

LT COL RS BASERA'S MISSION TO AKSAI-CHIN

With the increasing focus on Chinese road building activity through Indian territory, in early 1957 an Indian Army officer was selected to proceed on a special patrol to this very remote part of north-east Ladakh and physically confirm the reports of Chinese road-building activity. The officer who was selected for this difficult mission was Lt Col RS Basera of 1st Kumaon Rifles [now called 3 Kumaon (Rifles)]. Basera had recently completed the command of his battalion. His mission was to be tough, exciting and most unique, as he had to proceed under cover to the vast plateau of Aksai Chin and confirm reports that the Chinese were constructing a motorable road from Kashgar to Lhasa. This road supposedly passed through the northern part of a large, barren and high altitude swathe of Indian territory, called Aksai Chin. Interestingly, Basera was to proceed on the mission disguised as a yak herder. He was to be accompanied by one IA Havildar (Hav) named Diwan Singh from the Corps of Engineers. Both these Army personnel were to move in the company of three genuine yak herders and their three shaggy beasts.

Lt Col Basera received detailed briefings at the Headquarters (HQs) in Srinagar and Leh. During these briefings he was told about his mission in detail. He was also told that they must exercise extreme caution and not repeat the sorry case of the British mountaineer named Wignall, who had been apprehended by the Chinese, when he was surveying the Aksai Chin Road, from the Tibetan side.

The Intelligence officers who conducted the briefings in Srinagar, had stressed on the need to maintain utmost secrecy about this vitally, important mission. The two Army personnel were strictly told not to carry any tell-tale documents or other items that could disclose their identities, if they were ever caught and bodily searched by the Chinese, during the patrol. They were also told that the mission was of national importance and

it would be physically and mentally exhausting and quite tough. During the mission they would move on foot from Leh, along with trusted Ladhaki graziers and their yaks. They were to travel as light as possible and their rations and other essential loads would be carried in their back-packs and on the yaks. They were explicitly told that even after they had returned from the mission, they were never to tell their family and friends where they had been or of any details of their mission. Details of their mission were to be carried to the grave!

Basera was shown a large map and enlargement of Ladakh-Tibet and told to memorize the route. He was not permitted to make any notes, and also asked to destroy any notes he may have made earlier. On the map they were shown the route they were to take from Leh to Aksai Chin and back. They had to move in the easterly direction from Leh for about 250-300 km, till they reached the expected location of the new Chinese built road, in Aksai Chin. Initially, they would pass over difficult, undulating terrain, till they crossed the Karakoram Mountain Range and Shyok River. After passing Tangtse, they would move into the barren, high altitude plateau of Aksai Chin. The Intelligence officers told him that water was scarce, especially on the Aksai Chin plateau.

The men and animals would have to survive on the water they carried in goat-skin containers, which were to be filled at Leh. However, when they came across the few fresh water sources on the way to Aksai Chin, they could re-fill the containers. There were some large water sources on the way before they entered Aksai Chin, such as Pangong Tso Lake and the Shyok & Chang Chenmo rivers. He was also told that some small fresh water sources existed at the eastern part of Aksai Chin plateau. These water sources could be used in case of a grave emergency. It would entail some deviation of their route, but that would be acceptable in the event of such an emergency. After the briefings at Leh, they met with three, scruffy looking yak graziers and yaks that were to accompany them on the mission. The three Ladhakis included two short and tough, middle aged men and a bright young man named Nawang. The young man knew a smattering of Hindustani, and was

to act as the interpreter. The yak herders spoke only Ladhaki dialect and had been employed by the Army authorities in Leh. The herders were said to be trustworthy but they emitted a peculiar smell that was a heady mix of the sharp smell of rancid yak butter, their un-washed clothes and the slovenly yaks themselves. Basera and Diwan dreaded the fact that very soon, they too would be smelling like their yak herder companions!

As a pre-requisite to proceeding on the mission, Basera and Diwan Singh were glad to stop shaving, and grew a short stubble of hair on their respective faces. They removed their Olive Green (OG) Army uniforms, OG jerseys, jackets and donned the sets of well used and shaggy clothes, that were quite similar to the ones worn by the three yak herders. After adjusting the unwieldy headgear made of skins and sheep's fur on their heads, both the Army personnel looked very similar to the yak herders they were to accompany on the trek. The headgear had 'ear flaps' that hung down the sides of their faces. These leather flaps with fur on the inside, could be buttoned below the chin to ward off the icy cold winds. The buttoned down flaps were an effective covering that protected their faces from the cold winds and would also quite certainly hide their identities, whenever the need arose.

The Army authorities in Leh gave the yak herders rations to be carried for five individuals, for a month's duration of the trek. The rations were simple and comprised of rice, dal, tea leaves, salt, jaggery, milk powder and a few condiments. The rations were packed in containers that were tied in two bundles and carried as a body load on one yak. The second yak carried the bedding of quilts, rough fur-skins and cooking utensils. The third yak carried two goat-skin tents (one was a small tent and the other one was much larger), the wooden poles and some containers made of skins with potable water for the men and animals. The smaller tent was for use of the Colonel, while the other four men were to sleep in the larger tent. In addition to their loads, the yaks also carried sheaves of dried grass that would cushion the loads and serve as the animal's food during the long trek.

The three Ladakhis had cooked some large 'rotis' that could be eaten on the

next morning and afternoon (breakfast and lunch) with some pickles and washed down with hot tea. The yak herders would put rancid smelling butter in their tea, while Basera and Diwan would drink their tea with regular milk powder and sweetened with jaggery. This was to be the routine for meals for the next month or so, while they were on the mission to Aksai Chin. Food would be cooked only once a day, when they halted and set up their tents in the evening. Then, the evening meal was cooked, as well as 'rotis' were made for the next day. These large 'rotis' would be carried for their breakfast and lunch on the following day. In the evening, they would have the luxury of eating hot rice and dal.

The Patrol

Early the next morning, before sunrise the strange patrol of five individuals and three shaggy yaks, moved out of the sleeping town of Leh. Three Staff Officers, accompanied by a few jawans had come to see off the patrol. They shook hands with Basera and Diwan Singh and wished them good luck for their adventurous trek. The officer and Non Commissioned Officer (NCO) strode into the dark and cold March morning, closely following the lumbering yaks and three somber Ladhaki yak herders.

The patrol trudged along at a steady pace set by the slow moving, sturdy animals. Soon the Sun came up and its strong rays warmed the five men as they plodded along the rugged landscape. Barren mountains rose sharply on either side. After moving along in this manner for about three hours, the patrol halted and huddled down in a circle, to block the cold breeze that had begun to whip around them. A small fire was lit and the men and yaks protected it from the breeze. Soon, hot tea was brewing and 'rotis' were warmed on the blazing fire. The men looked about them at the vast expanse of treeless terrain that was of varying shades of grey and brown colour, as they ate the large 'rotis' and sipped the hot tea laced liberally with rather smelly, rancid butter, made of yak's milk.

Soon the yaks were plodding along again, followed by the three yak herders and two Army personnel. The patrol halted after travelling another ten kilometers or so, and they had a quick lunch of 'roti' and pickles. After the

covering about fifteen more kilometers, the patrol halted in the treeless expanse and pitched their tents against some large boulders that would protect them from the cold wind that blew strongly, every night from the north. Every day the patrol would cover about 25 km, before they halted well before it got dark. They would then cook the night's meal and 'rotis' for the next day. The herders pitched the tents, fed and watered the yaks, and then had the evening meal before settling in for the night.

On the third day after leaving Leh, they were doing the morning chores like preparing tea on a small wood-fire and putting down the tents, when they were startled to hear the rising thunder of horse hooves beating on the hard ground. Stopping whatever they were doing, the patrol members stood by the yaks and were fascinated to see a large cloud of dust that was rising above a large herd of 'Tibetan Wild Asses' (or 'kiangs'), as they galloped across the vast plain. The herd of wild asses was heading towards the soaring heights of Karakoram Mountains that could be seen in the far distance. The short and stocky animals had a coat of rough fur, to keep out the bitter cold of the area. After another three days they neared the small hamlet of Tangtse.

The hamlet of Tangtse comprised of a few stone walled and shale roofed houses, that were located in the gap between the lofty Karakoram range of mountains to the north and deep blue-green waters of the vast Pangong Tso lake. Because of the security of their mission, they stopped for the night before they reached Tangtse. On the next day, they moved fast and avoided meeting any of the few old people and children they could be see in the hamlet.

They crossed the rushing waters of Shyok River, over a rudimentary wood and stone bridge. It took a fair amount of coaxing to get the yaks to step on the bridge. Once they were firmly on the bridge, they crossed over to the other side in a great hurry. Once they were across the river, the patrol halted and permitted the yaks to drink their fill of the fast flowing water. The men too drank to their fill and the nearly empty water containers were all filled up. After crossing Shyok River, the march was resumed. All members

of the patrol were upbeat, even the animals seemed to have renewed energy. Shortly they came across Chang Chenmo River. It was a smaller river with much lesser water. They could not find a bridge to go across the river, so they splashed through the flowing, shallow waters and went over to the other side. They were happy that after crossing the Chang Chenmo, they were finally entering Aksai Chin plateau and thus nearing their goal. They would now have to be extremely cautious, and keep looking for the road the Chinese were building and be wary of any armed Chinese patrols. The Aksai Chin was a vast and desolate expanse of flat territory, that was devoid of any form of vegetation, including grass. Because of a deep, instinctive feeling, even the yaks were fearful of the area and had to be literally goaded, beaten from behind and pulled forward to enter Aksai Chin. However, after all exertions the patrol was soon plodding along the gravelly, flat soil of the plateau. The patrol comprised of eight large dots on the plain, grey backdrop. As they proceeded towards the north-east direction, the distant shapes of the imposing Kun-Lun Mountains, became increasingly clearer. To the left side and beyond the Karakoram Range, lay the forbidding, flat expanse of Taklamakan Desert.

They kept proceeding over the flat and rocky surface of Aksai Chin for three days, always cautious about their suddenly coming upon the Chinese road builders and newly constructed road! On the evening of the third day of their entering Aksai Chin, Nawang shook Basera's shoulder and pointed towards a distant dark line that stretched across the horizon. They halted and had their first look at the still distant road - the ultimate goal for which they had travelled such a long distance. They soon pitched their tents and the 'rice and dal' were soon sending out inviting smells, as they sat by the dancing flames of the small fire. Lt Col Basera got everyone together and went over the actions that they would take when they physically reached the road. After they had settled in for the night, there was very little small talk as on other days. They were all lost in their deep thoughts, and even Nawang, the 'great talker' who normally had a host of unanswered questions, was very silent.

On the next morning, they completed their chores early and set off towards the distant road. The otherwise sluggish yaks too moved forward with renewed energy, matching the sudden spring in the step of their handlers! Around midday, when they stopped to eat their 'roti', they were near the raised road and could see it quite clearly. The road had a gravel surface that still had to be tarred. There were no vehicles moving on the road and neither could any Chinese workers be seen in the area. They halted just next to the edge of the road and the yaks at down and began to chew cud. Diwan Singh quickly got busy with taking measurements of the road and even picked up some of the gravel to examine the road surface.

Basera checked the road in detail, and he and Diwan Singh even walked over to the areas on either side of the road. He picked up a piece of gravel from the Aksai Chin Road and put it into his pocket. For 'good luck' he told an interested Diwan Singh who wanted to know why Basera had picked up the piece of gravel. They pitched their tents next to a large heap of gravel that had possibly been left over from the time the road was being constructed.

During the early hours of the morning, they were woken from their slumber by the roaring sound of a convoy of three heavy duty trucks (Chissu 150) that thundered past them on the gravel road. The trucks were coming from Kashgar and heading towards Lhasa. This was the only activity they had seen on the road and they all came out of the tents and watched the red tail lights, as the trucks roared down the straight section of road to towards Lhasa. They completed the chores, loaded the yaks and began the long return journey to Leh. They were lost in thought as they trudged behind the yaks. Their mission had been successfully completed and now Basera was in a hurry to tell the authorities in Leh and Delhi about the road the Chinese had built through Indian territory.

During the return journey they seemed to be travelling at a faster pace, than on the way out. It possibly appeared that way as the terrain was well known and they were no longer overly cautious about being discovered and caught by the Chinese. Even the sluggish yaks seemed to know they were

returning home and moved faster. A few large vultures lazily circled over them, high up in the clear, blue sky, and seemed to be moving along with them. The days passed quickly and soon the patrol spotted the habitation and built up area of Leh. Nawang had been most talkative on the return journey and had even evinced a keen interest in Basera's wrist watch. At Leh they met the Intelligence officers, who asked them a lot of questions about the road and Aksai Chin.

At Leh, Lt Col RS Basera and Hav Diwan Singh had a sad parting with the three yak herders. They had become good friends during their month long trek. Basera gave Nawang his wrist watch, and the simple yak herders' joy was unimaginable. Basera and Diwan Singh had a long session with the Intelligence officers, where they verbally explained about their trek to Akai Chin. They were then asked to describe about the Chinese built road, in the greatest of detail. While they wrote a detailed account of their trek and the road they had seen, the Intelligence officers were busy on the telephone, informing their superiors about safe return of the patrol and the vital information they had brought back about the road across Aksai Chin. Their reports must have got alarm bells ringing, as the Intelligence officers returned and told Basera that they were required to proceed immediately to Delhi, where they would be interrogated by higher officials. There seemed to be a pressing need for them to be at Delhi, as they were given a Jeep to convey them to Srinagar and on to the rail-head at Pathankot.

De-briefing in Delhi

After the long journey from Leh to Delhi, Basera and Diwan Singh were happy to be received at the Delhi Railway Station and taken to Army HQs at the imposing South Block building. Here, they were de-briefed by officers from Military Intelligence (MI) and reminded about the need for utmost security concerning their mission to Aksai Chin. There were detailed sessions of debriefing concerning the mission and of the Aksai Chin road, in particular. At the end of the day they were told by a Lt Col from MI, that their report would be sent to Defence Minister Krishna Menon, who would then discuss it with Prime Minister (PM) Nehru, in presence of DMI (Director

of Military Intelligence). The Lt Col congratulated Basera for the fine work done by the patrol.

Strangely on next day, the rather disheartened Lt Col from MI told them that the PM had been apprised of their patrol report, on the previous day. However, both Defence Minister and PM had told DMI that he must be very sure about location of the road in question, and that it had been constructed through Indian territory, before any further action could be taken on this matter. The Defence Minister had surprisingly supported the Chinese side, and even called it a friendly neighbour. He asked DMI, if the area through which the road passed had been confirmed on a map. The DMI told him the patrol had not carried a map for security reasons. The PM then agreed with what the Defence Minister said and he more or less rebuked the DMI for sending the patrol. The PM told Defence Minister that no more such patrols were to be sent to Aksai Chin till the matter had been thoroughly investigated. He had added that such patrols could easily vitiate the good relations between friendly neighbours.

On being told of the previous day's high level happenings, Lt Col RS Basera felt utterly disgusted at the callous and partisan attitude of the higher dignitaries. The long and difficult patrol they had undertaken, now appeared to have been a futile, month long exercise.

Conclusion

After the debriefing in Delhi, both Lt Col RS Basera and Hav Diwan Singh were sent on a month's leave. After their leave both individuals received fresh posting orders, in what appears an attempt to white-wash their memories of the trek. Lt Col RS Basera religiously adhered to the assurances he had given to the intelligence officers in Leh, and never spoke or wrote about his interesting patrol to Aksai Chin in Ladakh, for as long as he lived. However, the patrol by Lt Col RS Basera to the icy wastes of Aksai Chin in March 1957, remains an incredible feat that was accomplished by an

individual of Kumaon Regiment* .

* Authors Note – Lt Col RS Basera solemnly followed the pledge he had given the authorities of Army Headquarters (MI Directorate) at Leh, regarding secrecy of the patrol that he was undertaking to Aksai Chin. As a true soldier, he never disclosed details of the patrol and literally took details of the mission to his grave! Now, the officer is long dead and gone. It has been a difficult task for me to get finer details of Lt Col RS Basera's patrol to Aksai Chin as he has left no notes or diaries. Since this brave officer's mission is still shrouded in mystery, it is possible that his brave actions may go unnoticed and unrewarded. This would surely be a tragic loss for posterity, I have written about this difficult patrol, the best I could. Thus, the gallant actions of Lt Col RS Basera need to be de-linked from any political motives, and his stellar actions should be posthumously rewarded with an appropriate award (such as the McGregor Medal for exploration).