

## **Chewang Rinchen - A Legend in His Own Time**

### **Chapter Six**

#### **INDO-PAK WAR 1971**

##### **BACKGROUND:**

By mid-1967, Major Chewang Rinchen had become very popular in the Nubra Valley for his victories of both war and peace under the benign leadership of Colonel Kapur. But soon came a short period of grief when Colonel Kapur's successor acted indiscreetly as mentioned in the last pages of the previous chapter. The people of the Nubra Valley felt very sore with what he did and raised their voice against him. How far Major Rinchen was involved in instigating the people of Nubra to protest is difficult to verify but within months the axe fell on him. By the order of the then General Officer Commanding, he was flown out of Baigdangdo in a helicopter to Lukung, a God-forsaken place near Pongong Tso (Lake) close to the Tibetan border as a 'punishment'. This added fuel to fire and even senior people like Chewang Rinchen, the Kalon of Nubra, Rigzin Namgial Lompo and the Head Lama of Sumur protested in a strong way and demanded removal of the Sector Commander from Partapur forthwith. The General Officer Commanding who had sent Major 'Chewang Rinchen into 'exile' had been posted out by then and his successor, realising the gravity of the situation, hastened to Partapur; where he met important people and pacified them, assuring that the Sector Commander, against whom they had raised their voice would be removed. The assurance given was carried out. After a few months honour of Major Rinchen was vindicated and he was posted back first to Leh, then transferred to 14 J&K Rifles at Tangdhar in the Srinagar Valley.

Major General Sukhwant Singh, in his book "Defence of the Western Border", makes a mention of these rather unsavoury events. He had been the Station Commander Leh from 1967 to 1969 and had looked after the

affairs of the Ladakh Scouts. "In this period, Rinchen was in constant trouble because he found military discipline so irksome and clashed with authority on many occasions," he states. He claims that he had to protect Rinchen from 'the Spartan and Holier than thou attitude' of his General Officer Commanding (who had posted out Major Rinchen to Lukung) because he (Major General Sukhwant Singb) saw 'some soldiery potential in Rinchen's apparently rebellious outlook'. He justifies his support to Rinchen because later the Indo-Pak War. 1971 'amply proved his confidence' in Rinchen.

It was in April 1969 that Major Chewang Rinchen was posted from the Ladakhi Scouts to 14 J&K Rifles and was given a regular commission with effect from July 20, 1962. He was posted at Chokibal in the Kashmir Valley. This was a field posting. On the dining-in-night in Officers' Mess, Rinchen was offered whisky but he requested the Commanding Officer, Lt.Col. Ranjit Singh to permit him to have his favourite drink, rum, which, he said, 'is a soldier's drink', The Commanding Officer smiled and was good enough to agree to Rinchen's request as a special case, though normally rum is not served in the Officers' Messes. The party lasted till late hours. All the officers were in a jovial mood and talked about war and peace and all sorts of topics. That evening, Rinchen consumed nearly two dozen pegs but all through he maintained sobriety and discipline. At the end of the party, the Commanding Officer told Rinchen that next morning at 0500 hours they would proceed to Tangdhar. All the officers rushed to their rooms for a bit of sleep; so did Rinchen. He had hardly slept for two hours when his orderly woke him up. Exactly at 5 am, he reported to the Commanding Officer with the sten gun 'slung arm'. Everyone was ready for the march.

Lt. Col. Ranjeet Singh was 48 years old but he was a tough and hardy guy. The party marched through snow, climbing a pass called Nasta Chun or Sadna Pass at a height of 3,000 metres. Someone casually remarked, "This

is the highest peak in the Kashmir Valley and many lives have been lost while crossing it." It appeared to be a challenge thrown to Rinchen. He could not swallow such a remark and retorted, "As far as I am concerned, climbing such a pass is no problem for me or for any Ladakhi brother of mine; we live our normal life at such or even greater heights, say up to 4,275 metres."

After lunch the entire party rolled down to the Tangdhar Valley and arrived at the Brigade Headquarters. Next day, as if to test his physical endurance and mental robustness, Rinchen was instructed to visit one of the highest posts in the region called Lipka Top at approx 4,220 metres as his company was to be deployed there temporarily. Rinchen welcomed the order to climb up to that post because nothing pleased him more than serving under tough conditions. It was fun for him and also good experience for the future. He had always enjoyed undergoing specialised training at such heights. Moreover, he looked at it from an optimistic point of view for it was a welcome change and gave him an opportunity to get familiar with Kashmir's green valleys and mountains in contrast to Ladakh's barren, inhospitable and rugged region.

Rinchen spent nearly a year in the midst of such surroundings. In October, 1970, his battalion was transferred to Ferozpur in West Punjab.

During his stay there with 14 J&K Rifles till August 1971, he remained very busy undergoing training in 'warfare in plains or deserts and river crossing'. However, when summer approached extreme heat became unbearable for him and he requested for a posting back to the Ladakh Scouts which he was lucky to get right in time. On August 13, 1971. Rinchen joined his old Regiment. the Ladakh Scouts. His next request was a posting in the Nubra Valley which was his home and where he had begun his army career at the age of 17. In the Nubra Valley, he was familiar with every inch of land and he had climbed almost every notable peak and crossed every pass. Lt. Col.

S.S. Tomar who was the Commandant of the Ladakh Scouts attached him to S.P. Company in the Nubra Sector.

This was just the time when clouds of war had begun to gather on the horizon. War with Pakistan became imminent. After a few weeks, when Major Prem Singh, the Second-in-Command, was posted out, Rinchen being the senior-most was appointed Deputy Commander of the Ladakh Scouts in the Nubra Sector.

In the first week of September, 1971, Major General S.P. Malhotra, General Officer Commanding, 3 Infantry Division, (later retired as Lt. General and Army Commander, Northern Command, visited the Partapur Sector. He ordered Major Rinchen to re-organise the old Nubra Guards and give them special training in firing small arms. Evidently, he did so to prepare Chewang Rinchen and his Nubra Guards for the coming events.

Major Rinchen was able to enlist about 550 young volunteer jawans whom he organised into four Companies called Karakoram, Saser, Remo and Saltoro. Their training commenced on November 1 and terminated on November 15, with a Passing-out-Parade at which the salute was taken by Major General S.P. Malhotra. The parade was organised with great pomp and show and all the trainees were smartly dressed in their local dress - goncha coat, skarak belt and pabu boots. The General Officer Commanding was greatly impressed by their turn-out, high morale and firing skill. He asked Colonel Udai Singh (later retired as Brigadier), the Sector Commander and Major Rinchen, the Deputy Commander, if they required any additional 'regular' battalion for the defence of their sector. Both of them assured the General that the Ladakhi Scouts and the Nubra Guards would be able to undertake any operation in that sector and that no additional forces would be necessary. It was, of course, understood that one Infantry Battalion along with a battery of artillery which was earmarked to move into that sector for effective support during operations would

report soon for duty. The General Officer Commanding was very pleased with Major Rinchen's organising capacity and qualities of leadership.

"He (Rinchen) not only imparted basic military training and trained the Nubra Guards hard but also converted them into a well-knit, highly motivated and a cohesive professional group," opines Lt. General S.P.Malhotra in his letter to the author.

Towards the end of November 1971, Lt.Gen. Sartaj Singh, Commanding 15 Corps visited the sector. Earlier, a message had arrived from the General Officer Commanding that the Corps Commander would like to hear, in brief, the history of the battles fought in the Valley, especially by the Nubra Guards. Major Rinchen made a presentation with detailed charts in the crew room and briefed the Corps Commander for approximately half an hour. The General went away highly impressed by the confidence which the Ladakh Scouts and the Nubra Guards had in themselves. He instructed Major Chewang Rinchen to organise an offensive operational exercise and thus get ready for any emergency.

Lt. General Sartaj Singh was known as a forceful and dynamic Commander, with an intelligent grasp of the essentials. Once he was assured of the competence and capabilities of a senior officer working under him and was satisfied with the latter's plans of action, he would have no hesitation in delegating authority to him to fill in the details, keeping a watchful eye from above without undue interference.

### **OPERATIONAL RESPONSIBILITIES OF THE G.O.C.:**

Major General S.P. Malhotra, General Officer Commanding, 3 Infantry Division was operationally responsible for the defence of Ladakh. He faced two hostile neighbours, China and Pakistan. The area of responsibility as far as Pakistan was concerned extended along the erstwhile ceasefire line from Baigdangdo in the Shyok river valley to the north of the Zojila. What China

would do in case of a war between India and Pakistan was quite unpredictable. The General Officer Commanding, therefore, had to keep day and night vigil on the eastern borders as well to see that China did not come forward to assist Pakistan with a view to fulfilling obligations under the Sino-Pak treaty of 1963.

In short, General Malhotra had two-fold operational responsibilities against Pakistan or/and China, separately or simultaneously. He was, therefore, required to ensure the security of the Srinagar-Leh road which was the supply line for Leh and ultimately for Partapur sector. He was also expected to exploit fully all opportunities for taking counter-offensive action against Pakistan but simultaneously to ensure that the balanced defence posture was not disturbed at any time.

The terrain of the region is broken and rugged cut by narrow gorges and ravines. The river valleys are narrow and the gradients steep. The temperature at the heights where operations were later conducted is as low as minus 40 degree celsius in winter.

Indian military base of the region was located at Partapur in the Nubra Valley. It was connected with Leh by a precipitous and indifferent pony track across Khardung La. An airfield had been constructed at Thoise in 1960 and this was the 'lifeline' for the maintenance of troops in the area. From Thoise a jeep track ran along the Shyok river to within a few miles of Baigdangdo.

### **PAKISTAN'S DEPLOYMENT OF FORCES:**

The area opposite Partapur Sector was held by Pakistan with three Companies of Karakoram Scouts with Wing Headquarters at Turtok. Later, these were reinforced by two Companies of mixed Karakoram and Gilgit Scouts. There were additional companies in the Kargil Sector. Pakistan had also mustered some reservists to make up the manpower at some posts.

Pakistan had three 75-mm guns, a section of 3.7" howitzers and six 3" mortars. Most of these weapons were deployed singly for snap shooting. The Pakistani posts, in varying strengths from a section upwards, were located at inhospitable heights. They were well entrenched and likely approaches were blocked with mines.

Pakistan's forward posts close to the cease-fire line near Baigdangdo were connected with the military base at Gilgit and Skardu by a jeepable road up to Turtok. From Turtok supplies were sent to the posts by foot and animal transport. The terrain on the Pakistani side, as on the Indian side was all rocky, mountainous and steep. A small force could hold up a frontal offensive and no local outflanking movement was possible for either side unless troops crossed high mountain ranges and this could be done only on a limited scale.

### **DEFENCE POTENTIALS OF THE NUBRA VALLEY**

The Nubra Valley is the Gateway to the vast landmass of Ladakh. Its defence potentials had its own problems. As mentioned earlier, it is situated approx 140 km to the north of Leh, at a height of approx 3,000 metres. It is cut off from Leh which is situated in the Indus Valley by the Ladakh range. The Khardung La (5,602 metres) is the only pass and it remains closed for six months during winter due to heavy snowfall.

The troops stationed in the sector, were, therefore, maintained by the Indian Air Force either by landing or air dropping of all war materials including three-tonners and light vehicles. For movement within the sector, animal transport (yak, camel, mules, ponies and donkeys) alone was utilised for carrying rations, beddings, ammunition and other war equipment to the forward posts. Very high posts were maintained by ponies or yaks. Helicopter service was used for carrying mail and evacuation of the sick.

On the Pakistan border, Indian posts as well as those of Pakistan were situated between the heights of 4,575 metres to 5,500 metres. One of the Pale posts, known as Gauri Shangkar, was at a height of approx 5,610 metres.

There were occasions when, due to bad weather for many days and non-supply of the essentials by air, the troops had to depend upon local vegetables, meat and other supplies like sattu, pawai, thukpa and chang. In fact, these food articles were supposed to be more suitable during operational periods, especially when no supplies arrived otherwise by airlift. Arrangement for the supply of warm clothing had also improved considerably and was certainly much better than during the 1962 Chinese operations.

Arms and ammunition issued to the troops within the sector were of the latest type and supplied in adequate quantity.

Every company was authorised a Medical Officer of the rank of a Captain and a Nursing Assistant. Supply of medicines was adequate. Local hakims and vaidyas were also available.

The Regiment was also authorised a special Signal Company Commander of the rank of Major. There were various types of signal equipment including long range and modern sets. Most of the jawans in the Signal Company were, however, from the plains. The locals were still under training.

### **RINCHEN'S DEPLOYMENT OF FORCES ON THE FRONT:**

When the Indo-Pak War broke out in 1971, it started from East Pakistan. As war hotted up in East Pakistan, President Yahya Khan of Pakistan began to speak ill of India and shelling across the western borders started. He even threatened India with a total war and deployed his army on the western front. One fine morning, he declared a state of emergency in Western Pakistan.



On December 3, 1971, India's Prime Minister declared, "India stands for peace but if war is thrust upon us, we are prepared to fight." On that very day the Pakistan Air Force made pre-emptive air strikes at various air bases of India.

On the night of December 3, Major Rinchen was conducting night exercises with the Battalion of the Nubra Guards at Deskit. A telephone message was received from Colonel Udai Singh at 2330 hours, "War is declared; Warn the Ladakhi Scouts and the Nubra Guards to be ready to move west on 4th morning." Rinchen closed down the night training and issued warning orders to the Nubra Guards to be ready for the march.

Most of the Nubra Guards were keen to go to their homes to bring necessary warm clothing and rations. "If I permit them to go to their homes, they might not return within due time," thought Rinchen. So he promised to issue them some rations and warm clothing on loan from the Ladakhi Scouts stores. This he completed during the night and by the morning of December 4 he was ready to move out with the troops.

On the morning of December 4, various operational tasks were allotted to the Ladakhi Scouts Battalion and the Nubra Guards, as follows :

#### A. LADAKHI SCOUTS:

K Company under the Command of Major Y. S. Thapa to move out of Partapur to forward posts to join D & G Companies.

G Company under the Command of Major Ahluwalia.

D Company under the Command of Major S.K.Singh.

F Company under the Command of Major G.Bisht. It was detained as Reserve in the Nubra Valley in the Sasoma Area adjacent to the Chinese Posts.

SP Company under the Command of Capt. B.S. Juge.

**B. NUBRA GUARDS:**

- a. Karakoram Coy Assault Group under the Command of Shri C. Targis, (Retired Naik).
- b. Saser Coy Line of Communication under the Command of Havaladar Tashi Mutup (Retired).
- c. Remo Coy Protection of the Airfield under the Command of Naib Subedar Wangial (Retired).
- d. Saltoro Coy in Reserve under the Command of CHM S.Namgial (Retired).

**C. PEOPLE'S SUPPORT:**

Cooperation of the people of the Nubra Valley was sought through the political leaders, Chewang Rinchen, the Kalon of Nubra, Kunzang Dorge. Major Rinchen's old father and Stanzin Tsering, the Headman. Shri Gurdev Singh, Assistant Commissioner of the Nubra Valley, located at Deskit, was ordered to supply necessary ponies and porters and make other necessary arrangements. It is gratifying to note that the people, one and all, came forward at short notice to assist those who were in uniform at the right time and at the right place. The morale of each young man was high as he rushed to help the troops in whatever way he could providing yaks, donkeys or ponies for carrying war equipment and rations to various points, putting aside all fears of enemy fire and shelling.

Major Rinchen most emphatically states how every family in Ladakh, whether Buddhist, Muslim or Christian, provided at least one member for serving in the Army. If one brother was serving with the Ladakhi Scouts.

another joined the Nubra Guards and a third attended a pony on military duties or worked as a porter.

In Major Rinchen's family, one of his younger brothers, Phunchok Namgial, was an MLC, another, Naik Sonam Dorge Singchan was serving in the Ladakhi Scouts as MT driver and the third, C. Norbu, was with the PWD. During the emergency, the last named joined the Nubra Guards. His servant also came forth with a pony for any duty. Rinchen's father, who was 82 years old, along with Phunchok Namgial, younger brother of Chewang Rinchen, went out to encourage the Nubrans to join the defence troops.

There were different types and trades of people in the Nubra Valley. like the Lan1as, the Maulvis and the Padris, business men, Government servants, farmers and labourers. "When freedom of the people is at stake all of them work together and give full support to the Army," Rinchen tells us.

There were many gompas, some mosques and a few churches. Thousands of Lamas belonging to the yellow and the red sects, Maulvis and Mir Waizes, followers of Shia and Sunni sects and the few Christian families — all were engaged in prayers — in gompas, mosques and churches — for victory of the Indian Army in the coming confrontation.

### **THE DHAL FORCE:**

The force known as the 'DHAL' force which was placed under the command of Major Rinchen for operations, comprised four Ladakhi Scouts Rifle Companies, D, G, K and SP and four Companies of the Nubra Guards, as mentioned earlier.

Rinchen set off with the main force on December 5 with the war cry, 'Ki Ki So So Lha giallo' (Victory to the God), and reached Baig dangdo by midnight after covering a long and tedious journey of 40 km on vehicles from Partapur to jeep-head Nullah Pachetang and another 40 km on foot.

Rinchen called all the Company Commanders at No. 7 post at Baigdangdo for the final briefing and orders at the Assembly Area Nagpothang - on the Baigdangdo Nullah. Colonel Udai Singh, the Sector Commander, was also there to finalise points of strategy. The briefing started at 1900 hours. There were five Company Commanders and two Medical Officers.

#### **LINE OF INDIRECT APPROACH:**

First important decision to be taken was regarding the approach to the Pak Chalunkha defence complex. There were two approaches available one from the right across the mountainous countryside and the other along the valley river-bed.

All Company Commanders, except Shri C. Targais of the Nubra Guards, were in favour of attacking the Pak positions from the river-bed side. Major S.K. Singh, Major Ahluwalia, Major Thapa and Capt. Juge, all wanted to take the river-bed route and avoid the tough climbing of the steep slopes of the mountains. But Rinchen was strongly opposed to the idea. He pointed out the risks involved. The enemy must have already covered the river-bed approach and gaps by laying mines, setting up barbed wire fencing and mounting road blocks. Moreover, there would always be a danger of facing firing by the enemy forces from the ridges on either side of the river-bed.

He selected the approach of Pt 'V' to capture Pt 18,402, the highest Pak-occupied post on the front and then roll down to Cbalunkha complex.

Rinchen had already tried this approach twice - once during August 1965 on instructions from Colonel ~r .at}d again in September 1971 during patrolling. Colonel Udai Singh agreed with Rinchen's arguments and approved his plan for an indirect approach. All Company Commanders became convinced that Major Rinchen's technique of indirect approach was most suitable for the Partapur Front terrain.

## **RADICAL CHANGES IN THE OUTFIT OF THE DHAL FORCE JAWANS:**

By the beginning of December 1971, when Major Rinchen was given the command of the Task Force to launch assault on Baltistan during the Indo-Pak War which took place in that month, he had experience of guerrilla warfare in the mountains extending over a period of 23 years. He had also crossed the 40th year of his life and had acquired maturity of judgment and clarity of tactical concepts. For some time past he had been nursing certain ideas to augment the fighting efficiency of the jawans under his command. These ideas were not only unorthodox and unconventional but positively revolutionary in concept and implementation and would have been normally unacceptable to the army way of thinking which often goes by rules and regulations blindly. Major Rinchen was lucky in one way. Not only his immediate boss but even those who were higher up in the long chain of command had full confidence in his qualities of leadership and his deep understanding of the tactical and strategic problems involved in mountain warfare. That is why when he proposed to introduce certain radical changes in the outfit of his jawans just before launching the attack against the enemy with a view to making them more nimble and agile, they accepted his ideas readily and agreed to give them an honest trial.

Rinchen discarded the steel helmet for the Balaclava cap and ammunition boots for pabos; the water bottle no more contained aqua pura but a new drink; and the load of ammunition and baggage was halved. He made his jawans literally 'light-capped, light-footed, light-armed and light-baggaged' Regarding the various changes which Rinchen introduced, the then GOC, Lt. Gen. S.P. Malhotra, points out, "All that I would like to say is that these applied universally throughout my command and not restricted only to Nubra Guards. It is therefore difficult to say as to which commander or any other officer in uniform suggested which changes and at what level of command were these approved and when. Suffice to say that such changes

and innovations worked to the advantage of troops in the high altitude and mountainous areas"

a. Steel Helmet or Balaclava Cap:

Major Rinchen had a feeling that wearing a steel helmet was not only unnecessary but positively harmful for fighting in the mountains for various reasons. Because of its heavy weight, it slowed the speed of a jawan while ascending or descending the steep slopes of mountains. As it was metallic, chances for frost-bite to the head, especially nose and ears, became greater. More important, while climbing up or rolling down, the accidental fall of a single steel helmet, rolling down the slope to the bottom hill, could make such a terrific noise, echoing and re-echoing and rent the air in the dead silence of the night that even a dozing and snoring sentry at the enemy post would 'stand-to-attention' and shout, "Dushman/ Dushman!" The assaulting party would lose the advantage of surprise. The steel helmet was, therefore, replaced by the Balaclava cap which was lighter and warmer.

b. Ammunition Boots or Pabos :

Major Rinchen ordered the jawans to deposit the ammunition or jungle boots and exchange them for the Ladakhi pabos which were light but pretty warm and would protect the feet from frost-bite. He asked the Headman of the village to help them in getting Pabos in exchange for ammunition boots from the villagers who were exceedingly happy to give away their pabos and get ammunition boots in return. Some officers who did not take his advice seriously suffered from frost-bite during the campaign,

c. Water Bottle with a New Drink:

Major Rinchen's experience was that water in the water bottle always froze after climbing a few hundred metres, especially on cold nights, when the temperature went down to minus twenty to forty degrees celsius. He asked the Quarter Masters of the various Companies to issue some extra rum, get it mixed with water and fill all 'water bottles' with this new drink. It did not freeze and proved to be the elixir of life for the jawans who otherwise shivered with cold during night marches. It also warmed up everyone while launching the assault.

It may be recalled that on the Kargil front, where there was acute shortage of water, water in Jerry cans brought by the jawans from the nullahs far down below to the battle sites at heights often got frozen. At times, the Jerry cans would burst forth and the jawans had to carry uncovered blocks of ice with their hands.

d. Bedding:

Every jawan carried one sleeping bag and two blankets with some additional bedding of considerable weight. Major Rinchen instructed his jawans to carry one sleeping bag and one blanket between two of them and in no case carry any extra bedding for the simple reason that they were not going to sleep during nights and did not require much bedding for rest during day. Moreover, he expected them to get free gift of bedding from the enemy jawans when the latter were put to rout from the bunkers.

e. Ammunition:

Major Rinchen also halved the quantity of ammunition which every jawan was required to carry with him as per the authorised scale. This reduced the load considerably. He told his brave jawans to depend more on hand grenades and bayonets and on indirect approach to the enemy posts by going from behind the enemy post and entering it by using the secret

approach route. He told them to use ammunition only as the last resort. His instructions were 'minimum expenditure of ammunition - one round one man and no more - and maximum use of hand grenades and bayonets'. Moreover, he wanted that his men used against the Pakistani forces the ammunition they had earlier captured in the offensive from the posts vacated by the Pakistani troops.

Lastly, Major Rinchen exhorted his jawans to launch the assault by shouting the war cry, 'Ki Ki So So Lah Gyalo.' "You are the tigers of Ladakh and Nubra; I will give you the roar, that shall galvanise you into reckless dare-devils. Victory shall be yours," said he.

#### **A. FIRST PHASE:**

Task A. To capture Picquet V and Pt 18,402 (5,609 metres)

B. Advance to capture Chulunkha Defence Complex

Order of March:

The troops moved at 1500 hours with the following order of march:

- A G. Company
- B Rinchen's Order 'O' - G Group
- C S P Company Element
- D K. Company and Medical Element
- E Companies of the Nubra Guards less I Platoon
- F 75 Porters from Baigdangdo
- E 1 Platoon of the Nubra Guards

i. Rinchen's First Objective - Pt 18,402:

The task of capturing Pt 18,402, the highest post ever captured in world history, was assigned to Major S.S. Ahluwalia whose company was leading.



One of his platoons was commanded by Naib Subedar C. Angdus who was given the task of supporting the attack on Pt 18,402 from the right ridge, while Major Ahluwalia was to launch the offensive with 2 platoons.

The 400-men column, marching in single file, was very long indeed and it was difficult to keep control and regulate the movement, especially while climbing the steep hills on a dark night. Rinchen could keep watch.

till the last light but, thereafter, due to sheer steep height, altitude sickness, difficulty in breathing, headache and cold, some people began to drop out, mostly the non-locals. The signal equipment and wireless set which were handled by the non-locals had to be shifted to the locals.

The Dhal Force was scheduled to capture Pt 18,402 by midnight but as climbing was tough, the time calculation went wrong. The attacking party could reach by midnight only close to Picquet 'V' which was just below Pt 18,402. A very light red firing went up from the Pak post Pt 18,402. Rinchen contacted Major Thapa and asked him to cover Picquet 'V'. Troops were rushed to occupy it prior to its getting alert.

The Pak troops which had learnt of the pending attack by the Indian troops started firing guns from Pt 18,402, followed by 2" mortars. After sometime 3"/ 81 mm mortars were also fired from the direction of Chulunkha.

About 75 per cent of Rinchen's troops were 'green'. They were taking part in an operation for the first time. Only 25 per cent were his old seasoned Ladakhi Scouts and Nubra Guards who had experience of fighting in 1948, 1962 and 1965. In the first hour of heavy shelling by the enemy, troops which were taking part for the first time became panicky and tried to take cover for shelter. It all devolved upon the Commanders to take initiative and boost up the morale of the troops by giving pep talks and raising slogans or by giving firm orders promptly and by ordering fire at the correct time.

Rinchen ordered Havaladar Narbu of the MMG section to engage the LMG firing from Pt 'V with a view to facilitating the advance of Major Ahluwalia towards the objective. As heavy firing was coming from Pt 18,402, Major Ahluwalia was instructed not to approach the objective from the front. He was told to move with one platoon silently from the left, go behind Pt 18,402 and wrest possession of the Pakistan line of communication to the top, while the rest of the troops were to continue keeping the enemy engaged by firing from their present position.

Next morning, by five o'clock, K Company had secured Pt 'V completely. At that critical moment Rinchen ordered the platoon of the Nubra Guards which was at the tail end of the long column of porters to shout at the top of their voice for the Pakistanis at Pt 18,402 : "Hands-up and surrender otherwise you will be arrested." The loud shouting by the Nubrans echoed and re-echoed in the midst of heavy snow-covered rocky hills. The attention of the Pak troops at Pt 18,402 was diverted and Major Ahluwalia got the opportunity to get behind, enter the Pak post on the quiet, cut off their line of communication, enter their bunkers and trenches and throw hand grenades and make a bayonet charge. Many Pak soldiers were killed in the bunkers and trenches and the remaining, along with the JCO, fled away towards the Administrative Post.

Rinchen, all the while, was awaiting news of the success from Major Ahluwalia. It took over an hour, waiting in extreme cold weather with snow all around. Hands, ears and feet were getting cold. Major Thapa waiting next to Major Rinchen was shivering badly with cold. Rinchen opened his water bottle and gave him a peg to drink, asking, "Guess, what is the drink?" "Arak. I believe?" replied Thapa. Rinchen gave him another peg. Thapa felt warm and said, "Oh, it is brandy mixed with water." Rinchen then asked Thapa, "What is the drink in your bottle?" "It is rum mixed with water," replied Thapa. "Then, carry on; whenever you feel thirsty or cold,

that is your drink on these heights," was the advice given by Rinchen to Thapa. Major Thapa was wearing pabo shoes and that is why he did not suffer from frost-bite, thus saving his feet. Capt. Juge who was the Mortar Officer suffered from severe cold and frost-bite. for he was wearing jungle boots.

In the morning hours, Rinchen could hear the sound of hand grenades bursting at Pt 18,402. Rinchen knew that the post had been stormed by Major Ahluwalia. It was apparent that Indirect approach had served the purpose. He ordered MMGs and 2" mortars to stop firing on Pt 18,402 lest his own men were killed. He took over the MMG from Havaladar Norbu and started firing on the enemy troops fleeing from Pt 18,402 and running towards the Administrative Post. The Pak troops from the Administrative Post opened fire in retaliation and heavy firing continued for about 15 minutes. Then, there was the war cry, 'Ki Ki So So La gyalo'. This was the success signal and Rinchen rushed to Pt 18,402 with the rest of the troops. It was 0700 hours and Major Ahluwalia had occupied the post with the help of 18 dare-devil NCOs and jawans. Five Pak soldiers were killed and one man with an LMG taken prisoner. There were no casualties on the Indian side except that three Nuns suffered minor injuries. Rinchen sent a runner to call Capt Sujan Singh, the Medical Officer, and his medical attendant but it was learnt that the Doctor and his medical attendant had returned to Baigdangdo at 0400 hours as they were down with severe cold and sickness. Under the circumstances the injured soldiers were given some local treatment and then sent to No. 7 post at Baigdangdo on the man pack.

L/Naik Ghulam Hasan of the Pakistan Army who had been made a prisoner of war at Pt 18,402 was interrogated. He gave some valuable information regarding the strength, disposition, arms and ammunitions and approaches to their post. As per his statement:

- a- There was one wing of Karakoram Scouts consisting of 3 Companies, each consisting of 4 Platoons
- b- There were approximately 2 Companies of Razakars
- c- One Platoon of 3"/81 mm mortar and one Platoon of MMGs
- d- The Wing Commander was a Major and the troops were mostly from Gilgit and Hunza, while a few were local. The Razakars were all local and were issued with 303 rifles

Initially his statement was not believed but later on it was found that he was correct in whatever he had said.

On the morning of December 8, at 0700 hours, when Rinchen was on the top of Pt 18,402, he observed the Pak-occupied area right from CP, OP Ridge to Turtok and Chulunkha. The Pakistani posts and lines of communication were clearly visible. Next, he looked back towards the Nubra Valley. The Indian Army Headquarters at Partapur and the Airfield at Thoise were clearly visible. Obviously, the Pakistani troops had chosen to occupy that point because of its importance from the tactical point of view. As Rinchen looked down from Pt 18,402 to the Pak Administration Post which was hardly 650 metres away, he could see a number of trenches and bunkers. In the centre it was obviously the cook house as smoke was coming out of its chimney. By then, the enemy at the Administration Post had learnt that their post at Pt 18,402 had been captured by the Indian troops and they had lost their morale. About 50 Pakistani soldiers seemed to be rushing to 'stand-to-position'. Rinchen asked Capt Juge to contact the mortar section at point No. 6 and order them to engage the enemy at the Administrative Post with shelling. The MMG was also fired. The shots neutralised the enemy troops which got panicky and began to run helter skelter, leaving their trenches and bunkers.

At about 0900 hours, Rinchen gave the success signal to the Commander of the Sector, Colonel Udai Singh, who congratulated the troops on their

success. The congratulatory message given by the Sector Commander went a long way in boosting the morale of the forces under Rinchen's command

ii. Offensive Against the Administrative Post:

The troops rested the whole day on the reverse slopes of Pt 'V and Pt 18,402. In the evening they arrived at Pt 18,402 and started rolling down at about 1830 hours.

The order of march was as follows:

- a. K Company under Major Y.S.Thapa followed by O Group of Rinchen
- b. Nubra Guards
- c. G Compapy
- d. Porters

The descent was as stoop and tough as the climbing on the other side approach to Pt 18,402 had been and it took two and a half hours to climb down by approx 300 metres. At 2200 hours they surrounded the Administrative post, but there was no sign of the enemy. The jawans of Rinchen entered the bunkers with bayonets and hand grenades and made a thorough search from bunker to bunker. As the troops from the Administrative Post had withdrawn, Major Thapa who commanded 'K' Company faced no resistance when he launched the attack.

Lot of war equipment and other stores were found at this post:

- a. 50 sets of ECC clothing, bedding, all made in USA and China
- b. Hundreds of blankets and sleeping bags
- c. Bukharies fitted in the bunkers
- d. A large number of utensils, including pressure cookers, cooked dal and puries for breakfast

e. Huge quantity of ammunition

After detailing troops for patrolling duty in the surrounding area.

Rinchen said to his officers and men, "you can use Pak bunkers, bukharies, beddings and enjoy good food, as the Pakistani soldiers have left everything in a hurry and had no time to poison the food. " Meat was cooked and lot of rum was consumed. Even the porters enjoyed good food and were given blankets. One of the bunkers, perhaps used by the officers, had American sleeping bags and air mattresses.

All the troops were given complete rest for the night till 'stand-to-report' next morning.

iii. Rinchen's offensive against Chulunkha:

December 9/10 were the victory days. Early morning, on December 9, when the troops assembled, Rinchen enquired from all the Commanders including the Commander of the porters if they were fit to advance. It was reported that a few Ladakhi Scouts and Nubra Guards and also a few porters were suffering from minor frost-bite of hands and feet. Rinchen checked the cases personally. Those suffering were detained with the Administration Column along with the porters. Major Ahluwalia was also detained. Capt. Juge, in spite of being frost-bitten, insisted on joining the forces for the advance against the final objective.

At 0930 hours, Rinchen proceeded along the ridges, with his 'O' Group (Order Group) towards the Chulunkha defence complex, crawling and hiding so as not to be seen by the enemy, till they reached a point from where he could see the entire Chulunkha defence line. Through binoculars he observed the area and the activities going on there for about half an hour. The approach to the post was only at one point and that was from the Chulunkha Nul1ah site. There was no other approach. That posed a big

problem to Rinchen who was always keen on reaching a higher level and then rolling down close to the enemy's stronghold but in this case there seemed to be no other alternative except the Nullah approach, which, Rinchen felt, would be risky as the enemy was most likely to have laid mines or set up road blocks.

Rinchen decided to lead the assault himself along with Major Thapa. Two platoons were picked up from K and G Companies and the Nubra Guards. One Platoon from each Company was kept in reserve. After lunch he briefed all the troops for the coming night attack. The jawans looked fresh after a full night's rest and their morale was very high.

Rinchen ordered Capt Juge to instruct the mortar section at No. 6 Post to fire mortars on the enemy defences. The mortars fell very close to the enemy's position but in retaliation not a single shot was fired from the Pak side, nor was there any sign of movement in that area. "It could be either of two possible alternatives," Rinchen pondered. He mumbled on, "Either the enemy troops have escaped or they have received good training and are well disciplined. They have not panicked and, sure enough, are not going to come out of their trenches and bunkers till the right moment."

Rinchen instructed the mortar section to stop shelling and took the bold decision to launch an assault, not frontal but through an indirect approach. As mentioned above, there was a water channel through which water was carried to the Chulunkha defences and this channel was running through the centre of the Pak stronghold. It was found to be dry as the villagers had stopped water supply just before the winter had set in. Rinchen instructed Major Thapa to move along the water channel and enter the main Pak position from behind, unless there was some obstacle along the channel. Naib Subedar C. Angdus and Naib Subedar ARahman were to assist him. Rinchen was in communication with both Major Thapa on one side and Colonel Udai Singh on the other. Major Thapa informed Rinchen on the

wireless that his group had entered the parameter of the Pak defences but while he could see trenches and bunkers there was no sign of enemy troops. Colonel Udai Singh flashed good news to Rinchen, "Congratulations, Rinchen. All India Radio has just announced that the Ladakhi Scouts in Partapur Sector had captured the highest post, Pt 18,402, the highest ever captured in the world history of warfare and were advancing like storm and thunder."

But soon, as ill luck would have it, contact with Major Thapa was cut off. Situation became worse when the enemy stationed at Chulunkha opened fire with mortars and machine guns. Rinchen's troops faced heavy firing from all sides - from the left and from the left top, from the right spur and from the right from across the river. It became most distressful.

It was most encouraging when Thapa's voice was heard again, informing Rinchen that his team had entered the enemy bunkers and a few enemy jawans had been killed and a JCO captured. Rinchen was getting impatient to join Major Thapa but he could not stir out and advance because of heavy MMGs firing from all around. The signalman was hit by a burst of MMG tire. Luckily he received only minor injuries to his leg. The wireless set had to be removed from his shoulders and put on the back of Rinchen's orderly.

Rinchen tried to do his very best to give field dressing to the signalman but he found it difficult to do so in the midst of heavy shelling from all sides.

"Oh, how I wish two bold and fearless jawans could crawl to the enemy post with band grenades and silence the gun post!" mused Rinchen. Sepoys Dorje and Ali readily offered their services and went crawling close to the enemy MMG post. They threw hand grenades but the MMG gun post was strongly defended and the grenades proved ineffective. Next, Naik Fateh Mohanunad offered his services to do the job. He said, "Kafiron ko to main khatam kar dunga; mujhe hathgole chahiye " Rinchen gave him one box of hand grenades which had been captured from the Pale forces at Pt 18,402.



Initially, Naik Fateh Mohammad also failed to destroy the bunkers in which the MMG was stationed. He requested for more grenades and they were despatched to him fast. At last success was achieved and the gun was silenced at about 0200 hours. Green 'V' light signal came from the top gun post with a war cry. No sooner had the guns been silenced than Rinchen with his party rushed forth to join Major Thapa. The reserve column which had been held up in the Nullah also advanced.

The main post had been captured but troubles were not yet over. Though a few guns had been silenced, quite a few others installed by the enemy in the surrounding areas, specially those from across the river Shyok, continued to fire. Colonel Udai Singl<sup>1</sup> became apprehensive of a counter-attack. Major Rinchen, however, played cool and did not get panicky. "Rest assured, Sir, the situation is well under control. You will soon hear some good news," said Rinchen to the Sector Commander on the wireless. Just then, two jawans arrived with a message from Naib Subedar Angdus, informing Rinchen that 'three crew members of the enemy MMG had been killed and the MMG captured.' It was rather unbelievable because not a single shot had been fired nor had any hand grenade burst. Later, Rinchen learnt that Naib Subedar S.Wangu, Havaladar Stobdan, Havaladar Norbu and Sepoy Sundus had advanced crawling, taking advantage of the enemy firing. Whenever the guns were fired, they advanced and whenever the guns stopped, they took position quietly. Thus, they managed to reach the enemy bunkers and kill all the crew members with bayonets. Havaladar Stobdan was in such a frenzy that he immediately seized the MMG and threw it in the Chulunkha Nullah. When, later, he was asked, "Why did you do so?", his answer was, "The gun was totally damaged. It was of no use to us."

Soon, Major Rinchen was in the Pak Command post with Major Thapa. He asked the Guard Commander to produce the senior-most prisoner of war

but no amount of interrogation could get any useful information from him. He was placed under arrest and kept in a separate bunker under a sentry. At about 0600 hours, a runner came from Naik Fateh Mohammad with news that the Pak soldiers had made a hole in the top of their bunker and were showing their hands. When Rinchen reached close to the bunker, he noted that the Pak troops had stopped firing and were shouting, "We want to surrender." Rinchen ordered his men to stop firing and throwing hand grenades on the enemy bunkers and shouted, "If you want to surrender, throw your weapons." They started throwing their arms out of the holes in the roof of their bunkers. These included two machine guns, one 2" mortar, a few rifles and sten guns and two V light pistols.

Rinchen again shouted, "Throw all grenades and bayonets and come out one by one holding your hands up." As they came out in a file, Rinchen asked one of the jawans from Naik Fateh Mohammad's Platoon to make a search of every one. One jawan of the Ladakhi Scouts who had got furious because the whole night he had suffered from severe cold and whose feet had been frost-bitten shot down a Pak prisoner of war and was going to shoot another when Rinchen shouted and ran towards him. He snatched away the rifle from his hand and gave him a hard slap. Addressing his jawans, he said, "Remember, once the Pak soldiers have surrendered, they are our guests and friends."

Rinchen has certain high ideals regarding the treatment to be meted out to the prisoners of war. Immediately he approached the Pakistani prisoners and apologised to them for the unfortunate incident. He shook hands with them one by one and congratulated them for their good fighting-spirit. "You are all brave and I appreciate your unbounded courage and absolute loyalty to your country. It was your duty to fight for your country as best as you could and you did so. Now, since you have surrendered, you are our guests and friends," said Rinchen, addressing the prisoners of war. Later, he asked

Targis, the Commander of a Nubra Guards Company, to detail an escort guard for the prisoners and gave him instructions to look after them with all courtesy.

There had been severe fighting for over ten hours to capture Pt 18,402 and Chulunkha defence complex but the Indian troops had surprisingly suffered no casualty. This was something highly creditable and Rinchen ascribes it to his adoption of the indirect approach technique and the guerrilla tactics of Shivaji.

Immediately after, Rinchen instructed Naib Subedar C.Angdus to go with his platoon to capture the Administrative Post and Chulunkha village which was close by. Surprisingly, not a single civilian could be seen in the village, for everyone had run away fearing that the Indian troops would ill-treat them. This impression had been created in their mind by the retreating Pak soldiers.

Naib Subedar Angdus had no alternative left but to surround the village and make a search from house to house. Only one JCO who was wounded and had been left behind by the fleeing Pakistani soldiers was found hiding in one of the houses.

By 1100 hours, the entire Chulunkha defence complex was under the occupation of the Indian troops. The following war equipment was also captured:

1. Rifles - .303 with ammunition - 75 to be distributed among the Razakars
2. Cash - about Rs. 8,000
3. Some important service documents
4. Transistor sets
5. Plenty of ammunition, ration and clothing
6. Signal equipment

iv. OP and CP captured in a Silent Battle:

All these days Rinchen had not received any news regarding Capt. Kalia who had been detailed to proceed 10 Tebe Nullah on December 8 along with a platoon. They had crossed the river Shyok the same night with the help of porters belonging to Baigdangdo, especially one Sikandar who was an expert in making local boats with Jerry cans. It was Sikandar who was primarily responsible for the successful crossing of all troops across the river during that cold and dark night. Capt. Kalia had failed to keep contact with Rinchen as his signal equipment had fallen down and got damaged. He was supposed to make an assault on the Pak CP and OP on December 9 and 10 simultaneously with the battle for Chulunkha defence complex. It was only when Rinchen was looking all around through binoculars that he observed a group of soldiers rolling down from the ridge Tebedo to Pakistan OP. How happy he was to note that it was the platoon of Capt. Kalia! Rinchen could see that about twenty Pak soldiers came forward with white flags and lined up before Capt. N.K. Kalia as soon as he arrived at the OP. The entire personnel of the enemy mortar platoon surrendered to Capt. Kalia along with huge quantities of arms, ammunition and clothing. The Pak CP post had already been vacated during the night of December 9 and 10. There had been no fighting at OP and CP; it was just a silent battle which resulted in success of the Indian forces. Rinchen immediately rushed with a section of troops to reinforce Capt. Kalia.

The first phase of capturing Chulunkha complex was thus completed with resounding victory. During this phase the following were captured:

1. Prisoners of war - JCOs - 2
2. Prisoners of war - ORs - 38
3. Razakar civilians - 4
4. 3" and 2" mortars - 6
5. Machine guns - 6
6. Rifles - 63

7. Other war equipment

8. Huge quantity of ammunition

9. Rations which lasted for six months for the Dhal Force Arms and ammunition surrendered by the Pakistani troops proved to be very useful to the Indian troops. By just turning their nozzles and barrels from east to west the rifles could be used against the Pakistani forces, in case the latter planned a counter-attack.

December 11 was an Administration Day for the entire Dhal Force. The entire day was devoted to re-organisation of the troops and evacuation of casualties including frost-bite cases to Sector Headquarters. Major Ahluwalia, Capt. Juge and Capt. Kalia were also evacuated to the General Hospital.

Major Rinchen often expresses his special gratitude to the helicopter pilots who flew over 6,100 metres high Khardung La from dawn to dusk.

Unmindful of bad weather and enemy air and ground attacks, they cleared all the wounded and frost-bite cases within 48 hours, making 70 sorties from Leh to forward posts on improvised landing grounds. He mentions especially the services rendered by Flight Lts. M.P. Singh, Ledu and Dhillon. Flight Lt. Behl was attached to the Dhal Force as ATC but his services had never been sought by Rinchen for any air support except on the last day of war i.e. December 17, when Rinchen had planned to mount an attack on Piun, the Pak Sector Headquarters.

Rinchen specially mentions the Brigade Major Chandramani of the Grenadiers, who was a dynamic officer with a cool temperament. During the entire operation, he was the key man between the Dhal Force and the Brigade Headquarters. Most regularly, he sent information about the welfare of the Ladakhi Scouts and the Nubra Guards to their families in distant villages. In particular, he sent special runners to inform the old parents of Rinchen how well their son was faring on the front.

## II Second Phase

December 12 was the day of re-organisation of troops, coordination of supporting, arms and briefing of the troops which were detailed for the next offensive.

### TASK:

- A. Offensive against Turtok on the left bank of the river Syhok
- B. Offensive against Thang on the right bank of the river Syhok

### Order of March:

The troops moved with the following order of march:

- A. D and G Companies and to advance along the left one Platoon of Nubra Guards road to Turtok.
- B. K Company with 2 Platoons of Nubra Guards to advance along the right road to Thang.
- C. Mortar Platoon to advance along the main road as a supporting arm for both offensives.

The patrolling teams which Rinchen had sent, on the night of December 12, towards Turtok and Thang had brought some important information regarding enemy dispositions. The Pakistani troops had established road blocks and were digging defences at Rarndo Nullah at Turtok on the left flank. The locals had set up road blocks opposite Turtok village top and river bed.

On December 12, the Indian troops resumed their advance and established their defence close to Rarndo Nullah from where they could study the Pakistani defence preparations more closely. It was clear that the Pakistani troops were being reinforced for making a counter-attack. Rinchen passed on a message to the Sector Commander that he would like to spend

the night for studying the enemy dispositions in greater detail and might have to postpone the attack towards the dawn.

The supporting arm moved close to the enemy defences till Pak Wing Headquarters at Turtok were within the range of the Indian mortar section. The first priority was given to destroying the road blocks to Turtok with mortars so that the troops could advance and launch an attack on Turtok on December 13/14 night without hindrance. Shelling started at 1600 hours to destroy the road blocks near Turtok axis and harass the Turtok top.

- a. Naib Subedar Angdus was detailed to clear the Turtok top.
- b. Major Thapa was asked to clear the road axis towards Thang.
- c. Major Rinchen, along with Major S.K. Singh, was to launch an assault on Turtok on December 13/14 night.

The Dhal Force commenced their advance just after last light in order to hit the respective targets. The entire advance was made under the cover of mortar barrage. A number of road blocks of boulders and rocks were destroyed but Rinchen did not find any resistance coming forth from the Pak troops. At about 2200 hours, shelling was stopped and the troops advanced to Turtok top village. By 0100 hours, they encircled the Wing Headquarters and the village and charged with hand grenades and bayonets. Surprisingly, the village was absolutely dead and silent. It was pitch dark and no light was coming out of any house. No noise was heard except that of the dogs barking, donkeys braying and cows mewing. Every house was locked from within and despite all shouting no one opened the doors. At last the Indian troops reached one of the big houses in the centre of the village near the mosque. Rinchen knocked at the door with his stick and requested the inmates to open the door but there was no response. So he posed as a porter from Baigdangdo and shouted in Balti language, "I am Ali, a porter, resident of Baigdangdo. I come with the Indian Army but don't

be afraid to open the door. The Indian soldiers will not harm you. I am responsible for your safety." It was after several efforts that finally there was a feeble voice from inside, "We are afraid of the Indian Army." After great persuasions two young men opened the door. Rinchen aimed his pistol at them and three jawans pointed their bayonets but Rinchen said politely, "Please don't be afraid of us; only tell us the truth.

Is there any Pak soldier hiding in your house?" They replied most pleadingly. "Khuda ki qasam, yahan koi Pakistani sipahi nahin hai." "Where are they?" asked Rinchen. "They have just run away after last light and the Pak. camp has been dismantled," was their reply.

Rinchen's men entered the house and searched every nook and corner but found nothing suspicious. Only an old man, named Ghulam Husain and his two younger brothers, were found hiding in one corner of a room. He was a member of the village Panchayat and a rich man of the village.

As the members of the Rinchen's party were suffering from severe cold, they asked the inmates of the house to light a fire which they did but they were still afraid of the Indian troops. Rinchen talked to them in the local Balti language and tried to free them from fear, "Please do not fear~ we have come to help you and flee you from the Pak. occupation after 23 years." Rinchen noted that while men folk were present in the house, there were neither women nor children. He was told that all ladies and children were hiding in the adjoining Nullah for fear of the Indian troops. Rinchen thought it better to call forth the village Headman and Chairman of the Panchayat and take them into confidence. Lambardar Karim Mohammad Sang Sang and Ghulam Mohammad who arrived promptly invited Major Rinchen and his party to their house, 'Sang Sang House'. Rinchen continued to plead, "Don't worry. I am an Officer of the Indian Army and come from the Nubra Valley." Immediately one villager recognised him, "So, you are from village Sumur and you are son of Kunzang." Soon they gained



confidence in what Rinchen said. Sang Sang served them nice Chinese tea in China-made tea set. Rinchen asked the Headman and the Chairman who were political leaders of the village to call forth all the villagers at the Pak Camp at 0900 hours when he proposed to address them.

About a thousand old and young people of Turtok assembled to hear Major Rinchen. Everyone was carrying a white flag and shouting 'Hindustan Zindabad.' They also brought dry fruits and offered them to all ranks of the Indian forces.

In his address Major Rinchen said:

1. We welcome you again to the Indian Nation after 23 years.
2. The Indian Army will help you in all respects. Bring back your women folk and children. They are like our mothers and sisters. I will be responsible for their safety, if there is any misbehaviour on the part of any soldier or civilian who has come with us, I shall take disciplinary action against the person who misbehaves.
3. I want you all to settle down as free citizens of India. Visit your religious places, cultivate your fields, take out your cattle to the grazing ground and carry on your routine work as usual. India is a democratic country. Here people of different religions live and work together in peace and cooperation."

Everyone was exceedingly happy to listen to the address given by Major Rinchen. They offered Major Rinchen the title of Nawab-i-Nubra. At 1100 hours Colonel Udai Singh also arrived at Turtok and the people received him warmly. December 14 was the victory day for the Ladakhi Scouts and the Nubra Guards because on that day they captured the Pak Wing Headquarters on the Nubra Front.

By 1600 hours, women returned from the Nullah along with the children, carrying bedding, rations, other necessary belongings, and small kids on their backs. All women had smeared their faces with black colour and mud,

only their eyes were visible. On arrival, they washed off the pigment, returned to normal life and settled down happily. Rinchen learnt that the local civil population was suffering from shortage of soap and salt. He immediately requested the Headquarters for supply of the same. Three helicopters arrived bringing soap, salt and rum: soap and salt for the civil population and rum for the soldiers.

By 1700 hours, Naib Subedar Angdus and his men also returned and reported that they had occupied the Pak post at Turtok top and that the Pak forces had withdrawn along the Turtok Nullah to the west.

c. Third Phase:

In the third phase the objectives of the Indian troops were:

Task A: to advance against Tyakshi, Parhethang and Piuo;

Task B: To carry out hot pursuit of the retreating enemy forces

Tyakshi village was approx 6 km from Turtok and it was secured by 2100 hours on December 14. One of the Indian Army ambush parties succeeded in capturing Pak soldiers along with arms, ammunition and other war equipment. These Pak soldiers were from the Gilgit Scouts and had come from Skardu to join as reinforcement. On the morning of December 15, Rinchen proceeded to Tyakshi and Pache Thang. Major S.K. Singh reported that Pakistan had offered little resistance and had withdrawn during the night towards Prahnu and Do Thang villages. According to him, while a few Pak soldiers were still crossing the bridge, one of them had been shot down by the Indian troops. At all the three villages, the people came out to receive the Indian forces as they had done at Turtok. Major Rinchen addressed the villagers as he had done at Turtok and assured them of the good intentions of the Indian Army. On December 15/16 night, they captured Thang and the Ridge which was 131er named Gorkha Ridge.

By the evening of December 15, Most of the Indian forces, comprising the Dhal Force arrived 31 Turtok. Some of the jawans represented that it was their New Year Day (Losar) and they were keen to celebrate it. Major Rinchen pointed out that it would not be proper to waste one day in celebrations when the enemy was preparing for a counter-attack. He promised to celebrate Losar with great pomp and show, once the fighting was over. However, he got permission from the Commander for extra issue of rum and for a bada khana. He arranged with the local contractor, Mohammad Sang Sang, for purchase of 12 sheep against full payment. The villagers made a free offer but Rinchen pointed out that unlike the Pakistani Army the Indian Army always liked to buy articles from the open market against full payment.

By then, the troops were quite tired and they needed re- enforcement and replacement. One company of 5/3 GR arrived at Turtok as reinforcement and to replace the wounded or frost- bitten soldiers. Plenty of ammunition and ration supply was also brought in by the land route.

One thousand ponies, yaks, donkeys and porters arrived from the Nubra Valley bringing beddings which the troops had left behind at Baigdangdo. So far, the Indian troops had been virtually the guests of the Pak army, using their ammunition, rations and beddings.

A small force of the Ladakhi Scouts, known as the Talwar Force, under the command of Captain S.D. Poon, had left Leh sometime back. Advancing along the Indus Valley crossing over Chorbat La, it was supposed to join the Dhal Force at Piun but due to failure of communication, their advance had been adversely effected.

By the evening of December 15, Rinchen received a message from the forward Indian troops that Thang and Gorkha Ridge were completely under their control but the enemy was reported to be preparing defence at Do Thang and Prahnu villages. It was learnt that about 2 more companies of

the Pak troops were arriving at their new defence line, presumably in preparation of a counter- attack. Rinchen ordered Major Thapa and Major Mishra (commanding 5/3 GR) who had reached the front on December 17, to reinforce Pachethang and Gorkha Ridge and to establish a base for launching an attack against Prahnu and Piun. The night of December 17/18 was fixed for the advance to Piun. This could not be accomplished.

News was received from the All India Radio that the Governments of India and Pakistan had agreed to a cease-fire at 1700 hours on December 17. A flash message was also received from the Brigade Headquarters ordering the Dhal Force to enforce cease-fire at the scheduled time. This greatly disappointed the troops whose morale was exceptionally high at that time and who were looking forward to liberate more of Baltistan including Skardu and Gilgit.

#### ACHIEVEMENTS OF THE DHAL FORCE: (December 7-17)

From the time that the Dhal Force had started from the Assembly Area at Baigdangdo on December 7 to December 17, when the forces reached Thang/Ridge, it had been almost ceaseless fighting for 10 days. During these 10 days' action, the Dhal Force, under the command of Major Rinchen and comprising exclusively the companies of the Ladakh Scouts and the Nubra Guards, achieved great success. Major Rinchen always recounts the important achievements on his finger tips.

1. Captured Pt 18,402, which is the highest post ever captured in the world's history of warfare.
2. Captured Chulunkha defence complex along with several villages covering approx 800 sq km. This was the largest area captured by any unit on the western/northern front during the 1971 war.

3. A number of Pak soldiers were killed and many were taken prisoner. Huge quantity of arms, ammunition and war equipment was seized.
4. Blankets and other clothing and rations were captured in huge quantity. Blankets were distributed even among the porters. Rations lasted for months for the troops.
5. Not a single casualty occurred on the Indian side except for a few cases of minor injury and frost-bite.
6. Pakistani casualties included 18 killed, 2 JCOs, 40 ORs and 4 Razakars taken prisoner and six wounded who were taken to Leh by a chopper.
7. Physical fitness and stamina of troops in ascending and descending the steep slopes of the mountains, along with arms and ammunition and some kit and bedding almost every night continuously from December 3 onwards was highly creditable. The troops still looked fresh and tough and were ready for the onward march.
8. The entire operation was carried out without artillery and air support and with minimum expenditure of ammunition, using only hand grenades and bayonets. Most of the ammunition expended was that captured from the Pakistani camps.

When, later, Lt.Gen. Sartaj Singh, the Corps Commander, visited and talked to the jawans at Turtok he congratulated the Ladakhi Scouts and the Nubra Guards on their bravery. He pointed out that there was not a single casualty because of good leadership, high morale, toughness, prompt action and adoption of high guerrilla tactics. While having tea in the crew room. Lt. Gen. Sartaj Singh pointed his stick at the revolver hanging by Rinchen's side and asked, "Rinchen, did you use this for the Pak troops?" Rinchen replied, "No, sir, not this time. I only used hand grenades and Pak-captured ammunition against them." The General remarked, "Well done, Rinchen, you have saved our ammunition."

Later, the Ladakh Scouts battalion was granted the Battle Honour of Turtok Operations of war.

### **The Aftermath of War:**

When cease-fire came into force with effect from 1700 hours on December 17, exchange of fire from both sides on the fighting front came to an end. But lots of administrative problems cropped up. The Conquests of War had been successfully over; immediately the need for the Conquests of Peace was felt. It was a quest for restoration of normalcy and peace at all levels. Rinchen's military exploits had been highly creditable winning applause from everyone but he was not just a war-monger. Soon he became engaged in discharging his responsibilities in the aftermath of war. First priority was, of course, given to setting up forward posts OR the new frontier at Ridge and Thang by digging trenches and constructing sangars. This task was highly sensitive and needed to be accomplished promptly and firmly but very tactfully without violating the cease-fire and yet not yielding to external pressure tactics. On December 18, when Rinchen visited the forward posts at the villages of Tyakshi, and Pache Thang, Lt. Bedi of the GR whose platoon was engaged in digging trenches on the spur of a ridge reported that the Pak troops were trying to occupy more and more area. Rinchen advised him to deal with the situation very tactfully lest fresh confrontation flared up. He decided to send a message to the Pak Commander for a flag meeting and he also kept his own Sector Commander well informed about all developments.

Rinchen often ruminates over the questions of war and peace giving vent to his feelings which indicate how balanced his views were on matters of war and peace. He was conscious of the fact that the Commander of the troops should be not only accountable for success in war but also for all subsequent actions that were required to be taken for restoration of

normalcy. "War", he states categorically, "should be avoided as far as possible. There is nothing good about war. It means so much blood-shed. It embitters relations between two neighbouring countries. It ruins the economy of both the countries involved. The winner wins war but loses peace thereafter." "But," with a glint in his eye, he continues, "if a war has to be fought, there can be nothing humane about it. One cannot be softy softy. It has to be merciless killing." "But once cease-fire is declared," he continues, "administrative responsibilities crop up manifold. The prisoners of war have to be treated with dignity the dead have to be honoured and buried with full military honours and, above all, a lot has to be done for the welfare of the people who have been liberated from thralldom of the unlawful occupants with a view to earning their goodwill. "

How are the prisoners of war to be treated? "You can bayonet them during war without showing any mercy. You are fully justified in doing so" Rinchen accepts. "But once they surrender and approach you with hands up. they are your friends and guests. We can't arraign them for what they have done for their country," he asserts emphatically.

Proper burial of those killed during war is another great responsibility of the Commander which he cannot afford to neglect. Rinchen detailed a team of Muslim jawans under a JCO along with a Maulvi of Baig dangdo to carry out all arrangements. It took five days to collect the dead bodies lying scattered all over the battlefields, select suitable sites for the burial grounds and then bury the dead according to their religious customs with full military honour.

Meanwhile, Rinchen had to tackle the immediate problems of the people who lived in the newly-occupied territory. All the villagers from Tyakshi and Pache Thang, including women and children, gathered at the school compound at Tyakshi and placed their immediate personal problems before Rinchen. In some cases, husbands and relations had been left behind on

the Pak side. They had gone to Skardu and other places on business and many of them had been taken prisoner by the Pak soldiers while they were withdrawing. In certain cases, while the people lived in the villages on the Indian side, their fields and grazing grounds lay in the Pakistan-occupied area.

Knowing full well that these problems could best be solved by a flag meeting with the Pak Commander, Rinchen wrote him a letter in Urdu stating the problems and suggesting that a flag meeting be held the very next day and sent it to him through two messengers. Rinchen also informed his own Sector Commander about this proposal. Unfortunately, there was no response from the Pak Commander. The two messengers who carried the letter did not return.

Rinchen also paid attention to the long-term problems of the newly liberated people. During 23 years' occupation, the Pakistan Government had paid little attention to improvement of the living conditions of the people in that area. Rinchen strongly felt that it was the bounden duty of the Indian Army units to make the lives of the liberated people better and more comfortable.

Problems were many. There were a few primary schools but without teachers, there was no provision for fair price shops for rations and clothing; was a dispensary but without a doctor; mosques in that area had not been repaired for long and, above all, no funds had been allowed by the Pak Government for developmental work.

Immediate steps were taken by Rinchen to do something for the people in the liberated area to enable them to have a better standard of living and, indirectly, to earn their confidence and goodwill:

1. Fair price shops were opened for rations to be sold at subsidized rates.
2. Co-operatives were set up for clothing, kerosene and other necessary items.



3. Medical doctor and medical staff were posted at the hospital.
4. Local people, though less qualified, were appointed as teachers in the primary schools.
5. A Naib Tahsildar and a Police Inspector were posted to attend to the problems of revenue and law and order.
6. Permission was given to the local people to visit Leh, Srinagar and other places.
7. Special funds were allotted by the Army for repair and maintenance of the mosques in that area.

Battles had been won with bayonets and grenades but providing proper administrative system to the liberated people was a greater achievement for the Command.