

# **A Hero Forgotten - Brigadier Sher Jung Thapa, MVC**

**Lieutenant General MS Shergill, PVSM, AVSM, VrC (Retd)**

## **Tryst with Destiny (Birth of Two Nations)**

**T**he independent 'dominions' of India and Pakistan were born on 14/15 August, 1947 exemplified by Hon'ble Pandit Jawahar Lal Nehru's famous speech at midnight in the Indian Parliament House at New Delhi. A rosy optimism was in the air for the future of both countries. None could have predicted the chilling happenings that were to sweep the state of Punjab. However, it were events, way to the North in the erstwhile state of Jammu and Kashmir, that would reverberate to this day.

## **State of Jammu and Kashmir**

This then was the largest of the Princely States. In this land mass lived four million people in 39 towns and 8903 villages making it very sparsely populated. In the main, the population was largely Muslim with the Hindus' predomination in the Jammu belt whilst, the region of Ladakh had a Buddhist concentration.

## **The Government**

The civil and military administration was headed by Maharaja Hari Singh. Whilst his power was supreme, the only check on his authority was exercised by the British Resident. The State had four provinces: Jammu, Srinagar, Ladakh and Gilgit, each with a Governor. Gilgit had been held on a 60 year lease by the Government of India being now handed back to the Maharaja on Independence.

The Army Headquarters were at Srinagar headed by Brigadier Rajendra Singh. There were four Brigades at: Jammu, Srinagar, Mirpur and Poonch based on a total of eight infantry battalions, one mountain battery and no armour. The forces were dependant on local contractors for supplies and on Northern Command Headquarters (HQ) at Rawalpindi for arms, ammunition and equipment. A wireless (now radio) link to Rawalpindi existed none, however to New Delhi.

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## Accession

In accordance with the constitution, the Princely States had the option to join India or Pakistan. They however could not remain independent. The Maharaja of Jammu and Kashmir decided to postpone this decision of accession. Instead, he offered a Standstill Agreement on 12 August, 1947 which was signed by Pakistan and not India.

The month of August ushered in a terrible wave of communal rioting in the whole of the Punjab. Very soon Jammu and Kashmir, which had remained placid and safe from such events, now got embroiled. September was to witness raids from Pakistan all along the Jammu border. These were to increase in their number, the sole purpose being loot and plunder.

### 'Operation Gulmarg'

<sup>a</sup> The Pakistan Army with the full knowledge of their Commander-in-Chief General Sir Frank Messervy, KCSI, KBE, CB, DSO, decided to invade Jammu and Kashmir with Lashkars consisting of 1,000 tribesmen. They were issued with arms, ammunition and essential clothing. Each Lashkar had a Major, Captain and ten Viceroy Commissioned Officers (VCOs) of the regular Army. This entire force was commanded by Major General Akbar Khan with the code name 'Tariq'. The day for the operation was 22 October 1947, being codenamed 'Operation Gulmarg'.

During October, the eyes of the World were focused on events taking place in the southern regions of Jammu and Kashmir. Dramatic events at that, the fall, butchery and rape at Baramula, soon Jhangar, Naushera are lost, Poonch besieged and the Lashkars are at the very gates of Srinagar. The Maharaja having signed the Instrument of Accession to India on 26 October 1947, is spirited away from the State and a vacuum at the top of the Civil and Military hierarchy takes place. Brigadier Rajendra Singh, the Chief of Staff, decided to take the field in person. With a heterogenous force of some 150 men scraped together from the barracks, he leaves Srinagar on 22 October to reach Uri at mid-night. Gallantly leading this small force, he is killed on the night of 26/27 October. By the end of October 1947, certain events are going to unfold in the high Himalayas where only adventurous trekkers and shikaris have occasion to visit. See Map 1.



## The Northern Front

Map 1



Area of Operations

## Gilgit

See Map 2. As stated earlier, till July 1947, Gilgit was administered by the Government of India. On 30 July, Brigadier Ghansar Singh arrived to take over as the Governor of Gilgit. The subordinate chiefs in the Gilgit region were: Mir of Hunza, Mir of Nagar, Raja of Punial and the Chieftains of Koh Ghizar, Yasin and Askoman. Of them, the Mirs of Hunza and Nagar were hostile. This was to prove very damaging as three-fourths of the men of the Gilgit Scouts came from Hunza and Nagar. Subedar Major Baber Khan of the Gilgit Scouts was the uncle of the Mir of Nagar and had married the sister of the Mir of Hunza. To add to the plot, Major WA Brown and Captain Matheson of the Gilgit Scouts, whose services had been



retained by the State, proved themselves utterly hostile to their retainers and turned renegade in the most abhorrent fashion.

Gilgit area was garrisoned by 6 Jammu and Kashmir Infantry, less two companies, with their HQ at Bunji 54 km from Gilgit. The battalion was composed of Muslims and Sikhs in about equal proportion. The latter were stated to be raw recruits. The battalion was commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Abdul Majid Khan. Brigadier Ghansar Singh had no qualms about the dangerous position he had been placed. On mid-night 31 October / 1 November, 100 soldiers of the Gilgit Scouts, led by Major Brown, surrounded the Governor's house with the intent of capturing his person. The Scouts opened fire which was replied to by the Brigadier, his orderly and driver to whom he had given his sporting guns. Exchange of fire went on for several hours. In this exchange of fire, seven Gilgit Scouts were killed. Come the morning, an ultimatum was given by Major Brown, that unless he surrendered, all non-Muslims in Gilgit would be killed. With no choice, he surrendered and was put under arrest. On 3 November, Major Brown held a flag hoisting ceremony in the Scout lines. Lieutenant Colonel Abdul Majid Khan was also placed into custody.

Map 2



Gilgit-Skardu



Their attention now turned to the Sikh troops at Bunji. The Sikh post at Janglot was attacked at night, the entire garrison killed, except for a lone survivor who managed to cross the icy Indus on a log of wood. When news of these happenings at Gilgit and Janglot reached the Sikh company at Bunji, they dispersed to make their way to Gurais from Astor. However, the Gilgit Scouts under Captain Matheson were guarding that route to prevent their escape. Over the next few days, the Sikhs were captured one by one.

The entire area of Gilgit thus passed into the hands Pakistan. Pakistan could now operate towards Gurais as also Skardu.

### **Skardu**

Skardu was the Tehsil headquarters in the district of Ladakh. It was a large Teshil, which included the Jagirs of the Raja of Rondhu, Khapalu, Shiger, Kharmang and Skardu. These Rajas had held their territories even during the Dogra rule over Kashmir and enjoyed considerable respect and influence over their populace who were entirely Muslim.

With the events of Gilgit and Bunji now over, command of 6 Jammu and Kashmir Infantry, now devolved on Major Sher Jung Thapa, who was given the local rank of Lieutenant Colonel. At Leh, was a company of Sikhs, less one platoon, under the command of Thapa. A mobile column under Captain Ganga Singh with two platoons of Sikhs with the only wireless telegraphy (WT) set in the battalion, was at Kargil. Captain Nek Alam held Skardu with two Muslim platoons. These were the remnants of 6 Jammu and Kashmir Infantry as the remainder had been lost at Gilgit and Bunji.

The news of the loss of the Gilgit reached Srinagar within a few days of the happenings. At Srinagar itself, a grave situation existed and the winter having set in, the passes closed, there was nothing that could be done, except to order Thapa to move to Skardu with as many troops he could muster from Leh and Kargil.

### **Lieutenant Colonel Sher Jung Thapa**

He was born on 18 June, 1908 at Abbotabad in what is now Pakistan. His father and grandfather had been distinguished soldiers.



He received his education at Dharamshala. As a young lad, he was a fine sportsman, in particular hockey. The college hockey team participated in all the local tournaments. Also taking part in these tournaments was the team of the 1<sup>st</sup> Gorkha Rifles Regimental Centre who were then located at Daramshala. Playing for the Centre was their Adjutant, a dashing British officer. This officer soon noticed young Thapa and took an avuncular interest in him and encouraged him to seek a future in the armed forces. He acted as mentor, giving advice to an impressionable young lad.

This is precisely what Thapa did and on 1 September 1932 he earned a commission into the Jammu and Kashmir State Forces. Then followed a routine soldier's life. He attended a Wireless Course on which he did very well, learning the nuance of WT. This proved to be fortuitous.

*from* Having organised a small force *from* Leh and Kargil of 2 Officers, 2 Junior Commissioned Officers and 75 men, to include the sole WT set, which was operated by three Muslims; he set forth to Leh on 23 November, to reach Skardu on 3 December.

Lieutenant Colonel Thapa now started a detailed reconnaissance of Skardu which is situated in a small valley through which the Indus river flows. The Shigar river from the North, flows into the Indus at Skardu. There were no villages on the northern side of the Skardu Valley. See Map 3.

The southern portion of the Valley was about 19 km long with a width of 8 km. The valley was fertile, green and small villages dotted the landscape. Skardu town had a school, post and telegraph office, buildings for the civil administration and the military post.

The valley was dominated by a 2700 meter hill, the base 5 km in circumference. The peak known as Point (Pt) 8853, was accessible from the North and South-west, the other sides being precipices. Skardu Fort was halfway up the eastern slope, hidden from the peak by an intervening knoll.



Map 3



Skardu

Having done his reconnaissance and considering that winter had set in, the only route to Skardu from Gilgit would be along the Indus, he decided to locate a post 32 km down river from Skardu, at Tsari. Of a total of four platoons, Captain Nek Alam with a Muslim platoon was to be on the right bank of the Indus and a Sikh platoon with Captain Krishna Singh on the left bank. He felt that these platoons would give ample warning to Skardu of any intruders. On 14 January 1948, a clash between opposing patrols took place at Tsari, to emphasise the location of these platoons. Communication between Skardu and Tsari was to be by runners, a most unsatisfactory affair indeed. With the departure of these platoons, Thapa had 40 Sikh and 21 Muslim troops.

Thapa had been sending messages with a constancy to Srinagar for reinforcements. On 15 January 1948, Captain Parbat Singh with two companies set out from Srinagar. See Map 4. By 20 January they reached Sonamarg, then they crossed the Zoji La in deep winter



which was accomplished by 30 January. Ahead lay the icy wastes of Machhoi, Matayan, Printers and then Dras and Kargil. It was on 10 February 1948 that they arrived to a rapturous welcome. In terms of distances, Srinagar to Gund (60 km) was motorable, beyond, all movement was on foot with Kargil being 140 km further and Kargil to Skardu 136 km. Skardu to Leh was 138 km, again by foot, in the other direction. The garrison now had 130 non-Muslim and 31 Muslim troops. There was no enemy in sight, it was the proverbial lull before the storm.

### **The Opening Gambit**

If anyone was under the impression that the raiders had been idle, they were to be mistaken. By the beginning of February, all their preparations were in order. Major Ehsan Ali, Captain Muhammad Khan and Lieutenant Baber Khan (promoted from Subedar Major), led a force of 600 tribal raiders, Chitralis and deserters of the State Forces. With utter secrecy they marched up the Indus river.

On the night of 9/10 February they attacked the platoon on the left bank of the river. Captain Krishna Singh was murdered in cold blood, the few survivors being led ~~off~~ to Gilgit. The platoon on the right bank commanded by Captain Nek Alam of Muslim troops, simply went over to the enemy.

The raiders then proceeded to Skardu 32 km away. They passed through small villages but not a whiff reached Skardu of their impending arrival.

### **The Siege Commences**

On 11 February, early morning, the garrison of Skardu woke to the rattle of musketry and shouting. There was a rush to their posts and just in time too. The tribals attacked with vigour but were met with a disciplined hail of fire from the defenders. The tribals now poured their wrath on the town below which was sacked and then retreated in total disorder, leaving 10 dead and one wounded bleeding. They also left behind a medium machine gun and a 2 - inch mortar. During the mayhem, they had killed Wazir Amar Nath, the District Officer and several non-Muslims. The defenders had 7 Other Ranks killed and one Officer and 15 Other Ranks wounded. The 3 Muslim Signalers who manned the WT set had deserted. Thapa now took charge of this wireless set himself.



A few days later, on 13 February as if out of the blue, Captain Ajit Singh with 70 men arrived as reinforcements. On the 15<sup>th</sup>, another column of the same strength entered Skardu. Skardu was now held by 285 men. Since the intent of the raiders was now clear, all non-Muslims (229 in number), some Muslims too (19) and Muslim civil prisoners (22) were now within the Skardu Fort.

The Fort required a number of companies for the defence, which Thapa did not have. He also required to hold an outer perimeter made up of small self-contained picquets which gave depth to the Fort. He did this by sending out seven picquets on the likely approaches. What he could not hold, was Pt 8853 or the peak which the raiders occupied on the night of 14/15 February.

Between 15 February and 16 March a number of clashes took place and in all cases the defenders came away the better. All along Thapa had been urgently asking for reinforcements.

### **'Biscuit Column'**

On 17 February, one company of the State Force troops, with two 2-in mortars and two MMG's were despatched to Kargil where another platoon was added to the column. Brigadier Faqir Singh now arrived as the column commander and on 8 March they commenced their move to Skardu by way of Parkutta and Gol. Unfortunately for 'Biscuit Column,' as they were known, the raiders were aware of their arrival. They pulled out as many troops as they could from Skardu and moved to Gol, 32 km due East of Skardu. Here, where the track went through a narrow gorge, they laid a neat ambush.

On 15 March, Thapa's lookouts reported some raiders heading towards Gol. The next day, 16<sup>th</sup>, a larger body of the raiders headed in the same direction. Thapa was well aware that a relieving column was on the way and expected them to arrive on 18 March. He realised that the raiders were going to intercept this column. He could not warn 'Biscuit Column' on the WT as their only WT set had broken down at Kargil. Thapa had conveyed his fears to Srinagar with a request for air strikes against the raiders. Unfortunately, no air support was forthcoming.

Brigadier Faqir Singh's 'Biscuit Column' entered the gorge at Thurgo, mid-way between Gol and Skardu on 17 March. Once in the gorge, all hell broke loose. Surprise was complete, panic over. The Brigadier was wounded and 'Biscuit Column' fell back all the





### Skardu - Gol - Tolti - Kargil - Dras - Baltal

way to Kargil to reach there on 2 April. They left behind 26 killed, 7 missing and 18 wounded troops. A huge booty of war material fell into the hands of the raiders: 27 rifles, 5 Sten guns, 2 Vickers Berthier machine guns, 64,000 rounds of rifle ammunition. Brigadier Faqir Singh was back in Srinagar soon after.

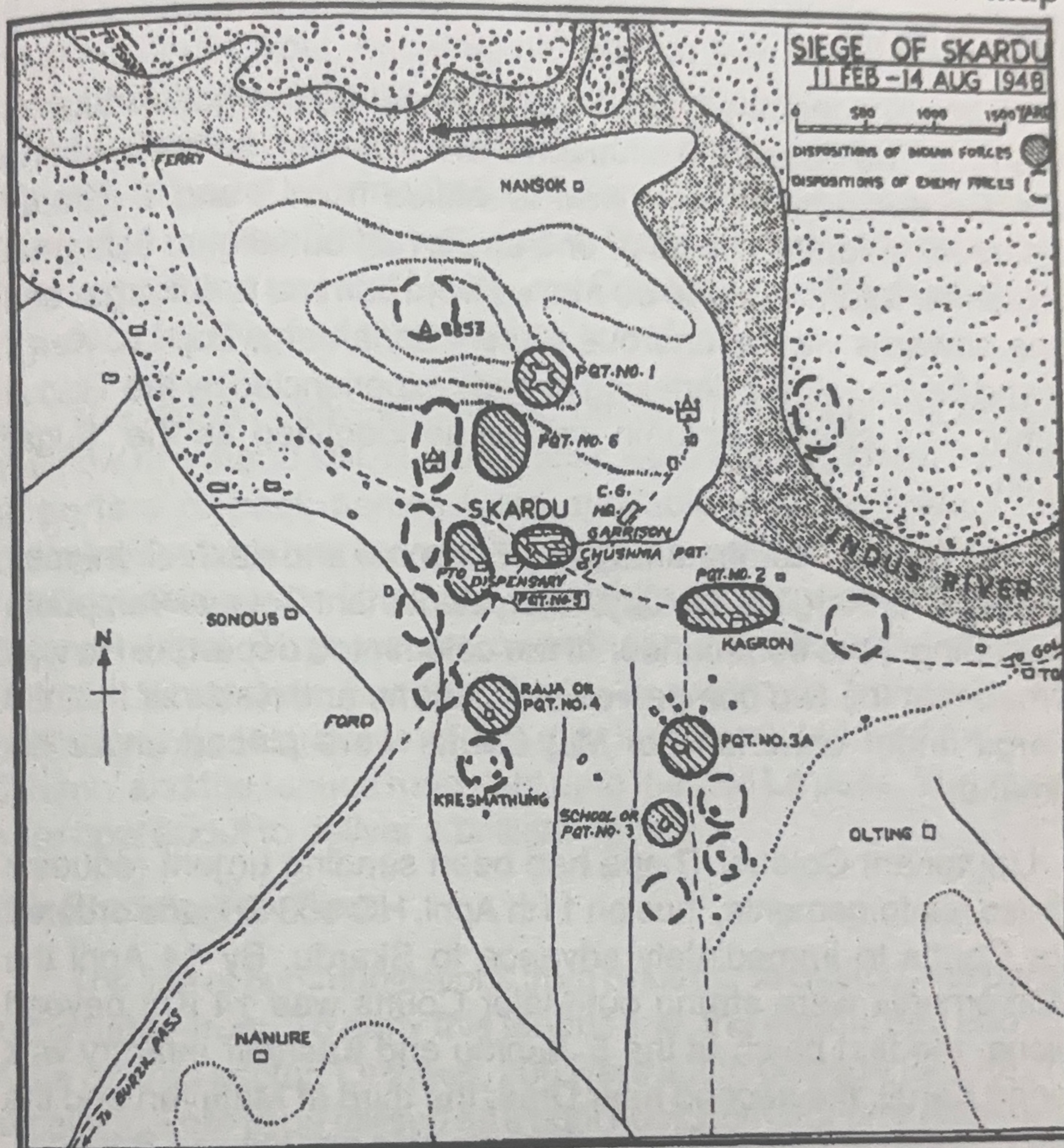
### Skardu 18 March - 10 April

See Map 5. Having affected a humiliating defeat on the 'Biscuit Column,' the raiders, emboldened, stepped up their attacks on Skardu. At 0300 hours 28 March, they attacked No 6 Picquet who though



out numbered, held firm. This was a diversion. Two hours later, the Skardu garrison was attacked from all sides and medium machine guns opened fire from Pt 8853. The defenders stood firm.

Map 5



Siege of Skardu

The fighting raged on till 4 April. The picquets of 'School' and 'Raja' remained cut off but their commanders, Captain Ajit Singh and 'Jemadar' (now Naib Subedar) Piar Singh, held on. Captain Ajit Singh was wounded on 30 March but did not leave his post. There was no water for days and contact was established with them on 4 April.

The raiders made another attempt on 7th April but the assault on the main defences broke up. The 'School' picquet was cut off once again. As the dawn came up on 10 April, Naik Chatru of 6 Jammu and Kashmir Infantry, led a desperate sortie from the Fort.



They cut their way through the raiders to reach the 'School' picquet who were at their last gasp. The raiders gave up, demoralised by their casualties and defeat. The sun shone on the garrison of Skardu, they were holding out with a will.

### **'Sugar Column'**

To imagine that the planners at Srinagar had forgotten Skardu is incorrect. The desperate situation there was high on their list and minds. Reinforcements were now identified from 5 and 7 Jammu and Kashmir Infantry, a total of one and a half battalions. 5 Jammu and Kashmir Infantry had to be moved from Jammu to Srinagar and thence onwards via the onerous route - Sonamarg, Zoji La, Kargil Dras and beyond. An undertaking already experienced by the 'Biscuit Column.' The present column was to be identified as the 'Sugar Column.'

On 3 April, 37 combatants of the 5 Jammu and Kashmir Infantry left Srinagar for Kargil. A few days later, Lieutenant Colonel Sampuran Bachan Singh, the commander of the column too departed. He was informed that the two companies of 7 Jammu and Kashmir Infantry at Kargil under command of Maj Coutts were placed under his command.

Lieutenant Colonel Thapa had been sending urgent requests for these reinforcements, thus on 11th April, HQ 163 Brigade ordered Major Coutts to immediately advance to Skardu. By 14 April the reinforcements were strung out-Major Coutts was 14 Km beyond Bagicha, the first batch of the 5 Jammu and Kashmir Infantry was entering Kargil, the second near Dras, the third at Matayan and the fourth and fifth at Gumri. The sixth batch was just leaving Srinagar.

Major Coutts entered Parkutta on 17 April to find it deserted, the reasons were obvious. The very next day the raiders attacked and skirmishes erupted over the next few days. Major Coutts kept sending a stream of alarming and despondent messages to HQ 163 Brigade when on 28 April, to his relief, Lieutenant Colonel Sampuran Bachan Singh arrived to take control.

### **Friction In Command and Control**

Acting Lieutenant Colonel Kripal Singh had been appointed commander of the entire relief column. He was now making his way forward to Dras and Kargil. His was a most unhappy situation. HQ



163 Brigade continued to send messages direct to Lieutenant Colonel Sampuran Bachan Singh and Major Coutts without he being informed. The above named officer, ignored him, kept him in the dark, maintaining no communications with him at all. He thus had no effective control over a column stretched over 160 km. Worse was to follow. On 27 April, Kripal Singh ordered that no troops would be moved without his sanction. On 1 May, Lieutenant Colonel Sampuran Bachan Singh asked HQ 163 Brigade for clarifications. In reply, HQ 163 Brigade informed all concerned that Lieutenant Colonel Sampuran Bachan Singh would be in 'independent' command of the foremost column and that Lieutenant Colonel Kripal Singh would take over once he reached the advance guard.

The friction between the two officers remained, the advance was now at a stand still. Ration stocks were running low at Parkutta, no porters or pack ponies were available and the raiders were attacking isolated parties and sniping the column. On 4 May, HQ 163 Brigade amended their previous order and confirmed Lieutenant Colonel Kripal Singh as the overall commander and Lieutenant Colonel Sampuran Bachan Singh to return to Srinagar. This vacillation was to prove fatal, not only for Skardu but also for 'Sugar Column' and the tenuous road right upto the Zoji La pass. The raiders were now about to deliver a brilliant riposte.

### **The Riposte-The Plan**

The line of communications from Srinagar to Skardu, ran parallel to the battle-front. To deny this tenuous line, the enemy had 800 men in the Skardu sector. Of these, 200 were left to besiege Skardu. The remaining were to be utilised as a right hook from Sonamarg to Kargil.

The operation was to be carried out from their base at Chilam Chowki:-

(a) A force of 250 men were to cross the Burzil pass, occupy Gurais, then cross the Rajdiangan pass and demonstrate against Bandipur. This was to be a feint attack.

(b) Now termed as the First column, of two platoons, they were to advance from Gurais via the Tilel valley and Baodab, turn South and strike the line of communications near Gund.

(c) The Second column, also of two platoons was to accompany the First upto Baodab, then keep going East by the



Kaobol Gali, move down the Muski 'nala' and strike near Pindras.

(d) The Third and Fourth columns were to set out together, climb up onto Deosai and then go down the Shingo valley to Gultari. From Gultari, the Third column of 100 men were to march to Dras and capture the same. The Fourth column of 250 men was to advance down the Shingo river and capture Kargil.

All columns were to strike their objectives on the same day, 10 May 1948. Their movement schedules had been planned with this date in mind.

### **The Riposte**

In accordance with their move schedule, the columns moved out on staggered dates. The feint attack against Bandipur was carried out on 28 April. The main force, or the Third and Fourth columns moved out from Chilam Chowki at 0100 hours 1 May. Each raider carried one week's rations and 150 rounds of ammunition. Porters and sledges carried a reserve stock of 10 days of rations and ammunition.

This force advanced for three days and nights across a desolate wilderness of rock and snow at an altitude of 4270 meters. A snow blizzard struck on the second day but they laboured on to reach the comparative shelter of Gultari on the third day. The route ahead was easier but they had lost four men in the snow and 60 to frost bite.

The First and the Second columns left Gurais on 3 May. The snow in the Tilel valley was very difficult and the Second column heading to Pindras was delayed by a day.

As the dawn crept over the hills and mountains on 10 May, the First column set fire to several wooden bridges between Sonamarg and Kangan. The Second column was still struggling in the snows, 48 km from Pindras. The Third column launched an attack on Dras, the defenders though taken totally by surprise, resolutely manned their defences and beat off the raiders.

The Fourth column crept upon a section of Gorkha troops guarding the Kharal bridge across the Shingo river. The Gorkha's were killed to a man. The column then struck Kargil. Surprise was complete. Some confirm that a polo match was in progress when the firing broke out. The fight was soon over and the garrison scattered, some up the Indus to Leh, the others up the Suru to Pahalgam.



Whilst these dramatic events were about to take place, the vacillating 'Sugar Column' was informed by HQ 163 Brigade on 4th May that the raiders were reported to be advancing towards Dras. Lieutenant Colonel Kripal Singh ordered Captain Kashmir Singh to hasten to Dras with two platoons and form a firm base. This was done and hence the attack on Dras on 10 May by the raiders failed.

With the fall of Kargil, the 'Sugar Column' was now caught between the enemy at both ends. Lieutenant Colonel Sampuran Bachan Singh and Major Coutts fell back from Bagicha. These troops got involved in a serious fire fight with the raiders north of Kargil on 11 May. He then retired to Olthingthang where he was joined by Major Coutts. On 13 May, three sections had crossed over the Suru river when the raiders struck. Both officers and a few survivors then swam the icy Indus to reach the safety of Leh on 18<sup>th</sup> May. In the bargain they had lost 1 JCO, 14 Other Ranks and 2 civilian signalers.

Lieutenant Colonel Kripal Singh still had 600 men of 5 and 7 Jammu and Kashmir Infantry between Totli and Parkutta. Despite these troops, he sent a message stating he was surrounded, cut off, being attacked from all sides and the situation was grave. The veracity of this could not be ascertained. On 15 May, they were sanctioned a withdrawal, fight their way out and concentrate at Olthingthang. Skardu was exempted from this order on the personal representation of Lieutenant Colonel Thapa.

Lieutenant Colonel Kirpal Singh started pulling back from Parkutta on 21 May, went past Tolti, and at midday on 22<sup>nd</sup> May the column was near the Kharmang bridge-they had walked into an ambush. They suffered 200 casualties, lost their entire heavy weapons, baggage and ceased to be an operational force.

The remnants went South-west avoiding used routes and then reached Faranshat in the valley of the Shingo valley. Whilst crossing the turbulent river using an old rope bridge, which broke, the enemy struck. The survivors split into two parties, those on the right bank were the 'A' and 'B' company's of the 7 Jammu and Kashmir Infantry. They turned due South heading to Dras. On 1<sup>st</sup> June, they encountered the raiders again. They were now at the very end of their tether and easily overpowered. Only two survivors reached Srinagar on 8<sup>th</sup> June to narrate a tale of woe.



annihilation(.) THREE(.) I therefore advise you to lay down arms and I take full responsibility to give protection to one and all(.). You must believe me and trust me as I am not only a soldier but also posses royal blood(.) I have given instrs to my officers and men that any one approaching with a white flag will not be fired at but taken into safe custody(.). FOUR(.) Lastly as a proof of my goodwill I wish to inform you that not a single Sikh or Hindu resident of CHITRAL has been hurt and not a single non-Muslim property looted or damaged and uptil now they carry on their business as if nothing at all has happened(.) I therefore advise you again to lay down arms and thus save your lives(.) An officer should accompany back the white flag if you consider my words sincere and honest(.).

The messenger was sent away with a refusal, the siege went on.

On 19 June, two Tempest aircraft of the RIAF attacked positions around the Fort which brought much cheer to those inside. Supply drops from these Tempest aircraft were received on 28 June, 1, 8, 11 and 17 July. Though most welcome they were just not enough for their requirement.

July, a month that would herald summer and ripening of fruit brought only continued misery to the defenders. Barley was now the main diet, malnutrition had set in, except for a steely indomitable will, the physique of the defenders now displayed clothes hanging on shrunken frames.

By August, the garrison was reduced to two 'Chapatties' of barley and a cup of tea per day. On 4 August, a conference was held. It was strongly felt that since no assistance had reached them for over six months, the garrison be permitted to break out and hope for the best. This was conveyed to Major General (later General) KS Thimayya, DSO who ordered that no withdrawal will take place without his permission.

On 7 August, Tempest aircraft attacked the raiders position and dropped two containers of supplies, a pittance indeed. 9 August was announced by the loud boom of a new gun, two 3.7 inch howitzers had now been brought in for the kill.

12 August witnessed a determined attack by 200 raiders on a picquet just outside the Fort. Hand to hand combat ensued. With ammunition running low, the last box of ammunition from the Fort



was rushed to them. The attack was repulsed, the raiders withdrew leaving behind a pile of their dead. This was the last swansong of the garrison, they had carried the day yet again. It was however the beginning of the end. What ammunition remained was 10 cartridges with each rifleman. That was all, no grenades, no bombs, nothing.

The day of 13 August passed slowly and as night fell, those of the garrison who could and wished to, slipped away from the Fort in small groups. Lieutenant Colonel Thapa sent his last message, to simply state that he had no option but to surrender on the morrow. His request was granted conveyed by Colonel Shri Ram Oberoi of the Srinagar Division on behalf of Major General KS Thimayya, DSO.

The garrison on 14 August 1948, consisted of Lieutenant Colonel Thapa, 4 Officers, 1 JCO and 35 Other Ranks apart from the civilians.

When the raiders took charge of the Fort, the Muslim's were led away, the remaining murdered. Captain Ganga Singh, the Adjutant was tied to the ground and shot. The fate of the womenfolk is best left to the imagination, it was a repeat of the events at Baramula. The only survivors were Lieutenant Colonel Thapa and his Sikh orderly, Sepoy Kalyan Singh. The moot question remains, why?

### **Kismet**

General Sir Douglas Gracey, KCB, KCIE, CBE, MC had assumed the appointment of Commander -in -Chief of the Pakistan Army in February 1948. He had a most distinguished career. From his office at Rawalpindi, he had full survey of the war of Jammu and Kashmir. The war on the Northern Front in the bleak landscape of the Himalaya's held a certain interest for him at a personal level.

He had been apprised of the happenings and in particular the defiant stand being taken by the garrison of Skardu. He was also informed that this garrison was commanded by a Lieutenant Colonel Sher Jung Thapa.

Today, it would be a matter of conjecture what thoughts must have crossed the mind of General Gracey on learning about the garrison commander. Doubtlessly his reflections would have taken him back a quarter of a century to 1924 when he was the Adjutant of the 151 Gorkha Rifles Regimental Centre and he had played hockey against a young lad at Dharamshala whom he had encouraged to



work hard and seek a future in the armed forces. Lieutenant Colonel Thapa was that young man he had befriended. He must have been proud of his progeny.

With the fall of Skardu now imminent, strict orders would emanate, that Lieutenant Colonel Thapa is to be extended all courtesies of war and his person is not to be harmed. No one dare disobey an order from the Commander-in-Chief. Fate thus intervened and gave to Lieutenant Colonel Thapa a reprieve from what would have been certain death at the hands of the raiders. It was 'kismet'.

### **A Balance Sheet**

The events on the Northern Front never came into the limelight during the 1947-48 war owing entirely to inaccessibility. The achievements by Pakistan remain extant. In a period of eight months and with just two battalions, a vast area from Gilgit to the Nubra and from the Karakoram till the Zoji La was under their sway. The sheer audacity in concept of the 'Riposte' towards Dras and Kargil followed by a brilliant execution; demands applause from any professional quarter. The raiders overwhelmed both nature's fury and the bleak landscape to reach their objectives<sup>1</sup>.

In October, 77 Parachute Brigade will launch two attacks to secure the vital Zoji La pass. Both attempts will fail. It is a desperate situation as winter is approaching which demands a gamble and a higher scale of leadership. 7<sup>th</sup> Light Cavalry, commanded by Lieutenant Colonel (later Major General) Rajindar Singh; are ordered to move from Akhnoor to Srinagar and then Baltal. They do so after an arduous journey on tracks.

On 1 November, the tanks storm and cross the Zoji La pass to the complete astonishment of the raiders. The rout is over in hours, the months long deadlock broken and the roll up of the line of communications begins to finally effect a link up with Leh; or else the province of Ladakh was as good as gone and the map of India would have been very different today. On 15 November, early snows fell and the Zoji La pass was closed. There could not have been a more close finish.

The conduct of operations both by the 'Biscuit' and 'Sugar Columns', makes sad reading. The rank and file faced the elements and long marches with a fortitude but poor leadership dampened any hopes of success.



What will live on forever, is the heroic stand at Skardu which was possible because of one man alone, Lieutenant Colonel Sher Jung Thapa. Whether it was in siting his weapons, fortifying his bunkers and defences and most importantly, rallying his command to surmount every conceivable hardship; that his majestic personality shone like a radiant star. The siege of Skardu will always be linked to Lieutenant Colonel Thapa and his sheer will to go on despite all odds.

### Envoy

The cease fire came into effect on 1 January 1949. A few weeks later, Lieutenant Colonel Thapa returned from Pakistan to a very warm welcome. He was awarded the Maha Vir Chakra ever so richly deserved. He was promoted to be Brigadier. By the early 1950's great changes took place for the State Forces, they were simply swept away, amalgamated, broken up or swallowed by the Indian Army. Their assets were taken over, their history and deeds became things of the past.

Till now, no definitive history of the State Forces exists, it is as if they were never there at all.

Brigadier Sher Jung Thapa retired in 1961 and settled in his home town of Dharamshala to lead a quiet, retired life. Highly respected and venerated, he took considerable interest in his surroundings and remained a pillar of society.

It is the early 1970's and one (the author) is home on leave and ventures into pater's study. He<sup>2</sup> is reading a letter and is in a pensive mood. One asks, if all is well. Silently, he hands over the letter. It is from Brigadier Sher Jung Thapa enquiring from an old comrade in arms, whether the recently announced monetary grant by the Punjab government to award winners, will include his eligibility as Kangra was once part of the Punjab.

"He was a remarkable man" pater said "what we did and achieve will pale in comparison against his stellar contribution", he went on. "Living on two 'Chapattis' a day for weeks, seven months on the defensive, he never despaired and today an ingrate Service and Nation cannot give him a decent allowance."

**Brigadier Sher Jung Thapa passed away in August 1999 aged 92, unnoticed by either the Army or the Nation. There were**



no obituaries, nothing. There is no memorial to his service rendered. At no school of instruction is there a battle study on Skardu or more importantly a study on the qualities or character of a man who withstood more than anyone. Still, his remarkable defence at Skardu will remain an abject lesson of what one can achieve if you have it in you. He had it in him in abundance. May this be a lasting tribute to a great personality.

1. Shades of the **Kargil conflict, 1999.**
2. Late **Major General Rajindar Singh 'Sparrow'**, MVC and Bar, Member of Parliament.