

# A Soldier on the Battlefield and in Love Fragments from the Life of an Army Chief

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The beginnings of World War II and the birth of the Regiment of Artillery (Indian Army) were almost synchronous. The Indian Gunners, therefore, received baptism in war both from the Panzers of Rommel and the Nippon savages of Kimura. Captain PP Kumaramangalam, as befitting the “seed” of Indian Gunner Officers, became the first gallantry awardee and the only Distinguished Service Order (DSO) of the Gunners in World War II. The scene of action was south of Bir Hachiem (today’s Libya) where the 3 Indian Motor Brigade, with just 28 field guns but without a single tank, was deployed to face over 300 tanks and 150 field guns of Rommel’s Afrika Korps. Once the battle was joined, it was over in less than two hours, the Germans losing 84 tanks of which 56 fell to our field guns. One German tank was just 30 m away when hit by No 3 Gun of 07 Field Battery and its Battery Commander stood erect and fully exposed throughout, motivating the gun detachment! And that was the true measure of Major PP Kumaramangalam, always Kay, to family and friends. Two days later, he, along with a dozen survivors, would return to the devastated gun area and retrieve 16 of their 28 guns (a few of which remained in action till the end of World War II). However, a month later, on a deep penetration mission, he was taken prisoner.

As the senior Indian Prisoner of War (POW), Kay encouraged fellow Indians to escape from prison. Most bids were foiled in the making and the few POWs who succeeded in fleeing, were soon recaptured. So the Germans decided to shift all Indian POWs to Italy and lodged them in Prison

Colditz. However, Kay and his friend Sahibzada Yakub Khan (son of the Nawab of Rampur and grandson of the Begum of Bhopal, later a Lieutenant General and Pakistan's Ambassador to the USA), made a clean break and sought shelter with an obliging Italian farming family. Some six months later, the host-family felt that they were being watched and felt constrained to warn their guests of the lurking danger. Before they sneaked away, the lady of the house removed her gold necklace and gifted it to Kay as a good luck charm.

A few days after this, one dark night, Kay slipped and fell, and, unfortunately, fractured an ankle. He was recaptured, and this time he and other POWs were moved to Stalag Luft III, in Germany. Following the German capitulation in May, 1945, all Indian prisoners were first taken to the UK and then in August, repatriated to Bombay. There, Kay was in his elements the moment he saw a hoarding at the docks, announcing the horse racing season at the Mahalaxmi Race Course. Horses were Kay's first love and the thought of reunion with his parents was temporarily shelved! He set about looking for lodgings but found none due to the post World War II rush of Britons in Bombay, awaiting repatriation to the UK. Luckily, he chanced upon an acquaintance who took him to his friend Bharucha, and the family's sprawling bungalow, overlooking the Mahalaxmi Race Course itself! The Bharucha household took to Kay as warmly as had his Italian hosts and after this Kay's personal life was to change forever. For, Ms Piloo Bharucha, also educated in England and an accomplished horse-woman, was also the most eligible spinster of Bombay! No sooner had Kay and Piloo stolen a glance at each other than they were to "*remain as one till death do us part*".

Shortly, Kay was to fly out to London once again, to attend an investiture ceremony at Buckingham Palace. For every act of valour recorded from the field of battle, there are countless which go unnoticed and so remain unrewarded. It has, therefore, become an accepted practice that in rewarding a few, nations, in fact, pay tribute to the whole phalanx of known and unknown bravehearts. Axiomatically, the investiture ceremonies performed by the heads of respective nations become moments of solemn dignity, surrounded in splendour.

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Having pinned the DSO on Kay, the King enquired how it felt to be back at home with his kin? On hearing the reply in effortless, fluent, King's English, it was natural that the monarch should enquire, "Where were you educated?" "At Eton College, Your Majesty." The King reached out smiling, and holding Kay by both shoulders said, "Good Luck, Captain." That was October 1945 and in June 1966, Kay would indeed be the Chief of the Army Staff (COAS)!

There is one episode following that investiture which must needs be recounted and recorded lest it be lost in times to come. When this gallant Major hurriedly slipped away from the Buckingham Palace ceremony, he headed straight for London's premier perfumery on Regent Street for a bottle of perfume, for who else but Piloo! When he came out and walked to his car, he was confronted by a policeman for a car-parking infringement. The Bobby enquired "Is this your car"? Kay merely nodded and the policeman said "May I have your name". In his typical unhurried, Etonian drawl and perhaps with a tinge of mischief, Kay replied, "Paramashiva Prabhakaran Kumaramangalam" to which the flustered Bobby responded "I ain't going to write all that for a mere 10 shilling fine. Don't do it again, Sir."

All POW camp repatriates were given six month leave to reunite with their families. Kay was by nature very reclusive and he was particularly shy and tongue-tied in the presence of women. Yet, paradoxically, he simply could not bear the thought of separation from Piloo. So after the briefest of visits to his parents, near Bangalore, Kay returned to the Bharuchas at Bombay. On termination of his leave, he was posted to an Air Defence Regiment at Quetta. No one knows whether they were *per se* engaged but we do know that Mr. Bharucha not only ensured comfortable and secure lodgings for Piloo at Quetta but also four horses and staff. So Kay and Piloo were on horseback, every morning and evening. Once again, the interlude was short-lived because the Army Headquarters had bigger things in store for Kay. They detailed him on a year-long Advance Gunnery Course at Fort Sill, USA. Undaunted, about a month later, Piloo reached the USA and they entered into a court marriage, registered at the Indian Embassy, Washington! When Kay returned to India, he was promoted to Brigadier, and appointed the first Indian Commandant of the School of Artillery, Deolali. Henceforth, they would move from one but always to the next Flag Staff House, with a string of noisy and sleek, black and tan Dachshunds, ending their Army journey at the Army House, New Delhi in July, 1969.

On the penultimate afternoon, Kay's friends at Delhi had organised a farewell polo match. Astride his polo pony, Kay was into the game in full stride. He had worn the good luck charm gifted by his Italian hosts ever since, but lost it that afternoon, barely days before demitting the office of the COAS, probably while changing a sweat-soaked polo shirt. The entire household staff of Army House was drafted to comb out every inch of the ground, but to no avail. Kay was visibly saddened.

As with his three predecessor COAS, he too received offers for assignments both from the government and some corporate houses but Kay remained firm in his resolve to live on the family farm at Hossur (off Bangalore), in peace and dignity. However, Zafar Futehally, a horse riding buddy did prevail and Kay accepted to be the president of the nascent World Wildlife Fund, India, but finding it alien to his disciplined work ethos, he resigned in less than a year!

Kay had chosen to spend his last two days in Army service at the Defence Services Staff College, Wellington. As may be imagined, he rode after hounds on the Ooty Downs and spent the evenings at the Ooty Gymkhana Races. Kay jockeyed in the last race and crossed the finishing line, as it were, of his long and chequered career on the last evening in Army uniform to the drumming of horse hoof beats! And like a true soldier, simply faded away.

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