

1962 War : Battle of Namka Chu - As I Saw It Brigadier AJS Behl (Retd)

Background

After reading an account of the above battle and subsequent days in Chinese captivity by Major JS Rathore (Retd) who was a Lance Naik (Technical Assistance) in the 'E' Troop of 17 Para Field Regiment, I felt motivated to put down my own experience of that war, as I saw it. Being an officer, I had the added advantage of seeing things from a higher plane and thus being able to put the events of those fateful days in a tactical perspective. I was the Gun Position Officer (GPO) of 'E' Troop from 17 Parachute Field Regiment which took part in operations in Oct 1962 in support of 7 Infantry Brigade on the Namka Chu in Kameng Frontier Division of erstwhile NEFA. The narrative that follows is based on my personal experience during that battle and later as a prisoner of war (PW).

Induction of 'E' Troop

'E' Troop ex 17 Parachute Field Regiment was inducted into the 7 Infantry Brigade Sector as per the operational plans to evict the Chinese from Thagla Ridge. A battery of 36 Heavy Mortar Regiment was already deployed there and augmenting the same by a troop ex a Parachute Field Regiment which could be airlifted fitted well into the operational plans of Lieutenant General BM Kaul. A JCO went to Kanpur to get winter clothing. I did a quick course in first aid for high altitude sickness with our medical unit 60 Parachute Field Ambulance. The induction of my troop was properly planned and we were well kitted, had adequate supply of gun ammunition and small arms ammunition.

We left Agra on 30 Sep 62. One AN12 and three C119 lifted the troop. It consisted of two officers, two JCOs and 45 men. We had four guns 75mm Pack Howitzers (made in the USA) and one first line ammunition for our four guns. The entire troop was concentrated at Tezpur, HQ 4 Infantry Division. I was briefed by Major Narinder Singh General Staff Officer 2 (Operations) HQ 4 Infantry Division. I was given blue prints of the area as no maps were available. In these blue prints McMahon Line was shown to be running along Thagla Ridge which is North of Namka Chu. 7 Infantry Brigade was deployed astride the Namka Chu which was tactically unsound.

I met General Kaul at Tezpur airport and he insisted that I should be in Tsangdhar before 10 Oct 62 failing which I will be in for serious trouble. I managed to reach Tsangdhar by 08 Oct thus saving myself from trouble. We left Tezpur airfield by Otter aircraft for Diranga in Bhutan and after a night stay there were heli-lifted to Zimithang. Our troop Commander Captain HS Talwar had already left for HQ 7 Infantry Brigade. Next morning, I was called by Major General Niranjana Prasad, General Officer Commanding for a cup of tea and a pep talk. He had been Commander 50 Independent Parachute Brigade before assuming command of 4 Infantry Division. Next day, I along with my troop moved to Tsangdhar via Karpola passes 1 and 2. The height of these passes is above 16000 feet and we went across them without any acclimatisation. We reached our Gun position at Tsangdhar on 08 Oct before last light, well before the limit laid down by General Kaul.

I got orders from my Troop Commander Captain HS Talwar to prepare the gun position. I got this ready in the next two days. The track to Bhutan and Karpola was on my left as we faced the Namka Chu. I was given man power to collect my guns, ammunition and other equipment. Everything had been dropped using Dakota aircraft as they have a small radius of turning. Some equipment did land in the Chinese hands as the air drop was taking place along Namka Chu. We managed to retrieve two guns and 80 rounds of gun ammunition from the area. By 18 Oct, the following had occurred :-

- (a) Both my JCOs had been evacuated due to sickness.
- (b) My Troop Havildar Major had been evacuated as he fell sick.
- (c) My Nursing Assistant died due to sickness.
- (d) My Troop Commander Captain HS Talwar had moved to HQ 7 Inf Bde.

I will say one thing at this stage that there was total lack of confidence in the air. The order for attacking the Chinese had been called off and we were told to adopt a defensive posture.

The Big Bang - 20 Oct 62

On the Night of 19/20 Oct, the Chinese had lit up bonfires on other side of Namka Chu and nobody could tell me the reason for this. I checked the sentries and went off to sleep. Next morning even before the stand to, heavy artillery fire started from the Chinese side. Two of my men Gunner Avtar Singh and radio operator got injured badly. I could not take them to the Advanced Dressing Station which was about 300 yards away due to heavy shelling. I removed their shell splinters and poured brandy on the wounds and gave them shell dressing. Both recovered fully in PW camp after about three months. By this time it was 0900 hours. We had no communications with anyone. Even with supply depot there was no communication. As there was no communication with anybody no fire support could be asked for by the Observation Post Officer who had started withdrawing with Brigadier JP Dalvi from the Brigade HQ. They had started withdrawing towards Hathungla side.

We had no option but to resort to direct firing on our own. I initially ordered direct firing towards Black Rock area to our left and fired about 20 rounds in that direction. I had organised an all round defence as is peculiar in a gun position. I sent out a small patrol to see what had happened to the helicopter which had landed a little while ago. I was told that a Major with a red turban and a Squadron Leader were lying dead near the helicopter. The helipad was about 400 yards from my gun position.

Next day, I recognised them as Major Ram Singh, Second in Command of 4 Division Signal Regiment and

Squadron Leader Sehgal and as a PW I buried them with the help of some of my men.

Havaladar Major of the Heavy Mortar Battery came to my trench to enquire as to what was happening. He was standing in my trench and was killed by fire when I was trying to indicate enemy to him. We were firing on the enemy who were near Black Rock area as also behind us. We fired about 20 more rounds with guns in direct firing mode and finished our ammunition. The fighting had become quite intense.

Two of my jawans had died and three more were wounded. The enemy was closing in and they had reached the area of the Supply Point. My three light machine guns were firing and we were using our personal weapons. I would like to add at this stage that Brigadier JP Dalvi in his book 'The Himalayan Blunder' (Page 382) has written that he saw my guns firing in direct firing mode over open sights and praised my troop for holding on at the gun position. It was mid-day by now. A withdrawal had started. People from supply depot and the FDLs were running away to Bhutan on the track which was close to my gun position telling us to hold on and continue firing. I can say with pride that none of my boys suggested that we should withdraw. We all stuck to our positions, fought to the best of our capability and with full confidence.

At this stage direct firing of guns was not possible as the melee of the battle was too thick and we had finished our gun ammunition. Our stubborn resistance came to an end by about 1530 hours. The Chinese had surrounded us from all sides. They hit us with rifle butts and we surrendered as they shouted on loudspeakers to surrender. From proud paratroopers we were now Prisoners of War of the Chinese. It was a big shock to me. In this battle, I lost three men killed and five were wounded.

Prisoners of War with the Chinese

Next day we were kept in Tsangdhar. We also buried our dead. On 22 Oct we were moved to an area across Namka Chu to Lee and to the road head at Marmang. From here we were loaded in open trucks and after a journey of three days reached our PW camp at a village called Chenye. In the camp we were divided into four companies. Gorkha troops were kept separately as the Chinese wanted to show a soft corner towards them. However, they failed in this attempt of theirs to create division amongst us. We had four lieutenant colonels, three majors and seven captains and subalterns in our camp.

38 of my men were in the PW camp with me. I can say with pride that all of them behaved in the highest traditions of the Indian Army. Whenever they met us they wished, stood to savdhan and gave all the respect to the officers. At the time of repatriation none of them including Captain Talwar and me accepted any gifts from the Chinese.

To give an example of their loyalty to Captain Talwar and me, my gun fitter Sardar Singh brought green tea every morning which was without milk and sugar. We took it and enjoyed it throughout our stay in the PW camp. My jawans gave two of us hot water for washing our hair every fortnight at 0200 hours to avoid being observed by the Chinese. We washed our long hair and did not cut our hair though some of the PWs had cut their hair in the camp. I reported sick everyday though I was perfectly fine. Captain Talwar, Lieutenant Bhup Singh of 2 RAJPUT and I had planned to escape in summers when the passes would open. However we were repatriated before that and our escape plan could never be put into practice.

Repatriation to India

We were handed over to Indian Red Cross at Bumla and were taken to Ranchi where a Centre for interrogation for all PWs had been established. In this camp they segregated officers, JCOs and jawans into groups of those who had been indoctrinated and those who had stood their ground. Those who were suspected of indoctrination were sent to some camps in India for observation. I was so happy that my Troop Commander Captain Talwar, self and all my 38 men were given all clear and posted back to 17 Parachute Field Regiment, a very rare feat at that time.

Brigadier AJS Behl (Retd) was commissioned into the Regiment of Artillery on 17 Dec 1961. He participated in the 1962 War as a young officer in the Battle of Namka Chu as part of 7 Infantry Brigade and was in Chinese captivity as a prisoner of war. He also participated in 1965 Rann of Kutch operations, 1965 and 1971 Wars. He retired from the Army as DDG, NCC, J&K in Apr 1995.

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