

Memoirs of a Prisoner of War : Sino-Indian War 1962

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Background

During early 1950s, India championed China's entry into the UNO and the slogan of "Hindi Chini Bhai Bhai" became popular across the country during the Chinese premier Chou En-lai's visit to India. The relations gradually deteriorated after it was discovered in 1957 that the Chinese had constructed a road through Indian territory in Aksai Chin. On 20 October 1962, the Chinese attacked the Indian positions in the Namka Chu Valley and overwhelmed the defences within a few hours. By the morning of 21 Oct, the Battles of Namka Chu, Tsangdhar and Hathungla were over and 7 Infantry Brigade had ceased to be an effective fighting force.¹ During this disastrous war a large number of Indian troops suffered the misfortune of becoming Chinese Prisoners of War (PsW) who remained in their captivity till 28 May 1963. The author was one amongst them. The narrative that follows is the personal experiences of Major JS Rathore (Retd) in Chinese captivity and was received through his son Colonel HS Rathore, presently posted as Senior Instructor at the School of Artillery, Deolali.

Beginning of the War

McMahon Line was established by the British as the boundary between India and Tibet. Later, after annexing Tibet, China raised questions about McMahon Line being the border between India and China. In erstwhile NEFA (now Arunachal Pradesh) they laid claim to the Thagla Ridge in the Kameng Frontier Division. Dhola Post established by Assam Rifles in early Jun 1962 acted as the trigger for a chain of events that were to result in a full scale war. To provide security to Dhola Post, India sent a company of 9 PUNJAB. When the Chinese surrounded the Dhola Post on 07 Oct 1962, India reacted by ordering 7 Infantry Brigade comprising 9 PUNJAB, 2 RAJPUT and 1/9 GR to Namka Chu. One troop of 4.2 inch mortars (four mortars) was allotted to provide fire support to the brigade. On 30 Sep 1962, decision to para drop one troop of 17 Parachute Field Regiment (PARA Fd Regt) by air from Agra was taken.²

Induction of F Troop, 17 Parachute Field Regiment

I was posted as a Lance Naik Technical Assistant (TA) at the HQ 52 Battery of 17 PARA Fd Regt. Colonel Manohar Singh, Colonel General Staff (Operations), 4 Infantry Division who had earlier commanded 17 PARA Fd Regt, requested the CO, Lieutenant Colonel RC Butalia to send selected officers and other ranks with the Troop. Captain HS Talwar, Troop Commander of 49 Battery, Second Lieutenant AS Behl, Gun Position Officer of 51 Battery and other personnel were selected as part of the F Troop of 52 Battery. Being a reputed TA, I was also shifted from the Battery HQ to be part of F Troop. Within 12 hours, four guns of F Troop reached the Kheria air base, Agra. On 01 Oct 62, one AN-12 aircraft flew with F Troop comprising two officers, two JCOs and 48 jawans from Kheria air base at Agra to Tejpur air base. Due to bad weather the aircraft could not land at Tejpur. It was diverted to Calcutta but could not land there also. Finally, after three hours we landed at the Amausi airport, Lucknow. Next day, F Troop was flown from Lucknow to Tejpur.

Now the plan was to para drop guns of the F Troop on the Tsangdhar feature (14500 feet) which was also the dropping zone (DZ) for 7 Infantry Brigade. However, due to non-availability of a suitable DZ, troops were ordered to move on foot - the guns and ammunition were planned to be para dropped. F Troop personnel started moving on foot from Tejpur foothills to Tsangdhar. Since we were neither kitted, nor trained for move across snow covered mountains we faced unforeseen problems. Lack of oxygen in high altitude areas resulted in many casualties. Both the JCOs, Troop Havaldar Major and two to three jawans were evacuated to Tejpur. Balance of F Troop personnel reached its designated place on Tsangdhar feature. After two days, ration and stores were para dropped followed by guns and ammunition on the third day. Our jawans did a great job under adverse conditions by recovering three guns and approx 200 rounds of ammunition. One gun barrel was badly damaged as it fell on rocks. Recoil system of one of the guns could not be located. Hence, with three guns and approx 200 rounds of ammunition, F Troop was ready to provide fire support to the brigade. Certain essential requirements for Artillery fire support, which were not available, are given below:-

- (a) No maps of the area of operations were provided. A sketch of the area with certain routes and landmarks marked on it was issued. However, due to snow, the landmarks could not be identified.
- (b) No liaison could be carried out with the Infantry in their defences. The observation post (OP) officer could not reconnoitre his OP position.
- (c) DZ was selected at a distance of 100 m from the gun area. Hence, gun area became an easy target for enemy artillery.
- (d) Only Radio Sets 62 were available for communication which caused a lot of communication problems.
- (e) Troops were ill equipped in terms of weapons, rations and clothing to fight a battle in snow bound high altitude areas.

Inadequate plans and preparations by the Indian Army and complete lack of intelligence about Chinese intentions created serious problems for the Indian troops. On 19 Oct, our OP party was ordered to move forward and marry up with Infantry. Till then, there was no improvement either in radio communications or availability of maps.

The Chinese Offensive

On 20 Oct, from about 0500 hours onwards, the Chinese started shelling our gun area at Tsangdhar. We neither received any orders from our OP for fire support nor could we establish any communication with the other OP officer. At that time an Indian Army helicopter came over our gun area. It was fired upon by a Chinese machine gun, compelling it to return back. We realised that the Chinese machine gun was firing from a nearby position. We tried to locate it with the help of binoculars through the fog surrounding our position. We were surprised to see hundreds of Chinese soldiers around our gun area firing small arms and throwing grenades at us. Two of our soldiers lost their lives and three were badly injured. We had only one bandolier of small arms ammunition with each one of us which was found to be unserviceable. When there was no firing from our side, the Chinese announced through a loudspeaker: "You are surrounded by us so either you surrender or be ready to die". Chinese, with their bayonets on the ready started advancing towards us. Second Lieutenant AS Behl had to take the decision to surrender.

Experiences in Chinese Captivity

After the surrender, a body of Chinese troops surrounded us and took us towards Namka Chu. We had to leave our dead and injured soldiers in the gun area. At that time I regretted the fact that, if we had received correct and timely orders from our OP, we had enough ammunition to cause heavy casualties on the enemy in terms of men and material. Our failure to fire our guns perturbed us very much after our surrender. Chinese took us towards Tibet. On the way we passed through 2 RAJPUT defended area and were horrified to see dead bodies of our soldiers, lying both inside and outside the bunkers. Our defensive positions were totally destroyed. More than 90 per cent of 2 RAJPUT troops had made the supreme sacrifice and the remaining were taken PsW.

We were made to walk across hilly terrain till about midnight on 20 Oct. We were allowed to rest but no food was given to us. On 21 Oct we were taken to a vacated Tibetan village in covered vehicles and reached there in the evening on the same day.

The life as a PW commenced on 22 Oct. The Tibetan village had PsW from 60 Heavy Mortar Battery, 17 PARA Fd Regt, 2 RAJPUT, 9 PUNJAB and the Pioneer Platoon. Prisoners were divided into two categories. One comprised Lance Naiks (L/Nk) to Lieutenant Colonels (Lt Col) and the other only soldiers. We were housed unit-wise in dirty vacated Tibetan mud houses. The responsibility of the cook house for the category of L/Nk to Lt Col was with our unit members. The menu initially was only rice without any vegetable/dal. Water was required to be fetched from a nala which was about a km away. For this three groups (each group comprised four officers, eight JCOs and 20 NCOs) were formed by us. We used to hang water buckets on wooden poles held them between the two of us. This Tibetan village was located on a small hillock. Ration was also carried by us on the issue days. We had only rice to eat. After 15 days, radish as vegetable without any condiments was also started. On some special occasions dry meat of goats/sheep along with purries was given. Water fetched by us was used for bathing and all other requirements. There were no arrangements or means for shaving and cutting hair; hence, all of us grew long beards and hair.

The mud houses were dirty and stinking. Dried hay was spread across on the floor. Each room housed 10 to 12 prisoners. We were given a thin woollen mattress and a quilt as our bedding. Each prisoner was given one blue woollen coat and a pair of pyjamas, one white shirt, canvas shoes and a cap as part of personnel clothing. Two to three times in a week, the Camp Officer used to speak to the PsW. The officer used to speak in Chinese language followed by translation in Hindi and English by an interpreter. Subject of the talks used to be: 'Hindi - Chini Bhai Bhai' and blaming the British and the American governments for being the main cause of the war.

After two months, the wounded soldiers were sent back to India. We wrote letters and sent these through them. This was the first time that we were able to inform our families that we were alive. Earlier, we were declared as PsW by our Government. Prior to that declaration, for about a month or so, our families had mourned for us as we were presumed to have died in the war. The family members and relatives still remained worried and sad. Although we were not tortured as prisoners but life as a PW was a harrowing experience. We were not treated as per the Geneva Conventions for PsW - in fact we did not get even one tenth of the considerations stipulated in it.

26 January 1963 Incident

To mislead the world about the humane treatment being given to PsW, on 26 Jan 1963 the Chinese planned an entertainment and sports programme during day time followed by a Barakhana at night. According to their plan, photographs of the event were to be taken and given to reporters from foreign countries for sending across to India and other countries. Captain HS Talwar called me along with other jawans to inform all other prisoners about the Chinese intent. A few senior officers of the Chinese army were expected to attend the Barakhana. To thwart the Chinese game plan, of deriving propaganda value from the event, I called the jawans of 17 PARA Fd Regt, explained the Chinese intent and told them not to attend the Barakhana. They were also briefed to spread the word to jawans of other units and motivate them not to attend the Barakhana. Our jawans worked with utmost secrecy and ingenuity, and succeeded in motivating one third of the PsW not to attend the Barakhana. The Chinese officers got very agitated and angry because of this incident. They started enquiring from the PsW about the originators of this plot.

On 30 Jan 1963, I was asked to face an inquiry by a Board of Chinese officers. In the Court of Inquiry, I was asked questions which would make me an accused. I told them that I did the right thing by not attending the Barkhana myself and so also the other jawans of 17 PARA Fd Regt. I explained to them that participation in any such function by us on our Republic Day while being PsW would amount to betrayal of our Country and we would not attend any such function in future also. They were also told that since PsW of other units were kept separately, we were unable to meet them, so they must have acted in this manner on their own.

Now, the Chinese officers singled me out for harassment. They started calling me for questioning before lunch and leaving me after the dinner time. This process continued for a week. One day, their interpreter gave me time to meet him at 1800 hours at an isolated house. I reached the designated place in time but the interpreter was not there because he had gone to see a Chinese movie in the open air theatre. He came there after two hours. I had got frustrated by their daily questioning and became very angry. One day I complained to him about my harassment and

frustration. He responded by asserting that I had to obey their orders and went on to utter some derogatory words against our Country. In a fit of rage I pushed him to the ground. On seeing this argument and scuffle, two Chinese soldiers and my PsW friends rushed towards us. They all intervened and the fighting between us was stopped.

Next day at about 1000 hours, their Camp Commander (with two other Chinese officers and the interpreter) came and ordered me to follow them. They took me to a Tibetan Gumpa (temple), which was about 400 metres away from the prison camp. We all sat down on stones. Although I felt strongly that they would not kill me as our names had already been sent to India as PsW in accordance with the Geneva Conventions, I was sure that I would be given some physical punishment. The Chinese Camp Commander, aged about 50 years, was considerate. He said Hindi – Chini Bhai Bhai and was apologetic about the incident of the previous night and for the prolonged harassment meted out to me. He made me and the interpreter to shake hands. The incident was thus resolved amicably for the time being.

Everything went on in a routine manner after the incident. On 28 May 1963, in accordance with an agreement, orders were given for all the PsW to be handed over to India. At that time, 17 PARA Fd Regt was at Ranchi and we were taken there after being handed over to India. Our Commanding Officer, Lieutenant Colonel RC Butalia, officers, JCOs and jawans gave us a warm reception and empathised with us for our sufferings in Chinese captivity.

Treatment on Repatriation

All the repatriated PsW of 17 PARA Fd Regt got a very affectionate and compassionate treatment within the unit. We were given two months leave. In my family and village it was like Holi celebrations. Each and everyone met me with warmth and understanding, and enquired about my harrowing experiences as a PW. On termination of leave we were attached to our respective training centres for screening/inquiry. Those amongst us who were found guilty of divulging security related information and cooperating with the Chinese captors were sent home. My record was found to be 'outstanding'; hence, I was sent back to my unit 17 PARA Field Regiment and continued to serve till my retirement. However, the debacle on the Namka Chu and my subsequent days as a PW have left an indelible impression on me; my greatest regret to this day remains that we were not able to provide any fire support.

Endnotes

1. Major General PJS Sandhu (Retd), USI Journal, Apr-Jun 2013, '1962 - The Battle of Namka Chu and Fall of Tawang' pp 271-289.
2. Palit and Dutt Publishers, Dehra Dun, 'History of the Regiment of Artillery : Indian Army', published by Army Headquarters, New Delhi, pages 185-186.

@Major JS Rathore (Retd) joined 17 PARA Field Regiment as a young soldier in Feb 1957, received Special List Commission on 30 Jun 1978 and retired from service on 30 Jun 1991. He participated in liberation of Goa - 1961, Sino-Indian War - 1962 and India-Pakistan Wars of 1965 and 1971.

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