

Speech by Lt. Gen. P.N. Kathpalia, PVSM , seminar on “ Remembering Chushul Martyrs” organized by Dr. Syama Prasad Mookerjee Research Foundation and Conclave of Defence Services Veterans at New Delhi on 18 Nov. 2008

Shri K.N. Sahani Ji, Gen Malik, Shri Madan Das Ji, Brig. R.B. Sharma and Shri Tarun Vijay and distinguished guests.

I have been asked to speak about the Sino-India Rezang La battle of 1962 in Ladhak and the lessons we didn't learn. The Battalion that faught this courageous battle, belongs to the Kumaon Regt whose father figure or Col of the Regt I became later on. Before I go on to the actual battle I consider it appropriate that you should know as to why this war had to be faught with our neighbour who at that time was friendly and slogans “Hindi Chini Bhai-Bhai” were very common. By treating this sector “a holy cow” as stated in one of the books, the Govt. squashed all debate about defence matters in parliament and the press – the freedom of which is proclaimed so loudly, essentially because it is hardly ever used to educate the public. The Henderson-Brooks report on the 1962 debacle has never been published, nor made available to any Indian scholar. Rajani Kothari wrote in a forward to Col J R Saigal's book on India- China and India- Pakistan wars, some excerpt are as fallows. What was Pandit Nehru's own perception of China? Was his statement of 1960 that a strong China was always expansionist a sudden revelation of the truth or did he always believe so? If he did, why did he not act on it earlier? Why was the dispute taken from the political to the legal plane in 1959? What was the nature or Soviet advice after 1957 about Sino-India relations? Did it influence decision making in Delhi? Did Chou En-lai come to New Delhi in 1960 prepared for a political settlement? If he did, why did negotiations fail? How did the “forward policy” come about? Was it at the initiative of the Army, the Intelligence Bureau, the Ministry of External Affairs, the Cabinet, or some other agency? What were the presumptions on which it was based? How was the decision to “drive out the Chinese” arrived at in 1962? What were the cost calculations? Was the C.I.A. involved with India's defence against China after 1962? If it was, how did this affect India's foreign policy? What lessons were derived from the 1962 debacle about the strength of the armed forces and weaponry, organization and leadership of the armed forces, our foreign policy posture, and our attitude towards Tibet? And how did these and other factors influence our image of ourselves and our neighbours?

History bears heavily on nations that refuse to learn from it. Let us not find correctives by the shortcut of wallowing in more recent feats of glory. A proper examination of the 1962 debacle will not take away from recent achievements but only put the whole of our defence endeavour in perspective by showing us how and why we went wrong, how and why the present seems so much better than the past, and how is the future to be faced - not just by the armed forces but by the nation as a whole.

The day-to-day happenings and the record of battle as also the reactions of the troops and the junior commanders and the developments leading to the sudden debacle on 18 Nov 1962, in the second phase of our operations against the Chinese, in the general area of Sela-Dirang-Bomdila, remained un-recorded.

Never in the history of warfare has a well organized, trained and fairly well equipped force with a fire power much superior to that of the enemy, and consisting of over 15000 seasoned soldiers deployed in an advantageous to defeat their country disintegrated in matter of minutes without a fight, thus causing on irreparable damage to India's prestige in the international field, cutting short the dynamic political career of Krishna Menon and irrevocable damage to the political stature of Jawaharlal Nehru. Geographically, we had most of the advantage to face the Chinese threat effectively. Once they came well with in NEFA. The Chinese could fight so long as their lines of communications were not over stretched and hence they had the advantage in the initial phase of the battle in Nyamika chu area. But once they moved beyond Towang, the Indian Army had all the advantages over them. When Nehru spoke of evicting the Chinese, though he did not show politico - military sagacity, he spoke with full knowledge of the facts; realizing that the Chinese would not under take military adventure on India in view of their positive handicap.

What actually happened in NEFA in November 1962 should have baffled every sane professional soldier—but the only unfortunate part is that this aspect has not even been considered adequately and analysed dispassionately by the authors of the episode, including Kaul and Dalvi. They have all tried to establish that the Chinese were geographically at a great advantage vis-à-vis India throughout the operations. Kaul, and to some extent Dalvi, took advantage of the arguments advanced by our political leaders and the Press to justify our failure. The fact is that while our forces, superior in fire power and equally matched in numbers, were fighting for their own country, were deployed on the high ground of their own choosing well known to them and where they had carried out detailed reconnaissance, the Chinese launched an operation into a hostile land, unknown to them as regards the attitude of the local population, quite ignorant of the tracks and roads they had never operated on them. In addition, we had the advantage of choosing the impregnable area-Sela (considered an impregnable fortress by the professionally oriented officiating Corps Commander, Lt. Gen Harbaksh Singh). Without oversimplifying the issue, I could say that even with a very small force sitting, as the Indian Army did, on top of a dominating fortress like Sela, one could maul and annihilate a force much larger (even 5 to 10 times) provided it was allowed a fight. Why it did not, is a different story. B.N. Mullick, the then Director of the Intelligence Bureau, blamed the Army, Lt. Gen Kaul blamed the Intelligence Bureau for the failure with regard to Chinese movements. Others blamed Menon and Nehru for all that happened during October – November 1962, without knowing the facts. That so far as the actual battlefields were concerned, our forces were much better placed geographically in relation to the Chinese during the November war and that for unknown reasons these favorable conditions were not exploited, it is a mystery that needs to be thoroughly investigated.

The Battle of Rezang La (Ladakh)

It was a Sunday morning when the dawn broke on 18th Nov 1962. It was unusually cold, with snow falling lightly over Rezang La since the early hours. This day saw a battle that was unique in many ways. Firstly India was to fight a major battle for the first time at such an high altitude without being equipped with modern arms and high altitude clothing, against a well planned attack in waves by a large force which was well clothed well equipped, besides belonging to and trained in a similar area. In spite of the prevailing conditions and poor weather, the valiant Ahirs of Haryana, UP and Rajasthan from the plains of North India took the challenge and showed the enemy their adaptability, physical and moral courage and fought to the last man last round. Many of them had never seen such hostile terrain, where air was rarefied and any physical activity required many times more effort than in the plains, nor had they seen snow flakes till they arrived in Ladakh. Our troops were equipped with out-moded 303 single action bolt rifles and no snow clothing.

The Brigade and battalion Commander, and other troops deployed around Chushul, were attracted by the sight of massive shelling having commenced at about 6.15 am on Rezang La, Gurung Hill and the Spanggur Gap. By now the entire Brigade defended sector was at “Stand To” Shortly thereafter the Chinese guns lifted their fire and brought intense artillery on the Chushul Airfield, and Battalion HQ of 13th Kumaon Near by. By now the attack on Major Shaitan Singh’s C Company had begun. By 9.00 am a portion Rezang La and Gurung Hill had fallen to the enemy. The shelling of Chushul Airfield and nearby defended localities continued for some more time; and then there was silence. The snowfall on Rezang La continued intermittently.

The dawn on Monday, 19th November, 1962 saw the Chinese resume the attack on Gurung Hill, held by 1/8 GR (Gorkha Rifles), and captured the remainder of the position. The Chinese could now overlook the Spanggur Gap Defences, making these untenable to defend. The fall off Rezang La on the other side exposed the flank of Muggur Hill and that position too had to be given up, though still intact. That night Brigadier ‘Tappy Raina’, the Brigade Commander ordered a tactical withdrawal to a new defence line on the hill south and south west of Chushul, overlooking the airfield and the road to Jaska La. By first light on 20 November, 1962, 13th Battalion. The Kumaon Regiment, under Command of Lt. Col H.S. Dhingra, was in occupation of their new defended area, less ‘C’ company, which was no more.

C Company under Command of Major Shaitan Singh, three JCOs and 124 other Ranks were deployed at Rezang La defended locality prior to the Chinese attack. When this locality fell to the Chinese, only 14 survivors – nine of them wounded – staggered into the Battalion HQ. The Line and wireless Communication to C Company had been disrupted; and Battalion HQ remained out of communication to C Company HQ from the time Rezang La came under heavy shelling two days earlier. Major Shaitan Singh and

remaining personnel of the Company were declared 'missing believed killed', in accordance with normal procedure in war. On the night of November 21, came the surprise declaration of a unilateral cease – fire by the Chinese. The fighting ceased next morning. In the mean time arrangements were made through the International Red Cross to collect our dead from Rezang La. It was only in mid February, 1963 a group headed by Brig (Later General) and Major (Latter Maj Gen G. N. Sinha and official of PIB equipped with cameras went to Rezang La, the scene of a pitched battle. It was an awesome sight; the closing stages of the battle of November 18 transferred into a tableau by the action of snow and subs zero temperature. They counted 96 frozen bodies scattered all over this locality in battle positions and area littered with empty shells, heavy mortar blinds and countless MMG and Rifles empty cases Major Shaitan Singh and his gallant men stayed and fought in the spirit of, last man last round, as had been narrated by the survivors who made it to the battalion HQ, because their Company Commander, late Major Shaitan Singh had ordered them to report to battalion HQ to apprise them of the battle conditions at Rezang La. (Report of one JCO and four ORs having being taken POWs were received through Red Cross).

The battle that Major Shaitan Singh and his company fought was indeed great. It was a battle that will be remembered by future generations of Chinese as well as Indians. The Chinese will remember it for the incredible heroism they saw; the Indians will have every reasons to be proud of those brave Soldiers of Kumaon Regiment, who preferred to die fighting rather than surrender even an inch of their mother land. The class composition of this brave battalion of the Kumaon Regiment was composed of 100% Ahirs.

Conclusion

Such courageous and brave events do not occur often. Therefore its is necessary to celebrate the historic and emotional day to rededicate ourselves to the nation's security and remind the people to pray for seeking peace for the souls of the soldiers who laid their lives for the country. It must be remembered that it is normal for people to forget the Army after the war, but such celebrations by the Govt. act as catalytic agent for the people.

The other issue that is equally important is that the Defence Services should not be considered as aliens, but a part of the nation, this will make them perform still better. It is therefore necessary that CDS/or the three service chiefs are involved in the Govt. decision making process. This would help the Armed forces to be ready all the time when and wherever they are required fully equipped.

The Lessons We didn't Learn

1. Coordination of the three services. In spite of the org existing there is no commander. The CDS does not exist. It will be more economical and more effective. The minister will get only one view point instead of three from the Defence service. It will save time of the minister.

2. The Defence services are under the Civil Govt. That is The Ministry-Politician and not The Civil Bureaucracy. The Bureaucratic have been trying for long to try get the Defence services under them. This will not happen. The day this happens, country will have a problem. This is only agency, which is a political and disciplined and will save the country.

3. Communication should never be lost between various sub units of a formation. If this happens try after native means but never believe in rumors. If this was followed the retreat would not have followed and Chinese would have been stuck. If you build a fortress and withdraw from it without a fight, then why build one. Leavuiq Sela with out a fight was not acceptable.

4. Never have a fixed set of ideas. All countries look at their National Interests first but we did not besides Nehru Kept praising the Chinese. Result was that Nehru was not prepared to listen against China from his staff as for as Sino Indian relationship was concerned. He did the same thing with Kashmir, even though Sardar Patel warned him. Even here he was warned by Patel in a letter.

5. B.N. Mullick informed Nehru when China intrud Indian territory but only after the Army had informed him. He did not believe the Army but accepted Mullick. It was only Mullick's advise that made him give orders to throw the Chinese out. The result was Army was in a hurry to throw them out as the earliest. However there was one Brig. who said he would wait till March 1963, so that he was logistically satisfied and the troops were few trained but he was not heard and orders continue to stay.