

Major Sudhir Walia died fighting terrorists in Jammu and Kashmir on August 29, 1999.

He was 31.

Just a month earlier he had led his elite commando infantry unit -- the 9 Parachute Commandos -- on an assault on Zulu Ridge in the Kargil war.

The Pakistani troops had begun their pullout from the Kargil region by that time but some invaders remained on the Zulu top at a height of 5,200 metres in the Mushkoh region of Jammu and Kashmir.

On July 25, 1999 -- a day before Vijay Diwas or Victory Day which commemorates the end of the Kargil war -- Major Walia and his team captured Zulu Ridge. Thirteen enemy soldiers were killed. There were five casualties on the Indian side.



For his valour and leadership in the face of the enemy Major Walia was recommended for a Vir Chakra, India's third highest award for gallantry in battle. His battalion was called the bravest of the brave for the recapture of the ridge.

A few days later, when General Ved Prakash Malik, Chief of the Army Staff, arrived in Srinagar

to review the situation at the corp headquarters, he met Sudhir briefly before he went into the meeting.

Two years before the Kargil war, Sudhir Walia had reported to his office in New Delhi as his aide-de-camp. That morning in Srinagar he was wearing the Viet Cong cap that was given to them on an official trip to Vietnam, remembers General Malik over the phone from his home in Panchkula, Haryana.

"Why did you go on the mission without proper acclimatisation, I asked him [about the attack on Zulu Ridge]," recalls General Malik, "He laughed and said -- 'Sir, I'm a *pahari* [hill dweller], I don't need to be acclimatised.'"

If you go to Major Walia's home, this is the first picture you will see in his verandah; the citation of the Ashok Chakra.

Major Sudhir Walia's story is one that will make you proud. **W**hen the Kargil war ended, 9 Para was assigned to fight terrorism in Jammu and Kashmir.

Major Walia opted for anti-terrorist operations and led his men into every mission with exemplary valour.

'I won't die in an accident or die of any disease,' he would often



tell his mother, 'I will go down in glory.'

The end came just the way he wanted it to be.

On Sunday, August 29, 1999, a month after the Kargil war ended, his team was ordered to demolish a terrorist hideout in the thick Haphruda jungle in Kupwara district.

Major Walia had threaded through the forest the whole night, but the enemy remained elusive.

In the morning as he went past a stream, he spotted toothpaste foam by the edge of the water. He knew the terrorists were within striking distance and stealthily caught up with them.

In a daring combat action he killed nine of the 20 terrorists, but was critically wounded when a bullet ripped through his stomach. He could not move but continued to command his men till they vanquished the enemy.

'Only after 35 minutes when the fighting stopped he permitted his own evacuation,' reads the citation in his home.

After the fighting stopped Sudhir was taken by a military helicopter to the army base. "He could not make it," says his mother, wiping her tears with the *dupatta* covering her head. "He passed away en route."

For his mother Rajeshwari Devi, Sudhir was the perfect son, a boy who would sleep on the floor and iron her clothes when he was home. How many sons would do that?