

Lieutenant-Colonel  
Mahmood Khan  
Durrani GC



# HERO *of the* MONTH

By Lord Ashcroft

ABOVE: Mahmood  
Durrani GC TRACES  
OF WAR

ABOVE LEFT: Durrani's  
George Cross, which is  
displayed in London's  
Imperial War Museum  
IWM OMD 5297A

The ability of some individuals to endure sustained torture is quite remarkable. Yet few men or women have survived the level of brutality inflicted on Mahmood Durrani for months on end during World War Two.

His courage undoubtedly saved his own life and those of the men who worked with him, it also resulted in his place in the history books as the only Japanese POW to be awarded the George Cross and to survive his wartime ordeal.

Born in Multan City, Western Punjab, India (now Pakistan) on July 1, 1914, Mahmood Khan Durrani was the son of Shahzada Hafees Ullah Khan Sadozzi, who was a surveyor and botanist. Durrani was educated at the Government Pilot Secondary School in Multan.

At some point in the early 1930s, Durrani was recruited into the Nawab of Bahawalpur's forces, the intention being for him to join the Nawab's bodyguard. In May 1935, Durrani was commissioned as a second lieutenant into the Bahawalpur State Forces. After being promoted to lieutenant in December 1938, he underwent extensive signals and mountain warfare training. After the outbreak of World War Two in September 1939, the

Nawab of Bahawalpur placed his forces at the disposal of the British.

Durrani had continued to serve in the military. From 1941, he served in Malaya and in March that year he was promoted to acting captain in the 1st Bahawalpur Infantry. After Malaya was overrun by the Japanese in 1942 and by this point a captain, Durrani and a small party were cut off from their colleagues. Three men, including Durrani, remained in hiding for three months before they were betrayed and seized by the enemy-sponsored Indian Nationalist Army (INA).

### Double agent

Durrani was sent to a POW camp where he refused to become a member of the INA, led by the Cambridge-educated Subhas Chandra Bose and which eventually totalled some 40,000 men. Not only did Durrani refuse to join the INA, but he did all he could to gather intelligence on this subversive organisation and, in particular, its attempts to infiltrate members into India.

However, at one point he acted as a double agent, setting up a school, the Sandicraft School, to send men back to India "to champion the Nationalist

ideology of the Indian National Congress". It was a dangerous ploy: on the face of it he was training agents to land from submarines and engage in sabotage in India. In fact, these men had been hand-picked by Durrani to spy for Britain. However, the Japanese became suspicious of his activities and they arrested him in May 1944.

From around June 6 they started to torture him brutally in order to identify his accomplices. Cigarettes were stubbed out on his legs, but Durrani told his captors nothing. He was then handed over to the INA, who tortured him further and condemned him to death. But Bose wanted to extract a confession from Durrani under torture before executing him. During this time, he was kept for long periods in solitary confinement and fed with only tiny amounts of poor food. Throughout his months of interrogation and torture by various organisations, he never divulged any information that could have been of use to the enemy.

Durrani's life was only saved when Japanese Emperor Hirohito surrendered to the Allies after the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. After the war, Durrani returned to Multan City, which

*"Durrani was kept for long periods in solitary and fed with only tiny amounts of food. Throughout months of interrogation and torture, he never divulged any information"*

Indian Army troops marching in Malaya. British India had a vastly important role in World War Two, particularly in Burma and the Far East AWM





The Memorial Gates at Hyde Park Corner/Constitution Hill commemorate people from five countries of the Indian subcontinent, Africa and the Caribbean who served for Britain in both world wars. The dome of the pavilion honours 74 VC and GC recipients, including Durrani  
LOOP/ALAMY

became part of Pakistan after partition. His extensive injuries resulting from his torture required long-term treatment, including spells in hospital.

### Interrogated every night

Durrani was awarded the GC on May 23, 1946 in recognition of “most conspicuous gallantry in carrying out hazardous work in a very brave manner”. The official recommendation for the decoration concluded: “His outstanding example of deliberate cold-blooded bravery is most fully deserving of the highest award.” He received his GC from Field Marshal Lord Wavell, the Viceroy, at a military parade in the Indian capital of Delhi.

In September 1946, Durrani married Shahzadi Razia Sultana in Ludhiana, India, and the couple went on to have five sons and three daughters. In the same year, he was promoted to major in the post-partition Pakistani military and two years later to lieutenant-colonel, the rank at which he retired in 1950.

His autobiography, *The Sixth Column: The heroic personal story of Mahmood Khan Durrani*, in which he graphically describes his wartime suffering, was first published in 1955. In a chilling chapter entitled *Arrest and Torture*, he described how, already weak from dysentery and starvation, he was given no food or water for two days and was then interrogated

by a Japanese captain, through an interpreter, for about three hours.

He wrote: “The Jap captain wielded his sword over my head every now and then, particularly when my mental energy failed and I sat dumbfounded like a piece of stone. In order to wake me up from such a state of mental deterioration and make me speak, all three Japs applied their smouldering red-hot cigarette ends to my legs and kept them there until they were extinguished. But my body proved to be almost dead to this torture to start with, and I felt the intensity of the pain only when I gained full consciousness later. This physical unconsciousness was probably due to my over consciousness about and determination not to make any mistake in answering the tricky questions shot at me by the captain.

“After about three hours of interrogation every night, I was ordered to move from the chair. But each time I could not, my whole body being paralysed; there appeared to be hardly any blood circulating in my veins. To remedy this inertia, cigarette ends were tapped on my legs by all the Japs present, causing burns, the acute pain of which brought me back to consciousness. Some massage of my legs was also done by them. Then two Japs supported me under the armpits and dragged me along, with my face covered, and hurled me

back into my cell. At the end of these three days and nights, I was left a heap of lifeless bone and flesh, remaining all the time in a fainting condition.”

### Unconquerable fortress

At his next destination, the INA concentration camp, he was sentenced to death and a firing squad was lined up. However, Bose’s determination to force a confession from his Muslim prisoner saved Durrani’s life. “You have got to confess eventually and meet your fate, so why undergo tortures unnecessarily,” Bose told him.

He was later brutally whipped and his fingers were crushed in specially designed presses, but still he refused to confess. Next, he was subjected to ‘water treatment’, almost drowning under a stream of running water. Durrani wrote in his book: “It may interest the reader to know how I felt when I stood before the firing squad or when I underwent the tortures and what I did at those particular moments.

“On that fateful evening of my trial, even prior to it, I was determined to die honourably and contentedly; for I had undertaken the hazardous task voluntarily and with full realisation of the consequences that could be nothing short of capital punishment. Arguing thus, I made up my mind that I should

not be sorry for dying at all. But when I was facing the firing squad, a strange and most grievous feeling crept over me; I felt it a great pity that I was dying while nobody in the whole world, except my enemies, knew how and why. Yet that was the only human weakness which I could not overcome at what appeared to be the last minutes of my life.

“As to my feelings whenever I underwent tortures at the hands of the INA people, I was fired with a righteous wrath – a wrath more intense than that when I was tortured by the Japs – and my mind strengthened beyond imagination. I scorned my torturers as the scum of the Indian people, who, I thought, might go ahead this time with their mean mentality and blackest butchery, but who would eventually have to pay for it.

“And so, every time they tortured me grievously, I said to myself, ‘Let them go ahead with their tortures and do anything with me, but by the grace of God they will not be able to subdue my spirit and make me do anything like making a confession’, which would be no less mean an act than the acts of those butchers.

“When not under any torture, I had moments of fear and hopelessness. I brooded over the next torture that might be in store. And when I thought of this, I realised at once that my heart was so weak that if a slight stroke were given on the body I would succumb to it immediately; but it surprises me to remember that such a heart as I had in those days would soon turn into an unconquerable fortress once the tortures began. As I underwent the torture tests, I laughed contemptuously in my mind at the futile attempts of my



INA leader Subhas Chandra Bose in Germany, where he met with Hitler. Members of the INA were considered traitors by the British and many Indian troops, but local sympathies for the Nationalists grew post-war as India neared independence  
HISTORY & ART COLLECTION/ALAMY

torturers to defeat me in keeping my sacred resolve.”

### No one more loyal

Mahmood Durrani was one of the first members of the George Cross Committee of the Victoria Cross and George Cross Association. He and his wife attended a garden party hosted by the Queen for association members in July 1962. In 1968 Brigadier Sir John ‘Jackie’ Smyth, the VC recipient and author, wrote of Durrani: “The British Commonwealth holds no more loyal and enthusiastic supporter than Colonel Mahmood Durrani.”

Durrani was a respected writer and poet after the war, and also had many articles published in the *Pakistan Times*. He died in the Combined Military Hospital in Multan,

Pakistan, on August 20, 1995, aged 81. He was buried the next day in a family grave in the Cantonment area of Multan.

His name is engraved on the Memorial Gates, Hyde Park, central London. The gates, also known as the Commonwealth Memorial Gates, were erected to honour the 5,000,000 men and women from the Indian subcontinent, Africa and the Caribbean who served with the British Armed Forces in both world wars. The memorial was inaugurated by Queen Elizabeth II in 2002.

I do not own the Durrani GC, but it is on display at the Lord Ashcroft Gallery at the Imperial War Museum in central London. [BW](#)

***“Let them go ahead with their tortures and do anything with me, but by the grace of God they will not be able to subdue my spirit”***

MAHMOOD DURRANI GC



Durrani's name (right-hand panel) as engraved on the Memorial Gates pavilion CARCHAROTH

### GEORGE CROSS HEROES



Lord Ashcroft KCMG PC is a businessman, philanthropist, author and pollster. His book *George Cross Heroes* was published in 2010 and is available in hardback and paperback. For more

information, visit [georgecrossheroes.com](http://georgecrossheroes.com).

Lord Ashcroft's VC and GC collection is on public display at the Imperial

War Museum, London. For

details, go to [iwm.org.uk/heroes](http://iwm.org.uk/heroes)

and information about

his VC collection may be

found at [lordashcroftmedals.com](http://lordashcroftmedals.com).

For more on Lord

Ashcroft's work, visit

[lordashcroft.com](http://lordashcroft.com). View Lord

Ashcroft's work on gallantry

here [lordashcroftonbravery.com](http://lordashcroftonbravery.com).

Follow him on Twitter

and/or Facebook

@LordAshcroft

