

# The Skirmish at Nathu La (1967)

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VK SINGH

## Background

Nathu La lies on the Old Silk Route between Tibet and India. In 1904, Major Francis Younghusband led a successful mission through Nathu La to capture Lhasa. This led to the setting up of trading posts at Gyantse and Gartok in Tibet, and gave control of the surrounding Chumbi Valley to the British. In 1947, Sikkim became an Indian protectorate. After China took control of Tibet in 1950, and suppressed a Tibetan uprising in 1959, refugees entered Sikkim through Nathu La. During the 1962 Sino-Indian War, Nathu La witnessed skirmishes between soldiers of the two countries. Shortly thereafter, the pass was sealed and closed for trade. Five years later, Nathu La was the scene of a 'border skirmish' between India and China, which resulted in heavy casualties to both sides. Significantly, it was the first and only instance when the Chinese got a 'bloody nose' from the Indians.

In order to help Pakistan during the 1965 War, the Chinese served an ultimatum and asked India to withdraw its posts at Nathu La and Jelep La, which were then held by 17 and 27 Mountain Divisions respectively. Accordingly, orders were issued by Corps Headquarters (HQ) to both divisions to vacate Nathu La and Jelep La. As a result, 27 Mountain Division vacated Jelep La, which the Chinese promptly occupied. However, Major General Sagat Singh, GOC 17 Mountain Division, refused to vacate Nathu La, which was a Border Out Post (BOP), while the main defences were at Changgu. In the adjoining sector, manned

by 27 Mountain Division, Jelep La was also a BOP, with the main defences located at Lungthu. In case of hostilities, the divisional commanders had been given the authority to vacate the posts, and fall back on the main defences. Sagat reasoned that Nathu La and Jelep La were passes on the watershed, which was the natural boundary. The McMahon Line, which India claimed as the International Border (IB), followed the watershed principle, and India and China had gone to war over this issue, three years earlier. Vacating the passes on the watershed would give the Chinese the tactical advantage of observation and fire into India, while denying the same to our own troops

**The Chinese got a 'bloody nose' from the Indians at Nathu La.**

The Chinese had installed loudspeakers at Nathu La, and warned the Indians that they would suffer as they did in 1962, if they did not withdraw. However, Sagat had carried out a detailed appreciation of the situation, and reached the conclusion that the Chinese were bluffing. They made threatening postures, such as advancing in large numbers, but on reaching the border, they always stopped, turned about and withdrew. They also did not use any artillery for covering fire, which they would have certainly done if they were serious about capturing any Indian positions. Indian artillery observation posts on adjoining high features called Camel's Back and Sebu La overlooked the Yatung Valley for several kilometres, and could bring down accurate fire on the enemy, an advantage that the Chinese did not have. It would have been a tactical blunder to vacate Nathu La and gift it to the enemy. Ultimately, Sagat's fortitude saved the day for India, and his stand was vindicated two years later, when there was a showdown at Nathu La.

Vexed by their failure to occupy Nathu La in 1965, the Chinese continued their pressure on the Indians. In December 1965, the Chinese fired on a patrol of 17 Assam Rifles, in North Sikkim, at a height of 16,000 ft, killing two men. They made regular broadcasts from loudspeakers at Nathu La, pointing out to Indian troops the pathetic conditions in which they lived, their low salaries and lack of amenities, comparing them to those enjoyed by Indian officers. It was a form of psychological warfare in which the Chinese were adept, and had to be countered. Sagat had similar loudspeakers installed on our own side and tape recorded messages, in the Chinese language, were broadcast every day. Throughout 1966, and early 1967, Chinese propaganda, intimidation and attempted incursions into Indian territory continued. The border was not marked, and there were several vantage points on the crest line which both sides thought belonged to

them. Patrols which walked along the border often clashed, resulting in tension, and, sometimes, even casualties.<sup>1</sup>

In the first week of August 1967, the BOP at Nathu La was occupied by 2 Grenadiers, relieving 18 Rajput. Lieutenant Colonel Rai Singh was then commanding 2 Grenadiers. Major Bishan Singh took over as 'Tiger Nathu La', as the company commander holding the pass was generally known, with Captain PS Dagar as his second-in-command. The deployment at Nathu La comprised a platoon each on Camels Back, South Shoulder, Centre Bump and Sebu La. The Battalion HQ was at Gole Ghar, while the battalion 3-inch mortars and administrative base were at Sherabthang.

Even while 2 Grenadiers was in the process of taking over the defences at Nathu La, Chinese activities increased. They were noticed repairing their bunkers on North Shoulder and making preparations to construct new ones. On August 13, the observation post at Sebu La reported that the Chinese had arrived on the crest line and dug trenches on our side of the international border. When challenged, they filled up the trenches and withdrew. On the same day, they added eight more loudspeakers to their already installed 21 speakers on South Shoulder. Due to this, the volume of their propaganda increased and could now be heard at Changgu.

The divisional commander discussed the problem with the corps commander, Lieutenant General JS Aurora, and obtained his concurrence to mark the crest line. 2 Grenadiers was ordered to lay a three-strand wire fence along the border from Nathu La towards the North Shoulder. However, as soon as work began on the fence on August 20, 1967, the Chinese became agitated, and asked the Indians to stop. One strand of wire was laid that day, and two more were added over the next two days. This led to an escalation in Chinese activity. On August 23, at about 1400 hours, Major Bishan Singh reported that about 75 Chinese in battle dress, carrying rifles fitted with bayonets, were advancing towards Nathu La. They advanced slowly in an extended line and stopped on reaching the border. They started shouting slogans which the Political Commissar read out from a red book and the rest repeated after him. The Indian troops were 'standing to', watching and waiting. Nothing happened for another hour. After standing on the border for about an hour, the Chinese withdrew and all was calm and quiet again.

On September 01, the corps commander along with the divisional commander visited Nathu La. The visibility that day was rather poor. They went to Centre Bump first and then to South Shoulder. Then they walked along the border to Four Poles area, where they crossed the border and went a few steps inside.

At once, the Chinese Political Commissar came running up to them, shouting “*Chini, Chini*”, indicating that they had crossed the border into China. The two Generals immediately withdrew, but the Chinese kept on grumbling. Soon a photographer came and took photographs of their footsteps across the border.

Next morning, General Sagat Singh again went to Nathu La. He directed that the border from Right OP to Camels Back must be patrolled. Immediately, a patrol of two officers, one Junior Commissioned Officer (JCO) and 15 Other Ranks (ORs) was sent out under Major Bishan Singh. As soon as the patrol reached the U Bump near Tekri, the Chinese surrounded them. Major Bishan Singh tried to explain to the Chinese officer that they had not crossed the border and, in fact, it was the Chinese who were in Indian territory. However, the Chinese did not budge. Bishan and his men then pushed their way through the Chinese and returned to Hotel. The Commanding Officer (CO), Lieutenant Colonel Rai Singh, was watching all this from South Shoulder.

On September 04, Sagat again went to Nathu La. He directed that the wire fence be converted into a Cat Wire Type 1 obstacle, using concertina coils. The task was allotted to 2 Grenadiers. A platoon of 70 Field Company Engineers under Major Cheema was allotted to assist them. On September 05, work started at 0500 hrs but the Chinese objected. There was an argument between Colonel Rai Singh and the Chinese Political Commissar as to alignment of the border. The work was stopped at 0800 hrs. However, work on the Chinese defences on North and South Shoulder continued. During the night, the Chinese came up to the Bump and cut off one Shoulder so that if water was poured on the other Shoulder, it would flow into China. Next morning, when our men went to straighten out some wire, a few Chinese came running up to the border with a bucket of water and poured it on the Bump, indicating the watershed.

On September 07, the work started again on the laying of the wire. This time, about 100 Chinese came to the fence and there was hand-to-hand fighting between the troops. Realising that they were unequal to the Jats, the Chinese withdrew and began pelting stones, the Grenadiers responding in the same manner. Because of all this fighting, there was not much progress in the laying of the wire. The Chinese suffered a few casualties in wounded, and we had two wounded. On September 08 and 09, things were relatively quiet but the Chinese continued work on their defences.

By now, Sagat's patience had been exhausted and he was determined to complete the work before he proceeded on leave on September 12. On the night of September 10, he held a conference at HQ 112 Mountain Brigade in Changgu,

where he personally briefed everyone on how the operation for laying the wire was to be carried out on September 11. Additional resources in men and material were moved for this purpose. One company of 18 Rajput was brought in to reinforce the defences. An ad hoc force of 90 men was organised into a protection party to charge the Chinese positions if they opened fire. Major Bishan Singh was in charge of the work, with Captain Dagar as his assistant. Apart from the platoon of 70 Field Company, a pioneer platoon was to assist in the construction of the fence.<sup>2</sup>

### **The Events of September 11, 1967**

As soon as work commenced on September 11, the Chinese came up to the fence, and tried to stop the work. There was a heated discussion between the Chinese Commander, who was accompanied by the Political Commissar, and Lieutenant Colonel Rai Singh, CO 2 Grenadiers. Sagat had foreseen this eventuality and told Rai Singh not to expose himself but remain in his bunker, where the brigade commander, Brigadier MMS Bakshi, MVC was also present. But this was not heeded and Rai Singh, with an escort, came out in the open to stand face-to-face with the Chinese officers. As the arguments became more heated, tempers rose, with both sides standing their ground. Suddenly, the Chinese opened fire, causing several casualties among the troops working on the wire fence. Colonel Rai Singh was hit by a Chinese bullet and fell down.

Seeing their CO fall, the Grenadiers became mad with rage. In a fit of fury, they came out of their trenches, and attacked the Chinese post, led by Captain Dagar. The company of 18 Rajput under Major Harbhajan Singh and the Sappers and pioneers working on the fence had been caught in the open and suffered heavy casualties from the Chinese firing. Realising that the only way to neutralise the Chinese fire was a physical assault, Harbhajan shouted to his men, and led them in a charge on the Chinese position. Several of the Indian troops were mowed down by Chinese machine-guns, but those who reached the Chinese bunkers used their bayonets and accounted for many of the enemy. Both Harbhajan and Dagar lost their lives in the action, for which they were later awarded the MVC and VrC respectively.

Second Lieutenant NC Gupta was commanding the brigade signal company, the Officer Commanding (OC) being on leave. Gupta had recently returned after completing the Commando Course at the Infantry School and was promptly christened 'Commando' by the brigade commander. A soft spoken and affable officer with a diminutive frame, Gupta made up in courage and diligence what he lacked in size. For his fearless actions in the Nathu La operations, he was awarded the Sena medal, though he was, in fact, recommended for the MVC.

Though young in years, Gupta maintained a diary of events as they occurred. Filling several foolscap sheets of paper, now yellowed with age, the record makes fascinating reading. It also brings to light several discrepancies between the actual events and the accounts that are to be found in war diaries and regimental histories written afterwards. (The author was also serving in 17 Mountain Divisional Signal Regiment in 1967. Subsequently, he had interviewed Lieutenant General Sagat Singh in 1997-98 while writing his biography. Most of the details given in this account are based on the diary maintained by Gupta, and personal interaction with him and General Sagat Singh).

Based on his diary, some of the events of September 11 are described by NC Gupta in the following words:

By about 0930 hrs, Chinese fire had intensified and gradually we started getting out of touch with the troops at North Shoulder and South Shoulder. By 0945 hrs, we had no contact with anyone on the position on the Shoulders even on the Artillery network. It was a panic station for me. All the lines were down and so was the B1 to the pass. I tried to enter the battalion net and the company net but failed. There was no response on any of the almost dozen frequencies of the battalion in use that day for various nets. I asked the operator at Brigade HQ to press in additional radio sets and keep trying for a response directly on ANGR-9 working to the Artillery OP and CO of the Field Regiment.

Around this time, from the vantage position at Central Bump, the Commander saw over a dozen troops running down the slopes of South Shoulder towards Sherabthang. He also observed that some of them had shed their helmets, packs and even rifles as they ran down. This created panic for us. The Commander asked me to call South Shoulder but there was no response. We tried to observe the area of South Shoulder but could see no movement. The shelling on the South Shoulder had also increased.

Under the circumstances perhaps there was no other option for the Commander but to ask me to send someone to South Shoulder to restore the communication. While I had a line party and spare radio sets with me, it was decided that a radio be sent to South Shoulder, a distance of around 500 mtrs. The route was open at places and involved going down around 300 mtrs and then up around 200 mtrs. The linemen with me were new to Nathu La and had never gone to South Shoulder. Havildar Bhakuni of the Rover had gone there many times. The choice was, therefore, between him and me. Seeing the gravity of the situation and the shelling, the Commander said, "OK, Commando (my pet name in Brigade HQ), off you go".

I reached South Shoulder at around 1000 hrs. To my astonishment, I found the post totally abandoned. I informed the same to the Commander. He asked me to look around for wounded, if any, and remain at the post and keep him in the picture. From the bunkers on South Shoulder I could see the Chinese in their bunker across. By this time, intermittent fog had started setting in. I informed the Commander that I could see a few dead soldiers in the area ahead of our defences close to the fence. Barring this, there was no one on the post that was designed for a platoon of Infantry. I resorted to intermittent firing from my carbine to indicate that the post is still occupied. Soon I found an LMG in its bunker. I then used it very carefully to try and depict our presence on the post.

At around 1100 hrs, the Commander informed me that reinforcements are on their way but would take at least three hours to reach and that I must hold on till then. A little later, he asked me to go around 100 mtrs down South Shoulder where he had spotted around six soldiers sitting behind a huge rock. After firing a few salvos of LMG, I went down. I found six Jawans of 2 Grenadiers, including 2/Lt Attar Singh (fresh from IMA), one Havildar and four Jawans. I made Attar Singh speak to the Commander. Thereafter, we all went back to the post and organised ourselves.

By 1200 hrs, the fog had intensified. As I was watching from one of the bunkers I saw one of the dead moving. He was just next to the fence barely 10 mtrs from the Chinese bunker. Taking advantage of the fog I went ahead to try and recover him. To my surprise, it was Major Bishan Singh, Tiger of Nathu La, who had been injured in the initial firing. He was a 6 foot tall Jat. He was badly injured. With great difficulty I managed to lift him and partly drag him into our defences. Once inside, I made him speak to the Commander. After the Commander had been briefed by him, the Commander asked me to evacuate him using the four Jawans and asked me, Attar Singh and the Havildar to remain at the post. Ten minutes later, the Commander asked me to return to the area of Bumps, leaving the radio set with 2/Lt Attar Singh.<sup>3</sup>

The shelling was on-off. On my way back, I was hit by a shrapnel of one shell. However, I never came to know of it at that point of time. I say so because that was the closest any shell had exploded near me. I came to know about it after three days when I was changing the uniform. My vest was full of dried blood with a small wound on the chest. In our family we had a tradition to give a silver coin when someone was going out on some important job. My mother had given me this coin when I left Delhi for 17 MDSR after YO's course. This coin was in my wallet along with the ID card and had taken the brunt of the shrapnel saving me from certain death.

By about 1330 hrs, the reinforcements had reached South Shoulder. After passing necessary instructions, the Rover Group decided to move to area Steps and then to

Sherabthang. Before moving, I left Havildar Bhakuni and the line party with the task of restoring the line in the battalion defended area including those to South Shoulder, H Section and the OP. I took the B1 radio myself and moved with the Commander.

The events of September 11 at Nathu La had been an experience for me. We lost around 70 troops in the day. The skirmish lasted five days before being called off. The most amazing event was the recovery of a wounded soldier from the fence after six days in the open. It was nothing short of a miracle.

The sad part was that over 90 soldiers of 2 Grenadiers had run away from the post. More than three dozen of them were later court-martialled. As a Signaller, it was something I had never expected out of Infantry.<sup>4</sup>

The skirmish at Nathu La developed into a full scale battle, lasting six days. The Indian casualties in the action were just over 200: 65 dead and 145 wounded. The Chinese are estimated to have suffered about 300 casualties. Though the action taken by Sagat in marking the border with a wire fence had the approval of the higher authorities, the large number of casualties suffered by both sides created an uproar and he was posted out soon afterwards as General Officer Commanding (GOC) 101 Area. However, Sagat was not perturbed. For the last two years, the Chinese had been instigating him and had killed several Indian soldiers. The spectre of the Chinese attack of 1962 still haunted the military and political leadership in India and had prevented them from taking effective action against them. This was the first time the Chinese got a bloody nose, and the myth of their invincibility was broken.

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Maj Gen **VK Singh** is an avid writer and has written many war accounts.

## Notes

1. Major General VK Singh, *Leadership in the Indian Army – Biographies of Twelve Soldiers* (New Delhi: Sage, 2005), pp. 309-10.
2. Colonel RD Palsokar, *The Grenadiers – A Tradition of Valour* (1980), p. 363.
3. According to the regimental history of the unit, "*The South Shoulder would have remained unoccupied had 2nd Lieutenant Attar Singh not been there. His personal example inspired the men to stay fast. For his steadfastness, he was promoted to the rank of captain on the spot by the GOC*". While the part about his on-the-spot promotion is true, this happened due to a misunderstanding. When the GOC came to know the real story later, he was enraged and almost ordered the officer to be stripped of the rank. His recommendation for a gallantry award was also reportedly cancelled.
4. Apparently, 2 Grenadiers was not the only battalion that showed traces of fear and weakness. Similar instances occurred in other units, including Gupta's own company, as subsequent entries in his diary reveal.