

Confrontation at Thag La: Indo China War 1962

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The genesis of confrontation at Thag La Ridge actually lies in a series of directives issued by the Government of the day, in midst of increasingly aggressive Chinese activities which commenced in the latter half of the fifties and gained momentum and shape post grant of asylum to the Dalai Lama. On 02 Nov 1961, in a high powered meeting chaired by the Prime Minister, it was decided that the Indian forces should remain in effective occupation of the whole frontier from NEFA to Ladakh and should cover all gaps by setting up posts or by means of effective patrolling. The aforesaid policy directive which has since been famously or infamously referred to as the *Forward Policy* was therefore not designed to evict China from territory India considered hers, but to check the continuing Chinese advance.

Army Headquarters in turn expeditiously gave impetus to the setting up of new posts under OPERATION ONKAR in areas as near to the Border as practicable. By 20th July 1962 a total of thirty four posts (8 in Kameng, 7 in Siang and 11 in Lohit Frontier) were established in NEFA along the Borders with Tibet. The newly established posts, manned largely by Assam Rifles, included one at Dhola, which was established a little south of Namka Chu on 04 Jun 1962, under the guidance of Capt Mahabir Prasad of 1 SIKH, who had accompanied the Assam Rifles Party. The siting of this post in particular has been cause of much debate and many have gone to the extent of saying that it provided the convenient and plausible *casus belli* for the war that followed.

Brig Dalvi in *Himalayan Blunder* takes the view that Dhola Post merely provided the Chinese with the excuse they wanted. Establishment of the Post in his opinion was an action fraught with grave consequences and was indiscreet politically as well as militarily. The post was ab initio required to be sited at the junction of Tibet, Bhutan, and India, however excessive snowfall had rendered the tri junction inaccessible, and therefore was located at Che Dong, on the southern bank of Namka Chu on 04 Jun 1962. The post was named after the Dhola ridge which was located a few miles to the south. Little was known at the time of establishment that the post would become the centre stage of the Sino-Indian war of 1962.

A perusal of sketch appended below indicates that the post was sited largely from administrative point of view and had little potential for defence. Further, it was located in territory which can be best termed as disputed and in light of contradictory claims, clarifications with regard to the location were sought by none other than the GOC 4 Infantry Division. The post was surrounded by high features of Tsangdhar and ThagLa and lay next to the Namka Chu River. It enjoyed good availability of water and ease of maintenance. Interestingly, while the post was being established, Capt Mahabir Prasad had sent a patrol to the crest of Thag La, which is the most dominating feature in the area. The crest of Thag La was unoccupied at that time. In retrospect, if Thag La was indeed our territory, and if Capt Prasad had decided to hold it, the course of our history may have been very different!

On 8 Sep 1962, which happened to be a Saturday, at 8.00 am, approximately 60 Chinese troops crossed the Namka Chu and surrounded the post. They also destroyed two log bridges on the river in vicinity of the post. The post commander, a Junior Commissioned Officer exaggerated the strength to 600 and reported the incident to his rear. Dhola Post was ordered to hold ground and reinforcements ex 9 Punjab at Lumpu were moved to Dhola. On 20 Sep 1962, two Chinese threw hand grenades and consequently three Indian soldiers were wounded. Firing from both sides continued intermittently till 29 Sep 1962.

On 22 Sep 1962, Ministry of Defence issued written orders to the COAS to take action for eviction of the Chinese in the Kameng Division of NEFA as soon as he was ready. The eviction operation was codenamed as LEGHORN. The task percolated down to 7 Infantry Brigade via Eastern Command/33 Corps/4 Infantry Division. The Brigade was ill prepared to take on the task, since it lacked the necessary artillery as well as logistic support. The commanders in chain postponed the reckoned date of completion of built up for offensive from 21

Sep to 29 Sep and later went on to change it to 01 Oct and 05 Oct. Needless to say, there were insurmountable difficulties in arranging air drop of vital stores including ammunition. Commanders and staff at all levels not only failed to anticipate the requirement but were also found wanting in coordination of pragmatic materialisation of needs of the forward troops.

While the forward dumping was in progress, Gen Umrao Singh, GOC 33 Corps was divested of the responsibility of NEFA and the task was handed over to the newly raised 4 Corps under the stewardship of Lt Gen BM Kaul. The new corps commander assumed charge on 04 Oct 1962 with the resolve of commencing Operation LEGHORN by 10 Oct 13. The corps commander not only moved to Dhola post haste, but also ordered concentration of all resources that comprised 7 Infantry Brigade to Tsangdhar. The corps commander witnessed the situation on ground and signaled HQ Eastern Command as follows on 07 Oct 1962:-

- Bulk of our air-drops of supplies, ammunition and winter clothing were landing in inaccessible places.
- There were only three days' ration available with 2 Rajput and 1/9 Gorkhas Rifles and fifty rounds of small arms ammunition per man. Our mortars and its ammunition were still in transit between Lumpu and Dhola.
- Due to lack of winter clothing men were spending night at a height of 15,000 feet in summer uniform with one blanket (Boots were also in short supply).
- There was an acute shortage of civil porters, which, coupled with inaccurate drops was slowing down the process of logistical build up.
- Additional aircraft be placed at the disposal of 4 Corps immediately for task of air-drops.
- The corps commander was taking all steps to evict the Chinese from our territory (despite the many difficulties) as ordered.
- The Chinese with their superior forces were likely to dislodge us from any position which we may initially capture.

On 8th October, the corps commander ordered Rajputs and Gorkhas down from Tsanghar to join troops along river line. The battalions were in place on 9th October, 1962. The corps commander decided to make a 'positional warfare' manoeuvre, since it was difficult for 7 Infantry Brigade to evict the Chinese from Thag La. The plan included occupation of Yumtso La, a little west of the Thag La peak, where they would take dominating positions behind the Chinese, as Yumtso La was still unoccupied. General Kaul chose the approach via Tseng-jong and the task was assigned to the Rajputs.

On 8th October, one platoon of 'D' Coy of 9 Punjab, under Major MS Chaudhary left for Tseng-jong to establish a bridgehead on the northern bank of Namka Chu. The platoon occupied location at 1500 hours. One section of this platoon occupied the Karpola II heights next morning. One platoon of A Coy of 9 Punjab, under Sub Chhail Singh, left for Tseng-jong on 9th October at 1000 hours to reinforce the platoon under Major Chaudhary. The Chinese did not react to these moves instantly; they only threw a grenade at the Indian post at Bridge IV at about 2030 hours.

However, at dawn of 10th October, when men from 2 Rajput were moving up the southern bank of the Namka Chu, making for the planned crossing point on the way to Yumtso La – a full battalion of Chinese emerged from their positions and moved quickly down the ridge, to form up for an attack on Tseng-jong. At the same time the Indian position at Tseng-jong came under fire of heavy mortars.

No sooner was the fire lifted, and at 0800 hours approximately 800 Chinese attacked the Punjabis at Tseng-jong from the East and North-East. After a heavy exchange of fire for about 45 minutes, the attack was repulsed. As the Indian troops had only pouch ammunition with them, Maj Chaudhary requested for machine gun and mortar fire from Bridge IV position. This request of Maj Chaudhary was not acceded to. A little later, the enemy reformed for a second time, and started assaulting the Indians at 0930 hours. By then, the Punjabis section, under Hav Malkiat Singh, on Karpola II had moved close to the flank of the Chinese. While the latter were bunched together, this section opened fire. The Chinese completely surprised, were caught in the cross-fire of light machine guns and suffered heavy casualties. They reacted by opening up heavy mortars. The Section under Hav Malkiat Singh was asked to withdraw to Tseng-jong.

Maj Chaudhary contacted his Battalion Commander Lt Col RN Mishra, on wireless and informed him that as the enemy was forming up again, it would be difficult for his men to hold the ground unless supported by MMGs and mortars from Bridge IV. Col Misra agreed to give fire support, but it was turned down by Brig Dalvi after consultations with Divisional and Corps Commanders. Brig Dalvi was of the opinion that provision of fire support would have attracted a response which may have been catastrophic for Rajputs who were on the move at that time.

The enemy assaulted the position a third time at 1200 hours from three sides – North, East and West – with 82 mm Mortars, 2-in Mortars, grenades and automatic weapons. Hand to hand fighting developed. Realising that the platoon at Tseng-jong was no more in a position to hold ground, orders were issued at

1230 hours by the Brigade Commander to the troops to withdraw. Consequently, troops at Tseng-jong reached south of the Namka Chu at around 1530 hours. In this action, Indians suffered heavy casualties – 6 dead, 11 wounded and 5 reported missing. The Peking Radio and Press announced their casualties as 77 dead and approximately 100 wounded.

In the Tseng-jong episode, three Maha Vir Chakras (MVC) and two Vir Chakras were awarded to 9 PUNJAB. Sep Kanshi Ram overpowered a Chinese soldier and snatched his automatic rifle and brought it with him, for which he was decorated with MVC. Naik Chain Singh was awarded MVC posthumously for bravery. Maj Chaudhary died of his wounds and was awarded MVC posthumously for “display of remarkable leadership and courage in extricating whatever was left of the platoons.” Besides Hav Malkiat Singh, Sep Suram Chand was another recipient of VrC. Our country is indeed blessed to have had heroes like these, who fought a well prepared, equipped and supported enemy, who outnumbered them 1:10, with almost nothing.

Corps Commander had personally witnessed the serious situation in which Indian troops were placed vis-à-vis the Chinese in Dhola area. The fact that Chinese could counter-attack in a big way was also evident. Gen Kaul sent a message to Eastern Command and Army Headquarters that “a grave situation had developed” that day at Tseng-jong, and sought permission to personally present the case before them at once and to seek further orders. Army Headquarters asked him to come to Delhi forthwith. Before leaving the Namka Chu area, Lt Gen Kaul told GOC 4 Div that instructions to drive the enemy back were to be held in abeyance till he returned from Delhi and present positions were to be held.

Chinese launched their main offensive along the entire front on 20 Oct 1962 and termed their action as self defence. What followed is history. But we must let memories of this history kept alive and not forgotten. The history is even more relevant today when bilateral trade between the nations has reached \$ 66 billion (in 2012), and both sides are enthusiastic to reach a goal of \$ 100 billion by 2015. While it may sound hunky-dory that China has become India’s biggest trading partner, it is also a reality that our borders remain un-demarcated. Recent intrusion in Ladakh therefore also needs to be seen in historical perspective. While we still possess one of the best fighting machines in the world, the Indian Jawan, we must not forget that he can fight against all odds, but may not compensate for lack of defence preparedness.

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