

Battle of Rezang La

Introduction

The India-China War of 1962 is one of the landmark events in India's post-independence history. The war had an overbearing implication on India's foreign policy and military affairs.

India and China were not bordering neighbours until China occupied Tibet in 1951 and established its effective control in Lhasa. For centuries, Tibet was the buffer that kept India and China geographically apart.

On 29 April 1954, India and China enunciated the Panchsheel, the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence. The two sides emphasized that the Five Principles of mutual respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity, mutual non-aggression, non-interference in each other's internal affairs, equality and mutual benefit, and peaceful coexistence, which were jointly initiated by India and China, which have proved full of vitality through the best of history, constitute the basic guiding principles for good relations between states.¹

However, the expansionist mindset soon took over the narrative and Tibet became a bone of contention between the two new neighbours across the hitherto peaceful Himalayan borderland. After the occupation of Tibet by the Chinese the Tibetans were not reconciled and there was no smooth functioning of the Chinese controlled Tibetan administration. Even the Dalai Lama's position was systematically undermined by the Chinese. It was under these circumstances that the Dalai Lama reportedly left Lhasa on March 17, 1959 unannounced and headed towards Lokha. The Dalai Lama and his entourage arrived in India on March 31, 1959.²

China started constructing roads into Tibet from Sinkiang in 1956. Maps released in China claimed Chinese territory for the Aksai Chin and a large portion of the region South of the McMahon Line. India insisted that China first had to evacuate the Aksai Chin before the Indo-Tibet border be jointly drawn. China commenced intrusion into Indian territory because it was not willing to evacuate.

India enacted the "Forward Policy" in 1960, which was aimed to prevent Chinese incursions into Indian territory by establishing Indian stations near the Sino-Indian boundary. The Forward Policy was predicated on the belief that China would refrain from attacking positions held by India.³ In reaction to the Forward Policy, China started gradually enhancing her road infrastructure leading to the border and strengthening her military positions along the border.⁴ On 30 April 1962, the Chinese government threatened to impose an extension of the patrolling along the entire boundary. Chinese forces surrounded an Indian position in the Galwan Valley in July 1962. The two sides clashed at Pangong Lake. They also continued to set up a number of new military posts in the Ladakh region. China stepped up its aggressive military actions along the Indian border in the early months of 1962. Up until 08 September 1962, no Chinese forces had crossed the Eastern Sector's highest watershed ridge, which serves as the traditional

¹ Panchsheel, External Publicity Division, Ministry Of External Affairs

Government Of India, https://www.mea.gov.in/Uploads/PublicationDocs/191_panchsheel.pdf

² Avtar Singh Bhasin India-China Relations 1947-2000: A Documentary Study (Five Volumes), Geetika Publishers 2018

³ Annual Report of the Ministry of External Affairs For 1962-63 <https://mealib.nic.in/?pdf2489?000>

⁴ https://www.mea.gov.in/Uploads/PublicationDocs/23460_IWM_Book_11-06-2014_.pdf

border between China and India. On 08 September 1962, Chinese forces breached the border in the Northwest corner of NEFA.⁵

Meanwhile, the Indian government repeatedly recommended that Chinese forces withdraw east of the traditional international boundary and Indian forces withdraw west of the Chinese claim line as depicted on Chinese maps in order to completely eliminate the possibility of military confrontations in the Ladakh region. This would set the stage for amicable negotiations between the two governments on the boundary dispute. Furthermore, India agreed to let Chinese civilian traffic to continue using the Aksai Chin road. This demonstrated India's sincere intention to resolve the boundary dispute.⁶

The first India-China War broke out on 20 October 1962, when China launched attacks simultaneously in the Eastern and Western sectors of the India-China border, putting an end to any chance of resolving the conflict in line with accepted international norms.

The Battle of Rezang La

The first phase of the Chinese attack in the western sector commenced on 20 October and concluded on 28 October. The Chinese forces had taken control of the Kailash Range, which dominated the eastern bank of the Indus Valley. In this sub-sector, all seven Indian outposts were destroyed, and New Demchok was captured. In this sector, the Chinese claimed to have recaptured 1900 square kilometers of territory.⁷



Soldiers of 13 Kumaon, days before the Battle of Rezang La

Source: Outlook India

On 24 October 1962, four days after the Chinese massive attack, the Chinese Government proposed that the two countries should agree to respect 'the line of actual control' as defined by China and that the Armed Forces of each side should withdraw 20 Kilometres from this line

⁵ *ibid*

⁶ *ibid*

⁷ P. J. S. Sandhu (Editor), 1962: A View from the Other Side of the Hill, USI Study, VIJ Books (India) Pvt Ltd (30 August 2015)

and disengage. When these Chinese proposals which were plainly terms of surrender were not accepted by India, China continued her invasion of Indian territory and launched further massive attacks on Jang, Walong, Tawang, Se La, Bomdi La and other places in NEFA and on Indian posts in the Chip Chap, Galwan and Chang Chenmo valleys and the Pangong-Spanggur Lake areas in Ladakh).⁸

However, there was a lull in fighting in the Western Sector from 29 October – 17 November 1962. On the Indian side, this period was utilised to organise the defence of Leh and to strengthen the defensive posture in the Chushul sub-sector. In November 1962, 13 KUMAON was deployed at Magar Hill and Rezang La in Chushul Sector, Eastern Ladakh, as part of 114 Infantry Brigade commanded by Brigadier (later General) TN Raina. 13 KUMAON looked after the southern flank with two companies on Magar Hill, a company with a section of 3 inch Mortars at Rezang La Hill and the Battalion Headquarters with one Company at Track Junction.⁹

The two strongholds were defended by a Platoon each. The Company Headquarters and the third Platoon were deployed on a height Point 5150 between the two strongholds. The total strength including the supporting elements of mortars, Heavy Machine Guns and Rocket Launchers was about 130 all ranks.¹⁰

The KUMAON Regiment is one of the most decorated infantry regiments of the Indian Army. The Regiment traces its origins to the 18th Century and has fought in every major campaign of the British Indian Army and the Indian Army, including the two World Wars. Three Army Chiefs belonged to the KUMAON Regiment General SM Srinagesh, General KS Thimayya, DSO, and General TN Raina, MVC, SM. The KUMAON Regiment gets its recruits from Kumaonis of Kumaon Division and Ahirs from the plains. The 13 Battalion has the distinction of being the first raising in the Regiment after Independence. The unit began to form at Kanpur on 05 August 1948 under Lieutenant Colonel HC Taylor, the composition being Kumaonis and Ahirs in equal proportion. By 01 July of the following year, the unit was ready to take its place beside other infantry Battalions of the Indian Army and joined 202 Infantry Brigade at Barrackpore. A couple of months later it moved to Fort William (Calcutta).¹¹

The Second Phase of Attack in the Western Sector

The second Phase of the attack began on 17 November 1962. The attacking troops commenced their move from assembly area near Reqing on respective routes – North and South. The Southern route was longer and difficult; it took them nine hours to cover about eight km and could reach their base for launching the attack on 18 November. The northern group did the approach march in vehicles moving without lights and dismounted after reaching the foothills of Point 5580, and thereafter moved up the mountain to reach their point for launching the attack. 9th Company of the 10th Regiment penetrated between ‘Indian Strongholds No. 7 and 8’ and cut off the route of withdrawal of ‘Indian No. 8 and 9 Strongholds’, thus achieving the encirclement of Indian positions, as also prevent reinforcements. The Chinese had deployed

⁸ Annual Report of the Ministry of External Affairs For 1962-63 <https://mealib.nic.in/?pdf2489?000>

⁹ P. J. S. Sandhu (Editor), 1962: A View from the Other Side of the Hill, VIJ Books (India) Pty Ltd (30 August 2015)

¹⁰ *ibid*

¹¹ Praval, K. C. (Karam Chand). (1976). Valour triumphs : a history of the Kumaon Regiment / K. C. Praval. Faridabad : Thomson Press (India)

determined, multi-directional attacks against the isolated forward Posts, employing their famous human wave tactics.¹²

A patrol from 'C' Company of 13 KUMAON detected the Chinese in their Forward Assembly Area at 0400 hours. The first wave of attack came at 0500 hours, which was beaten back with heavy enemy casualties. After a short but intense artillery bombardment, the attack from both directions commenced. The battle was fierce with no quarters given by either side. The attack by the Southern Group was stalled time and again, and reserves had to be called in. The Chinese Company Commander of No. 8 Company was killed in battle.

On failure of their first attack, the Chinese pounded Rezang La with heavy Artillery and Mortar fire of high intensity. Under covering fire, the Chinese launched their second wave on two platoons simultaneously but the intensity of own fire forced them to abandon the attacks. The Chinese then attacked a platoon from the West. Due to numerical superiority and fire power, the position fell in the hands of advancing Chinese troops. All men died in their trenches including the medical orderly Sepoy Dharam Pal Dahiya, who was found holding a morphine syringe and a bandage in his hand. He was decorated with Vir Chakra for his bravery.

The Chinese continued advancing towards the depth section position on Top where a dozen soldiers jumped out of their trenches and engaged the enemy in hand-to-hand combat, before attaining martyrdom. After capturing two Platoons, while the enemy was regrouping to attack the third Platoon and Company Headquarters, Naik Sahi Ram waited for the Chinese to assemble before opening up the Light Machine Gun & killing several Chinese soldiers. Major Shaitan Singh re-sited rest of the Light Machine Guns which kept firing until they were silenced. The gallant Company Commander received two bursts of Machine Gun fire in his arm and abdomen while moving from bunker to bunker raising morale of his men and continued to fight despite being seriously wounded.

For several hours the outcome of the battle hung in balance. Men were engaged in hand to hand combat. The Indian Company Commander even tried to launch a platoon counter-attack to regain the height, Point 5300 but did not succeed. The telephone line to the Battalion HQ was cut and the company radio set was destroyed in the initial stages. C Company 13 KUMAON was now on its own. No reinforcements could reach them. For them it was a fight to the finish.¹³

The enemy was finally stalled at Rezang La. The guns fell silent only around 2200 on 18 November. The valour of the Charlie Company not only successfully stopped China's advance, but it also resulted in the Chushul airport being saved, thereby preventing a possible Chinese occupation of the entire Ladakh region in 1962.

In a battle without parallel in the annals of modern military history, soldiers of the Charlie Company, 13 KUMAON fought to the 'last man, last round' on November 18, 1962. The battle of Rezang La was a unique battle fought in the sub-zero temperatures and adversarial terrains of Eastern Ladakh. It was not a large scale battle which involved a large number of troops. Here there was just a company that fought it out till the last man. The Battle stands out for

¹² Gurmeet Kanwal, Fighting to the Muzzle, CLAWS Journal, 10 December 2012, https://archive.claws.in/images/journals_doc/SW%20i-10.10.2012.184-186.pdf.

¹³ Major General PJS Sandhu, (Retd), 1962 - War in the Western Sector (Ladakh), Journal of the United Service Institution of India, Vol. CXLIII, No. 593, July-September 2013. <https://www.usiofindia.org/publication-journal/1962-war-in-the-western-sector-ladakh.html>

sheer valour, grit and dogged determination of C Company of 13 KUMAON that fought to the last man, defending Rezang La, under the dynamic leadership of Major Shaitan Singh. Against all odds and grossly outnumbered, the valiant soldiers of 'C' Company, 13 KUMAON, repulsed seven attacks by the Chinese, launched in waves. Despite heavy artillery shelling and fierce Chinese assaults, Major Shaitan Singh and his 113 brave hearts delivered the heaviest blow to the Chinese.



Rezang La Memorial Plaque

Source: Photo Division, MoD

By about 0900 hours, Rezang La and a portion of Gurung Hill had been captured by the Chinese. The Chinese moved their artillery forward which was resisted by Indian artillery which engaged them forcing them to move back to their original position. At 1400 hours on 19 November under cover of heavy snowfall and mist, the Chinese launched their attack on Gurung Hill which was captured by 1530 hours. The Brigade now systematically reorganised its defences on 20 November 1962 with a Battalion on Gompa Hill, Indo Tibetan Border Police Hill and the hill astride Tsaka La, The Brigade Headquarter was on Pankha Ridge. The Chinese were unable to proceed further due to the systematic reorganisation by the Brigade.¹⁴

13 KUMAON became the proud recipient of Battle Honour 'REZANG LA' and Theatre Honour 'LADAKH'. Subsequently, 'C' Company was reraised & rechristened as 'Rezang La Company' in 1963. The brave soldiers of 13 KUMAON were honoured with one Param Vir Chakra, Eight Vir Chakras, one Ati Vishisht Seva Medal, four Sena Medals and one Mention-

¹⁴ Chakravorty, P. (2017). Sino-Indian War of 1962. Indian Historical Review, 44(2), 285-312.

in-Despatches. Major Shaitan Singh, the Company Commander , was posthumously awarded the Param Vir Chakra for his exemplary leadership during the battle. ¹⁵

The Memorial was constructed in 1963 in the Chushul plains, at an altitude of over 15,000 feet, right at the India-China border to honour the troops of Charlie Company of 13 KUMAON Regiment, who on 18 November 1962, had defended Rezang La and the surrounding areas located at over 16,500 feet on the Kailash Ranges in Eastern Ladakh. The Hon'ble Raksha Mantri Shri Rajnath Singh dedicated to the Nation renovated Rezang La Memorial at a solemn ceremony at Chushul in Ladakh on 18 November 2021.



The Renovated Rezang La Memorial in Chushul

Source: Sainik Samachar

¹⁵ Baatchet, Indian Army Publication, Volume No 11/19, November 2019

<https://indianarmy.nic.in/writereaddata/documents/BaatCheet/English/Nov%202019.pdf>