

Watershed 1967 - India's Forgotten Victory Over China[@]

Probal DasGupta

The book titled “Watershed 1967 — India’s Forgotten Victory over China” published in 2020 is authored by Probal DasGupta, a former Army officer from the 11th Gorkha Rifles. The book starts with a section titled “Praise for the Book”. This has words of praise from some well-known people. After reading these words of praise, the reader looks forward to an engrossing book on military history. The lay reader is not disappointed. Even a military historian finds the book interesting, unless he is aware of the actual occurrences. Unfortunately, the truth is not correctly portrayed in the book.

The Book

In the Introduction (Page 9-12) to the book, the author states that “The twin victories at Cho La and Nathu La have only been covered in fragments through articles and papers. This book, based on extensive interviews with the army men who were present at the scene, captures the events truthfully and aims to fix this blind spot in history. This was personally important to me, being a former army officer myself.” The author’s claim that the twin victories at Cho La and Nathu La have only been covered in fragments through articles and papers is not correct. This subject has been covered in detail in Chapter 8 of Volume III of the History of the Corps of Signals.¹ It was also uploaded on the blog <http://veekay-militaryhistory.blogspot.com/2013/> in 2013. This includes extracts from the diary of 2/Lt (later Brig) NC Gupta, who was then the signal officer in HQ 112 Brigade. This is the most authentic account of the Nathula skirmish, as it was written as and when the events occurred. An account of the skirmish at Nathu La is also covered in the biography of General Sagat Singh that forms part of the book *Leadership in the Indian Army – Biographies of Twelve Soldiers*, written in 2005. This is the earliest published account of the action.²

[@]**Watershed 1967 - India's Forgotten Victory Over China.** By Probal DasGupta; Publisher: Juggernaut Books, New Delhi (April 2020), Pages 208; Price Rs 390/-, ISBN: 978-93-53450-93-9 (Paperback)

The 181-page book has eight chapters, followed by an epilogue. The first chapter titled *Secret Games: Spies, Soldiers and the Opening Gambit* has 18 pages, covering diverse subjects such as CIA plot to encourage China and Pakistan to attack India; meetings between Sheikh Abdullah and CIA operatives; Pakistani attacks in the Rann of Kutch in July 1965; Operation Gibraltar in Kashmir in August 1965; the war on the Western Front in September 1965; details of major battles such as Haji Pir, Asal Uttar, Dograi etc. There are 48 notes, mostly referring to newspaper articles in Indian and foreign journals.

The second chapter titled *In the Shadow of the Dragon: The War Moves East* has nine pages covering the Goa operation in December 1961; Pakistan's failed attempts to obtain help from USA and China; and the cease fire between India and Pakistan on 22 September. Both these chapters are irrelevant to the Nathula Operations of 1967 and have been added just as fillers.

The third chapter titled *Protests, Disagreements and a Temporary Truce: Advantage China* has 19 pages. It covers the diplomatic exchanges between India and China after some sheep crossed over into India; the agitation outside the Chinese embassy led by Atal Behari Vajpeyee, the ultimatum by China to India to vacate Nathu La and Jelep La; Sagat's refusal to vacate Nathula; minor skirmishes in 1965; the installation of loudspeakers by the Chinese at Nathula; the marriage of Hope Cooke with Palden Thondup, the Chogyal of Sikkim; her friendship with Gen Sagat; the Tashkent agreement; and the death of Lal Bahadur Shastri. The only relevant part is the one concerning the ultimatum by China to India to vacate Nathula and Jelep La; Sagat's refusal to vacate Nathula and the installation of loudspeakers by the Chinese at Nathula; minor skirmishes in 1965. The author has acknowledged the source as the article *The Skirmish at Nathula (1967)*.³

Chapter 4 titled *China's Psychological Tactics: Softening Up the Enemy Before the Storm* covers the insurgency in Mizo Hills, the bombing of Aizwal by IAF, the beginning of the Naxalite movement; machinations of Hope Cooke in an effort to gain independence from India; and the stand-off at Doklam. It again has limited relevance to the operations at Nathula and Chola.

Chapter 5 titled *1966-67: Warriors Arrive at the Watershed* covers the organisation of the Indian Army into commands, corps,

divisions, brigades and battalions; brief biographical sketches of some officers (KB Joshi, Parulekar, Ram Singh Rathore) and men (Tinjong Lama, Debi Prasad) of 7/11 GR and some officers of 2 Grenadiers (Rai Singh, Bishan Singh and PS Dagar). There is no mention of the names of officers or men from 18 Rajput or 10 JAK Rifles, the two other units that played a major role in the battles at Nathula and Chola.

Chapter 6 is titled *The Tipping Point: A Tale of Spies and a Breach at the Watershed*. This is the longest chapter (20 pages) covering the arrest and deportation of two Indian diplomats in Peking in June 1967; India's retaliation by expelling a Chinese diplomat followed by mob attacks on the Chinese embassy in New Delhi; similar attacks on the Indian embassy in Peking; arrival of 2 Grenadiers at Nathula in August 1967; commencement of laying the wire at Nathula by 2 Grenadiers on 20 August; objection by the Chinese; visit by the Corps Commander and Gen Sagat Singh to the border on 1 Sep 1967; patrol led by Maj Bishan Singh being surrounded by Chinese leading to scuffle; commencement of fencing using concertina coils on 5 Sep; brawl between Indian and Chinese soldiers at the fence on 7 Sep resulting in injury to the political commissar; meeting held at HQ 112 Brigade by Gen Sagat Singh during which Maj Bishan Singh was given the task of completion of fence; allotment of additional troops from Engineers to assist him.

Chapter 7 titled *Hellfire at Nathu La* is the most important chapter that covers the battle at Nathula. However, it has been assigned only nine pages. Some extracts from the chapter are given here along with comments in italics. The opening paragraph gives details of signal communications, including the new line laid overnight from the brigade headquarters in Changgu to Sherathang where the mortars were located. All posts were connected on telephone and radio. This network was patched to the Divisional HQ. This information has obviously been obtained from the diary of NC Gupta that is quoted mentioned in my articles as well as Chapter 8 of the History of the Corps of Signals, Volume III that is on my blog. The author has mentioned that the article includes extracts from NC Gupta's diary. The author has made no mention of a bunch of 30 soldiers who instinctively make a run for their lives: some even escaping from the scene. This unpleasant chapter of the battle is often dropped from narrations, but to exclude this

would undermine the heroism of the soldiers who stood and fought gallantly. Months later, court martials would be held to prosecute deserters, on charges of cowardice.

The author only mentions that Major Bishan Singh was injured. He has totally ignored the role of 2/Lt NC Gupta in saving his life. One can only conclude that this was done deliberately, to conceal the fact of 2/Lt Attar Singh quitting his post at South Shoulder and being taken back to the post by NC Gupta, under orders of the brigade commander.

The author also writes that “Signal Officer Naveen Gupta and Second Lieutenant Attar Singh, who was among the younger officers in the unit, joined in and ran from trench to trench as he yelled at the men to keep the flock together and respond with fire. The morale had to be kept up.” This is not true. Naveen did not join Attar Singh and run with him from trench to trench. In fact, Attar Singh was at South Shoulder while Naveen was with the brigade commander until he was sent up to South Shoulder. On the brigade commander’s instructions, Naveen and a line repair party proceeded towards South Shoulder with a radio set for the platoon there. On arriving at the post, Naveen found the bodies of a few dead soldiers ahead of the defences. The post wore a desolate look as most men had either been killed or had left the post, barring an abandoned light machine gun (LMG). The author has twisted the facts mentioned by NC Gupta in his diary. The diary runs into almost 30 pages of handwritten notes. It is not intended to reproduce the complete diary in this article. It has been included in the History of the Corps of Signals, Volume III.⁴

A short resume, describing the events relating to South Shoulder on 11 September as described in Gupta’s diary has recently been published in the Indian Military Review. It is reproduced below⁵

About an hour later Brigadier Bakshi spotted six soldiers sitting behind a huge rock, around 100 metres down South Shoulder and asked Gupta to investigate. On reaching the spot, Gupta found that they were from 2 Grenadiers, including 2/Lt Attar Singh who was in command of the post at South Shoulder.

The author writes “To the few that had had enough of the tough battle and who decided to retreat to a safer shelter, a rude

surprise awaited. Sagat had decided to move closer to the scene of the battle. Like a no-nonsense army drill sergeant out to catch cadets who had loitered outside the precincts without permission, the general had started to marshal the troops that had abandoned the battle, shouting at them, herding them back into action. Sagat stood on the road coming down from Nathu La trying to stem the rout. He even threatened to shoot anyone he found moving to the rear. Sagat hated to see his troops run away from the Chinese. When he saw a few men struggling to keep up, he screamed at them, scolding, lambasting those who had gone astray, finally collecting them like a schoolteacher at picnic and steering them back into class – up towards the forward posts, into their harnesses and back into the battle. Most of the soldiers stayed and fought valiantly, some attaining martyrdom. There were still a few who had deserted the battle that day. Over thirty soldiers faced court martial later for cowardice.” The citation for this given by the author is from an article in *The Print* by Vandana Menon and Nayanika Chatterjee, published on 01 October 2018. However, this article makes no mention of Gen Sagat “collecting the deserters like a schoolteacher at a picnic and steering them back”. This seems to be more of the authors creative writing. But the information about Sagat threatening to shoot deserters is true. This had been narrated to the reviewer by Lt Gen Sagat Singh himself when he met him at his home in Jaipur in 1997-98. In fact, 2 Grenadiers was not the only battalion that showed traces of cowardice under fire. Similar instances occurred in other units, including 2/Lt NC Gupta’s own company as entries in his diary reveal.

Chapter 8, titled *The Battle of Cho La*, describes the actions of 7/11 GR in the battle of Chola.⁶ It is entirely based on the regimental history of the regiment. “*The Path of Glory: Exploits of the 11 Gorkha Rifles*” written by Gautam Sharma and the author’s conversation with Lt Col KB Joshi. The Author has totally ignored the role of 10 JAK Rifles, which was awarded one MVC and three VrCs. The name of the brigade commander, Brig Kundan Singh has also not been mentioned. The regimental history mentions the name of the brigade commander and his conversation with Lt Col KB Joshi. It is not understood why the author has chosen to ignore his name. It now appears that the whole aim of writing the book is to eulogize the action of 7/11 GR. This would not be objectionable in case the book had been about the 7/11 GR and

not given the title it has, because that portrays it as a history of the full conflict.

The Epilogue covers subjects such as the war in 1971, the creation of Bangladesh and the merger of Sikkim with India with the assistance of RAW. All these are irrelevant to the subject of the book, which is professed to cover the battles of Nathula and Chola. Interestingly, the author has written 24 pages in the Epilogue, with 78 Notes. In comparison only 9 pages have been devoted to the battle at Nathula (97-105) and 15 pages (106-120) to Chola.

General Comments

The author seems to have done hardly any research, apart from snippets from books and articles and some interviews. Except for the regimental history of his own Regiment, the 11th Gorkha Rifles, he has not consulted the regimental histories of The Grenadiers, The Rajput Regiment and The Jammu & Kashmir Rifles. He has made no attempt to go through the war diaries of the units or the formation HQ. This being his first book he can perhaps be excused for gaffes such as using incorrect ranks, names, and decorations. In the book, Ranjit Singh Dayal, the captor of Haji Pir is called Rajinder Singh Dayal; Gen Shiv Charan Singh, GOC 27 Division is called Ramcharan Singh. Brig MMS Bakshi's is said to have been awarded a VrC in 1965, whereas he got an MVC. He also has a disconcerting habit of giving names without mentioning the rank. For instance, he mentions Kul Bhushan, Parulekar, Tinjong Lama, Debi Prasad etc. without their ranks. Kulbhushan is sometimes referred to as KB. His full name with rank Lt Col KB Joshi or Kul Bhushan Joshi is rarely mentioned. Since the battalion has another KB (Krishna Bahadur), this sometimes leaves the reader confused. Using names without ranks may be the norm in articles and stories; it is almost never done in a book on military history.

As already mentioned in Chapter 8 - The Battle of Cho La, the Author has totally ignored the role of 10 JAK RIF and its CO, Lt Col Mahatam Singh, MVC. In addition to the MVC for the CO, the battalion was awarded three VrCs. This is an unacceptable lapse and amounts to an insult to the unit.

The most conspicuous feature of the book is the distortion of facts relating to 2 Grenadiers. The only authentic version of the

battle is the diary of 2/Lt (later Brigadier) NC Gupta, which gives a day-by-day account of the occurrences from 11-14 September 1967. Its authenticity cannot be questioned because it was written daily as the events occurred, and not in hindsight. The diary clearly brings out the instances of cowardice, especially the vacation of South Shoulder at a critical juncture.

In the military—and the reviewer has noticed this most in historians from the Infantry—events are glossed over when they come across critical comments about their own or even other Regiments. In most cases War diaries are written after an event, and not as events occur. This leads to a disturbing trend – the falsification of military records by units; often in the name of the unit's izzat (honour). This is indeed a serious matter and needs urgent attention from those concerned with our military heritage and history. It also makes it imperative that military historians research their subject without bias, rancour or a desire to write pulp fiction which can become the basis for a war film.

Maj Gen VK Singh (Retd)

Endnotes

¹ Major General VK Singh. *History of the Corps of Signals, Volume III: Covering the First 25 Years of the Post –Independence History of the Corps from 1947 to 1972*, (KW Publishers, New Delhi 2014), pp 330-337.

² Major General VK Singh. *Leadership in the Indian Army –Biographies of Twelve Soldiers*, (Sage, New Delhi, 2005), pp 308-312

³ Major General VK Singh. *The Skirmish at Nathula (1967)*, (Scholar Warrior, Autumn 2014).

⁴ Major General VK Singh. *History of the Corps of Signals, Volume III. Op cit.*

⁵ Maj Gen VK Singh. *The Skirmish at Nathula (1967)*, (IMR August 2018).

⁶ Lt. Col. Gautam Sharma, *Path of Glory – Exploits of the 11th Gorkha Rifles*, (Allied Publishers, Delhi, 1988).