

Recollections of The Se La Bomdi La Debacle 1962*

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This book is based on personal recollections of the author who was the Brigade Major (BM) of the ill fated 62 Infantry Brigade at Se La, commanded by Late Brigadier Hoshiar Singh, IOM, IDSM, who was killed in battle. The story of 62 Infantry Brigade which has been a void all these years has been told in all its vivid detail.

The author brings to life the dilemmas that the Commander and the entire command and staff structure of 62 Infantry Brigade, commanding officers included, faced on the fateful night of 17/18 Nov 1962 (eve of the battle) when the Commander was ordered by General Officer Commanding (GOC) 4 Infantry Division to withdraw the entire Brigade from Se La to Bomdi La, while it was poised for a fight with the Chinese. The withdrawal was to commence the same night. *The Commander remonstrated against the decision but to no avail.* Perhaps, the fact that the road between the Divisional HQ at Dirang Dzong and Bomdi La had been interdicted by the Chinese on 17 Nov itself seems to have weighed heavily with the GOC. Reluctantly, the Brigade Commander asked for permission to commence withdrawal the next night (Night 18 / 19 Nov) which was agreed.

The Commander thereafter carried out a detailed briefing of the Reconnaissance Group and staff for withdrawal commencing the next night which was duly recorded by the author as the BM and has been reproduced in the book. Next morning (18 Nov) at 0400 hours, the Commander set out from his HQ to see for himself how the withdrawal of covering troops was progressing and to personally brief the commanding officers. Ironically, the Chinese were attacking Se La, Dirang Dzong and Bomdi La precisely at that time (morning of 18 Nov) simultaneously. That was the end

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of planned withdrawal and 62 Infantry Brigade as a fighting formation.

The book is also remarkable for another reason. It describes the battles at Se La, Dirang Dzong and Bomdi La based on two Chinese books : 'True History of China India Border War' authored by Professor Yan Xun of National Defence University (Beijing), published in 1993 and 'China's War of Self Defence Counter Attack on India' published by Academy of Military Sciences (Beijing) in 1994 which the author managed to obtain and get these translated through his personal efforts which is creditable. Two versions of the Chinese perspective based on the above two books have been narrated in Chapter 6 of the book. These throw fresh light, hitherto unknown, of the Chinese operational plans and conduct of the battles. However, these two narratives could have been combined to give one cohesive overview of the Chinese perspective. That would have made understanding the battles by the reader simpler.

There are many lessons that emerge from these battles and these have been brought out by the author in chapter 8 (Aftermath) of the book. Though the main aim of the Chinese lay in the Western Sector (Ladakh), the main effort was directed towards the Eastern Sector (Kameng) as the terrain there facilitated application of major forces. The military aim given to the PLA in the Kameng Sector was to annihilate the Indian forces deployed in this Sector. The operational plan was evolved accordingly. A study of the battles at Namka Chu, Se La and Bomdi La would reveal that the Chinese, time and again, adopted the tactics of deep penetration, outflanking, encirclement and multi-directional attacks to achieve their operational objectives. They succeeded admirably because the Indian forces neither expected, nor were they prepared for such tactics.

The author has rendered a yeoman service by bringing out this book fifty years after the event; better late than never. It is an irony that the bravery and sacrifice of the Indian soldiers have not been adequately recognised by the Nation because of the bigger debacle. Nonetheless, they deserve recognition, even at this belated stage.

The book is a valuable addition to the literature about the 1962 War and needs to be read by military professionals, scholars and students of military history.