

## Asian American and Pacific Islander Heritage Month: Surindar Bhaskar, DDS, PhD

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### Maj. Gen. Surindar N. Bhaskar, DDS, PhD, 1923-2016

*By Emma Florio, Special Collections Library Assistant*

Surindar Nath Bhaskar was born on January 7, 1923, in the Indian state of Punjab. He completed an undergraduate degree in dentistry at the University of the Punjab at age 19 and practiced general dentistry in Bombay (now known as Mumbai) for a short time. In 1942, he boarded a troop ship and came to the United States, at a time when there were few Indian immigrants in the country. He settled in Chicago where he began attending Northwestern University Dental School on a scholarship. He earned his DDS in 1946 and went on to receive an MS and a PhD from the University of Illinois at Chicago in 1948 and 1951, respectively. He met Norma Zeigle, an artist and former nurse, at a 1948 social at the University of Chicago International House where they were the two best dancers. They wed in 1950, on Bhaskar's 27th birthday, and were married for 66 years. They had three sons.

In 1955, after working as an instructor in histology at the University of Illinois' College of Dentistry, Bhaskar entered the United States Army Dental Corps. As his son explained years later, Bhaskar was naturalized as a United States citizen in 1954 and he wanted to give back to his new country. Over the next 20 years he would rise in the ranks to eventually become a Major General and Chief of the Corps. He first worked with the Armed Forces Institute of Pathology in Washington, DC, then in 1962 became the Chief of the Department of Dental and Oral Pathology at the US Army Institute of Dental Research as well as a consultant on oral pathology to the Surgeon General. From 1970 to 1973 he was Director of the Institute of Dental Research and Director of Personnel and Training in the Office of the Surgeon General from 1973 to 1975. While in DC he also was on the faculty of Georgetown's School of Dentistry. During his career he researched the use of pressurized water for the cleaning of wounds and appeared in newspapers across the country as an advocate for brushing the tongue as well as teeth to maintain oral hygiene.



*Bhaskar's dental school class of 1946 portrait, Galter Library Special Collections*

Bhaskar became Chief of the Army Dental Corps in 1975. In this role he was instrumental in the Army separating its dental services from its medical services so that dental care could be improved. In 1978, his efforts, along with those of his predecessor Major General Edwin Smith, resulted in legislation making Army dental activity separate from hospital and medical activity. Bhaskar retired from the military in 1979 after 24 years of service, having achieved the rank of Major General and having become the first Indian general in the United States military in the process. He received the Legion of Merit and the Meritorious Service Medal for his distinguished service.



Bhaskar in uniform as a Major General, circa 1975, via [Rediff.com](https://www.rediff.com)

After leaving the military Bhaskar decided to continue his education. In 1980, at the age of 57, he completed a residency in periodontics (the care of the gums and jawbone) at the UCLA School of Dentistry. He spent the rest of his career as a practicing periodontist in Monterey, California until his retirement in 2005 at age 82. He also traveled the world, lecturing on oral pathology and periodontics, delivering more than 10,000 hours of education throughout his career, in addition to writing 4 books and 200 articles on those same subjects.

Bhaskar died in Monterey in 2016. He was buried with full military honors at Arlington National Cemetery in Virginia. In 2018 the United States Army opened the Bhaskar Dental Clinic at Fort Shafter, the headquarters of the Army's Pacific command, in Honolulu. As his obituary stated: "He had a profound life that was full of adventure, success, intellectual challenge, pride, laughter and love. He lived the American Dream."

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## Selected References

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