

The Attack on Bomdi-La : A Personal Experience*

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Introduction

In Nov 1962, Bomdi-La had a full infantry brigade (48 Inf Bde) with a fair amount of artillery (arty) and an armoured squadron (armd sqn). The bde had around three weeks to prepare its defences and unlike Se-La and Dirang, was never bypassed or cut-off by the Chinese. And yet it fell without a serious battle. How did it happen?

As the Arty Observation Post (OP) Officer with an infantry battalion (1 SIKH LI), I was located in the company that was attacked. The only other officer present there was the company commander, Major NK Mayne. He was unfortunately wounded and evacuated quite early in the battle. Major Mayne is now no more which makes me the only officer who was actually present there throughout the attack. This narrative does not give the whole story about what happened at Bomdi-La. It is essentially about what I saw and where I was personally involved - a worm's eye view. Much was happening at other places of which I had no information.

Background

135 Heavy Mortar Battery (Hy Mor Bty) (comprising two troops of 4x4.2 inch hy mors each) ex 30 Hy Mor Regt was affiliated to 48 Inf Bde of 17 Inf Div located at Ambala. 48 Inf Bde including 135 Hy Mor Bty was moved from Ambala to Bomdi-La in the Kameng district of Arunachal Pradesh (then NEFA) at 48 hours notice. I was the Second-in-Command (2IC) of the battery even though I had barely three years service; the other four officers in the bty were all junior to me. My Bty Commander (BC) moved ahead with

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the Bde Orders Group (Bde 'O' Gp) while the rest of the bty followed by train a day later. We reached New Misamari, the railhead for the Bomdi-La – Dirang – Se-La Axis, on 27 Oct 1962. By then my BC had already moved up to Bomdi-La. Despite our hurried move from Ambala, there was no air of urgency in New Misamari. The transport capable of going up the steep 1 ton road to Bomdi-La and beyond was limited and was controlled by Headquarter (HQ), 4 Corps at Tezpur. Many units which had arrived before us were still waiting for vehicles to move up.

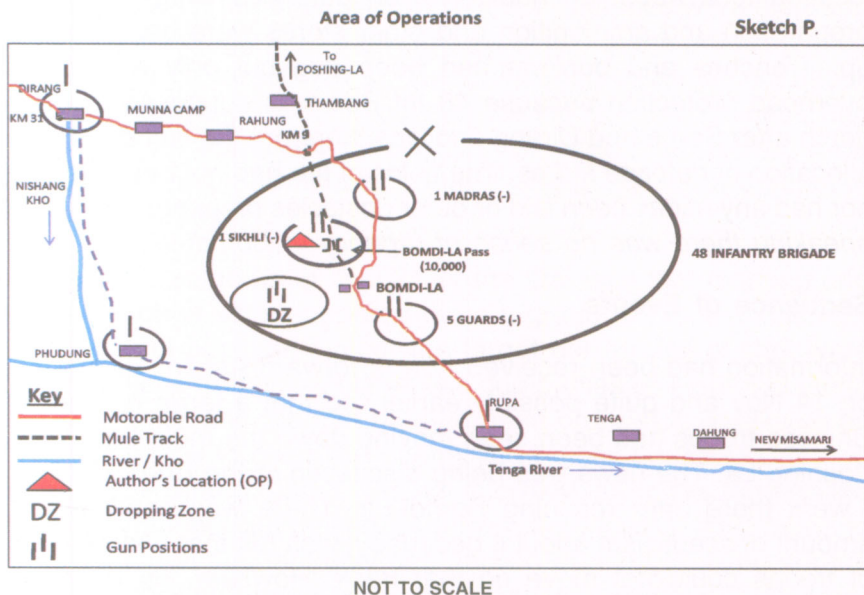
While still in New Misamari, we received a signal that Lieutenant General BM Kaul had once again taken over 4 Corps from the popular Lieutenant General Harbaksh Singh who had been appointed only a few days earlier. The signal specifically stated that the message must be read out to all ranks at roll call. I still remember an all-round feeling of dejection caused by the announcement.

Move-Up to Bomdi-La

Our move to Bomdi-La was the result of a decision taken by the Commander Corps Artillery (CC Arty) on the spur of the moment. All unit and subunit commanders in New Misamari periodically visited the Corps HQ at Tezpur to inquire about the availability of transport to move up. On one such trip on 13 Nov, I accidentally ran into the CC Arty who asked me what I was doing there. I told him that I had come to find out about the transport to move up. He thought for a moment and then told me that I should pool in all the good vehicles in my bty and move at least one troop to Bomdi-La at once. When I went and informed the General Staff Officer Grade-2 (Arty), [GSO 2 (Arty)] about the CC Arty's order he told me not to carry any ammunition as two x second line 4.2 ammunition had already been air dropped in Bomdi-La. Please refer to **Sketch**.

Since I was also the troop commander of B troop in addition to being the Bty 2IC, I decided to take my own troop to Bomdi-La. When I told my troop that we would not be carrying any ammunition, all the Junior Commissioned Officers (JCOs) protested saying that arty must never move without ammunition. It was finally decided to somehow squeeze in 50 rounds per mortar in the available

vehicles. This was a fortunate decision because on reaching Bomdi-La we found that no mortar ammunition had been dropped there.



We left New Misamari on 14 Nov and reached Bomdi-La town the same evening. 48 Inf Bde was located at Bomdi-La as part of 4 Inf Div which was responsible for the Kameng Sector. Another bde of the div was at Se-La and the third bde along with the Div HQ was located at Dirang – midway between Se-La and Bomdi-La. 48 Inf Bde's defences were based on a hill feature (Bomdi-La feature) just ahead of the town. The feature was around 10,000 ft high, thickly wooded and with very heavy undergrowth. A mule track from the town climbed steeply up to the pass on the feature and then dropped sharply down on the other side to meet the Bomdi-La-Dirang road near Km 9. 1 SIKH LI less a company was deployed astride the pass covering the mule track. 1 MADRAS less a company was on its right guarding the main axis and 5 GUARDS less a company was in depth. One company of each of these bns was located at Rupa, Dirang and Phudung. The arty element consisted of one fd bty ex 6 Fd Regt (8x25 pounder guns), RHQ 22 Mtn Regt with one bty (4x3.7 Inch Howitzer) and the newly arrived B Troop ex 135 Hy Mor Bty. An arm'd sqn from 7th Light Cavalry (less one troop) was also located in Bomdi-La.

On reaching Bomdi-La, I was ordered to move to 1 SIKH LI as OP officer the next morning. The climb from the base to the bn location took about an hour. The bn defences were still under preparation and ammunition and other stores were being hauled up. Trenches and bunkers had been dug but only a few had overhead protection because 48 Inf Bde was supposed to be in depth after Se-La and Dirang and was therefore the last priority for allocation of defence stores. The fields of fire had not been cleared nor had any mines been laid or other obstacles prepared. *Generally speaking there was no sense of urgency in Bomdi-La.*

Sequence of Events

Information had been received from a forward Assam Rifles post on 14 Nov and quite possibly earlier too that a large number of Chinese troops had been seen moving down the mule track from Poshing-La. The news was being discussed in the Bde HQ when I went there after reaching Bomdi-La. There was considerable amount of scepticism about it because it was felt that a large body of troops could not move on that track. However, as follow-up reports continued to confirm the information, 5 GUARDS was sent in bits and pieces on that axis over the next two days. First a platoon was sent and then the rest of the company. After that, when the seriousness of the threat was realised, the rest of the bn was sent to join them. The bn made contact with the Chinese at Thembang, a little distance ahead of Bomdi-La, on 17 Nov afternoon. A fierce battle ensued. 5 GUARDS was provided fire support by the fd and mtn guns but ultimately its position was overrun. The Chinese, in keeping with their known tactics, also cut-off the bn from the rear. Finding its route to Bomdi-La blocked, the bn split into small groups and made its way to the plains.

Bomdi-La was now left with only two battalions, both less a company. From Thembang the Chinese advanced further that night and established a road block near the Border Roads Camp at Km 9. All this time very little information about the enemy had been passed on to the forward troops by the brigade or the battalion HQs. Similarly, I got no information at all through the artillery channels, not even about the fate of 5 GUARDS. All through the night personnel from the Border Roads Camp moved back through Bomdi-La Pass but there was no hint given that the enemy was

so near. I was, therefore, taken by surprise when at about 0300 hr on Night 17-18 Nov I was told by my BC to fire a few rounds at random to let the enemy know that our defences were alert and ready. I accordingly fired a few rounds at one of the predesignated 'Defensive Fire' targets (DFs). The Chinese however did not attack that night and there was a general feeling that the Chinese had missed their opportunity because two more battalions were expected to reach Bomdi-La by that evening. We never thought of a day-time attack.

My BC came up to my OP for the first time that morning and tried to engage what appeared to be a group of Chinese. He was unsuccessful because neither the target nor the fall of shot were clearly visible. In the meantime, two companies of 1 SIKH LI along with two tanks and the mtn bty had been ordered to assemble on the road below to clear the enemy road block near Km 9 on the Bomdi-La – Dirang road. I was not informed about this through the artillery channels but picked it up from the inf bn. I later came to know that in actual fact only one section of mtn guns and not the whole battery had been ordered to join the task force. This order was reportedly given by the Corps Commander personally; the Bde Commander's objection that this would completely denude the Bomdi-La defences was overruled by him.

Two companies of the bn were pulled out as ordered. Only 'A' Company, which was deployed on the pass and in whose area my OP was located, was now left in the whole bn defended area. 1 MADRAS was left untouched. The whole operation to clear the road block eventually turned out to be meaningless because by then Dirang had already been abandoned and Se-La was also in the process of being abandoned.

The Attack

The Chinese pre-empted us. Before our task force could contact their road block (at Km 9) they attacked the defensive position just vacated by our troops. The attack came on Alfa Company position at 1230 hr. It was a frontal attack in single file along the mule track. There may have been other Chinese in the undergrowth on the sides but we could not see them. The bn Subedar Major and I were standing on the Pass after the departure of the two

companies when he remarked that some more stragglers from the Border Roads Camp seemed to be coming up. I looked through my binoculars and saw some people moving up the track about 1500 yards away. From their body language it was clear that they were not stragglers but Chinese. The attack took us by complete surprise. The withdrawal of the two companies from the bn had seemingly conveyed the impression that there was no immediate threat. Moreover, we were mentally unprepared for the possibility of a mid-day attack. Probably for the same reason there were no OPs in position to give early warning. *The situation now was that while two companies of 1 SIKH LI along with a section of mountain guns and two tanks were moving toward Km 9 at about a distance of about one and a half hour's walking time, the battalion position with only one company in location was being attacked by the Chinese.*

Everybody immediately rushed to his defensive position. The Medium Machine Gun (MMG) section near the pass opened up at once and though the enemy was still more than 1000 yards away most of the company's small arms and the infantry mortars also started firing. I called for fire on a DF task from all the artillery weapons. The hy mors and fd guns responded immediately but the mountain battery replied that they were on the move. Actually it was the section with the task force that I had contacted. I was not aware that the other section was still in its Gun Position and available to fire; nor did I have its radio call sign. The field guns' fire had to be stopped because they were blocked by the crest and their rounds were falling in our own positions. The surveyed data of the DF tasks had been given to the fd bty but it had not cared to calculate their crest clearance.

It is thus ironical that out of the 16 arty pieces in Bomdi-La at the time of the attack only four hy mors which had actually been sent there as an afterthought were available for engaging the enemy. The heavy mortars fire was not accurate because mortar rounds have a wide dispersion which is further exaggerated in hilly terrain. I found it difficult to correct their fire because there were many other weapons firing in the same area and I could not distinguish the mortar rounds from the others in the heavy smoke and dust. The thick undergrowth further compounded the problem. I tried various artillery procedures for such situations like 'salvo ranging' and 'report standby' but that did not help. I tried to guess which

could be the hy mors rounds and give corrections but to no avail. I later learnt that the field battery whose fire was crested and the section of mountain guns still deployed in the gun position had on their own begun engaging some other DF tasks. Since all the DFs in front of the battalion area were close to each other (and no meteorological information was available) it is possible that their fire was also falling in the same general area as the hy mors. This could possibly be one of the reasons why I could not determine the exact fall of shot of the hy mors.

All this while, Major Mayne, the company commander of A Company, was running from one platoon to the other encouraging his men and asking them to hold their fire till the enemy came within range. Their firing, however, continued. After some time Major Mayne came and stood behind my OP. The OP was just an open trench without any overhead protection or cover because till now I had not been given any defence stores. Seeing Major Mayne standing there I decided to come out of the trench and join him. Just as I was pulling myself out Major Mayne was hit by a bullet in his thigh. My Operator Wireless Arty (OWA) and Technical Assistant (TA) quickly pulled him inside the trench and applied first field dressing on his wound. Seeing him about to pass out the TA pulled out a bottle of rum from his pack and gave him a quick shot. I then told them to take him to the bn Medical Inspection Room while I continued to engage the enemy. The fire was still inaccurate and though the Chinese may have suffered some casualties on account of our small arms and arty fire I personally did not see a single Chinese drop. It was very disheartening.

By now, as often happens in the hills in the Northeast, a thick blanket of mist had begun to cover the area making the observation of fire even more difficult. The OWA and TA who had gone to evacuate the company commander came back very soon. They said that as soon as they reached the reverse slope about a dozen men from the company came and took the stretcher from them saying that they would evacuate their company commander. They also told me that they had seen a number of people from the bn leaving their positions and going down. I had no knowledge of what was happening because I was not in radio or line communication with anyone either in the company or the bn. We were unable to see what was happening in the forward platoons

because by now the visibility had been reduced to less than 15 yards. There was however no sound of firing or any other sound coming from those areas. The MMG section which had been firing without a break was now silent and the enemy shelling had also stopped. It appeared that the forward localities had either been overrun or abandoned. We began to feel quite isolated. It seemed that everyone had gone leaving us behind.

My TA and OWA started suggesting that we should also leave. Deep in my heart I too wanted to leave but was hesitant because I had no idea what was happening and whether the others had really left. Enemy firing and shelling had already made my OP unsafe as the wounding of Major Mayne had shown. Due to my inexperience (I had never performed the duties of an OP officer before, even in an exercise) I had selected an OP position that was tactically unsound. It had a good view but was on the forward slope and fully exposed to enemy fire. No senior officer had ever visited me. Even my own BC had come there for the first time that morning and he had not pointed out any flaw. Since the present OP position had become very unsafe I decided to move out. I said that we would first go to the Company HQ and if we found no one there then we would also leave; otherwise we would re-establish our OP there. We then picked up our equipment and making our way around two dead bodies lying just behind the OP made our way to the Company HQ some 75 yards behind us.

There was no one in the Company HQ when we first reached there but then we saw the Company 2IC, a Subedar, hurrying up the track. As soon as he saw me he said 'Sahib, where are you going? We want fire'. He could not tell me where he wanted the fire because he had no idea about what was happening in front. I told him that there did not seem to be anyone left in the forward localities. He however kept repeating that he wanted fire. Since he was insistent, and I was feeling guilty about having tried to leave, I quickly established my OP near the Company HQ. The OP was out in the open next to a big tree stump that was about two feet high and about a foot and a half in diameter. The Company 2IC came and sat down next to me while I called for fire on one of the DF tasks. The hy mors responded immediately but there was no reply from the mtn guns (I was still calling only the section with the

task force, not knowing that the other section was deployed in the gun position and was available to me).

The fog had now begun to lift and the visibility had improved. What none of us knew was that the Chinese were at that very moment less than 50 yards from us. I was leaning against the tree stump still trying to get through to the mtn bty when the OWA drew my attention toward the Pass. What I saw there was four Chinese standing in the open about 15 yards away, smiling and talking to each other. They had not seen us and their relaxed manner seemed to indicate that they did not expect to find any Indian troops around. It was obvious that the forward localities had been either overrun or quietly vacated under the cover of thick mist and that we had left our previous OP just in time. The logical thing for us to do now was to quietly slip away in the undergrowth. *However, without thinking I instinctively pulled out my pistol and fired at the Chinese.* Simultaneously, I rolled to my left and took cover behind the tree stump. I remember feeling at that time that this was the end. Thereafter, no other thought entered my mind. My shot did not hit any of the Chinese but resulted in drawing their attention to me. One of them immediately rushed toward me with his rifle and took cover on the other side of the stump.

The two of us were now on the opposite sides of the stump, he crouching with a rifle and me flat on my stomach with a pistol. The Chinese slowly brought his rifle around the stump on to my left side. I quickly moved my right arm with the pistol to the same side and fired blindly around the stump. He at once pulled back and so did I. A small pause and then his rifle came around the stump once again and I again fired in the same way. I don't know whether he was actually firing. I was too engrossed in trying to save myself to notice. This fire and pull back routine continued for some time, probably five or six times. He was handicapped because with a rifle he could not take proper aim at me from around the stump or stand up and fire at me from over the stump without exposing himself. Toward the end I was only gesturing with an empty pistol because the five rounds in it had already been expended. My adversary did not realise this and continued to pull back even when I brandished an empty pistol.

Till now I had remained totally engrossed in saving myself and all my actions had been reflexive. It now occurred to me that

my opponent would soon realise that my pistol was empty and become bolder. I also knew that though I had only seen four Chinese there were bound to be many more in the area and some of them would soon come to his aid. For the first time, I began to consider the possibility of escaping. No sooner had I thought about it then I made my plan though its chance of success appeared remote. The next time the Chinese pulled back on seeing my pistol, I quickly slid down the slope behind me, jumped into a nearby depression and dived into the undergrowth near it. I then began crawling. All this happened so quickly that it caught my adversary off guard and there was no reaction from him.

The Company 2IC and my TA and OWA had already left though I had not seen them go. The OWA was later captured by the Chinese. He told me after his release that all three of them had quietly slipped away as soon as they saw me trapped behind the stump. The TA and he were together for some distance after which he was hit by a bomb splinter in the leg and had fallen back. The following day he was captured by the Chinese near Tenga. The TA in the meantime went straight down to New Misamari. On reaching there he reported to the bty that he had personally seen me being killed, so confident was he that I would not come out alive.

The two SIKH LI companies were ordered to rush back to their defensive positions as soon as information of the Chinese attack was received. They had to move quite a distance and had managed to climb only part of the way up the hill by the time the Chinese reached the top of the Bomdi-La feature. The companies then took position wherever they were and began firing upward at the Chinese. Caught in the cross fire between the two, I continued to crawl downhill till I reached an open patch from where onwards it was safe to stand up and walk. It was now 1430 hr. Looking up, I saw a Dakota aircraft circling over the Dropping Zone (DZ), dropping two loads in each circuit and quite unaware of what was happening below.

Withdrawal from Bomdi-La

I hit the main road just below Bomdi-La town and headed for my troop's Gun Position near the DZ. As I was passing the DZ, I saw CO 22 Mtn Regt standing there with the COs of two inf bns which

were on their way up and the armed sqn commander. On seeing me, he asked me to join them. He then told all of us that the Bde Commander had gone away and he had taken over the brigade. He said that there was no enemy on the Bomdi-La feature. Our troops had just panicked and left and he planned to reoccupy the abandoned defences. His broad plan was for the two inf bns (which were still on their way up) to climb up the feature that night with one battalion on either side of the mule track and reoccupy the positions vacated by 1 SIKH LI. It was to be a silent attack with no artillery support. No other details were given. He then asked me to describe the terrain and the layout of the bn defences to the inf COs. I briefed them about whatever I knew. I also told them firmly that the enemy was very much there and that I had personally seen the Chinese troops. CO 22 Mtn Regt, however, ignored my view and continued to insist that there was no enemy on the hill feature. We continued to argue and at one point I even volunteered to go up to the defences with him if he was so confident about it but he brushed aside the idea. Surprisingly, the two inf bn COs had no questions on these half-baked orders. They probably felt that all this was just bravado and there was not going to be any attack. They were right because I did not hear any talk about it after that.

I went to my mortars Gun Position after that and found that all the men had gone leaving the mtrs behind. The fd and mtn btys were however still there. I then headed for Bomdi-La town. It was dark by the time I reached there. The people in Bomdi-La were just moving up and down the main road aimlessly, not knowing what had happened and what they should do. No one knew the whereabouts of the Bde Commander. They were equally hazy about when and why the Bde HQ, 1 SIKH LI and the administrative units deployed in and around the town had left and where they had gone. Most of them said that they had gone away from their unit for a short while for some reason and when they returned they found it gone. All were waiting for someone to tell them what to do next and where to go. Moving along the road I came across 10 persons from my own troop, including the Gun Position Officer (GPO) and a JCO. The GPO said that he had gone to the Bde HQ for some work and when he came back he found the troops gone. To this day, I have not been able to find out just under what circumstances my troop and the other elements deployed around

Bomdi-La town left. My BC was around there at that time but he could never clearly explain how it happened, such was the confusion. I also asked some of my men about it and all of them gave the same answer – everyone was leaving and so they also left. It appears that the sight of I SIKH LI troops coming down the hill and rushing backwards through the town unnerved them and they also joined them, so low was the morale.

My men and I spent the night in Bomdi-La with the enemy on the hill above us, waiting for further orders. The Chinese did not attack the town that night, probably because it had no tactical value. Instead they bypassed it and made straight for Rupa, their next objective. Around 0400 hr next morning we were told by someone that everyone was to withdraw to Tenga. Bomdi-La had now officially fallen, though not in battle – it had been handed over to the enemy piecemeal. No one said anything about I MADRAS which had not been attacked and had not taken part in the battle. It received no orders and seemed to have been forgotten. The battalion remained in its defences for the next 48 hr after which it decided to withdraw. It suffered heavy casualties on the way back.

We walked down to Tenga and reached there after about two hr. In Tenga also there was no sign of any command and control. People were sitting around in small groups, once again waiting for orders. Vehicles were lined up along the road but could not go down because a Major from Army Supply Corps (ASC) had closed the Traffic Check Post (TCP). He said that he had been ordered not to allow any vehicle to pass through. In the meantime the fd guns also reached Tenga and were told to deploy there even though they had no ammunition with them. About an hour after we reached Tenga, we heard some rifle shots. A Gurkha battalion that was on the way up from the plains had come in contact with the Chinese just beyond Tenga toward Rupa. The sound of the shots had an electrifying effect on the people sitting around in Tenga. They all immediately got up, climbed into the nearest vehicle and rushed toward the TCP. The TCP was still closed and the Major there refused to open it till he received orders from the CO of the Gurkha bn. Seeing me standing there the Adjutant of 22 Mtn Regt asked me to take a civilian jeep that he had commandeered and get the necessary permission from the CO. I found him about two kilometres away behind a huge rock talking on the radio. He at once agreed to let the mob in Tenga leave.

The moment the TCP was opened all types of vehicles with as many people packed into each as possible poured down the road. I squeezed all my ten men into the civilian jeep that was still with me and joined them. All the vehicles were stopped at a TCP on the way, probably at Eagle's Nest, where all those from the inf and some others were told to dismount while the rest of us were told to keep going. We then carried on to New Misamari.

Conclusion

Bomdi-La was a case of unbelievably poor leadership and bungled battle management in which every principle of war was violated. What stands out in this non-battle is the utter professional incompetence of the senior officers. They were in a time warp and their military thinking had not progressed beyond the World War II practices. Instead of fighting according to their own plan they reacted to the enemy's moves at each stage till they were overwhelmed by the events and lost complete control over their troops. Two other points need to be made here. It is popularly believed that one of the reasons we lost the 1962 War was because of our outdated equipment. This may be true for other areas but not for the Bomdi-La, Dirang and Se-La Axis because there never was any set piece battle here (except perhaps at Thembang to some extent) and even our existing weapons were hardly used. As the above narrative shows, the result would have been no different even if we had the latest equipment. The second point is about the use of Air Force (AF). There is a view that the result of the war would have been different if we had used our AF as we enjoyed a clear advantage over the Chinese in this area. I do not agree. I have already described the situation on the ground in Bomdi-La and according to my information things were about the same in Dirang and Se-La. No amount of air support, no matter how effective it was could have possibly made up for the poor leadership and lack of professionalism that was on display in these places. Even at the technical level it is questionable whether aircraft fitted with the avionics of that era would have been very effective in the hilly terrain and the thick undergrowth of that area.

I realised that day, how important it is for commanders at all levels to keep in constant touch with their troops, especially with those in the forward localities and keep passing on information to them. Each post and locality feels isolated when the going is bad

and tends to imagine the worst, particularly when it is not getting any information. Once troops get the impression that others are leaving, it is very difficult to stop a mass exodus.

I have tried to describe what happened at Bomdi-La without being judgemental except to say that the senior officers were unbelievably incompetent. This ultimately led to very low morale amongst the troops and resulted in the humiliating fall of Bomdi-La without a proper fight.