

1962 - The Battle of Namka Chu and Fall of Tawang (A View from other Side of the Hill)

Major General PJS Sandhu (Retd)*

Author's Note

In an earlier Issue of USI Journal (Oct-Dec 2011), I had covered the battles of Se-La and Bomdi-La which had been reconstructed primarily from Chinese literature. Subsequently, some more Chinese material has become available which has enabled me to also analyse the initial battle on the Namka Chu and the fall of Tawang. This completes the narrative of operations in the Kameng Sector during 1962 war.

Prelude

By the end of 1950s and the beginning of 1960s, the PLA had shifted its strategic focus from Ladakh to NEFA (now Arunachal Pradesh). By constructing the road connecting Xinjiang to Tibet through Aksai-Chin (completed in 1957) and securing it by establishing border posts across the road to give it sufficient depth, the Chinese had by and large achieved their aims in the Western Sector. They now turned their attention to the Eastern Sector. However, before initiating any armed action, they wanted to make sure that the international environment, if not friendly, was at least not hostile to them.

Their main concerns were the attitude of the erstwhile Soviet Union and the USA. The USA was locked with the Soviet Union in the Cuban missile crisis and had little interest in the Sino-Indian affairs. At the same time, the Soviet Union while in confrontation with the USA, wanted China on its side to be able to jointly deal with America. Hence, as a measure of expediency the Soviet Union changed its attitude towards the Sino-Indian border dispute. On 13 and 14 Oct 1962, Khrushchev conveyed to the Chinese ambassador in Moscow a message on the following lines ¹ :-

"The information received by the Soviet Union regarding India preparing to launch an attack on China is same as conveyed by China. Had Soviet Union been in place of China, it would have also adopted similar measures. On Sino-Indian border issue, an attitude of neutrality cannot be adopted and if someone is attacking China, neutrality on our part will be like a traitor's behavior".

This was perhaps the last time that the Soviet Union took a pro-China stance as far as Sino-Indian border dispute was concerned.

There was one more concern that the Chinese had, i.e. Taiwan taking advantage of a Sino-Indian conflict by initiating its own military action against the mainland. However, the Americans had unsuspectingly conveyed to the Chinese during the ambassadorial level talks in Warsaw that Taiwan had been restrained from taking any such action.²

Having secured the international environment, the Chinese leadership seem to have made up their mind in early 1962 to strike a hard and painful blow. Chairman Mao Zedong is reported to have said, "India made us suffer for three years, starting from 1959, 1960 and 1961; only then in 1962 we struck back".

By about July 1962, the negotiations between the Chinese and the Indian Government at political and diplomatic levels had reached a dead end. On 26 Jul 1962, soon after the meeting between Marshal Ch'en Yi and Mr Krishna Menon in Geneva, the Indian Government offered to send a ministerial level delegation to Beijing to discuss, without preconditions, all bilateral problems and disputes. The Chinese Premier Chou En Lai in a midnight meeting with the Indian Charge d' Affairs, Dr PK Banerjee on 04 Aug 1962 conveyed that China was willing to hold talks only on China's terms. In the words of Shri Sudharshan Bhutani, IFS (Retd) who was posted in the Indian embassy in Beijing from 1957- 62 "the door had been slammed shut".³

Hereafter, the relations deteriorated swiftly. The Eastern Sector (then known as NEFA) which had comparatively seen little activity till then came into prominence. The first manifestation was the Chinese reaction to the Indian post of Dhola which had been established in the area of Thagla Ridge by Assam Rifles in early June 1962. The Chinese reaction on 08 Sep 1962 though long in coming, was deliberate and massive, and was a forerunner of the events that followed. The Dhola confrontation began on 08 Sep 1962 and culminated in a major Chinese offensive on 20 Oct. This article attempts to reconstruct the battles in the Kameng Sector from Sep 1962 onwards till the fall of Tawang which was a prelude to the operations launched by the Chinese in Nov 1962. This narrative is in three parts as under :-

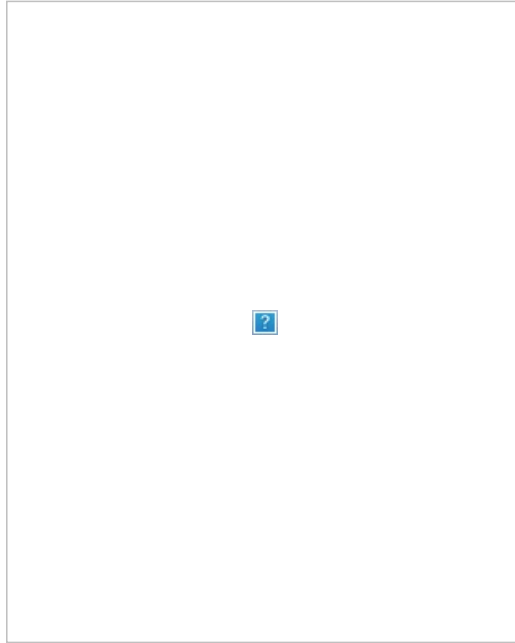
- (a) Part I - The Confrontation at Dhola.
- (b) Part II - The Battle at Namka Chu.
- (c) Part III - The Fall of Tawang.

Part I - The Confrontation at Dhola

It is generally believed that the war in the Eastern Sector was triggered by the Dhola incident in Sep 1962. It is doubtful if the war could have been prevented even if Dhola Post had not been established by India. However, wars always require some incident to act as a trigger and so Dhola may well have been that trigger.

Dhola Post was established by a platoon of 5 Assam Rifles on the southern bank of Namka Chu in the vicinity of Bridge III in early June 1962. Please refer to Sketch 'P'. An officer from 1 SIKH (Captain Mahavir Prasad) was deputed initially to assist in setting up of the Post. The Post was commanded by a Junior Commissioned Officer (JCO) who was reporting to his superiors through normal channels of Assam Rifles. Assam Rifles at that time were under the control of the Ministry of External Affairs. HQ 7 Infantry Brigade, though responsible for defence of the Kameng Sector,

was not in the chain of command of this platoon at Dhola.⁴ However, they were required to provide assistance in case of a Chinese reaction. HQ 7 Infantry Brigade was located at Tawang along with its two battalions 1/9 GORKHA RIFLES and 1 SIKH. There was no road beyond Tawang and the post at Dhola was supplied by porters. Tawang was the road head for 1 ton vehicles. The marching distance from Tawang to Dhola on the Namka Chu, though only about 22 kms, was three days march, either over Karpola I Pass (16,000 feet) or, over Hathungla Pass (13,500 feet).



The Indian version of the events is generally well known. The account given by Brigadier JP Dalvi in his book 'Himalayan Blunder' which is based on his first hand experience as Commander 7 Infantry Brigade appears to be quite authentic. It will be worthwhile to recount the main events as known today from early 1961 till 20 Oct 1962, i.e the day the Chinese launched their attack against Indian positions on the Namka Chu. These are :-

- (a) Brigadier Dalvi on assuming command of the brigade in Mar 1962 inherited the following tasks ⁵ :-
 - (i) Defend Tawang – the primary role.
 - (ii) Prevent any penetration of the McMahon Line.
 - (iii) Establish Assam Rifles post; and
 - (iv) Assist Assam Rifles posts.
- (b) The Chinese during their talks had raised a dispute about the exact alignment of the McMahon Line in the area of Thagla Ridge. Hence, Thagla Ridge became a disputed area. The Chinese had earlier also objected to the establishment of an Assam Rifles Post at Khenzamane in 1959 by surrounding it and then withdrawing after a few days.
- (c) In order to secure the boundary as perceived by India, 7 Infantry Brigade was ordered to establish an Assam Rifles post of a platoon strength in the area of Thagla Ridge. This post was called 'Dhola' and was established by 04 Jun 1962. In the event, the post was actually established on the southern bank of Namka Chu as this was the only place which was free of snow and for administrative reasons, such as availability of water and easier accessibility for replenishment parties.⁶ Undoubtedly, siting of the post was tactically unsound.
- (d) There was no visible reaction from the Chinese to the establishment of Dhola Post till 08 Sep. On 08 Sep, Dhola Post was reportedly surrounded by 600 Chinese, a number that kept varying between 60-1200 in subsequent days.
- (e) 7 Infantry Brigade was ordered to relieve Dhola Post. Further, the Post was to hold out at all costs.
- (f) A detachment of 9 PUNJAB located at Lumpu was immediately ordered to move via Hathungla Pass and establish contact with Dhola. Rest of the battalion was placed on four hours notice to be prepared to move to Lumpu to establish a firm base and man the Dropping Zone (DZ).
- (g) Simultaneously, HQ Eastern Command located at Lucknow also issued orders on 10 Sep for 7 Infantry Brigade to be prepared to move forward and deal with the Chinese investing Dhola. At this stage, 1 SIKH having been detached to Tawang Sector, the Brigade had only one battalion, i.e. 9 PUNJAB, as the other two battalions, 1/9 GORKHA RIFLES and 2 RAJPUT were still moving up from Misamari.
- (h) By the end of Sep, 7 Infantry Brigade was deployed on the Namka Chu in a linear fashion from Tsangle in the West to Bridge I in the East, a distance of nearly 20 kms and under direct domination of the Chinese on the Thagla Ridge. The Brigade had been tasked by the 'highest political authority' to throw the Chinese out from Thagla Ridge.

This was the setting till Lieutenant General BM Kaul, the newly appointed GOC IV Corps arrived (by helicopter) on the scene on 05 Oct 1962 and put into motion the actions to evict the Chinese from Thagla Ridge. He ordered the troops to get a 'move on' (to Namka Chu) without even waiting for the Brigade Commander to arrive who reached Dhola only on the afternoon of 07 Oct.

Kaul apparently was under some sort of pressure to do something (to evict the Chinese) by 10 Oct. Accordingly, he ordered 2 RAJPUT to move to Yumstola (16000 feet) on the Thagla Ridge, to sit behind the Chinese. However, after strong remonstrations by the Commanding Officers (COs), the Brigade Commander and the General Officer Commanding (GOC) of the Division, the order was changed to send a company strength patrol of 9 PUNJAB under Major Chaudhry to occupy Tseng-Jong (a herder's hut approximately half way to the top of Thagla Ridge) on 09 Oct to ascertain the Chinese reaction to our crossing the Namka Chu. They left small detachments on the crossing places on Namka Chu and reached Tseng-Jong before dusk on 09 Oct. 2 RAJPUT was to be in readiness to move to Yumstola the next day after the Chinese reaction was known.

The 9 PUNJAB patrol, approximately 50 strong was attacked by a battalion of the Chinese at 0500 hours (IST) on 10 Oct. The Punjabis managed to repulse the first attack but were overwhelmed in the second attack by sheer numbers. They were without any artillery or even mortar support. Soon they ran out of ammunition as they had carried only pouch ammunition. Major Chaudhry was wounded but continued to lead his men with great determination and courage.

The Punjabis suffered six dead including one officer and eleven wounded. The Chinese admitted to have suffered 11 killed and 22 wounded. However, on this day the Chinese allowed the Indians to withdraw and even carry their wounded without interference. They even cremated our dead. All this was watched by Indian troops deployed on the Namka Chu with amazement.

Lieutenant General Kaul saw for himself the Chinese attack develop and was badly shaken. His first reaction was - "Oh my God, you are right, they mean business".⁷ Shortly thereafter, he left for Delhi. However, before leaving, he ordered 7 Infantry Brigade to continue to hold their positions on the southern bank of the Namka Chu and ensure security of the crossings at all costs. The stage was now set for the events that were to unfold on 20 Oct. The irony of the situation was that the Indian troops on the Namka Chu could all along see the Chinese reconnaissance, deployment and preparations opposite them on the Thagla slopes but could do nothing, except to wait for the trap to be sprung, while the authorities in Delhi still made plans to throw the Chinese out!

Part II - The Battle of Namka Chu⁸

China Prepares

On 29 May 1962, HQ General Staff of the PLA based on a directive from the Central Military Commission (CMC) issued firm instructions to the Tibet Military Command to plan military operations on the Sino-Indian border. These instructions set into motion a chain of events that were to end in the massive attack on 20 Oct 1962. Some of the important actions are listed below :-

- (a) A forward HQ of Tibet Military Command which was to command all operations in the Eastern Sector was formed. This forward HQ was designated as Zang Zi 419 (Force 419) and was established at Lhasa on 11 June 1962.
- (b) Force 419 (equivalent of a division) had under its command 154, 155 and 157 Infantry Regiments, and some other combat support elements. Their main task was to prevent any further Indian encroachments in Tawang Sector.
- (c) Another Force under Huo Guang, Deputy Political Commissar of the Chengdu Military Region was tasked to prevent any Indian ingress from Sikkim towards Gyantse and Yatung (Chumbi Valley).
- (d) 11 Infantry Division was independently made responsible to prevent any Indian encroachments in the eastern part of Arunachal Pradesh, i.e. less Kameng Sector.

In addition to the above, the CMC asked Tibet Frontier Forces to make preparations to resume patrolling which had been halted a few months earlier. In response to the setting up of Dhola Post by India in early Jun 1962, GHQ PLA issued instructions regarding measures for "strengthening Sino-Indian Eastern Front and military posture in the Central Sector". On 06 Sep 1962 Gouzhi Xian, the Deputy Commander of Shannan Military District and Shi Zong Kuan, the Political Commissar of 2 Infantry Regiment along with the 3rd Company of this Regiment entered into the Namka Chu area (this was probably the force that was reported by Dhola Post Commander to have surrounded the Post on 08 Sep). Later they set up posts along the northern bank of the Namka Chu and were face to face with the Indian troops at Dhola which was on the southern bank in the area of Bridge III.

The formations and units of the PLA which had been selected to undertake the operations were also put through focused training commencing in Jun 1962. On 05 Jun, the Tibet Military Command issued detailed instructions regarding training to be carried out by various units. The units were required to practice quick mobilisation and rapid movement to designated operational areas. Priority was to be given to those skills which were required for defensive and offensive operations in the mountainous and jungle terrain. Special attention was to be paid to providing fire support in mountainous terrain, to meet a counter attack, demolition of bunkers, breaching obstacles, assembly and advance under fire. A large number of personnel in units were also trained in handling of explosives. The tactical training of cadres (commanders) in relation to the pending operations was also upgraded through training exercises at unit and regimental level. Force 419 and 32 Infantry Regiment were also given an in-depth exposure about the Indian strength, organisations, deployment and tactics.

As operations were to be conducted in high altitudes areas, a lot of emphasis was laid on acclimatisation and familiarising with the mountainous environment, lacking in oxygen and the prevailing adverse climatic conditions.

Troops were trained in first aid, casualty evacuation and treating frostbite cases. Each unit was tasked to carry out ground reconnaissance and conduct sand model discussions of their operational tasks, and only thereafter formulate their concrete plans. Operational plans were also rehearsed at unit and sub-unit level so that every soldier had a clear idea of his role in the battle. The aim of pre-battle training was to fully prepare individual soldiers, units and formations for the impending tasks and to inculcate among them a sense of confidence. The emphasis was on 'winning the first battle of the war'.

The CMC and the GHQ of the PLA took pains to especially get the units combat ready. Key appointments were specially selected and a proportion of officers, NCOs and soldiers with combat experience in previous wars (War of Liberation, Korean War, suppression of Tibetan rebellion etc.) were inducted into units. For example, in Force 419, as many as 273 cadres (commanders) at various levels were adjusted, which constituted 32.4 per cent of the overall strength. Such adjustments were carried out in all the battalions and regiments creating an elite core of experienced troops which would prove to be a stabilising influence in times of crisis.

All the units were instructed to carry out battlefield reconnaissance to understand the topography and dispositions of Indian troops. Beginning Oct, the Deputy C-in-C of the Tibet Military Command Zhao Wesijin, leading Commanders of the Force 419 above regimental level went to mountain passes to carry out a detailed reconnaissance of the ground and deployment of Indian forces in the Namka Chu valley before formulating their final plans.

By the end of Sep, the CPC Central Committee and the CMC had concluded that a military clash was unavoidable. All key commanders and staff who were on leave or away on duty were ordered to return to Tibet. The C-in-C of Tibet Military Command who was on leave (in Beijing) and his Chief of Staff who was already in Beijing were briefed by the Party Central Committee and senior members of the CMC. They returned to Lhasa on 12 Oct. The Forward HQ of Tibet Military Command and HQ Force 419 moved to Mama on 14 Oct 1962. Mama is located in Nyam Jang Chu Valley, approximately 15 kms North of Khenzamane.

As the operations were to be conducted in difficult terrain, far removed from the Chinese mainland, logistics preparations were given heightened importance. Tibet Military Command had built stocks of upto 445 tons of various war like stores at their forward bases, like Cuona, Longzi and Chayu before the war. Food stocks were built up to sustain a force of one division for upto 40 days of active operations. Due attention was also paid to develop road communications to the border areas. Road head was developed right up to Le Camp just North of Bumla. Powerful transmitters were set-up close to the border. Each border post was equipped with a radio station of 200 Watt. Some important locations were equipped with radio stations of 1000 watt which enabled them to communicate directly with the GHQ of the PLA during battle.

The CMC was also concerned about some internal disturbances in Tibet during the campaign. In order to cater for such a contingency, the CMC ordered the move of 130 Infantry Division of the 54th Army from Sichuan Province to Tibet and await further orders. Similarly, 134 Infantry Division, also of the 54th Army stationed in Nanchong Region was to remain in readiness and await orders for move into Tibet.

Chinese Order of Battle. The forward HQ of Tibet Military Region which was responsible to conduct operations in Tawang Sector had the following troops available to it :-

- (a) Force 419 (154, 155 and 157 Infantry Regiments).
- (b) 11 Infantry Division (31, 32 and 33 Infantry Regiments). It seems that only one battalion of 31 Infantry Regiment was available for this operation.
- (c) 2 Infantry Regiment ex Shannan Military sub-district (SMS).
- (d) 308 Artillery Regiment (two companies).
- (e) A part of 136 Engineer Regiment.

Concept of Operations. The concept of operations was to attack from both flanks with the main thrust being delivered from the left flank of the Indian Forces deployed on the Namka Chu. Simultaneously with the above, the Indian positions were to be outflanked from the eastern flank to cut off their route of withdrawal, while pinning them down from the front. Indian forces were to be split into many pockets and were to be destroyed in detail.

The Plan. Please refer to Sketch 'P'. 155 Infantry Regiment and one battalion of 157 Infantry Regiment of Force 419 were to launch the main attack from the left flank of the Indian forces between Bridge IV and Bridge V and roll up the left flank; namely, 2 RAJPUT positions on the Namka Chu. The main body of 157 Infantry Regiment less one battalion was to outflank the Indian positions from the West and attack Tsangdar directly which was the DZ as also the forward logistics base for 7 Infantry Brigade. 154 Infantry Regiment of Force 419 was to attack the right flank and destroy Indian forces deployed at Khinzemane and Dhola. 2nd Battalion of 32 Infantry Regiment ex 11 Infantry Division along with elements of SMS were to pin down the Indian forces from the front. The main force of 32 Infantry Regiment (less one battalion) along with 2nd Battalion of 31 Infantry Regiment ex 11 Infantry Division were to be located as reserves in the Area Le - Cuona (15-20 Km North of Bumla).

Supporting Operations. In conformity with the above attacks, Chengdu Sub Command had been ordered to launch feint attacks by two battalions towards Bumla, Longju and the areas East of it to confuse the Indian Forces. In addition, HQ 11 Infantry Division with its 33 Infantry Regiment was ordered to be a reserve in the area of Cuona and await further orders. Simultaneously, Xinjiang Military Command was ordered to undertake offensive operations to eliminate Indian posts in the Western Sector in coordination with the main attack in the Eastern Sector (Tawang Sector).

The Battle

The attack on the Namka Chu positions commenced in the early hours of 20 Oct at 0545 hours (IST).⁹ It was preceded by 15 minutes of intense bombardment. The Chinese had infiltrated through Indian positions on the Namka Chu during the night as there were large gaps. They had thus occupied higher ground behind Indian defences and were attacking downhill. The Indian defenders were thus forced to turn around and face the attack. As the Indian telephone lines ran along the Namka Chu these had also been cut during the night. The only communication available between the battalions being attacked and HQ 7 Infantry Brigade was the B1 Net (Brigade Command Net). Soon the B1 detachments of the battalions were either killed or taken prisoner and HQ 7 Infantry Brigade itself was overrun, the B1 Net also became non-functional. By about 0800 hours, the Brigade HQ was not in communication with any of its battalions. The situation is best captured in the words of Brigadier (then Captain) Lakshman Singh, Officer Commanding the Brigade Signal Section (in military parlance referred to as 'Sparrow'). I quote¹⁰ :-

"This was the end of the Brigade Command Net and also the Command of the Brigade as there was no one left to be commanded and no means to command.....The Brigade having lost both command and control could do little to influence the battle.

Operations on the Western Flank

The main force of the attack by the 1st and 2nd Battalions plus 8th Company of 155 Infantry Regiment was borne by the left flank of the Indian positions held by 2 RAJPUT in the area of Log Bridge, Temporary Bridge and Bridge IV (Chinese called this complex Qiang Deng and Ke Long) which found themselves being attacked from many directions. The Chinese had infiltrated to southeast of Indian positions, dividing the defences of 2 RAJPUT in two halves and progressed their attack northwards (downhill), tackling Indian positions piecemeal. Third Battalion of the Regiment less 8th Company was held in reserve. After the capture of Qiang Deng and Ke Long, the idea was to develop the attack eastwards towards Dhola which was held by a company of 9 PUNJAB and a platoon of 5 Assam Rifles. There was considerable hand to hand fighting. Chinese also used flame throwers to neutralise the machine gun bunkers. 2 RAJPUT fought valiantly but were not able to give a coordinated battle because command and control had been lost and their defences had been penetrated. The casualties suffered by 2 RAJPUT bear testimony to the heroic fight put up by them against overwhelming odds. Against their overall strength of 513 all ranks deployed on the Namka Chu, they suffered 282 killed, 171 taken prisoner which included 81 wounded - there were only 60 survivors. CO 2 RAJPUT Lieutenant Colonel Rikhy and CO of 4 Infantry Division Signal Regiment Lieutenant Colonel Tiwari (who was manning the B1 net of the battalion till the last) were taken prisoners. The Chinese battalion (2nd Battalion 155 Infantry Regiment) which had attacked in the first phase suffered 21 killed and 34 wounded. 1st Battalion 155 Infantry Regiment which had attacked in the second phase suffered 59 killed and 79 wounded. The Chinese casualties also indicate the tough resistance put up by the defenders. The battle had lasted for about three hours.

Operations on the Eastern Flank

Simultaneously with the operations on the western flank, 154 Infantry Regiment of Task Force 419 was given the task of attacking the eastern flank of Indian forces (7 Infantry Brigade); namely, at Khenzemane (established in 1959), advance along Nyam Jang Chu, destroy Drokung Samba Bridge and cut off the route of withdrawal of Indian forces to Ziminthaung. Zhou Zhong was the Commander of 154 Infantry Regiment. He assigned 3rd Battalion for the main attack on Khenzemane. The 2nd Battalion was tasked to bypass and go straight for Drokung Samba Bridge. The 1st Battalion was to roll up the eastern flank of Indian positions on the Namka Chu in the area of Bridges I and II.

This attack too commenced at 0545 hours (IST) and was preceded by 15 minutes of intense shelling. The 3rd Battalion attacked Khenzemane Post from the northwest direction in echelons, while simultaneously encircling the post. The attack continued till the Drokung Samba Bridge where 2nd Battalion was already in position on the heights, effectively dominating the bridge by fire. The bridge was subsequently destroyed by the Chinese, thus cutting off the route of withdrawal. The attack was supported by concentrated fire of the Artillery Group consisting of 21 X 82 mm mortars, 3 X 75 mm recoilless guns and 2 X 120 mm mortars ex 11 Infantry Division. For some reason (possibly over cautiousness on the part of the battalion commander), the attack by the 1st Battalion against the eastern flank on the Namka Chu got delayed till 1800 hours on 20 Oct, hence Indian troops deployed in the area of Bridges I and II, and junction of Namka Chu and Nyam Jang Chu i.e 9 PUNJAB (minus) and 4 GRENADIERS could withdraw in reasonably good order.

Capture of Tsangdhar

As per Chinese perceptions, Tsangdhar which lay about six km South of Namka Chu was located North of McMahon Line. It was a forward logistics base for 7 Infantry Brigade and also a DZ for airdrops. It was held by one company of 1/9 GR. On the morning of 20 Oct, 1/9 GR less two companies were preparing for move to Tsangle as per orders from Lieutenant General BM Kaul. So, in effect, on the morning of the attack (20 Oct), Tsangdhar was defended by one company of 1/9 GR which was deployed on a hill top West of Tsangdhar. Chinese appreciated that outflanking and capture of Tsangdhar would not only make the Indian defences on the Namka Chu untenable but would also effectively block any reinforcements coming from the direction of Lumpu.

The task for capture and outflanking of Tsangdhar was assigned to 157 Infantry Regiment of Force 419, commanded by Li De Rong. He in turn tasked the 1st Battalion reinforced by No. 8 Company for capture of Tsangdhar by an outflanking move from the West. The battalion crossed Namka Chu in its upper reaches, advanced cross country in a single file for about 12 hours and reached their assigned positions for attack northwest of Tsangdhar by first light 20 Oct. The battalion outflanked the Indian positions from the South by a company and attacked from the West with two companies while holding a company in reserve. Guns deployed about 500 m to the northwest of Tsangdhar provided effective fire support. By about 1300 hours, the battle of Tsangdhar was over. In the meantime, the main body of 157 Infantry Regiment had crossed Namka Chu and advanced quickly towards Tsangdhar and occupied the mountain passes leading out from this area. Lt Col Ahluwalia, CO 1/9 GORKHA RIFLES and 492 other ranks of the battalion were taken prisoners.

Simultaneously with the above, 32 Infantry Regiment of 11 Infantry Division alongwith elements of SMS who were providing the firm base on northern bank of Namka Chu advanced and relieved the troops of Force 419 on the Namka Chu to enable them to carry out mopping up operations. Later, 32 Infantry Regiment attacked Hathungla Ridge and occupied the same by first light 21 Oct. By the morning of 21 Oct, the battles of Namka Chu, Tsangdhar and Hathungla were over and the Indian 7 Infantry Brigade had ceased to be an effective fighting force. Two of the COs had been taken prisoners. Lieutenant Colonel Rattan Singh CO 5 Assam Rifles was also taken a prisoner.

Part III - Fall of Tawang (22-24 Oct 1962)¹¹

Preliminary Operations. After the battle of Namka Chu, taking advantage of disorderly retreat, the CPC Central Committee ordered its forces to strike even a greater blow to the Indian forces. Accordingly, at 1900 hours (IST) on 20 Oct, they ordered their forces to consolidate their gains, cross McMahon Line (so far they perceived themselves to be evicting Indian troops from North of McMahon Line) and capture Lumpu-Ziminthaung, thus creating favourable conditions for capture of Tawang in the next phase.

Forward HQ of Tibet Military Command ordered pursuit operations to commence at 1600 hours (IST) on 21 Oct. The outline plan was as under :-

- (a) 157 Infantry Regiment plus 3rd Battalion ex 155 Infantry Regiment were to advance along the western flank from Tsangdhar to Karpola I and on to Lumpu.
- (b) HQ Force 419 with 154 Infantry Regiment leading and 155 Infantry Regiment less 3rd battalion were to carry out pursuit along the main Axis Hathungla - Serkhim - Lumpu.
- (c) One company from 2nd Regiment of SMS was to advance along the eastern bank of Nyam Jang Chu to Ziminthaung where tactical HQ of Indian 4 Infantry Division was located.

Having secured Lumpu and Ziminthaung, Forward HQ of Tibet Military Command at 1630 h (IST) on 22 Oct, ordered troops ex SMS to capture Bumla and exploit towards Tawang. Bumla was held by a platoon of 5 Assam Rifles and a platoon ex 1 SIKH (deployed slightly in depth) with the remainder Company of 1 SIKH deployed at Tongpeng La.

For the Capture of Bumla, HQ SMS tasked three companies of the 3rd Infantry Regiment with an artillery company and elements of Frontier Guards; placing all of them under the command of the Deputy Commander of SMS - Guozhi Xian. In outline, the plan was to outflank the Indian positions from the West using one company in order to sever the link between the Assam Rifles platoon and the 1 SIKH platoon. The other two companies were to launch the main attack against Bumla from southeast direction.

The attack commenced at 0500 hours (IST) on 23 Oct and faced stiff opposition from the 1 SIKH platoon under Subedar Joginder Singh, PVC (posthumous). However, the position was overwhelmed after three attacks. The attacking troops had to call for reinforcements from 33 Infantry Regiment and readjust their plans. Having eliminated the 1 SIKH platoon at Bumla, 33 Infantry Regiment troops continued their attack against the 1 SIKH company at Tongpengla which managed to make a clean break and withdraw to Jung in good order. At first light on 24 Oct, four companies ex SMS resumed their advance towards Tawang.

At this point of time, Tawang was defended by 1 SIKH, 4 GARHWAL RIFLES, one artillery regiment, an engineer detachment, all under the command of Brigadier Kalyan Singh, Commander 4 Artillery Brigade. As per Chinese estimates Tawang had a total strength of about 2700 troops.

Please refer to Sketch 'Q'. The plan involved advance along three different routes and finally culminating in a three pronged attack on Tawang. Force 419 (comprising three infantry regiments), 11 Infantry Division and four companies ex SMS (roughly a total strength of six infantry regiments) were tasked for capture of Tawang. The outline plan was as under :-

- (a) Main force consisting of Force 419 was to advance from Lumpu via Lumla and capture Tawang in coordination with units of 11 Infantry Division.
- (b) 1st Battalion of 31 Infantry Regiment was to advance from Takson Gompa via Gangshen Pass directly on to Tawang and assist the main Force 419 advancing from the West for capture of Tawang.
- (c) 33 Infantry Regiment of 11 Infantry Division was to advance along the eastern flank from Bumla via Mukdong La directly on to Tawang Chu and cut off the route of withdrawal of Indian troops deployed at Tawang, as also prevent any reinforcements coming from Derang Dzong.



(d) 32 Infantry Regiment of 11 Infantry Division and four companies of SMS were to advance on the main Axis Bumla – Tawang via Milakteng La and coordinate their actions with both the forces advancing on the western and eastern flanks.

The advance to Tawang started at first light on 23 Oct and by last light 23 Oct Tawang had been surrounded and came under attack from many directions. There was no coordinated resistance from the defenders and by first light 24 Oct Tawang was occupied by the Chinese. They now controlled all areas North of Tawang Chu in the Kameng Sub Division.

It would be seen from the above that the Chinese had used bulk of their forces (four regiments out of a total of six regiments) to outflank and encircle Tawang, as also cut off the route of withdrawal and prevent reinforcements. Only about one third of the forces were used for direct advance on to the objective. This was typical of the tactics that Chinese were to employ even in the subsequent battles at Se-La and Bomdi-La.

Casualties

As per the Chinese accounts, in the operations conducted in the Tawang Sector so far, they had killed 832 Indian troops and taken 1065 men as prisoners, a total of 1897 all ranks. The Chinese had lost 151 killed (16 officers and 135 men) and 334 seriously wounded (30 officers and 304 men).¹² In addition, they had captured vast quantities of arms, ammunition, vehicles and equipment.

Conclusion

It would seem that by early 1962 Chinese had made up their mind to launch a large scale military operation and deliver a crippling blow to the Indian Army. While their main objectives lay in the Western Sector (Ladakh), it was in the Eastern Sector (Kameng Sub Division of NEFA) that they decided to launch their major effort as the terrain there facilitated employment of large forces. The 1959 rebellion in Tibet had necessitated movement of additional PLA troops into the Tibetan Autonomous Region and these formations were already available in Tibet, fully acclimatised and bloodied for combat.

In the Kameng Sector, the establishment of Dhola Post by India during early June 1962 proved to be the trigger. The first phase of operations was aimed at annihilation of Indian troops deployed on the Namka Chu in a linear fashion and the capture of Tawang. The attack on Namka Chu was carried out from both flanks with the main thrust being delivered from the western flank. Simultaneously, Indian positions were infiltrated (as there were large gaps) and divided into smaller bits for piecemeal destruction. The destruction of the Brigade was a foregone conclusion. After a pause of about 48 hours, operations were resumed for capture of Tawang. This time it was planned to encircle Indian positions, cut-off routes of withdrawal and launch multidirectional attacks.

After the destruction of 7 Infantry Brigade there was no effective formation responsible for defence of Tawang. The morale of Indian troops was also low. The adhoc troops under Commander Artillery of 4 Infantry Division were ordered to withdraw and Tawang fell without a fight by 24 Oct . The stage was now set for further operations towards Se-La and Bomdi-La.

If one was to ascribe a single reason for the debacle on the Namka Chu and fall of Tawang, it would be – a faulty battle plan with poor generalship, made worse by political interference. The troops fought valiantly against overwhelming odds. The casualties suffered by 7 Infantry Brigade units are a testimony to that. Let no one fault the Indian soldier for gallantry, even in hindsight.

Endnotes

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3. Sudarshan Bhutani, A Clash of Political Cultures-Sino Indian Relations (1957-1962), Lotus Collection, Roli Books Pvt Ltd, 2004, Page 167-168
4. Brig JP Dalvi, Himalayan Blunder, Published by Dinkar Sakrikar, for Thackerr & Co. Ltd. 18/20 Rampart Row, Bombay-1, 1969, Page 137.
5. Ibid 4, Page 118.
6. Ibid 4, Page 138.
7. Ibid 4, Pages 292-296.
8. This account draws heavily on the Chinese book A History of Counter Attack War in Self Defence Along Sino-Indian Border, Beijing Military Science Publications 1994, ISBN 7 - 80021-772-8, Aug 1994, First Edition.
9. This would correspond to 0745 h Chinese time in Tibet.
10. Brigadier Lakshman Singh, VSM (Retd), Letters from the Border, and Other Less Told Stories, BLS Publishers, First Published August 2003, Page 74.
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12. loc. cit.

***Major General PJS Sandhu (Retd)** was commissioned into 8th Light Cavalry on 15 June 1966 and later commanded 47 Armoured Regiment. He retired from the Army as Chief of Staff, 1 Corps on 31 July 2003. Presently, he is working as Deputy Director and Editor at USI since 01 May 2007.

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