

BIOGRAPHY:

Major-General Premangsu Chowdry, PVSM, FRGS

Major-General Premangsu Chowdry, one of the Institute's few remaining World War II veterans, turned 100-years-old on 1 May 2020. To mark the occasion, the Board elected him to Life Membership.

Premangsu Chowdry (known to his friends as 'Prem') was born and raised in East Bengal (now Bangladesh). At the outbreak of World War II, he joined the British Indian Army and was commissioned into the Royal Garhwal Rifles in December 1941. He was posted as a 2nd Lieutenant to the 3rd Battalion.

World War II

In North Africa in 1942, as part of the 5th Indian Division, the battalion took part in the 'Battle of Tobruk', which cost the battalion 12 officers and over 500 soldiers. The battalion was then withdrawn to Cyprus for six-months of rest and reinforcement during which Prem participated in raids into the Greek islands.

From early 1943 to May 1945 as part of the 10th Indian Division, the battalion took part in the Italian Campaign. Initially, it was deployed in the Taranto, Eastern and Central Sectors along the Apennine Mountains and undertook assault river crossings at Sangro, Garigliano and Senio. Subsequently, it took part in the battles of Monte Grande and Cassino. Prem served sequentially as the Battalion Signals Officer, a support platoon commander, Assistant Adjutant, a rifle company commander and Headquarters Company commander. He was mentioned-in-despatches (MiD) for his outstanding operational performance and, in 1944, he was promoted to major. The battalion earned the battle honours: Gallabat, Barentu, Massawa, Keren, Amba Alagi, and Città di Castello. It also earned the theatre honours: North Africa 1940-43 and Italy 1943-45.

In mid-1945, the battalion was sent to the Italian border on a 3-months' assignment to prevent Yugoslavian partisans under Marshal Josef Tito entering the Italian-speaking province of Istria (currently in Croatia) to which Yugoslavia had laid claim at the end of World War I. Prem was instrumental in accomplishing this politically-sensitive assignment.

Post-War Indian Army

In October 1945, Prem returned to India with his battalion which deployed in the North West Frontier Province (in current Pakistan) to suppress an Hazara tribal uprising in Waziristan and the Swat Valley. During the 1948 India-Pakistan war, the battalion deployed in Kashmir. They cleared the Baramullah-Uri axis under heavy odds and Prem earned a second MiD for gallantry.

Following the 1948 war, Prem was given command of the 3rd Battalion, 5th Gorkha Rifles (Frontier Force). In September 1948, the battalion provided support to the police in Hyderabad, a Nizam-ruled princely state, to ensure that the state remained in the Indian Union. The battalion supported the civil administration with Prem acting as the civil administrator.

In December 1950, Prem became General Staff Officer Grade 1 (GSO1), Headquarters British Commonwealth

Occupation Force (BCOF) in Japan then commanded Lieutenant-General Sir Horace Robertson, an Australian, who also appointed Prem as the BCOF Liaison Officer at Headquarters United Nations Forces in Japan under General Douglas MacArthur. In 1951, Prem was posted as GSO1 at Headquarters, British Commonwealth Division, in Korea.

In October 1952, Prem returned to India and took command of the 2nd Battalion, 5th Gorkha Rifles (Frontier Force). In 1953, he married Sheila Devichand in New Delhi.

In 1954, Prem attended the Joint Services Staff College in England and then served on exchange with the British Army of the Rhine and later with the Royal Air Force and the Royal Navy.

Back in India from 1955 to 1960, several staff and training postings followed before, aged 40, he was promoted to brigadier and took command of the 114th Infantry Brigade in Ladakh.

At the end of 1960, Prem was appointed as commandant of the Ethiopian Military Academy and as an unofficial military advisor to Emperor Haile Selassie. In 1962, Prem's advice to the Emperor contributed to the Emperor overcoming an internal coup.



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In 1963, Prem took command of the 120th Infantry Brigade. In 1965, he became acting chief-of-staff of 1st Corps at Mathura which took part in the second India-Pakistan war. Prem earned another MiD for his exemplary contribution to the war effort.

In 1967 aged 47, Prem was posted as the General Officer Commanding (GOC) Madhya Pradesh Area. The following year, he took command of the 3rd Infantry Division

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at Leh which he commanded until 1970. Prem earned the Param Vishisht Seva Medal (PVSM)¹ during this command both for his overall meritorious service and specifically for his direction of a disaster relief programme following an earthquake in the Ladakh region.

In December 1970, Prem became GOC Bengal Area which included responsibility for dealing with a Naxalite uprising in Bengal. He had under his operational control the three Army divisions then based in Bengal, the Railway, the State Police, the Central Reserve Police Force, the Border Security Force and the Home Guards. During the 1971 India-Pakistan war, which led to the creation of Bangladesh, Prem's Bengal Area managed thousands of refugees pouring into India from East Pakistan. His headquarters had to co-ordinate the entire

¹The Param Vishisht Seva Medal is awarded in recognition of exceptional military service in peace-time.

logistics and movement of people and goods by rail and road in the region as part of the war effort.

Post-Army Life

On 30 April 1974, after 33 years of meritorious service, Prem retired from the Army to pursue a career in business. Prem held senior executive positions in the corporate and public sectors, converting loss-making enterprises into profitable ones. In 1983 aged 63, Prem retired permanently. He and Sheila thereafter spent time with their three sons in Sydney and Dubai. Since Sheila's death, Prem has resided in Sydney with his eldest son, Rahoul.

Prem is a Fellow of the Royal Geographical Society (United Kingdom) and a Life Member of both the Royal United Services institute for Defence and Security Studies, New South Wales, and the United Service Institution of India.

Joseph Matthews and David Leece²

²This is an abstract, prepared by the editor, of a lengthier biography of General Chowdry written by Colonel Joseph Matthews, Indian Army (Retired), based on interviews he held with General Chowdry in Sydney in 2019.