

With Sepoy Karam Chand at the Battle of Walong

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“A nation that does not prepare for all the forms of war should then renounce the use of war in national policy. A people that do not prepare to fight should then be morally prepared to surrender. To fail to prepare soldiers and citizens for limited, bloody ground action, and then to engage in it, is folly verging on the criminal.”

- T. R. Fehrenbach,

This Kind of War: The Classic Military History of the Korean War

Abstract

In July 2010, the Border Road Task Force (BRTF), while working on road improvement near Walong, uncovered a grave with the remains of a jawan of 4 Dogra who had died in the 1962 war. The battle of Walong occurred in the second phase of the 1962 war during the offensive in the Lohit valley. A bitterly fought battle, it was the only one in which the Indian and Chinese casualties were comparable. Interspersed with some autobiographical fiction, this article gives the account of a part of the battle of Walong where the only counter attack of the 1962 war was launched and the only planned withdrawal took place.

Introduction

Fifty eight years ago, India suffered its worst military defeat

leaving a gaping wound in our national psyche and showing how unprepared India was, militarily and politically. On the 58th anniversary of the Chinese invasion, this article is about an ordinary jawan. We don't know his feat of bravery, whether he was actually brave, and how exactly he died. Like many others, he was

unsung till 2010. He was Sepoy (Sep) Karam Chand of 4th Battalion of the Dogra Regiment (4 Dogra).

In July 2010, while the author was commanding 2 Mountain Division, the BRTF informed that while repairing a part of the road in the area between the Yapak Ti (Stream) and Walong Advanced Landing Ground (ALG) — which had caved away towards the Lohit River — they had found the remains of a person. Fully aware that this was a 1962 war battlefield, extreme care was taken to exhume the remains, which were of almost an intact body. Found with the remains were what we call ‘dog tags’ or identity discs with the name Karam Chand and personal number 3950976. There was also a silver ring, a ball point pen, an empty dilapidated wallet or pay book and a few rounds of ammunition. We presume the burial of Karam Singh must have been done by the Chinese because both dog tags were with the body.



The Lohit Brigade (82 Mountain Brigade) got the name checked from the war memorial at Walong, where the names of all the 364 soldiers who were martyred in this battle are inscribed.¹ There were two Sepoy Karam Chands of 4 Dogra on the memorial; the personal number of one matched the one on the dog tag. When the army checked the war records, they could ascertain that the disc belonged to which Sepoy Karam Chand of the 4 Dogra. The Colonel of the Regiment of the Dogras, Lieutenant General Jasbir Singh was contacted, who then located the next of kin of the martyr. There were no close relatives. His parents were long gone and he had been a bachelor. The Regiment then collected the remains and a fitting funeral was given to the forgotten soldier at his native place in Himachal Pradesh.² For 48 years, Sepoy Karam Chand had slept in eternal sleep, on the banks of the Lohit, in a manner immortalised in a poem on the cenotaph at the Walong ALG by Bernard Dougal, the District Commissioner of Lohit District, after the war. The poem titled ‘Asleep in the Mishmi Hills’ goes:

*“The Sentinel hills that around as stand,
bear witness that we loved our land.
Amidst shattered rock and flaming pine,*

*We fought and died on Namti plains.
O Lohit gently besides us glide,
Pale stars above softly shine,
As we sleep here in sun and rain”*



Map 1 : The Walong Sector

Phase I (21-22 Oct 1962)

The first phase of the war in the Lohit Valley was fought at Hill 100 on the Western Bank of the Lohit River and MacMohan Ridge (now called Madan Ridge — after a martyred defender of 2 Assam Rifles) on the Eastern bank. The defenders were a Company of 6 Kumaon and two platoons of 2 Assam Rifles. 6 Kumaon was the only infantry battalion in the Lohit Valley in phase 1 of the war and were part of 5 Brigade, with its Headquarters (HQ) in faraway North Lakhimpur. Attacked by the People's Liberation Army (PLA), 153 Regiment³ and a reinforced Battalion from the Chengdu military sub area⁴, the Kumaonese and five platoons of 2 Assam Rifles fell back to Walong, occupying a position (Ashi Ridge) between the Nam Ti and Tilam Ti.

Phase II (23 Oct to 14 Nov 1962)

2 Mountain Division (Mtn Div) was hurriedly raised, for the Subansiri, Siang and Lohit sectors, on 28 Oct 1962 with the Tactical HQ at Tezu and the main HQ at Dinjan. Major General Mahindra Singh Pathania, General Officer Commanding (GOC) 23 Infantry Division, which was deployed in Nagaland, was moved to set it up with a skeleton staff drawn from HQ 23 Div. As troops were hurriedly flown/marched in, a mix of units were inducted. 4 Sikh, 2/8 Gorkha Rifles (GR), (later replaced by 3/3 GR), and 4 Dogra, under 181 Brigade and later under 11 Brigade. The build-up also made the Chinese induct additional troops in the form of 130 Division with three Regiments (388, 389 and 390) with an Engineer Regiment, Artillery Battalion and an Anti-aircraft Battalion. 130 Division formed the attacking troops, with the original 153 Regiment maintaining contact and providing the firm base.⁵

4th Dogra Enters the War

As 6 Kumaon fell back to Walong, additional troops were rushed in either on foot or by a stream of tireless Otter aircraft which could bring in only 10-11 men with equipment at a time.⁶ The first company of 4 Dogra arrived on 14 Nov and was immediately sent to reinforce the Tri Junction area where 6 Kumaon was embroiled in a life and death struggle.

Fictionalised Narrative through Karam Chand's Eyes

We took off from the rough Airstrip at Tezu on 14 Nov early in the morning at first light — which was at 4 AM — and landed at Walong ALG after covering the 90 kilometres, as the crow flies, in 25 minutes. I was told that if we had walked it would have taken us five days, so one felt elated at having avoided that drudgery. It was only the second time that I had ever flown in an aircraft. The first time was a few days before, when we were flown in a Dakota aircraft from Dimapur.⁷ We quickly unloaded the aircraft as it still had to do many more trips before the afternoon, when the winds would make flying impossible. A number of Otter aircraft were ferrying the battalion so there was an unending stream of landings and take offs. As soon as the company had disembarked and fallen in, we were asked to move out. Before we knew it, we were in the war.



Map 2 : The Battlefield at Walong

The Chinese had secured the Green Pimple spur to the west of Walong on 06 Nov. A further advance along this spur could mean the fall of the Walong airstrip. It also threatened and overlooked the Brigade defences. Green Pimple was dominated by Yellow Pimple, which in turn was dominated by Tri Junction, a high point where three ridgelines met. Tri Junction was, thus, correctly appreciated as vital ground. This if held, would enable 11 Brigade to roll down to Ashi Hill which dominated the easiest axis to Walong along the right (west) bank of the Lohit River. Ashi hill had been captured by the enemy before they tried to cross the Nam Ti, where they suffered major casualties.. By 10 Nov, the Brigade Commander, Brigadier NC Rawley, had appreciated that the enemy was building up for an attack on Walong from the Green

Pimple area. He came to the conclusion that it was essential to secure Green Pimple through Tri junction to spoil the enemy attack. The whole of 6 Kumaon was concentrated on the western flank. It was tasked to retake Green Pimple and then hold the complete area from Green Pimple to Tri Junction. On the morning of 14 Nov 1962, led by Captain Mathur of Alpha Company, with Second Lieutenant (2/Lt) Khetri with the leading platoon, 6 Kumaon set off to launch the only attack made in any sector of the war. At 0850 hrs, to the cries of *Kali Mata ki Jai*, they attacked. In spite of sustained Chinese mortar and machine gun fire, the Kumaonese managed to force the forward Chinese posts to retreat and secured Tri Junction. They, thereafter, started firming in for the attack on Yellow Pimple which would lead to the final objective, Green Pimple. The attack was launched but by mid-day mounting casualties and shortage of ammunition slowed down progress. Brigadier Rawley ordered Alpha Company of 4 Dogra, which was at the ALG, to immediately move up to support 6 Kumaon and also get them ammunition. In addition, Delta Company of 4 Dogra was also ordered into the battle.

Fictionalised Narrative through Karam Chand's Eyes

The distant sound of gunfire and artillery seemed ominous as we moved up. It was still daylight but swiftly the shadows were lengthening. I was told that a guide from 6 Kumaon was leading us. I was in No 3 Platoon at the tail end of the column. Besides our own weapon and ammunition, we were carrying at least 20 kgs of additional load of ammunition and water for 6 Kumaon. Grunting with the effort, we kept on climbing. As it became dark and we came closer to the frontline, one could hear almost a continuous thunder of gunfire. The noise was absolutely deafening. The night was lit up as if it was Diwali.⁸ As my adrenalin surged, the harsh realisation stuck in; Diwali had been over on 28 Oct 62, this was war. Our forward platoon had to fight through Chinese troops who had surrounded the Kumaonese. They then got embroiled in creating a defence line on the flank. When we managed to reach the Kumaonese, we were only a platoon strength. The Kumaonese were overjoyed with the supplies and the hope that the rest of 4 Dogra would now come up. But that was not to be. We had no respite as we started distributing the ammunition and water and then were given a part of the defences to hold. The Chinese had

again sealed the gap through which we got in. Early in the morning, amidst a fusillade of fire, Major KJS Grewal and part of Delta Company fought their way in.⁹

At 1 AM, the Chinese, after (as per their accounts) having faced nine Indian attacks, attacked with what Brigadier Rawley appreciated was a Regiment.¹⁰ The determined Chinese attack, in overwhelming numbers, forced a retreat. This was also the only option as even if 6 Kumaon had taken Green Pimple, there would be no ammunition to resist a counter attack. Alpha Company of 6 Kumaon took defensive positions at 11,000 feet along the West Ridge. It was attacked repeatedly by the Chinese and after the 5th attack it was relieved by Delta Company of 4 Sikh. Little did 11 Brigade know that by last light 15 Nov, the 130th PLA division had reached its assembly areas to attack it. At first light on 16 Nov, the full force of the attacking 388 Regiment hit the Walong defences. Having cleared 4 Sikh and 3/3 GR positions, 389 Regiment linked up with 388 Regiment and drove a wedge between 4 Dogra and 6 Kumaon.¹¹ Two months after the cease-fire, when the Indians returned, they found that the Chinese had buried and marked the positions of the dead. In this bitterly fought battle on the mountain tops. Many of the bunkers showed the dead where they had last manned their weapons.

The Martyrdom of Karam Chand

As the brave but ill-timed attack by 6 Kumaon crumbled, 4 Dogra was fed piecemeal into the battle. As a result, the 11 Brigade's western flank was open and the only reserves were two companies of 4 Dogra which were also holding a firm base near the Brigade HQ. In face of the main attack on 16 Nov, as the frontal positions at Ladders held by part of 3/3 GR and Maha plateau held by 4 SIKH crumbled, so did the mix of troops of 3/3 GR and a company of 4 Sikh on the East bank. At 1200 hrs, orders for withdrawal were given. It is again to the credit of 11 Brigade that the withdrawal was planned and conducted as well as could be done in the chaotic situation. The overall plan was as under:¹²

- All troops on the East bank of the Lohit to immediately withdraw along the East bank to Hawai and join the Brigade column after crossing the suspension steel wire strung there.

- All troops on the West bank to start thinning out at 1400 hrs on 16 Nov.
- HQ 11 Brigade and supporting arms to cross the Brigade Check Point (CP) between 1500 and 1600 hrs. This would be at Yapak Ti – Lohit River junction.
- 4 Sikh to commence thinning out by 1700 hrs and abandon positions by 2000 hrs on 16 Nov.
- Leapfrogging successively would be one company of 4 Dogra, whose initial position would be Area Dropping Zone (DZ), and one company of 6 Kumaon at Yapak ridge.
- All layback troops to be in position by 1400 hrs. The last position to be abandoned would be the 6 Kumaon layback troops at Yapak ridge.
- All troops would be self-contained for four days. All guns to be destroyed /rendered unserviceable.

In execution, the withdrawal was not as smooth. Chinese troops were close at the heels of the withdrawing troops and wherever possible carried out outflanking moves to set up ambushes on the routes of withdrawal. At approximately 1200 hrs, the Brigade Commander ordered one company of 4 Dogra at the mortar position to reinforce the firm base. This company was ambushed west of the firm base at 1300 hrs. However, the company managed to break contact with the enemy and moved along the Yapak Ridge to the Brigade CP.

Fictionalised Narrative through Karam Chand's Eyes

Having shed our loads for 6 Kumaon, we started digging foxholes and preparing our defences. By the next day, our Company had managed to get together. The ensuing night was bitterly cold and we shivered in our limited warm clothing. Intermittent fire continued along the front as enemy patrols probed our defences. On 16 Nov, we came under extremely heavy shelling. Our heavy mortars fired to break the enemy attack. They halted the first attack but then their firing stopped. We were ordered to withdraw to the mortar position. No sooner did we reach there that we were told to move to the firm base. At about 1000 hrs, this

area came under heavy shelling. Our platoon commander Subedar Rattan Chand moved from trench to trench motivating us to hold firm in face of very heavy automatic fire from the enemy on the higher ground above us.¹³ As orders for withdrawal were given, he kept us moving in spite of the casualties we were getting and the wounded comrades we were carrying along. By now, we were in a continuous fire fight with the pursuing enemy. My section was ordered to cover the withdrawal of the rest of the Company. By now, we were only four of us in the section. We found cover in the rocks, took stock of our ammunition and waited for the enemy. I found a dead comrade near me who had two clips of .303 ammunition on his bandolier. I took them and stuffed them in my pockets. For half an hour we waited. By now, our comrades seemed to have gone far away. In any case, the gushing Yapak Ti drowned out all sound. We got up and started moving tactically along the Yapak Ridge. It was getting dark now. We could see the Lohit River below. Suddenly, there was a blaze of gunfire. I saw a comrade fall and rushed towards the Yapak Ti. A stabbing pain made me realise that I too had been hit. I fell into the Yapak Ti... and then there was nothing.

Conclusion

The move of the Brigade column from the Brigade Rendezvous (RV) to Hayuliang was covered by troops holding successive delaying positions. Each of the withdrawing battalions, in spite of the mauling they had suffered, managed to organise successive layback positions effectively. HQ 11 Brigade maintained control throughout. Helicopters were used to drop food to the withdrawing troops.¹⁴ The Chinese followed up to a place called Changwinty, beyond the 90 degree westward bend of the Lohit and about 40 km from Hayuliang. The tail of the Brigade column cleared the covering troops, provided by 82 Brigade, at Hayuliang by 1030 hrs on 21 Nov 1962. The Chinese declared a ceasefire on 22 Nov 1962. However, in all sectors till 26 Nov the Chinese kept on firing on the isolated withdrawing troops.¹⁵ The battle in the Lohit Valley had seen the only attack and the only coordinated withdrawal of the war. A withdrawal operation is one of the most difficult operations of war. The Indian Army, to avoid defeatism, stopped practising it after 1962 to this day. It is a moot point whether this is a good decision.

Epilogue

Of the four Indian Infantry battalions involved, a total of 364 men were killed, 278 wounded and 345 taken prisoners of war. This was 44 per cent of the total strength of the units. As per Chinese accounts, PLA casualties were 198 killed and 554 wounded. As evidenced in the 2020 clash with the PLA at Galwan valley, the Chinese always hide their real casualties. To have admitted a sizable casualty figure in the Lohit Valley operations is a testimony to the known and unknown Indian braves who fought there. In 4 Dogra, of the total strength of 537 which flew into Walong with their CO, Lt Col RS Pathania, 110 were killed, 31 wounded and 74 were taken as prisoners of war.¹⁶ Among the 110 was the unknown, and till 2010 unsung, Sepoy Karam Chand.

Endnotes

¹ Maj Gen PJS Sandhu (Ed), 1962, A View from the Other Side of the Hill. *USI of India study* (Vij Books, New Delhi :2015), p.105.

² PTI, "Sepoy Karam Chand cremated 48 years after his death", *The Times of India*, Jul 15, 2010. Accessed Jul 31, 2020 from <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/Sepoy-Karam-Chand-cremated-48-years-after-his-death/articleshow/6172388.cms>

³ A PLA Regiment was equivalent to an Indian Brigade.

⁴ Maj Gen PJS Sandhu (Ed). Op cit.

⁵ Maj Gen PJS Sandhu (Ed). Ibid. .

⁶ Ghanshyam Singh Katoch, "In Memoriam: India and its Canadian 'Otters'", *Weekly Voice*, Nov 08, 2019. Accessed Aug 02, 2020 from <https://www.weeklyvoice.com/in-memoriam-india-and-its-canadian-otters/>

⁷ The Gallant Dogras ; The Dogra Regimental Centre (New Delhi, Lancer: 2005), p.118

⁸ This scene was narrated by Brig Rawley in his papers referred to in "1962, A view from the Other Side of the Hill". Coincidentally, Brig NC Rawley in successive ranks commanded 11 Brigade in the 1962 war, 11 Division in the 1965 war and 11 Corps in the 1971 war.

⁹ The Gallant Dogras. Op cit.

¹⁰ Maj Gen PJS Sandhu. P. 101.

¹¹ Ibid. p.102.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid. p. 119.

¹⁴ SN Prasad (Ed), PB Sinha and AA Athale, History of the conflict with China 1962. Government of India, Ministry of Defence Historical Division P.376. (Unpublished) Downloaded from internet on May 20, 2020 from Bharat Rakshak <https://www.bharat-rakshak.com/ARMY/history/1962war/266-official-history.html>

¹⁵ SN Prasad (Ed), PB Sinha and AA Athale,

¹⁶ Maj Gen PJS Sandhu (Ed). p. 105.

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