

A Legacy of Strength and Perseverance

Category: Grit

written by Neeta Nayak | January 4, 2025

As a noun, grit is defined as “courage and resolve, strength of character.” It often emerges in the face of great challenges. We associate grit with heroic figures: army captains holding their ground against tremendous odds, navy commanders saving sinking ships, air force pilots navigating disaster zones. Yet, many gritty individuals remain unsung heroes, quietly shaping lives. My maternal grandfather was one such hero.

Born the youngest son of a landowner, his life changed when his father died young and his eldest brother inherited all the property. Left vulnerable, he was advised to become the town’s tailor to earn a livelihood. But he was determined to become a doctor, so he moved to Bombay (now Mumbai) and worked nights in a shipyard while putting himself through medical school. Somedays he went without knowing where his next meal would come from. It was sheer grit that earned him an MBBS in the 1930s.

A newly minted doctor, just married, with an infant daughter, he was called to serve as an army surgeon during World War II. The British ruled India, and the world was in chaos. With Hitler advancing and Japan gaining strength, Indians were drafted into the Allied forces. My grandfather was sent to Persia (now Iran) and thereabouts, where WW ll was raging in full force.

On the battlefield, he treated horrific injuries with limited supplies, suturing bleeding wounds with bare hands. Gloves were a luxury, and repeated needle sticks unfortunately led to hepatitis C. More devastating was the PTSD that haunted him for life. He would speak with me, an eleven year old at the time, for hours about the vision of severed legs, torn arms, blinded eyes, gunshots to the head, and soldiers looking to him as their last hope of surviving another day. Even as he battled liver cancer, in his final months before death, the horrors of war weighed heavily on his mind.

Despite his anguish, my gritty grandfather returned to civilian life, raising a family and serving patients with unwavering dedication. In a time when discussing mental health was taboo and could get one labeled “crazy,” he bore his pain silently, refusing to let it define him.

In my eyes, he was a hero—unsung and unrecognized. His unyielding grit remains a source of hope and confidence for his descendants, inspiring us to persevere through our own challenges!

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