

Raid on Enemy Penga Post – May 17/18 1965

LT COL (RETD) A K (SAM) SHARMA



“Buzzards Feast In Summer-moonshine”

In May of 1965, 4/3 GR was holding the Cease Fire Line (CFL), now called the Line of Control (LoC) on Chhawa West in the general area Ramulidhara in the 25 Infantry Division Sector of J&K. Facing us was 9 Baluch. From our piquets, at night, we could see the glow of the lights of the Mangla Dam on the Jhelum in POK. Since October 1964 the entire divisional sector had become very active. Daily spats occurred between the Gurkhas and Baluchis and then the area would erupt into a veritable cauldron of fire. Ambushes too were frequent. Just a fortnight earlier a Road Opening Party (ROP) of the battalion had been ambushed by the wily Baluchis right inside our area. The leading scout had been hit, but he fired back emptying his SLR magazine into the fleeing enemy before collapsing owing to loss of blood. After last light, it was a sight to see enemy tracer from heavy automatics lining and criss-crossing the valley. Raids were the order of the day and the general policy was that the raiding of an Indian post had to be replied by a counter raid in Pakistan Occupied Kashmir (POK) within 24 hours as a reprisal. The Penga Raid was conceived out of this policy.

On 15 May 65, one of the Battalions in the Kalal Gap was raided by the Pakistani's and was mauled badly. The Pakistanis took away five bodies and

later cut off their heads and propped them on stakes in a macabre exhibition of senseless brutality. As a reprisal to this act, the Penga raid was launched.

It was but natural that Maj Chanda of Alpha Company should draw the short straw. No – the short straw did not even figure. But it should give the readers an indication of his popularity with the battalion headquarters. Chanda was officiating for the company commander, Maj Surinder Kshatri who was away on compassionate leave when the balloon went up for the raid. Maj Kshatri had first mooted the operation to the then CO, Lt Col RK Duleep Sinh. The company was deployed on the CFL right opposite the Penga Post. Kshatri had assessed that the three bumps on the feature were held by a platoon.

24 hours were given to get ready for the raid. On 17 May 1965 at 1700h Chanda briefed the raid party off a black board sketch on Piquet 564, 'Sansar' with both the CO Lt Col SDS Yadava and the Second-in-Command Maj Bhagwant Singh Gill in attendance. The 2IC reminded the whole lot not to come back with out a positive identification like a weapon, or even the tauko (head) of the enemy or even a PoW. The CO further enjoined all to up hold the good name & honour of the paltan by making the raid a successful venture. The SM, Dil Bahadur Gurung further gingered up the boys reminding them of the deeds of valour of their forefathers, with many a 'hoi ki hoi nas'.

Major J 'Guruji' Chanda was the raid party commander. The six sub groups under him were commanded as under: -

- 2/Lt 'Paoche' Gangte - Support Group Commander
- 2/Lt AK 'Sam' Sharma - Assault Group Commander No. 1
- 2/Lt 'Mota' Yogendra Singh - Assault Group Commander No. 3
- Sub Rik Bahadur Gurung - Assault Group Commander No. 2
- 2/Lt O P Verma - Fire Base 1
- 2/Lt L Colney - Fire Base 2

Individual sub group commanders briefed the men allotted to them on the ground, giving all an opportunity to have good look at their objectives & routes and tied up minor details. 2/Lt A K Sharma (Sam) discovered that he had Hav Aspur of the Sniper Section as his No 2 along with Hav Hum Bahadur and Rfn Dash Bahadur of A Coy, as also Rfn Kharka Bahadur of the MT. Apart from Aspur, who had been his instructor in a unit pre-course cadre and knew him some what, Sam had never met the others. So it really warmed the cockles of his heart to see them operate as they did in the execution stage of the raid, which since raising in October 1962 was the first bleeding of the paltan, and that too in an offensive action.

Just to preserve the notions of security, even the Adjutant was left in the dark. 2/Lt Paotinal Gangte, a Manipuri kuki and also a great one for a sense of history and the momentous occasion, kept merrily clicking away on his camera and recorded the event for posterity. Troops set out for Penga immediately after last light and after an uneventful approach march in the summer moonshine arrived at the RV after about an hour and a half. At this point, Sub Mandhoj Gurung of B Coy got annoyed with one of his men and in the pre-combat jitters ticked him off at the top his voice, little realising that the enemy was then with in earshot. This was to prove almost disastrous.

As soon as Gangte confirmed on the radio that his support group was in position, the raid party moved towards the release point at the base of the Penga feature, the assault groups moving in their laid down order of march. As per the plan, each group was to carry out a final check at the release point and then on a given signal raid their respective objective. But well before reaching the release point, when still in a dry nullah bed, the enemy opened up with a barrage of weapons including two to three Browning medium machine guns, firing from the flanks and depth. Evidently Mandhoj Gurung's outburst a few minutes earlier had led to the loss of surprise and the ensuing reception to the raid party was therefore particularly warm.

As with all troops who have never been into battle before, the Gurkhas faced with such heavy volume of fire, went to ground. Chanda realising that the show could no longer be orchestrated yelled to the party to rush their respective objectives. But in that heavy cacophony of fire to which the raid party was subjected, nobody got up. At this point of time leadership was called for and Chanda along with his young officers who much to their credit did not take cover, but kept standing got everybody up with a bit of butt-kicking and haranguing of the troops (Aphno beizzati garuncha? Gorkhali ko beizzati garaunch? Paltan ko beizzati garaunchah? Uth! uth! uuuth!)

Well 'uth' they did and soon the groups were moving towards their objective, the officers leading the way. Sam's objective was the Left Bump, Yogi's the Right Bump with the aim to also capture the much coveted and prized Browning machine gun and Sub Rik Gurung's objective was the Centre bump. Chanda was moving along with Rik Gurung and to his left. The enemy fire seemed unending and along with it was spewed, a stream of Urdu cum Multani invective and damnation in the fires of hell for the Kafirs.

With firing and screaming emanating from all sides the confusion in the battlefield was intense. Chanda had reached the release point towards the Centre

Bump and Sam, moving to the Left Bump, came rushing after him herding his group towards the Left bump. At this point, in the confusion of darkness, Sam mistook Chanda for the enemy and fired the full burst of his 9 mm Sten machine carbine at him. Providentially, however, not a single bullet found its mark! The confusion was soon resolved and after a moment of panic realising what he had done, Sam resumed the charge to the Left Bump from its flank and rear. He went in blazing away from his carbine, in a regular Rambo-style, throwing hand grenades as he closed in. Rfn Kharke was to his left and to his right was Rfn Dash Bahadur. Aspur and Hum Bahadur provided the rear protection to Sam who was not yet twenty years old and looked even younger. As he approached an enemy bunker he noticed an enemy soldier descending the reverse slope of the Left Bump. Sam got into position to fire at the enemy but to his horror and utter consternation he discovered that just at that moment it had jammed as, sadly, was the wont of this weapon. The next best option was to use the bayonet but at this moment, Rfn Kharka Bahadur, seeing the enemy soldier lunging determinedly towards his commander, held his sten gun from its muzzle end and clubbed the enemy soldier on his head, with its wooden butt. The enemy soldier wobbled, and even as he did so, Sam snatched his rifle and yelled at his comrades to withdraw to the RV. This rifle was the only trophy the raid party was to bring back, snatched from the hands of a Pathan soldier.

In the meanwhile, Sub Rik Bahadur Gurung, went to the Right bump and inflicted severe damage on the enemy. According to him, he bayoneted three of the enemy and killed a few of them. While all this was going on, CHM Sidhiman Gurung, of 'A' coy came back and told Chanda that he was wounded. Chanda asked him what happened and he replied " Huzoor, Subedar sahib le pet man bayonet ghonp diyo ". That brought down Rik Bahadur's claim to two. Chanda sent Sidhiman Gurung back to the RV all by himself. There was no time for niceties such as finding any body to accompany him. Later he was carried piggy back to Sansar, by the men in turn.

Yogi could not make it to the enemy Browning emplacement. He and his group were pinned down by heavy fire from the post. He almost was killed in action! He still has the jungle-hat with bullet-hole about a centimeter below the crown! By this time, it was between 0030 and 0100 and Chanda blew the whistle for the groups to return. The troops were quick to comply. Once together, someone asked the company commander why he had blown the whistle so soon. It had appeared to be an action of only about five minutes. In actual fact, the operation had lasted for about 25 minutes or more.

The support group stayed put, while all the three assault groups withdrew to a pre-determined RV to regroup. It was then discovered that Rfn Kharka Bahadur Gurung was missing from Sam's group. Chanda asked Sam to go back with his group and look for him. Sub Rik Bahadur was asked to accompany them. Sam was leading his boys back again, only to discover that no one was following him! He was wild, but Sub Rik Bahadur came to his 'rescue', and taking a 2 inch mortar from its number, told Sam; "Saab, apapne admi le kar dhundene jao. Main ap ko yahan se covering fire deta hun". Sam was aghast at such conduct from a very senior JCO, but as he had a job to do, therefore herded his boys (all except Hav Hum Bdr who feigned 'tauco dhukhe cha'-headache) back on their feet and trotted back towards the rear of the Left Bump, where he had last seen Kharke, physically.

They searched in all the possible nooks and crannies, the nullahs, behind bushes of rhododendron, the stunted pine and bramble, but in vain. Hav Aspuri Gurung even called out Kharke's name. At this, some of the enemy started to wail and cries of , "Bhago, Bhago, kafir phir aa gaye hain" rent the air. Aspuri let go a long burst from his Sten Machine Carbine, in their direction, and withdrew.

When news of the missing sepoy reached the brigade HQ, Brig UBS Verma, Commander 80 Infantry Brigade Commander ordered another search party to be sent. Sam volunteered for this one, being his moral duty. Mota Yogi and Gangte, being the comrades in arms in every sense of the term, volunteered as well. Chanda had no option but to accede to their request. They retraced their steps to the Left Bump and its rear, but in vain once again. Sam, Gangte and Yogi, thought nothing of sitting down for a pow-wow right in front of the Left Bump, and examined the options open to them. It was decided to send back Yogi to report back the situation to Chanda. Yogi showed reluctance to leave Sam & Gangte behind in very close proximity of the enemy. Sam lost his shirt on him and drawing his khukri hit him on his back-side with an admonishment-cum-command, 'Yogi, do as you are told and quit worrying about my safety. We can look after our selves. There are a number of folds in the ground and the bullets will not be able to get us'.

Yogi did as he was bid, only to rejoin after some time with the orders that yet another search had been ordered by the Brigade. Sam was back again, this time followed only by one NK Kharka Bahadur of A Company, who was not even part of his assault group; but was his gaonle as he later mentioned. The two scoured the terrain yet again, but again in vain. Sam was held back by Nk Kharka Bdr when he insisted on entering enemy bunkers for the search,

with the hissed comment, 'Kya kar raha hai Saab? Ham ko marvana hai? ap ko dushman pakar kega, Chalo wapis'. The matter was reported all the way up the channel, with orders for yet another search. This time no one volunteered. Sam went in again this time all alone and with out even his Sten Machine Gun, armed only with a drawn 11 inch khukri.

Daylight was approaching when permission to abandon search was accorded. This was just as well as the Pakistanis were homing on to our location with their infantry mortars. To achieve a clean break, Chanda ordered Sub Mandhoj Gurung to engage the enemy bunkers on the reverse slope of the Left Bump. The JCO proceeded to bring down a heavy volume of fire with the 2 inch mortars, with a lot of gusto and verve. Nk Jhabi Lal on Sansar, was contacted on the wireless and ordered to open up with the 3 inch mortars behind the Bumps to prevent any of the enemy reinforcements joining them as also to keep the enemy heads down to prevent effective fire on the raid party. They did their job very well and indeed no reinforcements came. These mortars took a heavy toll on the enemy and it was reported on the UN MIGOP channels, that it accounted for almost all of the enemy 9 killed and 27 wounded.

Half way back to the piquet, as per the pre-determined time the Raid commander started enquiring whether support group had started withdrawing. He could not raise Paoche on the wireless, though he called out his call sign several times. When he could not raise Gangte even after 30 minutes, he got worried. But within about 5 minutes thereafter Paoche gave the signal that he had started withdrawing. Much relieved, the complete raiding party got back to the picket somewhere between 0300 and 0400h. Later, on enquiry, Paoche revealed that his group had been pinned down by enemy fire and for sometime he just could not move. So he lit his torch and threw it a distance away which had desired effect of the enemy fire shifting on to the lighted torch just as he thought it would. All that was excellent and very nice but after he managed to extricate his group, he went back to retrieve his torch! That's why the delay in his coming on the wireless!

The raid party had to halt frequently as the injured CHM Sidhiman Gurung had to be carried. Jemadar Kundhoj Gurung of A coy had also been wounded by grenade shrapnel and had also to be helped out. It was a relief for all to finally make it back to the FDLs.

As they sat down for the debriefing by about 0600 or 0700, things were gloomy and Chanda could feel the glare of the CO burning his back for coming back without Kharke. He did not even shake any body's hand, as was customary, he was so disappointed and angry. Anyway the deed was done. While debriefing was

going on, someone noticed Fat Yogi's jungle hat. It was jungle hats those days, as helmets would have been noisy. A bullet had cleanly passed through it without messing up Fat Yogi's forehead. The jungle hat was supposed to be kept for future but insensitive as we are to history – it was not. So was the rifle Sam brought back, but for one regulation or the other, this trophy also did not materialize. A point of interest here: whilst inspecting it, it took the unit armourer all his savvy and skill to strip the bolt off it; it was jammed so hard!

Later that day or the day following, came the news of enemy casualties. Next day Sam did find the Penga post abandoned but for a few enemy soldiers. Through the field glasses he clearly noticed drove upon drove of turkey buzzards as they perched on the parapets of the post and partied and feasted on the enemy dead. Since they were at a higher elevation, the battlefield could be seen quite clearly.

After last light the Pakis tried to close in, on to the Indian piquets, 564, 565 and 566, but were detected, and engaged by 3-inch mortar defensive fire. Nk Jabi Lal of the 3-inch mortars, kept his mortar numbers busy the whole night. The news of the Pakistani casualties cheered up the Battalion to quite an extent particularly the Commanding Officer. Maj Gen Amrik Singh, GOC 25Inf Div was clearly very happy with the results achieved by 4/3 G R and said so in his after action report to 15 Corps; a 'candidly, plucky raid' it was, he said.

That is how 4/3 GR recalls the Penga Raid. One is reminded of a quote from Ernest Hemingway. Writing in the introduction to 'Men Against Fire', he says; "As they get further and further from a war they have taken part in, all men have a tendency to make it as they wish it had been rather than how it really was. So every year in July, the anniversary of the month when I got the big wound, I read 'The Middle Parts of Fortune', and it all comes back to me as though it was not yesterday, nor long ago, but as though it were this morning before day light and you were waiting there dry mouthed, for it to start." This account is hence a record of what happened on that fateful day so many years ago. It is a record free from any embellishment. Men react differently when under fire. Some actions are heroic. Others markedly less so. But each operation has a story to tell and lessons to be learned. The Penga raid is certainly one such action.