Campaign during the period from 29 October to 8 November, 1914 during the Great War (the First world War). The climax of his bravery reached at Zonnebeke in Belgium during the War when he rescued a large number of wounded soldiers who were lying close to the enemy trenches. This award was gazetted on 18 February, 1915.

Since a twice winner of the same award (medal) is not given the same medal physically twice; as per military traditions only a clasp is awarded to the medal. It is called "Bar" to the medal as it is in the shape of a horizontal bar that is worn horizontally across the suspension ribbon on which the first medal is hung on the award-winner's left chest on his uniform.

Martin- Leake later rose to the rank of a Lieutenant Colonel in Royal Army Corps and today after winning the Victoria Cross twice, we must remember him in military parlance as Major General Arthur Martin-Leake ,Bar to VC, F.R.C.S.

As regards Martin -Leake's railway connection, after being demobbed from the Army ,he came to India and joined the Bengal Nagpur Company Ltd.(B.N.R.) in Calcutta as its Chief Medical Officer(CMO).Unfortunately because of lack of preservation of Indian Railways' historical records and our indifference to the railway heritage we could not have any material to know of Martin-Leake's work as a medical railway man . However, a 27 -page pamphlet ,dated 17 August, 1917, published by B.N.R. Hqrs Office entitled "War Record of Officers & Men" of the B.N.R. inter alia proudly details the citation for award of Bar to VC to the then Surgeon Major A. M. Leake , V.C., F.R.C.S. Only other reference to him that one can find is in an article in July 1947 issue of B. N. R.'s in house magazine.

Martin Leake, a young tall and very handsome man comes out as a swashbuckling, fun-loving, colorful and a very adventurous man. Unassuming and self-less he was untouched and unruffled by the rarest aura and glory that was inevitably bestowed on him because of his winning not one but two Victoria Crosses. The story goes that when the second Victoria Cross (clasp) was to be awarded to him he was not available for the ceremony as he had escaped to the jungles to track the wild elephants. On another occasion the elite Bengal Club of Calcutta, of which he was a very distinguished member, had an oil painting made of him which was to be unveiled and at which ceremony he had been invited to be present. To escape that, he disappeared once again; this time, preferring to hunt a man-eating tiger in Bengal's jungles!

Martin Leake had two brothers also employed on the B.N.R. They were Sammy Leake (the elder), the Superintending Engineer, and Dicky Leak, the District Engineer. These brother engineers had supervised one of the most difficult and interesting bridges over the Roop Narain River at Kolaghat about 52 kms from Calcutta. Martin Leake , whenever he could find time, would go to his these two brothers to relax in their bungalow on a bit high ground overlooking the river and the bridge. They would sit together in the evening on their verandah facing out to the bridge enjoying themselves with smoking and 'chhota pegs ', comparing notes of the day in quite tones and watch the sun set and the natural scenery. Martin Leake sometimes took time off from his job in Calcutta to join them at their work site too. He would find a diversion

discussing his brothers' trials and tribulations of the difficult task on their hands of the construction of the great bridge. Martin Leake, true to his nature and mission of alleviating human suffering, also volunteered his services in the Second World War and worked as a surgeon in a mobile medical unit. His Victoria Cross medal is displayed in the Army Medical Services Museum, at Aldershot in England.

He died on 22 June, 1953 at the age of 79 years, and was buried in St. John's Church, High Cross, Hertfordshire in England. His grave was refurbished a few years ago by his siblings accompanied by ceremonial military honours at the site on this solemn occasion. We wonder, if today, the South Eastern Railway successor of the equally famous B.N.R., is aware of its glorious historical distinction in the rarest acquisition of one of its officers namely Arthur Martin Leake.

Now we move to the next Victoria Cross railway man; Colonel William Spottiswoode Trevor who achieved the highest post of Director General, Railways in the Government of India in 1880-81. Only evidence of his railway work that we could come across is his voluminous "Administration Report on Railways in India for 1880-81" sent to Britain from India in 1882. His post of Director General of Railways could be compared with that of existing Chairman Railway Board.

We shall see later how. Let us trace briefly Trevor's career first.

Born in India on 9 October, 1831 Trevor was commissioned as Second Lieutenant in Royal Engineers (Bengal Engineers of Indian Army) on 11 December, 1849. After several army postings and distinguishing himself in active service including in Second Burma War in 1852, he came to the then Public Works Department of the Government of India as an engineer where he rose to the post of Chief Engineer. From there he became in charge of the State Railways as its top officer then designated as the Director General of Railways. The State (Government) Railways then was a "branch" under the Public Works Department of the Central Government. Under a plan for re-organisation of the supervision and control of the Guaranteed Railways and the State Railways which had been leased for working to railway companies all financial powers and day-to-day management were vested either in the Consulting Engineers or the Government. On behalf of the Government of India for this purpose an exclusive post of Director General of Railways was established 1879 for managing these Railways. The Director General was to be assisted by several other officials like Director of Construction; Director of State Railways, Stores; Three Assistants to the Director General of Railways; Accountant General Railways etc.

The designation, Director General of Railways, through successive administrative reforms, became Secretary to the Government of India, Public Works Department; President; Chairman Railway Board; President of the Railway Board; Chief Commissioner of the Railway Board; and finally the Chairman Railway Board! The Railway Board came in existence in March, 1905.

"Administration Report for Railways for 1880-81" dispatched by him in 1882 to their Head Office in England shows him as:

Colonel W.S. Trevor, VC, R.E.
DIRECTOR GENERAL OF RAILWAYS

"R.E. expands to "Royal Engineers" the arm of Indian Army, where Trevor came from. Finally he became a Major General.

Incidentally in 1879-80, the first Director General Of Railways was none other than his elder brother Major General John Salusbury Trevor, R.E. ,(also a civil engineer like W.S.Trevor from Royal Engineers),who had worked for several years in various railway companies as chairman and also in Railway Department of the Government of India in various capacities before rising to the top slot. Incidentally he was also born in India in Cawnpore (now Kanpur).

"Administration Report for Railways for 1879-80' was his work as Director General of Railways. What an amazing railway family in India! Let us hasten to add that those days many railway companies and the State Railways had several regular serving army engineers on their role in various technical and managerial capacities. Now the story of William S. Trevor's winning the rare decoration of valour namely the Victoria Cross.

In 1864 a civil war broke out in Bhutan, the British wishing to protect their interests sent a peace mission to restore order. The British mission's attempts to broker peace were rejected so Britain declared war on Bhutan in November,1864.Bhutan armed with matchlocks, bows, swords and arrows, knives, and catapults were no match for the well-equipped British and Indian force and were defeated in five months. As a Major in the Indian army during this Bhutan war on 30 April, 1865 at Deewan Giri in Bhutan about 200 enemy fighters had barricaded themselves in the blockhouse which they continue to defend after the rest of the position had been cleared, and their main body was in retreat. The blockhouse which was loopholed was the key of the enemy's position .Seeing no officer of the storming party near him and being anxious that the place be taken immediately as any protracted resistance might have caused the main body of the Bhutanese to rally the General in command ordered the two officers present including Major Trevor to show the way into the blockhouse. The British force had been fighting in a sweltering summer sun on a very steep and treacherous ground for over three hours so it was quite a hardy task. Major Trevor encountered a fourteen feet high wall to scale and then to enter a house, occupied by some 200 desperate enemies. He did it head foremost through an opening not more than 2 feet wide between the top of the wall and roof of the blockhouse. It was because of Major Trevor's extraordinary personal example and leadership that the Sikh troops followed him with greatest alacrity. Earlier his Major General's exhortation in Hindustani to same body of soldiers to do that had had no effect. Trevor was wounded in the battle.

For this highest bravery in Bhutan War (1864-66) Trevor was awarded the prestigious Victoria Cross on 23 March, 1868 by Major General Fordyce, commanding the Presidency Division at The Maidan in Calcutta.

His Victoria Cross is displayed in Royal Engineers' Museum, Gillingham, Kent , England. He died on 2 November, 1907 and lies buried in Kensal Green Cemetery (Plot 179/PS/31775), London, England

Thus end the revelations of unprecedented bravery in wars by Railway Officers as a part of Indian Railways'rich history. A Chief Medical Officer of a Railway and an officer who rose to be the top executive of the entire Government Railways as their Director General! We can pride ourselves as we had an exemplary versatile railway man as CRB who was a VC perhaps the rarest record!

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