



A periodic dossier of Dr. Syama Prasad Mookerjee Research Foundation

The Nationalist



परक्रमयुवा प्रसा राट्टामुदयतापिस
Dr. SYAMA PRASAD MOOKERJEE
RESEARCH FOUNDATION

Volume 2/ Issue 2, November 2008

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Remembering Chushul Martyrs

A relook at the Nehruvian policies and the Chinese aggression

Hero of Rezang La Major Shaitan Singh, PVC



Major Shaitan Singh Bhati was born on December 1, 1924 at Jodhpur in

Rajasthan. He was the son of Lieutenant Colonel Hem Singhji Bhati, and was commissioned in the Kumaon Regiment on 01 August 1949. Major Shaitan Singh Bhati was awarded Param Vir Chakra, the highest wartime gallantry medal, posthumously, for his leadership and courage during the 1962 Indo-China War.

The Indo-China conflict in 1962 was triggered by a dispute over Aksai Chin. Chushul sector, only 15 miles from the border as the crow flies and with an all weather landing strip was critical to the defence of Ladakh.

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How Jan Sangh cautioned Nehru govt. and how warnings fell on deaf ears.



“Is it not a fact that the Indian border police have stopped patrolling the traditional border in Ladakh after the ultimatum given by the Chinese?”

-Shri Atal Bihari Vajpayee in Lok Sabha, 19 Nov. 1959

MR. SPEAKER I have received notices of five adjournment motions, all relating to the construction of airfield by the Chinese in Ladakh.

SHRI VAJPAYEE ; The subject matter of this adjournment motion raises a very important issue. Large chunks of Indian territory are under forcible occupation of the Chinese. Do we have any means to know whether war preparations, through construction of airfield are or are not being made by the Chinese on Indian territory ? Secondly, supposing these reports appearing in the press are correct and the Chinese are making airfields on our territory, may I know if the basic attitude of the Government of India

towards these border incidents will change and the Chinese will be asked not to make war preparations on our territory ? Otherwise our negotiations will not run smoothly.

MR. SPEAKER The Hon. Prime Minister.

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VOICES “I remember many a time when our senior generals came to us and wrote to the defence ministry saying that they wanted certain things....If we had foresight, known exactly what would happen, we would have done something else...what India has learnt from the Chinese invasion is that in the world of today there is no place for weak nations...We have living in an unreal world of our own creation”

- Pt. Jawaharlal Nehru in Rajya Sabha, in 1963.

“This is not an imperialistic game, our patriotism demands that every citizen of India individual, who calls himself a patriot, should condemn these aggressions whether they are committed by China or Pakistan. But the Communist Party far from condemning the Chinese aggression gives an opportunity to China to publish anti- Indian literature in its press”

-Atal Bihari Vajpayee in Rajya Sabha , on 23 June 1962.

Former Air Vice-Marshal A.K. Tewary, in an article in Indian Defence Review, said that had India pressed in the IAF, the outcome of the war would have been a different. “In the final analysis, the use of combat air power would have turned the tables on the Chinese and the 1962 war could well have been a debacle for China.”

-The Hindu, 9 October 2008.

Hero of Rezang La.....

Chushul is at 14,230 feet and is a small village in a narrow sandy valley about 25 miles long and 4 miles wide, flanked by mountains that rise to over 19,000 feet. Chushul was the solitary Indian position east of the Ladakh range. The importance of this sector was not lost on Major Shaitan Singh.

Rezang La is a pass and is on the south-eastern approach to Chushul Valley. The feature was 3000 yards long and 2000 yards wide at an average height of 16,000 feet.

During the 1962 Indo-China conflict, 13 Kumaon was deployed in Chushul sector. Major Shaitan Singh, who was a Rajput from Jodhpur commanded 'C' Company of 13 Kumaon.

'C' Company's three platoons were numbered 7, 8 and 9 and had .303 rifles with about 600 rounds per head, and between them six LMGs, and 1,000 grenades and mortar bombs.

The 'C' Coy of the battalion, led by Major Shaitan Singh, held this crucial position at Rezang La, at a height of 5000 metres. The company area was defended by three platoon positions and the surrounding terrain isolated it from the rest of the battalion. The expected Chinese attack on Rezang La came on November 18th in the morning. It was the end of a very cold winter night, with light snow falling. The icy winds howling through Rezang La were biting and numbing. More than the thin air and cold, the location of Rezang La had a more serious drawback. It was crested to Indian artillery because of an intervening feature, which meant that they had to make without the protective comfort of the big guns. In the dim light of the morning, the Chinese were seen advancing through nullahs to attack No.7 and No.8 platoon positions.

The Indian Army troops fell on their prepared positions to face the Chinese offensive. At 0500 hours when the visibility improved, both platoons opened up on the advancing Chinese with rifles, light machine guns, grenades and mortars. Indian artillery could, however, not be used. The nullahs were littered with dead bodies. The survivors took position behind boulders and the dead bodies. The Chinese, though they failed the first frontal attack, were not discouraged. They subjected the Indian positions to intense artillery and mortar fire at about 0540 hours. Soon about 350 Chinese troops commenced advance through the nullahs.

This time, No.9 Platoon, which held fire till the enemy was within 90 metres opened up with all weapons in their possession. Within minutes, the nullahs were again full of dead bodies, mainly of the Chinese.

Unsuccessful in frontal attack, the enemy, approximately 400 strong, then attacked from the rear of the company position. They simultaneously opened intense medium machine gun fire on No.8 Platoon. This attack was contained at the barbed wire fencing of the post. The Chinese then resorted to heavy artillery and mortar shelling. An assault group of 120 Chinese also charged No.7 Platoon position from the rear. However, Indian Army 3-inch mortar killed many of them. When 20 survivors charged the post, about a dozen Kumaonis rushed out of their trenches to engage them in a hand-to-hand combat. Meanwhile, the Chinese brought up fresh reinforcements. The encirclement of No.7 Platoon was now complete. The platoon, however, fought valiantly till there was no survivor. No.8 Platoon also fought bravely to the last round.

Major Shaitan Singh, the Company Commander, displayed exemplary leadership and courage in the battle of Rezang La. By all accounts, he led his troops most admirably. Unmindful of his personal safety he moved from one platoon post to another and encouraged his men to fight. While moving among the posts he was seriously wounded, by a sniping Chinese MMG. But he continued to fight along with his men. While he was being evacuated by two of his comrades, the Chinese brought heavy machine gun fire on them. Major Shaitan Singh sensed danger to their lives and ordered them to leave him. They placed him behind a boulder on the slopes of a hill, where he breathed his last.

The Chinese announced a unilateral ceasefire on November 21, 1962.

In this action, 109 Kumaonis out of a total of 123 were killed. Of the 14 survivors, 9 were severely injured. The Chinese suffered many more in killed. Estimates are around 800 Chinese casualties. After the war was over, the body of Major Shaitan Singh Bhati was found at the same place, dead from the bullet wound and the freezing cold. It was flown to Jodhpur and cremated with full military honours. Major Shaitan Singh Bhati was awarded Param Vir Chakra, the highest wartime gallantry medal, posthumously, for his leadership and devotion to duty.



How Jan Sangh...

SHRI JAWAHARLAL NEHRU Prime Minister and Minister of External Affairs : The question raised in these adjournment motions is about a report that the Chinese authorities have built an air-strip in the Aksai Chin area. That is one thing in some reports it is further mentioned that such an air strip has been constructed near Chusul. In the third set of reports, to which the Hon. Member Shri Braj Raj Singh referred, it is said that something was happening in the Malikshah region.

"Is it not a fact that the Indian border police have stopped patrolling the traditional border in Ladakh after the ultimatum given by the Chinese on 26th October that if they continue to patrol on the traditional border they will violate the MacMahon Line and come into India ? "

-ATAL BIHARI
VAJPAYEE

Now the question is one of fact. I shall reply with such factual information as have got. The inferences to be drawn from it naturally depend upon the correctness of the facts. I shall not go into inference. Hon. member will have a chance in four or five days' time to discuss this entire matter more fully. So far as the Aksai Chin area is concerned we have received no information about the building of an airfield. We have tried to find out what

we can, and this report has not been confirmed. I cannot at the same time absolutely say that it is not so, because none of our people has been there. My information is that some travellers and others have said this in Srinagar. I do not know on what their information is based. The utmost I can say is that I cannot give any precise information about the rumour that an airstrip has been constructed at Aksai Chin. We are still trying to get as much information as possible. So far as the report about an airfield near Chusul is concerned that is definitely incorrect. There is no such thing.

So far as Malikshah is concerned Malikshah is not in Ladakh at all. It is well within the Sirtkiang region of China.

SHRI NATH PAI (Rajapur): I want a small explanation. The Prime Minister has been kind enough to tell us that he cannot either confirm or deny whether such an airstrip has been built. We are told and we hold the view that Aksai Chin is an integral part of India. Now, do you not think it is an extraordinary state of affairs that we do not know what is happening on our own territory? Either we are being prevented from getting that information by foreign forces or we are not watchful enough. We would like to know what is it that prevented us from knowing what is happening on our own territory.

SHRI JAWAHARLAL NEHRU: It is a fact, which we

may deplore, that in the Aksai Chin area there is no representative of the Indian Government. Neither is there now nor has one been there for sometime. Except that occasionally patrol parties have gone in past years we are not there. We can go there only, more or less, at the present moment after some kind of conflict and after exhibiting high mountaineering skill etc; we can, no doubt. There is a question of controversy and dispute now. Anyway the only possible way of discovering that would perhaps be flying over it and taking a picture at low flight. It is a matter for our military authorities to see if that is a right course to adopt in the circumstances or not.

SHRI VAJPAYEE ; Is it not a fact that the Indian border police have stopped patrolling the traditional border in Ladakh after the ultimatum given by the Chinese on 26th October that if they continue to patrol on the traditional border they will violate the MacMahon Line and come into India ?

SHRI JAWAHARLAL NEHRU: The member referred to an ultimatum by the Chinese Government. I am not aware of any ultimatum. But it is true that in one of their communications they said something like what the Hon' member has said. But it has no bearing on this matter at all. This is something which has no effect on our actions and on whatever decisions we take.

RAJA MAHENDRA PRATAP: This is only Anglo-American propaganda going on... (Interruption).

SHRI VAJPAYEE: I strongly object to what my Hon. friend has said. Let him withdraw his words.

ACHARYA KRIPALANI (Sitamarhi) : On September 12th in my speech I said that no mention was made of the airstrip built in our territory and the Prime Minister in his answer said : "Some Hon. member mentioned or enquired if the Chinese had built an airfield in Indian territory. There is no such thing."

At that time the Prime Minister said positively that there was no such thing. Today he is very uncertain.

SHRI JAWAHARLAL NEHRU: My answer will stand.

ACHARYA KRIPALANI: I have not mentioned the place but it was the same place. There was no question of the place. There was only the question of an airfield.

SHRI JAWAHARLAL NEHRU: My answer would still be that so far my knowledge goes there is no such airstrip on Indian territory. About the place near Chushul which I have seen recently, I can definitely say that it is not there.

"I am not aware of any ultimatum. But it is true that in one of their communications they said something like what the Hon' member has said. But it has no bearing on this matter at all."
-PT. JAWAHAR
LAL NEHRU

Communist's Loyalties Lay Outside India

Shri Atal Bihari Vajpayee in Rajya Sabha on March 25, 1965 on calling attention motion regarding anti-national activities of pro-China Communist's

Madam, the statement made by the Home Minister regarding the anti national activities of the Communists owing allegiance to Peking has confirmed that these elements are active in our country in the guise of leftist communists and constitute a danger to the freedom and security of the country. I have a grudge against the government as to why did it take so much time to expose the designs and misdeeds of these anti-national elements?

Revolutionary Ideology of Communism

Communists believe in a revolutionary ideology. But if that ideology remains confined within the borders of the country and does not adopt violent methods to bring about change in the society it could be fought. However, communism is not a philosophy of life. It is a worldwide conspiracy to deprive the people of their freedom and dignity by hook or by crook, by the use of force and arms. And that is the reason why, when one should feel ashamed of treason and using the language of a traitor, our Communist friends, drunk with revolution are not prepared to accept anti-national activities as treason. We heard the speech of Shri Nausher Ali the other day. That speech was made deliberately. It was a challenge thrown to the House, to the country. Even if the Ministry of Home Affairs had not published this booklet his speech alone was sufficient to prove that their loyalties lay beyond the Himalayas and they would not hesitate to betray the country in the garb of revolution. Not only this, they would rather deem it their duty and would feel elated in doing so. What should be done with such elements? Let no Hon'ble member take me otherwise, but I would like to give an example. If a party is formed in India-I am not talking of individuals, I am talking of a Party-which says that Pakistan had not attacked Kashmir, and its members display pictures of the President of Pakistan and shout slogans in their processions asking people not to worry, saying that Pakistan would be coming here in four months time, what attitude would be adopted by the people and the government of this country towards them? I am not in favour of placing China and Pakistan in the same category. Until recently Pakistan was a part of our country and we want to improve our relations with Pakistan. But if any group of people with their loyalties centered elsewhere, outside the borders of India, tries in an organised manner to shatter the morale of the country during this period of crisis and makes an attempt to bolster the strength of the enemy the government cannot sit silently and watch. The surprise is not why the government woke up now, but why it kept mum so long.

Leftists Display Portrait of Mao

The left Communists had displayed the portrait of Mao Tse-tung in their Conference at Tenali. A war-like situation is prevailing between China and India. China has occupied a large tract of our land, an emergency has been declared in the country, and the country and this House are bound by the sacred resolution that we would not rest till the last inch of our land is liberated from the Chinese clutches. Does the hanging of Mao Tse-tung's portrait on this occasion not show where their loyalties lie?

And it was not only in the Tenali Conference alone, Mao Tse-tung's portraits were also displayed at Bagdogra, Darjeeling, Berhampur, Murshidabad, and in Maharashtra in Bombay, Guntur and Nadia district as well. At the time of the Calcutta Conference also Mao Tse-tung's pictures were hung at the venues of the Press Conference. When the Press people were called, the portrait was removed and when the media men pointed out to the vacant space and asked whose picture was put up there the Communist leaders had no answer.

SHRI BHUPESH GUPTA: It is just possible that Shri Nanda's picture might have been displayed there.

SHRI VAJPAYEE: Madam Chairperson, there was a time when Shri Nanda was praised sky-high and our friend Shri Bhupesh Gupta did not see any other person who was as progressive and as committed to the economic development of India as Shri Nanda was. Today the situation has changed.

SHRI BHUPESH GUPTA: I am sorry for him.

SHRI VAJPAYEE: You need not be sorry for him, because Shri Nanda took action, even though belatedly, against the communists. Therefore Shri Nanda if has now become a reactionary, an autocrat and what not. I want to tell my Congress friends to beware of their friendship.

SHRI BHUPESH GUPTA: Here is my friend. Congressmen too can have as their friend a Jan Sangh member.

SHRI VAJPAYEE: Do not talk of Jan Sangh. Our assessment of a person, our assessment of a Congressman does not depend upon his attitude towards us. Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel had banned Rashtriya Swayam Sewak Sangh. Thousands of people were put behind bars on the

basis of false allegations. All of them were released later on. But we never said that Sardar Patel was not a great man or that he was not the chief architect of national integration.

SHRI ARJUN ARORA: On a Point of order. Is not the word Jhutha (false) unparliamentary?

SOME HON'BLE MEMBERS: No, No.

SHRI VAJPAYEE: Madam, so long as the interests of the Communist Party get promoted this government's policy, this government Ministers are all right for them but as soon as the policy of the government goes against them they change their assessment immediately, and this is the reason for the opposition to six Nanda today. Otherwise, Shri Nanda continues to be the same person as before. The question is why did the Ministry of Home Affairs take belated action? The second question is, why did they take action half-heartedly? Some Communist were arrested, but their supporters and followers were not arrested. They have been left free in order to break the morale of the people. Shri Namboodiripad and Shri Jyoti Bosu have not been touched. Only the government makes distinction between the Left and the Right although this distinction has come down and among the Leftists also the government has released two leaders. They have been allowed to contest the elections and make election propaganda. The government has to be criticized for this weakness, and not for arresting them.

Communist's Loyalties Lay Outside India

I submit that those whose loyalties are not with India, who are out to strengthen the hands of our enemy and who can revolt at the behest of Peking could never be treated leniently. More of their workers should be arrested if the need arises. Their newspapers have been allowed to be published freely. I have never seen you dub the party as anti-national and indulging in pro- Peking activities, and you allow its newspapers to continue to be published. Action should have been taken against them as well. An impression should have been created in the country and among the people that you really mean to take action against them. But if you take action hesitatingly it could not be called action. The government has only attempted to tinker with the problem that is not enough. Those who are not patriots should not be treated lightly; they should be dealt with firmly. Only that could protect our freedom and security.

Do Leftists get Money from Chinese Embassy?

The Home Minister had stated in the other House that Leftist Communists were getting financial help from the Chinese Embassy. This should be thoroughly investigated. The Bank of China accounts have been referred to in this

connection. We have already demanded in this House that the result of examination of the accounts of the Bank of China should be made public and should be made known to the House. Communists have alleged that certain Congressmen have taken money from the Bank of China. To the best of my knowledge the big guns of the Communist Party withdraw money from the Bank of China and huge amounts were withdrawn before the elections through blank cheques and no account has been kept. Where has that money gone? Who are the recipients of that money? After all, why is the government hesitating to put forth the report about the accounts of the Bank of China before the House?

SHRI DAHYABHAI V. PATEL (Gujarat): Because Congress has a share in it?

SHRI BHUPESH GUPTA: Madam, they must be eating chicken tandoori in Moti Mahal Restaurant.

SHRI VAJPAYEE: I would like to make a suggestion in this regard, although it has got a wider implication. A restriction should be placed on all foreign embassies here that they should get all their printing work-advertisements etc.-done only through the government, through the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting. The embassies that are financially helping those elements or forces do it through distributing printing work and advertisements in the newspapers belonging to their party. Why should not the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, in consultation with the Ministry of External Affairs inform the foreign embassies that whatever printing work or advertisements are given should be routed through them? They were influencing the politics of our country by giving them money through printing work and distribution of advertisements.

Sending Communists to Jail not enough

Madam, after all, it is not enough to put the communists behind the bars.

SHRI BHUPESH GUPTA: Shoot them. We might be the target, but they will miss it.

SHRI VAJPAYEE: I am not advocating that they be shot. We have to think about this problem a bit deeply. We have defence of India Rules during the Emergency and we may arrest them and put them behind the bars. Merely because some communists have won the elections in Kerala does not change the seriousness of this problem. It is true that they have won. But if they have won the election they cannot be allowed to play with the security of this country.

AN HON'BLE MEMBER: Absolutely correct.

SHRI VAJPAYEE: Who should form the government

in Kerala is a different question. But I would like to go deeper into the matter. It is well known that the Communists have their loyalties outside the country. But how to resolve it, let Shri Nanda explain it. Why has a ban not been imposed on the Left Communists, the Communist Party (Marxist)? Why has it not been declared unlawful? They are with China. They do not believe in democracy. They are against a peaceful change and nobody should have any doubt that if they get opportunity they would try to bring a change in the country with the help of arms, because this is their philosophy, this is their ideology; there is no need to collect proof in favour of it. If a communist does not believe in an armed revolution he is not a communist in the true sense.

I pity Shri Bhupesh Gupta. If anybody has to be a communist in India why should he become pro-Moscow? Why should he not be pro-Peking? Peking is our neighbour. Peking has a revolutionary ideology, Peking can supply arms. The defeat of the Right communists in Kerala and the victory of the Left communists over them are not only a warning to them but a warning to them but the entire country. This quarrel between Moscow and Peking... (Interruptions).

I am closing. This quarrel between Moscow and Peking is over ideology. But we should not forget that looking at the geographical position of India only Peking supporters could be more effective. The position in Europe is different. The position in South-East Asia is quite different. That entire area is sitting on dynamite. He who ignores it would attract notice. Therefore the government should seriously ponder over the question, which has far-reaching consequences.

It is one thing to have friendly relations with communist countries, and quite another to adopt a particular policy towards the Communist Party. I had said this earlier too, and I repeat it again. President Nasser has maintained friendly relations with the Soviet Union, but has not allowed the Communist Party to grow in his country. Algeria has maintained friendly relations with Communist countries but has declared the Communists in the country unlawful. We maintain relations with communist countries but are allowing such communists to function in our country whose loyalties are outside India and who would not hesitate to conspire against our freedom during a period of crisis. Thank you.

(Excerpts from the book— "ATAL BIHARI VAJPAYEE FOUR DECADES IN INDIA" Vol. - 3, page no. 191 to 195).

Episode 1962: An eye-opener for India

The India-China War was an eye-opener for India. Indian and Chinese forces were involved in a series of clashes along the border throughout 1962 but significant fighting of the India-China Border War took place from October 10, 1962 to November 20, 1962. The fighting took place in Walong, Tawang, and Aksai Chin. The defeat in the 1962 border war made him realise that there is indeed no place for weak nations in the world politics.

The erroneous assessment by the political leadership that China will not react to India's 'Forward Policy' in North East Frontier Agency (NEFA) & Ladakh region, and China's unfounded perception of Indian designs to seize Tibet are the most important factors which possibly led to India's defeat on the eastern front along with ill-equipped and ill prepared Indian army.

At that time Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru and his Defence Minister VK Krishna Menon's arrogant belief that they would solve the crisis through diplomacy and that China would not dare attack India despite the latter's 'Forward Policy'. Pt. Nehru's going ahead with this policy was based on assumptions. The rationale behind the policy was to setup border posts and drive out the Chinese from the areas which India considered its own.

Indian Army was not ready to take on the Chinese. Very few Indian soldiers had operated in mountain areas. The troops were using obsolete weapons unsuitable for mountain warfare and that too were in short supply. Indian soldiers did not have enough winter clothing and shoes. Even the line of communications was difficult as there was no road network. The morale of the forces was at its lowest. The Chinese were well supplied as they had stocked supplies in Tibet and their soldiers were well acquainted with mountain warfare.

The Indian intelligence apparatus in the Himalayas was lacking and also our intelligence community not properly analysing Chinese domestic and diplomatic developments as well. They had no clear indication of Chinese strength, mobility and tactics, especially the human wave attacks.

No use of Indian Air Force (IAF) was another surprising question which possibly led to India's defeat on mountain regions. The Indian Air Force (IAF) was not used for any offensive action and was only confined to air dropping supplies to the troops.

The 1962 War has left a deep scar on the Indian psyche. The political and military leadership sacrificed officers and soldiers under them despite knowing that the army was not prepared to take on the Chinese forces in a terrain where we were logistically weak.

A bird's eye view of India-China relations in 1962

April 1962- China issues ultimatum demanding the withdrawal of the Indian frontier personnel from the border posts.

22 May 1962- Parliamentarian Hem Barua (Congress) in a Call Attention Notice in Parliament reports the indignation heaped on the Indian Embassy in Beijing, which was denied permission to celebrate the Republic day by the Chinese Government.

2 June 1962- China rejects India's demands to withdraw its forces from Indian territory.

3 June 1962- The Agreement on Trade and Intercourse between India and China lapses.

10 June 1962 - Indian and Chinese soldiers face off within 100 yards of each other in the Galwan Valley in Ladakh and an armed clash was narrowly averted when the Chinese withdrew just at a time when India threatened to use force.

26 July 1962- Both sides indicate willingness to hold discussions on the basis of the Officials' Report which China earlier disregarded, for the resolution of the boundary dispute.

13 Aug 1962- The Indian Government moves a motion calling for consideration of the situation along the Indo-China border, particularly in the Ladakh region.

13 Sept 1962- China repeats its proposal for the withdrawal of the armed forces by both sides, 20km back from the Indian border.

20 Sept 1962- Chinese forces cross the Mc Mohan Line in the Thagla region 2 miles east of Dhola in NEFA and open fire on an auxiliary Indian post.

29 Sept 1962- Chinese forces launch another intensified attack in the North-Eastern border.

6 Oct 1962- New Delhi again accuses China of intruding into Indian territory in the eastern sector and attacking Indian forces.

20 Oct 1962- China launches a massive multi-pronged attack all along the border from NEFA to Ladakh.

24 Oct 1962- China proposes a three-point cease-fire formula — Both parties would respect the Line of Actual Control, the armed forces would withdraw 20km from this line and; talks between the prime-ministers of both countries to seek a friendly settlement.

26 Oct 1962- India proclaims national emergency.

27 Oct 1962 - Nehru rejects China's ceasefire proposal.

15 Nov 1962- A massive Chinese attack on the eastern front, Tawang, Walong in the western sector over run, Rezang La and the Chushul airport shelled.

18 Nov 1962- Chinese troops capture Bomdila in the NEFA region.

21 Nov 1962- China declares a unilateral ceasefire along the entire border and announces withdrawal of its troops to position 20km behind the LAC.

8 Dec 1962- China sends a note signed by Zhou Enlai to India reiterating the three-point ceasefire formula. India accepts.

Chushul, the 'sword of India'

-Tarun Vijay

Revisiting 1962's incredible saga of valour



India may have lost the 1962 war with China, but it was not completely a saga of defeat. Hamstrung by an indecisive leadership and poor military equipment, the Indian army put up a valiant resistance along the McMahon Line. It is another matter the political leadership of the day did not back them. One such spot where our soldiers fought back, and repelled, the Chinese incursions was at Razang La near Chushul,

in the Himalayan heights. On November 18, 1962, 114 soldiers of the 13th Kumaon fought till the last man, and last bullet, in sub-zero temperatures, to beat back the huge Chinese army. A grateful nation acknowledged their valour by posthumously conferring the Param Vir Chakra on Major Shaitan Singh.

Forty-six years later to the day, Tarun Vijay undertook an emotional journey to Chushul and Razang La, site of a memorial to commemorate the brave souls who died so we may live in peace and security, to file this audio report.

"Sir, a national crisis has been created as a result of the Chinese attack on the northern border. China has expansionist designs.....it has set its eyes like a vulture on 48 thousand square miles of land belonging to India.

"On August 25, 1959, while speaking on the Kerala debates the Prime Minister (Pt. Nehru) had stated that India would not remain India if per chance it becomes Communist. The same thing applies to China as well. ..The Defence Minister (Krishna Menon) has a doubtful past and his present conduct is dubious. He has Communist leanings. In his message on the Territorial Army Day ...he said that India should not keep a large army because keeping a large army was not compatible with our morality."— Atal Bihari Vajpayee in Lok Sabha, December 22, 1959.

The ironies of history take strange shapes. In 1962, Nehru didn't listen to the warnings of the erstwhile Jana Sangh, believed 'Chinese can never attack us' and lost face and land both to his 'Bhai' like friends. Then the government arrested more than four hundred top Communist

leaders under charges of sedition and invited the volunteers of the RSS (Rashtriya Swayamsewak Sangh) to participate in the 1963's Republic Day Parade at Raj Path in New Delhi in full uniform recognising its services during the war.

In 2008 the Communists have become the darlings of the Congress that still sources its legacy to Nehru and

the RSS is sought to be banned.

By 1962, China had taken Aksai Chin and invaded NEFA.

In 2008, China is still occupying Aksai Chin and has rebuffed our foreign minister with a renewed claim on Arunachal Pradesh (formerly known as NEFA).

But can the nation forget the 1962? Who were those who fought and died? For whom? And to what avail? One of the stories India can never forget is the battle we fought in the Indus valley, near Chushul village.

The battle of Rezangla fought at an altitude of 17000 ft, is one of the most incredible sagas of valour and courage Indian soldiers showed. That was 18th November, 1962, exactly 46 years before. They fought and died for the Indian soil.

In 2008, we are still waiting for a leader to show any will or a resolute action to indicate we are serious to take back the land China grabbed.

Congress changed post Nehru, so did the others? Politics and immediate interests have overpowered security concerns and distinctions between the identities of the enemy and patriots are as blurred as they were in 1962.

Unanswered questions

46 years later, the question remains still unanswered, why did we have to fight a war and why was it that the brave 114 soldiers of the 13th Kumaon had to offer their supreme sacrifice fighting till 'last man and last bullet' in the sub zero temperature (minus 15 degree Celsius) at Rezang La on 18th November 1962? What were the causes of that war and what happened afterwards? Who remembers them except a few ex soldiers and the patriotic crowd at Rewari (Haryana), the hometown of most of the martyred Ahirs who had fought at Rezang La? Why no politician thinks it a matter of honour to send his children to join army? Why do we have an important road in Delhi named after Krishna Menon, the disgraced defence minister during the '62 war and nothing significant to honour the men who gave their lives to save India in Chushul? These were the thoughts coming to my mind when I started for Chushul last fortnight to get a feel of 'November in Rezang La' and pay my homage to the brave hearts.

1962 war with China is a sad story of a completely in-

capable leadership, favouritism at the top echelons of the army and a disregard of the nation's security needs by those who were hailed by the people as their saviours. Neville Maxwell, a British journalist, writes in his famous book India's China war, "At the time of Independence, Kaul appeared to be a failed officer, if not one disgraced. But his courtier wiles, irrelevant or damning until then, were to serve him brilliantly in the new order that Independence brought, after he came to the notice of Nehru, a fellow Kashmiri Brahmin and, indeed, distant kinsman.

"Boosted by the prime minister's steady favouritism, Kaul rocketed through the Army structure to emerge in 1961 at the very summit of the Army HQ. Not only did he hold the key appointment of chief of general staff but the army commander, Thapar, was, in effect, his client. Kaul had, of course, by then acquired a significant following, disparaged by the other side as 'Kaul boys' ('call-girls' had just entered usage), and his appointment as CGS opened a putsch in HQ, an eviction of the old guard, with his rivals, until then his superiors, being not only pushed out but often hounded thereafter with charges of disloyalty."

Those who didn't know their men, their land and the risks involved called the shots, yet our brave hearts stood firm for the honour of their motherland. The Rezang La's battle saga is amongst the most inspiring stories of soldiers dying in the line of duty, yet our schools, which proudly prescribe the age old narration of Romulus and Remus, find it unworthy to insert a lesson on how India was defended at Rezang La by the Indian soldiers of 13th Kumaon.

They fought till the last man, last bullet

They were ill equipped, ill prepared and heavily outnumbered by the Chinese. All the 114 Jawans died in action, not a single soul retreated and neither did they let the Chinese intrude. For three months the government didn't know about them, about their extraordinary sacrifice till in January end, next year, in 1963, shepherds from Chushul found bodies of Jawans scattered on the Rezang La pass, after the snow had melted. The dead bodies of the Chinese were far more in number, about eight hundred on our side and it was estimated that more than a thousand might have fallen to the bullets of Indian soldiers. It was an unbelievable feat and government decorated major Shaitan Singh with a Param Veer Chakra, posthumously. The citation for the Param Veer Chakra awarded to him reads-, ***"Major Shaitan Singh was commanding a company of an infantry battalion deployed at Rezang La in the Chushul sector at a height of about 17,000 feet. The locality was isolated from the main defended sector and consisted of five platoon-defended positions. On 18 November 1962, the Chinese forces subjected the company position to heavy artillery, mortar and small arms fire and attacked it in overwhelming strength in several successive waves. Against heavy odds, our troops beat back***

successive waves of enemy attack. During the action, Major Shaitan Singh dominated the scene of operations and moved at great personal risk from one platoon post to another sustaining the morale of his hard-pressed platoon posts. While doing so he was seriously wounded but continued to encourage and lead his men, who, following his brave example fought gallantly and inflicted heavy casualties on the enemy. For every man lost to us, the enemy lost four or five. When major Shaitan Singh fell disabled by wounds in his arms and abdomen, his men tried to evacuate him but they came under heavy machine-gun fire. Major Shaitan Singh then ordered his men to leave him to his fate in order to save their lives. Major Shaitan Singh's supreme courage; leadership and exemplary devotion to duty inspired his company to fight almost to the last man."

The battle fired the imagination of the young soldiers and the Bollywood alike. A successful movie Haqeeqat based on Chushul saga was made by Chetan Anand starring Dharmendra and Balraj Sahani. I was on my way to visit the same area, the village called Chushul and the Rezang La memorial, in the same month November, 46 years after the battle had taken place.

Chushul, the village of the bravehearts

The journey to Rezang La was the most scintillating pilgrimage for me, like a Kailas yatra. Interestingly the best route to Kailas also goes through Chushul connecting Demchok(on Line of Actual Control, within Indian territory) to Nyari province of Tibet running alongside Indus River. There has been a long standing demand from Ladakhis, supported by J&K leaders like Dr. Farookh Abdulah to have this route opened for the Kailas yatra. Eighty minutes flight from Delhi to Leh, itself is a memorable one, which passes over Manali, Rohtang pass and snow clad awful mountains before touching down at Kushok Bakula Rinpoche airport, Leh . The outside temperature was minus eight and I straightway drove to a friend's house for a couple of hours of acclimatization. At eleven thousand feet high altitude, it's mandatory to acclimatize before moving to another destination and any violation may prove fatal. 'No Gama in the land of Lama', says the Border Roads Organisation's roadside advisory, meaning don't show un-due haste and bravado in this land of high mountains and cool Buddhist life style.

It would be seven hours to Chushul, said my guide Dorjey, while putting my rucksack into the Innova. We left Leh early morning and passed through Stakna, the summer palace, Thikse Gompa, Sindhu Darshan, Upshi, Hemis Gompa, Karu and negotiated the tough Chang La Baba pass at 17800 ft height, saying hello at Chemday monastery. At Chang La army Jawans offer a cup of 'love tea' to all travelers free of cost- a Kahva with cashew nuts and roasted almonds. It's really invigorating. Next was Tsoltak, Luking was further 65 kms and Chushul another 124 kms. Post Chang La a continuous descent along

Tangtse took us to the breathtaking expanse of a mesmerizing empire of salt waters called Pangong Tso lake. It's a magic God created for the gods. Tourists are allowed only up to this point and all non-resident Indians too need an Inner Line Permit issued by the district magistrate, Leh to enter this area. The lake is 134 kms long and five kms wide. Another forty kms, along side this blue, turquoise green world of water, and we will be at Chushul. The road is really a patchwork of scattered stones and pebbles, though a board announces that Luking-Chushul road is under construction. A little before dusk we finally arrived at Chushul, which looked a sleepy dreamy eyed village. It has a population of 993 persons to be exact as informed by its 'numberdar.

The wind was getting wilder by the minute. It was chilling cold outside and it seemed almost impossible to push the shutters of the camera with bare fingers. Frozen and numbed they were. At four the wind got ferocious and the waves it created in the lake was a great fun to watch.

Chushul has hardly changed since 1962. There is no electricity, though solar power connections are given to the villagers with a dose of subsidies. "But we can't run colour TVs on that low voltage connections"- complained villagers. Lights are off too early, usually there is only one bulb lit in each home, for cooking, evening gup shup and studies for the kids. So the usual schedule is to have a heavy peg of local rice brew, early supper and go to sleep. The dependable sources of news are transistors and B&W TVs, with Doordarshan's unchallenged monopoly. Though a few enterprising households have bought dish TV receivers, so they access a few more channels.

I had hardly taken the prescribed and mandatory rest at Leh, so the dreadful headache began at a deadly pace and soon the world turned colorless to me too. The wintry chill coupled with the lack of oxygen and horrific wind made my task truly 'adventurous'. I cursed myself at leaving the comfortable zones of electioneering in Delhi and other states to reach at a place when none even thinks to come in winter.

Forgotten warriors

Suddenly 1962 flashed before my eyes. Its 2008, we have better woolen jackets, comfortable sleeping bags, well connected communication system, a strong political opposition and an awakened and vocal leadership in the forces. 1962 was different. Ill equipped jawans, bad communication system hardly worth its name, poor clothings and the Chinese attacked this very month, in this chilling winter at four thirty in the wee hours of the morning. In such a sub zero atmosphere I was unable to operate my camera. They had to operate .303 guns and throw mortars and keep fighting!! I was at a lower level, in the village with a comparatively warmer temperature. They were at the top of Rezang La, facing Trishul, at 17000 ft height.

They defeated the death and kept the flag high; Delhi forgot them and sang in praise of defeatists.

Do the inhabitants of Chushul remember that story? I asked with excitement and waited for a reply. None could say, yes or recount what perhaps was told by his father or grand father. There is hardly any remembrance of the battle nation feels so proud of, in this village, which once stood as a 'sword of the nation'. Army's valour has hardly been passed on to the villagers, to the new generation. Like an unconcerned machine, some men in uniform come to the Rezang La Memorial every year, perform some rituals and go away. Without touching the lives of those locals who carry the burden of that great legacy.

"Give us upgraded school, Bijli and SDM office"

'Sir, you have come from Delhi, please tell government to upgrade our school to higher secondary level', said Sonam Paljor, ex sarpanch and Phunchuk Namgyal. 'Our children have to go to Leh for higher studies, we can't afford that, and hence none has passed a graduation degree from this village except one so far'. I was surprised to hear that. Chushul is not as far as some would like us to believe. It's not an impossible country, as politicians would like to offer as excuse for not bestowing small mercies to this famously brave last frontier. No roads, no electricity, no upgraded school, no land line telephone, no mobile, no hospital. This is how we honour the people and the village that fought our fiercest battles and is responsible to provide local infrastructural support to the armed forces, so vital and critical in times of a crisis.

There is only one Immarset telephone, with the local army post, and it's made available to 'civilians' only for two hours per day in the afternoons. Suppose there is any emergency, someone fell sick and has to be taken to Leh? I asked naively. 'Here, no emergency, none can do anything, army post is closed after evening and we cant reach them'. Said Phunchuk. There is a local government run public health clinic, but doctor is hardly available, and even when he is there, few medicines, no equipments. I saw some textbooks of local primary school; nothing is mentioned about the soldiers' lives. Or the Rezang La saga. How do we expect them to have any respect for the armed forces unless they are introduced to them nicely? That night my roommate in the Buddhist guesthouse was Sonam Tsering, the man who dons the glory of being the first M.A., a post graduate from Chushul. The only one so far. He is an elected councilor to the Ladakh Autonomous Hill Development Council from Chushul on a Ladakh Union Territory Front (LUTF) ticket. His father ran a transport business hence could afford sending him to Leh and then Chandigarh for higher studies. But his two younger brothers and a sister couldn't follow him and have remained confined to Chushul. The local high school is a gift from army.

It's a hundred percent Buddhist village and there is a permanent complaint that none visits them from Delhi- no politician, no minister has ever spoken to them about their lives and demands. Some times a minister comes in an army helicopter, stays with army officers and goes back immediately. 'They come here to take pictures', smiled Phunchuk. An old village monk told me in the morning that his grand pa used to tell him stories about how they had brought the dead bodies of the Rezang La warriors from the mountaintop. That's it. Nothing further. Even village doesn't celebrate 18th November, the Rezang La day.

Sonam said, 'Sir, before the Chinese attack in 1962, Chushul was the sub divisional headquarters and the sub divisional magistrate (SDM) used to have his offices here. After the war, he was shifted and it's causing a great difficulty to the villagers. Why was the office of the SDM shifted?

The village depends solely on army for anything; still the cordial touch is missing. It's too mechanized.

I had to recharge my camera batteries and there was nothing that would have helped. Solar power won't do that, giggled Sonam, 'sir, its no use here, we sometimes hire a generator whenever there is an election meeting or any government officer arrives from Leh'. Some how the sarpanch brought an inverter as a cherished treasure and that worked well.

The darkness dwelled a bit too early and in the thick of night I almost felt dead. I had two thick blankets underneath and a 'Siachin quality' sleeping bag covered with another heavy quilt. Yet the chill pierced through my bones and the headache rose to newer heights. Besides the toilets was old-fashioned Tibetan type with a hole in the floor and freezing water to wash. Do our soldiers at the mountaintop OPs (Observation Posts) have heated bunkers to keep a better watch on Chinese activities; I asked Sonam and the sarpanch. None could answer. Perhaps I had asked a foolish question. The villagers had a lot to say. The Chinese look at them with contempt and often in flag meetings with their Indian counterparts they complain about how Chushul villagers and shepherds often 'violate' Line of Actual Control.

Saluting the martyrs.

A dose of Paracetamol helped and hence the morning was a little comfortable. We started for Rezang La memorial at six, bidding adieu to a hallowed village. I was thrilled and felt I should have taken some flower to put at the memorial as a wreath. But nothing was available. Having taken the turn from Chushul, at every second mile I saw a board put up by the army showing direction and the miles to the memorial. Dorjey indicated the beautiful Trishul Mountains on my left, bathing in the first rays of a nascent sunrise. The fields are vast and grand, we were cruising in a sea of openness, roads are either invisible or it's a sporty challenge to you to create your own path!! Yet the danger looms large as the heights on our left are under Chinese control and they monitor our activities comfortably.

The Rezang La memorial is a simple marble pillar with names of all the 114 martyrs etched on two sides, in Hindi and in English. The third side has these inspiring words,

"How can a Man die better than facing Fearful Odds,

For the Ashes of His Fathers and the Temples of His Gods,

To the sacred memory of the Heroes of Rezang La,

114 Martyrs of 13 Kumaon who fought to the Last Man,

Last Round, Against Hordes of Chinese on 18 November 1962.

Built by All Ranks, 13th Battalion, The Kumaon Regiment.

The pilgrimage to the village that once was the 'Sword of India' was coming to an end. I had to go further, on the road to Demchhok, the route that finally reaches Kailas Manasarovar alongside the majestic Indus River. That's another story, another time.

URL- <http://www.rediff.com/news/2008/nov/18sd1.htm>

(Rediff News)

13 Kumaon's Last Stand: Chushul, November 18, 1962

-Rajeev Srinivasan

Most of us studied the Alfred Tennyson poem 'The Charge of the Light Brigade' in school. The Battle of Thermopylae we read of with goose bumps. We all know about Custer's Last Stand. And the battle cry 'Remember the Alamo!' resonates with us.

Yet, none of us has heard of the 13th Kumaon Battalion's Last Stand at Rezang La, Ladakh, in the Battle of Chushul, on November 18, 1962. I think this is a great pity.

For, let us remind ourselves of these examples of heroism:

- The Battle of Thermopylae in ancient Greece in 480 BCE, where 300 Spartans under Leonidas stopped a Persian army of 250,000 at a narrow mountain pass. They died to the last man, but provided enough time for the rest of the Greek army to escape to fight another day.
- The 13th Light Brigade of the British Army at Balaclava, the Crimea, in 1854. Six hundred and seventy-three men rode at Russian artillery and were decimated.
- At the Alamo in San Antonio, Texas, in 1836, several hundred Texans held out against the Mexican Army before they were killed to the last man.
- Custer's Last Stand was the Battle of Little Bighorn, 1876, in Montana where the Sioux nation under Chief Sitting Bull wiped out George Custer and 265 men.

And finally:

- The C Company of the 13th Kumaon Battalion, under Major Shaitan Singh (Param Vir Chakra, Posthumous) held off a fierce Chinese attack on November 18, 1962, at the Rezang La heights that they held. Massively outnumbered and outgunned, the defenders died almost to the last man, and expended their last round. All 114 men were killed or wounded. But they succeeded in blunting the Chinese assault, killing as many as a thousand Chinese in the process at Rezang La and at nearby Gurung Hill. Thereafter, the Chinese did not push further towards the Chushul plain. It was a critical checkpoint on a potential Chinese advance on Leh.

The story of 13th Kumaon is the kind of thing that would make the patriotic Indian stand tall with tears in his eyes.

Why have Indians so consistently ignored the great sacrifices made by our soldiers? Why isn't the story of the valiant 13th Kumaon a part of every child's textbooks? Why have we let these brave men die unwept, unmourned, and unsung? Just as we let thousands of soldiers die in Kashmir, in Kargil, everywhere, they are mere cannon fodder. India needs a draft, so people in power feel the pain of their children dying for the nation.

I think I know why there is no official celebration of the Battle of Chushul: the government can hardly bother to honour the Unknown Soldier on Kargil Day. Then how will they remember something that happened forty years ago?

There is also an element of shame. Congress governments were unwilling to talk about 1962 because it brings out the fact that 'someone had blunder'd' and that was their deity, Jawaharlal Nehru, along with his defence minister, V K Krishna Menon. Admitting this would leave them shamefaced, so they just let the soldiers 'but do and die'. Even the current government is unwilling to publish the Henderson Brooks report. Why? It will at least shed some light on what happened.

The media in India should have taken this up in the absence of governmental action. But the media, influenced by Chinese propaganda, has portrayed the 1962 war on Chinese terms. Aping the Xinhua propaganda agency, Indian media mavens have taken the stand that the war was India's fault. As though Indians, with no mountain divisions, would go over the Himalayas and attack the Chinese in Tibet and Ladakh and Arunachal Pradesh! The Marxists in India say the 1962 affair was an internal matter for the Chinese, as they have generously 'awarded' Arunachal Pradesh to China. The Chinese believe this, too. They told the CM of Arunachal Pradesh recently that he did not need a visa to go to China, as he was a Chinese citizen! Americans, Britons and Australians accept China's lies, for it suits them to support China.

But we know that all this isn't true. Individual Indians must remember the 13th Kumaon. As the Quebec motto goes, *Je me souviens*: I remember. And I shall always remember those brave men of C Company who died in a frozen wasteland. For me. For you.

The Battle of Chushul

-L. N. Subramanian

Chushul was an important target for the Chinese. It lay on the road to Leh. A narrow sandy valley at an altitude of 4337 meters, it was bound to the north by the clear blue waters of the Pangong Tso (lake), the east and west by 5700 meter ranges and the Chushul airfield to the south. There is an opening in the eastern side known as the Spanggur gap, which led to Rudok a 100 kms to the east. As part of the forward policy a number of posts were established around Chushul. The J&K militia manned these posts. As tensions with the Chinese mounted Western Command requested a division of troops (4 Brigades) for an effective defence of Leh. Instead by September 62 only 114th Brigade with 2 battalions the 1/8th Gorkha Rifles and 5 Jat. These units were strung in pickets. They could at the most only serve as trip wires to any Chinese advance. They were targets for Chinese intimidation. In May Alpha post manned by a JCO and 14 Ors of J & K militia was surrounded by 2 companies of Chinese troops. The troops were told that the post had to be held at all costs. The Chinese stood 120 yards away and got into attack formation. The JCO still held his nerve and did not open fire. Finally the Chinese withdrew. In a similar incident on 10th July a Gorkha post was surrounded by 350 Chinese troops at 200 yards. The Chinese used loudspeakers to convince the Gorkhas that they should not be fighting for India. But Subheddar Jang Bahadur told them off in unparliamentary language. Once again the Chinese withdrew but the stage was being set for further confrontations.

The Chinese Strike

On the night of 19/20 October all the 14th J & K militia posts as well as the Galwan post held by 5 Jat was attacked. North of DBO at Chandini the post was held by Subedar Sonam Stobdan and 29 men. Attacked by 500 Chinese the men held out for a whole day. Only one man survived seriously wounded. Sub Sonam was awarded the MVC and Sepoys Chiring, Wangchuk and Phunchok were awarded VrCs. Galwan post held by Subedar Jang Bahadur Thapa's men since July was reinforced by a company of 5 Jat led by Major Hasabnis. The Chinese pounded this post with artillery for a full day before over-running it. Sub Thapa was amongst those killed. The attacks continued remorselessly. Post Parmodak at 17,000 feet was held by a section of one NCO and 5 Ors. Soon the others were dead leaving only Havaldar Tulsi Ram. Undaunted he continued to pepper the advancing Chinese with LMG fire till he was gunned down. Likewise at Post Bishan at 18,645 feet, Company Havaldar Major Anand Ram and 12 men of the J & K militia were pounded by the Chinese for 45 minutes. The Chinese made two assaults but were beaten back. Surrounded Anand Ram

found a gap along a steep precipice and extracted his men one by one. So did Subedar Amar Singh and his platoon at Post Patrol Base south of the Galwan River. Although tasked with observing the Chinese and asked to withdraw if contact was made he stood his ground. He and most of his section was wiped out.

The next posts to be attacked were Srijap I and Srijap II. Held by the doughty Gorkhas led by Major Dhan Singh Thapa the Chinese pounded it with artillery from 6 am. In spite of this they beat back 2 Chinese assaults. Meanwhile Naik Rabi Lal Thapa who had taken a storm boat from Thakung post saw this battle from 1000 metres. As the Chinese made a 3rd assault the Gorkhas leapt out with shouts of "Ayo Gorkhali". Khukris and bayonets clashed in a last grim battle. By 8.30 am it was over with most of the Gorkhas dead. A hundred Chinese were also strewn around. Major Dhan Singh Thapa was awarded the PVC.

By 22nd October the Chinese had cleared all posts north of Chushul. On Oct 27th they turned to the southern approaches. The posts Chang La and Jara La were attacked. For 4 hours its outnumbered defenders fought bravely. Jemadar Ishe Thundup commanding the Chang La post asked his men to withdraw and covered it himself. In the process the gallant Jemadar was killed earning a posthumous MVC. The men at Jara La were surrounded but managed to break through in the night.

Chushul stood isolated with only the battalion headquarters of the 1/8th GR and a MMG section to defend it. However the Chinese also needed a break to regroup from the severe losses they had suffered. For 8 days they had thrown everything at the Indians from masses of troops supported by heavy artillery. The Indians had some small arms and 2 in mortars with very little ammunition. Still they had caused heavy casualties. Blue uniformed porters were seen carrying truckloads of wounded and dead at the end of each day's battle. They suffered over 50 percent casualties.

Deployment of 114th Brigade

114th Brigade reeled back in the face of the Chinese assault. All they could do was to concentrate its resources on the outskirts of Leh. If Leh fell it would open the door to the whole of Ladakh. Brigadier Raina was planning the deployment of his newly arrived 5th battalion, the 13th Kumaon when the orders arrived for him to move to Chushul to take over command of its defences. At first it seemed another one of those crazy plans that characterised the Indian response elsewhere against the

Chinese. After all there were only the Bn HQ of 1/8 and MMG section at Chushul. But additional messages from Corps Headquarters clarified the situation. Leh was to become Divisional HQ for 3rd Infantry Division commanded by Maj Gen Budh Singh. Moving to Leh were the 70th and 163rd Infantry Brigades along with 2 tank troops, a field artillery regiment, a heavy mortar battery and other supporting arms. This was made possible by IAF An-12s.

114th Brigade now comprised of the 1st Jat, 5th Jat, 13th Kumaon, 1/8th Gorkha Rifles and elements of J&K militia. In addition there were 2 troops of 20th Lancers, 38th Battery of 13 Field Regiment, and a troop of 32 Heavy Mortar Regiment and company of Mahar Regiment MMG. It was in charge of the Lukung-Chushul-TsakaLa area a distance of 80 km. Brigadier Raina flew down to Chushul on 28th October with the rest of the Brigade HQ moving by road.

The Chinese could attack Chushul in three possible ways

1. From Tsaka La in the South down the mountains east of Dungti. This would have to be an infantry attack because of lack of motor able roads. They could also come down the Demchok – Dungti road allowing them to use armour and artillery. But this would mean a major battle at Dungti where 70th Brigade was deployed.

2. An attack via Thakung in the North West which gave them 2 options

i). Advance along Marsmik La to Lukung and subsequently along Lukung –Thakung-Chushul

ii). An waterborne assault across the Pongong Lake

3. The third way would be to attack Chushul via Rudok. This had motorable roads up to the forward posts allowing for an infantry attack supported by armour and artillery around the Spanggur Gap.

It seemed highly likely that the Chinese would take the third option. This meant 2 options for the defenders;

1. Holding the heights east of the Chushul Valley – Gurung Hill, Magar Hill and Rezang La

2. The heights on the west side of Chushul

The second option meant giving up the airfield and thus the first option was chosen. Accordingly the Brigade's sector was divided into 2 sub sectors Lukung and Chushul.

Once allocated the troops started digging in and set up the defences. For once supplies started arriving in sufficient numbers. In fact there was a shortage of porters to carry the stores to forward positions. Under Brigadier

Raina's supervision every tank able approach was mined and covered by 106 mm recoilless guns. The Field Artillery and armour was hidden under cover. In addition dummy guns, tanks and fuel tanks were set up. Old disused bull dozers were made to look like tanks. With preparations the Indians awaited the Chinese attack.

The Battle

The early morning hours of 18th November were unusually cold. A mist shrouded the area with visibility for only 200 yards. The calm of the dawn was shattered by the explosions of artillery fire. It was 0435 hours and the battle for Chushul had begun. The early barrage targeted the dummy fuel dumps, artillery positions and tank positions. The Indians had the satisfaction of watching the Chinese waste a lot of ammunition on the dummy defences.

Brig Raina asked for situation reports from the various battalions. Only 1/8th GR and 13 Kumaon had been shelled. Raina ordered covering fire for the two battalions and the 25 ponders of the 38th Field Artillery replied back. By 0515 hrs the 1/8th GR reported enemy figures moving in the dark. At 0545 hrs the Chinese attacked the 2 platoons on Gurung hill commanded by Captain P.L. Kher. The Gorkhas beat back the attack. As the Chinese started an artillery bombardment in preparation for an attack the Indian gunners fired back in DF mode at Chinese preparation sites. Guided by OP 2nd Lt S.D. Goswami the artillery attack caught the Chinese in the open and the severe casualties forced them to abandon the attack.

Meanwhile 13th Kumaon was asked to send out a patrol led by Major Jatar to see what was happening with C Company at Rezang La. The phone wires were dead. Meanwhile the radio crackled with Kher reporting a second attack forming. Once again Goswami brought down accurate fire. The Chinese advanced line after line. The artillery and MMGs were tearing big gaps in the advancing Chinese. At 150 yards Kher ordered his men to open fire. Meanwhile other Chinese troops were streaming down the gullies leading to Gurung hill from the Spanggur Gap. Now the AMX 13 tanks of B Squadron 20th Lancers commanded by 2nd Lt S.P.S. Baswani were thrown in the fray. As Baswani tried to fire his gun he found the automatic loading gear had frozen. He switched to manual. After a few rounds the loader thawed out. The crews pumped out HE shells decimating ranks of advancing Chinese. As they ran out of ammunition they withdrew to reload. On their return they found the Chinese still swarming in huge numbers. Even for the concept of human waves this was unprecedented. In spite of whole lines being decimated the Chinese pressed forward desperate to take Gurung Hill at any cost. By 0900 hours they reached the forward posts manned by Jemadar Amar Bahadur Gurung. Initially the Gorkhas were thrown back but the valiant Gurung

led a khukri charge and retook the positions. However he was mortally wounded. Meanwhile Kher was wounded and as he watched the Chinese attack again develop he had 2 options. Stand and fight and be overrun or withdraw to Camel's back where he had a better chance. He opted for the second and called for artillery fire on his own positions to give him a chance to disengage. Meanwhile Goswami continued to direct fire from his OP. The 3 others in his post were dead. After ordering fire on his position he started to withdraw on Kher's order when he was hit. He collapsed and lay there till a patrol found him in the night and brought him back. But the severe cold had caused frost bite and his legs had to be amputated. Goswami was awarded the MVC. The other 3 men Tech Assistant Gurdeep Singh received the VrC and signallers Naik Pritam Singh and Lance Naik Sarwan Singh received the Sena Medals. The Chinese had achieved half their aim of taking the 2 shoulders. With Gurung Hill in their hands they now turned their attention on Magar Hill.

Meanwhile let's shift our attention to Rezag La. This was a massive feature of 5180 metres. It was defended by C Company of 13th Kumaon led by Major Shaitan Singh. They were deployed over a 2 km frontage with a total of 118 men.

The 3 platoons 7th led by Jemadar Surja 3000 yards north of the pass, 9th led by Jemadar Ramchandra was 1100 yards south of 7th platoons position and 8th platoon was deployed a further 1600 yards south with company headquarters behind them along with the 3 in mortars. Unfortunately due to the shortage of guns 13th Kumaon unlike the men at Gurung Hill did not have artillery cover which was needed for the more important posts. Although they were well entrenched they did not have mines as well as adequate overhead protection for the command posts.

Every morning the Company would put out 3 Ops and every evening the platoons would send out 3 LPs. In addition patrols consisting of an NCOs and 3 men would constantly move about each platoon overlapping with the other. With the distances between the Rezag La and the others there was very little support that could be given. The men at Rezag La were to fight till the "last man, last round". In spite of this expectation morale continued to be high.

On the night of the 17th the LPs as usual went forward. At 2200 hrs a storm blew up lashing the area with heavy winds and snow for about 2 hours. When it subsided the fresh snow helped in seeing out to 600 meters. At 0200

the LP from 8th platoon saw a body of troops half a mile away moving up the pass. The LP commander Lance Naik Brij Lal rushed back to inform the platoon HQ. Platoon HQ sent an LMG out to the LP post. On returning to the post with section commander Hukum Chand it was found that the Chinese were less than 250 yards away. Along

with Lance Naik Ram Singh and his LMG section they moved further down to engage the Chinese. Since the Chinese were now moving rapidly Hukum Chand fired a red very light as well as opened a burst of LMG fire to warn the rest of the company. There was silence now from the LP. Meanwhile the burst of LMG fire had brought the rest of the company to a rapid stand to. As Shaitan Singh checked on the wireless of the various positions.

Meanwhile a Chinese patrol snuck up and cut the lines to the battalion headquarters. The Company lines were now silent. The platoons were ordered to put out patrols to see what was happening. At 0435 all platoons reported heavy shelling. The barrage went on for 20 minutes. Naik Ram Kunwar in charge of the mortars reported that No 1 mortar position was hit. The crew were killed and the optical sight was damaged. A new crew was assembled. Meanwhile for some

reason nobody from 5 Jat under 13 Kumaon seemed to have reported the tell tale flashes of the shelling.

Meanwhile Shaitan Singh ordered the platoons to watch their flanks as the first attack was probably a feint. Meanwhile Naik Sahi Ram and his LMG section which had moved forward to cover a reentrant saw a Chinese column come up carelessly. When the column came close the section opened up with LMG and grenades leaving the column decimated.

Now at 0505 hours both Hari Ram and Surja saw attacks forming up against their platoon positions. They requested mortar support. Under the Ops accurate sighting the mortars hammered the Chinese attack causing heavy casualties. By 0515 the attacks had been beaten back. Over the next 50 minutes there was a couple of skirmishes with Chinese patrols. For some reason the Chinese seemed to just walk in with no tactical movement of any sort.

Now the Chinese realised that this was no walkover and started forming for a more tactical assault. Jemadar Surja watching the attack forming up asked Lance Naik Ram Singh to take an LMG and move 40 yards forward

***Half a league half a league
Half a league onward...
Into the valley of Death
Rode the six hundred...***

***Not tho' the soldier knew
Some one had blunder'd;
Theirs not to make reply,
Theirs not to reason why,
Theirs but to do & die...***

***Cannon to right of them,
Cannon to left of them,
Cannon in front of them
Volley'd and thunder'd;...***

***When can their glory fade?
O the wild charge they
made!***

***All the world wonder'd.
Honour the charge they
made!
Honour the Light Brigade...***

towards some rocks along with Gulab Singh. The Chinese meanwhile brought in a MMG and set it up 600 yards from the platoon lines. Then under a 10 minute mortar barrage they attacked. With the MMG covering them they advanced to about 40 yards when Surja ordered his men to open fire. The fire from the platoon lines as well as the LMG fire from the left broke up the attack. However the MMG was causing problems with 3 dead and a few more with serious head wounds. Surja now had only 11 men with him. It became imperative to take out the MMG. Gulab Singh volunteered for the job. Along with Ram Singh he worked his way 500 yards down the left to the cover of some rocks. As they peered over the rocks at the MMG 70 yards away they also saw a platoon sized unit in a depression. Realising that they had been lucky to come this far the 2 men charged the 70 yards with the cry "Data Shri Krishna ki Jai". 30 yards away the MMG opened up and Gulab Singh fell. Ram Singh still continued firing from the hip till a burst of MMG fire hit him. He fell only 5 feet away from the MMG. The mission to knock the MMG out had failed by a few feet.

Meanwhile 7th platoon also continued to get hammered by mortar fire. Then an MMG was dragged up opposite them and they too were under MMG fire. The combination of continuous mortar and MMG fire was taking its toll. The No 2 mortar position was hit killing its crew. A bullet passed through Ram Kunwar miraculously missing his spine. He continued to reorganise, forming a new unit consisting of Lance Naik Shri Ram for the No 1 mortar and himself and Naik Surat Singh for the No 2 unit.

The wait was on for the next Chinese attack. It had become clear that the Chinese planned to finish off 7 and 8 platoons before taking on the 9th platoon and CHQ. At 0655 hrs the sun rose and the Chinese artillery began again. Naik Chandgi Ram's 3rd Section and Hukum Singhs 1st section opened up and cut down the first two waves. Regrouping the Chinese launched two more attacks which were also beaten back. But now the Kumaonis were down to a few men. As the 5th attack was launched, Chandgi Ram led his men into a bayonet charge. Likewise Hari Ram took the second section in a counter attack which temporarily stabilised the situation. But the Chinese threw in yet another wave also engulfed Rugha Nath's 1st section. With that attack 8 platoon ceased to exist. At 7th platoon as the barrage lifted Surja saw a mass of grey at 40 yards. Calmly he called up HQ to tell them that they were going out to meet the assault. A vicious hand to hand fight ensued in which all the men were killed. All were found with multiple bullet and bayonet wounds. At 0800 hours the Chinese fired a green light signalling the end of 7th and 8th platoons.

The Chinese now were regrouping in the area where they had wiped out 7th platoon. Yet the fight was not over. A little distance away Naik Sahi Ram watched with con-

trolled fury. He had wondered why he was not called back to the platoons' main position but like a good soldier waited at his position. When he saw the Chinese regrouping he realised that they his platoon was no more. He waited for the Chinese to assemble before he let rip with his LMG. The bunched up Chinese did not expect this and were mowed down in large numbers. The Chinese fled and Sahi Ram settled back awaiting the next attack. The Chinese brought in recoilless guns and methodically destroyed his positions. Shaitan Singh gauged the situation and decided that the best position for him to make his stand would be the No 7 platoons position. After Sahi Ram's devastating fire the position was clear of Chinese. He called up 9th platoon Jemadar Ramchander and told him to leave 2 LMGs to engage the Chinese while the rest of the men moved to the bump. The 2 LMGs were under Sepoy Nihal Singh and Harphul Singh. Harphul already having lost his brother in law and his nephew was thirsting for revenge. The mortars now without ammo were to be disabled and all maps and other documents burned. The men moved in single file. After they had covered 600 yards tragedy struck. An unseen MMG coughed to life and mowed down the attacking Kumaonis. Major Shaitan Singh was hit and pulled by Phul Singh to cover. 32 men were killed. Meanwhile back at 9 platoons position the few men left behind were under attack. With the odds arrayed against them Lance Havaladar Balbir Singh led his 3 men into swirling mass of grey. Ram Kunwar and the remaining men fired off their last rounds before machine gun fire killed them. The 2 LMG men and the MMG had been duelling for 10 minutes now. Harphul finally managed to hit one of the crew neutralizing one MMG briefly. A 75 mm antitank rocket exploded amongst his position killing him instantly. Nihal Singh continued to fire till he was hit on both elbows and could not hold on anymore.

As Ram Kunwar disabled the mortars and was moving away he was hit by rifle fire. He saw the Chinese 20 yards away. Angry he took a rifle and went inside the command post. The first Chinese soldier to peek in received a round into his head. The remaining Chinese threw a flurry of hand grenades to silence him. Phul Singh along with OP Jai Narian tried to drag Shaitan Singh. But the gaping hole in his back was draining his life out. Finally as Shaitan Singh stopped breathing they moved back to the main lines. Incredibly both Nihal Singh and Ram Kunwar managed to slip out enemy captivity and make it back to safety. Of the 118 men at Rezag La 109 men laid down their lives. 5 men were captured and only 4 men returned back alive.

With the fall of Rezag La the men on Magar Hill now awaited the anticipated Chinese attack. The gunners at Magar Hill were itching to get have a go. At one point a Chinese column was marching up the gully between Rezag La and Gurung Hill. The guns were moved into direct firing mode. Wisely the Chinese decided not to at-

tack. At another point the Chinese moved in mortars in the Spanggur Gap. Sighted by the Magar observation post they were immediately shelled. One mortar was knocked off and the rest scampered back to safety. But with Gurung in their hands the Chinese now could regroup and roll down the hill and overrun the Gorkhas and Kumaonis and take the airfield. This would cut off troops deployed eastwards including those on Magar Hill.

With over one thousand Chinese killed for 140 Indian dead the Brigade had achieved its primary task. It was now decided to pull all troops to positions in depth and wait for the second round. Accordingly in the night the units withdrew with smart discipline taking with them every piece of equipment. Except for a couple of disabled tanks and empty fuel containers and other junk everything else was pulled out. The depth positions had better tactical advantages. To attack these positions the Chinese would have to come up from the lower heights. Also their build up will have to be in the open. The attack will have to traverse through the Chushul Valley an ideal killing field.

The Cease Fire

The second round never came. On 21st November the Chinese declared a ceasefire. The Indian Army and 114th Brigade were justifiably proud of its conduct during the battle of Chushul. Outnumbered 10 to 1 they had fought with considerable elan and tactical skills inflicting horrendous casualties on the Chinese. There was no vain sacrifice of lives due to egos. Peking radio admitted to having suffered its worst casualties at Rezang La. Ironically it could have also been an indicator of things to come. The Indian Army was just coming to grips with this war. Barely a fraction of the Army had been involved. It was possible that the Battle at Chushul was a sign that the remainder of the war was going to be much harder and a notice to us that if the country had not lost its nerves the end of this war could have been on better terms.

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