

## My Face-off Moment with the PLA

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### Abstract

*For India the year 2020 will be remembered for Covid-19 and Chinese intrusions in Ladakh. However, such transgressions and intrusions have occurred in the past also. This personal narrative is about the establishment of a Post at the Bara Hoti plains region of India. The author gives an enthralling account of the race against time six months before the war broke out which enabled checkmating a Chinese move to seize an important grazing ground.*

**E**xcept for a few bureaucrats and fewer officers of the Army

and Air Headquarters in New Delhi, none else would have heard of the place named Rim-Kin, in the 'Disputed' Bara Hoti plains region of India, in February 1962. Happily, it had fallen to my lot to venture out and explore a plausible route for establishing an army post in the vicinity of Rim-Kin, to oversee and checkmate attempts of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) from intruding across the Sino-Indian border. I had barely settled into my second 'Field' tenure in J&K, when I was summoned by my Commanding Officer Major Shivdev Singh who looked agitated and without ado queried angrily, "Have you pulled strings for transfer to a 'Peace Station'?" But before I could gather my wits, he ordered, "Report to Headquarters 9 Infantry Brigade at Lucknow forthwith. Be sure to take the Officers' Bus to Pathankot tomorrow morning".

So in the last week of February 1962, Brigadier Bisheshwar Nath (a burly six foot something with a walrus moustaches) showed me a signal from the Army Headquarters marked 'Top Secret and Personal for the Commander' directing him in nutshell; (i) to occupy a Company Defended Locality at Rim-Kin the soonest but not later than 15 May 1962 and; (ii) Captain Baljit Singh would command the

Special Task Force (STF) till the Rim-Kin perimeter-defence was effectively established.

Next, the Brigadier led me to an adjoining room and on a wall covered with maps he placed his index finger on one spot and said, *"This is the Bara Hoti Grazing Ground (BGG) which the Chinese threaten to usurp from India. I have personally handpicked one Company of the fittest and highly motivated soldiers of 14 Rajput Battalion, to constitute the STF. Your task lies in inducting them from Joshimath onwards, either en-bloc or in dribblets, across the Chor Hoti Pass, approximately 16,000 feet above sea level (ASL). You have a carte blanche sanction from the Army Headquarters to hire/purchase specialised equipment, mountain guides, etc., and travel any-where in the country, to do so"* (words to that effect). Noticing my stricken looks and becoming empathetic, the Brigadier mentioned, "Young man, I have been informed that you are a fresh graduate from the Basic and Advanced Mountaineering Courses under Mr Tenzing's tutelage and have requisite knowledge and skills to tackle this assignment. So cheer up and get a terrain briefing from Lieutenant Colonel KM Pandalai (KMP) of the 14 Rajput who has just returned from Joshimath".

What I learnt next was anything but reassuring. Firstly, that there was just one single-lane, 560 km road from Lucknow to Joshimath (last 300 km stone-paved), which under favourable weather was a three-day journey for cargo-laden light trucks. Thereafter, a well beaten 80 km pony track to Ghamsali (10,000 feet ASL) and thence pristine, mostly untrodden, 40 to 60 km terra firma to Rim-Kin! Wisely, the Colonel had already commenced shipment of 30 days commodities for the STF to Joshimath.

What KMP informed me next was the most worrisome aspect of the STF's capabilities that they had no previous experience of living and soldiering at high altitudes. If it was a matter of few soldiers to be attuned to operate in high altitude environment, I could have handled it by myself. But given a large body of 120 and limited time, this vital task was best entrusted to the High Altitude Warfare School (HAWS), Gulmarg. The Brigadier agreed readily, organised airlift to Srinagar, and exposed STF to a compressed ten days training capsule. He also agreed to establish a forward logistics dump at Ghamsali as an urgent priority. I departed for

Darjeeling by the next train and with Tenzing Sahib's help, hired four 'B' grade Sherpas, purchased such accessories as charting a route over the Chor Hoti Pass may require, and together with the Sherpas, set out for Joshimath.

We preceded the STF by four days for a fast foray to Rim-Kin and back. The approach to Chor Hoti Pass lay through a narrow horse shoe, with 10 to 15 feet deep snow pile. Once the sun touched the area, the ascent was very exhausting even for seasoned climbers. The descent on the far side was down a near vertical rock face and we set to fix a Manila-hemp rope for 240 feet on the steepest stretch. The going beyond for about three km was over an almost level snowed up plateau, ending at a wet and dangerously slippery rock ledge. Here again, two rope hand-rails were fixed for 250 feet, ending close to the spine of the Rim-Kin ridge, our ultimate goal post! We bivouacked for the night, unarmed and taking comfort that the Brigadier did not expect the PLA to show up before mid-May.

Meanwhile, as planned, Captain RS Taragi, (Rajinder), had moved to Ghamsali with the STF and commenced stocking 10 days' worth rations at Kala Zabar (12,600 feet ASL), about 10 km en route Chor Hoti. We decided to make the first push with 30 soldiers, leaving Kala Zabar at 2300 hrs on April 21, each carrying personal kit and two days survival rations. The snow on the approaches to Chor Hoti was firm and compacted by night but laden with 30 kg, the going was slow and laboured. At 0400 hrs on 22 April, all of us were atop the Chor Hoti saddle. The descent using fixed ropes was a new experience for the soldiers and almost all of them had to be led by us in relays, one by one. In the event, the last man reached Rim-Kin at 1845 hrs on 22 April 1962 and, in so doing, consolidated India's claim on BGG. In truth, I must admit that the soldiers were so exhausted after the 12 to 16 hour long very demanding day (a few even hallucinating '*kiya hum Tibet pahunch gaeya Saab*') that they could have been taken hostages without a murmur, at the mere asking.

We were given a radio set of American origin with independent power source, which had to be cranked manually by two men for the duration of the transmission. But it worked! We communicated the code of having touched base at Rim-Kin and air-

drop of tentage, fuel and basic food. At this stage, I got into a huddle with Rajinder, the Sherpas and two radio operators to organise our soldiers into three groups of ten each, prod them to erect the ten two-men tents we had carried and generally keep them moving about. The Sherpas also lit three stoves and set about brewing three *langar-degchis* of extra sweet tea! Half a mug of warm brew and '*shakkar paras*' helped lift spirits all around and avert looming disaster from dehydration etc. There was no acknowledgement of our radio message but on 24 April, we were awoken by the drone of aircraft over Rim-Kin. In the next 20 minutes, two Dakotas dropped cargo, creating a cloud of floating white parachutes. The 'drop' had spread several hundred metres all around which, combined with the fatigue factor and parachutes merging with the snow, resulted in us detecting and retrieving only about 20 per cent of cargo.

The Sherpas and I now guided the second batch of fifty STF soldiers from Kala Zabar to Rim-Kin. Accompanying this batch were also 15 Constables of the UP Armed Constabulary, who were to set up a Revenue Collection Post (RCP) from the graziers in BGG. In time, the STF 'Defended Locality' was sited about two km ahead of Rim-Kin, on a flat ridge, with a commanding view over BGG right up to the International Border (IB). And on 29 April 1962, the Indian National Flag was hoisted at the RCP with full military symbolism including a bugle-call and smart salute by the STF! Henceforth, the Tricolour was unfurled at Reveille every morning.

The BGG is a gigantic amphitheatre about 26 square kms at 13,500 feet mean elevation, with ridges one to three thousand feet higher than the BGG plateau-floor. But its North East rim which forms the IB with Tibet (China) is barely 500 feet higher than the BGG, making Tun Jan La (14,500 feet ASL) a convenient gateway to Bara Hoti Plains for the PLA.

On 12 May 1962, our Observation Post (OP) reported men and ponies descending Tun Jan La, about two hours walking time from us. At last, here was the PLA detachment of 20 soldiers, with 30 laden ponies, on course to Rim-Kin. We had time to deploy our six light machine guns (LMGs), two medium machine guns (MMGs) and assemble the remaining 65 soldiers, with bolt action rifles,

fixed bayonets and charged magazines, near the RCP in a show of strength. No one had given us any orders to follow in the event of a show down and, far flung as we were, our strength lay in instinctive actions. The eyeball to eyeball moment occurred at 1045 hrs when the PLA detachment's repeated attempts to bypass the RCP was physically blocked by us, all the while drawing their attention to the fluttering Tricolour. After a few minutes of heated gesticulations, and noticing our numbers, they retreated by about 100 metres and pitched their tents inside an abandoned stone walled enclosure of the graziers. We offered them a kettle of hot tea but they refused it out of hand. Sadly, for the RCP the 30 ponies of the PLA were the only livestock that pastured in the BGG and they **refused** to pay the revenue!

The Tun Jan La is also the origin of a stream which flows past Rim-Kin and ultimately drains into the Dhauli Ganga near Malari (midway Joshimath en route Ghamsali), thus, leaving no doubt that Tun Jan La is the watershed ridge, per se. The Sherpas and I walked down this stream for about four kilometres and felt that a mule track (ultimately a motor-able road) linking Rim-Kin to Malari may be possible and, thus, provide an all year access to Rim-Kin by avoiding the Chor Hoti obstacle altogether in future. When a month later, I was debriefed by Major General DK Palit, the then Director Military Operations, he accepted and got implemented my recommendations of road to Rim-Kin as also parachutes in Red and Orange colours for use in snow bound areas.

On 14 May, the STF hosted the Sherpas and me to '*Lunch Bara Khana*' and waved us off with full throated war cry of the Rajputs, '***Bol Bajrang Bali Ki Jai!***' We had hoped to spend time at Ghamsali for a bath and change of clothes, the first in six weeks, but found seven ponies and a note to reach Joshimath, two days hence. Brigadier Bisheshwar Nath and Colonel KM Pandalai broke with Officers' Mess protocol, ushered the Sherpas and me in the same clothes to a sit down dinner and, in warm bonhomie, gifted me a Rajput Regiment memento with a touching inscription: "*....for his immemorable service in establishing Rim-Kin, 20 April 62*".

As I recall the mission, I get goose bumps. What if the radio set had got damaged or weather prevented air drop of food and tentage? We were simply lucky!! I was awarded the Chief of Army Staff Commendation Card for gallantry and distinguished service

for the task at Bara Hoti. It is easily among the most prized, hard earned and memorable awards of my service.

### **Endnotes**

<sup>1</sup> Ghamsali had first seen Indian Army boots back in 1952 when Major General Harold Williams, the E-in-C had conceived and led a Sapper Expedition to Kamet (25,446 ft) and put Captain ND Jayal with two Sherpas on the summit. The E-in-C superannuated as Lieutenant General Sir Harold Williams and Major Nandu Jayal became the first Principle of the Himalayan Mountaineering Institute, Darjeeling. However, Kamet was first summited by a Swiss, Frank Smyth in 1931 and who on the return to Ghamsali decided to explore the surroundings and literally stumbled upon the since famed 'Valley of Flowers'.

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*Journal of the United Service Institution of India*, Vol. CL, No. 621, July-September 2020.

## Winning a Battle Honour: 1 Sikh LI in Pyawbwe, 1945

Colonel Harjeet Singh (Retd)®

### Abstract

*Pyawbwe was captured in a three-brigade envelopment by 17 Indian Division. It was stoutly defended and after its capture some 1,110 Japanese dead and 13 guns were counted. The official history describes the fight as 'the only large action in the Battle of the Rangoon Road' and says that it 'finally shattered [the Japanese] 33rd Army'. The Imperial War Museum, London is digitising their collection of World War II newsreels. Among those is one of 1 Sikh LI in action at Pyawbwe in Burma, on 11 April 1945, filmed by an Indian Public Relations cameraman, Lieutenant H Benjamin. A copy of the video, with the dope-sheet, is now with the USI. The video is muted so it does not have any background sounds or narrative, but it does give an insight to the Pyawbwe operations. This account covers the story of 1 Sikh Light Infantry (1 Sikh LI) and their earning the battle honour of Pyawbwe, in addition to other honours. The article aims to provide context to the battle.*

### Preparations in India

**A**fter its raising at Jullundur on 01 October 1941, 1 Sikh LI moved to the Jungle Training School at Raiwala, near Dehradun, in March 1944 to prepare for a move to the Arakan in Burma for operations. These orders were changed in late April and the Battalion moved to Ranchi in May 1944, where it joined 99 Infantry Brigade, in readiness to join 17 Indian Division who were then fighting at Imphal. The Battalion was moved to several different camps in the Ranchi area, including Lohardaga, Dipatoli