

War in the Mountains : A Worm's Eye View

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In relation to the 1962 Sino-Indian Conflict, there have been several books, but none from the point of view of a battalion adjutant, in this case, of 4th Grenadiers (the author was then Adjutant, and is now settled in Australia after retiring from the Indian Army in 1970). This is the first worm's eye view account of this conflict, and inevitably is both an emotive and saddening one. Insofar as the long suffering Indian soldier is concerned, one perforce must first invoke the unfortunate late Brigadier John Dalvi, Commander 7th Infantry Brigade on the Namka Chu who was taken prisoner by the Chinese in 1962. "The Gurkhas, the Rajputs, the Sikhs, the Dogras, the Bengalis (of the Rajput Regiment), the Mussulmans of the Grenadiers, the Jats, the South Indian Signallers and all others from the four corners of India had nothing to sustain them but their regimental pride and traditions. They had done what they had done, because they were soldiers, for no-one can do more than give his life for his country".

As to the causes of the failure, the late Brigadier Dalvi was most succinct, "1962 was the national failure of which every Indian is guilty. It was a failure of the higher direction of war, a failure of the Opposition, a failure of the General Staff (myself included); it was a failure of responsible public opinion and the Press. For the Government of India it was the Himalayan blunder at all levels." Of Dalvi's book *Himalayan Blunder*, Neville Maxwell later recorded "This may come to be regarded as a classic of military literature, epitomising the predicament of the officer under orders which he knows must lead to the destruction of his command".

After the ceasefire, Lt Gen. T. Henderson-Brooks was asked to undertake an inquiry as to this 1962 Sino-Indian conflict. His report, often referred to in the Indian media as 'The Henderson-Brooks Report', is still classified, and, therefore, not yet released by the Government of India. In a personal memoir, in an Indian Armed Forces issue of *The Indo-British Review* (Vol. 16, No. 1, Madras, March 1989), he did encapsulate, "as regards the conflict with China

The Mountain and the Men. By Lt Col OJ Thomas (Retd), Western Australia, Oscar Thomas, 1962-1995, p. 164, ISBN 0 646 25706 4

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on which I had to report, in my opinion it was not really a war. One Indian division had to cover a front of 500 miles. To have a section in position, it was necessary to use the remainder of the platoon to maintain them. The section was only flag-flying. When the clash occurred, the unfortunate reinforcements were not properly clothed or armed, and without supporting weapons. They were not acclimatised, having been rushed into position (in one battalion alone, there were 300 cases of pneumonia). On the other side, the Chinese soldier was suitably dressed, well-armed and supported by heavy weapons, with excellent lines of communication, attacking downhill. The unfortunate Indian soldier was rushed up from sea level to heights ranging from 12,000 to 16,000 feet. I am not breaching security in writing this; it is all in Neville Maxwell's *India's China War*.

The travails and tribulations of the 4th Grenadiers in the withdrawal recounted in the book under review more than bear out what Lt. Gen. Henderson-Brooks has encapsulated, in poignant detail. Mr. A.M. Khaleeli, the former Indian High Commissioner in Australia, deftly sums up what this book is all about in his Foreword. "It is not so much an account of political miscalculation at a high level or of poor leadership by the senior army brass, though one cannot avoid this conclusion; it is more the account of a dignified officer, proud of his country and of his men, who in the midst of a debacle, succeeded in fighting their way out of an impossible situation in harsh and little-known territory".

"Ill-equipped as they were and virtually abandoned, this group of about 250 men and some officers, maintained their morale, camaraderie and discipline. The saga of survival for nearly 18 days with hardly any food, in bitterly cold and forbidding terrain, is a tribute to their *esprit de corps*, leadership and the legendary courage and tenacity of Indian soldiers when properly led. The love and respect with which Col. Thomas, then just a young officer, regarded his wonderful NCOs and jawans is reflected throughout the narrative and in no small measure contributed to their success."

"In the midst of danger and suffering, one catches glimpses of humour and humanity in the midst of tragedy when men so close to each other die, or are casualties in a struggle. While reading this relatively unknown episode of a military action in 1962, it is unfortunately an inescapable conclusion that many dedicated, brave and long-suffering Indian jawans and officers were made to confront a prepared adversary without the slightest fore-thought regarding what war is all about. It is a tribute to these men that despite the senior military and political leadership being found wanting, that their coolness and courage showed those qualities which, with better leadership, would ensure that such accidents would never again happen to India."

The 4th Grenadiers had entrained at Delhi on December 6, 1962, detraining near the foothills of the North East Frontier Agency on September 11, 1962. It moved off for Tawang with 50 rounds of ammunition per man, two blankets per man, some extra issue clothing but with no extreme cold clothing, with light entrenching tools and three days haversack rations. The rest of the battalion's clothing, ammunition, digging tools, tentage and cooking equipment was to be airdropped at Tawang but never was. The battalion in this state eventually reaches its allotted positions on the Namka Chu near the McMahon Line on October 11, 1962. On October 20, the Chinese over-ran the brigade's improvised defences, and the traumatic withdrawal of what is left of the 4th Grenadiers, some 250 in all, commences. This is a narrative of indomitable courage during a withdrawal in extremely difficult and arduous conditions, necessitating cross country moves in mountainous terrain, and thereby also suffering fatalities, in order to avoid Chinese outflanking moves. They eventually reached safety, ultimately through Eastern Bhutan. On November 7, 1962, the survivors with frostbite for which they were to lose portions of their limbs, including the author, are put in a hospital train at Tezpur for Lucknow which they reached on November 9, and then onto Delhi, where their terrible ordeal ends. From the profits of the sale of this book, half will go to the Grenadiers Regimental Centre, to bolster the Oscar Thomas Scholarship Fund for the education and care of deserving children of the Regiment, and the balance to families of those men who gave their lives in the defence of their country and in the honour of their Regiment.

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