

## Shere Thapa's Last Stand and Operations in the Upper Subansiri

Lieutenant General AC Soneja, AVSM\*\*, VSM\*\* (Retd)@

### Abstract

*Legends in the military are born in martyrdom and adversity. In the isolated and desolate spots where soldiers serve, the melancholy quiet and deepening shadows of late evenings create illusions which bring to life the spirits of dead warriors. Soon shrines get created at such places to honour them. If the shrine is on a road, passers-by stop and pay obeisance. If it is off the beaten track, the martyr's memory lives on in local folklore. In Arunachal Pradesh, the first category is Rifleman (Rfn) Jaswant Singh of 4<sup>th</sup> Battalion, the Garhwal Rifles. In the second is Havildar Shere Thapa of 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion, the Jammu & Kashmir Rifles. The author tells the latter's story intertwined with operations in the upper Subansiri in November 1962.*

### The Beginning

It is well known that we, as a nation, in 1962 were neither prepared

nor motivated or equipped to fight a war with the Chinese. We did not have proper winter clothing, equipment, weapons or adequate ammunition. The Indian Air Force (IAF) was ostensibly better, but as per writings we did not have the will or strategic foresight to use it. It was under these circumstances that we were pushed into war with China. There was gloom in the entire country. The Chinese were able to create a fear psychosis in the minds of our leaders and the public. A speech by the Prime Minister (PM) during that period of conflict was termed as a farewell speech to the people of Arunachal Pradesh and Assam. Though the public willingly donated jewellery and cash, and volunteered to enrol in the Army in

large numbers but it was too late. Our leaders suddenly realised that nations can be defended only by well trained and equipped Armies and a whole of the nation approach. During the preceding decade and a half, we had seen action in J&K, Junagarh, Hyderabad and Goa, but all these operations were one-sided and nothing in comparison with what was to follow in October and November 1962 on the Indo-Tibetan border. The civilian leadership did not understand the concept of 'training'. They felt that large numbers of troops in cantonments were unutilised manpower and orders were passed to use troops as labour in construction activity in new cantonments. The result was obvious in 1962 when confronting a serious enemy.

Despite loss of face and vast tracts of land, both in Arunachal Pradesh and Ladakh, there were undoubted spurts of bravery displayed by many of our troops and units. Havildar Shere Thapa's bravery in Subansiri Frontier sub-division and Rfn Jaswant's action along the northern slopes of Sela Pass are examples. Performance of two battalions of J&K Militia composed of Ladakhis, which later became the Indus and Karakoram Wings of the Ladakh Scouts, was particularly remarkable; Shaitan Singh and Rezangla also became legends.

### **Prelude to War**

The year 1962, up to March, saw the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion of the Jammu & Kashmir Rifles (2 JAK RIF) at Palampur concentrating for training for jungle warfare in preparation for its field tenure in the North East. However, as the tensions on the Sino-Indian border mounted, orders were received for its move to the present-day Arunachal Pradesh. Training switched over to mountain warfare. The unit left Pathankot on 25 April 1962 and reached Jorhat after eight days, on 03 May 1962. Arunachal Pradesh (NEFA) had five administrative frontier divisions as shown in the map.



**Map 1: Frontier Divisions NEFA 1962**

The battalion was tasked to defend Subansiri Frontier Division. They were to relieve the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion of 5<sup>th</sup> Gurkha Rifles at Daporijo which was over 100 miles to the North of Jorhat. Reaching there itself was a very tough exercise. Long foot marches were involved. Most hills that the unit had to traverse had an eighty to ninety degree climb to negotiate. One wrong step could lead a man down to sure death thousands of feet below.

The Battalion, less two companies (B & C Companies), were to defend Daporijo landing ground. They were also asked to be prepared to move to Taliha for its defence. Alpha and Delta companies were to be located at Taksing and Limeking respectively. Bravo company was to guard the approach Limeking — Taliha, while Charlie company was to defend Ziro landing ground. From 08 September onwards, reports started coming in regarding the build-up and ingress of Chinese opposite 7 Infantry Brigade in Kameng Sector. This was opposite Tawang which is known for its beautiful monastery. Notwithstanding various constraints, Alpha Company, under Major Balwan Singh, was ordered to move forthwith to Limeking from Taliha on 18 September 1962. This column moved out on a man packed basis. Simultaneously, Battalion Tactical Headquarters, along with D company, left Daporijo for Taliha on their way to Limeking on 21

September. Alpha Company on arrival at Limeking on 02 October was ordered to further proceed to Taksing. They completed their concentration on 07 October. On 21 September, Major Bishamber Singh (the future CO) arrived at Limeking and took over as Company Commander of Delta Company. While Alpha and Delta Companies were preparing their defences at Taksing and Limeking, the Chinese invasion started on 28 October in Kameng Frontier Division opposite 7 Infantry Brigade sector.

### **Struggle at Subansiri**

Charlie Company 2 JAK RIF moved from Ziro to Daporijo by air on 03 October and further moved to Taliha on 23 October. While readjustments of defences at Taliha were in progress, the battalion, less one company, was again ordered to take up defences at Daporijo and not at Sippi.

On the morning of 23 October, the Chinese attacked opposite 2 JAK RIF in the areas of Longju and Lung using a PLA battalion group.<sup>1</sup> Under the weight of Chinese pressure and likely bypassing of their defences, the Assam Rifles post at Maja was asked to withdraw. During their movement they were ambushed at Redding. On the same day, i.e. 23 October, the Chinese attacked the Assam Rifles post at Asafila. Only 08 men could return to Taksing. The Taksing garrison was asked to withdraw to Limeking since threat to Glensenyak appeared imminent.



**Map 2: Operations in the Upper Subansiri Valley**

On 24 October, many Assam Rifles stragglers had re-joined at Taksing. Alpha Company, under Major Balwan Singh, conducted the withdrawal of the remaining garrison including the political staff, civil employees and refugees. Towards the end of October, as part of general reorganisation and with the induction of 192 Infantry Brigade, the area of responsibility was redefined. 5 Brigade was assigned the responsibility for Subansiri sector, named as Sector 1, with effect from 13 November. The brigade was to occupy a cohesive brigade defended sector. Another battalion, 1st Battalion of 4 Gurkha Rifles ex 192 Brigade was also allotted to 5 Brigade.<sup>2</sup>

Major Bishamber Singh was appointed Commander at Limeking on 01 November 1962. The defences were reorganised along the main approach to Glensenyak–Limeking by occupying Rio Bridge area which was in any case demolished.

By 14 November, the Chinese managed to reach the area of Rio Bridge. On the same day, a patrol from Delta Company under 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenant, now Major (Retired), MR Kishore spotted the



Chinese and fired at them. They were able to cause some casualties. As per Chinese accounts, they claimed one Indian killed and six casualties on their own side.<sup>3</sup> Major Kishore, now in his 80s, still remembers the day and the encounter of 14 November 1962 and states that his patrol had suffered no casualties.<sup>4</sup> Meanwhile, the strength of the protective patrol at the Rio Bridge was increased by another section. Captain

Amir Singh of Alpha Company was in command of the patrol with Subedar Sher Bahadur (not to be confused with Havildar Shere Thapa) as his second in command. After 12 November, this patrol was being turned over every 24 to 48 hours between Alpha and Delta Companies. As the position was in a rocky area next to the stream, it was bitterly cold and no fires were lit. With only Angola shirts and Olive Green jerseys, this turnover was unavoidable. On 18 November, the patrol was of Alpha Company. At about 1500 hours, Chinese were seen approaching the area of the protective patrol. As soon as the Chinese came in the effective range of the 2 JAK RIF troops, the Indians opened fire with light machine guns, 2 inch mortars and rifles. The Chinese were taken by surprise and suffered very heavy casualties in dead and wounded. As per reports, there were 70 to 150 enemy casualties.<sup>5</sup> Subedar Major (Hony Captain) Rattan Chand (Retd), who was a young soldier at that time, recounts that the Chinese climbing down a vertical slope on the other side of the Ngo nullah were "falling like ripe mangos".<sup>6</sup> A figure of 70 is also stated in the first official history of the Jammu & Kashmir Rifles.<sup>7</sup> The patrol withdrew to Ging only when their entire ammunition had been expended and only some LMG ammunition was left. The LMG was initially being manned by Rifleman Inder Singh but when he got injured, he was evacuated and Havildar Shere Thapa took over the LMG.

As the patrol withdrew, Havildar Shere Thapa volunteered to stay back to cover the withdrawal. Havildar Shere Thapa was well covered and concealed in a natural rock sangar and held up the enemy for long till his ammunition ran out and he fell. His action and the destruction of the bridge at Rio (Rihuye in Chinese accounts) delayed the Chinese for nearly 72 hours.<sup>8</sup> The mortal remains of Shere Thapa were buried by the Chinese at the same spot where he laid down his life. The Chinese, in a show of magnanimity, wrote a small note of appreciation of his bravery on a piece of wood. All over, wherever they could, the Chinese buried the Indian dead, especially where they felt a soldier deserved credit. Whether they did it genuinely or with an aim to project a benign Chinese image or to make the Indian humiliation more pronounced is a matter of conjecture. This author feels that the aim was the last one. The author is aware that when the war ended, the Chinese returned every single item that they had captured or recovered, including sewing needles.<sup>9</sup>

Despite a gap of 58 years, many of the locals still remember the brave action of the NCO and that of other soldiers of 2 JAK RIF.<sup>10,11,12</sup> The hill feature overlooking the place where his mortal remains lay buried till cremated has been very aptly named after him as also the present bridge at Rio. In 2 JAK RIF all formal unit functions end with a unit regimental song which includes a line immortalising the bravery of Havildar Shere Thapa.

By 18 November, the deployment of 5 Infantry Brigade was as under:

- Headquarters at North Lakhimpur.
- 1/4 GR at Daporijo and the battalion less two companies at Taliha.
- 2 JAK RIF with a tactical headquarter and two companies at Limeking.
- MMG Platoon ex 6 MAHAR less a section at Taliha, with a section at Limeking.
- 69 Heavy Mortar Battery at Taliha.

The Chinese continued their advance. On 20 November, they managed to reach a point about a 1000 yards ahead of village Ging where they encountered a two-section ambush. The ambush later withdrew without any casualties. Having occupied Ging, the Chinese moved further and encountered another section position at about 1600 hrs on 20 November. By this time, the Chinese had reached approximately thousand yards short of Limeking. On 20 November 1962, while the Chinese were pressing hard to take Limeking, orders were received from Headquarters 5 Mountain Brigade for withdrawal. Major Bishamber Singh planned an orderly withdrawal, including destruction of stores and heavy equipment. Thinning out started the same evening and before the daybreak the next day the complete garrison had cleared off from Limeking. Soon after the last troops came out of Limeking, the Chinese occupied the position and started shelling the withdrawing column with heavy mortars. 2 JAK RIF was, however, fortunate and got out of Limeking without further casualties.

On the next day, the Chinese unilaterally declared cease fire with effect from midnight 21/22 November 1962. Meanwhile, our troops reached Taliha by 25 November. Major Bishamber Singh was awarded "Mention-in-Despatches" for his handling of the battalion less two companies involved in operations. After reaching Taliha on 25 November, the battalion was ordered to occupy a position at Sippi, near Daporijo, which they occupied by 22 November. After the war, in January 1963, the battalion was concentrated at Sippi for rest and recuperation, training and administration.

### **Conclusion**

The war that started in the last week of October 1962 suddenly stopped with effect from midnight of 21/22 November. Our humiliation was complete, particularly so in the area of Kameng Frontier Division where we lost an over 200 km stretch from the Thagla Ridge to Tawang, Jang, Sela and Bomdila. In hindsight, one can say that even Limeking went without a fight when we had enough strength and resources to hold it even if bypassed. The senior military and political leadership came in for a lot of opprobrium. But gallant heroes like Havildar Shere Thapa made us proud by their valour, bravery and sacrifice. The locals of Taksing



still remember the sacrifice by Havildar Shere Thapa. The folklore praising him continues. His memorial, till date, draws a lot of respect and honour from every passing soldier and civilian alike. Guides take the occasional trekker there (as can be seen on videos on youtube<sup>13</sup>) and narrate the legend pointing out the bullet scarred rock face at the spot where Havildar Shere Thapa made his last stand. The military lives through its heroes. Heroes inspire them to do more. The noted American psychologist Brian Wansick of Cornell University states<sup>14</sup> that profiles in heroism can help us better understand leadership in crisis situations. Operationally, these profiles may aid recruiters of future soldiers [...] by knowing what characteristics in potential [soldiers] might best reflect the potential for heroic leadership. They also offer insights as to how training can develop heroic potential.

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Maj Gen PJS Sandhu (Ed), 1962, A View from the Other Side of the Hill. *USI of India study* (Vij Books, New Delhi :2015), p.110.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, p.111.

<sup>3</sup> Op cit. p.111.

<sup>4</sup> Telephonic interview of Maj MR Kishore (Retd) by the author on 15 Jul 2020.

<sup>5</sup> Interview with Col (then 2/Lt) Amar Patil of 2 JAK RIF.

<sup>6</sup> Conversation with Sub Major Hony Capt Rattan Chand by Col NKM Bhatnagar who commanded 2 JAK RIF in the period 1998-2000 at Along, as narrated to the author.

<sup>7</sup> Maj Gen DK Palit, Jammu and Kashmir Arms, (Dehradun, Palit & Dutt :1977), p.105

<sup>8</sup> Maj Gen PJS Sandhu (Ed). P. 111.

<sup>9</sup> Recounted to the author by Lt Gen GS Katoch (Retd), who in 1978 as a 2/Lt while doing a destruction board found vouchers signed by Chinese listing what they returned after the ceasefire, from weapons to sewing needles.

<sup>10</sup> M Panging Pao, "Heroes of the 1962 War at Arunachal", *Arunachal Times*, May 20, 2018 . Accessed Jul 20, 2020 from <https://arunachaltimes.in/index.php/2018/05/20/heroes-of-1962-war-in-arunachal-3/>

<sup>11</sup> Pradeep Kumar, Hav Shere Thapa Biography Traced? , Arunachal Observer, Jul, 01, 2019 . Accessed Jul 12, 2020 from <https://arunachalobserver.org/2019/07/01/martyr-army-havildar-shere-thapa-biography-traced/>

<sup>12</sup> Pradeep Kumar, "1962 Chinese War ankho dekhi -1; Hav Shere Thapa deserves Param Vir Chakra, says Col", Northeast Today, Aug 04, 2020, Accessd Aug 06, 2020 from <https://www.northeasttoday.in/2020/08/04/1962-chinese-war-ankho-dekhi-1-hav-shere-thapa-deserves-param-vir-chakra-says-col/>

<sup>13</sup> Youtube accessed Aug 06, 2020 at [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kPKjIn\\_owqw](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kPKjIn_owqw)

<sup>14</sup> Brian Wansink and K Ittersum, The Psychology of Heroes: Antecedents and consequences of War Decorated Heroism, *Psychology of War* 2012, p. 63-91

©**Lieutenant General Avinash Chander Soneja, AVSM\*\*, VSM\*\* (Retd)** holds a Master's Degree in Defence Studies, M.Phil in International Relations and a MBA in HR. He has authored a book titled "Militancy in Kashmir" based upon his experience as CO 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion the Jammu & Kashmir Rifles in the Kashmir Valley.

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