

# Rezang La: Tactical Sacrifice and Strategic Legacy in 1962 Sino-India War

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## Introduction

India recently marked the 63<sup>rd</sup> anniversary of the Battle of Rezang La, which was fought on 18 Nov 1962. The hard-fought battle in the Himalayas still retains its relevance in the study of mountain warfare and small unit resilience. Rezang La, in the historical annals of Indian Military history, is a prime example of tactical sacrifice, where a small unit accepted extreme loss to secure an operational effect. The 1962 Sino-Indian War, though a strategic setback for India, showcased the Indian Army's courage and resilience against overwhelming odds. It was fought in the harsh terrains of Ladakh and Arunachal Pradesh. The Battle of Rezang La, where Major Shaitan Singh and his 13 KUMAON troops held their ground against an entire Chinese battalion, became legendary. Indian soldiers fought tenaciously in the face of extreme weather and a numerically superior enemy, displaying heroic resistance at positions like Namka Chu and Walong.



Soldiers of the 13 Kumaon before the 1962 India-China War<sup>1</sup>

The war in Ladakh was very different from the operations in the Eastern Sector in many ways. Firstly, the Chinese aim in Ladakh was to reach their Claim Line of 07 Nov 1959, as compared to annihilation of Indian troops deployed in the Kameng Sector in the North-East Frontier Agency. Secondly, there were no large-scale battles. Most of the actions were at a battalion, company, or platoon level. Thirdly, the troops were already in contact for many months and weeks preceding the operations because of the 'Forward Policy' of India and 'Armed Coexistence' followed by China. The Battle of Rezang La, fought between the Indian and Chinese troops on the icy mountain tops on the south-eastern ridge of the Chushul Valley, is often remembered as a show of great Indian strength during the war in 1962. The Indian troops were severely outnumbered, were not as acclimatised to winter conditions as their Chinese counterparts, had inferior weaponry, and, more importantly, the heights of mountain tops interfered with the flight of artillery shells. It was in this battle that 123 Indian bravehearts of 13 KUMAON's Charlie Company fought to the 'Last man, last round' on 18 Nov.<sup>2</sup> Major

Shaitan Singh laid down his life for the country and was awarded Param Vir Chakra for the display of exceptional gallantry in the face of enemy.<sup>3</sup>

### **The Battle of Rezang La**

The Chinese made their first official claim on Aksai Chin in 1954. In 1954-55, alignments of the Aksai Chin highway were reconnoitered by the Chinese. It was announced to be completed in Sep 1957. India sent two patrols to the area in 1958; one returned and the second under Major Iyyenger of the Madras Sappers was seized by the Chinese. The confrontation in Ladakh had begun.<sup>4</sup> General Tapishwar Narain Raina was commanding 114 Brigade, which fought the Chinese in the western front. For his contribution during the war, he was awarded Maha Vir Chakra.<sup>5</sup>

The Rezang La was defended by a reinforced Company of 13 KUMAON. The two strongholds were defended by a platoon each. The Company Headquarters and the third platoon were deployed at Point 5150 between the two strongholds. The total strength including the supporting elements of mortars, heavy machine guns, and rocket launchers was 141 all ranks. The localities were mutually supporting and defences were well coordinated. However, Chinese noted that fire power towards the front was strong and comparatively weak towards flanks and rear.<sup>6</sup>

Chinese Commanders carried out a detailed reconnaissance of the layout of defences of Indian strongholds No 8 and 9 (Rezang La). They planned to carry out a night approach march and attack at the first light. They decided to outflank the positions from the south and launch a multidirectional wave of attacks.<sup>7</sup> As for Indian stronghold No 16 (held by 1/8 GR), since outflanking was not possible, they decided to launch a frontal attack under the cover of heavy artillery fire.

3 B/11 R/4 D, along with a reinforced 9th Company of 3 B/10 R, was given the task of capturing Indian strongholds No 8 and 9. The attacking force was divided into two groups—North and South, each under the command of the Deputy Commander of 4<sup>th</sup> Division, Wanghongjie, and the Regimental Commander, Gaohuanchang, respectively. The Southern Group consisting of 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> Company (less one Platoon) of 11<sup>th</sup> Regiment under the Regimental Commander had to attack from South to North and capture Indian stronghold No 9. Meanwhile, the Northern Group consisting of 9<sup>th</sup> Company of 11<sup>th</sup> Regiment and 9<sup>th</sup> Company of 10<sup>th</sup> Regiment, under the Deputy Divisional Commander, had to attack from North to South and capture Indian stronghold No 8.<sup>8</sup> The attacking troops commenced their move from assembly area near Ritu on respective routes—North and South at 2000 hours on 17 Nov. The Southern route was longer and difficult; it took them nine hours to cover about eight kms. The troop could reach their base for launching the attack only by about 0600 hours on 18 Nov. On the other hand, the Northern group did the approach march in vehicles moving without lights and dismounted after reaching the foothills of Point 5580, and thereafter moved up the mountain to reach their point for launching the attack. 9<sup>th</sup> Company of the 10<sup>th</sup> Regiment penetrated between Indian strongholds No 7 and 8 in Ali and cut off the route of withdrawal of Indian strongholds No 8 and 9, thus, achieving the encirclement of Indian positions.

After a short but intense artillery bombardment, the attack on Rezang La was launched from both directions on 18 Nov at about 0915 hours. A patrol from 'C' Company detected the Chinese in their Forward Assembly Area at 0400 hours. The first wave of attack came at 0500

hours, which was beaten back with heavy enemy casualties. On failure of their first attack, the Chinese pounded Rezang La with heavy artillery and mortar fire of high intensity. Under covering fire, the Chinese launched their second wave on two platoons simultaneously, but the intensity of their own fire forced them to abandon the attacks. The Chinese then attacked a platoon from the west. Due to numerical superiority and fire power, the position fell in the hands of advancing Chinese troops. All men died in their trenches including the medical orderly Sepoy Dharam Pal Dahaiya, who was found holding a morphine syringe and a bandage in his hand. The Chinese continued advancing towards the depth section position on top, where a dozen Ahirs jumped out of their trenches and engaged the enemy in a hand-to-hand combat, before attaining martyrdom.<sup>9</sup>

Major Shaitan Singh, the Company Commander of the 'C' Company of 13 KUMAON, despite the odds, repelled several waves of hostile onslaught. Throughout the action, Major Singh moved at great personal risk from one platoon post to another and raised the morale. He was gravely wounded while doing so, but continued to encourage and lead his soldiers, who, inspired by his bold example, battled gallantly, and inflicted numerous casualties on the enemy. The enemy lost four or five men for every man India lost. When Major Singh became incapacitated due to wounds in his arms and abdomen, his troops attempted to rescue him but were met with heavy machine gun fire. Major Singh ordered his soldiers to abandon him to his fate to preserve their own lives. Major Singh's exemplary leadership is etched in the pages of Indian history.<sup>10</sup>

13 KUMAON became the proud recipient of Battle Honour 'Rezang La' and Theatre Honour 'Ladakh'. Subsequently, 'C' Company was re-raised and rechristened as 'Rezang La Company' in 1963. The company is the recipient of one Param Vir Chakra, eight Vir Chakras, four Sena Medals, and one Mentioned-in-Dispatches, making it one of the highest decorated companies of the Indian Army to this day.



General (then-Brigadier) T N Raina, MVC, Commander 114 Infantry Brigade, lighting the mass funeral pyre<sup>11</sup>

## Conclusion

All over the Rezang La defences, brave soldiers lay dead in their bunkers and trenches. There were multiple wounds on their bodies, still clutching cold weapons in stiff hands. In all, 96 bodies were recovered from the Rezang La battlefield. Subsequently, in 1965, almost three years later, a shepherd recovered two bodies at a light machine gun position on a flank. Ten men of Charlie Company remained unaccounted for. The Chinese took six severely wounded men as prisoners of war. Of these, two escaped miraculously and rejoined the battalion.<sup>12</sup> At the end of the battle, the gallant soldiers of 13 KUMAON were martyred fighting the enemy till their last bullet. The battle of Rezang La not only reminds of the courage displayed but also the tactical decisions behind a stand that altered the course of operations in Chushul Sector. The troop not only halted the Chinese advance but also prevented the takeover of the Chushul airfield and a deeper Chinese infiltration inside the Indian territory.

## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> Vajiram Content, "Battle of Rezang La", *Vajiram and Ravi*, 19 Nov 2022, accessed 29 Nov 2025 <https://vajiramandravi.com/current-affairs/battle-of-rezang-la/>

<sup>2</sup> PB Sinha, Colonel AA Athale, "History of the Conflict with China, 1962", *History Division, Ministry of Defence*, Government of India, 1992.

<sup>3</sup> Major General Ian Cardozo, *Param Vir: Our Heroes in Battle*, [The Lotus Collection, Roli Books Pvt. Ltd: New Delhi], 2003

<sup>4</sup> Sinha, Athale, "History of the Conflict with China".

<sup>5</sup> "Gallantry Awards", *Ministry of Defence*, Government of India, 2025, <https://gallantryawards.gov.in/awardee/1229>

<sup>6</sup> P J S Sandhu, *1962: A View from the Other Side of the Hill*, USI Study, [VIJ Books (India) Pvt Ltd: New Delhi]

<sup>7</sup> Gurmeet Kanwal, "Fighting to the Muzzle", *CLAWS*, accessed 29 Nov 2025, [archive.claws.co.in/images/journals\\_doc/SW%20i-10.10.2012.184-186.pdf](archive.claws.co.in/images/journals_doc/SW%20i-10.10.2012.184-186.pdf)

<sup>8</sup> Major General PJS Sandhu, "1962-War in the Western Sector (Ladakh)", *USI Journal*, 10 Nov 2024, accessed 28 Nov 2025

<https://www.usiofindia.org/publication-journal/1962-war-in-the-western-sector-ladakh.html>

<sup>9</sup> Sinha, Athale, "History of the Conflict with China".

<sup>10</sup> Cardozo, *Param Vir: Our Heroes in Battle*.

<sup>11</sup> "Unforgettable Battle of 1962: 13 Kumaon at Rezang La – Indian Army", *Bharat Rakshak*, 2025, accessed 28 Nov 2025, <https://www.bharat-rakshak.com/army/history/1962war/rezang-la/>

<sup>12</sup> Kanwal, "Fighting to the Muzzle"

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