

The Saga of Ladakh

Heroic Battles of Rezang La & Gurung Hill

1961-62

Maj General Jagjit Singh

FOREWORD

MUCH has been written on the India-China War of 1962. However, an impression seems to prevail that the Indian Army suffered a defeat at the hands of China in this war. This is far from the truth. The fighting took place mainly in three Sectors- in Ladakh in the North West, in Walong in the North East and Tawang-Sela in the Centre. The formations involved were about a brigade each in the North West and North East and about a division in the Centre. Despite inadequate preparedness and several other handicaps, the formations in the North West and North East fought extremely well against overwhelming odds. Only in the Centre did the formation suffer a reverse. Apart from several important factors, one of the main reasons for this was ineffective military leadership at different levels. It is hoped that a comprehensive and objective account of this war would be available in the near future. In the meantime, any attempts by those who were in the ring and other analysts to bring out accounts of the War as they saw it should be encouraged.

Major General Jagjit Singh, the author of the Book, has had a distinguished career. After his initial grounding in the Regiment, he became Brigade Major of the famous 114 Infantry Brigade in Ladakh during the war against China. Subsequently, after commanding a regiment, he was Commander Artillery Brigade of an important formation. Then, he was our Military Attache in the Soviet Union. Finally, he was Major General Artillery of a vital operational Command. He is a professional to the core and has made a deep study of warfare. As such, he is eminently qualified to write this Book about the War in the north west and has made a fine job of it.

In this well illustrated Book, the author has unfolded the events that took place in the North Western Sector in a most commendable manner, thereby making a very useful contribution to India's post-war military history. The war time Brigade Major of 114 Infantry Brigade has placed on record the gallant performance of the Brigade in the war, particularly the valour of the

Indian Officer and Jawan in that rare feat of arms at Rezang La, the pluck and nerve displayed by Indian troops at posts 'Alfa' and Galwan and in the battle for Gurung Hill, and the extreme devotion to duty elsewhere, in fighting the Chinese in Ladakh. For this, Major General Jagjit Singh deserves to be congratulated.

The heroic performance of 114 Infantry Brigade only proves that given competent, inspiring and determined military leadership, the Indian soldiers' and officers' performance is unmatched, as they have proved time and again. Equally, if the leadership is weak or ineffective, even at the divisional or corps levels, it can result in a national humiliation. This indeed is the main difference in leadership in the military and other walks of life. It must, therefore, be our constant endeavour to produce good combat leaders at all levels and ensure that only the really deserving reach higher ranks.

Although the author has dealt with the war in only one particular Sector, he has made wide ranging recommendations towards the improvement of India's National Defence in the last chapter of the Book. While one may not agree with all that he says, it must be conceded that these have been made frankly and without any vested interest; rather as a result of considerable thought. They merit careful examination.

I have no doubt that this Book will be of considerable interest not only to the military but also to our people in general who are interested in matters of national security.

(KV KRISHNA RAO)

General Chief of the Army Staff

New Delhi

28 November 1982

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PREFACE

THE performance of the Indian Army in the Sino-Indian War, 1962, is considered a stigma on it. Admittedly, it suffered a reverse on the Eastern Front in NEFA. But very little is known of the acts of gallantry and devotion to duty of troops that fought on the Western Front, in Ladakh. These heroic deeds lie buried in the desolate expanses of the Despang plains, in the lonely Galwan valley, on the banks of the Pongong Lake and on the snowy pinnacles of Gurung Hill and Rezang La-areas of main fighting in Ladakh.

As the staff officer in charge of operations of 114 Infantry Brigade (the formation that took part in this fighting) I witnessed the wanton intrusions of the Chinese army into Indian territory from April 1961, culminating in its massive onslaughts in October- November 1962.

The Saga of Ladakh is an attempt to tell the reader how well the Indian jawan fought in Ladakh and of the innumerable disadvantages which he accepted with discipline and dignity. Deployed in indefensible penny-packets, he stood firm, fought with inborn tenacity and laid down his life in a fight by so few against so many.

The last chapter contains a few thoughts which have been gathering in my mind for long on India's military preparedness. I have had occasion to discuss them not only with many a civil and military official but also with a cross- section of intelligentsia from various walks of life. They merit serious consideration by our policy makers.

I dedicate the book to the memory of General T.N. Raina, MVC, and a recipient of Padma Bhushan, India's Chief of Army Staff from June 1975 to May 1978. As the war-time commander of 114 Infantry Brigade he was the moving figure, the meticulous planner, the tenacious leader of troops.

I also pay homage to those gallant officers and jawans who laid down their lives defending the honour of Mother India in Ladakh.

Jagjit Singh

Major General (Retd)

3 October 1982

Kalyani House

Chharabara

Simla

NEW DELHI TO LEH

I was posted to Ladakh in April 1961 as the Brigade Major¹ of 114 Infantry Brigade. Serving as a battery commander in a gunner regiment in Delhi, I reacted to the move with mixed feelings. It meant rolling up my kit for duties far away, leaving command of a fine body of men, a comfortable home, family and friends. The appointment, on the other hand, offered its own charm of mountains and snow, of Lamas and monasteries, of people that I had read about but never met. Our relations with China had taken an adverse turn towards the close of 1960. There was, therefore, also a possibility, perhaps, of some form of confrontation with the Chinese. And so, with thoughts as above, I said *au revoir* to Delhi.

In accordance with my instructions, I reported en route at Headquarters XV Corps, which directly controlled 114 Infantry Brigade. There I was given a general briefing regarding the Brigade's operational responsibility. Next morning I left for Srinagar, from where I was to take an airlift to Leh², where the Brigade headquarters was located. With the Srinagar-Leh road still under construction, troops in Ladakh were maintained entirely by the Indian Air Force. Due to shortage of transport aircraft, the air effort available was limited. Bad weather placed further restrictions on flights to Leh. As such, troops in Ladakh had often to spend many days of waiting at the transit camp in Srinagar, before getting a seat in flights to Leh.

Military transit camps are usually never all that attractive to stay in. The camp staff are often lousy or trouble makers whom unit commanders have got rid of. Only now and then a good officer gets posted on compassionate home posting and both food and management improve. Once he is gone, the camp sinks into indifference again.

¹ One of the two principal staff officers to the Brigade Commander. He deals with operations, intelligence and training.

² Leh is the District Headquarters and main trade centre of Ladakh.

The transients themselves seldom know one another. Those proceeding on leave are restive, longing to get home as early as possible. Ones returning to units from leave are equally non-communicative, with thoughts of loved ones left behind and of life in harness for another year, before their next annual leave. But the transit camp in Srinagar was an exception. The magnetic pull of God's own nature given to the vale of Kashmir, in so much abundance, perhaps, made one shed all thoughts as above. The camp, therefore, vibrated with enthusiasm and an air of relaxation. Rightly did the Persian poet of old, Firdausi, exclaim in ecstasy on visiting Kashmir: "If there be paradise on earth; it is here, it is here, it is here." And yet one cannot help adding: that historically, this beautiful homeland of the Kashmiris has been singularly devoid of peace and serenity. One could, perhaps, compare Kashmir with a supremely beautiful woman, who has had so many claimants that her own life has been so bereft of joy and happiness. In his very educative book, *Jammu & Kashmir Arms*, Maj General D.K. Palit, VrC, writes:

"From the earliest times the people of Kashmir have lived through an almost continuous period of turbulence and tyranny, constant warfare, savagery and exploitation. It is true that periodically there have appeared such illustrious rulers as Meghvahana and Lalitaditya, Shahab-ud-din and Zain-al-Abdin-whose reigns brought peace and prosperity for brief periods, but they could do little to mitigate the overall misery of millennia."

Abutting on Russia, China and Afghanistan, Kashmir has always been a strategic outpost of the sub-continent, intimately connected with its history and international contacts. Many centuries ago, Invaders from Central Asia had descended on the plains of India through Kashmir. The Aryans were the first people who made Kashmir their home-land. In the 5th Century BC, Kashmir came under the Persian rule for a short period. This was followed by the restless nomads of Central Asia, the Kushans, establishing a long period of Kushan rule in the AD 1st Century. The white Huns were the next

conquerors of Kashmir, four centuries later. In the 14th Century, a muslim jagirdar from Swat, who had risen to be the Prime Minister of Kashmir, seized the throne, thus founding the Sultan dynasty. During the reign of Akbar, Kashmir came under the Moghul rule. With the decline of Moghul power, after the death of Akbar's great grandson Aurangzeb, Kashmir was invaded by the Afghans who ruled Kashmir for nearly 60 years, till their defeat at the hands of the Sikhs under Maharaja Ranjeet Singh, in early 19th Century. After the defeat of the Sikh army, in the first Sikh War of 1848, by the British, (with traitorous Sikh Generals Tej Singh and Lal Singh fully contributing to this defeat) Kashmir was sold by the latter to Raja Gulab Singh, the ruler of Jammu, for Rs 75 lakhs, Under the Treaty of Amritsar, in 1846, the British recognised Raja Gulab Singh and his descendants as the rulers of Jammu and Kashmir. The history of J&K, thereafter, revolves around the Dogra rulers, till its accession to the Indian Union in October 1947.

To get back to our transit camp and prospects of flying to Leh-whereas, the daily morning announcement, whether there would be flights to Leh or not (depending on weather) was eagerly awaited, a negative report evoked a concealed feeling of joy, giving both officer and man one more day in Srinagar. One soon made friends and left the camp for a shikara ride in the beauteous Dal Lake, a visit to the fascinating Shalimar gardens of the days of the Grand Moghuls or just admired the majestic chinar trees lining the road to Gulmarg and so on. I too spent four delightful days before flying to Leh, along with a few others and a cargo of kerosene oil.

"We are now flying over the Zoji La³," said a passenger. This is the first mountain pass on the way to Leh. Namik La and Fotu La are the two others. Zoji La, over 4,880 metres above sea level, has military history.

During the Indo-Pakistan conflict of 1947; Zoji La had, at one stage, been captured by the Pakistanis. In that scenario of our initial reverses on the

³ La' means mountain pass.

high Himalayan front, Kargil, hopelessly outnumbered, succumbed to enemy attacks on 10 May 1948. Dras was the next to fall. From Dras, the enemy had advanced westward and occupied Zoji La. Two months later, by 14 August 1948, the garrison at Skardu had surrendered. Under that gallant soldier, Lt Colonel Sher Jung Thapa⁴, troops at Skardu had put up a heroic resistance for nearly 6 months before giving up the contest, with the last box of ammunition expended against an overwhelming attack.

With Zoji La and Kargil in her hands and Skardu too fallen to her, Pakistan was now poised for a two-pronged advance, descending from Zoji La heights to Srinagar, and from Kargil to Leh.

The situation, of course, was much less dangerous as compared with the military threat that had existed earlier in October 1946, when 5,000 heavily armed tribesmen from the north-west, guided by Pakistani army officers, had reached the gates of Srinagar. Advancing from the direction of Abbotabad in Pakistan, the Pathans had crossed the border by the early hours of 21 October 1947. Domel and Muzaffarabad, two small border townships were overrun-their inhabitants killed and looted and their women raped. Uri and Baramula were the next to fall, with the same savagery committed against the defenceless civilians-men, women and children. The State Forces of Jammu and Kashmir had fought well, but with desertion and treachery of the bigoted Muslim elements of Maharaja's army, the garrisons at these two places could not check the invaders' advance towards the valley. In a desperate bid to save Srinagar, the ruler had himself wanted to go forward with reinforcements to fight the aggressor having, meanwhile, opened negotiations with New Delhi regarding accession, with an urgent request to fly in troops to defend Srinagar. He was, however, dissuaded from going into battle himself by his Chief of Staff, Brigadier Rajinder Singh, who in turn, led this force. But it was already a little too late and the reinforcements inadequately small to stem the enemy's advance. Rajinder Singh's decision to demolish the steel-girdle bridge at Uri was, however,

⁴ Thapa was awarded the Maha Vir Chakra, India's second highest gallantry award.

one single factor that caused a crucial two days' delay to the tribesmen. Fighting his way through a road block, a day later, Rajinder was wounded from a Pathan's bullet. Ordering his men to hide him under a culvert and make good their escape to Baramula, this brave Dogra officer laid his life there⁵.

With Maharaja Hari Singh's final accession to India, the first contingent of Indian troops, of the crack 1st Sikh Battalion of the Sikh Regiment, commanded by Lt Colonel Ranjit Rai, had landed at Srinagar airfield. It would be out of context to go into further details of operations thereafter, leading to the expulsion of both Pathans, and later, the regular army of Pakistan from the soil of Kashmir in this sector of the front. Suffice it to say that with the bulk of Brigadier Sen's⁶ 161 Infantry Brigade reaching Srinagar, just in time, this beautiful city had been saved.

The Indian Army's strength in Kashmir had substantially increased by the time that Zoji La and Kargil had to be captured. For the capture of Zoji La, it was decided to employ tanks of 7 Cavalry Regiment, in support of the assaulting infantry. The secret move of tanks to this height was a bold plan that required ingenuity, pluck and determination and equally difficult to execute. However, this regiment, commanded by Lt Colonel Rajinder Singh⁷, was to win fame in carrying out the task brilliantly. As anticipated, the unexpected arrival of tanks so surprised the Pakistanis that their defences soon cracked and disintegrated. Our forces had won a major tactical victory.

77 Para Brigade later sent a column from Zoji La to capture Kargil.

⁵ Brigadier Rajinder Singh was awarded a posthumous Maha Vir Chakra, thus becoming the first recipient of this award.

⁶ Author of a well written book on the Jammu and Kashmir operations, *Slender Was the Thread*, Sen rose to the rank of Lt General.

⁷ Popularly known as 'Sparrow', he was awarded the Maha Vir Chakra for his unit's role in the capture of Zoji La. He later commanded with distinction an armoured division, during the 1965 war against Pakistan and was awarded a bar to his MVC. Retired from the Army, as Major General, he is now a member of Parliament.

Concurrently, the Leh Brigade⁸ sent another column from Leh. The two columns met at Kargil. Thereafter, the threat from north was eliminated.

This then was Zoji La, a pass of great strategic importance that now lay below, covered deep in snow.

The beautiful vale of Kashmir, with its tall, green pines and fir clad slopes, had been left behind. From Zoji La onward there was a remarkable contrast. A completely different panorama lay open before the eyes-a new world, as it were. Occasionally, one took a puff from the oxygen cylinder issued to each passenger, to minimise the effect of high altitude. Now and then one saw in the distance a solitary cloud, hovering on top of a peak, sharing its loneliness. Perhaps it was the lofty peak, which had stood there for centuries, that longed for companionship. Down below lay an isolated hut, a small village, a monastery perched on a hilltop, a mane wall⁹, a chorten¹⁰, the mighty Indus river meandering through rugged-valleys, and the road from Srinagar, zig- zagging its way through the mountains. But beyond that were only an unending series of mountains, snow-capped or just naked rock, both awesome and majestic. It was nature in the raw-a treeless expanse of wilderness-the bleak wastes of Central Asia, as far as the eye could behold.

Sitting on the hard, uncushioned seat of the unpressurised air- craft, my mind wandered to many thoughts. I marvelled at the determination and

⁸ Major General K.S. Thimmaya, General Officer Commanding at Srinagar (later Chief of the Army Staff) had earlier flown to Leh along with air advisor, Air Commodore Arjun Singh and, as an immediate measure, a company of Indian Army Gorkhas had been flown in. Meanwhile another Gorkha battalion, the 2/8 Gorkha Rifles, was moved by foot across the outer and mid Himalayan ranges, to form the Leh Brigade.

⁹ Mane wall is a wall made of mud and stone, generally located near the entrance to a village. It is about 5 ft high and varying from 10 to 500 ft in length. The stones in the wall are placed there by the devout Buddhists going on a distant journey or entering into an important event. These stones are artistically carved with, Buddhist prayers, images of Lord Buddha and mystic symbols. When passing by a mane wall, a Buddhist always keeps to its left.

¹⁰ Chorten is a 10 to 30 ft high tower of pyramid shape, made of clay and stone. It is erected at each extremity of a mane wall. A chorten contains ashes of a dead person, mixed with clay and made in the form of an image of the deceased. Alongside a wealthy man's image in a chorten made specially for him may be kept wheat, barley, rice, peas, pearls, coral beads, turquoise, gold, silver, copper, iron, rolls of prayer, sandal wood, etc.

religious zeal of ancient Indian pilgrims who had trekked through these forbidding mountains to spread Buddhism in Tibet. I admired the grit and physical courage of traders of old, who braved travelling through Ladakh to far off Sinkiang and Lhasa, to sell their merchandise, losing many a life en route. But these were mere passing thoughts. What kept coming to my mind most was the briefing that I had received at the Corps Headquarters a few days ago. As I tried to reflect on the problems that faced us in Ladakh, the spirit of enthusiasm and bravado that I had tried to display in front of the Corps staff gradually vanished after seeing the stark realities of the terrain, and visualising the consequent difficulties of maintenance, command and control.

And what would be our plight if we were to get involved in border clashes with China-with the Brigade Headquarters located at Leh and troops so widely spread out a 150 kilometres and more ahead?

But then a discomfoting discovery took my thoughts away: As the plane, unable to cross over the high peaks, negotiated through narrow valleys, a Junior Commissioned Officer (JCO) of the 14 Jammu and Kashmir Militia, seated next to me, quietly, mentioned that there was only one parachute available between the two of us!

We were on a Packet craft. These aircraft were all old and so, to provide against a possible emergency, it was essential to equip each passenger with a parachute. The aircraft crew had apparently made a mistake in counting the passengers and provided one parachute short. Of course, nothing could then be done about it in mid-air. Under the circumstances, therefore, I being the senior, offered it to the JCO to wear the parachute. But the JCO, who had gallantly not worn it so far, could hardly now forget his soldierly pride. He politely declined. And so, there it lay throughout the flight-one parachute between the two of us.

Our aircraft had been airborne now for an hour. And soon, swooping across the jagged brown mountains, we made a perfect landing at one of

the highest airfields in the world. I was in Leh.

"I suggest that you take it easy for a couple of days. It is not advisable to start moving around too much, immediately on arrival here," said the officer who had come to meet me at the airfield. He was right. The effects of high altitude were already beginning to show on me. And so, after some initial tasks connected with settling down, I thought it prudent to rest. Looking across my room at the strange landscape of sand, rock and snow, I thought of the life to be for the next two years or so. How interesting can soldiering be, I thought. What a change from Delhi to Ladakh! Within a week, I had taken over the duties of Brigade Major. Major Bansi Lal Kapoor, my predecessor, having briefed me as conscientiously as possible for over a week, had left.

It had been a hectic period for me, taking charge of a heap of secret files and documents, including some which were Top Secret, going through details of troops' deployment, briefs on various units and sub-units with the Brigade and listening to Bansi's own opinion of the various Brigade officers I had to deal with. He warned me that I would need to remain alert all the time as Ladakh was an area of constant priority attention from the higher ups. "A small slip on your part and they would be at your throat," he had cautioned. This was understandable. Nonetheless, the outgoing Brigade Major had certainly put the new incumbent in some jitters. "Wish you good luck, brother," he said as he boarded the aircraft for Srinagar. I thought I needed it.

Looking back at it, whereas the Corps Headquarters with whom we mainly dealt were a pain in the neck, now and then, (as higher headquarters tend to be in the performance of their duty) I found as I got down to work that they generally well understood our problems and cooperated.

THE LAND OF LADAKHIS

Geography

The countries bordering Ladakh are Pakistan and China (Sinkiang across the Karakorum Pass to the north and Tibet to the east). It is a land of high mountains with a total area of approximately 97, 872 sq kms. The average height of the mountains is about, 5,100 metres. Nubra Peak is the highest, over 7,500 metres above sea level. Treeless and rock-strewn, the mountains of Ladakh look both awesome and majestic. Except for the higher peaks, which are snow-covered throughout the year, all that meets the eye is a vast spectacle of sand and rock. Ladakh does not experience heavy rain or snowfall, but there are occasions in winter when the entire landscape is covered with snow.

The valleys of Leeb, Nubra, Chushul and Demchok provide the main centres of human activity. Leeb valley is the largest and the Nubra comes second. The vales of Demchok and Chushul are the smallest, with a few tiny villages in each. The River Indus flowing leisurely through the valleys of Demchok and Leeb, provides the maximum benefit to Ladakh. Next in importance comes River Nubra. The remaining rivers are of little utility.

The most picturesque of Ladakh's lakes is the salt water Pongong Tso, about 4,200 metres above sea level. It is about 64 kms long and 3 to 6 kms wide. Its blue and sparkling waters lend freshness and serenity to the weary traveller passing along its shores.

With a total population of little over 100,000, Ladakh is very sparsely inhabited. The population density is three per 2 ½ kms- one of the lowest in the world. Leeb is its only town. The rest of the people are scattered over some 260 villages.

Climate

During winter it gets extremely cold, with temperature going down, at places to minus 30° to 40°C. Icicles form on the moustaches from moisture in one's own breath. A tomato or an onion becomes as hard as stone and has to be put into hot water before use. A bathroom, without good drainage, turns into a skating rink. I get shivers to think of one's plight when caught in a blizzard. A mention of Ladakh winter brings to mind an incident I cannot forget.

It was late October in 1961. I was returning from a visit to Hot Springs, a post east of Leh, close to the international border. A company of 1/8 Gorkha Rifles was located there. We were a party of four- Lt Colonel Pathak, the Commanding Officer of 1/8 Gorkha Rifles, Major Bisht, the Company Commander at Hot Springs, a Ladakhi, whose pony carried our bed-rolls and myself. While crossing the 5,250 metres Marsmik La, a two days' march from Hot Springs, we were caught in a snow blizzard, so intense that we could hardly lift our faces or walk straight. As we climbed higher, coming nearer the pass, it became more and more difficult to breathe. Every step was a torture. After about two hours of this struggle, we were nearing a collapse. I prayed to God from the bottom of my heart for mercy. The Ladakhi pony- owner moved his prayer wheel¹¹ faster, repeating the chant Om Mani Padme Hum.¹² But the Weather Lord continued to be furious and merciless. I still do not know how we managed to make to the pass. Sheer

¹¹ Prayer Wheel-A means of saying prayer. It consists of a small copper cylinder inside which prayer written on a piece of parchment is fixed. This cylinder is continually kept turning around on a wooden handle by a slight movement of the wrist, assisted by a little weight at the end of a chain which is attached to the side of the cylinder. It is an ingenious means of saying prayers. By constantly moving the prayer wheel, a Buddhist believes he keeps adding to his total of prayers. Believing in the theories of re- incarnation and ultimate Nirvana, a complete escape from the cares of this world, the devout Buddhist carries it wherever he goes.

¹² Om Mani Padme Hum-(O Jewel in the Lotus). According to the Buddhists of Ladakh, Lord Buddha was born in a Lotus. Like it, he brought glory, purity and beauty to the oppressed and poverty stricken people; In Ladakh, the above words are heard everywhere. You hear them on wind-swept passes, in streets, shops and monasteries, wherever you go.

will to survive, perhaps. On reaching Marsmik La, the pony owner promptly performed the Buddhist ritual of going around the abbos,¹³ added a stone to it and chanted some words of prayer.

Incidents like the one narrated above are, however, uncommon. Nevertheless, a Ladakhi winter is most uncomfortable. During summer, on the other hand, it often gets very hot by day, since the rarefied atmosphere offers but little impediment to the sun's rays. I would not recommend a mid-day outing on a bright sunny day in June, without suitable headgear, particularly to one with a bald patch. By night, it gets cold again, with temperatures dropping down to sub-zero at places.

Leh Town

For centuries Leh had been an important trading centre. It was the meeting point of trade between India, Tibet and Central Asia. Yarkandi and Tibetan traders brought wool, gold, silver, jade, velvet, silk, carpets, felt, skins and salt to Leh. The Indians went there with cotton goods, shawls, brocades, pearls, shoes, opium, indigo, ginger and wheat.

With the occupation of Tibet and Sinkiang by China in 1951, this trade dwindled and Leh was hard hit. It lost its old zest and spirit. The hustle and bustle of its L-shaped bazar was gone. The splendour of rich merchants flaunting their wealth, their colourful costumes lending an aura of gaiety to its streets, had vanished. Its old sarais, where many caravans spent months of trade and leisure, fell into decay.

Then came the induction of the Indian Army, and with it the construction of accommodation for troops, new roads and the airfield at Leh. And, finally, the resources of the Indian Union poured in to uplift Ladakh from poverty

¹³ Abbos-Ladakhi Buddhists make a small cairn on reaching a pass. In case, one already exists, they add a stone or two to it. At times, streamers of coloured cloth with prayers written on them, mounted on a wooden stick, are planted on the rock pile. The Ladakhis go around this pile of stones, called the abbos, chanting words of prayer, a token of thanksgiving to the Almighty for His mercy.

and illiteracy. Leh started to breathe again. Today it is again humming with activity, having regained its past glory which it may soon surpass.

The People

The Ladakhis are a simple and unsophisticated people. They are affable, cheerful, hospitable and tolerant. Mongoloid in looks they are, normally, short-statured-about 5ft 2in for men and 4ft 9in for women being the average. They are broad-built and very sturdy. On a frosty night, with nothing but their normal clothing, they can coil themselves up and sleep on bare stony ground. They seem to have a rooted objection to bathing. It may be understandable during periods of severe winter but the habit persists even in fair weather!

The majority of the people are Buddhists, though there is a sizeable minority of Muslims and a few families of Christians. Buddhists of Ladakh follow Mahayana Buddhism- but one heavy with rituals and ceremonies, ushered in by Padma Sambhava, the great Indian scholar.

In Ladakh, men and women are dressed in warm clothing even in summer. The male costume consists of a thick woollen or velvet gown (goncha) reaching down to the ankles, with a cloth girdle on the waist-line. On the head, they wear a quilted cloth cap with two ear-flaps, which are generally turned up in warm weather. Amongst the Buddhists the more orthodox grow a pig tail. The women are similarly dressed as men, except for a piece of sheep skin which they throw around the back and shoulders and a peyrak¹⁴ tied to the head. Both men and women wear half-boots of coarse woollen cloth or felt. The staple food of the people is gram. Ground into flour, it is mixed with tea and butter and eaten as a rough paste or as bread. Ladakhis drink their tea with Yak butter and salt. It has a pungent smell and one has to acquire a taste for it. They call it gur gur chai. Chhang, a beer made out of barley, is their favourite drink.

¹⁴ Peyrak-This is a piece of leather, studded with turquoise, about 2 ft long and 8 in broad.

Ladakhi music is melodious. But as regards their folk dancing, I have nothing much to say in praise. About eight to ten dancers, men and women, keep walking around slowly and solemnly in a circle to the strain of clarionets and drums. They gesticulate with their hands, turning their palms up and down. They close their hands in concert. Except for the colourful dresses worn by the participants, Ladakhi dances are, in fact, dull.

Monasteries, Oracles and Lamas

Often situated at places difficult of access-a mountain spur, an isolated rock or a nook under the shelter of a lofty cliff- monasteries are the most impressive structures in all Ladakh. They are generally well endowed, their extensive estates comprising large areas of fertile land.

The central hall in a monastery is its most decorative place. The largest idol of the Buddha possessed by the monastery is installed there. Its walls are adorned with paintings from Buddhist mythology and there are bowls of butter with wicks which constantly burn. The air is redolent with burning incense. Resting their holy books on small teapots the Lamas offer their daily prayers here, amidst the music of trumpets and drums or the ringing of bells. Then there are subsidiary temples, administrative centres and residential quarters for the Lamas. A large courtyard generally forms the entrance to a monastery. It is here that the people gather during festivals and watch the inmates dance to the tune of music and drums.

The day-to-day life in a monastery is mostly quiet and peaceful. On festive occasions, however, the place springs into hectic activity. Preparations, in fact, start many days earlier. The whole area has to be cleaned up. Costumes for the dancers are to be sorted out; drums and bugles, essential accompaniments to a dance, are to be tuned up. In the case of a big monastery, arrangements may be required to accommodate an oracle or two. These oracles are an extraordinary phenomenon. They are known to get under a divine spell, and while in that state, they are said to predict the future. Tibet was famous for its state oracles, whom both king and clergy

consulted before taking important decisions.

I had an exciting experience with an oracle myself. The scene of incident was Hemis Monastery¹⁵, the oldest in Ladakh, about 32 kms east of Leh. Some of us from the army had gone there to watch the Hemis annual fair, one of the most spectacular events in Ladakh. Thousands flock to Hemis on this day. The courtyard was already thronged with devotees when we got there. With customary hospitality our party was promptly guided to a balcony, from where we could get the best view of the events in the courtyard below.

We saw the sword dance and the famous masked dance¹⁶, with the participants dressed as demons and gods. Then there were other items of amusement. The pageantry was indeed superb.

Suddenly, in the midst of it all, we heard the beating of big drums, followed by a few shrill calls from bugles. All eyes turned towards the steps leading to the main hall of worship. Two tall figures, with bare arms, legs and feet, rushed down the staircase into the courtyard. They wore a warlike headgear, with straps fastened around the chin. In their hands they held a sword and lance each. A local Ladakhi sitting next to me explained that they were the well known oracles of Ladakh. They had remained confined to one of the monastery rooms for several days and had come out only that morning. They were now in a state of trance, he said. In my mind, however,

¹⁵ Hemis Monastery-Founded in AD 1047 by Stagtasaog Raspa, who came there in search of a place of retreat. Three storeys high, it is today a thriving centre of about 500 Lamas. It has only one lament. Its head Lama, who had gone to Tibet many years ago, is now in Chinese hands. Hemis may never see him again.

¹⁶ Masked Dance-This dance is supposed to have a definite object. The belief is that after a man dies, his soul on its way to its next sphere, is waylaid with horrible faces and forms who endeavour to terrify the soul. Should the demons succeed in this, the soul wanders about in space for an indefinite period seeking in vain, its proper sphere. In order to lessen the risk of such mischance, the Lamas, 'during this festival, put on masks resembling the faces of these demons and imitate their awful antics. In this way, the spectators are familiarised with these sights and sounds of terror-so that when they die, their souls are not dismayed, by the apparitions.

the picture formed of oracles was so different to what I now saw in front of us. Here were two armed individuals, dancing wildly in the courtyard, at times pressing the sharp edge of their sword against their tongue, at times running out to walk on the parapet walls of the monastery, precariously balancing their movements. I became intensely curious to have a closer look at them. I left my seat and made for the courtyard where they were then participating in a masked dance, along with other Lamas. Reaching the courtyard, I squatted in front of a row of senior Lamas seated in the main balcony. I was there for hardly a few minutes when one of the oracles rushed towards me. The oracle was keen to greet me, I thought. But what did I behold? Trembling from head to feet, his blood-shot eyes were staring hard at me. The man was definitely under a spell. For a moment I was nonplussed. I, however, soon realised that he may well strike me with his lance or sword. And all that I possessed in self-defence was my regimental cane! Meanwhile, a couple of Lamas, whom I had earlier noticed acting as some form of escort, rushed towards him. But before they could intervene, the oracle had pushed his lance into me; its sharp edge slightly cutting through the palm of my hand, as I pushed forward my arm in self-defence. My hand was soon blood-stained. There was a loud murmur from the audience. The escort Lamas had, meanwhile, closed in. The situation now seemed better, though not the wrath of the oracle in trance, who continued to stand before me poised for another assault. By now the Lamas had held his arms.

The goddess, I was told later, had been pleased and satisfied, for human blood had been drawn. I was the lucky one for being instrumental in fulfilling her desire, they said. I cannot say whether the goddess had been pleased or otherwise, but one would not like to be in a similar situation again! The memory of the incident stays, as does the scar of the oracle's lance on my right palm.

The lamaseries have two classes of monks-the working monks and the praying monks. The former attend to the temporal interests of the

community-cultivating land, collecting rent from tenants and so on. The latter devote themselves entirely to study and prayers.

Four Ladakh monasteries are headed by a Shooshok. This personage is supposed to be an incarnation. According to Buddhists' belief, when a man attains a high pitch of virtue, he can, when he dies, either attain Nirvana he has earned, or return to earth as an incarnation or Shooshok. When a Shooshok is about to die, he calls around him his disciples and tells them where he would be reborn and all the circumstances of rebirth. As soon as he is dead, the disciples proceed to the place indicated and search for a newly born child which bears the sacred marks and is considered to be the most probable incarnation of the departed soul. Quite often an oracle's help is sought for locating the child. Sometimes, more than one boy are involved. They have then to decide who could be the incarnate. Having found the child they leave him with his parents for one year, after which they return bringing with them a number of prayer books, rosaries, prayer-wheels and other priestly articles, amongst which are those belonging to the late incarnate. Then the child has to prove that he is the new incarnate, by recognising the property that was his in his previous existence, and by relating reminiscences of his past. If he is successful, he is acknowledged as the Shooshok (also known as Rimpoche) and is carried off for ever from his home and family, to be educated in the sacred monastery, of which he becomes the head.

The doctrine of re-incarnation, as practised today, was introduced in the 15th Century in Tibet, and through Tibet to Ladakh. Possibly it was more of a political than a divine institution. It is said that the aim was to maintain the authority of the priesthood, to perpetuate the power of the Lamas in a peaceful way and to avoid contest among ambitious Lamas for spiritual leadership. The discovery of the baby, to whom the soul of the deceased had passed, answered all questions and settled all quarrels.

There is yet another view as to how the doctrine of re-incarnation came

about. Under Lamaism, the Church had become an effective instrument for the control of state policy. It was in the hands of rich and powerful families. The Manchus of China saw the doctrine of re-incarnation as the way of breaking that control. Since the locating of the incarnate child was often left to the oracles, they would heavily bribe these individuals to direct the search into poor and insignificant families. By selecting a Lama from poor families and different groups, the Manchus sought to prevent the growth of Lamaism.

There are two sects of Lamas-the Red and the Yellow. The Yellow sect is mostly confined to Tibet. It came into Buddhism as a reformed sect. Since the fifth Dalai Lama, in the 7th Century, Dalai Lamas have all been from the Yellow sect. The Yellow Lamas are not allowed to marry and are generally more strict than the Red sect Lamas. Ladakhi Lamas are mostly from the Red sect. Women can also become nuns and are known as Chomos. Like their male counterparts, they are required to shave their hair. There are approximately 2,000 Lamas and 200 Chomos in Ladakh.

Polyandry

Plurality of husbands, except amongst the richer people, was till recently the common practice in Ladakh. According to this custom, up to three brothers in a family could get married to one woman. The eldest brother was called father, and the other two 'little fathers'. If there were more than three brothers, they left the family estate and sought their fortunes outside, by becoming Lamas, or working as labourers or becoming magpas.¹⁷

Many reasons have been given how this system of marriage originated. According to some, polyandry was considered necessary to check the

¹⁷ Magpa was the name given to the husband of a woman who had no brothers and thus was the heiress of the family property. Such a woman was not required, unless she wished so herself, to marry the eldest son and his two younger brothers. She often got married to a younger brother, who became a 'magpa.' The Magpa had to give up his family name and take up the family name of the heiress. She was free to change a Magpa without any excuse.

growth of population. It was felt that, as the land produce was meagre, increase in birth-rate would create a serious food problem, particularly when the geographical isolation of Ladakh hindered emigration. Another reason for polyandry appears to be the law of primogeniture, which was in force in Ladakh. According to this law the land passed to the eldest son on the death of the father. If several fathers had only one eldest son among them, the parcelling out of land holdings was minimised to that extent.¹⁸

History

The first settlers in Ladakh were the Mons from North India. Then came the Dards of Baltistan, followed by the Mongols from east. The people of Ladakh are a happy mixture of these three groups.

Ladakh's historical records go as far back as 400 BC. However, information available prior to the 16th Century is scanty. The founder of Leh-Chon Dynasty, which ruled Ladakh till the end of the 15th Century, was Skyed-Lde-Ngme-Gon. It was during the reign of the dynasty that 'Kangur', a 100-volume scripture of Ladakh was compiled. The Namgyal dynasty came into power in the 16th Century. Sevang Namgyal consolidated his power over the whole of Ladakh and was a good administrator. He was succeeded by his brother Jamyang Namgyal, who proved to be a weak ruler. Taking advantage of it, Ladakh was invaded by Ali Mir, the ruler of Skardu. Ali Mir's invasion brought a great deal of damage to the monasteries when his troops destroyed the image of Buddha and threw religious and historical books into the Indus. Ladakh was again invaded during the reign of Singge Namgyal (the eldest son Jamyang Namgyal) by Ahmed Khan, the chief of the Baltis. The invader, however, was given a crushing defeat. It was during his reign that Rudok was also added to the Kingdom of Ladakh. Singge reigned from AD 1620 to 1670.

Singge was succeeded by his son Daldan Namgyal. Like his father, Daldan

¹⁸ In response to the demand of educated Ladakhis, polyandry was declared illegal and the law of primogeniture abolished in 1941.

was an energetic king who brought the ruler of the Baltis into submission and made him a tributary of Ladakh. But this success was shortly followed by an invasion by the Sokpos, a Mongol tribe from across the east. The Sokpos advanced via Rudok, but were stopped at Lukung. The Sokpos again invaded Ladakh the following year along the same route, crossed the Chang La, and took possession of Leh. However, with the help given by the Moghul Governor of Kashmir, the invaders were forced to retreat. The Sokpos invaded Ladakh a third time, reaching as far as Leh, but agreed to retire on receiving possession of the district of Rudok.

Gradually the Namgyal dynasty declined, due to weak kings. In the year 1834, Zorawar Singh, a general of Raja Gulab Singh of Jammu invaded Ladakh. The famous general of Jammu Raj was a Dogra Rajput from Kangra. Having left his home at an early age and with no formal education, he started his career as a sepoy in Gulab Singh's army. Within a few years the ruler spotted his military talent. He was given the title of Wazir and appointed the Governor of Kishtwar, which had been recently annexed. He was also promoted to the rank of a General. Having taken Kishtwar, the ambitious Raja ordered Zorawar Singh to extend his territory up to Ladakh on the pretext that Ladakh had once been under Kishtwar and should be so restored.

The astute Zorawar Singh realised the magnitude of the task given, to him by his ruler. Ladakh had till then been invaded by armies of neighbouring States, living in similar terrain and climate. It was for the first time that soldiers from the plains of Jammu were to undertake such an invasion. The general soon put his troops through a course of intensive training, in snow and mountain, warfare, forced marches and 'living on limited rations. He had fully appreciated the value of good training and acclimatisation of his army before undertaking the invasion.

Crossing the Zaskar range from Kishtwar in 1834 Zorawar and his army of 10,000 troops fought in an inhospitable terrain for nearly six years. By

1840, Ladakh had finally been made a tributary of the Dogra Raj. It would be out of context to give a detailed account of the various battles which were fought and of the intrigues and rebellions that took place as the Dogra army marched up and down the land of Ladakhis. Suffice it to say that the indomitable Zorawar Singh had finally succeeded in the mission given to him by his ruler. With skilful use of his cavalry, artillery and infantry, with forced marches, night attacks, use of surprise, and fair and firm handling of the newly conquered people, Zorawar Singh and his troops achieved a remarkable feat of arms. His fort at Le4 reminds us of his glorious campaigns in this region.

A few words about the Ladakh army of those days. On call to arms, the soldiers were told off for the cavalry or the infantry by the simple process of selecting those who had ponies for the cavalry and the rest to form the infantry. The soldiers were armed with swords, matchlocks, bows and arrows, with a few having shields and helmets. The Commander-in-Chief was generally a member of the royal family or a nobleman. The Ladakh army was, thus, just a militia. Similar was the state of Baltistan, Rudok and other kingdoms of the region. In an emergency every house was obliged to provide one soldier. It is said that during Zorawar's invasion, Ladakh raised an army of 22,000 when the total number of houses was 24,000. This was an ample demonstration of the people's will to fight and it took nearly six years before Zorawar was able to finally subjugate Ladakh. Whereas the will to fight is an essential pre-requisite for an army to gain victory, it is not enough by itself.

Towards the end of 1847, Zorawar Singh undertook the invasion of Baltistan, which consisted of three states: Skardu, Gilgit and Hunza. Skardu the largest offered maximum resistance but the whole of Baltistan was subjugated in a few months of fighting by an army of 15,000 Dogras.

Elated by his successes, General Zorawar Singh, with the approval of Raja

Gulab Singh, now decided to annex the Tibetan provinces of Rudok in the east and Gar, beyond Tashigong, in the south. The pretext for the invasion was that they had once formed part of Ladakh in the 17th Century. But the real reason was that these provinces produced some of the finest wool in Tibet. And so, in mid 1841, Zorawar set out with an army of 5,000 Dogras, under Colonel Basti Ram, a brave commander of Zorawar, and a force of Ladakhis and Baltis under General Ghulam Khan. The army marched from Leh, along the Indus. Rudok and Gar were overrun without much opposition. General Zorawar then decided to advance further, entering the holy district of Mansarovar. Zorawar's advance had been easy till now. But like the Russians during Napoleon's invasion of their land in the 18th Century, and later by Hitler's armies during the second world war, the Tibetans had intentionally fallen back to expose the attacking force to extreme cold and a long line of communications. Even the genius of Zorawar (as was the case with Napoleon and Hitler) fell a victim to over- confidence and an underrating of the enemy's capability. The two armies finally clashed in December 1841. Though outnumbered and out- stretched, the spirited General launched his troops into attack. When the battle was going well in his favour, Zorawar was struck in the shoulder by a ball. He fell down from his horse and shortly thereafter a Tibetan pierced him with his lance. As the great soldier lay dead in the battle-field his army was demoralised with the death of their leader and lost the will to carry on the fight. Thus ended the brilliant military career of this illustrious General of India.

A concluding thought, while writing about the history of Ladakh would be pertinent. The reader would note that, whereas Ladakh had been invaded by the Sokpos via Rudok, or from the north-west via Skardu by the Muslims, there had been no attempt at invasion from the north or north-east along the routes from the Karakoram pass to Leh. In his book, Ladakh, Alexander Cunningham rightly comments: "The difficulties of passage through the Karakoram mountain prevented Chinese Governors of Khotan and Yarkand from attempting the conquest of Ladakh."

Animals and Birds

Let me start with the yak. Short and broad-built, it is shaggy, clumsy and slow. It has wild-looking eyes and is very temperamental. The yak is at its best during the winter. No amount of cold seems to affect it. It is also a natural pathfinder, unerring in the van whenever the tracks get covered up with snow. Too intractable for the plough, it is better used as a beast of burden. Ladakh also has some wild yaks. The yak cow is only kept for milk. Yak wool is used for making tents, particularly by nomads living at higher altitudes.

An ordinary yak cow crossed with a male yak produces the dzo, a hybrid that is more tractable than the yak and is used for plough as well as load-carrying.

Wild sheep and goats are generally found at altitudes of 4,800 metres and above. They are swift and sure-footed, and it is difficult to shoot one. Their fine under-fleece is woven into beautiful and expensive Kashmiri shawls. The common domestic goat is little bigger than those in the plains of India. It provides the daily mutton and are also employed for load-carrying, mostly wool and salt.

The Ladakh hare, called the ribong or the hill donkey (on account of the length of its ears), abounds in the areas of Demchok, Chushul and Hot Springs. Bluish grey or slate coloured, it falls an easy prey even to an average shot. A Gorkha driver, taking me to Demchok once, decided to stretch the point a little too far. He thought of 'hunting' them under his vehicle's wheels. After watching him at his game for a while, I had to intervene, to avoid the vehicle falling down precipice.

Ladakh also has the snow leopard, bear, wolf, fox and the marmot. There are generally two main categories of dogs; the burly, growling, tough and ferocious bandog mastiff, on the one hand, and the petite, delicate and loving Lhasa apso, on the other. Different of build and temperament, the

two never get on well together. My batman, while taking out my Lhasa apso pair, 'Tikse' and 'Tsering', for their evening stroll in Leh, had to carry a big cudgel to fend off mastiffs. Of this latter species, few are now left in Ladakh. Service officers, civil officials and other visitors have taken them away, often at fancy prices. Ladakhis have made some money but have nearly lost a treasure.

There are a fair number of ponies and donkeys and some wild horses in Ladakh. The latter are only to be seen in higher regions, generally in the valleys of Chushul and Demchok. Reddish brown on the back and sides and white on the abdomen, they combine the features of both the zebra and the horse. These happy creatures move freely around, undisturbed by local Ladakhis, in small herds of five to ten, in beautiful line formation.

The birds in Ladakh are limited, both in species and numbers. The chakor or its bigger counterpart the ram chakor, duck, teet, eagle and the kite are the main settlers.

Agriculture and Mineral Wealth

"Agriculture in Ladakh is entirely dependent on artificial irrigation, as rainfall is only about 3 inches a year. Waters from springs, streams and rivers have to be conducted with considerable skill and care from terrace to terrace and field to field. Wheat, barley, millet, beans, turnips, mustard, potatoes, apples, mulberry, apricot and walnuts are the main produce. Poplar and willow are the two varieties of trees that grow here. Efforts are being made to grow eucalyptus and pine. The afforestation scheme, introduced by the Government of Jammu and Kashmir some years ago, is gradually adding to the forest wealth of Ladakh. Besides conservation of soil, this will help in meeting one of the main wants of Ladakh: fuel and timber. It reminds me of a Ladakhi saying: "Cut a twig, you cut your limb."

Both the Government of India and the State Government are making efforts to improve agriculture. Murste Experimental Farm was set up by Mr

Joshi, a devoted agricultural scientist. Using high altitude seedlings, Joshi demonstrated that practically every variety of corn could be grown in Ladakh. Renamed as the Field Research Laboratory and now under the Army, this establishment has vastly increased its scope of activity from growing vegetables and corn to hybrid cows, poultry and solar cookers. Ladakhi farmers are evincing keen interest and are gradually changing over to new methods of farming advocated by the Field Research Laboratory. Shortage of water, however, is the main hindrance to the growth of agriculture in Ladakh. These difficulties should be overcome once the Stakna Hydro Electric Project is completed.

Ladakh is rich in minerals. It has slate, lime, gypsum, clay, copper, lead, iron, sulphur, borax, chromite and limestone. Gold dust is said to lie hidden in the sands of River Indus.

Towards Modern Ways

Ladakh today stands on the threshold of modernisation. Into this inhospitably bleak, scraggy and mountainous land are blowing winds of change, breaking down its walls of isolation. New communications, along with planned schemes of agrarian development, afforestation and soil conservation are bringing Ladakh nearer to enduring economic progress. Things are changing rapidly in a land that has been so unchangeable. Ladakh is fast breaking from its moorings which held her back till now.

No longer do the Ladakhis bring hay to feed an aircraft. Nor does a father tell his son, pointing to a jeep, that this baby (jeep) like the mother (aircraft) would soon get wings and fly!¹⁹ The smell of rancid yak butter still pervades his home and temple and the devout Buddhist still moves around with his pigtail and prayer wheel, but a visit to Leh bazar also gives glimpses of the most fashionable brands in cosmetics, of corduroy trousers, felt hats and salwar kameez.²⁰ The young Ladakhi is keen to learn and is taking

¹⁹ These stories relate to the first contact of Ladakhis with the Indian armed forces.

²⁰ Corresponds to shirt and trousers worn mostly by women from the Punjab.

proper advantage of a large network of schools opened by the civil administration; education being free all the way up to the High School standard.

The Ladakhi is on the march. Without losing much of his charm, individuality or sturdy independence, he is changing the old order to new. Modern education and greater opportunities for employment are giving him a new hope, a new life. This will in turn gradually effect the intake of lamas in the monasteries—a development which, I feel, would be good for Ladakh. After all, how does it help a nation to maintain thousands (lakhs in the case of the rest of India) of able-bodied, mentally and physically fit individuals, living the shut-away life of a lama or a sadhu? A society must, of course, have men of religious pursuits. We can, however, afford to do with a lesser number, without affecting either our religion or our spiritual way of life.

THE ARMY TAKES OVER

DEFENCE of our northern border had been neglected from time immemorial, because the mighty Himalayas generated a sense of security. While the seasonal routes and passes of this great mountain wall discouraged invaders from across, they did help establish constant trade with China. Through these routes Buddhism spread from India to the countries of Asia's mainland. Pilgrims, students, teachers and philosophers from either side trekked in search of knowledge and wisdom.

Thus the Himalayas remained the quiet sentinels of India till the British came. The military expertise of the British could not however, rest content with the defence of India's northern borders just by a series of mute mountain ranges. They sought to establish a buffer zone in Tibet (same as they did in Afghanistan in the north-west), by making it stable and self-reliant but under British influence.

They visualised a threat to the northern border primarily from Czarist Russia, which had expanded its empire to Central Asia. Nonetheless, they also kept a watchful eye on China, which was no doubt a weak country then, but it had great potential with which the British did not like to take a chance. So, although they conceded to China a formal suzerainty over Tibet; they, for all practical purposes, dealt directly with the Government of Lhasa.

However, in the first part of the 19th Century, this buffer faced a serious danger when Raja Gulab Singh of J & K sent his troops under the command of General Zorawar Singh to annex Tibet. The British were greatly concerned by this attack but before they could react in any effective manner, Zorawar Singh's troops had suffered defeat at the hands of Tibetans. The Tibetans then advanced towards Leh. But the Dogra ruler, meanwhile, sent a reinforcing army to Ladakh, which in turn inflicted a defeat on the Tibetans.

With both the sides having earned even honours, a treaty was signed in 1842, between the representatives of Tibet, China and Raja Gulab Singh. As a result of this treaty, the whole of Ladakh, including Aksai Chin, became a part of Jammu and Kashmir State. That Aksai Chin formed part of Jammu and Kashmir State was again confirmed by an officer of the Survey of India, W.H. Johnson, who, after visiting Khotan in 1865, had trekked back across Aksai Chin. The area of Aksai Chin was also shown as a part of Jammu and Kashmir territory in an atlas, in 1868, and in due course, on the official maps of the Government of India.

It must be mentioned here that despite various attempts by the British, the exact boundary line of Ladakh and Aksai Chin, remained un-demarcated due to Chinese reluctance. The Chinese evaded the issue on the excuse that the traditional boundary did not require any additional fixation. Although the situation was accepted as such and Aksai Chin was shown as part of Ladakh on Indian maps, it was to be understood only a century thereafter what deep political foresight had motivated the Chinese diplomatic reservations on fixation of boundary in Ladakh and Aksai Chin.

The real drama started only in the middle of the 20th Century when, on this side of the Himalayas, a truncated and impoverished India finally became independent and established a democratic form of government, while on the other side of the mighty ranges emerged a strong communist dictatorship in China with a ruthless secret design to build their country into a super-military power. So while surreptitiously preparing for this role within, they kept a low profile to the world without.

The Indian government, on the other hand, had opted for a policy of non-alignment and friendship with all the countries. In view of our long cultural and trade ties with China, special attention was paid to our relations with it. Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, the first Prime Minister of the Democratic Republic of India, made special efforts to develop friendly relations with this great neighbour of ours in Asia.

On 7 October 1950, India was shocked to learn that Chinese troops had moved into Tibet. Chairman Mao Tse Tung's dictum: 'Power grows out of the barrel of a gun' had been demonstrated in practice. The Government of India condemned the Chinese aggression but in mild terms. The political leadership was fully conscious that China had emerged as a strong military power and, as such, it was not possible to maintain India's sphere of influence in Tibet, as it prevailed during the British days when Great Britain was at the zenith of its power.

With the resurgence of China, it was the continuance of the age-old Sino-Indian friendship which was considered to be of greater consequence. With this basic approach India continued to strive for the upkeep of good relations with China.

The occupation of Tibet was followed by the appearance of official Chinese maps showing parts of our borders as Chinese territory. This caused both surprise and resentment at New Delhi. The Chinese Premier, Chou-en-Lai, however, explained that they were based on old maps and would be revised soon. Once again, in her desire to maintain friendly relations with China, India accepted China's word. Thus assured, she continued to give scant military importance to the northern border. On the other hand, she went all out to secure for China her rightful place in the world comity of nations. Year after year India would take up China's case for admission to the United Nations, even at the cost of irritating some other nations.

In 1954, India and China signed a trade agreement. This included the five principles of peaceful co-existence, commonly referred to as the Panch Sheel. These five principles were: (1) mutual respect of each other's territorial integrity and sovereignty; (2) mutual non-aggression; (3) mutual non-interference in each other's internal affairs; (4) equality and mutual benefits; and (5) peaceful co-existence. Panch Sheel obviously implied that there were no outstanding issues between the two countries. The slogan of Hindi-Chini-Bhai Bhai rent the air in both the lands.

With the signing of the Panch Sheel, India felt reassured that friendly relations between the two countries would continue. India's earnestness in signing the trade agreement and desire to have absolutely peaceful and friendly relations with China are also evident from another step it took to solidify friendship with China. India unilaterally relinquished its extra-territorial rights in Tibet, which it had inherited from the British. As a consequence of this relinquishment, India withdrew its military escort from Yatung and Gyantse, and transferred its posts, telephone and telegraph services, along with its rest houses in Tibet, to the control of the Government of China.

In the above atmosphere of friendship, Indian leaders were unable to see through the Chinese game, that the signing of the Panch Sheel was only an outward facade: that after her deep involvement in the Korean war, China only wanted to gain time to build up roads and military installations in Tibet: that she would revive the border question once she was militarily prepared in Tibet, so that she could dictate terms through a position of strength-what she had been unable to achieve during the British regime.

In 1956 the Indian Military Attache in Peking, Brigadier Malik received information that China had started building a highway through Indian territory in the Aksai Chin area. He reported the matter to Army Headquarters in New Delhi. A Similar report was sent by the Indian Embassy to the Foreign Ministry. But little cognizance was, apparently, taken of this report. The strategic Aksai Chin Highway was finally reported to have been completed by the end of 1957. The Chinese province of Sinkiang had now a direct road link with Tibet.

In the summer of 1958, at last, India sent two patrols to obtain the alignment of this road, with a view to ascertain whether it cut across Indian territory. One of these patrols, led by Captain Iyenger, was captured and released only on Government of India's request. The existence of the Aksai Chin Highway and the fact that it passed through the Indian territory had

now been confirmed.

In the same year, Chinese troops entered Khurnak Fort in Eastern Ladakh. In 1959 the Chinese started enforcement of communism on unwilling Tibetans. This was closely followed by the dramatic escape of the Dalai Lama from Lhasa to India and the grant of political asylum to him by this country. One condition of the asylum was that the refugee Lama and his compatriots would not be allowed to indulge in any political activity. This was done naturally to protect the Chinese political interest in Tibet. Nevertheless, the Chinese felt enraged. In fact, they promptly proclaimed that, besides giving asylum to the Dalai Lama, India had also had a hand in the sparking of the Tibetan revolt, which had followed the Chinese occupation of that country. This was a false accusation-a travesty of the truth.

In October 1959, Chinese troops ambushed a small column of the Indian Police in Chang Chenmo valley, in the area of Hot Springs. Nine Indian policemen were killed and ten were taken prisoner and, thereafter, subjected to most inhuman treatment. The Chinese also established a camp in Indian territory at Spanggur, near Chushul. By the end of the year, they had spread west and south of the Aksai Chin road and established new posts, disregarding Indian protests. They also built a road to Kongka La and along the Chip Chap river. About 2,240 square kilometres of Indian territory in Ladakh had been occupied by the Chinese by then.

Thus ended the 1950s-from the hey-days of Sino-Indian friendship of 1954 to the surreptitious and illegal Chinese occupation of a large chunk of Indian territory by 1959.

It is an irony of fate, however, that even the wisdom of Pandit Nehru failed to comprehend the real mind of the Chinese. As such, the northern borders continued to remain unguarded, with just a few police check posts, located at some focal points.

In April 1960, Chou-en-Lai visited New Delhi, at Pandit Nehru's, invitation. It was hoped that this visit may pave the way for the normalisation of relations between the two countries, but the talks between the two premiers ended in failure. Regarding China's ingress into Ladakh, the Chinese Prime Minister asserted that the territory so occupied was part of China. He expressed surprise that this was being regarded by India as aggression.

Chou-en-Lai had slammed the door for further negotiations and had fully exposed the Chinese hand. Sino-Indian relations had taken a new turn. As to what was going to be the final outcome, no one could say for certain, but the goodwill of the Hindi-Chini Bhai Bhai slogan had vanished into thin air.

In the light of above developments, the defence of the northern border could no longer remain neglected. As it is, we had lost many valuable years. At last, in April 1960, the border responsibility was handed over to the Army. This led to the induction into Ladakh of Headquarters 114 Infantry Brigade with 7 and 14 Jammu and Kashmir Militia (Ladakhis) Battalions under its Command.

The above force was, however, quite inadequate to keep a watchful eye on the Chinese, leave aside its ability to protect it. An additional infantry battalion (1/8 Gorkha Rifles) and some ancillary troops were, therefore, inducted into Ladakh during April 1961. With the arrival of this unit, re-allocation of border responsibility was made. Accordingly, 14 Militia Battalion was to look after the area north of the Galwan river, 1/8 Gorkha Rifles to hold the area between Galwan river and Chushul, and 7 Militia Battalion, the rest of the territory to the south. A few additional posts were also to be established with the arrival of the third battalion.

There were no road communications in Ladakh at this time. Movement was entirely on foot and by animal transport. This was both difficult and slow, often hazardous, and scarcity of animals made matters worse. Signal communications were solely based on wireless which, due to atmospheric conditions and the long distances involved, were not reliable. A patrol out on

a mission would very soon get out of communication, giving rise to concern. At times transmission of important messages would be inordinately delayed. Shortage of aircraft and vagaries of weather made logistics a difficult problem, a major concern to all. Above all there was the human element. We were dealing with troops operating under conditions of extreme stress and strain. Re-deployment of troops and establishment of new posts proved to be a gigantic task.

Establishment of our post at Daulat Beg Oldi (DBO), in early April 1961, gave us maximum anxiety.

Situated 16 kms south-east of the Karakoram Pass, DBO lies in the wilderness of Despang plains, at an altitude of about 5,030 metres. From Leh, it is approximately 120 kms to the south-east on the old trade route between Leh and Yarkand. There are two routes to DBO from Leh: one, via the Syhok river, known as the winter route; the other, across the Sasar La, used during summer. Both routes converge at Murgo. Daulat Beg Oldi is said to owe its name to Daulat Beg, a Yarkandi merchant who was caught in a blizzard and died here. The entire area between Murgo-known to the traders of old as the 'Gateway to Hell'-and DBO is, in fact, notorious for the countless lives taken by the treacherous weather en route. Human and animal skeletons that still lie around the area are a witness to the fact.

This then was the area where troops of the Indian Army had been ordered to establish a post. Moreover, it had to be established urgently, since it was apprehended that the Chinese, who had already intruded along the Chip Chap river, may occupy DBO before us.

A platoon of 14 Jammu and Kashmir Militia located at Leh was ordered for the task. It was to follow the winter route along the Syhok river to Sultan Chushku, where we already had a post, and thence to DBO. The platoon was equipped with radio sets to maintain communication with Leh, snow clothing and other equipment as well as adequate rations and fodder for the journey, with 10 days' reserves. Ponies for load-carrying were provided.

The Indian Air Force was to commence air-dropping of rations, fodder and so on, once the troops reached DBO.

The men offered their prayers, customary with our troops, before undertaking any venture. And this certainly was one. The local militia men said au revoir to their families. Finally, with every detail tied up as best as possible, the column left for the barren wastes of DBO.

All went well for about 5 days. Then suddenly the weather turned foul. While, the men were able to withstand the wind and snow, the ponies started to die. By the time the column reached Sultan Chushku, there were just enough left to carry essential equipment and 6 days' fodder and rations for the journey beyond. It being a 4 days' march from Sultan Chushku to DBO, the column could thus sustain itself only for about 2 days, on reaching its destination. No ponies could be spared from Sultan Chushku. The question, therefore, was: would the weather, which continued to be inclement, permit an air-drop within 2-3 days of the troops reaching Daulat Beg, Oldi? If not, they would starve and freeze to death in the icy-cold winds of DBO. Was the column still to proceed further?

The Brigade Commander, Brigadier Rawind Singh Grewal, paced up and down in his office at Leh. His was the final word and responsibility. With characteristic guts, for which he was famous, he gave the 'Go' order. "Tell them," he said to me, "though far away, in spirit I am with them. I shall pray for their safety." Loved and respected by all, he held the confidence of the men. Next day, the column started moving forward to DBO without fear or despondency. It is faith that becomes the strongest anchor in distress, the greatest source of inspiration to do one's duty. It is a mighty weapon. Without faith, be it in God, in one's leaders or, in a cause, no army can fight well, no nation can make any worthwhile progress.

In four days our troops reached DBO. Except for one signaller who lost his life en route, the platoon suffered no casualties. Airdrop of rations also took place in time. The post had finally been established. Fortune had truly

favoured the brave.

By the middle of 1961, revised deployment of troops had been completed. The Brigade now held a frontage of about 480 kms, with posts extending from a little beyond Demchock in the east, to DBO in the north-west. Troops had braved tremendous physical hardships, moving in some cases with incredible speed across the rugged terrain.

There was no question of any respite for the men yet. On reaching their new location, they threw themselves into the task of preparation of defences and construction of living accommodation²¹. There was also considerable patrolling to be carried out. A constant vigil of Chinese activities across their front had to be maintained.

At Brigade Headquarters there was plenty of work with such wide flung deployment. The Brigade Commander was ever busy visiting troops or attending conferences at higher headquarters. The staff officers' lot is generally busy, anywhere. It was particularly so for us with our problems in Ladakh. There was also a feeling of intense solitude and boredom, at times, because one felt so utterly cut off from the rest of the world. The first movie that came to Leh during the year was a silent film, Tarzan the Ape Man. The entire garrison turned up in the helicopter shed and saw it in pin-drop silence!

Many visitors would come to Leh during the summer months, Ranging from members of parliament, journalists, civil and military officials, to people from all walks of life-they were a welcome arrival. It meant a good change for us. The Brigade Officers' Mess was usually the centre of social activity. The only drawback was that their visits invariably reduced our

²¹ In the early stages, everyone lived in tents. Later, troops constructed living bunkers with mud brick walls, where possible. In due course, someone in the rear thought of manufacturing what were called 'Mongol Huts', a replica of the Mongolian yurt. These were spherical wooden structures, wrapped in tarpaulin, with a lining of blankets inside. 4-5 men could sleep in a 'Mongol Hut'. Each hut was provided a bukhari (oil stove) which made it adequately warm inside.

stock of fresh vegetables, fruits and eggs to nil. Each time, therefore, we would make a resolve that in future we shall only offer tinned peas and potatoes-which was our standard menu-to our guests. And yet, the traditional Indian hospitality would take the better of us. During winter, visitors would be very few, but so would the arrival of fresh supplies reduce, due to bad weather and limited flights to Leh.

In the morning, at the time when aircraft normally arrived in Leh, all eyes would turn to the airfield. Arrival of a plane meant fresh supplies and letters from home. Often there would be no flight for many days due to inclement weather. The airfield would still be full of troops, hopefully awaiting an air-lift.

Sick men and those proceeding on essential duty had priority in outgoing aircraft. Thereafter, only the lucky ones got a seat. Others had to wait till the next flying day. At times, it was a pathetic sight, with many compassionate cases having to be denied a seat.

And thus passed the year 1961. For the first time, troops had occupied posts as high as 5,180 metres, and that to live there and fight, if so required. We had the sharp-witted Malayalees and Tamilians from down south, the sturdy Marathas of Shivaji, Dogras of Zorawar's clan, stocky Gorkhas, the tall warriors from the Punjab and Haryana, the Sikhs and the Jats, and the rugged, ever smiling Ladakhis. Many others were to come next year in response to the call of duty-a call from Bharat Mata for a cause no less sacred than the protection of her honour.

THE FORWARD POLICY

As 1962 dawned, India and China were still at peace. The border dispute was confined to the files in the Foreign Ministeries at New Delhi and Peking, whence were fired diplomatic salvoes of charges and counter charges, protests and counter- protests. The border had become alive politically but, barring the two aggressive incidents with Captain Iyenger's patrol in 1958 and with the police patrol in 1959, Ladakh had remained militarily quiet.

Perhaps, it is not right to say that it was wholly quiet, for the Chinese had gradually crept forward and consolidated their illegitimate positions on Indian territory. They had by then set up posts practically opposite every post of ours. They seemed to be applying the common strategem that possession was nine points of law.

Whenever the Chinese came up against an Indian position, however, further intrusion would stop. This, possibly, led the Indian government to conclude that China did not wish to enforce her territorial claims by actual use of force, but wanted to infiltrate into unoccupied areas without conflict.

With this belief, the Government of India decided to match with the Chinese game of spreading out their presence. Accordingly was issued what was termed 'the Forward Policy Directive'. Under this directive our troops were to move as far forward into unoccupied Indian territory as was logistically possible, and set up new posts. Force was only to be used in self-defence.

To help implement this forward policy, 5 Jat battalion was inducted into Ladakh, in April 1962. With that we had four infantry battalions with us in Ladakh. Nonetheless, this force was most inadequate for the task entrusted to the Brigade. It had to cover the area from Demchok in the south to DBO in the north, a distance of nearly 480 kms, which was too vast an area for one brigade. Perforce troops, had to be dispersed into small, isolated posts,

each barely 10 to 20 strong.

Obviously, these posts were to have little defence potential; at best, they could act as flag posts, merely to show physical presence of Indian troops in the new areas to be occupied by us.

We had received the forward policy directive when Ladakh was still in the grip of winter. But for Rawind Garewal, there was to be no waiting for fairer weather to commence implementation of the directive. An extremely tough and determined soldier, he urged his subordinate commanders to get on with the task at once.

But the establishment of new posts was to pose us immense problems. We were to enter into an unusual game of chess-board manoeuvres with a highly competent opponent, who could match every move of ours with an easy proficiency-a type of chess which few armies had played before.

Thus, whenever we established a new post, the Chinese promptly set up one opposite. For them the exercise was much simpler than it was for us. They had already built a network of roads connecting their territory with the area. These had been easy to make in most cases, because the terrain on their side was generally flat and open. Through this network, they brought in their troops on fast mechanical transport and used the same fast means to service them.

On the other hand, we had to use Yaks and ponies on difficult mountain tracks for carriage of ammunition, rations and baggage, with jawans moving alongside on foot. In fact, whenever there was a shortage of animal transport, troops had to give a helping hand in load carrying. And so, where we moved 20 with so much difficulty, the Chinese were able to press in 200 with ease. Rarely had so few been pitched against so many.

To begin with the establishment of new posts was undertaken in the cold and desolate Despang plains. Gradually thereafter, we spread in other sectors of Ladakh. The state of communications and logistic support being

what it was, the establishment of each new post meant a test of human endurance, operational efficiency and administrative planning. Yet in a period of 16 months, from April 1961 to August 1962, we were able to increase the number of posts from 13 to 65.

In addition to establishing new posts, a helipad was made in the vicinity of each, wherever possible. It was also during this period that the world's highest landing strip was prepared at an altitude of 4,997 metres, at DBO.

I have known our troops to be experts at improvisation. The Indian Army developed this skill on account of an acute shortage of material resources, faced particularly during the early years of India's independence. But the marking of the landing strip at DBO, perhaps, takes the cake. The only means available, at this post, to indicate the limits of landing to the pilot of the Packet aircraft carrying out the test landing were human and animal skeletons of old Indian and Yarkandi caravans lying about in the area .

These months of immense activity, with the entire burden on one brigade headquarters were literally maddening. There is a patient on the dangerously-ill list at post A, a message would come, similar reports would follow from posts Band C. The wireless set at post D had gone out of order, as well as the reserve set. The charging set at post E had been burnt in an accidental fire. The ponies at post F had developed some disease and were fast dying, or their fodder had been exhausted. The Chinese had set up a post opposite our post H and were playing Indian music on amplifiers-a senseless yet distracting Chinese effort at propaganda among our jawans. The Chinese had surrounded our dropping zone for post J or they were intimidating the few jawans at post K by a show of force. The Chinese had fired at our patrol sent out from post L, or had surrounded our post M, and so on. The problems were numerous.

Every day brought its moments of suspense, accomplishment or frustration. Never a dull moment, as the Brigade Ordnance Officer, Captain J. Verghese would say. There were no 'trade union timings' for work; no

Sundays nor holidays.

Some events of these hectic days still stand out in my memory.

It was early April 1961. The Desoang plains were still under the icy spell of winter. Although Daulat Beg Oldi had recently been reinforced, our strength there was still woefully meagre. The Chinese, on the other hand, were ever multiplying in number. Their patrol activity had also increased. It was apprehended that they would establish a post astride our line of communications to Sultan Chushku, a development that would place us in a difficult situation. It was, therefore, decided to pre-empt such a move by establishing a section post forward of DBO with a dual aim: to provide a measure of deterrence to the Chinese and to gain additional territory as part of the Forward Policy.

The post was soon set up. But due to the acute shortage of ponies, only bare essentials could be provided there. For the first few days, in fact, this post-named Jagmag-had just one actic tent, one oil stove, one wireless set and some emergency rations. I regularly kept a wireless contact with the section commander, Havildar Targis, since the Brigade Commander wanted to be in constant touch with the post. With mercury at sub-zero level, it was unbearably cold there. Then a continuous strong gale made it worse. To add to it, sometimes the ration ponies were delayed and the men at the post would run out of food. The Chinese patrols too, now and then, became active around the post. But Targis would always assure me that he and his ten jawans would hold on, come what may. And hold on they did, with undaunted courage and determination.

Some months later, when a strong Chinese force was seen advancing towards this post, Havildar Targis at once sent a 'flash' message to me at Brigade Headquarters and requested for immediate reinforcements. According to the official procedure he should have sent this report to his unit instead of directly approaching the Brigade. Perhaps his acquaintance with me through my earlier wireless exchanges had encouraged him to approach

me directly. For the lapse he was reprimanded by his unit Commander but, in all this, credit must be given to him that he had made a request for reinforcements with a view to stand and face the Chinese and not for permission to pull out.

Another incident I remember from a bright morning in May 1962. There was a pleasant nip in the air and the weather was just right for an outing. For a long time I had been thinking to go fishing in the Indus but my duties had not spared me even one holiday so far. I thought that, since things were running normally, I might be able to make it on that day. So I made up my mind and went up to the Headquarters, for it was essential for me to look up whether there was anything urgent to be attended to, before I left.

I saw through my office and was just leaving when there was a call from Lt Colonel Nihal Singh, Commanding Officer 14 Militia Battalion, from his headquarters at Thoise (in the Nubra valley, north of Leh). He told me that he had just received a report from post Alfa that about 100 Chinese soldiers were advancing in assault formation towards the post. They were about 800 metres away from it at that time. Tiger²² had already been informed by the Colonel and to me he suggested that I might consider reporting the matter to higher-ups.

The time was 9.15 a.m.

Hitherto, the Chinese had only tried to play around with our patrols but this was something serious. Were they now planning an assault or was it just a show of force?

Post Alfa was about 24 kms to the north-east of DBO and had a strength of 14 all ranks, commanded by a JCO. They were thus vastly outnumbered by the confronting Chinese. Should we therefore withdraw from the post and relinquish it for Chinese occupation? But vacation of a post merely in view of

²²Tiger is the appointment code for an officer in command of troops. In this case, Lt Colonel Nihal Singh was referring to Brigadier Garewal who had flown by helicopter to DBO only 2 days before.

a Chinese show of force would encourage the Chinese to try repeating the tactic with other posts.

Meanwhile, Brigadier Garewal, at DBO, had taken stock of this grave situation. He had ordered Alfa to stay firm, not to fire at the Chinese and to await further orders from him. He was in direct communication with the post commander.

A little later, Colonel Nihal Singh conveyed to me the orders issued by the Brigade Commander. On our part, we at Leh had informed the Corps Headquarters of the Chinese movement towards Post Alfa and the orders issued to the post.

It was now 9.50 a.m.

The Chinese advancing towards the post in slow stages had by this time come to within 300 metres. The post commander now requested for permission either to open fire or pull out. The situation was extremely tense.

The higher authorities had, meanwhile, acted fast. By 10.15 a.m. we received the instructions (after due approval from Delhi, as I learnt later) that there was to be no withdrawal from Alfa: The post was 'to fight to the last man and the last round'.

I spoke to Lt Colonel Nihal Singh to communicate the above instructions from Corps Headquarters to the Brigade Commander. The Brigadier got the instructions. However, he did not pass on the order to Alfa for he still felt that the Chinese were merely making a show of force and if the post were to take up battle with them in accordance with the fight orders from the Corps Headquarters, the situation might aggravate and, perhaps, spread on the entire Brigade front. So the Brigade Commander, in reply to the request from the post commander, again instructed him to stay firm and hold fire until further orders.

The Brigade Commander's judgement proved correct. By noon, the

Chinese, who had advanced upto about 130 metres of the post, started to pull back. Thus a possible show down with the Chinese was averted mainly due to Brigadier Garewal's capable command and Post Alfa's nerve.

So passed this morning, when I had thought that the things looked relaxed and had hoped to go out for fishing.

THE GALWAN EPISODE

SOON after the Post Alfa incident, we received orders to set up a platoon post in a specified area in Galwan valley. So far, the establishment of new posts, their location and strength had been generally left to the discretion and judgement of the 114 Infantry Brigade, since the higher-ups had full faith in Rawind Garewal's capabilities, drive and determination. Only sometimes, it was suggested to him to consider establishing a post at place A or B. The pros and cons would then be discussed and a decision taken. But this was the first time that the Brigade had received order to establish a post at a specific location. The order was certainly ambitious despite the fact that a post in the place mentioned would consolidate our claim on a large area. The higher authorities had been emboldened after the Chinese pullout from Alfa. Perhaps, they had become all the more convinced that the Chinese would not resort to actual use of force.

In setting up tiny, isolated posts with little defence potential, we had fought a 'political' battle. The task had been quite hazardous and had been done under most trying conditions. But from the defence point of view, it had not helped us much. Rather, as we saw things at Leh, military situation in Ladakh was definitely deteriorating. The Alfa incident, in our opinion, was not a sign of Chinese weakness; on the other hand, it signified Peking's intention to use force, eventually. It was a sample of things to come. The writing was there on the wall, but were we reading it?

As it was, we had our hands full with the maintenance of the large number of posts already established in the Brigade Sector.

Our resources were stretched to their utmost. To establish another post of a platoon strength deep in Galwan valley was, in my opinion, asking for trouble. I expressed my opinion to the Brigade Commander and suggested that we represent against the establishment of this new post. But he did not

seem to favour the idea. Perhaps, he felt that it would be pointless to represent. For once I differed with my commander for whom, otherwise, I had high respect and admiration. I am also to blame for not urging him forcefully enough. Be that as it may, the fact of the matter is that forgetting our troubled minds, we accepted the order and issued instructions for move of troops to Galwan.

On 10 July 1962, when our new Gal wan post had hardly yet settled down, about 350 Chinese advanced towards it. They closed in to approximately 45 metres and surrounded the post.

The report was quite upsetting and there was serious concern and alarm at all levels upto Delhi. We awaited for clear- cut, urgent instructions on how to deal with the matter. But, bureaucracy, it is said, is a muddle-headed ass. Instead of receiving any orders, we were asked clarifications which were apparently meaningless and irrelevant. The fact of the matter was that our post had been surrounded and cut off by the Chinese. How did it matter for the people at the top to know whether the strength of the Chinese soldiers around the post was actually 300, 350 or 400; or whether they were within 40, 45 or 60 metres? But such queries were asked and we furnished the replies.

Next day, however, the Chinese vacated the area to the south and south-east of the post and generally fell back to about 200 metres on other sides. The southern and south-eastern sides were, apparently, opened to our men to give them the option to quit the post.

But there was no question of withdrawing from the post. For to pull out would have meant inviting similar pressure on our other posts, and consequently being pushed back simply by the Chinese cold war tactics. So we held on to the post.

The Chinese too stood their ground and the stalemate continued for a few days. During these days, the Chinese set up a microphone with amplifiers

aimed at our post, and used it to issue threats to demoralise our jawans. These threats were however, regularly punctuated by Indian music, perhaps to soften the effect of their threats.

Naib Subedar Jang Bahadur and the 30 odd jawans from 1/8 Gorkha 'Rifles, who were manning this post, were un-impressed by this Chinese drama, and rigorously kept up their guard. However, the ceaseless routine of sentry duty by the same few men put a strain on them. So to give them the necessary relief, the battalion sent a reinforcement column under Major V.P. Bhasin, after a few days.

After the Gorkhas had been in occupation of the Galwan post for about two months, it was decided to relieve them. The relief obviously had to be carried out by helicopters.

At this stage, Brigadier Garewal²³ received the order for his transfer on promotion. He was to hand over command of the Brigade to Brigadier T.N. Raina.

Tall, well-built but with a limp from an old battle wound, Brigadier Rawind Garewal had been a very understanding boss. He was the outdoor type of a commander, mostly visiting one unit or the other and seldom staying for long at the headquarters. Thus on, the one hand, he always had the pulse of his command and was well conversant with their problems, and on the other, he could help his staff by taking quick and on-the-spot decisions, thereby helping them to work faster.

He was usually patient and relaxed, but would now and then get annoyed on receiving some thoughtless order from the Corps staff. On such occasions, he would himself draft an angry reply and pass it on to me for despatch. But I would usually hold such missives till some time later when he would walk again into my office and seeing the communication lying still

²³ Brigadier Garewal was awarded the Param Vishisht Seva Medal (PVSM) for his meritorious service in Ladakh.

on my table would ask me why it was held up. My silence in reply to his question would make him look at me thoughtfully for a second, and then a grin would suddenly appear, on his face and he would agree to suitably amend the reply. But there were times when I felt agitated about some issue. Then with that typical grin of his he would calm me, down.

I should say that one was fortunate for having been working with him particularly, under the maddening tempo and difficult conditions obtaining in Ladakh. Our only crib with him was that he would neither himself take a few days off from Ladakh nor let anyone else do so. Yet we felt sad on his going away, little knowing that, as we bid farewell to him, he had only two years more to live. He died in an air crash when, as a Divisional Commander, he was on his way to attend a conference at the Corps Headquarters. In his death, the Army lost a fine soldier and a dedicated general.

The Gorkhas at the Galwan post were to be relieved by troops from the 5th Battalion. The Jat Regiment, with Major S.S. Hasabnis in command. Jats are the simple cultivators from all- over northern India. But in the battle field they are reckless fighters. They take to arms as naturally as to agriculture.

I recall the morning of the first flight of helicopters taking the relief force of Jat troops from Hot Springs to Galwan. I was present there along with the new Brigade Commander, Brigadier Raina, who had gone to supervise the relief programme personally. The Jats were all dressed in their winter kit, with their personal weapons and ammunition slung across their shoulders. They well realised, each one of them, the situation that they were soon to face. One would think that men about to leave for such a hazardous mission would betray some fear, tension or suspense. But this was not so with the gallant jawans of the 5th Jat Battalion. On the contrary, they were full of enthusiasm and self-confidence, thus displaying the inherent stoicism and simplicity of the Indian soldier. It was really heartening to look at them.

The first helicopter took off at the appointed time. But on the return flight,

its engine started to lose power and the pilot decided to force land. He, however, landed very close to a Chinese post, for we were not aware of the existence of this post between Hot Springs and Galwan. Presumably, it was set up very recently and so the pilots had not been briefed to avoid flying over it.

Within minutes of the force landing of the helicopter, a hundred odd Chinese rolled down-hill and surrounded the helicopter. The helicopter had by chance landed facing back towards Post Galwan. Shortly after landing a strong tail wind started blowing. This wind could help the 'copter to take off. So with great presence of mind, the pilot and the co-pilot, Sq Leaders Bhadwar and Narayanan, immediately started the engine and took off without spending time even on the normal instrument check. The Chinese were left completely stupefied by this sudden action. Both Bhadwar and Narayanan were decorated for their pluck and presence of mind.

The relief programme was eventually completed without any further mishap. But Post Galwan continued to be under siege by the Chinese.

6

THE CHINESE STRIKE

By early October 1962, 114 Infantry Brigade, consisting of five infantry battalions, was deployed as follows:

SECTOR

SECTOR	BATTALION
Northern Sector (Dault Beg Oldi-Sultan Chushku)	14 Jammu and Kashmir Militia (Ladakhis)
Central Sector (Galwan River-Lukung)	5 Jat
Chushul Sector (Sirjap-Spanggur)	1/8 Gorkha Rifles
Southern Sector (Dungti-Demchok)	7 Jammu and Kashmir Militia (Ladakh is)
Leh	13 Kumaon ²⁴

There was no armour or artillery with the Brigade, at this stage.

Operations in Northern Sector

We had by this time recovered about 6,475 sq kms of Indian territory through our 'forward policy'. Hereafter, it was not possible to set up any more posts in the forward areas. The Chinese were becoming more aggressive every day. They could afford this arrogance and bellicosity, for theirs was the mightier sword.

Their bellicose intentions were established when on the morning of 17 October, I received a wireless from Major S.S. Randhawa. Randhawa, a veteran soldier with many years' service in Ladakh, was in immediate

²⁴ This battalion was inducted into Ladakh in September 1962 and was temporarily located at Leh.

command of troops in the Despang plains. His command was located at DBO. He reported to me that his forward posts had spotted four white-painted Chinese jeeps that morning. They could not make out the purpose or the objective of those jeeps, but they were all alert.

Appearance of such jeeps in the forward area was a new Chinese move which seriously puzzled us. What were the jeeps doing there?²⁵ We were soon to find the answer.

Two days later, on the night of 19/20 October, the Chinese forces advanced onto our forward posts in Depsang plains. The concentration of Chinese troops was first noticed opposite posts Parmodak and Bishan. This was at about 10 p.m. Haviidar Tulsi Ram, commanding Parmodak, informed Randhawa about this development.

The 17 men who were 'standing to' at these two posts, with bayonets fixed and eyes focussed on the approaching Chinese, wondered as to what this was all about. Were the Chinese indulging in yet another display of force, to scare them away- at this time of the night? Would their posts be surrounded like Post Galwan to live under continuous siege thereafter? Or were the Chinese designs more sinister? The dragon, however, knew well its mind. It had resolved to draw blood that night. These posts were to be its first victims.

At about 11 p.m. the Chinese started shelling the above posts. The post commanders immediately passed this information to Daulat Beg Oldi and sought further orders. You will hold your posts and fight to the 'last man and the last round' came the reply. This was in keeping with the orders, earlier issued to the Brigade by the higher authorities.

The shelling stopped after some time but under its cover the Chinese had already closed in on the posts. Arrayed in assault formation they were now barely 180 metres away. Frenzied, indoctrinated, well equipped and

²⁵ Apparently, they were reconnaissance jeeps in which senior Chinese commanders carried out a final survey of our posts before launching their attack.

determined soldiery of New China was moving into their first attack against India. It required raw courage for those grossly outnumbered and ill equipped Indian jawans of 14 J & K Militia to face up to the attack. But Parmodak and Bishan were manned by dedicated men of great courage. They were already hitting back hard.

Post Parmodak. This was our smallest post in Ladakh. It had five men in all: Havildar Tulsi Ram and four others. It, however, enjoyed a great tactical advantage over the attacker. Located at about 5,485 metres above sea level, it dominated the surrounding area. It was, therefore, not easy to assault the position. The Chinese shelling killed the light machine- gunner of this post and so Havildar Tulsi Ram himself had now taken over the weapon. Before long, the remaining three men had also fallen. Tulsi Ram now remained the only survivor. A man of lesser courage would have tried to rush out for safety but Tulsi held on. Firing his machine- gun at the advancing enemy he was taking a heavy toll from it for killing his brethren-in-arms.

But as his ammunition started giving way, and the Chinese approached dangerously close, he found an opportunity to leap out of his trench, carrying his machine-gun with him, and slip downhill towards DBO. For his dauntless courage, Havildar Tulsi Ram was awarded the Vir Chakra.

Post Bishan. Set up at 5,650 metres, it was our highest post in Ladakh. It had a strength of 12 men. It also had the same tactical advantage as had Parmodak. The Chinese shelled this post for about 45 minutes which killed four of the men and destroyed all the bunkers of the post. But that did not deter the rest who continued to fight gallantly under the inspiring leadership of Company Havildar-Major Anant Ram. Two Chinese assaults were beaten back, inflicting about one hundred casualties. The Chinese then surrounded the post and cut it off. This decided Anant Ram to pull back. Finding a small opening, which the Chinese had some-how left uncovered, he extricated his men one by one along a precipice. For his resolute leadership and courage,

Company Havildar-Major Anant Ram was awarded the Vir Chakra.

Post Chandni. This was yet another of our posts which put up a hard fight. The post was held by 25 ORs commanded by Subedar Sonam Stopdhan. The Chinese attacked this post on the early morning of 20 October. It was first subjected to intense shelling by mortars and mountain guns for about an hour. Then followed the infantry assault. Under the inspiring leadership of Subedar Sonam Stopdhan, the troops put up a heroic defence. But the Chinese kept advancing, one wave after another. Finally, one by one the brave Indian jawans fell and the post was completely razed to ground. I recall Randhawa's words, his voice choked with emotion, as he spoke to me on wireless: "Chandni khatam ho gai, Chandni jal gail," (Chandni is finished, Chandni has been turned to ashes.)²⁶ The Chinese, however, suffered heavy casualties. Subedar Stopdhan was awarded the Maha Vir Chakra and Sepoys Chiring, Wangchuk and Phunchok, each a Vir Chakra, for their brave deeds. During the President's investiture ceremony a year later, however, only Phunchok was present to receive his award. The others decorated for bravery had laid down their lives defending Chandni.

Post Bhujan. After the fall of Chandni, the Chinese attacked Post Bhujan. Naib Subedar Rigzin Phunphok and his 15 men fought heroically but again they were also crushed by Chinese numbers. The few who survived, fell back and made a tortuous journey to Sultan Chushku. Naib Subedar Rigzin was awarded the Vir Chakra for leadership and bravery.

During 20-21 October the Chinese similarly attacked a number of other Indian posts.

By 22 afternoon, of a total of 18 posts in this sector, only two-Daulat Beg Oldi and Talwari remained intact. The rest had fallen fighting, adding a few more gallantry awards to 14 J and K Militia.

²⁶ Randhawa had served with 14 Jammu and Kashmir Militia for many years and knew the men well. He had led a couple of difficult patrols during the early phase of our setting up of new posts in the Despang plains- for which he was decorated. The death of his former colleagues naturally made him emotional at the time of reporting.

China had unleashed an undeclared war against India-a befitting finale to her incessant propaganda of hatred. Sino- Indian history had taken a new turn. The age-old ties of good- will between the two countries had snapped, opening a new and bitter chapter. The Despang plains thundered with shell and bullet. So did the neighbouring hills. They obviously stood bewildered, taken aback. Used to the soft jingle of the bells of camels, ponies and yaks of peaceful caravans of old that went their way, never before had they ever witnessed this ghastly spectacle; this brutal killing of man by man; this flow of human blood. Never before had they heard the deafening sound of gun-fire and the groans of the wounded. The Himalayas had been rudely woken up from their long, deep slumber. This hitherto impenetrable barrier had been pierced by the lustful designs of man for power and supremacy.

Was this an attack in the normal sense of the word, by a state engaged in a border dispute with another? No, it was some- thing far more. It was a betrayal of one whom the attacker had proclaimed a Bhai. It was a stab in the back. Chinese cloak-and-dagger diplomacy had shed the cloak; only the dagger now brandished. An expansionist China had put back the clock of history to the era of the celestial empire; the only difference from the past being that a neighbour friendly through the ages had become her target No.1.

A journey's end it was for those who had laid their lives on the bloody battle field of Despang plains. Little did they know during their early struggles against the winds and freezing cold that this was not all-that the worst was still to come-that it was not weather which was to act treacherous, as in the case of Daulat Beg, the caravan leader of old, but Man himself.

Posts DBO and Talwari: Daulat Beg Oldi had a strength of 125 all ranks and Talwari was about 10 strong. At about 4 a.m. on 22 October, a patrolled by an officer reported a concentration of over 1,000 Chinese troops in the vicinity of DBO; about 300-400 troops to the south and over 700 to the

south-east. Their intentions were obvious: They were planning to annihilate the post.

In the face of such enemy strength, DBO could not be expected to hold out for long. Lt Colonel Nihal Singh who had flown from his headquarters at Thoise to DBO at the outbreak of hostilities so as to take over personal command of troops in the Despang plains, saw this helpless situation and requested the Brigade Commander for permission to withdraw from these two posts.²⁷ There was no logic in sticking to the posts and sacrificing our men. So by 3.30 a.m. on 23 October, DBO was abandoned. The withdrawal route, along Gapshan-Syhok river-Chong Kumdan glacier-Astash glacier-Saser Brangsa, was long and hazardous. But with the main maintenance route to the Despang plains via Sultan Chushku having been already cut off by the Chinese, there was no alternative.

Naib Subedar Bhimu Kamble of the Mahar Regiment was in command of a platoon of medium machine-guns at Daulat Beg Oldi. According to orders, all heavy equipment was to be destroyed. But Kamble decided not to part with his medium machine-guns and ordered the platoon to carry these with them. Having gone about 6-7 kms, he discovered that one machine-gun had been left behind. Taking 6 men, he returned to Daulat Beg Oldi. The Chinese, who had apparently, not yet known of our withdrawal were carrying out intermittent shelling of the area. Kamble and his party entered the abandoned post, collected the machine-gun and sneaked back.

Assault on the Central Sector

What the Chinese had started on the night of 19/20 October was not an isolated attack on a few of our posts; but it was a full scale undeclared war against India. They were using the Aksai Chin road for the real purpose for which they had built it. The Central Sector too was a simultaneous target for their attack.

²⁷ The order 'to fight to the last man and last round' had by now been cancelled by the higher authorities. I have more to say on this order in Chapter 11.

Post Galwan. This was the first victim in this Sector. Commanded by Major S.S. Hasabnis, it had a strength of 60 all ranks. It may be recalled that this post was under Chinese encirclement since its establishment in July 1962. Early on the morning of 20 October, the Chinese opened up with heavy rifle, machine gun, rocket launcher and mortar fire on the post from all sides. The firing lasted for about an hour. Then came the assault by about 600 infantrymen.

Hasabnis and his men fought back as best as they could, but the outcome was inevitable. 30 all ranks, including two JCOs and Captain Paul, who was the Medical Officer attached to the post, were killed. 18 others, including Hasabnis, were wounded,

Recalling the assault a few years later, Hasabnis wrote to me that even his jawans felt agitated at the tactically unsound location of the post. "I could give no answer, except to say that there may be political reasons or some one's error in ordering the post to be sited there. The only thing we can do is to fight as best as we can and leave this question for others to answer..." said Hasabnis.

So ended the Galwan episode and with it the constant suspense and vigil of a brave body of men who had faced this unusual and unfair military situation courageously, cheerfully and with good discipline, in the highest traditions of the Indian Army. And when the attack came, they presented the enemy with a rain of bullets, rather than a display of white flags.

Post Patrol Base. Subedar Amar Singh commanded Patrol Base, a platoon post south of the Galwan valley. This gallant patriot would inspire his men by saying, 'We have come here to fight the Chinese. Remember we are not going to leave this sacred soil, whatever the odds.'

On 21 October, Amar Singh received instructions to leave one section at this post and to withdraw the remaining men to a given position in the rear. The section was to watch Chinese movement in the area and to provide

early information to our post at Hot Springs. It was not to get involved in fighting but to withdraw at an opportune moment. But true to his words, Amar Singh decided to stay back with this section.

At about 11.30 a.m. on 22 October, the Chinese started shelling the section's observation post. Amar Singh moved forward from the main section post to the Observation Post, presumably to make a personal assessment of the situation. Soon the observation post was attacked by the enemy. After some time, the rest of the section also came under attack. Amar Singh and his men held their ground till physically overrun by the Chinese. Amar Singh was killed, along with most of his section.

Post Kongma. "About 300 Chinese are advancing towards us. They are a thousand yards away at present," came a message from Post Kongma at about 2 p.m. on 22 October. I received the message personally at the Brigade Headquarters, as the post was not in wireless communication with the battalion head- quarters, at the time. Within minutes of the message the Chinese had started shelling the post. The post kept fighting till late evening by when all its ammunition was finished. Kongma's indomitable commander, Subedar Surjit Singh, who despite his wounds had been directing the fire of his post had also finally breathed his last. Further fighting was futile. The last 6 of Jats, out of a total of about 30, were then compelled to withdraw and the post fell to the Chinese.

Post Nulla Junction. On the night of 23 October, the platoon post at Nulla Junction pulled out after a brief engagement. Only one section, out of three, had come under attack. This section was deployed ahead of the rest of the platoon to act as an observation post. The Chinese started shelling the section post at about 10.30 p.m. By 11.30 p.m. the battle was over and the Chinese had overrun the position. At this stage, the company commander ordered the entire post to withdraw and build up at Hot Springs.

It had been a brief but bloody fight for Naik Maya Ram, the section commander, and his 6 men. For the last few minutes, before receiving

orders to withdraw, Maya Ram fought single handed. Four of his comrades had been killed and two wounded. The wounded were told to pull out first, while Maya Ram kept covering their movement. And finally, he abandoned the post himself.

Post Hot Springs. With the above developments, the post at Hot Springs was left out on a limb. Brigadier Raina felt that it was better to withdraw our men from there and to build up at Lukung, where the rest of the battalion (5 Jat) were busy preparing their main defences. Lukung was a strong defensive position. Wireless communication between the Brigade and battalion headquarters having broken down temporarily, we contacted Hot Springs direct. I spoke to the company commander, Major Ajit Singh, and informed him of the Brigadier's plan. Ajit Singh was very disturbed to learn of the plan to fall back. He pleaded: 'Give us a chance to avenge the massacre of our brothers elsewhere. Let Chinese blood flow at Hot Springs. We are well prepared and my men are fully behind me. Please convey this request to the Brigade Commander.' The Chinese were, however, fast building up opposite the post, poised for a major attack. So, orders were issued to Major Ajit Singh to withdraw to Lukung.

Attack on the Chushul Sector

Posts Sirjap I and II. At about 6 a.m. on 21 October, the Chinese opened a heavy barrage of artillery fire on Sirjap-I, Some rounds fell on the Command post and damaged the wireless set, thus putting the post out of communication. Under the resolute leadership of Major Dhan Singh Thapa, Sirjap-I put up a gallant fight. With hardly 40 all ranks, two successive enemy attacks were beaten back. The Chinese, who had attacked with about 10 to 1 superiority, suffered about 100 casualties.

An eye-witness account of this heroic battle was given by Naik Rabi Lal Thapa, who saw the grim spectacle from barely 1,000 metres. Naik Thapa had volunteered from Thakung, a small post on the eastern shores of Pangong Tso, to take a storm boat to Sirjap-I and report the latest situation.

He saw the Chinese closing in on the post and entering its perimeter. The Gorkhas manning Sirjap-I had also left out of their trenches and with their war cry-"Ayo Gurkhali!" (The Gorkha has arrived) they were now engaging the enemy in a mortal hand-to-hand combat. Rabi Lal then knew that Thapa and his men were, perhaps, fighting their last battle. By about 8.30 a.m. most of the Gorkhas had fallen and the post reduced to smoke and rubble.

The fearless Major Dhan Singh was awarded the Param Vir Chakra, India's highest award for gallantry.

The Chinese then turned to Sirjap-II, which also fell but only after a severe fighting.

By 22 October, all forward posts in the Chushul Sector had been either withdrawn or overrun by the Chinese.

Operations in the Southern Sector

Post Chang La. At dawn on 27 October, the Chinese attacked our post at Chang La. For four hours its 17 defenders withstood the Chinese assaults, launched with overwhelming superiority. But when finally it became impossible to hold the post any further, the post commander, a JCO ordered his men to pull out. He himself covered the withdrawal with light machine-gun fire and, in the process, he laid down his life. The post also suffered a few more casualties.

Post Jara La. Almost simultaneously the Chinese surrounded the post at Jara La. With a Havildar in command, it also had the same strength as Chang La. The Chinese aim appeared to be to force the post into submission by a sheer show of numerical superiority of almost 20:1. Throughout the day, they kept the post surrounded. At night, our jawans decided to break through the encirclement. One man was killed and another wounded, while seven were taken prisoner. The rest managed to escape, to fight another day.

The remaining two posts in this sector also fell to Chinese assaults on this

day.

By 28 October the Chinese aggression came to a temporary halt. Presumably they now wanted some respite to lick their wounds after the severe fighting and to carry out regrouping for further offensive operations. They now held the line Daulat Beg Oldi-Sirjap-Demchok.

These had been devastating 8 days. The Chinese had thrown in masses of infantry, heavily supported by artillery against small isolated posts, equipped with just small arms and tiny 2-inch mortars and only in some cases a section each of 3-inch mortars and medium machine-guns. And yet, it had not been an easy walkover for the Chinese. They faced stout opposition and suffered considerable casualties; their blue uniformed porters carrying truck loads of the killed and wounded during each single day of fighting. The Indian troops fought the enemy with courage and displayed extreme devotion to duty. Thus, over 50 per cent of the troops who came to actual grips with the enemy, were either killed, wounded or captured. The ratio of killed to wounded and captured was about 4:5-a very high ratio of killed, for any battle.

The first reaction of this naked, unabashed aggression by China was one of profound shock, as India woke up on the morning of 21 October 1962.

On 22 October, Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru broadcast to the nation, asking the country to gird up its loins. He said:

"Perhaps there are not many instances in history where one country, that is India, has gone out of her way to be friendly and co-operative with the Chinese Government and people and to plead their cause in the Councils of the world and then for the Chinese Government to return evil for good and even go to the extent of committing aggression and invade our sacred soil. No self-respecting country, and certainly not India, with her love of freedom, can submit to this, whatever the consequences may be."

The Prime Minister had aptly summed up the nation's feelings. On 26

October, the President, under Article 352 of the Constitution, declared a state of Emergency in the country. The Defence of India Ordinance was also promulgated. Shri Morarji Desai, the then Finance Minister, announced the setting up of a National Defence Fund for voluntary contributions. To ensure wider participation of the people in the defence effort, two important committees were formed-the National Defence Council and the Citizens' Central Committee.

Then came Diwali, the festival of lights. On the Diwali of 1962, however, no lamps were lit. There was little joy in the hearts of people. But, for the front-line soldier came hundreds of packets of the choicest sweets.

Parades and public meetings were held throughout the land, condemning the Chinese aggression and expressing the people's will to fight the invader. Opposition parties set aside their political differences and declared full support to the Indian Government.

In Leh, able-bodied Ladakhis offered their services to the Brigade Headquarters, to help in preparation of defences, improvement of roads and tracks, to serve as porters or to fight alongside the army to defend their very hearth and home.

Elsewhere in India huge crowds thronged the recruiting offices for an opportunity to serve the country. There were long queues at the hospitals for donating blood. Housewives started to knit garments for the jawans, when they were told of shortage of woollens at the front. Workers pledged not to resort to strikes or undertake any agitation which might hamper production. Canteens were set up on railway stations to serve free refreshments and meals to the troops. Women volunteered their services to attend to the wounded at hospitals.

Contributions poured in from all corners of India for the National Defence Fund; from rich and poor, young and old. With a lead given by Smt Indira Gandhi, women parted with their jewellery of silver and gold.

A new tide of patriotic emotion swept the vast Motherland. From the shores of Kanya Kumari in the south, to the northern- most tip of Indian democracy, from arid Rajasthan in the west to Bengal and Assam in the east, India's 500 million stood as one man behind Nehru. For the soldier in the field, it was an immensely encouraging resurgence of the nation.

NEW COMMAND SET UP

As 114 Infantry Brigade reeled back in the face of the Chinese onslaught, urgent plans were being made at higher headquarters for the conduct of further operations in Ladakh. There was an obvious requirement of additional troops in the Sector. All that 114 Infantry Brigade could now be expected to do was to concentrate its forces on the outskirts of Leh, to give a 'last man, last round' battle for the defence of Ladakh's capital. If Leh fell, the whole of Ladakh would have virtually been lost to the Chinese.

Plans for the defence of Leh had, in fact, already been drawn up at the Brigade Headquarters. Small detachments were to operate between the forward areas and Leh, with the task of delaying the Chinese advance as long as possible. The bulk of the Brigade was to pull back from forward areas and occupy perimeter defences for the Leh battle. The locals had volunteered in large numbers to help prepare our new defences. Given the weapons and some basic training, they were also eager to fight.

However, this planning had to be abruptly stopped. The Corps Headquarters signalled Brigadier Raina to take over 'personal command' of the Chushul Sector. The signal was quite perplexing to us at Brigade Headquarters. All that we had at Chushul, at this time, was the Headquarters of 1/8 Gorkha Rifles, with two platoons and some medium machine-guns. Facing us, on the other hand, the Chinese had approximately one regiment (equivalent of our brigade) in area Spanggur-Rudok. A Chinese attack on Chushul, at this juncture, would have meant a virtual walk-over for them. What then was the logic in the Brigade Commander moving to Chushul for personal command of a 'one battalion sector'?

The signal was, however, soon clarified. A divisional headquarters, two infantry brigades, two tank troops with squadron headquarters, one field

artillery regiment, one heavy mortar battery, engineers and medium machine-guns were on the move to Ladakh. Construction of the Srinagar-Leh highway had by now been completed. A few Soviet AN 12 transport aircraft had also arrived in India. Induction of additional troops had, thus, become possible.

The new command set up and areas of responsibility, were fixed as under:

(a) Northern Sector (Saser La-Syhok-Thoise): 14 J & K Militia Battalion, under the direct control of Headquarters 3 Infantry Division.

(b) Central Sector (Lukung-Chushul-Tsaka La): 114 Infantry Brigade (four infantry battalions) with Squadron Headquarters and two tank troops, one battery of field artillery, one troop of heavy mortars, one company of engineers and one company of medium machine-guns.

(c) Southern Sector (Demchok-Dungti): 70 Infantry Brigade (three regular infantry battalions and 7 J & K Militia Battalion), with one battery of field artillery, one heavy mortar troop, one company of field engineers and one company of medium machine-guns.

(d) Leh Sector: 163 Infantry Brigade, with one battery of field artillery, one heavy mortar troop and one company of field engineers. Divisional Headquarters was to be located at Leh.

Move to Chushul

"If we are to fight now at Lukung-Chushul- Tsaka La, we must move the Brigade Headquarters to Chushul, at once," said Brigadier Raina to me.

"Please fix up with the helicopter boys for a flight tomorrow morning. I would like yourself and the GSO 3²⁸ to accompany me. The DAA and QMG²⁹ can bring the

²⁸ GSO 3 (General Staff Officer 3) assists the Brigade Major in his duties.

²⁹

DAA & QMG (Deputy Assistant Adjutant and Quartermaster General is the counterpart of Brigade Major, and deals with administration.)

Brigade Headquarters personnel, essential stores and equipment by road," he added.

By about 5 a.m. the next day, the road convoy was on the move. A couple of hours later, the helicopter party also set course for Chushul.

Everybody was silent throughout the flight; each one engrossed in his own thoughts. Only the helicopter engine kept making its humming sound. We had felt the impact of war from a comparative distance (at Leh) till now, but soon we were likely to be in the thick of it. I do not know what thoughts crossed the minds of others. Mine went to my small family. A soldier must guard against family ties and emotions standing in the way of his duty. If the wife is destined to have her soldier husband back after a war, the parents their son, the children their father, no harm can come to him. If the fate of so many is linked with that of his, can fear or anxiety on his part help alter the destiny of so many? Thus I argued within myself to reassure my mind and quell the dull feeling of fear quietly surging through me.

Life is precious for every person. So, fear is the first natural reaction when life is faced with any danger. A soldier too, naturally, experiences fear when going into battle; some do more, others do less. But this fear has to be overcome if they have to fight and not run back at the first sound of gun-fire. Fear is a psychological phenomenon, a state of mind. Since all human minds are not alike, men overcome fear in different ways.

The motivation to conquer fear could flow from an intense emotion, faith in God, in an ideology, in destiny or in one's leaders, love for one's country, unit or formation, family reputation, one's own self-respect, the urge to win glory, hatred for the enemy or the will to take revenge, or a combination of one or more of these factors. Thus do men overcome fear and risk life in battle.

As leaders of men at various levels, the officer cadre has to be conscious and watchful all the time during a battle that those under their command are not affected by fear or cowardice at any time. Needless to say that while doing that, the officers must themselves first be able to control their own fear. After all, men follow their leaders.

I recall our first night in Chushul that we passed in a small bunker. Brigadier Raina slept in full uniform with his personal weapon next to him. Naturally, I too did accordingly. I never asked the Brigadier the reason for sleeping thus fully attired- whether it was on account of cold weather or that he had got 'cold feet'-vulnerable as we were to a Chinese raid, had they got the wind of the Brigade Commander's arrival. In the latter event I agree, it would have been better to have been taken a prisoner in uniform (if self-defence had failed) than in one's sleeping pyjamas.

Deployment of 114 Infantry Brigade

As stated earlier, the Sector of 114 Infantry Brigade's operational responsibility extended from Tsaka La to Lukung, a distance of about 80 kms. We in turn subdivided it into Lukung and Chushul Sub-Sectors. The former comprised of the Lukung defile and the massifs dominating the defile; the latter extended from Thakung to Tsaka La. Between the two Sub-Sectors there was a gap of about 40 kms which was linked by an unmetalled road, capable of taking upto 3-ton vehicles³⁰.

5 Jat, with a troop of heavy mortars (32 Heavy Mortar Regiment) and a few medium machine-guns was made responsible for the defence of the Lukung Sub-Sector. The rest of the Brigade, with the following troops, was deployed in the Chushul Sub-Sector:

(a) 1/8 Gorkha Rifles

³⁰ From Lukung this road went upto Darbuk. The portion between Darbuk and Leh, across the Chang La was still under construction. The going from Lukung to Darbuk was very rugged.

- (b) 13 Kumaon
- (c) 1 Jat
- (d) Squadron headquarters and two tank troops (20 Lancers).
- (e) 38 Field Battery (13 Field Regiment)
- (f) Company medium machine-guns (1 Mahar)
- (g) Company field engineers

In the event, the entire fighting took place in Chushul Sub-Sector.

Chushul Sub-Sector

Chushul was an egg-shaped Sub-Sector, centred around the Chushul valley with:

(a) An unmetalled road linking it to Lukung in the north and Dungti in the south;

(b) Thakung dominating the northern approach to the valley and Tsaka La, the southern;

(c) Features 4,870 to 5,180 metres high on its east and west; and

(d) a gap nearly 2 kms wide and 6 kms long through the eastern range of mountains, near Spanggur Tso. We called it the Spanggur Gap.

The Chushul valley itself is 7-10 kms wide and almost 40 kms long. Both barren and sandy, it has an average altitude of 4,115 metres.

Main Enemy Approaches to Chushul

The Chinese could attack Chushul from three main directions:

Firstly, via Tsaka La, by rolling down the mountains east of Dungti- Tsaka La. In the absence of any road communications from this direction, they could, however, attack mainly with infantry. Alternatively, they could

advance along the road Demchok-Dungti. In this event their attack could be supported both by armour and artillery. This approach, however, would have meant fighting a major battle at Dungti, where the bulk of 70 Infantry Brigade was deployed.

Secondly, via Thakung. They could do so in three possible ways:

(a) By advancing along the land route from the direction of Marsmik La to Lukung and, thereafter, along the road Lukung- Thakung-Chushul.

(b) By an amphibious assault across the Pongong lake.

(c) By attacking along both the above routes.

In all these cases, they could attack mainly with Infantry, as there were no road communications to the east. Further, the column coming by the land route had to eliminate our troops at Lukung, a strong defensive position, before hitting Chushul.

It follows from the above that an attack via Thakung or Tsaka La gave basic disadvantages to the Chinese.

Thirdly, the Chinese could attack Chushul via Rudok. A road capable of carrying heavy vehicles was available upto their forward most post, located at the eastern extremity of the Spanggur Gap. By attacking from this direction, the Chinese could make maximum use of their resources, including armour and artillery.

It was thus considered most likely that an attack would come from this direction. Opening the Spanggur Gap was the obvious aim, in this event. Inter alia, the ground dominating the Gap had to be captured to help clear the Gap. Two features dominated the Gap-Gurung Hill in the north and Magar Hill³¹ in the south. The Spanggur Gap, the Gurung and the Magar

³¹ 1/8 Gorkha Rifles, who had been in token occupation of these heights till now, had given them these nicknames, after the Gurungs and the Magars-two main sub-castes of this unit.

Hills were, therefore, considered to be the main Chinese objectives, in the Chushul Sub-Sector. Subsidiary thrusts were, however, possible along the entire eastern range of mountains. The most important of them was Rezang La, located between Magar Hill and Tsaka La. If this was captured by the Chinese, they could roll down the hill and cut off the road from Leh-Dungti-Tsaka La to Chushul, in conjunction with their main thrust astride the Spanggur Gap axis.

In view of the above broad considerations, Brigadier Raina decided to deploy the Brigade as follows:

(a) 1/8 Gorkha Rifles. A company in the Spanggur Gap and the airfield and a company each at Gurung Hill and heights north of Gurung Hill.³²

(b) 13 Kumaon. A company at Rezang La and approximately two companies at Magar Hill. The rest of the Battalion in area south of the Chushul airfield.

(c) 1 Jat. Approximately two companies between Thakung and heights north of Gurung Hill. The rest of the Battalion at Brigade depth position in the area of Chushul village.

(d) 5 Jat. A company at Tsaka La. The rest of the Battalion held the Lukung defile.

(e) Armour. Both the troops, along with the Squadron Headquarters, below Gurung Hill.

(f) Artillery. A troop each at the foot of Magar and Gurung Hills, respectively.

(g) Brigade Headquarters. Behind Chushul village.

³² The fourth company of 1/8 Gorkhas had been badly mauled in the fighting at Sirjap and Yula posts earlier in October and was not available for the Chushul battle.

PREPARATIONS FOR BATTLE

MODERN science has placed powerful weapons in the hands of the attacker. It is no more just a matter of rushing soldiers to an area to be defended and expect them to fight. Today's defence requires detailed planning and preparation. At first, it needs proper ground reconnaissance of the area. Based on that, a deployment pattern is worked out. Then troops have to dig down, in order to withstand the inevitable bombing and shelling by the enemy. Defences are camouflaged to prevent enemy's observation, then ringed with mines, booby traps and barbed wire fences. Ammunition and supplies are stocked up and a network of signal communications organised. And finally, time permitting, suitable measures to deceive the enemy regarding the layout of defences have to be taken. Although, defensive preparations can never really be considered complete, these are some of the essential pre-requisites.

It takes much longer to prepare defences in the mountains than in the plains; more so at higher altitudes, the ground being hard and physical exertion much more taxing. In view of this, as well as of a potential threat of an imminent Chinese attack, we had to make the defence preparations at our top speed.

The bitter cold mornings would start with a conference by the Brigade Commander-these conferences were known as the 'morning prayers'. These were attended by all commanding officers, their adjutants and quartermasters, and staff officers from Brigade Headquarters. Brigadier Raina would generally start by reminding all present that God had, perhaps, granted us yet another day. 'For Heavens sake, gentlemen, let's prepare fast. Tomorrow, we may be at battle.'

Brigadier Raina was a hard taskmaster. A perfectionist himself, he expected nothing less from others, juniors as well as seniors. He was a man

of few words and always gave a straight answer. I recall an incident when the Brigadier was briefing a senior commander and explaining a point, with a pointer, on a sand model. The commander made an off-the-cuff comment on his planning. The Brigadier who had fully prepared his brief was so annoyed that he threw the pointer on the sand model and said, "This is what I feel about the problem, Sir." The commander not only understood his point but also realised his error, and gracefully ignored the incident.

Normally of course, Raina was very polite and respectful to those above, and never harmed his juniors if he could help it. But he did not at all like work-shirkers. Another facet of his personality was that he did not easily put faith in anyone, but once he did, it was lasting.

Having given the battalions their areas of responsibility, the Brigade Commander laid down priorities for detailed reconnaissance and siting of each defended locality. The battalion commanders planned their daily programmes accordingly. Every morning, Brigadier Raina would review the progress made on the previous day and tie up the activities for the day. Then he would set out to check the detailed siting of some particular locality. And after he had approved, the troops would be moved up for occupation and preparation of field defences.

I often accompanied the Brigadier on these reconnaissance- cum-siting missions. The massifs of Gurung and Magar Hills, and Rezag La looked fairly easy to scale. But one soon got out of this illusion and that the hard way. I recall one such experience. The Brigadier and I had gone to Rezag La for confirming the siting of the company there. On the return trip we dropped in for a cup of tea at the headquarters of 1/8 Gorkha Rifles. While at tea, the Brigadier suddenly decided to visit the Gurung Hill, on that very day. Although he had already confirmed the layout of defences at this feature the previous day, he wanted to reexamine certain aspects. It was 3 p.m. when we, along with the commanding officer of 1/8 Gorkha Rifles, started up the Gurung Hill. A Subedar from this unit, who knew the area

well, accompanied us. By the time we reached our destination, there were only 40 minutes of daylight left for reconnaissance. Anyhow, we had barely managed to complete our task when it was already dark. To make it worst we had neither a torch nor a compass, which was a serious slip on my part. As a Brigade Major, I should have remembered to carry these items before setting out for reconnaissance.

By then a strong wind had set in, bringing with it the biting cold of the Ladakh winter. Our limbs soon began to ache. We were at the eastern extremity of the Gurung Hill. To go back via the long route, from the west, by which we had come was out of question. The answer lay in rolling down into the Spanggur Gap; that being the shortest way down. We could thereby reach the section post located in the Gap and from there call for a jeep to carry us back. There was only one snag: a Chinese post was also located in the neighbourhood. If we lost our way, we would be in the hands of the Chinese. But, since we had no other option, we let the Subedar lead us to the Gap. He warned us that it would be tough going. Tough indeed it was and how! We literally had to crawl down at places. It was about 8 p.m. when we finally managed to reach the post, having covered a few hundred metres in two long hours.

The reconnaissance phase was over within a few days and the troops moved to their allotted defensive positions. Then they got down to digging of trenches, and weapon pits, linking of posts with crawl trenches, laying of mines, barbed wire and telephone lines, netting in of radio sets, dumping of ammunition, collection and storage of rations and a host of other activities connected with the task that lay ahead. And there were problems galore. Often in digging, rocks had to be blasted. Animal transport was usually in short supply and, therefore, jawans themselves had to carry the bulk of their requirements. It was a mad rush for we could see the Chinese building up fast on the other side. It was a race against time and so every hour mattered. We prayed to God to give us time to prepare and not get caught in the open by the enemy artillery.

On the noon of 26 October, a squadron headquarters and two troops of AMX tanks of 20 Lancers rolled out of AN-12 aircraft at Chushul airfield. This was a very welcome arrival. With the anti-tank recoilless guns held by infantry battalions and the anti-tank mines laid by us in the Spanggur Gap, we could now confidently face a Chinese tank attack through Spanggur. (Wisely, the Chinese kept their armour back during the battle).

The airlifting of tanks to an altitude of 4,570 metres had not only topped the Zoji La performance of 1948, but also set a world record. The black berretted jawans of the Indian Armoured Corps looked somewhat flustered as they landed at the airfield. It was perhaps the effect of high altitude. But they soon settled down, regaining their elan, of which the Corps is so proud.

The loading of tanks in AN 12s at Chandigarh airfield had not been easy; the initial attempts being unsuccessful. Considerable improvisation had to be done and finally after trial and error, the AMXs were loaded on the nights of 24/25 and 25/26 October. The Air Force Squadron went all out to help, cutting down fuel, removing certain fitments and so on, to reduce the all out weight of each transporting aircraft.

The general area west of the airfield was best suited to deploy the armour. From here, it could meet a Chinese tank assault through the Gap more effectively than from any other area. Being central to the Brigade Sector, tanks could also be moved fast in counter-attack, in conjunction with infantry, wherever required. The snag was that any deployment in this area could be effectively seen by the Chinese artillery observation posts. Chinese artillery, of which they had preponderance, would thus have accurately engaged our tanks and curtailed their effectiveness. The tank squadron was, therefore, located in a 'hide' position, below Gurung Hill, with a position prepared for occupation in the area west of the airfield.

In the event of a Chinese tank attack, or to support a counter- attack if one were launched by us, the tank squadron was to move from its 'hide' location to the prepared position in the area of the airfield. The squadron

was also to provide limited fire support to Gurung Hill, if it were otherwise uncommitted.

The field battery had moved by road from Srinagar to Chushul. Same as for the armour, the area west of the airfield was ideally suited for the deployment of guns. From here guns could provide fire support to Gurung Hill, the Gap and Magar Hill which, as earlier mentioned, were our vital defences. But such deployment also suffered from the same draw-back as that for the tanks viz the Chinese could spot it and their gunners could open counter-fire and silence our guns.

Therefore, the field battery was split up with one troop deployed behind the Gurung Hill, and the other, behind the Magar Hill, in such a manner that the guns were hidden from Chinese observation. With this deployment, both troops could shoot into the Spanggur Gap, but the Gurung Hill troop could not reach out to Magar Hill and vice versa. Though such splitting of artillery violated the principle of providing maximum number of guns to engage maximum number of targets, yet in the present situation there was no alternative. Such deployment, however, was to give us one major advantage, in that, hidden from the Chinese, our guns would be free to shoot.

To further deceive the Chinese about these deployments we prepared dummy positions for artillery and armour in the area, west of the airfield.

Gun pits were dug and dummy gun structures were placed therein and camouflaged. To make it appear absolutely real, movement of gunners was simulated there during the day and a couple of hurricane lamps lit at the site during the night.

For armour deception, we used unserviceable bulldozers, once employed for the construction of Chushul airfield and laying there since then. A wooden balli (thin log of wood) was fixed in each of the bulldozers to simulate a tank gun barrel. Then these dummy tanks were properly

camouflaged. The tank boys also employed tactics similar to those of the gunners to create an appearance of normal activity there round the clock.

We believed that the Chinese would fall for this deception, because the area west of airfield was actually suitable for the deployment of both artillery and tanks. And that was precisely what happened during the ensuing attack. While not a shell was fired at either artillery troop position, the dummy guns were given a real plastering by Chinese gunners. The dummy armour position was also heavily shelled.

Our administrative base for the Chushul garrison, containing stocks of petrol, kerosene oil, foodstuffs, ammunition and other military hardware was located in the area of the airfield. The base had been sited there primarily for administrative convenience, since the items being unloaded at the airfield could be easily stocked at the base nearby, from where they could be drawn by troops, as and when required. Tactically, the base should have been located further west, well away from the line of forward defences, but due to transportation problems, it had been allowed to remain there.

The Chinese aggression had now changed the situation, and it had become imperative to shift the base urgently to a rear area. Our transport situation had also by then eased a little. So we moved the administrative base to the rear, well before the Chinese launched their attack. The only difficulty, in this regard, was posed by the kerosene and petrol containers, of which there was a very large number. However, on inspection it was found that bulk of them were empty. So we shifted only the full ones and let the empty containers remain where they were. Thereafter, we kept adding all empties to this lot. The idea was to give the Chinese the impression that our petrol and kerosene dump continued to be there.

The Chinese did fall for this subterfuge and they heavily shelled the pile of empty containers. But the cold reaction from this believedly highly inflammable dump must have baffled them. And yet the fact that they kept

pounding at it indicated that the riddle of the empty containers had remained unsolved with them!

The artillery effort thus wasted by the Chinese in the engagement of our dummy artillery and armour positions and the dump of empty containers would have been, otherwise, used against our troops.

In spite of the handicaps, we made good progress and in about a month of our occupation of Chushul defences we had achieved basic minimum preparation. The higher authorities had allotted the Brigade (however inadequate) all that was possible, in terms of troops, fire-power and material. In case the attack had come a few days later, we would have, of course, laid more mines and further improved our battle preparedness.

But none the less, at one stage, an element of suspense, as to when the attack would come, had started to irritate our minds.

Let me explain this further. Apart from building up its defences, a defending force also takes measures to prevent or delay the attackers' build-up or to diminish its effectiveness. He is rocketed and bombed by the defenders' air force and their long range artillery shells his movement and concentration of troops and material. Where possible, spoiling or pre-emptive attacks are launched by the defending infantry and armour. But we were placed in a totally different situation in Chushul. We had orders not to take any aggressive action that might escalate the situation. The higher authorities, apparently, believed that the Chinese build-up was merely a large scale effort at intimidation of Indian forces aimed at making them retreat and vacate the area within the Chinese claim-line. In gist, we were to be prepared for the worst, but were not to induce or give the Chinese the excuse to attack. Frankly, none in the Brigade saw the strange logic of this.

The Chinese had already used force against our troops in DBO, Galwan valley and elsewhere. What then led the higher-ups to deduce that the

Chinese had suddenly turned non-violent and would like to avoid further armed conflict? One could only compare such thinking with the behaviour of an ostrich with its head in the desert sand!

The reader will, thus, appreciate that our situation in Chushul was not very enviable. Here we were observing the Chinese carry out a colossal buildup of infantry, armour and artillery which would, eventually, be unleashed against us. And yet, we were to do nothing to delay or prevent this by fire or by capturing a Chinese post or two. Nor were we to get any counterveilling reinforcements. Our feeling of both irritation and suspense and, inter alia, the desire to have it out with the Chinese as early as possible was, therefore, understandable.

One aspect of the 'no-escalation' order which worried me most was that we could not even register the important targets on our guns by actually firing a few rounds. Normally, this is not essential, for with an accurate survey of targets and taking care to make necessary adjustments to offset local meteorological effects, guns are expected to fire accurately. It became imperative in the present situation, however, for we had never tested the fire of our guns at such high altitudes as in Chushul, where the mercury was down to minus 30°-40°C.

As it is, we had most inadequate artillery with the Brigade; just 8 guns in all³³. We could not at all afford to take a chance on the target accuracy of these few guns. I, therefore, suggested to the Brigade Commander that we must adjust the fire of guns, on some possible targets in front of us, within our own territory. The Brigadier agreed and limited registration was done.

We reaped the benefit of this exercise with Major Joshi, the battery commander and a competent ex-instructor in gunnery from the School of Artillery, Deolali. For his officers and men won the Honours for the battle of Gurung Hill, later.

³³ In the second world war, a brigade in defence was often provided the fire support of as many as 44 to 78 guns, by most armies.

Our bunkers and trenches had by now been prepared (though not as well as desired), and rations and ammunition had been moved up to each locality. The most threatened venues of attack had been mined and barbed-wired. Some overhead protection had also been provided, at least to important bunkers. Given more time and resources we would have, of course, liked to thicken up the mine fields, as also the barbed wire fences. These would have also been laid elsewhere, in the defensive sector. Likewise, overhead protection to requisite bunkers would have been improved.

Telephone lines had been laid and wireless sets tuned and netted. Great care and attention had been given to this aspect of our preparations. I need hardly emphasise the importance of good signal communications. Their failure leads to confusion and chaos, at times to defeat. This is particularly so in a defensive battle where, once the battle has been joined in, commanders can exercise command and control best from their respective command posts. I recall here my conversation with Brigadier Raina. "Have you thoroughly buttoned up the network of signal communications?" he enquired.

"Yes Sir, I have ensured a duplication of communications, both wireless and telephone," I replied.³⁴

"But, this is not enough, my boy," he quipped. "Beg, borrow or steal; but lay more telephone lines at least," he added. At first I wondered as to where would I beg, borrow or steal in this wilderness! But then it struck me that units usually kept some extra stock of cable undisclosed. So, I appealed to them for their 'hidden' stock and sure enough, it was produced.

The Brigade Commander had been correct in taking the precaution. During the attack most telephone lines were cut by enemy shelling. But for the extra lines which came to our aid it would not have possible to ensure telephonic communications during the battle.

³⁴ Duplication of communications is the normal teaching.

The tanks stood ready for the call to action, hidden from Chinese observation at the foot of Gurung Hill, and so also the guns-their barrels laid on the most dangerous targets to ensure immediate response.

Infantry-artillery cooperation is vital for success in battle. Artillery has the highest respect for the 'queen of the battle-field', the Infantry. The queen also, I may say, feels lost without artillery, the 'king of the battle-field' or the 'god of war', as Russian gunners would say.

The kings and queens apart, it is the infantry which bears the major brunt of battle. Gunners, who have to work in close cooperation with the infantry, know it too well and hence their regard for the infantryman. For them, therefore, provision of fire support to the infantry is not merely compliance of military manuals; it is some thing far more-an 'unwritten pledge'. And so, a great deal of mutual respect and admiration has grown between the two. This is so particularly in battle; though, at times, the queen tends to ignore, the king during peace!

Brigade vehicles operated during the day in the area of the airfield, for the transportation of supplies, ammunition, and so on, as they arrived there by air. At night they moved to the rear. The only transport allowed to stay the night in the airfield area was the minimum essential requirement of armour, artillery and the infantry units, deployed in front. In the rear, the vehicles were parked under the centralised control of the Brigade Headquarters, well away from Chinese gun range, till the next morning. This was a regular routine, and it proved beneficial during the battle.

The Chinese build-up, meanwhile, continued unabated. We too had by now achieved a measure of preparedness. Above all, our spirits were high. A fine atmosphere prevailed.

Lieutenant Colonel H.S. Dhingra³⁵, commanded the 13 Kumaonis and Lt Colonel Hari Chand, MVC, the 1/8 Gorkhas. Both were veteran soldiers and between them, they set the pace for the rest of the officers of 114 Infantry

³⁵ Dhingra was awarded the Sena Medal for his effective command of 13 Kumaonis.

Brigade, in strict compliance of orders without cribbing or arguing. An argumentative or belly-aching subordinate is a serious liability during the hour of trial in battle. It is, at times, frustrating to have such people around. Their attitude often permeates in junior officers and men. Nothing moves in such environments. It is fortunate that Indian Army's discipline seldom tolerates such types. Dhingra and Hari were products of a fine army.

The Lt Colonels had, in turn, imbibed the same spirit in their Adjutants, Captains Sekhlani and Kher,³⁶ fine youngsters, both quick and accurate in staff work. As the Brigade Major, I was fortunate to have to deal with these four officers.

Major Reddy, the tough and stocky commander of the Medium Machine-Gun Company was a jolly soul. He liked his evening drink and smoked the strong Charminar cigarettes. But, he evidently, knew where to draw the line, since he was as fit as a fiddle. Full of aggressive spirit, he kept inspiring his boys, spread out at various places for the ensuing battle.

Major Girish Sinha, the Second-in-Command of 13 Kumaon, was the commander of the Brigade reserve of one company. He and his men were meant to be in constant readiness, once the battle started, either to reinforce a position or to launch a counter attack, supported by artillery (and tanks, if possible). True to his role, he was always seen in full battle order, complete with steel helmet and sten-gun slung across his shoulder. A keen and capable officer, he was regretful that he never got the opportunity to come to grips with the enemy.

Captain Diwan, VrC, was the dashing Commander of the armoured squadron. He had borrowed a khukris³⁷ from 1/8 Gorkhas Rifles and he wore it all the time. At one stage during the battle he came to me at the Brigade Command post to report that all his high explosive ammunition had been expended. "Then fire your solid shot," I quipped. For a while, he was

³⁶ Kher later took over command of troops at Gurung Hill during the battle.

³⁷ Khukri is a short Nepalese scimitar worn by all Gorkha soldiers. Gorkhas use it in hand-to-hand fighting.

perplexed at my reply, since this ammunition is meant to be used against tanks and not infantry. But then he left the Brigade Command post, with a smile saying, "Thank you, Sir." He and his boys did not want to sit back without firing.

Captain Percy Route, of the Brigade Signal Company, managed to stay on in Chushul, despite the arrival of his replacement, well before the battle. He confessed that he was keen to earn the Ladakh Medal, when it was all over. We cooperated!

His main job was to shoot rabbits for the Brigade officers' mess! Now and then, he obliged the battalions, as well. One might say that Percy received his medal the easy way, merely by shooting rabbits. Agreed, but we must credit him for his spirit of adventure, for risking his life, when he could have been sitting in the safety and comfort of a peace station in the plains. We called him the 'Signal Officer at Large'.

The order given to 114 Infantry Brigade by the higher headquarters, in the event of attack, was to inflict maximum casualties on the Chinese at our forward line of defences (Rezang La- Magar Hill-Gurung Hill) and then to withdraw to depth positions along the range of hills west of the Chushul valley.

The military reader, in particular, may comment that this order was contradictory and contrary to normal teaching. He may question whether our forward line was the main position or a delaying position? If it were the former, troops should have been ordered to hold ground and fight and there should have been no question of laying down a withdrawal to depth positions. On the other hand, if this line were meant to be a delaying position, it should have been thinly held. In this event troops were expected to inflict limited casualties on the enemy and having imposed an element of delay, withdraw to main defences in depth.

Needless to say that the higher authorities were also aware of this

contradiction and deviation from the normal concepts in defence. But the situation in Chushul was peculiar, i.e. whereas the primary requirement was to contest the Chinese claim-line, for which purpose the forward line along which it ran had to be held in strength, there was need to retain the capability to give further battle, in case the Chinese were to advance beyond their claim-line.

THE BATTLE OF CHUSHUL

AT dawn on Sunday, 18 November 1962, the Chinese launched their attack in the Chushul area. May 6, that is the day when they had indulged in the tactics of intimidation for the first time (opposite our Post Alfa, in the Northern Sector) by a show of overwhelming force, had also been a Sunday. Likewise, some other incidents between 6 May and 18 November strangely had also occurred on a Sunday.

It is possible that, in the past, the Chinese chose Sundays to create trouble, knowing that Sunday was usually a day of make- and-mend and rest for Indian troops. But on 18 November, they could not have had any notion of taking our troops by surprise, for they were well aware that their movements were under careful observation, round the clock. The choice of a Sunday for an attack on Chushul should have been merely incidental.

It was an unusually cold morning. There was a blanket of mist around and visibility hardly extended over 200 yards. It was snowing heavily. I had gone to bed early at night and had therefore woken up earlier than usual in the morning. I lit the 'oil stove to warm up the bunker and then switched on my battery-operated reading lamp to read for a while. I had barely started when I heard sounds or explosion in the distance. How come that the engineers had started their rock blasting (they were preparing living bunkers for troops) so early in the morning? -was my first reaction. But the illusion was soon dispelled. In fact, the balloon had gone up; the long awaited attack had begun.

Within minutes, Chushul was alive with combat activity: troops rushed to battle positions, rifles, mortars, guns and rockets blazed fire, signal operators sent messages on telephone and wireless sets. The valley echoed with the boom of guns. The time was 5.40 a.m.

For a while it was all quiet in the Brigade Command post. No one spoke;

everyone was with some thought or the other. Brigadier Raina broke the spell, asking me to send his jeep. It should have his. Flag and Star plates, he added. He was obviously taking a risk in thus driving out with his flag flying and thus exposed to Chinese observation and artillery fire. But to the Brigadier it was more important that he drove around the battle zone in full state to boost the men's morale. The battle having just begun, it was unlikely that any serious developments would take place just yet. He could, therefore, afford to be away from his Command Post for sometime, leaving me to handle any minor situations that might arise.

The battle of Chushul was fought on the snowy heights of Rezang La and Gurung Hill. Both were attacked simultaneously. The Chinese assaulted these positions with an overwhelming numerical superiority of over 10 to 1. They came in human waves, one after another, unmindful of casualties. Their attacks were well planned and were pressed home with vigour and determination. The Chinese mortars and guns shelled us for an hour before they came in with their attack. Their gunners shot well. The shelling was intense and aimed not only at inflicting casualties, but also at breaking our will to fight.

Notwithstanding the above compliments to Chinese commanders and to their infantry and artillery, an honest verdict must give the Battle Honours for the battle of Chushul to the Indian officer and jawan.

Though vastly outnumbered and outgunned, the troops did not lose their nerve. In keeping with their orders which were to inflict maximum casualties on the enemy and withdraw to depth positions, the defenders of Gurung Hill fought both bravely and with skill, pulling out at the opportune moment.

In the battle at Gurung Hill, the artillery observation post, in particular, played a heroic role. It kept engaging the assaulting Chinese till its four members were either wounded or dead. Their fire inflicted considerable casualties on the enemy. At the same time, it enabled the infantry to

withdraw in time, without suffering undue casualties. Gurung Hill fell on the second day of battle.

But in the battle at Rezang La, destiny had a different role for its gallant defenders; though the same orders were applicable to them. Having repulsed a frontal attack, they held on, perhaps a while too long, by when the Chinese had developed an enveloping movement to attack Rezang La from both flanks and the rear. With no artillery support to help them extricate, as mentioned earlier, they fought it out with the Chinese almost to the 'last man and last round.' instead of putting up their hands in surrender. Rezang La fell on the first day of battle, leaving behind a proud example of human courage and will to fight, seldom equalled in the annals of military warfare.

With the capture of Gurung Hill and Rezang La, the Chinese had breached our defences. They were now in a position to cut off the remaining troops deployed in front. 114 Infantry Brigade, therefore, withdrew to previously prepared positions in depth.

The withdrawal was carried out in pitch darkness on the night of 19 November, without chaos or confusion. With the light on the 20th, the troops were ready to face the Chinese once again.

Here is a narration of the battles of Rezang La and Gurung Hill in some detail. It has been pieced together from the telephone and wireless messages as they poured in at the brigade command post during the battle; from interrogation of surviving officers and men; from the accounts written by company and battalion commanders, soon after the battle and from a visit to Rezang La and Gurung Hill by a team of officers arranged in February 1963, with Chinese consent, to collect our dead.

THE BATTLE OF REZANG LA

Rezang La is a massive feature, approximately 5, 180 metres high. It was defended by C Company of 13th Battalion The Kumaon Regiment. Deployed

over a frontage of about 2 kms, it had a strength of 118 all ranks. The company was commanded by Major Shaitan Singh.

The Company consisting of Nos 7, 8 and 9 platoons, was deployed in a linear order. It is advisable to place some troops in depth. But the important ground required to be covered at Rezang La was much larger than what could be covered by the troops available. A linear deployment was, thus, inevitable. Some depth was, however, arranged within each platoon, with the company headquarters in depth between Nos 8 and 9 platoons. The section of 3 mortars was behind the company headquarters. The company administrative base, with its cook house, reserve rations and clothing was located in the valley below.

The company position had been well prepared within the limits of time and resources available. Though not to the extent required, the troops had a measure of overhead protection for command posts up to platoon level, and for all light machineguns, against shelling by enemy guns and mortars. Each platoon locality was ringed by barbed wire. A network of crawl trenches connected the company down to section posts. It had adequate stocks of ammunition. No mines had, however, been laid. Due to their paucity, priority in their laying had been given to the more important defensive positions of Gurung Hill, Spanggur Gap and Magar Hill. The worst of it was that, due to a shortage of guns, the company was without any artillery and had to rely for fire support only on its own section of mortars. Finally, it was isolated from the Spanggur Gap complex of defences.

The Rezang La position suffered from these major disadvantages. We were fully aware of this. But with limited troops and supporting weapons, it was inevitable for some areas to face the above drawbacks.

The defenders of Rezang La, however, possessed one vital asset. They had stout hearts and the will to fight. With this essential pre-requisite, Major Shaitan Singh and his men had lain entrenched in their mountain fastness, on constant vigil.

The broad pattern and sequence of attack on Rezang La was as follows:

- (a) A silent approach march by Chinese troops to Rezang La;
- (b) Frontal assaults on Nos 7 and 8 platoons;
- (c) Intense artillery and mortar fire to cover the movement of troops, for subsequent attacks from the flanks and rear;
- (d) Attack on Nos 7 and 8 platoons from the flanks;
- (e) Attack on remaining defences from the rear.

Silent Approach March

Movement of Chinese troops, as they approached Rezang La stealthily under the cover of darkness, was first detected by the three listening posts, deployed about 300 metres ahead by each platoon. This was at about 3 a.m. The listening post (LP) commanders duly gave the pre-arranged warning signals to respective platoon commanders.

The normal role of an LP is to pass maximum information about the enemy, e.g. direction of advance, approximate strength and so on, and, thereafter, to withdraw to the main platoon position. The post is not expected to delay the enemy's advance (by engaging him from long distance) or to hold ground and fight. There is logic in giving only such a limited role (of passing information only) to an LP. Such posts are deployed in an isolated manner and are manned by just three or four men. As such, it is a virtual suicide for an LP to stay in its position longer than necessary, since its men cannot hope to live to fight another day.

The LPs at Rezang La had also been instructed to pass maximum information about the Chinese, and withdraw. But Major Shaitan Singh had imbibed his men with so much emotion and aggressive spirit that, on seeing the approaching enemy his LP commanders, apparently, decided not to withdraw, after passing on the requisite information. They wanted to be the first in the company to give a taste of Indian bullets to the Chinese.

The LPs paid the price. Except for Lance Naik Ram Singh, who was captured, the rest died fighting.

Recalling later, the fight put up by his LP of 3 men, Ram Singh said that the Chinese advance was held up for nearly an hour during which they (the Chinese) suffered a lot of casualties. At one stage, Sepoy Bharat Singh of the LP advised Lance Naik Hukam Singh, the LP Commander, that they should withdraw, since the LP had not only carried out its task of giving early warning but had also delayed the Chinese advance. L/Naik Hukam Singh replied:

"Jitni dair tak dushman ko rokenge aur marenge, utna hi mokka company ko kamyabi ka milega:" (The longer we delay and cause casualties to the enemy, the better the chances of success for the company.)

And so the three men kept holding on to their post. As the enemy found it difficult to advance further, he brought down artillery fire on the LP. One shell fell close to Hukam Singh killing him instantly.

Lance Naik Ram Singh at once jumped into his place, took over the light machine-gun and started engaging the enemy. Soon, Sepoy Bharat Singh was killed. But Ram Singh kept on firing, in a desperate bid to keep the enemy at bay. Then a shell landed close to him, blowing off both his legs. The brave Ahir wretched in pain and then lost consciousness. He was later taken prisoner and removed to a Chinese hospital.

Similar is the story of the other two LPs.

Frontal Attacks

With the LPs annihilated, the Chinese advanced further, with the aim of attacking Nos 7 and 8 platoons, frontally. The Chinese commander had made an unsound tactical plan of attack. He had trapped his troops in the killing area between these platoons. The Indian bullets soon mowed down the leading elements. The section of 3-inch mortars had also taken a heavy toll in the killed and wounded. Going uphill was difficult and slow for the

assaulting Chinese. The enemy realised that he was faced with a determined and well prepared opponent, and that to launch more troops into the frontal attack was to reinforce failure. The Chinese, therefore, decided to change the line of attack and switch over to the flanks and the rear. If the frontal attack was only a diversion, they paid heavily for it.

Concurrently, as the Chinese commenced movement of troops to our flanks and a wide outflanking movement to the company's rear, they engulfed Rezang La with a massive fire of both guns and mortars. They seemed to have a two-fold objective: One, to inflict maximum casualties and thereby break the will of the defenders to fight; and the other, to cover the movement of their troops to the flanks and the rear.

The jawans could see the flash of enemy guns. How they wished that they had their own artillery to retaliate. Yet the thought hardly touched their fighting morale. Shells covered every few yards of ground. Their sound was deafening but it only made the jawans' blood boil.

The Chinese had by now moved to the flanks of Nos 7 and 8 platoons.

No 7 platoon, commanded by Naib Subedar Surja was attacked by approximately 400 Chinese from the left flank. The platoon commander called for the fire of 3-inch mortars. Their fire landed smack in the midst of the first echelon of about 130 Chinese, inflicting heavy casualties. But the enemy pressed the attack, unmindful of losses. At one stage some Ahirs fought with bare hands! Two jawans charged a medium machinegun position but were killed within 2 feet of it. One burly Ahir lifted a Chinaman and threw him down the Rezang La rocks to his death. A splinter hit Naib Subedar Surja on the head. "Larte raho! 13 Kumaon ka nam uncha rakho!" (Keep fighting and glorify the name of 13 Kumaon), were his last words. And fight they did till the very end. No mercy was sought nor any given.

Even the Chinese could not help recognising the bravery of No 7 platoon. As a token of respect, they covered the very brave with blankets and stuck

Indian bayonets on the ground next to them. Nine such bayonets were found stuck in the ground when the team of Indian officers visited Rezang La in February 1963.

No 8 platoon, commanded by Naib Subedar Hari Ram, was attacked by approximately the same strength, from the right flank. The barbed wire was breached with explosives, and the Chinese charged the right forward section. The first assaulting wave was successfully engaged. The enemy suffered considerable casualties and the attack was repulsed. Another assault wave, meanwhile, moved behind the platoon to attack its headquarters and the depth section. Soon our men were gripped in hand to hand fighting. Pitched against overwhelming odds of over 10 Chinese to 1 Ahir, the outcome was inevitable.

The most stubborn fight was put up by the third section, commanded by Lance Naik Chandgi Ram. This section repulsed as many as six successive assaults before falling into Chinese hands.

Large number of fired rounds of rifle, sten-gun and machine-gun, in practically every trench and numerous hand grenade levers scattered everywhere were seen by the visiting team later. All these bore a silent testimony to the severity of the fight put up by No 8 platoon.

The wide outflanking Chinese movement to come to the rear of C company, with nearly a thousand troops had, by now, been completed. It was a sinister manoeuvre with three apparent aims: (a) to assist their troops engaged in capturing Nos 7 and 8 platoon localities, if required; (b) to attack our remaining troops, i.e. the mortar section, company headquarters and 9 platoon from the rear; and (c) to seal off the escape routes of our troops from Rezang La.

Time now was about 7 a.m. The Chinese did not have to reinforce their troops assaulting Nos 7 and 8 platoons. These had already fallen by this time. Nor was there the need to seal off the escape routes since there were

none left to escape.

The Chinese now assaulted the mortar section, on their way to attack the company headquarters and No 9 platoon. The mortar section had been continuously in action since the attack commenced. The men had fired the mortars down to a range of 30-40 metres, ignoring the danger to themselves from the splinters of their own mortars. At the start of the battle the post had 1,000 mortar bombs. When the post was overrun, it had just seven bombs left; the rest had been fired.

The conspicuous gallantry and presence of mind of Havildar Ram Kumar, the mortar section commander, is worth a mention. Though badly wounded, he kept on directing the mortar fire till he fell unconscious. With the rest of the mortar detachment dead, he lay in that state the whole day. On regaining consciousness he sneaked out avoiding Chinese observation and eventually reached the battalion headquarters early next morning.

As mentioned earlier, Rezang La was subjected to intense artillery fire, after the failure of frontal attacks against Nos 7 and 8 platoons. Later, when these platoons were attacked from the flanks, the entire volume of fire was shifted to the company headquarters and No 9 platoon.

Not always does artillery get such a free band at destruction and for such long duration, as at Rezang La. There is retaliatory counter-bombardment by the opposing artillery. Guns may also be engaged by the opponents' air force. But at Rezang La, neither supporting artillery nor air force was available to our troops.

By the time, the Chinese attacked No 9 platoon, there were only a few left to give battle. The dazed jawans fired mostly at random against the assaulting Chinese. Many groaned with pain, the rest lay dead.

At this stage, Major Shaitan Singh was wounded in the arm. Realising that it was only a question of time for No 9 platoon also to be overrun, the wounded company commander was persuaded by the remaining personnel

of his command post to leave Rezang La. With the pain of defeat and of his wounds, Shaitan started to find his way out, escorted by the four survivors from the company headquarters. But the Chinese soon detected the group and killed two of the men. A burst of fire also hit Shaitan in the abdomen. The remaining two men picked him up and continued to rush down-hill towards the company base, now and then taking cover behind boulders, to escape the Chinese fire.

Major Shaitan Singh had become unconscious with the loss of blood. Life was fast ebbing out of him. For a moment he regained consciousness. Turning to the loyal jawans who were risking their lives in trying to carry him, he said that they should leave him alone and save their lives. Reluctantly the men obeyed. 'Tell the battalion how well the company fought,' were the last words heard from this brave soldier. With this he breathed his last.

Three months later his body was found exactly in the same place where he was left.

The snowy pinnacles of Rezang La had stood helplessly by watching this unequal match of 'so few against so many'. It was all over by about 8 a.m.

Talking to a plucky survivor, a few years later, I observed that he had wound marks on both elbows. He had an interesting story to narrate. He was the No. 2 light machine-gunner in a section post. When the No.1 gunner was hit on his forehead by a bullet and died, this man picked up the machine-gun and started firing. 'I decided to put my head down in the trench, exposing only my arms above the ground.' he said. 'How could you take an aim?' was my natural question. 'There was no need to take aim. I could see Chinese soldiers by the hundreds, all over. I thought I would be able to kill many Chinese by just spraying the area with my machine-gun by exposing only my arms to Chinese fire,' he replied. He kept the enemy at bay for sometime but had to give up the fight, when both his elbows were hit by bullets. He was captured, but managed to make good his escape, later at

night.

Out of a total of 118 all ranks, one officer, 2 JCOs and 106 other ranks laid down their lives. One JCO and 4 ORs were taken prisoner. Of the five prisoners, one later succumbed to his wounds. Only four managed to return alive from the ghastly hell at Rezang La, on November 18.

When later, in 1963, the bodies of the brave Indian soldiers were recovered from Rezang La most men were found still holding on to their weapons. Each one of them had multiple wounds from bullets and shell splinters. Many had been bayoneted to death. Narrating to me his visit to Rezang La in 1965, as Commander 114 Infantry Brigade, General Krishna Rao said that Rezang La was littered with hand grenade levers and fired rifle and light machine-gun cases. Two bodies, which had escaped the earlier search in 1963, were now recovered. One of them was of the LP commander Lance Naik Hukam Singh.

The Chinese, of course, were not allowed to get away without paying the price; they lost four to five times our number. This was confirmed by a Chinese radio broadcast on 23 November, which announced that they had suffered their maximum casualties in the battle of Rezang La.

Thus ended this rare feat of arms, of utmost courage and devotion to duty. Surrounded from all sides, these brave soldiers preferred death to the dishonour of surrender; each one of them attaining true martyrdom on the snowy battle-field of Rezang La. In the history of warfare can be found very few instances when, in the face of overwhelming odds, a large body of troops have fought to the proverbial 'last man, last round'. Rezang La, without doubt, ranks as one of the finest such examples.

Major Shaitan Singh was awarded the Param Vir Chakra. The three platoon commanders, Hari Ram, Ram Chander and Surja and five other ranks were awarded the Vir Chakra. Four men received the Sena Medal. Except for four, all these awards were posthumous.

A small monument has been erected in the Chushul valley to honour the memory of those who laid down their lives defending Rezang La. The following words by Macaulay are inscribed on it:

"How can man die better

Than facing fearful odds

For the ashes of his fathers

And the temples of his gods?".

Visiting Ladakh nearly two decades later I paid homage to the fallen heroes of Rezang La. The picture of the young jawans whom I had twice met as they prepared their defences came before me. I could not, help thinking that, whereas they had immortalised themselves on that fateful Sunday in November 1962, war itself was so futile-bringing only death and destruction in its wake.

THE BATTLE OF GURUNG HILL

Gurung Hill was as massive a feature as Rezang La. It extended over 3,000 metres in length and was about 2,000 metres wide. The average height of Gurung Hill was about 5,030 metres. Overlooking both Spanggur Gap and airfield, it was of vital tactical importance. Its neighbouring Black Hill, which derived this name from its black rocks, overlooked it. Black Hill was held by the Chinese and their troops were deployed on its reverse slopes. An artillery observation post, located on the highest point of Black Hill, could observe all movement on Gurung Hill. At one stage, the Black Hill was held very thinly by the Chinese, and had we not been given the 'no escalation' order, we would have certainly captured it during the early stages of the Chinese build-up, thus making our defensive position far stronger.

Gurung Hill was divided into two distinct geographical parts. The portion joining the Black Hill was flat. The rest of the Gurung Hill looked like a camel's back. For ease of description I have henceforth termed these two

parts as the Plateau and the Camel's Back, respectively.

Unlike Rejang La, which had been totally isolated, Gurung Hill occupied a central place in the network of defences. But even in the case of Gurung Hill, it could not be supported by any type of fire from troops deployed on its flanks, because of distance. For all practical purposes, therefore, Gurung Hill was also an isolated position. Again it was the shortage of troops, on the one hand, and the important areas of ground that required to be held, on the other, that had forced us into it.

1/8 Gorkha Rifles deployed one company less one platoon on the Plateau and a platoon on Camel's Back. Furthermore, due to its tactical importance, a section of medium machine-guns and one troop of field guns³⁸ were allotted to Gurung Hill³⁹, and as a bonus, tank support too. However, the squadron of tanks was primarily to fight a tank battle, in case of a Chinese tank assault through the Spanggur Gap. Tanks carry very little high explosive ammunition, the bulk of it being armour piercing ammunition for use against enemy tanks, so their contribution in breaking up the Chinese infantry assault on Gurung Hill was going to be very limited. Nonetheless, located just below Gurung Hill, the tanks, if uncommitted, could well fire a few hundred high explosive rounds in support of Gurung Hill.

In the event, the broad pattern and sequence of attack on Gurung Hill was as follows:

18 November

(a) Heavy artillery and mortar firing on Gurung Hill, in general, and the Plateau, in particular.

(b) Initial assault on the Plateau, from the direction of Black Hill.

(e) A subsequent two-pronged attack on the Plateau from Black Hill and

³⁸ Four machine guns and four artillery pieces.

³⁹ Artillery observation post, the section of machine guns and the Company's 3-inch mortar section were deployed on the Plateau.

nullahs leading to the Plateau, from the Spanggur Gap.

19 November

(a) Heavy artillery and mortar firing on the Camel's Back.

(b) A two pronged attack on the Camel's Back from the direction of the Plateau and the nullah's leading to the camel's back from the Spanggur Gap.

The Chinese commenced the battle for Gurung Hill, on 18 November, with a heavy volume of artillery and mortar fire. Our entire network of defences in the Gurung Hill-Spanggur Gap- Magar Hill complex, the dummy gun and tank positions and the area of empty petrol and kerosene containers, Headquarters 13 Kumaon, located next to the airfield, and the airfield itself were engaged. The main Chinese punch was, however, chiefly directed against the Plateau, the actual objective of the attack.

Within minutes our guns and mortars boomed back in reply. The artillery troop in support of Gurung Hill had rightly picked on the Chinese artillery observation post as the Priority I target. Its destruction, or even partial neutralisation, would have denied the Chinese proper direction and control of fire on the Plateau.

The duration of fire on Gurung Hill was much less than that on Rezang La. The reason was simple. The enemy had to carry out long outflanking moves for their attacks on Rezang La, and the whole move was required to be covered by artillery fire. In the case of attack on Gurung Hill, on the other hand, the reverse slopes of Black Hill provided a covered jumping-off ground for the Chinese infantry, obscured from our observation.

In consequence, our troops suffered much less casualties from artillery and mortar fire during the Gurung Hill battle.

Assault on the Plateau

While still engaging our troops with guns and mortars, the Chinese hurtled down Black Hill to assault the Plateau. Their strength was estimated to be

about 400.

The Gorkha has been classed amongst the finest fighting soldiers in the world. His simplicity and obedience of orders, his physical toughness and mental robustness have earned him this reputation in many a past war. The Gorkhas holding the Plateau had the same warrior blood in them, but the battle that they were about to fight was between unequals with vast disparity in strength.

Our artillery fire, supplemented by the fire of infantry mortars at Gurung Hill had, meanwhile, started engaging the assaulting Chinese. Artillery fire was accurate and Indian gunners were paying back their Chinese counterparts for the massacre of company headquarters and No 9 platoon at Rezag La. To compensate for lack of guns, the artillery observation post officer at the Plateau, 2nd Lieutenant Goswami, had ordered 'intense' fire. It is not usual to fire guns at 'intense' rate, because the barrels get heated and worn out faster, the men are soon exhausted and the ammunition expenditure is unduly heavy. Further, since it involves fastest possible loading and laying, firing can be somewhat inaccurate. Young Goswami had, however, correctly appreciated this requirement in the present context, as also the capability of his men with a high standard of training and physical fitness, to fire accurately.

Artillery fire appeared to have blunted the initial onslaught. Chinese infantry suffered considerable casualties. The survivors had gone down to ground to save their lives. Our medium and light machine-gunners had also contributed in halting the attack. The riflemen, however, still held their fire. They were to start shooting when the assaulting troops approached nearer.

The Chinese commander now threw in a second echelon into the attack. Wave after wave of Chinese soldiers was seen rolling down from Black Hill. Chinese troops were also seen advancing to the Plateau along the nullahs, from the Spanggur Gap area. There appeared to be no shortage of troops.

The initial waves of the second echelon also suffered heavy casualties. By now the Gorkha riflemen too were getting their share of shooting, loading 5 rounds at a time in their outmoded .303 rifles⁴⁰. To thicken up our fire for the Plateau company, one tank troop had also been ordered to move out from the squadron 'hide' at the base of Gurung Hill, and in a matter of minutes, the armour boys had also joined in battle, to carry out some 'direct' shooting with high explosive shells.

The Chinese, however, kept advancing, in a desperate effort to engage the Plateau in close combat and by about 9 a.m. they had succeeded in penetrating our curtain of fire. The Gorkhas had drawn their khukris⁴¹ by then and were all set for a hand-to-hand fight.

The Chinese now charged the forward section of the first platoon position. The position was overrun. The company commander, Captain P.L. Kher, launched a quick counter-attack with the remaining two sections of the platoon and succeeded in recapturing the lost locality. Led by Naib Subedar Amar Bahadur Gurung⁴² this action was certainly daring and in the highest traditions of the Indian infantry. Nonetheless, this meagre force could not hold ground for long. Soon it was also overrun, along with the mortar position. The remaining troops on the Plateau continued to fight, but heavily outnumbered they could not be expected to hold on for long.

At this stage Captain Kher ordered the second platoon and the company headquarters on the Plateau to pull out. Though wounded now, Kher executed the withdrawal with great pluck and nerve. For some time he even asked for artillery fire on his own position; a bold decision taken only in grave situations. Direct shooting by the armour was also extremely effective. However, by 10 a.m. the Chinese had overrun the Plateau.

⁴⁰ The Indian Army has since been equipped with semi-automatic rifles with a far better kill capability.

⁴¹ Gorkhas seldom use the bayonet: they prefer to use a khukri, in hand-to-hand fighting.

⁴² Naib Subedar Gurung lost his life in the attack and was awarded posthumous Vir Chakra.

1/8 Gorkha had fought a gallant action. They must also be complimented for their coolness in that hour of trial, for the manner in which they were able to extricate themselves.

But the main heroes of the battle for the Plateau were the gunners, manning the artillery observation post, 2nd Lieutenant S.D. Goswami, Technical Assistant Gurdip Singh and signallers Naik Pritam Singh and Lance Naik Sarwan Singh.

Once again, young Goswami had made a correct appreciation of the situation. If the Gorkhas were to pull out from the Plateau, without getting totally involved in fighting against heavy odds (in keeping with their orders to inflict maximum casualties and withdraw) only close and intimate artillery support could enable them to do so, he thought. It meant manning the post as long as possible. And so he kept bringing down artillery fire, as the infantrymen pulled out in small tactical groups, using the oft-practised fire and movement tactics, within each group.

With the first platoon locality in Chinese hands, they were now advancing to assault the second platoon. But the gallant artillery observation post continued to occupy its small bunker in the first platoon locality, directing the fire of guns on the assaulting Chinese.

At this stage, Goswami was struck by a Chinese bullet and then by splinters from a hand grenade. Severely wounded, he lost consciousness. At this, Technical Assistant Gurdip Singh took over the control of artillery fire. Signal operators, Naik Pritam Singh and Lance Naik Sarwan Singh kept maintaining the post's communications with the guns. But they were soon spotted by the Chinese mopping-up troops, and killed. The Chinese also took 2nd Lieutenant Goswami for dead and left him alone. But on regaining consciousness, he mustered strength and during the hours of darkness managed to make good his escape to the Camel's Back, from where he was rushed to the field hospital, near the Brigade Command post. When I went to see him an hour after his arrival in the hospital, the delirious youngster

was muttering excitedly that he wanted to go back to the Plateau to fight the enemy. Goswami was awarded the Maha Vir Chakra. But the action at the Plateau rendered him a cripple, to walk on artificial legs for the rest of his life. He lost his legs due to exposure to cold. Vir Chakra was awarded to the Technical Assistant and Sena Medals to the two Signallers, all posthumous.

As mentioned earlier, Brigadier Raina had ordered that after collection of supplies from the Chushul airfield, and their delivery to units, the Brigade vehicles must be parked behind Chushul village, by evening. This would ensure the safety of the vehicle fleet in the event of an attack, since the parking area was outside the range of Chinese guns. All that remained forward of the village were the gun-towing and the Command post vehicles of the gunners and essential vehicles of armour and infantry. The vehicles were parked accordingly, on the morning of the attack.

With the fall of the Plateau and Rezang La, and keeping in view the scale of Chinese attack, it was apparent that our forward troops might soon have to withdraw to depth positions. Thereafter, if the Chinese decided to press their offensive further, there was only one axis along which we could have opposed the Chinese advance, till the outskirts of Leh, where 163 Infantry Brigade was already deployed to defend the Ladakh capital. This was the axis Chushul village-Tartar camp- Tangate-Changla Pass-Leh. No vehicles could be used on this route and troops would have had to be maintained by air-drops.

The safety of our vehicle fleet in the event of a withdrawal from Chushul now began to cause concern. Brigadier Raina called an urgent conference in the afternoon of 18 November, to evolve a plan of action.

We had the following options: Option 1: To retain the vehicles in Chushul village. Option 2: To move the vehicles immediately to Leh via Tsaka La-Dungti.

The supporters of the first option felt that the Chinese were unlikely to

cross their 1960 claim-line. This roughly ran along our main defences at Gurung Hill-Magar Hill-Rezang La. Since Chushul village was well beyond it, the vehicle fleet was safe, they argued. They further felt that to move the vehicles to Leh, via Tsaka La-Dungti, was fraught with danger; firstly, from Chinese artillery fire, as the vehicles moved through the Chushul valley, and secondly, from likely interception by Chinese infantry, which might roll down from Rezang La.

The supporters of the second option, (including me) had a different basis of reasoning. Firstly, it was wrong to base our decision on the assumption that Chinese would not cross their claim-line. As soldiers, we had no business to indulge in a political speculation on this vital issue. We must take a military decision in the front line. Secondly, there was little chances of the Chinese rolling down in strength to establish an effective block on the road to Tsaka la, below Rezang La, in view of the heavy casualties suffered by them at Rezang La. Thirdly, we need not be too apprehensive of the engagement of our vehicles by the Chinese artillery, as their gunners would be lucky to score a rare hit on moving vehicles. We must, therefore, be prepared to take a calculated risk, we argued. I volunteered to lead the vehicle convoy upto Tsaka La.

The Brigade Commander listened to both view points for a good half hour and finally chose the second option.

'My orders are that the brigade vehicles will be moved out, as soon as possible, to Leh, via Tsaka La-Dungti. Two sections of infantry and two recoilless guns from 13 Kumaon Battalion will accompany the convoy. Major Balwant Singh (the DAA and QMG) will organise the move,' said the Brigadier. That put an end to the discussion.

Organising the move involved marshalling of vehicles from their various parking sites, laying down their order of march, the distance that one vehicle was required to keep from the other (to avoid presenting a concentrated target) and so on. As to speed, I was sure, Balwant left it to

the drivers themselves. They obviously knew, that it meant going hell for leather till they reached Tsaka La. Beyond that place, all was safe and quiet. Balwant was a person of great drive and really got things moving within a short time.

Within about two hours, the entire convoy of over a hundred vehicles had gone past Tsaka La. Chinese artillery could damage none. Further, not a single vehicle had a mechanical break-down en route. With regard to the latter, Brigadier Raina complimented Captain Brij Khanna, his Electrical and Mechanical advisor at the Brigade Headquarters, and the Brigade workshop, for maintaining the vehicles so well. Brij had come rushing to Chushul from annual leave, without a recall telegram, on reading in newspapers about the Chinese activities in Ladakh.

Left with a mere handful of vehicles at Chushul, we heaved a sigh of relief, all set to carry out further fighting from our depth defence line, if it came to that.

Captain Surinder Singh, GSO 3, had also signalled the move of Brigade vehicles to the Divisional Headquarters. Prompt and accurate in staff work, he was an asset as my No.2 I learnt later at the Army Headquarters, New Delhi, that no one was ever in doubt regarding the happenings at Chushul. The credit goes to Surinder. He was, however, fretful that we were not being bold enough as he advocated a tank assault through the Spanggur Gap, as the battle developed. I did not blame his youthful mind for thinking on those lines, since tank officers are trained to be bold and aggressive in the employment of armour.

Assault on the Camel's Back

The Chinese had suffered considerable casualties during their attack on the Plateau. This was evident from the fact that, although they had the whole day of 18th during which to assault the Camel's Back, they did not do so. They wanted time to lick their wounds and to reorganise themselves

before attacking our troops at the Camel's Back. This position was, therefore, attacked only the next day.

At 2 p.m. on 19 November, the Chinese launched their troops into attack on the Camel's Back. As on 18 November, intense artillery and mortar shelling preceded the attack. Our guns, tanks and mortars also opened up in reply. Guns had, in fact, been active throughout the previous day taking on targets meriting engagement, registering new target areas and so on.

The Camel's Back was attacked from two directions. A force of about 200 Chinese rushed down into the assault from the Plateau. Another, approximately a 100 strong from the Spanggur Gap end, attacked uphill, along two nullahs. As in the case of the Chinese assault along nullahs in the battle of Rezang La, our troops gave the latter a bloody nose. But the assault from the Plateau succeeded in breaking through our defences.

By about 3.30 p.m. our platoon position at the Camel's Back had been overrun. The battle of Gurung Hill had ended and with it, the battle of Chushul.

The Chinese suffered an estimated 500 casualties in the battle of Gurung Hill, mainly through the sharp and consistent shooting by F troop, 38 Field Battery, 13 Field Regiment. The outcome of this battle would have been different had we had more guns available to support the infantry. This arm has expanded many fold since 1962. Nonetheless, in my opinion, we are still far short of artillery, which, in the words of Field Marshal Montgomery is a 'battle-winning factor'. Our military planners need to give it a rethinking and consider further expansion of this vital component of the Army.

26 bodies of Indian jawans with multiple wounds were later recovered from the battle ground at Gurung Hill by our visiting team.

A small monument has been erected in the Chushul valley to pay homage to the jawans who laid down their lives defending Gurung Hill.

Magar Hill Artillery

The gunners had provided most invaluable fire support during the two-day battle for Gurung Hill. The gun pits were piled with fired cartridges.

The Magar Hill guns also had their share of good shooting and battle thrill, though on a much lesser scale. Besides firing periodically at the Chinese positions opposite Magar Hill, two incidents in this area of the front, are worth mentioning.

It was just about getting dark on 18 November, when the Magar Hill troop observed a Chinese column rolling down into the valley from a nullah between Rezag La and Magar Hill. The troop was deployed about 1,800 metres away. This was not a happy development, as Major Joshi, the battery commander received this report on his telephone in the Brigade Command post.

What were the Chinese up to? Were they, flushed with their victory at Rezag La, now planning to move into the Chushul valley? Were they going to attack our gun position, or trying to intimidate our troops into pulling out? These two apprehensions naturally crossed one's mind, giving rise to immediate concern. What added to it was that the Brigade Commander, who had left for 1/8 Gorkha Rifles headquarters an hour or so earlier, could not be contacted.

Someone suggested that the guns should be pulled back immediately, before it was too late. But at this juncture it was unthinkable to do so. The Chinese could attack Magar Hill at any time, in which event, our troops would be deprived of artillery support.

However, a decision had to be taken fast and definite orders given to the young, gun position officer and his two veteran section commanders. Major Joshi and I conferred quickly and decided to order the troop to remain in its present location, to deploy all its four light machine-guns facing the direction of the Chinese advance and to prepare for 'open sight' shooting. This close range shooting can be deadly, provided the gunners keep their

nerve. We know that we could trust 13 Field Regiment to do that.

Seeing the guns face their way, the Chinese rushed back towards the nullah, never to threaten our guns again. I cannot help adding that the Sikh gunners must have twirled up their moustaches while they hurled a solid abuse at the Chinese infantry!

As a precaution, later, the Brigadier moved one platoon from the Brigade reserve (of one company) to defend the guns.

As a rule, things are generally never so bad in battle as they may appear to be at first. It mostly pays to give a cool second thought. Besides the vital consideration of providing fire support to Magar Hill, the withdrawal of guns to a safer place would have been the negation of the 'aggressive spirit', a fundamental attitude in battle.

As the battle raged on the Camel's Back, on the second day, the Chinese decided to move a battery of heavy mortars into the Spanggur Gap. The aim obviously was to gain more range for the mortars and so to engage targets in depth. It was certainly foolhardy of them to deploy mortars in the open, right under the nose of our Magar Hill artillery observation post, and in broad daylight.

The observation post officer was prompt to call for fire having worked out the accurate location of the Chinese deployment. The guns responded fast, to engage the lucrative target. One mortar received a direct hit. In panic, the Chinese rushed back to safety, carrying back their dead and wounded and the remaining mortar pieces, faster than they had come!

Gurung Hill and Magar Hill, as discussed earlier were our vital defences. With the former now in Chinese hands, they had obtained an access into the Chushul valley. Their next moves were likely to be to consolidate at Gurung Hill while concentrating additional troops behind Black Hill during the remaining hours of daylight of 19 November. During the night of 19/20 November, these troops would have assembled on Gurung Hill, to swoop

down the valley below during the early hours of the 20th. They would have overrun the guns, the armour, the headquarters of 1/8 Gorkha Rifles and 13 Kumaon, and then fanned out astride the airfield, thus cutting off our remaining troops deployed forward, east of the valley. Magar Hill and the Spanggur Gap would have, thereafter, been attacked singly or simultaneously, followed by an attack on troops of 1 Jat, deployed on the left flank of Gurung Hill.

In case the forward troops were to stay put in their present positions, It would have meant their annihilation. The task given to 114 Infantry Brigade was to inflict maximum casualties on the Chinese and to pull back with minimum losses to the Brigade. This had been well achieved. Over one thousand Chinese had been killed against 140 all ranks of the Brigade. Raina, therefore, decided to withdraw the forward troops to depth positions.

In the evening, over telephone I passed to all concerned the pre-arranged code word for withdrawal as well as the sequence of withdrawal and time and route to be followed by each unit. Every recipient acknowledged the order, entering it in his battle log book, for record. We did the same at the Brigade Headquarters. The withdrawal commenced at the last light.

The guns were the first to move. Infantry units were the last to pull out. Despite a pitch dark night, the withdrawal was executed without any mishap. There was no losing of way, no shooting into one another, no loss of equipment, no mad rush back for life. It was like a well rehearsed peace time demonstration of a withdrawal operation. 114 Infantry Brigade had not lost its nerve despite the reverses. Besides our losses at Rezang La and Gurung Hill, destruction of two recoilless guns due to enemy shelling in the Spanggur Gap and two non-runner tanks which we had to destroy ourselves, the entire Brigade equipment had been retrieved. Only the empty petrol and kerosene oil containers, the dummy guns and tanks, a few wooden huts and miscellaneous junk at the airfield stayed back. By the first light on 20 November, all troops had occupied their depth positions in areas

earlier allotted and prepared by respective units. The company of 5 Jat at Tsaka La fell back to Dungti to join 70 Infantry Brigade.

The first round had been over. We now lay waiting for the second.

The Ceasefire

There was to be no second round with the Chinese, however. Saner counsels had prevailed at Peking, for on 21 November, the bloody game of war was terminated. The Chinese had declared a ceasefire. The Chinese aggression had been a stab in the back. We now had them declare a unilateral ceasefire. As front-line soldiers, however, it would have been unwise to slacken our defensive preparations in depth positions. For us, therefore, there was to be no respite. The severity of winter increased with the passing of each day. Digging of new defences became increasingly difficult. The lowest recorded temperature was down to minus 40°C. And yet, it was imperative that we kept up the tempo of our defensive preparations.

The depth positions enjoyed certain tactical advantages vis-a- vis the Magar-Gurung Hills-Rezang La line. In the latter case, the Chinese had the advantage of attacking us from upper heights. Their routes of build up were also obscured from observation. For an attack on our depth positions, on the other hand, the Chinese would have had to traverse the open valley of Chushul. The valley provided a good killing ground to the defender.

Why did we at all occupy the latter defence line, to start with? The reasons were two-fold: firstly, the Chinese 1960 claim-line lay along this defence line. Not to occupy it physically would have meant handing over this part of our territory to the Chinese, without firing a shot. This was not politically acceptable. Secondly, our line of communication to Leh along the Chushul-Dungti-Leh road could have been cut off by the Chinese at will.

We had been in occupation of depth positions for some time, when orders were received by the Brigade to move further to the rear; to an area where

we could occupy a proper Brigade-defended sector, where a compact defence, so essential in mountain warfare, with depth, mutual support at least within each unit and good zones of observation, was possible. It was to be ground of our own choosing, unhemmed by considerations of holding a claim-line. The Border Road Organisation, India's finest road builders, had also completed construction of a road link between the new position and Leh. The higher headquarters indicated the general area of our new defence line to the Brigade, leaving Brigadier Raina to decide the detailed siting of units. The ceasefire had come to stay. We could afford to carry out this rearward move in phases.

And so we set out to occupy a third defensive position; back to the same drill all over again, of reconnaissances, of allotment of areas to battalions, of digging and blasting of rock at mountain tops, of carriage of defence stores to areas concerned, and finally, of occupation of defences by troops.

The Brigade vehicle convoy rolled back to Chushul from Leh and 114 Infantry Brigade carried out the rearward move.

It was early February 1963. The ceasefire had come to stay. The army in Ladakh had also settled down to some form of semi-peace-time routine. Villagers in forward areas, who had moved to the rear, had returned to their lands, along with their women and children, sheep, pony and yak. The Ladakhi countryside in these places had again started to breathe. Though not the same land of quiet and peace that it was before the aggression, Ladakh had for all intents and purposes returned to normal.

My tenure of service in Ladakh had also been completed. The strain of the past two years had adversely affected my health. Brigadier Raina was keen that my new posting should be to a good station and in an appointment where there was much less to do. He was kind to ask me for my choice of station. He had contacts in the Military Secretary's branch at Army Headquarters and hoped to fix up my posting.

Thanking him for taking special interest in me, I said that I would like to go to the Indian Military Academy at Dehra Dun, if possible. Here one could play hockey with the cadets and do a bit of riding and so on. But the 'Pandits' at Delhi thought differently. This officer has gained valuable experience in Ladakh and, as such, it would be useful to post him to the prestigious Military Operations Directorate in New Delhi, came the reply to Raina's letter.

To avoid further embarrassment, I requested Raina not to pursue the matter. Let me look at the rejection to Raina's request from another angle. Perhaps, I could be of some help in the Directorate, in the future planning for Ladakh, I said to myself.

Well, it did not exactly work out that way, since in the M.O. Directorate, I found a place in the Section dealing with the insurgency operations in Nagaland! Of Nagaland, I had no experience or clue.

A few emotional send offs and a warm, long hug from Raina, I said au revoir to 114 Infantry Brigade. And with it a memorable chapter of my life had come to an end.

THE IAF IN LADAKH

THE Sino-Indian war did not escalate into aerial warfare. The participation of our Air Force was, therefore, confined to transport support, that is, providing the Army with its requirement of petrol, supplies, military hardware, material for construction of bunkers, transportation of troops and evacuation of casualties.

There was a general shortage of transport aircraft in the country. Inclement weather of Ladakh placed further restrictions on the number of flying days. On the other hand, due to the complete absence of road communications, till the opening of the Srinagar-Leh road during mid-1962, troops had to be entirely maintained by air. The above factors placed tremendous responsibilities on our Air Force. Its task was indeed stupendous.

The aircraft available for the above tasks were the American Fairchild Packets based at the Srinagar and Pathankot airfields, the Soviet AN 12s based at Chandigarh and Ambala, and a flight of Soviet MI 8 helicopters located at Leh. The Packets could land at all airfields in Ladakh, the AN 12s operated at the Chushul and the Leh airfields and the MI 8 helicopters made use of every conceivable helipad.

The twin-engined Packets were old machines. To fly them at the high altitudes of Ladakh where the engine performance is much reduced and the terrain provides few places for forced landing was indeed hazardous. And yet our pilots kept flying, day in and day out, thus displaying doggedness of purpose and sustained courage of a high order. The Packet pilots, in fact, created world records by landing at Chushul and Daulat Beg Oldi.

In 1960, when it was decided to undertake a landing by a Packet at Chushul, the American manufacturers who were consulted prior to the attempt wrote back to say that the height of the landing strip, i.e. 13,000 ft.

(3,965 metres) mentioned by the Indian Air Force, was obviously an error in typing. According to them to land at such a high altitude was full of risk. But Air Vice Marshal Pinto and Wing Commander L.S. Grewal, two renowned pilots of those days, carried out a successful landing, defying the manufacturers' warning to the contrary.

Pinto was the Chief Air Representative in Jammu and Kashmir. He fully appreciated our problems and difficulties and went all out to achieve the challenging task of meeting the target of air maintenance worked out by the Army administrative staff. It is unfortunate that he did not live long. He died in a helicopter crash three years later, depriving the country of an outstanding military leader. Grewal rose to the rank of Air Marshal. This highly decorated airman (PVSM, AVSM, VrC) has now retired after 38 years of distinguished service. Recalling to me in 1982, the first landing at Chushul, the Air Marshal commented with nostalgia, 'It is a pity that the Chushul airfield now lies in no-man's land.' He also had high words of praise for Army engineers responsible for construction and maintenance of Ladakh airfields and for Army personnel employed in loading and unloading of aircraft at the two ends.

Packet landing at the improvised air-strip at Daulat Beg Oldi, two years later, was another feat in airmanship. Squadron Leader C.S. Raje (now Air Vice Marshal) who carried out the landing was awarded the Vir Chakra,

The daily routine of Packet pilots was exacting. It meant reporting at the airfield at 5 a.m., carrying out a landing sortie in the morning and an air-drop mission in the afternoon. The strain on the pilots and crew was immense. But there appeared to be no alternative, if troops in Ladakh were to be maintained to requisite strength. The acquisition of AN 12s from the USSR in 1960 was, therefore, greeted with great enthusiasm and relief. In our subsequent build-up of troops in Ladakh, the brunt was then borne by these aircraft.

The AN 12s could land at Leh with comparative ease. But landing at the

Chushul airfield required considerable skill. Wing Commander T.N. Gadiok,⁴³ a veteran pilot on AN 12s in Ladakh said, 'Though nearly 4,000 yards long, the dusty airfield at Chushul was a nightmare for the pilots. It could be approached either from Dungti or from the Spanggur Lake end. Often the approach from Dungti was covered by a blanket of low cloud. It, therefore, necessitated a spiral descent through clouds over the lake and a direct approach, regardless of the wind speed and its direction over the airfield. The dusty surface got polarised over a period of time, and was helpful in arresting the speed of the aircraft after touch-down; but its ingress into the under-carriage system made our technicians' jobs difficult. They referred to it as "Chushul Talcum".'

Like the Packets, the AN 12s also achieved an incredible feat. This, as mentioned earlier, was the landing of AMX tanks at Chushul, just before the battle. AN 12s were not equipped to transport these tanks. It required considerable improvisation. to load them, while keeping in view the aircraft's centre of gravity. Taking off and landing with such a load also required great skill and courage. The man who volunteered to undertake this mission was Wing Commander Chandan Singh.⁴⁴ Quiet and soft spoken, he was a highly respected pilot. Even the Russians must have been surprised to learn of the AMXs landing at Chushul in their AN 12s.

M[8 helicopter flight located at Leh did useful work in casualty evacuation and in meeting other emergent requirements of small isolated posts. Helicopters were also employed in relief of troops at our post in the Galwan valley. Helicopter pilots were both skilful and courageous. But they tended to be rather independent minded, since Headquarters 114 Infantry Brigade had no authority to exercise any control over their functioning. Frankly, we had to be careful not to rub them on the wrong side, even inadvertently. Be

⁴³ Gadiok retired as an Air Marshal with a PVSM for his distinguished services to the Indian Air Force.

⁴⁴ A recipient of MVC, AVSM, VrC, Chandan Singh retired from the Air Force as Air Vice Marshal. He won his latter award for landing the AMX tanks at Chushul.

that as it may, the Air Force's participation in Ladakh was complete.

As a member of 114 Infantry Brigade I must record my grateful thanks to the Air Force for its selfless and untiring efforts to keep us going despite the hazards of flying.

I must, however, make one comment on the employment of our Air Force, and that is our failure to utilise the inbuilt facility of photo cover from AN 12 aircraft. Because of the barrier of terrain, it was difficult to make accurate visual observations of the Chinese build-up. Had we equipped these aircraft with cameras, every sortie would have provided valuable information which would have made it so much simpler to determine the Chinese intentions.

A POLITICO-MILITARY ANALYSIS

OUR confrontation with China started from the time that India learnt of the surreptitious construction of the Aksai Chin road through Indian territory. With an outward facade of the 'Bhai-Bhai' relationship, the Chinese government had ordered its engineers to bulldoze their way through the centuries old good neighbourly relations between the two countries. Besides enhancing China's military capability in Sinkiang facing the Russian border, this strategic highway enabled her to exercise a greater control over Tibet. More important for India, it improved China's armed posture against our northern borders in the Ladakh region. China could now move troops against India, not only from the mainland, via Lhasa, but also from Sinkiang, the latter route being both shorter and easier for military movement.

The Indian Army was inducted into Ladakh in April 1960, replacing the border police. In early 1962, the Government took a major political decision to order the Army to edge as far forward as possible, to assert India's territorial rights in Ladakh. The forward policy brought us 'eye-ball to eye-ball' with the Chinese.

Taking advantage of their military superiority the Chinese initially confronted our troops with a show of force to intimidate them to vacate their newly occupied posts. When these tactics yielded no result, they resorted to small arm firing at our patrols, or on troops collecting supplies dropped by the Indian Air Force. Then followed the overwhelming encirclement of our post in the Galwan valley. The balloon finally went up on the night of 19/20 October 1962, with China launching massive attacks against our small posts. Indian troops fought bravely and in the process suffered considerable casualties. But as they were vastly outnumbered and out-gunned, it was out of the question to expect them to halt the Chinese advance. The finale to the bloody drama in Ladakh came in the battle of Chushul, followed by a

unilateral ceasefire by the Chinese.

Thus ended this unhappy chapter in India's post-Independence history. The country had been caught militarily unprepared with the cream of India's youth laying down their lives in this unequal combat. I do sincerely hope, however, that history will not blame the front-line officers and men for the 1962 debacle. They were as brave and steadfast in Ladakh, as they had been on the battle-fields of Flanders, Mesopotamia, India's North-West Frontier, Burma, Africa, Europe and elsewhere fighting under the British.

Let us analyse the reasons that led to the Army's reverse. These were basically three:

Firstly, a wrong assessment of China's aims and intentions by India's political leaders according to whom China was not expected to use military force to resolve the border dispute. They put greater faith in past history and failed to take into account that the new regime which ruled China had no such sentiments, more so when the borders were not properly demarcated. They also totally ignored military indications, e.g. construction of new roads on our borders and concentration of troops in areas where never before in history had any troops been positioned. For this faulty assessment, the civil intelligence set-up was as much responsible as the politicians. Indian leaders of the day were great sons of the country. They were men of vision, were intensely patriotic and dedicated. They possessed an outstanding grasp of international affairs. But nonetheless, they made this grave error of judgement. Furthermore, with no military background, they could not well appreciate the military problem, i.e. the quantum of logistic support required, on the one hand, and the difficult area of operations with the lack of road communications, on the other. Our leaders did not realise that with this basic drawback, it was wrong to order the Army forward, should the cold war turn hot. The same applied to the members of the Opposition and Parliament in general.

Secondly, the failure on the part of Army High Command to stand up to the

politicians, to tell them 'forcefully and categorically' that in view of the adverse factors, the Army would be unprepared to meet a Chinese attack; that even otherwise, in case the two armies were to confront each other, one firing incident could lead to another, thus setting up a chain reaction.

Thirdly, some senior Army commanders themselves looked at the military problem with a political eye, the eye which saw no possibility of the Chinese resorting to force of arms and, if at all, perhaps on a very limited scale. In consequence the Army top brass of the day accepted the implementation of the Forward Policy Directive. Having once committed themselves, they found it difficult to get out of it.

This then was the tragedy of 1962. An unprepared army, thereafter, committed battle- field mistakes, particularly in NEFA, with generals blaming one another for bad decision-making and tactical handling of troops.

If only there had been a better knowledge and awareness of India's defence unpreparedness along the northern borders, in the country's Parliament, the decision to adopt the Forward Policy Directive could, perhaps, have been averted. As it was, the political appreciation of China had been totally wrong. Loud protests from the Opposition to deal firmly and promptly with the Chinese made matters worse.

As mentioned earlier, able-bodied Ladakhis had offered their services to help the Army in the defence of Ladakh, to act as porters, help prepare defences and to fight alongside the jawans, given weapons and some training. Hardy, acclimatised, charged with patriotic zeal to defend Ladakh, the Army could have utilised this manpower to considerable advantage. But we had not catered for the employment of civilians in the battle zone, in our normal peace-time planning. It was, therefore, too late to organise them, to issue them arms, digging implements and so on, once the hostilities had actually begun.

Then we had a force of the Indo-Tibetan Border Police (ITBP) strung in small posts along the border. They were fully acclimatised trained in basic military tactics, including the handling of small arms, and had good knowledge of the ground. Their primary task was to gather intelligence. In the event of war, they were to augment the strength of the Army. With the outbreak of hostilities, they had been placed under the Army's operational control. This last minute switch over did not help.

I recall a discussion at Brigade Headquarters a few days before the battle of Chushul regarding the employment of a platoon of the ITBP, located at a place called Tsogsalu, between Lukung and Hot Springs. The Brigade Commander suggested that the platoon be pulled back and deployed alongside the Army. But the concerned battalion commander was hesitant for the reason that he had no idea of their state of morale or combat capability. The platoon finally remained unutilised. In fact no troops of the ITBP took part in the fighting in Ladakh.

Since 1962, the strength of our border police forces has been gradually increasing. We now have another agency, the Border Security Force, an organisation much larger than the ITBP. It is for consideration whether the existing command and control structure of these para-military forces can give the country their requisite military value in the event of war.

Let me come to the major mistakes committed by the Army, during handling of Ladakh operations which caused greater loss of life.

The first mistake was with regard to the fighting that took place in the Despang plains and in other sectors when the Chinese launched their initial attacks. The order received from the higher authorities was to 'fight to the last man and last round'. It was wrong to give this order to troops deployed in indefensible penny-packets. The order is valid when the task allotted has been assessed to be within the means of the recipient. But with the Chinese around in overwhelming numbers, that was obviously not the case. The order would have also been justifiable if these small posts had an important

military task which had a close bearing on the future conduct of operations, or meant the saving of more lives elsewhere. Such a situation did not exist. Was this order then given to impress the Chinese of our determination to fight, or to impress the politicians of the high morale of troops? The order 'fight to the last man and last round' cost us many valuable lives. Such orders only shake the confidence of men in their senior officers.

It was only in December 1981 that I learnt from Maj General D.K. Palit, VrC., (Retd)⁴⁵, who was then the Director of Military

General Palit is amongst the foremost military thinkers and writers in India today.

Operations at Army Headquarters in 1962 that it took him some effort to persuade the Chief of the Army Staff to cancel this order, and to allow the troops to regroup for further fighting in strength. 114 Infantry Brigade owes him a word of thanks. But the Chief of the Army Staff who initially gave such an order, and other senior commanders down the chain, who did not strongly protest, must be held responsible for the unnecessary loss of life.

The second mistake was in relation to the battle at Rezang La. The defenders of Rezang La fought a heroic battle, the like of which one comes across but rarely in the annals of warfare. Attacked initially from the front and then from the flanks and rear, almost a whole company of Ahirs of 13 Kumaon had made the supreme sacrifice. Isolated from the rest of the brigade and without any supporting artillery, we had, however, given these gallant men an unfair deal to carry out their task, which, as mentioned earlier, was to inflict maximum casualties on the Chinese and then withdraw.

Realising the isolated position that troops at Rezang La was to occupy, and the fact that no guns could possibly be spared out of just 8 guns forming the field battery allotted to the Brigade, the Brigade Commander had requested

for additional artillery for Rezang La. But this request was turned down by the Divisional Headquarters. And so, Major Shaitan Singh and his men were left to their section of 3-inch mortars to fend for themselves. I also do not absolve myself of the mistake as the Brigade Major, for not having urged my Brigade Commander, as forcefully as possible, to press for artillery support for Rezang La.

There were, in Ladakh, two field batteries of 13 Field Regiment, besides the one with us at Chushul. One battery was with the brigade at Dungti and the other, with the brigade at Leh. The Divisional Commander should have moved one of these two to the Chushul Sector. Had this been done, our troops at Rezang La would not only have inflicted more casualties on the Chinese, but the guns would have also provided the company commander with a better opportunity to extricate his men, as was done at Gurung Hill. The need for artillery support was all the more greater at Rezang La, that being an isolated position. In the absence of artillery support, and when attacked from all directions, C company had been faced with one of the two alternatives: either to surrender or to fight to the bitter end. The proud Ahir chose the latter course.

Artillery is a mobile arm, given a reasonable road axis for movement. This was available between Dungti and Chushul. Guns could, therefore, have been easily moved upto Tsaka La, where we already had a company of infantry deployed. The movement time, along the road Dungti- Tsaka La was not more than an hour. Only the dumping of ammunition was more time- consuming. This could have been done earlier. With a measure of flank protection to guard against any Chinese rolling down from the eastern range of mountains to attack the gun position, the safety of guns could have also been ensured. Further, at any point of time, guns could have been pulled back to Dungti, as was done in the case of the infantry company at Tsaka La. The loss of unexpended artillery ammunition in this event was, of course, of little consequence. But the Divisional Headquarters failed to exploit the mobility of guns, keeping rigidly to the initial allotment of one

field battery per infantry brigade. Even though no build-up of the enemy was taking place opposite Dungti, leave aside any threat to Leh.

I regret to say that formation commanders, in general, are very touchy in having to part with the guns allotted to them. Whereas, this attitude is to an extent understandable, it must be curbed if we are to exploit fully the artillery's mobility in the battle- field.

There is also the need to expand this arm of the Service, as earlier brought out. We all talk about the importance of artillery, but one can shout from the top roof and say that we are still very much short of it. Is it that in our actual planning in peace time, we tend to be parochial without, perhaps, realising that we are being so. Guns are valuable both to the infantry and armour. They are needed everywhere. Let me put in simple terms. We need to double the amount of fire power that we are able to provide our armour and infantry today. Requiring much less deployment area, our need is for more multi-barrelled rocket artillery.

The third mistake was the inadequate provisioning of proper equipment for fast digging of trenches, more so in the areas where the ground was hard and rocky. As such, it had not been possible to prepare good fire trenches, fox holes and inter-linking trenches, particularly in the Chushul area, where troops were required to prepare defences against time. Similarly, there was a shortage of ballis and sandbags to provide overhead protection, at least to important bunkers. In consequence troops suffered considerable casualties on account of enemy shelling.

INDIA'S SECURITY ENVIRONMENT

IN the Asian quadrant of the international chess-board, the two super powers played their first hand in Korea, and later in Vietnam; the USA with direct involvement and the USSR by supply of military hardware. A few years later, both the USA and the USSR commenced building up a naval presence in the Indian Ocean, ignoring loud and persistent protests from the littoral states. The compelling reason in the case of the USA was to ensure a continued flow of the Middle-East oil for the Western Alliance in the event of war. The USSR retaliated in order to deny this vital item to the West. It also gave her a suitable opportunity to enter the warm waters of the Indian Ocean for which she had striven for long. Thus respective spheres of influence were developed by both super powers in West Asia, Iran and in nearby African countries, to obtain base facilities, not only for ships at sea, but also to improve their military stance in general. An important step forward in this regard was the acquisition by the USA of the island of Diego Garcia, from the United Kingdom as a strategic base in depth.

In December 1979, troops of the Soviet Union entered Afghanistan and occupied the country. However, unethical be the occupation of Afghanistan, Russia had killed two birds with one stone. She had countered Diego Garcia by establishing a forward base, closer to a possible area of super power confrontation. At the same time, she had checked a spill-over of Muslim fundamentalism, which had gained in strength with Iran's Khomeini coming to power, into her soft under-belly of the Central Asian republics consisting of Muslims.

But none of the above events, i.e. wars in the Far East, the induction of naval fleets in the Indian Ocean or the occupation of Afghanistan led to a direct military confrontation between the super powers. They withdrew from the brink.

Before proceeding further, let us review the developments over the years of the international politico-military line-up in South Asia as they affect India's security.

Starting from the days when President Nixon of the USA first visited China in February 1972, to commence a process of rapprochement, the two countries have been gradually improving relations with each other. In his book, *The Real War*, Richard Nixon refers to his hand-shake with Chou En-lai on alighting from the presidential plane as a 'turning point in history'. Since this visit by Nixon, Sino-US relations began to improve gradually. It is reported that by 1979 the USA had set up missile monitoring stations in Sinkiang, facing the Soviet Union. Despite the Taiwan irritant, in today's situation, the two countries have almost become collaborators, with the USA willing to make available technical know-how for the production of sophisticated military hardware, be it on a limited scale. China which was frequently referred to by the Americans as the 'yellow peril' during the 'fifties and the 'sixties, has become the 'yellow pearl'!

In Sino-Pakistan relations, much has happened during the past two decades. The two countries have developed very close relations, both politically and militarily. Besides the provision of military hardware to the extent that China can afford, the Chinese have constructed the strategic highway, skirting the Karakoram Pass, which links the two countries on India's north. The Karakoram highway may be said to contain a 'Chinese sword in a Pakistani sheath'.

During the days of General Eisenhower and Dulles, when the USA first commenced arms supplies to Pakistan, these leaders had assured India of suitable action against Pakistan, should American arms be used against India. The action taken against that country was positive, at least to the extent that further supply of military hardware to her was stopped. Then followed a distinct US tilt towards Pakistan, during the Nixon-Kissinger era. An American naval task force was ordered to sail from the Tonkin Bay to the

Bay of Bengal to coerce India during the 1971 Indo-Pakistan war.

Fortunately, however, with superior political handling and generalship, East Pakistan had fallen before the arrival of the US task force. This unfriendly act on the part of the American administration was a shock to India. But since the US Congress had advocated restraint in the US involvement, it helped counter-balance India's deep resentment on this issue. During President Carter's regime, in fact, Indo-US relations improved markedly.

In 1955, Mr Bulganin and Mr Khrushchev visited India. This visit of the Soviet leaders almost coincided with the development of the Sino- Soviet rift, though it had not surfaced openly as yet. The Russians had, however, taken a long-term perspective of their national interests and extended their hand of friendship to India. India gave a welcome response to the Soviet gesture, in keeping with her policy of maintaining friendly relations with all countries. To Soviet Russia, friendship with India was important. While India's huge population was a drag on her economic development, in Soviet eyes it was also a great potential that could be used if Russia had to face a military confrontation with China. To India it meant befriending a country advanced in modern technology. To that extent, India had friendly ties equally with the USA. Be that as it may, the Indo-Soviet friendship gradually developed. The Soviet Union has helped India with military equipment and has provided technological assistance in many spheres of India's military and economic progress. She has supported India at international forums on almost all issues, including Kashmir. In 1971, the two countries signed a Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation. The Indo-Soviet friendship has stood the test of time.

With the above backdrop, let us come to the present times and consider the latest development that has taken place affecting India's national interests and defence.

Spurred by the urgency to contain the Soviet Union, following the occupation of Afghanistan, more so with the loss of Iran (Turkey being far

removed from the scene) President Reagan and General Haig decided, towards the middle of 1981, to arm Pakistan heavily. In taking this decision, the USA did not hesitate even to the waiver of the Symington Amendment in Pakistan's favour. Further, even the US Congress was involved to support the arming of Pakistan. It must be noted with regret, however, that in her decision to arm Pakistan, America today almost openly acknowledges that military aid to Pakistan is meant not only against the Soviet Union, but also against India. The Indo-US relations, therefore, appear to have taken an unfriendly turn, far exceeding the situation that prevailed in 1971.

To sum up, the USA, China and Pakistan have apparently lined up against the Soviet Union and India. In consequence, India, which had fostered, nourished and cherished non-alignment and non-interference in the internal affairs of other countries, has been forced into an armament race of a high magnitude. The fact of the matter is that in the super power rivalry at the global level, America dislikes the close and friendly relations that have developed between India and the Soviet Union. China, which harbours an ambition for supermacy, at least in Asia at this point of time, also wants to break-up this friendship.

The USA overlooks the fact that India has also always endeavoured to maintain friendly relations with her, that the Indo- Soviet treaty of Friendship and Cooperation is not aimed against any country. China too forgets India's constant support to her for UN membership. Whereas every country goes by its self- interests in the matter of foreign policy, one may say that it is a strange world in which we live. The world's most powerful democracy has lined up against the world's largest, and that China gave 'evil for good', in the words of Nehru in 1962.

India has often been called a satellite-cum-military ally of the Soviet Union by the US and Chinese propagandists. This is both unfair and mischievous, India is a regional power in her own right, having made a technological progress of a fairly high order, both in economic and military spheres. With

regard to military equipment, the country produces a wide range of weaponry, including ships, tanks, guns and aircraft, and has made a great stride in the field of electronics. India's emphasis is on indigenous production, as highlighted by General Krishna Rao, in his Army Day Speech to troops in January 1982. Dependence on foreign procurement is only to the extent that she cannot help, in the interest of national defence. The time is not too far when India would be militarily self-sufficient, almost totally. Above all, India is committed to the concept of non-alignment, given to her by that great visionary, Jawaharlal Nehru. It is not in an outburst of emotion or national pride when I say that given a period of peace and tranquillity, India would play a more positive role through non-alignment in a world threatened too frequently by war.

Having slightly digressed from my theme, i.e. the USA-China-Pakistan line-up, let us consider why Pakistan has joined as the third member of the trio. The primary reason for this appears to be a hatred for India and, inter alia, constant search for an opportunity to what she considers a settling of old scores.

On this subject of Indo-Pak relations, an opposite view expressed in some quarters must also be stated. According to this school of thought, Pakistan has always looked for military aid basically for self-defence, with the big neighbour, India, sitting next door; that Pakistani leaders doubt India's acceptance of Pakistan as an independent entity; that India would, therefore, endeavour to engulf Pakistan within the Indian Union, one day or the other. One finds it difficult to accept this view for four main reasons. Firstly, going by past experience, it is Pakistan that has been the aggressor and not India. If anything, India has been magnanimous in giving back large parts of Pakistan territory captured by her soldiers with so much loss of blood. Secondly, the dismemberment of East Pakistan during the 1971 war and the creation of Bangladesh was Pakistan's own doing, because of the political and economic alienation of her eastern wing. Bangladesh today is a sovereign independent country, and by no means an Indian dependent or

satellite. Thirdly, as repeatedly declared by the Indian Government, the stability of Pakistan is in the overall national interests of India. This makes strategic sense, more so in the current international environment. And fourthly, both India and Pakistan being economically poor, their need of the hour is the removal of poverty as opposed to an armament race.

Two excellent and illuminating articles, one by Mr K, Subramaniam, Head of the Indian Institute of Strategic Studies, and the other by Mr Madhu Limaye, an eminent parliamentarian, appearing in The Illustrated Weekly of India in December 1981, have focussed public attention on the hostile environment in which India finds herself today. Both authors have expressed apprehensions on the possibility of a military adventure by Pakistan's military junta and the need to be vigilant and militarily prepared, Mr Subramaniam has even hinted at the possibility of a direct US intervention in Pakistan's favour in the event of an Indo-Pakistan war, should things not go too well for the latter.

As for China, she may, to start with, display a show of force on India's northern frontiers, to pin down our forces deployed opposite Tibet. But in case Pakistan was fighting a losing war, Chinese intervention could well be expected.

Let us take the projection a step further. Will Soviet Russia, sitting next door in Afghanistan afford to remain a silent spectator in the above situation? It does not appear conceivable that she would.

In the book titled World War 3, a commendable analysis based on today's international situation has been carried out by a team of experts. Under the caption, 'Shadow of the Super Powers', Lawrence Freedman, an expert in international affairs and strategic studies, has this to say. "If world war 3 begins, it is unlikely to be a conscious decision of super power leaders. More likely they will be dragged into it by ambitious and irresponsible clients in circumstances they, the super powers, do not fully understand." This assessment aptly fits into the situation that obtains today in South Asia,

with the promised massive supply of military hardware to Pakistan by the USA. Whereas the final scores between the super powers would still be settled on the soil of Europe, it is the Indian sub-continent, Afghanistan, Iran and Central Asia that may well face the initial onslaught.

General Zia-ul-Haq of Pakistan has obviously considered the pros and cons of accepting US military aid. The horrible prospects of a third world war, and the untold misery and destruction that it would bring to his country by virtue of its size and geographical location, must have been fully taken into account. What then could be the prime reason for accepting the massive military aid that has been offered by the USA? Is it the fear of a Soviet invasion of Pakistan? The answer appears to be in the negative. The Soviet Union had shrewdly calculated, while entering Afghanistan, that in the cold war context for the Middle East oil, the USA would say, 'thus far and no more'. In the crystal-gazing carried out by the military junta in Pakistan, the likelihood of a third world war, therefore, appears to be a very remote possibility. The junta's appreciation seems to be that, despite the arming of Pakistan and, inter alia, the country having to give military bases to the USA, in due course, both Soviet Union and America would stop short of actual military confrontation-as has been the case in the past. But with Pakistan having acquired the requisite military build-up, she could afford to gamble into an attack across the Indian borders; not with a view to a long-drawn-out war aimed at reaching the plains of Central India, but a short war of high intensity, with limited objectives. In case, Pakistan emerges the victor, capturing portions of Indian territory, including parts of Kashmir and Ladakh, Pakistani Military would have wiped out its shame of defeat of 1971, and General Zia-ul-Haq placed firmly in the saddle.

In view of the above analysis, Shrimati Indira Gandhi's warnings and apprehensions that the arming of Pakistan by USA constitutes a threat to the security of India should not be taken as political rhetoric to divert the people's attention from our present problems and shortcomings. In any case, with her charisma and the respect that the Indian masses have given

her, she does not need to indulge in such tactics.

The historic outpost of Kashmir would again come to play a vital role and the defence of Ladakh assume greater military importance than ever before; more so, if China actively joins hands with Pakistan. Historically, Ladakh has been invaded by Balti Muslims from the north. The Sokpos had captured Leh advancing from the direction of Rudok in the east.

During the 1947-48 war, Pakistan had attacked Ladakh from the north via Skardu and the Chinese from Rudok at Chushul, in 1962. An attack from the direction of Tashigong had also been expected in 1962 for which 70 Infantry Brigade had been deployed in the Dungti area.

In the event of a future war, history is likely to repeat itself with enemy attacks in Ladakh from the north, east and south. The only significant change that has taken place from the past is that, besides greater destructive capability of present-day warfare, the construction of the Sinkiang and Karakoram highways would make Ladakh a much bloodier battle-ground than ever before. Leh, Kargil and Zoji La would again be threatened and, in case they fall into enemy hands, India would no doubt produce another Rajinder Singh to evict the aggressor from Zoji La and a Thimmaya to re-establish the security of Leh. One who comes by the sword, goes down by the sword, is the verdict of history.

To complete the setting, let me add the possibility of Soviet Russia's active participation at one stage or the other. The words of Khrushchev, 'You can climb to the top of the mountains and shout to us,' uttered during his visit to Kashmir in 1955, may prove to be prophetic. The chain-reaction thus set in motion by the arming of Pakistan, rather than wean away India from the Soviet Union, would force her out of non-alignment at gunpoint!

Whatever the future actually has in store, it would be apt to remind ourselves of a saying in Russian: 'A hundred variations were worked out, but war came according to the 101st.' It certainly is difficult to foresee how

a war may start. One common factor, however, is the military preparedness of a country. With this basic thought, may I take the reader to the last chapter of this book.