

# Medals and Ribbons

Jul. - Sep. 2023 | Vol.3 | Issue 3 ■ Price Rs.200/- ■ Annual Subscription Rs.700/- (ENGLISH QUARTERLY)

A SALUTE TO OUR VALIANT WARRIORS



## ROUTING THE **PAKISTANI** RAIDERS

● J&K Operations 1947-48 ●

### **The Tide Turns At Shalateng**

*The Most Crucial Battle to  
Save Srinagar*

### **Brigadier Mohammed Usman, MVC - A Tribute**

*The Hero of Nowshera and Jhangar*

### **Operation Polo**

*The Hyderabad  
Annexation - September 1948*

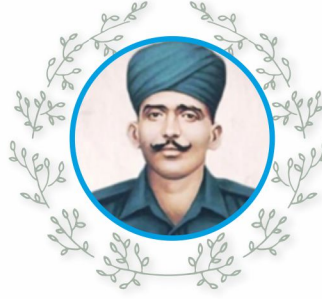


# DEDICATED TO

## The Param Vir Chakra Awardees of the 1947-48 Jammu & Kashmir Operations



**Major Somnath Sharma,  
PVC (Posthumous)  
Kumaon Regiment,  
3 November 1947.  
Badgam**



**Naik Jadunath Singh,  
PVC (Posthumous)  
Rajput Regiment,  
6 February 1948.  
Nowshera.**



**Second Lieutenant  
Rama Raghoba Rane, PVC  
Bombay Sappers,  
8 April 1948.  
Nowshera.**



**Company Havildar  
Maj Piru Singh, PVC (Posthumous)  
Rajputana Rifles,  
17 July 1948.  
Tithwal.**



**Lance Naik Karam Singh, PVC  
Sikh Regiment,  
13 October 1948.  
Tithwal.**



## Col David Devasahayam



The Jammu & Kashmir Operations in 1947 - 48 were the first victorious campaign of the Indian Armed Forces after Independence. When I look at the macro picture, I am amazed as well as proud at the scale of the victory. With their backs to the wall, with thousands of Pakistani irregulars at the gates of Srinagar, the Indian Armed Forces landed in the nick of time – and stood like an unassailable rock in front of the Pakistani marauders. Major Somnath Sharma of the 4th Battalion of the Kumaon Regiment would posthumously win the first Param Vir Chakra in these initial battles near the airfield. We tenaciously fought back, making the raiders flee, and from that one foothold, we expanded outwards, beyond the Kashmir valley, to the outlying regions, securing the Poonch-Rajouri region, the Kargil-Ladakh frontiers, and across the Shamsabari range to Tithwal and beyond.

There were some epic battles. Zojila was a very tough nut to crack. Poonch remained under siege for a year with air maintenance sustaining the forces therein. Nowshera and Jhangar saw fierce and violent attacks, and greater combat power and force levels were applied to recapture Jhangar. The Tangdhar – Tithwal Sector also saw

some ferocious fighting. Several attacks were launched by the Pakistanis, but the Indian soldier stood strong and resilient. Leh and Ladakh too remained isolated, defended by a garrison of about 800 regulars and Militia volunteers against an estimated 4000 Pakistani Raiders – who could not make much headway along the Shyok and Indus River valleys.

My own unit, the 2/8 Gorkha Rifles was the primary combat force in Leh – Ladakh, and Lieutenant Colonel HS Parab, our first Indian Commanding Officer was appointed the Military Governor in Leh. His ingenious application of offensive defence ensured that the Pakistani Forces could not progress operations towards Leh. One of the Company Commanders, Major Hari Chand would win the Mahavir Chakra for his gallantry in these operations.



(Left) Maj Somnath Sharma, PVC (Posthumous)  
(Right) Maj Hari Chand, MVC

Many heroes emerged in these battles – Brigadier Mohammed Usman, MVC, Lieutenant Colonel Dewan Ranjit Rai, MVC, Naik Jadunath Singh, PVC, Lance Naik Karam Singh, PVC, CHM Piru Singh, PVC, 2nd Lieutenant RR Rane, PVC, to name a few. Military leaders who led the campaign and broke through the enemy resistance in difficult circumstances included Maj Gen K S Thimayya and Brigadier Harbakhsh Singh. Air Commodore Mehar Singh, the intrepid and daredevil pilot showed the way from the skies as he landed and bombed wherever necessary. In fact, he converted every impossible landing to **landing executed!**

The phenomenal gallantry, fortitude and resilience displayed by the Indian Army and Indian Air Force deserves to be brought forth, and hence we have strung together these battles of 1947 - 48 for our readers.

May I take this opportunity to also thank the readers for the “Thumbs Up” that you have given to our last issue on “Titans from the Military Arena”. I have received excellent reviews on our compilation. I am sure the readers will find this issue as interesting as our previous issues.





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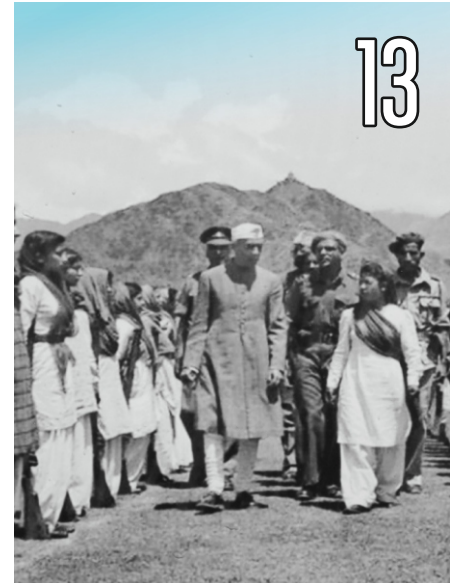
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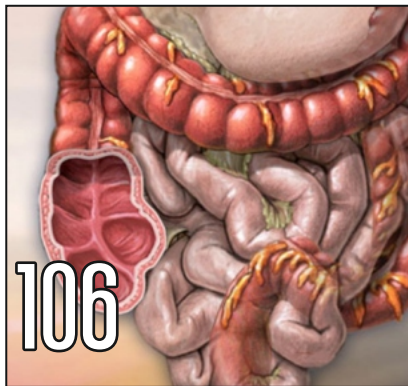
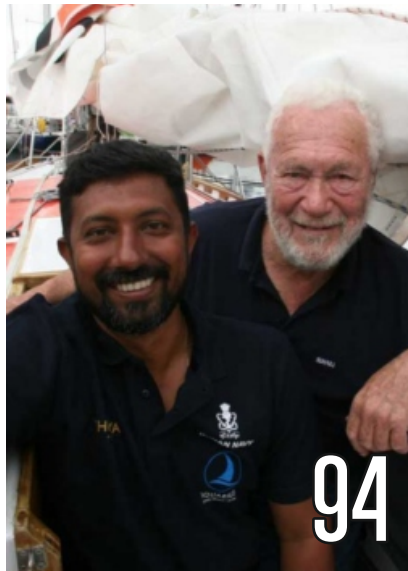
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## Medals and Ribbons

A SALUTE TO OUR VALIANT WARRIORS

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Lt Gen J S Sandhu, (Retd).

The Americans are deft at introducing Jargon onto the strategic discourses platform, and VUCA is a term being used to define the global scene presently – Volatile, Uncertain, Complex, Ambiguous. About 75 years ago, the Indian sub-continent passed through a VUCA phase, consequent to India's Partition. Large scale communal riots made the situation volatile, millions of citizens trudged across the new national boundaries as refugees to an uncertain future, the mergers of hesitant princely states made matters complex and ambiguous too.

In the midst of the VUCA nightmare of 1947-48, the Indian Armed Forces emerged as a stabilising force, controlling the Partition riots and violence, while simultaneously tackling recalcitrant princely states. India's biggest challenge was in recovering and regaining control in Jammu & Kashmir (J&K), which acceded to India on 26 October 1947, when

Pakistani marauders were looting and plundering in Baramulla, a mere 55 kms from Srinagar.

The Pakistani raiders were barbaric, steeped in the medieval practice wherein invaders indulged in rape and plunder. Women faced the brunt, and hundreds of women in J&K were raped, many were carted away to Khyber Pakhtunkhwa from Mirpur, enroute some were paraded naked in Jhelum City in Pakistan, and several were sold to bidders. And the world remained silent. We too have brushed those memories away and moved on. Sadly, instances of barbarism continue even today. To quote an example, hundreds of Nigerian schoolgirls were abducted by Boko Haram a few years ago.

Barbaric actions are not limited to conflict zones only, but also occur often where feudal, orthodox, patriarchal power is wielded, and we have seen reports of gang rape, stripping naked and lynching from urban centres too. Society needs to introspect.

The Indian Armed Forces emerged victorious in the J&K Campaign in 1947-48. What stood out was the phenomenal boldness, offensive spirit, fortitude and willingness to surmount extremely difficult challenges. Our risk taking propensity gave exceptional success, undoubtedly **'Fortune Favours the Brave.'** The spirit of the 40 member **Lehdett** of 2 DOGRA, led by Prithi Chand, Khushal Chand and Bhim Chand who trudged across the avalanche prone and snow walled Zojila in February 1948 to reach beleaguered Leh epitomises that resilience of the Indian soldier. The steely courage of Air Commodore Mehar Singh who landed amidst enemy fire often at the Poonch dirt airstrip, and at the challenging high altitude Leh airstrip is indeed remarkable.

The leadership of Generals Cariappa and Thimayya, who moved light tanks to Zojila was commendable – indicative of their strong resolve and determination to overcome the resistance. There were countless other valiant warriors. The J&K State Forces also sacrificed many young men, fighting the intruders in the initial days, and alongside the Army thereafter. There were hundreds of volunteers also, who joined as Militia, including a large number of

women who formed a Women's Militia in Srinagar. Such volunteers were a major asset in Ladakh, Nowshera, Jhangar, Poonch too. We fully appreciate their contribution.

We have strung together accounts of many sterling actions, largely sequentially starting with Brigadier Rajinder Singh and Maqbool Sherwani's attempts to stall the invaders, followed by the critical Battle at Shalateng where the tide turned. To give the readers a holistic perspective, we have described the events and operations in Gilgit, Nowshera, Jhangar, Rajouri, Poonch, Tithwal, Zojila, Kargil and Leh.

Besides the J&K operations, we have included a commentary on Operation Polo, the annexation of Hyderabad in September 1948. Through a beautifully penned essay by Commodore Sanjay Tewari, we salute Commander Abhilash Tomy's stupendous calibre as he won accolades in the Golden Globe Race. An incredible feat indeed. In our regular columns, Dr. Renuka David has expounded on Colon Cancer in the Wellness Page and our financial guide discusses Home Loans in the Money Matters column. We close with a look at our Traditions of Heritage, history and Military Music at OTA, Chennai.

**In the next October 23 Issue, our primary theme will include the Goa, Daman and Diu Operations of December 1961, and actions on the Northern Borders in 1962, and later in Nathula, Sumdorong Chu, Chumar and other such face-offs with the Northern adversary.** We look forward to interesting accounts of these historic battles and events; the articles may be sent to [chiefeditor@medalsandribbons.com](mailto:chiefeditor@medalsandribbons.com) by 05 August 2023.

Finally, I am sure the readers will rate this issue as "top-class" too, and we look forward to your earnest feedback. The Editorial Team thanks all the readers for your valuable support and your positive kudos, which has enabled us to record and enhance the glory and pride of the Indian Armed Forces.





# RAJINDER LEADS

## THE FIRST RESPONDERS

As the Kabiliaes attacked across the Jhelum, and headed towards Srinagar, the Kashmir State Forces were the first responders. Through a series of Delaying Positions, Brigadier Rajinder Singh, MVC and a small band of Dogra soldiers played a crucial role as they contested the advance of the enemy.

22 October 1947 was a beautiful day, quiet and peaceful in Srinagar. The Festival of Dussehra was two days away, and rehearsals were on for the parade and durbar on 24 October of Maharaja Hari Singh, the ruler of J&K State.

Not yet known, however, the border town of Muzaffarabad was being put to the sword by a 6000-strong horde of invaders who had been welcomed by the company of J&K State Forces deployed to the West of the town to guard the border. A deep conspiracy executed over the last few weeks had used the religion card to subvert the minds of the Muslim soldiers who made up that subunit of the illustrious 4 Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) Infantry. The news of invasion and plunder at Muzaffarabad was personally conveyed by Lieutenant Colonel Narain Singh, the Commanding Officer (CO) on the wireless to Captain Nasib Singh at the Headquarters (HQ) in Srinagar. About an hour later, the CO shared the details about the attack on the battalion HQ and Officers' Mess, stating that they had not been able to take out weapons from the armoury.

The senior officers at the HQ in Srinagar went into firefighting mode. Information was scanty and incomplete since the sender himself had hardly any time to react. In the afternoon, the final message came from Domel (near Muzaffarabad) informing that the CO had moved towards the



*Brigadier Rajinder Singh, MVC (Posthumous)*



*Wreath Laying at the Statue in Brigadier Rajinder Singh Chowk, Jammu.  
(Photo credit: thenorthlines.com)*



barracks, and the unit HQ had been surrounded. The last line of the message read, "I am going to destroy my (radio) set." That was the last communiqué from the CO of the 4 J&K Infantry.

At Srinagar, the Maharaja summoned his Chief of Staff, Brigadier Rajinder Singh. Brigadier Rajinder Singh's driver was Sepoy Waryam Singh, who happened to be his natural cousin too. Brigadier Rajinder Singh had lost his father very early in life, and had been brought up by Lieutenant Colonel Govind Singh, Waryam's father. On his return from the meeting, the Chief of Staff shared the conversation he had with the Maharaja inside the palace.

Before sending for his Chief of Staff, the Maharaja had summoned Brigadier Faqir Singh, the Commander of Kashmir Brigade. Brigadier Faqir Singh, however, had humbly expressed his inability to handle the crisis and had recommended that the Maharaja task Brigadier Rajinder Singh, who in Brigadier Faqir Singh's view, was the most competent man for the moment. For the Maharaja, such a step would have been difficult to take. The protocol and chain of command demanded that Brigadier Faqir Singh be tasked first.

Possibly to obviate such an issue, the Maharaja received Rajinder Singh in combat uniform, wearing his full battle regalia. After briefing the Chief of Staff about the negotiations that needed to be opened with Delhi, the Maharaja expressed his desire to go to the front to lead his men personally. Rajinder Singh responded by volunteering to go himself, letting the Maharaja tackle the powers at Delhi.

There were not enough troops available at Srinagar at that time. The cantonment mustered up a force of about one hundred soldiers from different units and the officers' training school. The column left Srinagar at 1830 hours and

slowly made its way to Baramulla through heavy, incessant rain, reaching Uri around midnight.

Besides Brigadier Rajinder Singh, there were three more officers-Captains Prithi Singh and Nasib Singh, as well as Lieutenant Khazan Singh. The news of the long convoy carrying marauders and information of loot, rape and plunder had already reached Uri by then. The town was on tenterhooks, and the first thing that the Chief of Staff did was to reassure the locals before organising a blocking position alongside Uri Nala. On 23 October 1947, the column moved at 0800 hours towards Garhi on the Muzaffarabad Road leaving a weak platoon at Uri.

About a km ahead of Hatian Bala, huge flames and billowing dark smoke caught the column's attention. The unfortunate village of Garhi, which lay on either side of the Jhelum River, had been looted and set on fire. That also meant that contact with the enemy was now imminent. Brigadier Rajinder Singh

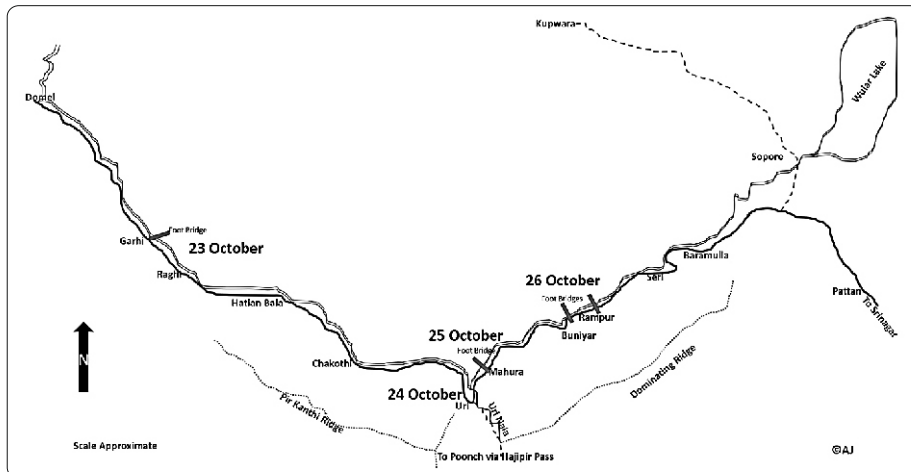
ordered the column to halt and summoned Captain Prithi Singh and Subedar Duni Chand for orders. He wanted to take the enemy by surprise to offset the numerical advantage that the latter enjoyed. It was going to be a battle, as proved later, between 6000 frenzied invaders being led by Pakistan Army command elements and less than 100 Dogra soldiers under their Chief of Staff.

The plan evolved around occupying two localities, one on either side of the road. Captain Prithi Chand was tasked to move ahead to position himself between the river and the road, i.e., towards the right of the road, while Subedar Duni Chand was to occupy a hillock to the left of the road. Both the commanders were to have weak platoons of about 20 men each. Brigadier Rajinder Singh deployed his party on the road, slightly to the rear. Unfortunately, the terrain didn't allow visual contact among the three groups, and only Brigadier Rajinder Singh's



Daughters of Late Brigadier Rajinder Singh





*The delaying actions by Brigadier Rajinder Singh and his team on the Baramulla - Muzaffarabad Road*

group had a radio set. With no visual or radio contact, it would be up to individual platoon commanders to make best use of whatever they had at their disposal.

Subedar Duni Chand was taking a final round when Brigadier Rajinder Singh climbed up the hill to see the locality for himself. As they stood discussing the likely development, they spotted several buses and lorries moving up in a seemingly unending line at a far distance. Soon, the leading buses went out of view because of the intervening curves on the road and thick foliage. The number of buses and lorries must have astonished him, but Brigadier Rajinder Singh stayed calm and having passed his directions to the men on the hillock, he fell back to his position to the rear.

On the other side of the road, in a bold and daring action, Captain Prithi Singh rushed up a dominating hill and let off a barrage of fire as soon as the first few Pakistani vehicles pulled up within range of their weapons. The sudden volley of bullets stunned the enemy. The Captain ordered one section to rush forward and capture the leading truck while the

remainder platoon gave covering fire to the assaulting section. The enemy truck was captured, driven a little, and then its tyres were shot to immobilise it. The vehicle was now stuck and stood in the middle of the road. Captain Prithi Singh's platoon suffered about ten fatalities and two wounded, including the Captain himself. Eventually, the injured were evacuated, but they had done their job. They had halted the Pakistani invasion as the vehicle with burst tyres could not be moved. The road now stood blocked, and the immobilised enemy vehicle column had to clear the block.

After a few minutes, Subedar Duni Chand's men spotted the enemy troops climbing the higher slopes further to their left. Soon, the enemy on the left of the road started bringing down heavy fire on the men who had no protection on the hillock. Despite being heavily outnumbered, the platoon fought on for the better part of the day before the last man and last round was finished. The enemy had been delayed by one full day. The Battle at Garhi finds no mention in most of the historical accounts of that conflict. After a full-day delay at Muzaffarabad, both due to the heroic action by Lieutenant Colonel Narain Singh's group and indulgence in looting and raping, a delay of another day at Garhi was to prove crucial in the overall scheme of things. The battle stands out for the gallant stand taken by a handful of Dogra soldiers against 6000 plus frenzied Kabailies led and directed by Pakistani regulars. With a ratio of 100:1, the Battle of Garhi rightfully deserves a place of pride in the annals of military history.

Close to sunset, the force started pulling back. Brigadier Rajinder Singh took stock of the situation once they reached Uri. He was pleased to find the men and the junior leaders in excellent shape and high morale despite having suffered casualties. Uri was a township that had no defence potential due to its domination by hills around it. After a confirmatory reconnaissance, Rajinder Singh decided to deploy on the home side of a steel bridge that lay towards the East of Uri. Such a decision also meant that Uri had to be abandoned. There was a significant panic among the local residents and refugees who, having seen the State Forces moving ahead to meet the enemy, had initially felt secure. Now that the place had to be evacuated, some chaos ensued.

The bridge, short of Uri, covered a gap that was impossible to cross by any vehicle once the bridge had been blown up. Sepoy Barita Ram, sent from Srinagar to deliver explosives to 4 J&K Infantry for the

demolition of Domel bridge in case of a contingency, had not been able to reach Domel and was now part of Brigadier Rajinder's column. The explosives available with him came in handy as the Chief of Staff ordered his men to prepare the bridge for demolition. Thereafter, the troops sat waiting, allowing civilians to escape via that bridge. The Pakistani irregulars reached Uri late in the evening and started plundering the township.

Sometime during the night, Brigadier Rajinder Singh briefed the Maharaja about the situation from the nearest telephone at Baramulla. After his conversation with the Maharaja, Rajinder Singh knew he had to make do with whatever resources were available with him. Luckily, one platoon of infantry, one section of Medium Machine Guns (MMGs) and one section of 3-inch Mortars arrived as reinforcements under Captain Jwala Singh during the night of 23/24 October. Captain Jwala Singh also brought with him a written order from Maharaja Hari Singh, directing Brigadier Rajinder Singh to hold Uri at all costs, even if it meant fighting to the last man and the last round. The reinforcements were no doubt woefully inadequate, but there was nothing more that could be done than to prepare for a do-and-die battle.

The men worked at night to make their defence as impregnable as possible, and as the stars began to disappear from the morning sky, the position had been well-prepared. The last surviving refugees too crossed the bridge just before first light. Very soon, in the early hours of 24 October 1947, the enemy came hurtling along the road. The demolition was set off, and the bridge was destroyed. That development must have dampened the spirits of the invaders, but their desire to reach Srinagar and lay hands on the Treasury of the Maharaja urged them on. They launched a frontal attack only to be mowed down by

the sweeping fire of the MMGs and mortars.

The enemy resorted to outflanking leaving Brigadier Rajinder Singh with no alternative but to withdraw. Keeping the force engaged frontally, a large portion of the enemy crossed over to the North Bank of the Jhelum River via a footbridge to cross back behind the Uri defences near Mahura via another footbridge. Another enemy column, with a similar aim in view, moved over the hills around the left flank. Rajinder was in a dilemma now. Even if he had stuck to his defences at Uri, as ordered by the Maharaja, he would not have been able to stop the invaders from a free run to Baramulla and later Srinagar. On the other hand, once cut off from the rear, his force stood no chance for too long.

Realising the gravity, Rajinder Singh decided to withdraw to Mahura and fight the next battle there. The first vehicle of the withdrawing column reached Mahura at about 2030 hours on 24 October 1947. Mistaking it for the enemy lorry, the staff at the powerhouse cut off the electric supply and the whole of Srinagar was plunged into darkness. At that moment, Dussehra celebrations were on at Srinagar. Despite the threat building up, the Maharaja didn't want the panic to set in. The customary holding of the Durbar had just got over, and the guests were moving in for dinner when the lights went off. While the generator was started to enable the dinner to be served in the palace, many senior functionaries realised that the enemy had reached Mahura.

The enemy contacted Mahura on the morning of 25 October 1947. When several waves failed to dislodge the determined band of a few brave men, the enemy resorted to outflanking manoeuvres. Brigadier Rajinder Singh

ordered Captains Jwala Singh and Nasib Singh to destroy two footbridges at Rampur and Buniyar. The same was done, but the enemy was all over by then. By midday, the enemy mounted another attack on the Mahura defences, and the little locality held on tenaciously. Ultimately, while over 1000 invaders hammered at the defences, an equal number moved over the hills in an outflanking move towards Baramulla, making the position untenable. By the evening of 25 October 1947, the 'outflanked' problem was staring back at Brigadier Rajinder Singh. Brigadier Rajinder Singh ordered an evacuation and falling back to the next position at Rampur near Buniyar. There were a few hours of daylight left, and he wanted to use the same to site the next delaying position. The move was executed smoothly despite enemy interference.

At daybreak on 26 October 1947, the slopes along the road looked as if infested with tribal raiders. 3-inch mortars and machine guns had a field day, and the invaders bought numerous casualties. Consequently, no assault came in during the day, and the enemy was kept at bay. However, fighting patrols brought in the news about trees being felled to create roadblocks in the rear. Sensing trouble yet again, Brigadier Rajinder Singh ordered his men to prepare for withdrawal with instructions to rush such obstacles and take up a new position at Seri, close to Baramulla.

The force started moving back after midnight. As the convoy moved ahead, the enemy was found holding virtually every metre of the ridge that dominated the road. The column was interfered with continuously, and the men inside the vehicles were getting hit without any break. The column moved





General KM Cariappa presenting the first Maba Vir Chakra to Smt Ram Dei, widow of Brigadier Rajinder Singh at Srinagar.

on, with the leading vehicle banging into the obstructions at the first roadblock. At the second roadblock, while attempting a breakthrough, the driver of the leading vehicle was hit and lost control. The column came to a halt.

The second roadblock was more extensive and was well-covered by fire. Despite the darkness, the enemy was bringing effective fire onto the obstacle. Captain Jwala Singh got the first three vehicles pushed aside and gave orders to shift the loads and rush through. Brigadier Rajinder Singh had been watching the progress when Captain Jwala Singh requested him to get back into the vehicle. "Don't worry; I am all right," was the reply from Rajinder Singh, who told Captain Jwala Singh to hurry up and reach Seri at the earliest. The situation was grim as the enemy was sure to attack by first light. Jwala Singh boarded the first functional vehicle and began leading the vehicles through the roadblock.

As the vehicles crossed the roadblock, Captain Jwala Singh was hit in the foot. His driver too, was shot. But they were able to rush through the obstacle, escorting a

couple of vehicles carrying mortars and MMGs. They did reach the high ground at Seri after rushing a couple of smaller roadblocks enroute. Soon three more vehicles arrived, and no other vehicle was seen approaching after that. Most soldiers inside the vehicles were either dead or were injured.

At the second obstacle at a place called Dewan Mandir, Brigadier Rajinder Singh's driver had also been killed, and Rajinder had taken the wheel. But he too was hit in his leg, rendering him incapable of driving. Captain Khazan Singh and a couple of surviving men pulled him out and started carrying him on the back. The going was very slow, and firing from the hills was taking its toll. Brigadier Rajinder Singh, realising the huge delay that would be incurred while carrying him on foot, forcefully ordered them to leave him and move on. He ordered them to leave him on the side of the road and hand over his pistol to him. In doing so, he was simply making sure that he, indeed, would be the last man with the last round, as desired by his Maharaja. He was then left with his pistol under a culvert, and the rest of the group melted into the broken ground along the river. That was the last that was heard of the brave officer in the early hours of 27 October. The Indian troops started landing at Srinagar airfield a few hours later.



*Major General Goverdhan Singh Jamwal, AVSM (Retd), is the man who saw it all and that too from very close quarters. He holds the distinction of being the first and the last General of the erstwhile J&K State Forces. An authority on the subject, he has many seminars, speeches and much-appreciated interviews to his credit. While in service, he had the privilege of serving as an ADC to the then Sadr-e-Riyasat, Dr Karan Singh, as also as the Military Secretary to the President of India. Post-retirement, he was the President of the Dharmarth and Mata Vaishno Devi Trusts, a member of the J&K Legislative Council and the President of the J&K Ex-Servicemen League.*



**Maj. Gen. Goverdhan Singh Jamwal**



*Maqbool Sherwani*

# MAQBOOL SHERWANI

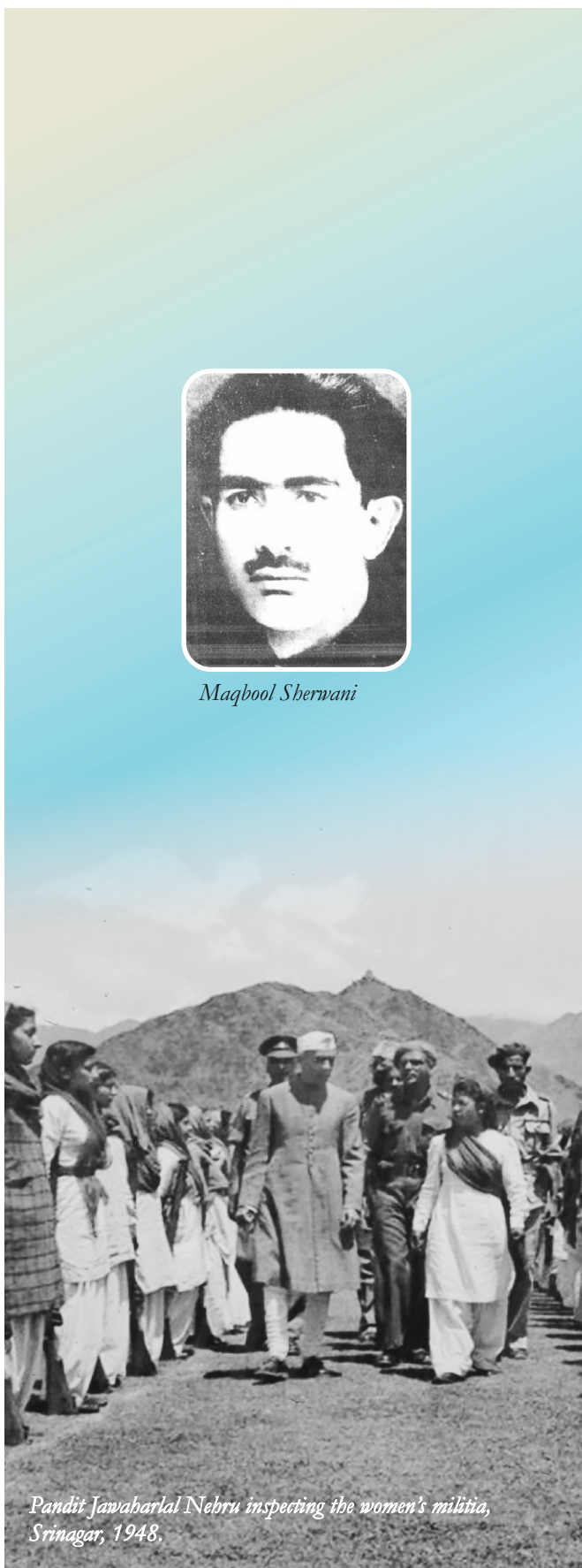
## THE SHER OF BARAMULLA

As the Kabailies took over Muzaffarabad on 21/22 October 1947, many local volunteers joined the State Forces to face the invaders. These volunteers also included a number of Kashmiri women, who formed a 'Women Militia'. Maqbool Sherwani led the volunteers in Baramulla, his valour and example is vividly remembered.

Maqbool Sherwani, a 19 year old youth, influenced the history of the state of Jammu & Kashmir (J&K) in 1947, displaying exemplary courage and presence of mind. His leadership ensured that Pakistan's nefarious designs of capturing Srinagar Airport met with resistance in Baramulla and provided valuable time for the Indian Army who arrived at Srinagar in the nick of time and pushed back the Pakistani invaders.

### **The Partition and Operation Gulmarg**

The Partition of India in 1947 led to the creation of Pakistan as a separate nation for Muslims, resulting in widespread violence and mass migration of people across the newly-drawn borders. In the Kashmir region, the situation was particularly volatile as the princely state had a Muslim majority but was ruled by a Hindu King. Both India and Pakistan laid claim to the region, and the British had shrewdly left it to the ruler to decide which country to join. The Maharaja signed a Standstill Agreement with the two new nations, buying more time to decide his State's fate. The situation was volatile, with two



*Pandit Jawaharlal Nebru inspecting the women's militia, Srinagar, 1948.*





(Left) Hamla Awar Khabardaar: Women's Defence Corps in Kashmir (a 1947 photograph by Ram Chand Mehta)  
 (Right) Child soldiers of National Conference in Kashmir's Lal Chowk in 1947.

Srinagar, with the help of these tribesmen. By 21 October 1947, about 20000 tribesmen crossed the bridges over Rivers Jhelum and Neelum and occupied the first major town of Muzaffarabad. Maharaja Hari Singh, the ruler of the princely state, was ill prepared for the military onslaught and his forces, deployed in penny packets, were over run at many places. The Pakistani raiders called *Kabailies*, ruthlessly committed large scale atrocities to include rape, loot and murder of civilians. Those among the locals who could not recite the “*Kalima*”, were ruthlessly butchered.

political forces at the forefront in Kashmir. The Muslim Conference batted for Pakistan, whereas Sheikh Abdullah's National Conference had broken off from the Muslim Conference and was not inclined to join Pakistan. Interestingly, Maharaja Hari Singh had booked Sheikh Abdullah for sedition in 1946, and Pandit Nehru had to intervene on behalf of the Sheikh.

The Awaam in J&K was aware of the post partition violence engulfing the new nations, and apprehensions of widespread violence took root in J&K. The National Conference and other volunteers joined hands to form a ‘*Salamati Fauj*’, a ‘*Peace Force*’ wanting the well-being of the Awaam.

The Pakistan military was not ready to leave the State's decision in the hands of Maharaja Hari Singh. Masquerading as raids by tribal invaders, the Pakistan Army launched **Operation Gulmarg**, under the leadership of Pakistani Army Officers, for the capture of the Muslim predominant state of J&K. Launched on the night of 21/22 October 1947 under the command of Major General Akbar Khan, **Operation Gulmarg** aimed to capture

### Baramulla's Three Days of Sorrow

The *Kabailies* captured Muzaffarabad and advanced towards Uri, where Brigadier Rajinder Singh of the State Forces faced them. Outnumbered, the State Forces delayed the raiders, but could not hold them at bay. The *Kabailies* reached Baramulla on 24th October. The invaders killed patients at St Joseph's Hospital at Baramulla and burnt down the building of the Hospital. Nuns at the hospital, were mercilessly raped and killed by the Pakistanis. It is often quoted that, out of a total population of 14000 in Baramulla, only 3000 citizens survived the rapacious onslaught on the town – which lasted three days from 24th to the 26th of October. The raiders engaged in plunder, the members of Sikh and Hindu communities being special targets. Their properties were looted, houses were burnt and their women folk were raped. Some elders recall that the Jhelum River was tinged red with the blood of the innocent. The atrocities perpetrated in the town of Baramulla have been recounted by the survivors of the carnage and by Western correspondents.

The fall of Srinagar looked imminent and Maharaja Hari Singh, appealed to India for military assistance to fight the Pakistani invaders. The request was considered by the Indian Defence Committee on 25 October 1947, which at that time was steered by Lord Mountbatten. Events swiftly unfolded, leading to the Accession of the State of J&K to India on 26 October 1947, after the Instrument of Accession was signed.

### Maqbool Sherwani Comes Into Action

Maqbool had joined National Conference in 1939 and in due course of time, began to be recognized as a staunch National Conference activist in Baramulla. Young and enthusiastic Sherwani came into prominence when Mohammad Ali Jinnah came to Kashmir in May 1944.

The rivalry between the Muslim and National Conference came to fore and the National Conference activists disrupted Jinnah's rally. As Sherwani was a staunch supporter of Sheikh Abdullah, he raised the slogan:

*“Sher-i- Kashmir ka kya Irsbad?  
(What does the Lion of Kashmir want?)  
Hindu, Muslim, Sikh Ithaad”.*  
*(The unity of Hindu, Muslim, and Sikh).*

This episode symbolized Sherwani's brave persona as well as ideological opposition to Jinnah. The news of this disruption of the meeting splashed all over India.

As the raiders advanced beyond Muzaffarabad, Sheikh Abdullah called upon the local populace to rise up in the defence of their country. A National Militia was formed and Sherwani, who was described by his colleagues as of a happy-go-lucky nature, played a vibrant role in the National Militia. Among the 22 National Conference volunteers who joined the resistance forces, Sherwani was the most vibrant and led a number of detachments of militiamen who toured different areas instilling confidence and unity among the terror-stricken people of Kashmir. Being an adventurer, he would ride village to village on his motorbike and hold public meetings and campaigns to unify them and collectively take on the raiders, thus, he came to be known as the 'motorcycling militia man'.

Sherwani in fact intercepted the raiders single handed on the road to Srinagar. The Pakistani invaders, were flummoxed to see a lone Kashmiri, standing in their way. The Pakistani invaders, asked Maqbool to guide them to Srinagar. Displaying astute presence of mind, he told the invaders, that the Indian Army was camping outside

Baramulla and that, a move towards Srinagar would require a different route to be adopted. The invaders, after wandering on the wrong path, realised that they had been fooled by Sherwani.

Many say, that had the Pakistani invaders continued to follow the straight road from Baramulla to Srinagar, the outcome of the war, would have been completely different. The raiders returned and hunted for Sherwani, finding him at Sumbal Bandipur, approximately 35 kms from Baramulla. To teach him a lesson for misguiding them and to create horrors in the minds of the people, he was crucified in the central square of Baramulla. Even when the blood was oozing out of the wounds on his body, the tribals wrote kafir on his shirt with his own blood. Sherwani preferred death to the betrayal of his country. The raiders offered to set him free if he would shout the slogan "*Sheikh Abdullah Murdabad*". The raiders insisted that Maqbool shout "*Pakistan Zindabad*", however, Maqbool refused to cow down in front of the barrels of the invaders. 14 bullets were pumped into the captured hero of Baramulla by the raiders and Maqbool's body was left nailed on a wooden plank.

Sherwani's actions gave the Indian Army time to mobilize and fly in reinforcements to the area, while triggering the Kashmiri youth to band together and form the J&K Militia, which also fought the invaders. Today the J&K Militia, is known as the Jammu and Kashmir Light Infantry Regiment (JAK LI). The Indian Army, leveraging the buffer time provided by Sherwani's heroic actions, was able to launch a counter-attack, and after several days of heavy fighting, the tribesmen were forced to retreat.

### Maqbool's Legacy

Maqbool Sherwani's bravery and sacrifice during the 1947-48 operations in the Kashmir region are an inspiration. His actions saved Srinagar from the rape and plunder of the irregular tribesmen. Sherwani's heroism is remembered in many ways, including through a Memorial in Baramulla and a gallantry award in his name. The Balidan Stambh Monument at the JAK LI Regimental Centre bears the name of Maqbool Sherwani. In his memory, the Second Battalion of the JAK LI was named as the "**Sherwani Paltan.**"

The memorial of Janab Maqbool Sherwani, located in Old Baramulla Town, was damaged during the beginning of the Pakistan sponsored insurgency in the valley, during the late 1980s. The Pakistani sponsored terrorists, had set ablaze the memorial in 1988. In a fitting tribute, the JAK LI Regiment repaired the Memorial in April 2021 and the Indian Army held remembrance prayers, for the revered martyr. The JAK LI Regimental Centre has also established a Museum in the name of the Sher of Baramulla, which is frequently visited by the youth of Kashmir.

The valour and heroism exhibited by Janab Maqbool Sherwani, stalled the Pakistani advance towards Srinagar, while permitting the Indian Army to counter attack the Pakistani invaders in 1947-48. With time, his crucifixion passed into popular lore, and gradually became a legend in the valley for his unflinching loyalty to the nation. The tales of heroism and saga, by Janab Maqbool Sherwani, continue to inspire generations of youth in Kashmir.

■ Lt Gen JS Sandhu (Retd) Editor

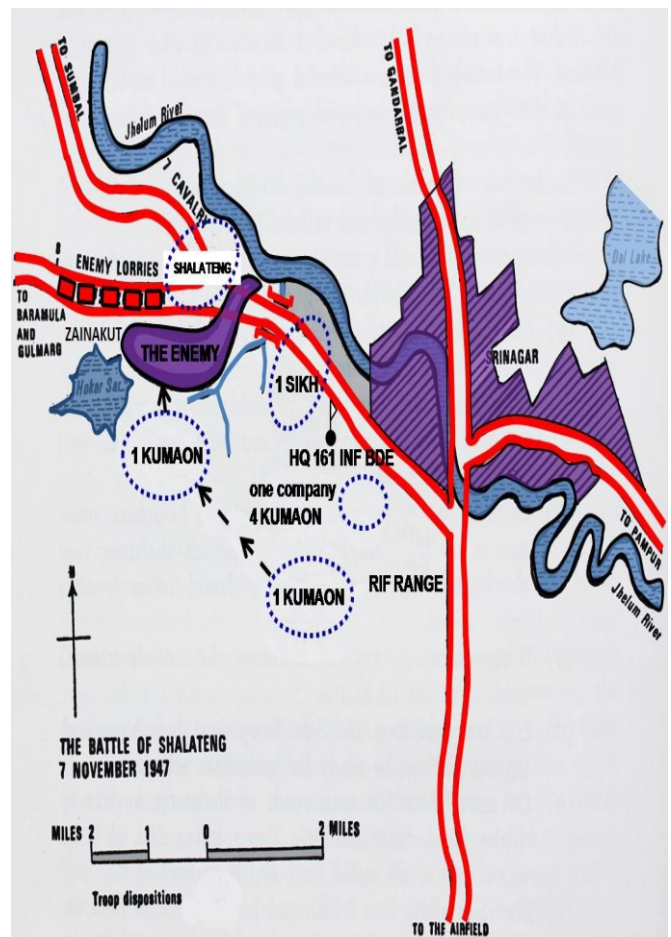


# THE TIDE TURNS AT SHALATENG

On 01 November 2016, having just taken over the Chinar Corps in Srinagar, I prepared for Shri Manohar Parrikar, the then Raksha Mantri's visit to the Badgam Memorial on 03 November, where Major Som Nath Sharma, PVC (posthumous) had been killed in action 69 years earlier. My mind raced back in time to the fast paced actions in the last week of October 1947 and early November 1947, when the Indian Army landed in Srinagar in the nick of time and routed the raiders of Jammu & Kashmir (J&K) in the decisive Battle of Shalateng. Located in the heart of modern day Srinagar, along the banks of River Jhelum, Shalateng was the site of one of the bloodiest battles of the J&K operations in 1947-48.

## The Saviours of Kashmir Arrive

The first troops to land on 27 October 1947 were the Battalion Headquarters (HQ) and two companies of 1 SIKH under Lieutenant Colonel Dewan Ranjit Rai, the Commanding Officer (CO). C Company led by Captain Kamaljit Singh immediately moved in civilian vehicles commandeered by the



local authorities towards Baramulla, whose fate was not very clear. Seeing terror stricken refugees fleeing from Baramulla, the company learnt that Baramulla was already in enemy hands and burning. Kamaljit decided to take up defences near Mile 32-33 on the Srinagar – Baramulla Road. In the meanwhile, D Company 1 SIKH under Major Harwant Singh carried out a flag march through Srinagar city till late that evening, restoring the morale of the people of Srinagar and subduing pro-Pakistan elements. Thereafter, D Company less two platoons (which were left at the airfield for its protection) joined C Company at 0400 hours October 28. The two companies along with the troops of State Forces started preparing their defences. At about 0900 hours, movement of the 'Kabailies' (Pakistani raiders) was noticed on both flanks and exchange of fire took place. Lieutenant Colonel Dewan Ranjit Rai had also reached these companies on the morning of October 28.

The raiders attacked the SIKH position at about 1130 hours, which was repulsed with heavy casualties. The raiders took up positions on both sides of the road. Colonel Rai realised the need for immediate reinforcements, but A and B Companies had not yet reached. There was no radio communications with the airfield. Giving instructions to Major Harwant and Captain Kamaljit to hold the position at all costs, the CO returned to the airfield, where A and B Companies landed at 1400 hours. There were reports of the raiders bypassing the Sikh troops at Mile 32-33, by moving towards Magam on the Gulmarg Road. Rai sent a mobile patrol towards Magam to check. In the meantime, the Pakistanis had intensified their firing on the SIKH position. At 1530 hours, they launched another attack but were beaten back. The raiders regrouped and launched an out flanking move to get behind the Sikhs. At

1700 hours, Colonel Rai decided that the situation was critical and if his C and D Companies were to be kept intact, a withdrawal was essential. Lieutenant Colonel Ranjit Rai died in this action while supervising the withdrawal during the night of October 28 / 29. But 1 SIKH had made the *Kabailies* wary and slowed down their advance. 1 SIKH fell back and took up defences at Shalateng.

The next day, the unit again moved up to take up a position near Patan to further delay the Pakistani forces, reaching Milestone 17 at 0400 hours October 29. A convoy of the raiders reached the position at about 0700 hours and a skirmish ensued at Patan. Two attacks by the raiders were foiled on 29th October. The next two days were quiet with no further attacks. 1 SIKH used the time to improve their defences.

### 161 Brigade Takes Charge

In the meantime, 161 Brigade under Brigadier J C Katoch had started arriving and established its HQ at the

airfield in Srinagar. 1 KUMAON Regiment arrived under Lieutenant Colonel Pritam Singh and took over the duties of protection of the airfield. One company of MAHARs (machine guns) and some mountain guns also arrived. After 30th October, 4 KUMAON and 1 PUNJAB and other supporting troops landed. Some elements of 4 KUMAON under Major Somnath Sharma moved to Badgam, since a threat was learnt to be developing from raiders who had outflanked the Sikh positions on the Baramulla Road. 1 PUNJAB moved to Magam on the Gulmarg Road and took up defences. Brigadier Katoch was wounded on October 31 while visiting 1 SIKH at Patan and Brigadier L P Sen took command of the Brigade on November 2. On November 3, 1 SIKH attacked the raiders facing them at Patan, who were taken by surprise and fled.

The situation around Srinagar was extremely fluid when Brigadier Sen took over. The enemy was assessed to



1 SIKH troops in defensive position near Patan





*(Left) Weapons recovered from the Kabailies. (Right) Kabailies surrender to the Indian troops*

be about 8000 raiders divided in three columns led by Pakistan Army Regulars. The main force of about 5000 was approaching Srinagar along the Baramulla – Patan – Srinagar Road. A Northern column of about 2000 was approaching from the North via Sopore and a Southern column of about 1000 was approaching the airfield from the South via Magam/Badgam. The enemy was supported by machine guns and mortars. The enemy morale was high. They had decimated the State Forces en route and captured and looted one town after another with ease.

Brigadier Sen formed two groups from his units. He formed a Srinagar Defence Force of two battalions, 6 Rajputana Rifles and 4 KUMAON under Colonel Harbakhsh Singh (later Lieutenant General) for the defence of Srinagar and the airfield. With the rest of the Brigade group, he decided to deal with the enemy approaching Srinagar. At Jammu, HQ J&K Force was established under Major General Kalwant Singh to

enemy concentration, two companies of 4 KUMAON under Major Somnath Sharma proceeded to the area. Another patrol of 1 KUMAON passed through the companies of 4 KUMAON, contacted 1 PUNJAB at Magam and returned to the airfield, without having any enemy contact. Major Sharma and his companies established a firm base on a hillock near Badgam, when he was asked to send back one of the companies to the airfield. Later in the day, at about 1500 hours, Somnath's company was engaged by the enemy with mortar and machine-gun fire. Though without properly dug in defences, the company fought a determined battle. The first attack was beaten back but further attacks followed with relentless fury. Major Sharma, who had accompanied the unit in spite of having a hand in plaster, died fighting when a 2 inch mortar shell landed close to him. He was awarded the Param Vir Chakra posthumously.

Another soldier, Sepoy Dewan Singh, who was in charge of a light machine gun, seeing the enemy encircling his platoon, stood up and blazed away with his machine gun at the on-rushing enemy. This stopped the enemy long enough for his platoon to withdraw. Dewan Singh was hit in the shoulder but continued to hold his position to cover the withdrawal of his platoon till he fell to a burst of machine-gun fire. For his outstanding gallantry, he was posthumously awarded the Maha Vir Chakra. The company suffered 20 killed and 26 wounded. The enemy captured Badgam by November 4 and the airfield was now in danger.

Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel, the Home Minister and Sardar Baldev Singh, the Defence Minister flew into Srinagar on 4th November. Brigadier Sen was told that the airfield had to be defended at all costs and

co-ordinate the operations. He arrived in Srinagar on November 5.

The Forces under Brigadier Sen included 1 (Para) KUMAON, 1 (Para) PUNJAB, 1 SIKH, 6 Rajputana Rifles and 4 KUMAON. 6 Rajputana Rifles and 4 KUMAON were deployed for defence of the airfield. In addition, there were 80 machine gunners from 1 MAHAR, four 3.7 - inch howitzers of the Patiala Mountain Battery, a troop (three guns) of 11 Field Regiment and a troop of armoured cars of 7 Light Cavalry which arrived on 5th November.

### Action At Badgam

Badgam was a small village South West of Srinagar a few kilometres from the airfield. On hearing reports of

that he would receive sizeable reinforcements in the next few days. Brigadier Sen decided to redeploy and reorganise his troops for the defence of Srinagar. 1 PUNJAB, initially placed at Magam was withdrawn to Humhoma between Badgam and the airfield after Badgam fell. 1 SIKH was withdrawn from Patan to Shalateng, just 7 kms outside Srinagar on the Baramulla Road. 1 KUMAON was deployed at the Rifle Range. Two armoured cars and a rifle troop of 7 Light Cavalry were despatched to the North to protect the approach from Sopore.

### The Decisive Battle at Shalateng

The enemy closely followed the withdrawing Sikhs and a sizeable force attacked Shalateng on the night of November 5. The enemy attack failed. An aerial reconnaissance on 6th November picked up a heavy concentration of the enemy between Shalateng and Zainakut villages West of the 1 SIKH deployment. A fleet of lorries was seen on the road to Baramulla beyond. Brigadier Sen could either hold the enemy till the reinforcements arrived or he could attack the enemy with what he had and try to put him off balance. He decided to attack.

Brigadier Sen's plan was simple. 1 SIKH was to hold the firm base at Shalateng while 1 KUMAON moved from the Rifle Range and attacked the enemy from a canal bank South West of the Sikhs. One company of 4 KUMAON, deployed at the airfield, secured the forming up place for 1 KUMAON. The armoured cars of 7 Light Cavalry moved along the road from Gandarbhal via Sumbal and Shadipur to the junction of the Bandipur - Srinagar Road to the rear of the enemy. The assault was launched by 1 KUMAON as soon as the armoured cars reached their position. Once the Kumaonis attacked, the Sikhs

also attacked the enemy from the East. Every available artillery gun and mortar supported the Indian attack.

The battle commenced around noon on 7th November and was over by 1700 hours in the evening. Not expecting the Indian Army to attack, the Pakistanis, under the command of Major Khurshid Anwar were taken completely by surprise. The machine gun fire from the armoured cars from the rear was especially unnerving for the enemy. Shot up from all sides and subjected to heavy shelling, they ran helter skelter and fled the battlefield. The Tempests of the Air Force also joined in and strafed the fleeing enemy. The raiders had lost decisively and were in full retreat towards Baramulla. The Sikhs pursued the retreating enemy and Patan was recaptured by 2000 hours the same evening. The enemy left 472 dead on the battlefield and 146 more bodies were counted on the road to Baramulla. The Indian casualties were light.

The Battle of Shalateng was the most decisive battle to counter the Pakistani designs in J&K. It was a classical example of a defender launching a spoiling attack that turned possible defeat or stalemate into victory. It totally changed the tide of battle in the Kashmir Valley and removed the threat to Srinagar. In his book, "**The Story of the Pakistan Army**," Major General Fazal Muqeem Khan writes about the impact of the Battle of Shalateng on the Pakistani Army:

*"The Battle of Shalateng was a severe blow to the morale of the Pakistan Army. The Indian Army's superior firepower and military tactics were a wake-up call for us. We realized that we needed to modernize our military and learn from our mistakes."*



■ Lt Gen JS Sandhu (Retd) Editor



*Indian troops protecting the hapless and displaced avaan*



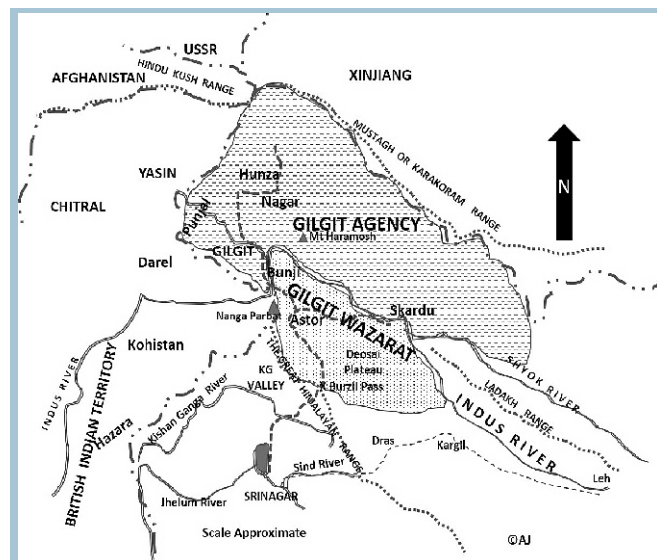
# TREACHERY AND INTRIGUE IN GILGIT

In the 19th and 20th century, the 'Great Game' in the frontier regions of Kashmir and the Hindukush was often discussed as the British worked to prevent Russian ingress Southward. But they also played the Great Game against India, fanning the Muslim nation demand, partitioning India and so on. They orchestrated a coup d'état in Gilgit – Bunji, and facilitated the merger of that area into Pakistan. A 'must know' account.

Ordinarily, Datta Khel, a nondescript town in North Waziristan, would have remained unknown to the outside world for many decades before hitting the news headlines in 2011 when an American drone strike killed a few dozen. However, to those who knew it, an operation named after this town was to change the regime in a remote, lofty region in the Himalayas during the fag end of colonial rule in 1947.

The infamous Great Game, which had started in the 1840s, was the thought process that led to the execution of **Operation Datta Khel** a century later. In simplistic terms, the Great Game was a British plan to counter the expansionist designs of Tsarist Russia, aiming to hit the warm waters of the Persian Gulf and take hold of the oil fields in West Asia. In 1876, General Kaufmann annexed Khokand after a revolt in that chieftom. Russian territory now touched Afghanistan, where the Emir was more inclined towards the Russians than the British. To the East of Afghanistan lay the region loosely referred to as Gilgit-Baltistan.

The British set into motion a deliberate plan to counter the Russians. What were their options in the Gilgit-Baltistan region that was part of the princely State of Jammu & Kashmir (J&K)? One option involved the direct annexation of Chitral, Hunza,



*Gilgit Agency as existing in 1947*



*Major William Brown, the then Commandant Gilgit Scouts (Photo Credit Cover of the book 'The Gilgit Rebellion' by Major William Brown)*

Yasin and Nagar principalities that lay on the periphery of the state and paid tribute to the ruler of J&K. But the option was not favoured due to the fear of an overreaction from the Russians, and more importantly, foreseeable issues involved in military deployment in an area so remote and away from the nearest supply nodes. The only other option envisaged exercising more control on J&K and coaxing Maharaja Ranbir Singh to bring such areas under his control without the British being seen in the show window. That was what they decided to do.

In 1877, they negotiated the establishment of the Gilgit Agency under an Officer on Special Duty based in Gilgit. However, that plan didn't work for multiple reasons, and the agency wound up in July 1880. But the British kept the option open for redeploying it if the need so arose. The Maharaja of J&K State was told to keep the Viceroy updated on frontier matters.

In 1887, some Russians reportedly visited Hunza on a casual trip. That visit was soon followed by a survey of the Hindu Kush by Captain Gromchevsky of the Russian Army the same year. Sir Mortimer Durand, the Indian Foreign Secretary, wrote a strong note, recommending the re-establishment of the Gilgit Agency, as also the recruitment of locals to raise a force for the defence of the State's frontiers in the region. His recommendations were readily accepted by the Government in Delhi.

In a parallel development, Maharaja Duleep Singh, the ruler of Punjab, travelled to Russia to garner the support of the Russian Tsar in 1888. Captain Gromchevsky returned soon, along with an escort of six Cossacks and was received by the Mir of Hunza, Mir Safadr Ali, who happened to be a vassal of the Maharaja. Many inputs about Russian agents' presence in Gilgit and other parts of the

State's territory started doing rounds. Some observers claim that such rumours had been intentionally spread to implicate the Maharaja for his alleged involvement with the Russians. Nevertheless, such developments provided an opportunity to annex the State. A case was prepared to point to the hospitality extended to the Russians in Hunza and subsequent inputs about the arrival of a few Russians in the Kashmir region. The Maharaja was forced to resign, and the power to govern the State moved into the hands of a Council of Regency. The British handpicked the members, and in practical terms, the British became the rulers of the State. The Gilgit Agency was re-established in July 1889.

In 1892, the British enrolled local men to raise a 300 men-strong Gilgit Scouts. As the decades passed, the British insecurities regarding the Russians kept rising. The British began to exert pressure on the new ruler of the State, Maharaja Hari Singh, to ensure that he fell in line despite his open defiance

towards the former. When it appeared that the young ruler might not co-operate, the British engineered an ugly communal situation inside the State in 1931, thereby pushing the Maharaja on the backfoot. Badly cornered by a British-Muslim League plot, the Maharaja handed over the areas to the North of the Indus River to the British on a 60-year-long lease in 1935. The British now had an unhindered run when it came to governing the Gilgit Agency and their concerns about the Russians were addressed.

Lieutenant Colonel Roger Bacon, the Political Agent at Gilgit, had also been entrusted with another crucial but secret task by the British Government. He had established a seismic monitoring station in Gilgit, ostensibly to study the geological activities in the region. However, that facility had actually been put into place to monitor the Russian nuclear programme. In the early 1940s, the Russians, having made a pact with the ruler of Xinjiang, started transporting high-grade



*Gilgit Scouts at the hoisting of Pakistani Flag in Gilgit, 03 November 1947 (photo credit pamirtimes.net)*





*The Gilgit Scouts on parade (photo credit pamirtimes.net)*

Uranium and Beryllium ore from Altai to their research facility at Semipalatinsk. Once it was established beyond doubt that the research facility at Semipalatinsk was actually a nuclear testing facility, the Americans and the British started to get jitters. The so-called Hyde Park Agreement, with the intent to keep the development of atomic weapons only to themselves, was signed between President Roosevelt and Prime Minister Churchill in 1944. As a fallout of this agreement, the seismic monitoring station was set up in Gilgit being the closest the UK or the USA could get to Semipalatinsk. Gilgit, therefore, had become indispensable for the Western allies.

Concurrently, a lot had been happening within the power circles in the British Government. The British, masters of divide-and-rule politics, had pitched the two communities - Hindus and Muslims - against each other at the macro level. Cutting India down to a manageable size was the motive and the British didn't want India to grow too big once they left. During World War II itself, spadework for the execution of the plan started.

The Tucker Committee

recommended pulling out all regular army units from the Gilgit - Baltistan Frontier region. The committee further recommended that local levies and scouts take over such duties and, if need be, raise more of such levies and scouts. By the beginning of 1947, all regular brigades in the frontier region had been disbanded. The British possibly did not want Indian Army troops in that area.

With Indian independence finalised for mid-August 1947, the British had to cut short the long lease and handover Gilgit back to the Maharaja of J&K. A meeting was held between the Political Agent, the Resident of Kashmir and the Maharaja at Srinagar in mid-July 1947,

and the British officers stressed two issues - firstly, the Scouts were 100% Muslims and had no love lost for the Kashmir-based officers; and secondly, the local Mirs, Khans, Ras and such like lords were likely to resent the Kashmiri Hindus taking over their control once again. The Maharaja, in the view of Lieutenant Colonel Bacon, would have to retain at least two British officers-one as the Commandant of the Scouts and another one as his deputy-cum-Assistant Political Agent at Chilas while the Governor could be a Dogra. The only catch was the compulsion that the British officers opting for the jobs would have to resign their commission and be willing to work as the employees of the Maharaja. Seeing merit in the logic put forth, the Maharaja accepted the arrangement and asked the Political Agent to look for such officers. Bacon, in consultation with Cunningham (who was slated to return for his third term as the Governor), had already done the spadework.

On 30 July 1947, the Chief of Staff of the J&K State Forces, Major General HL Scott and Brigadier Ghansar Singh, Governor-designate, arrived to complete the formalities of handing - taking over at Gilgit. Major William Brown, was presented to Major General Scott as one of the two volunteer officers who were willing to resign their British Commissions and work for the State. As per the plan, he had been posted to Gilgit Scouts just before the arrival of the new Governor. Now on his second tenure with Gilgit Scouts, Major Brown swore his allegiance to the Maharaja in front of Major General Scott (*later, he claimed that he had wrapped an Oxford Dictionary instead of a Holy Bible in a piece of cloth while taking the pledge!*). They also discussed the possibility of Captain Joke Mathieson joining Major Brown as his Second-in-Command. Major General Scott assured him that he would put in a word for Captain Mathieson to the Maharaja.

Major Brown called all the native Viceroy Commissioned Officers

(VCOs) and, using his previous acquaintances, started discussing the impending developments. The feeling that Gilgit was best under a British Government was injected, encouraged and fanned during the first meeting itself. He then collaborated with the senior-most VCO and the most influential of all, Subedar Major Babar Khan from Nagar. Interestingly, in his book, Major Brown later admitted that he never had, prior to that day, enjoyed any good relationship with Babar Khan.

After the ceremonies, the new Governor discovered that all controlled articles like salt, kerosene oil, cloth, sugar etc, had been unduly consumed or intentionally mismanaged, and nothing was left in the stores. The British wanted to discredit the State Administration by creating a shortage of essential commodities during the upcoming winters. Moreover, Brigadier Ghansar had no staff to assist him since all the Muslim employees working for the British had opted for services in Pakistan. The State had assumed that with the new Governor taking over, the civil administration of the Gilgit Agency would shift, lock, stock and barrel, to the new dispensation. When that didn't happen, no corrective or contingency plan was put in place.

Operation Gulmarg to annex J&K was planned, and the operational order for the same was signed by the British Commander-in-Chief of Pakistan, General Frank Messervey, as early as 18 August 1947 itself. In Gilgit-Baltistan, a plan devised by Governor Cunningham and Lieutenant Colonel Bacon was to be executed by Major Brown and Captain Mathieson. It was hatched, certainly not without the knowledge of the Government in Britain, to cater for a situation wherein the Hindu Maharaja of the State decided to join India.

Considering the importance of Gilgit, the British decided to plan and execute the rebellion without really depending upon Pakistan or its Army. In his analysis, Major Brown rightly concluded that the key to success or otherwise of his move would be dependent upon the two Armed Forces in the province—the Gilgit Scouts and the 6 J&K Infantry (of the State Forces deployed at places between Bunji and Leh).

As regards the Scouts, Hunza, Punial, Yasin and Kuh Ghizar were completely under Brown's control. That force was worth six platoons and most of the HQ, giving a total strength of about three hundred and fifty rifles. Brown was not so sure about the Nagar and Gilgit Sub-division, with four platoons numbering about two hundred men. He ensured dispositions in a way so that there were platoons of unquestioned loyalty in the Gilgit HQ and Chilas.

6 J&K Infantry was the greatest

factor since the battalion consisted of about five hundred men. The battalion was well-trained, with an excellent war record, and was equipped with all modern weapons such as Bren guns, Sten guns, 3-inch mortars, and grenades: a great contrast to the Scouts. It had 50% Poonchi Muslims, while the balance consisted mainly of raw Sikh recruits and a few Hindus. Brown knew that the Sikhs and the Dogras were implicitly loyal to the Maharaja, and they would oppose a revolt in the Gilgit Province. However, the Muslim soldiers, while on their way to relieve 5 J&K Infantry in the recent past, had reportedly shouted anti-Maharaja slogans. That input gave Brown a lot of confidence.

Major Brown and Captain Jock Mathieson jointly finalised the plan and gave a codename to the Operation—**Datta Khel**. That was also to be the codeword to start the execution. Brown didn't finalise a date for the coup d'etat, as he would call his plan. But since he



*Gilgit Scouts officers and troops (photo credit claudearpi.blogspot.in)*





*Brigadier Ghansara Singh surrendering to Subedar Major Babar Khan at Gilgit, 01 November 1947  
(photo credit reddit.com)*

was placed at Gilgit while Jock was at Chilas, he decided to take it upon himself to watch closely and then spring the operation by communicating the codeword.

The plan had the following contours:

- To begin with, the Governor and his personal staff were to be taken into protective custody;
- Almost simultaneously, all Hindu and Sikh civilians were to be rounded up and placed in a refugee camp under guard;
- All telephone links would be cut, and the civil wireless station was to be brought under control;
- Immediately, a signal was to be sent to the Chief Minister (CM) of the North West Frontier Province (NWFP) in Peshawar to the effect that there had been a revolt in Gilgit in favour of Pakistan, and with the request that he should inform the Pakistan Government;

Further to the South, on the other side of the border, more than 20000 tribesmen from the NWFP had gathered at launch pads under the supervision of CM Sardar Abdul Qayyum Khan and Governor Cunningham of NWFP by mid-October 1947. A 6000 men-strong force invaded the Kashmir Valley on 22 October 1947 and the Maharaja signed the Instrument of Accession for merger of his State into the Union of India on 26 October 1947.

Once the news of the merger reached Gilgit, Major Brown openly instigated the locals - Amirs and commoners alike - against the decision of a Hindu Maharaja to join India. Tempers started to run high and a general sense of restlessness began to prevail in the region. He over-exaggerated the threat from the Chitralis and Swatis and started declaring that the region would soon be embroiled in a war-like situation and that the only way out of the situation was by merging Gilgit-Baltistan with Pakistan, irrespective of the decision of the Maharaja.

Major Brown and his accomplices, however, faced an issue, and that was the fact that the public at large was hesitant to rebel against the State. Despite many fanciful stories weaved by Major Brown in his book, the fact remains that the natives at large, despite their religion, were not hostile to the Governor or the Maharaja. In fact, with the Buddhist DNA and the Shia, as well as Noorbakshi belief, many saw no merit in joining hands with a Sunni -dominated Pakistan against a secular king, Maharaja Hari Singh.

Further, barring Nagar and Hunza, no principality within the

- Major Brown was to then take whatever steps he considered necessary to uphold the new regime. He had already made a blueprint to set up his own administration for the entire Province;
- At Chilas, Captain Jock was to take similar action, and the overall responsibility of dealing with the 6 J&K Infantry also lay upon him. If the Muslims of the battalion turned out to be loyal to the Maharaja, a fighting patrol of three platoons of Scouts would move out from Chilas and liquidate the force. If, on the other hand, the Muslims of the 6 J&K Infantry were prepared to forego their allegiance to the Maharaja, the task of crippling the rest of the Battalion would be given to them.

geographical boundaries of the State (Chitral, as mentioned to the fore, was not part of the State per se, though Mehtar did pay tribute to the Maharaja in return for subsidies) had any issues with the State. The Raja of Punial and the chieftains of Koh Ghizar, Yasin and Ishkoman were supportive of the Dogras. And thanks to rudimentary communications, the region's remoteness, and the pacifist nature of social and religious belief, there had been no incidence of communal conflict or disharmony despite the bloodshed happening in Punjab or in the Jammu region.

The saving grace for the Brown-Mathieson-VCOs gang was the fact that the Gilgit Scouts were largely made up of personnel from Nagar and Hunza and with their own principalities conspiring against the Maharaja, the bulk of the personnel of Gilgit Scouts co-operated in the plan. The icing on the cake was the fact that Subedar Major Babar Khan was the uncle of the Mir of Nagar and was the brother-in-law of the Mir of Hunza. Tribal loyalties and unseen linkages were what Major Brown and his team had relied on. The news of revolt in the Poonch-Mirpur area soon reached Gilgit, and battle-hardened and tough Poonchi Muslim soldiers of 6 J&K Infantry got charged up and were ready to have a go at their own fellow non-Muslim soldiers.

Local non-Muslim shopkeepers and residents called on the Governor and requested him to bring in troops from Bunji since the recent behaviour of the Gilgit Scouts towards the non-Muslims had left nothing to doubt. Though hesitant, on the afternoon of 30 October 1947, Brigadier Ghansar ordered Lieutenant Colonel Abdul Majid Khan, Commanding Officer of 6 J&K Infantry, to rush to Gilgit with all that he had at his disposal. No help, however, arrived over

the next two days, despite a mere separation of 35 miles between Gilgit and Bunji.

Major Brown decided to act. On the intervening night of 31 October and 01 November 1947, about 100 men from the Gilgit Scouts, led by Major Brown with Lieutenant Haider Khan and Subedar Major Babar Khan, laid siege to the house of the Governor. As the first group of men tried to force themselves into the house, Brigadier Ghansar opened fire, followed by his driver and orderly, who kept the Scouts at bay through the night.

Major Brown sent in a team of three non-Muslims to the Governor in the morning to negotiate the surrender. The terms were very clear—either surrender and get evacuated, along with all other non-Muslims, to Bunji or face the death of all non-Muslim civilians in Gilgit. The Governor had little choice, and he accepted the terms and surrendered.

On that very day, a provisional government was formed under Subedar

Rais Khan. Major Brown and other officers of Gilgit Scouts, as well as 6 J&K Infantry, became part of the Government at Gilgit. Major Brown, having accomplished his mission, sent a telegram to the Pakistani government, informing them about Gilgit's merger with Pakistan. On 03 November, the Pakistan flag was hoisted at Gilgit, and a ceremony was held to mark the end of a vicious plot codenamed **Operation Datta Khel**.

While the Brits wanted the world to believe that the rebellion had been organic and they had no role to play, their intrigue was undeniable since there had been no involvement of any Pakistani in the plot. A decoration without citation for Major Brown further strengthened the belief that the British had played dirty and had thrown principles out of the window to merge Gilgit-Baltistan into Pakistan. The operation remains a blot on an otherwise carefully projected virtuous image of the British.



*Colonel Ajay K Raina, SM (Retd), is a Poonchi Dogra whose parents had migrated from Bagh and Pallandri (now in PoJK) during the 1947 crisis. Growing up listening to the stories of those days from his parents and grandparents, he developed a passion for the history of those times leading him to author five books solely on the 1947-48 conflict. He joined the Indian Military Academy, Dehradun and was commissioned into 93 Field Regiment in December 1990. He was awarded Sena Medal (Gallantry) during his tenure in 6 RR (SIKH). He is a graduate of the Long Gunnery Staff Course, Technical Staff Course and is also a PG in Business Administration (2-year regular course) specialising in Finance. An adventure enthusiast, he and his family have been mentioned in the Limca Book of Records 2011. During one such adventure trip, he was bit by a landslide and severely injured. With his medical category permanently downgraded, he took premature retirement in 2017. He is now a successful hospitality professional and consultant. He has authored 22 books.*



**Col Ajay K Raina**



# BRIGADIER MOHAMMED USMAN, MVC

## THE HERO OF NOWSHERA AND JHANGAR

It is said that 'those whom the Gods love, die young'. The brave rarely have long lives, and so it was with Mohammed Usman. When he laid down his life at Jhangar, he was 12 days short of his 36th birthday. A grateful nation awarded him the Maha Vir Chakra, and he was given a State Funeral, a rarity for a military leader. Usman's valour, courage and tenacity, against fearful odds, played a crucial role in 1948, when a new born nation faced its first test of battle. His deeds are now part of the legend of Nowshera and Jhangar.

Born on 15 July 1912 in Bibipur village of Azamgarh district, Uttar Pradesh, Usman showed signs of courage even as a young lad. When he was twelve years old, while passing through a village, he saw several people around a well and learned that a child had fallen in the well. Usman unhesitatingly jumped in, and saved the life of the child.

The competition to become a commissioned officer in the British Indian Army was very tough in the 1920s. Usman decided to try his luck, and applied for Sandhurst. He was selected and in July 1932 sailed for England. On 19 March 1935, he joined the 5th Battalion (King George's Own) 10 Baluch Regiment, also known as Jacob's Rifles. Towards the end of World War II, he was posted to 16/10 Baluch, as second-in-command. The battalion was then in the Arakan, in Burma, and part of 51 Infantry Brigade under 25 Indian Division. As the war came to a close, Usman was promoted to Lieutenant Colonel, and given command of 14/10 Baluch, which was in the same division. In 1946, Usman was posted on staff to 2 Airborne Division. Major General SC Sinha, who was then serving in 3 Parachute Battalion as a Captain, recalls that



Usman's posting came as a surprise to everyone.

In February 1947, the British Government announced that India would become independent by June 1948. Large scale communal violence engulfed the Punjab and North West Frontier Province, and the Army was called in. 2 Airborne Division played a major part in quelling the disturbances, and Usman had his hands full, rushing troops to various places where the situation became critical. Parachute units carried out their assigned tasks in an exemplary manner, and gradually the situation improved. However, the scale and ferocity of the violence convinced Mountbatten that the communal divide was too deep rooted to remain dormant for long, and he took the momentous decision to advance the date of transfer of power to 15 August 1947.

Usman was one of the senior Muslim officers in the Army, and it was expected that he would opt for Pakistan. But he surprised everyone by opting for India. A large number of officers from the Baluch Regiment, to which he belonged, questioned his decision. Both Mohammed Ali Jinnah and Liaquat Ali Khan tried to make him change his mind, with allurements of quick promotions, but Usman stood firm.

After Partition, the two Parachute Brigades were placed under the Joint Boundary Force, under Major General KS Thimayya, who was responsible for the evacuation of refugees, as the Force Commander. Usman was then commanding 77 Parachute Brigade in Amritsar, while 50 Parachute Brigade, under Brigadier YS Paranjpe, was in Gurdaspur. Though a Muslim, Usman was free of religious prejudice, and his impartiality, fairness and secular outlook was a fine example to the troops under his command. In those days, communal

passions had flared up to unprecedented heights.

In October 1947, when the conflict in Kashmir started, 50 Parachute Brigade moved to Jammu with its two battalions, 1 Parachute Punjab (now 1 Para) and 3 Parachute Rajput. Both units had recently shed their Muslim companies, and were deployed on internal security duties.

At this time, the borders of the erstwhile Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) State were manned by elements of the State Forces. There was a brigade each at Mirpur, Jammu and Poonch. The Headquarters (HQ) of the Mirpur Brigade was at Jhangar, with a battalion at Kotli, two companies at Nowshera, and a company at Mirpur. These troops had no artillery, and the battalion had 400 men, while the company had 100. By the beginning of November, Pakistani raiders had invaded the sector in strength. Mirpur, being very close to the border, had been encircled, Jhangar was besieged, and Kotli was threatened. On 7 November, Rajouri was captured by

the raiders, and 30000 Hindus were killed, wounded or abducted. Over 1500 refugees were slaughtered at Chingas. There were fervent appeals to the Defence Minister and to Pandit Jawahar Lal Nehru, to relieve Kotli and Mirpur, and save the lives of the thousands of civilians. Due to paucity of troops, and the operations in progress in Kashmir, little succour could be given, till after the capture of Uri by Indian Forces, on 13 November 1947.

50 Parachute Brigade reached Akhnur on 13 November. Major General Kalwant Singh, GOC J&K Division issued orders for the relief of Nowshera, Jhangar, Mirpur, Kotli and Poonch on 16 November. Brigadier YS Paranjpe, who was commanding 50 Parachute Brigade felt that after establishing a firm base at Jhangar, Mirpur should be relieved first, so that the advance to Kotli was not interfered with by the raiders. However, he was over ruled by Kalwant.

Nowshera was occupied on 18



*Pakistani Militia lined up ready for invasion. (photo credit firstpost.com)*





Brigadier Mohammed Usman, MVC (photo courtesy tfipost.com)

November, after a brief engagement. Paranjpe had just three companies with him, and wanted to wait till the rest of the column fetched up. However, Kalwant was in a tearing hurry to reach Kotli, and ordered him to continue. Paranjpe resumed the advance on 19 November, and occupied Jhangar the same day. Paranjpe set out from Jhangar for Kotli on 20 November, but after about 15 miles, the advance was held up, due to enemy snipers, and road blocks set up by the raiders. Armoured cars and field guns were brought up at some places to clear the blocks, and Kotli was relieved only on 26 November, after negotiating forty seven road blocks. Two companies of demoralised J&K State Forces troops, and about 9000 civilians were evacuated from Kotli.

Regrettably, by this time the fate of Mirpur had been sealed. It could not be relieved, and was torched by the raiders. About 400 soldiers and 10000 refugees managed to escape, and reached Jhangar. The Pathans killed several hundred soldiers and civilians, and captured hundreds of women. The abducted

women were taken away to the Frontier, as war booty. En route, many of them were sold for 150 rupees, after being paraded naked through the streets of Jhelum, by the exultant Pathan tribesmen.

On 27 November, the day after it had been relieved, Kalwant decided that Kotli could not be held, due to the vulnerability of the long line of communication, and ordered the troops to fall back to Jhangar. Soon after, Brigadier Paranjpe was hospitalised, and Usman was ordered to take over command of 50 Parachute Brigade. If Kalwant's decision to rush to Kotli, without securing his open flank by securing Mirpur was

surprising, even stranger was his decision to fall back to Jhangar, immediately after its capture. In the event, Mirpur was lost. And thereby hangs a tale. The wife of one of Maharaja Hari Singh's ADCs lived in Kotli. She was also reportedly one of the Maharaja's many mistresses. It was said that a large treasure, belonging to the State, was kept in Kotli. Kalwant Singh's haste to relieve Kotli was probably attributable to these two factors, rather than tactical reasons. The lady and the treasure were probably saved. However, the lives of several hundred men, and the honour of several thousand women were lost.

After falling back from Kotli, 50 Parachute Brigade occupied Jhangar and Nowshera. 1 Para Punjab was at Jhangar, while the Brigade HQ and the second battalion were at Nowshera. Though the Brigade was holding Nowshera, the enemy was occupying several positions around it, particularly to the North. Usman realised the inherent danger of enemy presence in close vicinity of Nowshera, and made several attempts to remove them, and clear the road towards Chingas. But the troops available to him were inadequate for the task. The situation in Jhangar was also causing concern. Besides 1 Para Punjab, which had just 450 men, the garrison comprised a troop of 7 Cavalry and a platoon of Mahar medium machine gunners.

The enemy could advance to Jhangar from Kotli as well as Mirpur, and the defender had to cover these two approaches. A line of hills ran along the route from Kotli to Jhangar, and continued to Nowshera. The road towards Mirpur was dominated by the Pir Matalsi ridge, and its occupation was essential for the defence of Jhangar. Lieutenant Colonel GIS Kullar, Commanding Officer (CO) 1 Para Punjab, had sited his battalion to defend the two approaches from Mirpur and Kotli, with the Battalion HQ in the middle, at the cross roads.

Since the beginning of December, the enemy had been harassing the garrison at Jhangar with fire from mortars and small arms. On 9 December, the enemy attacked Jhangar, and the attacking troops reached within 50 metres of the defences on Pir Matalsi, before they were beaten back, leaving 40 dead. Apart from lack of troops, the defenders were severely handicapped by lack of intelligence about the enemy. Their main source of information was refugees, who were prone to exaggeration, and could not be relied upon. The local Muslim population had been alienated, due to years of neglect by the Dogra rulers, and their loyalties were subverted by Pakistani propaganda, which made them believe that the raiders would liberate them.

The enemy strength in the area opposite Jhangar at this time was about 1500. A company of 1 Rajput, which had joined the brigade was sent to reinforce Jhangar. The company left Nowshera on the morning of 23 December, escorted by two armoured cars of 7 Cavalry. Four miles outside Nowshera, the column was ambushed, and had to stop. Two armoured cars which had set out from Jhangar, to meet the column half way, and escort them, met the same fate, and were ambushed just a kilometre from the first ambush. To ensure that the columns could neither advance nor retreat, the enemy blew up bridges on both sides of the ambush sites.

At dawn the next day, a day before Christmas, Jhangar was attacked again. The 1 Rajput company had not been able to reinforce 1 Para Punjab. The first objective to be attacked was Pir Matalsi, which was over-run in an hour. The second company guarding the Mirpur approach fell soon afterwards, and Kullar readjusted his defences, by occupying small features around the road junction. After a few hours, the enemy launched another attack, from the North West. With the road to

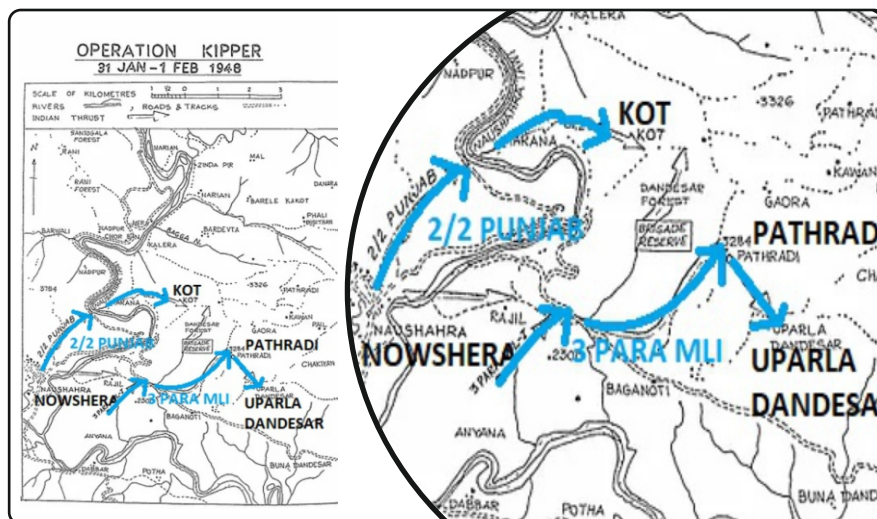
Nowshera blocked, reinforcement was not possible. The weather being bad, even the Air Force could not provide any succour to the beleaguered troops defending Jhangar. Wisely, Kullar decided to withdraw to Nowshera, and sent back all available transport. He did not know that the road was blocked, since wireless communications with Nowshera had been disrupted, after the second assault at 0730 hours.

As soon as Usman came to know of the attack on Jhangar, he sent reinforcements, in spite of the road blocks. He despatched 1 Rajput, less a company, with a section each of mountain artillery and medium machine guns, via a diversion. It was too late, since the defences of Jhangar had been over run, and the enemy was knocking at the gates of Nowshera itself. The relief column came up against a road block after advancing just three kilometres, and had to halt. Attempts by the Rajputs to force their way were foiled by the enemy, who had occupied Kothi Dhar, which overlooked the road blocks. By

the afternoon, troops who had withdrawn from Jhangar reached the road blocks, and fought their way to Nowshera with the help of the relief column. Stragglers continued to stream into Nowshera for the next two or three days.

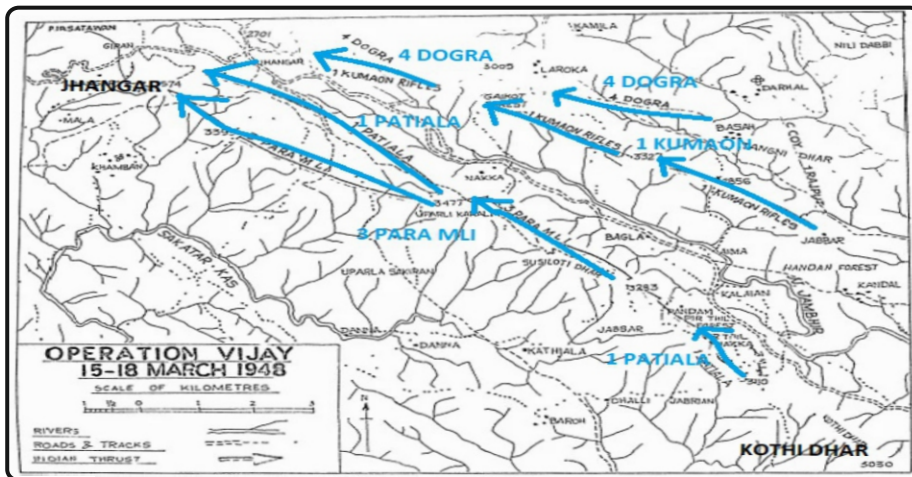
The loss of Jhangar was a big blow to the Indian Army. It was the first major reverse of the operations in Jammu and Kashmir. 1 Para Punjab suffered 101 casualties - 55 killed and 46 wounded. Enemy casualties were estimated to be 1000, but that was little consolation. But the debacle did have a positive result. It brought home to the top leadership the dangers of neglecting the defence of strategic positions. J&K Division was allotted an additional brigade; the administrative set up was improved; steps were taken to establish an intelligence organisation.

The enemy's next objective was Nowshera and they began to encircle the town. By the first week of January, all four roads leading out of Nowshera



Map showing Operation Kipper





Map showing Advance towards Jhangar in March 1948 in Operation Vijay

the enemy, given by men of 1 Para Punjab, which made them appear ten feet tall. Usman, faced a daunting task - he had to frustrate the designs of the enemy and win the confidence of his own troops. He set about it in real earnest, and his forceful personality, good man management, and professional acumen soon changed the situation. He introduced the greeting **'Jai Hind'** in the brigade. 1 Para Punjab was sent to Beripattan, so that the other units in Nowshera were not demoralised by their tall stories. It also did the unit good to be trusted with an independent task, after their defeat at the hands of the enemy.

were dominated by the enemy. 3 Parachute Maratha Light Infantry (Maratha LI) arrived by 3 January. Soon after, Lieutenant Colonel Rawind Singh Grewal, their CO was wounded and had to be evacuated. He was replaced by Lieutenant Colonel Harbans Singh Virk, DSO, who took over on 7 January 1948.

The enemy mounted an assault on Nowshera the same evening, from the South West. However, it was not pressed home, and with the help of artillery and mortars, the defenders were able to fend it off. Two days later, another daylight attack came from the North West. This too was repulsed. Then, a force of about 5000 was launched by the enemy the same afternoon, supported by artillery. After a bitter fight, this enemy attempt was also foiled.

At this time, the situation of 50 Parachute Brigade was precarious, with many places around Nowshera in enemy hands, and the threat of a major assault ever present. After the bitter communal frenzy of Partition, some of the troops were not really sure of the loyalty of a Muslim commander. The situation was not improved by the exaggerated accounts of

for the enemy, in passive defence. He started *'reconnaissance in force'*, which entailed hitting the enemy, whenever he could. In January 1948, Lieutenant General KM Cariappa took over Delhi and East Punjab Command (later Western Command). Soon after taking over, he visited Nowshera where he told Usman that he wanted a present from him. He wanted Usman to capture Kot, which was the highest feature in the range of hills overlooking the Nowshera valley. The enemy was building up for an attack on Nowshera, and it was vital to wrest Kot from him before this happened. Usman assured Cariappa that he would capture the feature in the next few days.

Kot lay about 9 kilometres North East of Nowshera, and overlooked the Nowshera Tawi valley to the North, South and South West for about 10 km. The enemy strength was estimated to be a battalion, of about 500 men, who were mostly deserters from the State Forces and ex-servicemen of the erstwhile Indian Army. They were reported to have two or three 3-inch mortars and one or two medium machine guns, in addition to four light machine guns and about four hundred rifles. The defences at Kot were supported from the enemy position at Pathradi.

The operation for the capture of Kot was code named **'Kipper'**, the name by which Cariappa was affectionately known in the Army. Usman decided to attack both features simultaneously, with a battalion each. 3 Parachute (Maratha LI) was to capture Pathradi and Uparla Dandesar, while 2/2 Punjab, which had been given to him for the operation, was to capture Kot. The attack was supported by a Squadron of 7 Cavalry, a company less a platoon of Mahar machine gunners, and two batteries of field artillery. The Air Force was to provide air support, if required, from their base at Jammu. A deception plan was also made,

to make the enemy believe that an advance to Jhangar was in the offing. Mules and ponies were hired, and it was given out that they would be required to go to Jhangar.

Moving off at last light on 31 January, the troops were near their objectives before first light next morning. 3 Parachute (Maratha LI) assaulting troops rushed forward, and charged the enemy, with the famous war cry of the Marathas 'Bol Shri Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj ki Jai'. There was hand-to-hand fighting and the enemy withdrew, leaving several dead and wounded. After consolidating the defences at Pathradi, a company moved to Uparla Dandesar, which was captured by mid-day.

The attack on Kot was launched at 0630 hours on 1 February 1948. By 0700 hours, it appeared that the feature had been captured, and 2/2 Punjab sent a success signal. However, the defenders soon launched a fierce counter attack, and recaptured the feature. Usman ordered the two companies (brigade reserve) to move up, and after heavy artillery and air bombardment, the feature was in Indian hands at 1010 hours. The enemy losses were 156 dead and 200 wounded. This was a major reverse inflicted on the enemy, and proved costly for him.

On 6 February 1948, one of the most important battles of the J&K operations was fought at Nowshera. The loss of Kot and Pathradi was a big blow to the enemy, and infuriated by the defeat, the enemy put everything he had in the Battle at Nowshera. At that time, there were five battalions, under Usman, namely 3 Para Rajput, 3 Para (Maratha LI), 1 Rajput, 2/2 Punjab and 1 Patiala. In addition, he had a squadron of 7 Cavalry, and a battery each of field and mountain guns.

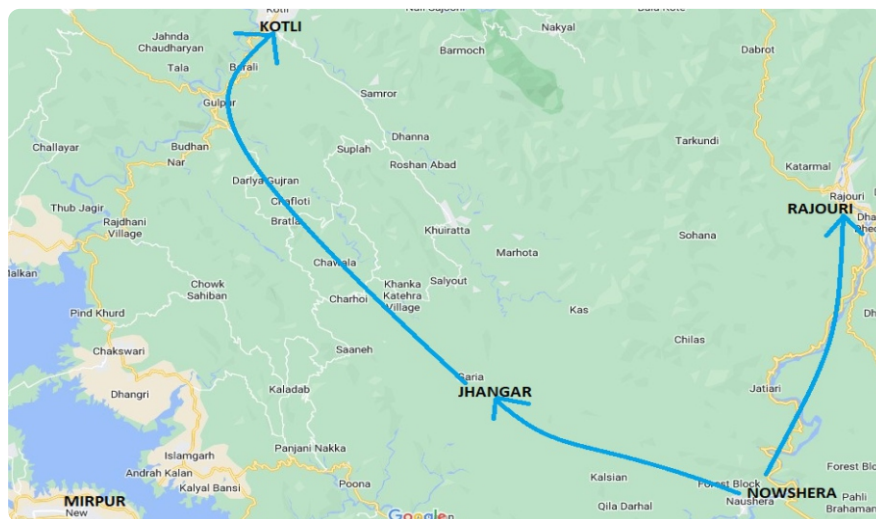
On 6 February, Usman learnt of the impending enemy attack and alerted all the picquets. At 0640 hours, the enemy launched a determined attack, in which

about 11000 troops were used. After mortar bombardment lasting 20 minutes, about 3000 Pathans attacked Tain Dhar, and an equal number charged towards Kot. In addition, about 5000 tribesmen were used to attack the surrounding picquets, such as Kangota and Redian.

Tain Dhar feature, which overlooked Nowshera was the key to the Nowshera valley, and was held by 1 Rajput, under the command of Lieutenant Colonel Guman Singh. Usman, having anticipated the possibility of an attack on Tain Dhar, had catered for reinforcements. The Gujar company of 3 Para Rajput under Major Gurdial Singh, had been pre-positioned half way up the Tain Dhar slopes, with the task of reinforcing the main position on orders from him. Starting at first light, wave after wave of hostiles hurled themselves against defences. The brunt of the attack was borne by piquet number 2, of 1 Rajput, which had 27 men, of whom 24 lost

their lives, or were severely wounded. The three surviving soldiers continued to fight, in hand to hand fighting, till another two were fatally wounded, and there was a lone survivor. It was at this critical moment that reinforcements arrived, and the situation was saved.

While the attacks on Tain Dhar and Kot were in progress, a horde of about 5000 Pathans attacked the positions from the West and South West. The tribesmen were engaged by artillery, mortars and machine guns, all of which combined to bring down accurate fire on the attackers. The attack continued for almost four hours, before the enemy was beaten back, leaving 2000 dead. Own casualties were 33 dead and 102 wounded. The dauntless Rajputs put up a gallant fight, and suffered most of the casualties. It was in this action that Naik Jadunath Singh was awarded PVC posthumously. In addition, the battalion won two MVCs, including that of the company commander, Lieutenant Kishen Singh



*Overview of the area of operations*





Pakistani soldiers in defensive position in 1947 - 48 in J&K (photo credit wikipedia.org)

Rathore, and four VrCs. The artillery too played a decisive role in the action, and Nowshera is often called a '**gunners battle**'. After this failure, the enemy withdrew, and the tide turned. The tribesmen lost the will to fight.

Besides the combatant soldiers the '*Balak Sena*' (Boys Army) played a creditable role in this Battle. The '*Balak Sena*' raised by Usman, comprised six to 12 year old orphaned children of Nowshera. These children were formed into a boys company and acted as messengers, carrying messages, often under fire. After the operation, three of these boys were presented with gold watches by the Prime Minister, for their bravery during the battle.

The Battle of Nowshera brought Usman into the limelight. Overnight, his name was on everyone's lips, and he became a national hero. The Pakistanis announced a prize of Rs 50000 for his head. Soon after the operation, Major General Kalwant Singh, GOC J&K Division said that credit for the success at Nowshera went to Brigadier Mohammed Usman. When Usman came to know of it, he wrote a letter to Kalwant, protesting

that the soldiers who fought so valiantly and laid down their lives deserved the credit, and not he, as the brigade commander.

Recapture of Jhangar was the next task. Initially, several probing actions were carried out, to assess the enemy strength till end of February. 19 Infantry Brigade under Brigadier (later Major General) Yadunath Singh was inducted with 4 Dogra, 1 Rajputana Rifles and 1 Kumaon Rifles. In addition, 2 Jat moved from Beri Pattan to reinforce 50 Parachute Brigade. Major General Kalwant Singh moved his Tactical HQ to Nowshera to coordinate the operations of the two

brigades. On 1 March, 50 Parachute Brigade captured Ambli Dhar without any hitch. 19 Infantry Brigade dislodged the enemy from Kaman Gosha Gala by 05 March, and by 09 March, it was firmly established astride the Handan ridge, after capturing Orange Hill and Kataria Choti. By this time 50 Parachute Brigade had also taken Point 3030, West of Shan Da Mohra. Both brigades were now poised for the final thrust, and on 10 March, Major General Kalwant Singh issued orders for the recapture of Jhangar.

It was then that Usman issued his famous order of the day, quoting the famous lines from Horatius, which read as follows:

*"Comrades of 50 Parachute Brigade Group,  
Time has come when our planning and preparation for the recapture of JHANGAR has to be put to test. It is not an easy task but I am confident of success - because our plan is sound and our preparations have been good. More so, because I have complete confidence in you all to do your best to recapture the ground we lost on 24 December and to retrieve the honour of our arms. The eyes of the World are on us. The hopes and aspirations of our countrymen are based upon our efforts. We must not falter - we must not fail them.*

*To every man upon this Earth  
Death cometh soon or late  
And how can man die better  
Than facing fearful odds  
For the ashes of his fathers  
And the temples of his Gods.*

*So forward friends, fearless we go to JHANGAR. India expects everyone to do his duty."*

The operation to re-capture Jhangar commenced on 14 March. 50 Parachute Brigade advanced to the South of the valley, and 19 Infantry Brigade to the North, with a squadron of 7 Cavalry moving along the road in the middle. 50 Parachute Brigade had under command 3 Para (Maratha LI), 3 Para Rajput, 1 Patiala, and a company of 3/1 Punjab. 19 Infantry Brigade had 1 Rajput less a company, 4 Dogra and 1 Kumaon Rifles. The heavy rain and slush had turned the roads into a quagmire, which made movement difficult and slow. Field artillery could not move, but Kalwant decided to go ahead with the operation. By night fall, 3 Para (Maratha LI), which was in the vanguard reached Kothi Dhar.

Ahead of Kothi Dhar lay the formidable obstacle, of Phir Thal Naka, where the enemy had his main line of defences. Next morning, 3 Para (Maratha LI) commenced their advance at 0830 hours. As soon as the leading company had gone over the top, the enemy suddenly opened fire with automatic weapons from Phir Thal Naka. Among the first casualties was the company commander, Major SP Chopra, who was shot through the head even as he was trying to pass a message to the battalion HQ. Within a few hours, 3 Para (Maratha LI) had suffered 18 casualties, which included two officers killed. Three lives were lost in trying to recover the body of Major Chopra, under heavy enemy fire, but the task was accomplished.

Usman wanted to pull back the unit, and make another attempt after some preparation, including artillery support. But Virk insisted that he would be able to hold on. By the end of the day, some field guns were brought up. The company of 3 Para (Maratha LI) which had been pinned down was extricated after last light. Usman spent the next day preparing for the attack

on Phir Thal Naka. He decided to attack with two battalions, supported by artillery and air. 3 Para (Maratha LI) was to attack from the right, while 1 Patiala was to go in from the left. A company of 3/1 Punjab was to divert the enemy's attention by engaging the feature from the South, while 3 Para Rajput was kept in reserve. The Air Force was requested to soften up the objective before the assault went in, and the light tanks were to operate along the road to Jhangar.

The attack on Phir Thal Naka commenced at 0730 hours on 17 March 1948. Usman had managed to muster considerable amount of artillery - 24 field guns, and the mortars of all three battalions, which had been brigaded. After facing an intense 15 minute barrage, the enemy fled without offering any resistance. The intelligent use of concentrated artillery on a very limited front, with brigaded mortars of the infantry battalions, placed under the CO of the artillery regiment proved to be very effective. Lieutenant Colonel Virk

and Major Chopra were awarded the MVC, while Captain Sucha Singh, who led the final successful assault, was awarded the VrC.

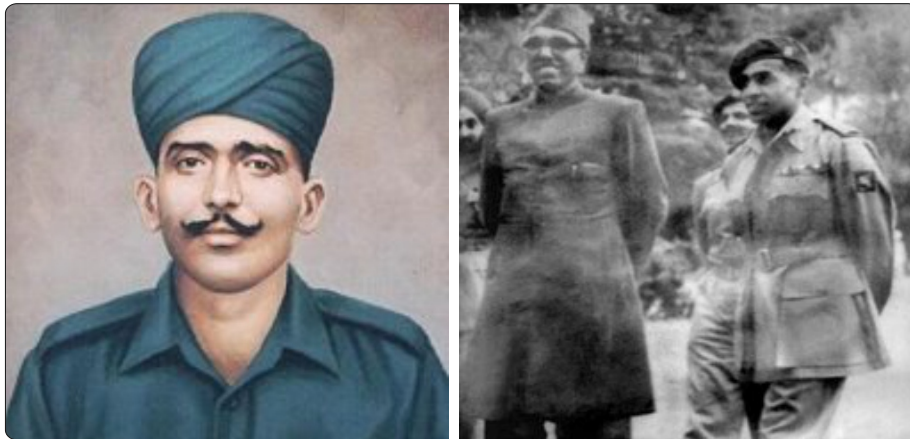
Meanwhile, the advance of 19 Infantry Brigade had also progressed well, and by 17 March, they had cleared Gaikot forest. The way was now clear for the attack on Jhangar, and both brigades prepared for the final dash next day. At 0830 hours on 18 March, 3 Para Rajput took Uparli Karhali, and by 1000 hours, Usman had reached there with his HQ. The brigade now advanced on a two battalion front, with 1 Patiala on the right, and 3 Para (Maratha LI) on the left. At 1300 hours, when 3 Para (Maratha LI) reached Point 3399, word came through that 19 Infantry Brigade had already entered Jhangar.

After the loss of Jhangar in December 1947, Usman had taken a vow, like Rana Pratap, that he would not sleep on a cot, till he had avenged the loss. He had kept his promise since



*Grave of Brigadier Mohammed Usman, MVC at the Batla House Graveyard near Jamia Millia Islamia, Delhi*





*(Left) Naik Jadunath Singh, PVC who was killed in action at Nowshera.  
(Right) Brigadier Usman with Sheikh Abdullah*

then, and slept on the floor, even though it was bitterly cold. Now that he had redeemed his pledge, a cot was borrowed from the village, and Usman slept on it.

After the capture of Jhangar, 50 Parachute Brigade remained to defend the town, while 19 Infantry Brigade was withdrawn to Nowshera, for operations towards Rajouri. The next three months were spent in consolidating the defences, and beating back enemy attacks, which continued. Two major attacks were launched against Jhangar, on 16 April and 10 May 1948. Both were beaten back, with heavy casualties to the enemy.

The enemy had no artillery in the sector, and his small arms fire could reach only the forward troops. In the middle of June, an Indian aircraft flying over the enemy positions to the South of Jhangar saw some gun pits. Another sortie a few days later reported that the guns were now manned. Some air attacks were mounted, but these had limited effect. At the same time, orders were passed that HQ and units in the rear should construct bunkers with proper overhead protection.

Usman died in enemy artillery shelling on 3 July 1948. The circumstances

began, they took shelter under a large overhanging rock in a terraced field, just above the signallers' bunker. With Usman were his artillery battery commander, Major Bhagwan Singh, and the Brigade Intelligence Officer, Captain SC Sinha. After a while, the enemy guns ceased firing. Usman moved to the Brigade Command Post and stopped at the entrance to the command post, to encourage the signallers. Just then, a 25 pounder shell landed on the rock nearby, and the splinters killed him on the spot, at the entrance of the bunker. Two of the signallers working outside, as well as Lieutenant Ram Singh were wounded.

The shelling continued throughout the night, and about 800 shells were dropped on Jhangar. Fortunately, it was not followed by an infantry attack, except for two abortive attempts at infiltration by a company. Besides Brigadier Usman, four men lost their lives during the shelling, while eight were wounded, including three officers. Usman's untimely death cast a gloom on the entire garrison. There was not a single person with dry eyes, and veteran soldiers cried unashamedly, for a man who had endeared himself to them all, in so short a time. Soon afterwards, the Government announced that Usman had been posthumously awarded the MVC, the second highest award for gallantry in India.

When Usman had taken over 50 Parachute Brigade, after the fall of Kotli, its morale was low, and had fallen still further after the loss of Jhangar. In a few months, Usman had managed to motivate the men under his command, and the battles of Nowshera and Phir Thal Naka bear testimony to his leadership. He was a charismatic commander, who was very popular with both officers and men. He had a delightful sense of humour, and could remain cheerful even in the most trying circumstances. His courage and selflessness were obvious; he inspired confidence in his subordinates, and commanded by personal example. While he was quick to reward the deserving, and give credit where due,

of his death were described by Captain SC Sinha (later Major General). Every evening at 1730 hours, Usman held a conference in the sand model room, which was nothing more than a couple of tents rigged together. That day, the time of the conference had been advanced by half an hour, and it finished earlier than usual. At 1745 hours, the enemy started shelling the Brigade HQ. Four 25 pounder shells landed about 500 metres North of the cross roads. These were ranging shots, since the next salvo fell nearer. Usman and a few of his staff officers had been going round the HQ, after the conference ended. When the shelling



(Left) Indian Troops ready for action near Nowshera. (Right) A Stuart Tank of 7 Cavalry. These tanks were part of the advance towards Jhangar in March 1948

he rarely condemned anyone without first giving him a fair hearing. He was a hard task master, who demanded the best from every one, and did not hesitate to take to task those who did not pull their weight. He showed by example that loyalty was a two way street, and always stood up for his subordinates.

Usman had all the qualities of a military leader. A man of simple tastes, he was a teetotaler, and had become a vegetarian. A bachelor, a large part of his salary went to support poor children, and pay for their education. After his death, several letters were received by the Brigade HQ, from such indigent children, who felt that they had become orphans. After the fall of Jhangar, a large number of civilians sought refuge in Nowshera. There was a shortage of food, and Usman ordered that the troops would observe a fast on Tuesdays, so that the saved rations could be given to civilians.

Though a devout Muslim, Usman was a staunch Nationalist, and apparently had no problem in remaining loyal to his religion as well as his country. During the enemy attack on Nowshera, he was told that the raiders were hiding behind a mosque, and our gunners were reluctant to fire at a place of worship. Usman said that

the place was no longer holy, if it was being used in this manner, and ordered that it should be blown up.

Mohammed Usman was the senior most Indian Army officer to have lost his life during the J&K operations, in 1947-48. Even today, he is venerated by the people of Jammu and the surrounding region. Memorials have been built at Nowshera, and at Jhangar, where veterans gather on the anniversary of his

death, to honour his memory. The memorial at Jhangar is built on the same rock, on which the shell which took his life had landed. As he had exhorted his men to do before the Battle of Jhangar, he died, **'for the ashes of his fathers, and the temples of his Gods'**. Can a soldier die better, or a Nation ask for more, of its sons?



*Major General Vinay Kumar Singh (Retd) was commissioned in the Corps of Signals in 1965. An alumnus of Defence Services Staff College, College of Defence Management and National Defence College, he is a qualified telecom engineer. After superannuating in 2002, he has been a prolific writer, biographer and military historian, who has authored nine books dealing with military history and intelligence. As an RTI and social activist, he was closely associated with the anti-corruption movement of India Against Corruption. He has three blogs, [veekay-militaryhistory.blogspot.in](http://veekay-militaryhistory.blogspot.in); [veekaysarticles.blogspot.com](http://veekaysarticles.blogspot.com) and [veekaysnewsletter.blogspot.in](http://veekaysnewsletter.blogspot.in). He lives in Gurgaon and can be reached by email: [vinay4299@gmail.com](mailto:vinay4299@gmail.com).*



**Maj. Gen. Vinay Kumar Singh**



# FIRST BOOTS IN LADAKH

## THE LEHDETT

As winter froze movement across the passes in Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) in December 1947, vast areas across the Great Himalayan Range remained cut-off from India, while remaining accessible to Pakistan. A few bold men took on the challenge of crossing the formidable, snow covered Zojila in February 1948 to reach and save Kargil and Ladakh from falling into Pakistani control. We applaud the valour of these men – the LEHDETT.

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*“That Leh was held, and the enemy deprived of the pleasure of sacking and looting it, was the outcome of a great deed which will find few equals in military history.*

*Brigadier LP Sen, DSO,  
161 Infantry Brigade.*

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As it happens time and again in warfare, a bunch of brave hearts fired with the ideals of honour of their country, devotion to duty and *Izzat* of their battalion, volunteer for missions unmindful of the hazardous odds. So it was that forty soldiers of 2 Dogra Battalion volunteered for a mission over uncharted territory, crossing two Himalayan Passes above 11000 feet high, frequented by snow blizzards, sub-zero temperatures and covered about 315 kms on foot in **NINE** days, without any snow or high altitude clothing!

To better grasp the necessity for such an audacious mission, a brief historical perspective becomes unavoidable. The *de jure* Northern border of Maharaja Ranjit Singh’s kingdom was bound by the *ipso facto* dominions of Gilgit, Baltistan and Ladakh. With the decline and disintegration of the Sikh kingdom, Ranjit Singh’s Dogra satraps carved out Jammu & Kashmir (J&K) inclusive of Ladakh, Baltistan and Gilgit as their hereditary fiefdom, and recognised in time by the Government of India. Because in the “Great Game” diplomacy for Central Asia, the Gilgit and Baltistan regions had acquired a certain strategic mystique, so the British created and stationed a Paramilitary Force, the “**Gilgit Scouts**” of some six hundred locals, commanded by a Major of and accountable to the British Army in India. But in the run up to Independence of the subcontinent,



*Khaltse Bridge Over Indus, 1948*



*Colonel Pritbi Chand, MVC*

the jurisdiction of Gilgit Scouts under Major William Brown was transferred to the Maharaja of J&K, in July 1947.

Now when the birth pangs of the Republic of India and Pakistan conflagrated into the J&K War in October 1947, on devious machinations Major Brown and Gilgit Scouts rose in revolt, hoisted the flag of Pakistan on the Gilgit Agency Headquarters, placed the Governor under arrest and massacred all non-Muslim inhabitants.

Major General KS Thimayya was quick to grasp the strategic advantage accruing to Pakistan, to operate unchallenged along the Gilgit-Skardu-Shyok-Nubra Valley axis to isolate and consolidate their control over the entire Ladakh Province. General Thimayya ordered Major Sher Jung Thapa's Company ex 6 J&K Rifles located at Leh to Skardu to forestall Pakistan's entry both to the Shyok Valley and to the Leh region. Thapa marched off from Leh along with 75 soldiers on 23 November and reached Skardu on 03 December 1947 covering 138 km and held on at Skardu literally till the last man last round till August 1948.

In 1947, route connectivity between Srinagar and Leh was confined to one fair-weather, unpaved road up to Sonamarg and a pony track cum footpath beyond over Zoji La (11575 feet), Kargil, Fotu La (13478 feet) and onto Leh. Today this tarmac stretch of NH1D is sign posted as 425 km but making concessions for gradients engineered to suit motorised, wheeled transport, it would be a judicious assumption that the foot-distance in 1948 may have been around 300 km. All through winters, Zoji La usually had 20 to 30 feet deep snow accumulation and the entire segment between Baltal and Dras was prone to frequent and lethal avalanches. Furthermore, there was absolutely no availability of food, fuel and fodder

for men and animals, anywhere along this axis.

Fully cognisant of these irreconcilable facts, both Lieutenant General KM Cariappa and Major General KS Thimayya were of the unanimous opinion that *"...the fall of Leh will be a strategic blow to India. It has to be saved at all cost..."* Brigadier LP Sen, Commander 161 Infantry Brigade was directed that the vacuum of military presence in Leh had to be restored and forthwith. Brigadier Sen happened to be in the 2 Dogra Officers Mess and while thinking aloud his options, Lieutenant Colonel GG Bewoor (another future COASI), stated that his Battalion had close to 80 soldiers belonging to Lahaul and Spiti valleys who may be best suited to take up this gauntlet.

The dice was cast and Major Prithi Chand and his cousin Captain Khushal Chand, both from Patseo village in the shadow of Baralacha Pass (16700 feet) on the boundary of Lahaul and Ladakh districts were asked about the feasibility

of reaching Leh. Their prompt response was in the affirmative. With this reassurance, from among the volunteers, 40 medically fit soldiers, two specially trained medical orderlies, three wireless operators, Subedar Bhim Chand (maternal uncle of the two cousins!) together made up one slightly bloated platoon, since memorialised as **"The LEHDETT"**.

Besides his personal weapon and a bandolier of 50 bullets, each soldier was given one extra rifle for a later, specific role in Ladakh. The platoon was provisioned with two months rations (to be carried on locally procured ponies) in the hope that by then replenishments to Leh through air-drops would materialise. So on 16 February 1948 the **LEHDETT** set out in unit vehicles to Sonamarg, saddled loads astride ponies on 17th and marched for Baltal on the long haul to Leh. As the pony owners sensed the ultimate destination, the entire lot vanished at night.



*Thakur Sabib's house in Patseo, Himachal Pradesh in early 70s*





*Lt Gen Ranbir Singh, Army Commander Northern Command paying respects at the Colonel Khushal Chand, MVC Memorial in 2019*

On 18 February, while Prithi Chand confabulated with Colonel Bewoor over wireless, Khushal Chand with ten soldiers went up the right spur overlooking the Zoji La saddle. Spending the better part of the day, they confirmed heavy deposits of snow not only on the Pass but also on the two shoulders of Zoji La. Even more worrisome was the frequency of avalanches from mid-morning till mid-evening. Prithi Chand in the meanwhile was ordered to abandon all provisions including the extra rifles and proceed with personal weapons and on “survival” rations up to Kargil where replenishments from the J&K State Forces supply dump would be made available.

Having experienced winters in Lahaul and Spiti, the **LEHDETT** collectively decided that Zoji La would be safest to cross at the dead of night. Using empty cooking vessels, they created drum-beat vibrations continuously over the next three days to induce snow avalanches, paving a safer passage across the Pass. Accordingly, on night 24/25 February, Zoji La was successfully crossed despite a blizzard, without any loss of life or snow-injury. This was a Herculean

achievement as they had none of the specialised snow clothing and sophisticated accessories, whatsoever and in Brigadier Sen’s words *“It called for unbound courage, determination and stamina...”!* They rested at Kargil on 02 March, possibly engaged ponies and porters, collected two hundred rifles from the J&K Forces armoury, food provisions and set out for Leh, covering the 249 kms to a rousing welcome from the locals by sundown on 08 March 1948!

These doughty soldiers knew that their mission was far from complete. They amalgamated the 25 soldiers left behind by Sher Jung Thapa, persuaded

another two hundred able bodied Leh residents to undergo training in the use of rifles and by mid-April, created the **“Leh Militia”**. Simultaneously, the two officers launched a brilliant initiative to enthruse the locals to clear the broad, level patch of ground between Leh town and River Indus of all boulders. Twenty civilians under Sonam Norbu, who was the head of Maharaja Hari Singh’s PWD Department, set about the task along with many other local volunteers. He had a Diploma in Engineering from London and was the Chief Architect-Supervisor-Creator of the Leh Advance Landing Ground!

By end April 1948, Major Prithi Chand proudly reported to Major General KS Thimayya, DSO over wireless that Leh was ready to receive replenishments by air-drops. Little did he know that General Thimayya would in fact land at that very spot in a Dakota, flown by Air Commodore Mehar Singh, DSO on 24 May 1948, creating an enviable landmark in the World of Aviation history!

Fortuitously, Pakistan remained obsessed with the capture of Skardu where Sher Jung Thapa rebuffed all attempts. In May 1948, the enemy diverted a sizeable force to capture Kargil and the Zoji La ridge line, thus bolting all doors for Indian reinforcements to Ladakh. Learning of the Pakistani presence at Kargil, Prithi Chand despatched Khushal Chand with few soldiers to defend the only bridge over the Indus River at Khaltse, the gateway to Leh. The Pakistanis showed up on 22 May and Khushal Chand finding himself hopelessly outnumbered, set ablaze the centuries old wooden bridge and gained valuable time.

From 28 May onwards, Air Commodore Mehar Singh led Dakota sorties to fly in one company of 2/4 GR together with supporting weapons, adequate ammunition and logistical wherewithal, the first wholesome military advantage accruing from **LEHDETT’s** three month long singular stand in Ladakh.

Meanwhile, Subedar Bhim Chand with 80 armed militia soldiers checkmated and inflicted heavy casualties on enemy intruders (estimated at 900) in the Shyok and Nubra valleys, in two nail biting actions. He was awarded the VrC and Bar, while Prithi Chand and Khushal Chand were decorated with the MVC. While Khushal Chand was engaged in dousing planks of the bridge with kerosene and setting it afire, Naik Bir Singh kept the enemy at bay, got fatally wounded and was awarded a VrC (Posthumous). May be the moment of honour best belonged to Sepoy Togbe, the first **Leh Militia** volunteer who showed boundless courage in the Shyok Valley encounters and was awarded a VrC!

Major General KS Thimayya, General Officer Commanding Srinagar Division paid lavish tribute to **“The LEHDETT, One Force too Many”** and placed on record that *“Their deeds and acts of gallantry against very superior forces in the Ladakh valley will go down in the annals of the Indian Army as one of the greatest feats.”* Let us stand up in salute to the **LEHDETT’s** spirit of devotion to duty and the unflinching vision of field commanders.

### Reminiscences Thereafter

In the normal course, Prithi Chand and Khushal Chand were promoted Lieutenant Colonels; Prithi Chand assumed command of 3/11 GR and Khushal Chand took over 9 Dogra. Prithi Chand and Bhim Chand lived to a ripe old age but sadly Khushal Chand perished in an air crash aged 50, serving with the UN Mission in Indo-China.

On a few days leave in 1960, I accompanied my father to Lieutenant General Kalwant Singh's residence in Chandigarh – he had been the Colonel of the Dogra Regiment. During our conversation, General Kalwant mentioned

that Colonel Philips was the last British Commanding Officer of 2 Dogra who handed over command to his 2iC in December 1947 in the Valley; Major G G Bewoor was a Company Commander then. On a month's annual leave in June 1964, my wife and I had set out on a trek from Manali to Baralacha La (16700 feet) and one of our night halts was at Village Patseo about 20 km short of Baralacha. Per chance we struck conversation with the hereditary Thakur Sahib who invited us to his home. And displayed in his humble dwelling, no less than a Hall of Fame, were enlarged photo portraits of 2 Maha Vir Chakra awardees (Prithi Chand & Khushal Chand) and 1 VrC and Bar (Bhim Chand) veterans of 2 Dogra, his nephews! A few years later in 1983, I was privileged to welcome 2 Dogra in 112 Mountain Brigade in North Sikkim.

When I first published this article in The Sunday Tribune Magazine (SPECTRUM) on 17 February 2019, I had a pleasant surprise call from Mr Ashok Thakur (a retired IAS officer), the

son of Colonel Khushal Chand! I was happy beyond words to learn that in 2012, a Memorial Chorten had been constructed near the Khaltse Bridge by the family, (the site of Khushal Chand's MVC action) and had it duly consecrated in a private ceremony by His Holiness The Dalai Lama. Mr. Ashok Thakur, the proud son of a valiant decorated father, sent me this email in the last week of April 2019;

*“We had a function on the 22nd this month at Khaltse Ladakh where our family and villagers of Khaltse had built a Chorten in 2012 in memory of the contributions of our late father Colonel Khushal Chand MVC. The Chorten had been inaugurated then by HH Dalai Lama.*

*This time more than 300 ex-servicemen from all over Ladakh with their families were present at the event which was presided over by the Army Commander (NC) General Ranbir Singh.*

*We also had a ceremony at the Hall of Fame in Leh where we handed over our*



Prithi Chand (to the left) with Khushal Chand (to the right)





HH The Dalai Lama at the Consecration of the Chorten made in honour of Colonel Khushal Chand, MVC at Khaltse in August 2012. Mrs Sonam Youngzintse, widow of Colonel Khushal Chand is in white shawl to the right

*father's MVC and the service medals to the Army Commander for the Hall of Fame where it is displayed prominently today. We also handed over the sheep skin dress and boots which Major Khushal Chand had worn while crossing the Zojila pass in the dead of winter in February 1948 which is also now on display at the Hall of Fame.*

*Since this is a very special occasion for our family I feel that I must share it with you as well."*

I requested Mr Ashok Thakur to elucidate concerning the idea of constructing the Memorial at the very site of the battle, he was gracious to state the following;

A Chorten (*stupa*) made in honour of Late Colonel Thakur Khushal Chand, MVC (1919-1957) by his family members was consecrated by HH the Dalai Lama and HH Thri Galden Sres Rimpoche on 11th and 12th August 2012 amidst much pride and enthusiasm by the people of Ladakh. The ornate Chorten, built next to the bridge which Major Khushal Chand destroyed in 1948, stands today as a symbol of defiance and courage by the people of Ladakh.

The Consecration Ceremony was

very well attended by the people from all over Ladakh especially from villages around Khaltse who turned up in large numbers in their colourful traditional attire. Togden Rimpoche, Head Lama of the Lamayuru monastery and the lamas of Rizong and Samtaling conducted puja. Apart from the locals including Ex Servicemen attending the function, some of the Colonel's old colleagues like Major General K.S. Kohli (Retd) of 9 Dogra attended the function. **The presence of the 78 years' old orderly of Colonel Khushal Chand was another highlight of the occasion.** Brigadier JS Verma, Colonel of the Dogra

Regiment also participated and so did Colonel Mukherjee, Commander Tiger Brigade, officers and jawans from the Ladakh Scouts, Dogras, 9 Garhwal Rifles and 13 Kumaon Regiment posted in Ladakh. Lieutenant General Bakshi, the Corps Commander at Leh was extremely helpful in providing all logistic support. **"Mrs Sonam Youngzintse, the 92 years old widow of Late Colonel Khushal Chand, travelled all the way from Manali and added special dignity and emotion to the event."**

The Chorten stands today as a sentinel at the crucial junction of Ladakh, Kargil and Da Hanu symbolizing courage, determination and quiet confidence of the peace loving people of Ladakh. Had it not been for the hardships, sacrifice and courage shown by the **valiant 40** of 2 Dogra and the response they received from the people of Ladakh, perhaps the political boundaries of the country would have looked different today.

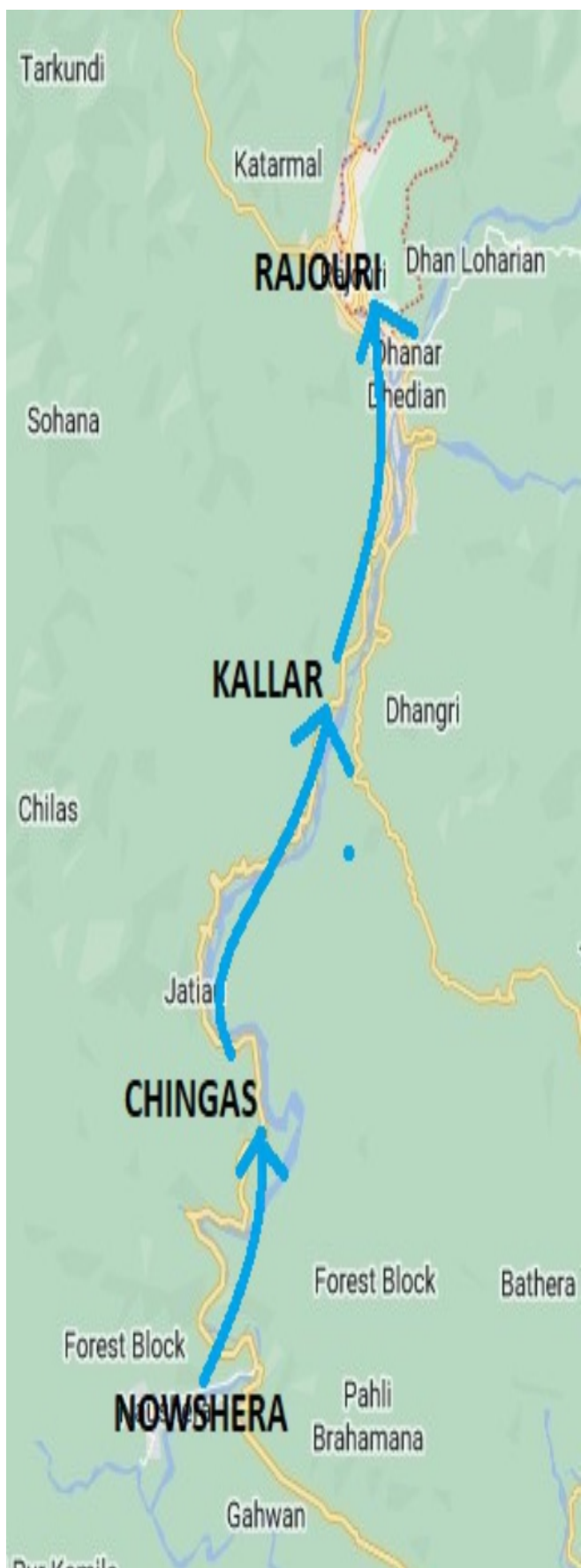
*(This article was first published in The Tribune on 17 February 2019. The article has been reproduced herein with their consent, and has been updated and suitably modified)*

*Lt Gen Baljit Singh, AVSM, VSM (Retd) was commissioned into the Regiment of Artillery in 1956.*

*He superannuated from service in 1992 after a distinguished career spanning 36 years. He was invited to the Board of Trustees of World Wildlife India in 1990 and served two terms therein.*



**Lt Gen Baljit Singh**



# RACE TO RAJOURI

## APRIL 1948

After stabilizing the Srinagar and Kashmir Valley area, the Indian Forces expanded their operations beyond the Kashmir Valley. The Nowshera – Rajouri – Poonch area was a vital region to the West of the Pir Panjal Range. Many important battles and actions were fought in this region, as the Indian troops pushed back the Pakistani Forces.

### Run up to the Battle

While the decisive battle for Srinagar was being fought in the Valley, the situation in the Jammu Region was fast deteriorating. The Pakistani aggression in this area started on October 15, 1947. The raiders were mostly local Muslims from across the border reinforced by Muslim deserters of the State Forces and supported and led by Pakistani regulars. They were well backed from across the borders by Pakistan Army with supplies, arms, ammunition and fire support. The State Forces in the area were stationed in the towns of Mirpur, Kotli, Poonch, Jhangar, Nowshera, Bhimbergali, Rajouri and Beri Pattan. The raiders succeeded in capturing large areas close to the border and were besieging the towns with overwhelming forces. Thousands of refugees had taken shelter in these towns. Poonch alone had 40000 refugees. Major General Kalwant Singh, Commander Jammu and Kashmir Division, had moved his Headquarters (HQ) to Jammu. With the battle in the valley under control, he now concentrated on relieving these towns and saving the refugees. His plan visualized employment of two





*Lt Col Zorawar Singh, MC, Commandant CIH issuing orders on 13 April 1948  
(photo credit bharatrankshak.com)*

columns as follows:

- One column under 161 Infantry Brigade would move South from Uri through the Hajipir Pass and relieve Poonch.
- The other column of 50 Parachute Brigade would move to Kotli by way of Akhnur, Beri Pattan, Nowshera and Jhangar and then move to Mirpur. 20 November 1947 was the date planned for relief of Mirpur.

The 50 Parachute Brigade column started from Jammu on 16 November. On reaching Beri Pattan, it found its path blocked. The enemy had burnt the ferry. It took 24 hours to build a temporary causeway. No serious opposition was encountered up to Jhangar. But progress was slow due to numerous roadblocks of felled trees, boulders, mines and demolished causeways. Jhangar was relieved on 20 November. At Jhangar, two companies of 3/1 Punjab joined the brigade. These were a Sikh and a Rajput company of the battalion which had been allotted to Pakistan and had managed to escape. The Mirpur garrison was able to

fight their way out in end November. The enemy attacked Jhangar on December 23-24. A force of about 6000 attacked Jhangar while another force of 3000 raiders cut off the route from Nowshera to Jhangar. As reinforcements failed to reach Jhangar, it fell into enemy hands.

Lieutenant General K M Cariappa took over command of Western Command on 20 January 1948. 50 Parachute Brigade was located at Nowshera. During his visit to Nowshera at the end of January, General Cariappa directed Brigadier Usman, Commander 50 Parachute Brigade, to capture Kot which lay about 8 kms West of Nowshera. It was an

important feature and dominated the Kot - Tawi valley. The enemy comprised about 500, mainly deserters of State Forces, supported by 3" mortar and medium machine guns. The position was attacked by two battalions and captured. The enemy suffered about 150 killed and 200 wounded. The success at Kot raised the morale of the Indian Army. The enemy reacted by mounting a major attack on Nowshera on 06 February 1948. 11000 to 15000 troops were used in this determined attack. They over ran Indian positions Southwest of Nowshera. Tain Dhar, a dominating hill feature held by a company of RAJPUTs came under determined attack and almost every jawan was killed. Fortunately, reinforcements in the form of another company of RAJPUTs reached the feature in time and the enemy was pushed back. Lieutenant Kishen Singh Rathore, who led the reinforcing company was awarded the Mahavir Chakra. Naik Jadunath Singh of the company was posthumously awarded the Param Vir Chakra. Artillery and Air Force also supported the Indian infantry. The battle raged the whole day. The Indian Forces beat back waves of attacks and held firm. Unable to capture Nowshera, the enemy retreated. The enemy suffered over 2000 killed. The successful defence of Nowshera turned the tide of battle.

The Indian Army now launched Operation Vijay for capture of Jhangar. 19 Infantry Brigade under Brigadier Yadunath Singh joined 50 Parachute Brigade at Nowshera. To direct the operations, General Kalwant Singh moved his Tactical HQ to Nowshera and General Cariappa moved to Jammu. After a number of determined assaults on the various features enroute and around Jhangar, the town was finally captured on 18 March 1948. 50 Parachute Brigade was left to hold on to Jhangar and 19 Infantry Brigade returned to Nowshera. The enemy kept shelling Jhangar.

General Cariappa now turned his attention to Rajouri. Non-Muslims escaping from here had brought tales of inhuman atrocities. The town of Rajouri lay 48 kms North of Nowshera. A fair-weather road linking the two towns followed along the valley of the Tawi River and passed through thickly wooded hills. It was a single lane road in a bad state. Many of the hills were well defended.

### Plan for Rajouri

As per Major General Kalwant Singh's plan for capture of Rajouri, 19 Infantry Brigade was to advance from Nowshera to Rajouri. The brigade was to commence advance on 08 April 1948 with Central India Horse (CIH) less one squadron, 4 DOGRA, 2 JAT, 2 RAJPUTANA RIFLES, one field and one mountain battery and 37 Assault Field Company, Engineers. 50 Parachute Brigade and 80 Infantry Brigade were to carry out diversionary attacks to confuse the enemy about the actual intentions of the Indian Army.

The enemy was holding a number of positions on the 48 km route of advance. The first major position enroute was at Barwali Ridge, a ridge about 11 kms North of Nowshera held by Pakistani Regulars and supported by 3" mortars and medium machine guns. To delay the Indian Forces, the enemy had created a large number of landslides, blown up culverts and minor bridges and established a number of road blocks using felled trees, mines and booby traps.

### The Advance

The advance commenced at dawn on 08 April. As the advancing troops reached the area of Nadpur Fort, the enemy brought down heavy 3" mortar fire. A mortar bomb landed in the engineer section of the van guard killing two jawans

and wounding two sappers including 2nd Lieutenant Rama Raghoba Rane. The officer's injury was not very serious and he refused to be evacuated. The advance was held up by mines and a road block of five big pine trees which was covered by machine gun fire. Though wounded, Lieutenant Rane started clearing the mines and the road block without waiting for reinforcements. The Barwali Ridge was soon contacted and attacked by 4 DOGRA supported by artillery and tank fire. The crews of the Stuart Tanks of CIH fired 2000 rounds of 37mm ammunition and several thousand rounds of 30 calibre, but thanks to the efficient training of the regiment, the skilled maintenance of the equipment, and the high quality of the tanks themselves not a single weapon failed to fire at any time.

Despite determined resistance from the enemy, the Dogras succeeded in capturing the ridge by 1600 hours. The engineers immediately began to clear a land slide at the foot of the ridge. The enemy put in a determined counter

attack and recaptured a portion of the ridge. The sappers had to withdraw due to the volume of enemy fire. The enemy was again evicted in a night attack and the advance resumed next morning.

Another road block was soon encountered. The engineer platoon under Lieutenant Rane started clearing the landslide at dawn. To be protected from the enemy fire from adjoining hills, Rane took a tank close to the block and crawling under the tank, removed the mines and blasted the road block. He succeeded in removing the road block by 1000 hours on 09 April. The advance was now conducted on a broad front with the infantry moving through the hills on both sides of the road and the tanks moving along the main axis. The progress was slow as roadblocks had been established at almost every km. Each road block was covered by enemy fire. But Rane and his men of the engineer platoon kept clearing the road blocks with total disregard for their personal safety.



*Chingas Serai, on the road between Nowshera and Rajouri (photo credit jammutoorism.gov.in)*





*Dhanidhar Fort, Rajouri (photo credit thepirpanjal.com)*

Chingas, an important enemy base about half way between Nowshera and Rajouri was expected to be held in strength. The defences were based on hills surrounding the village. In the morning of 10 April, Lieutenant Colonel Zorawar Singh, MC, Commandant CIH, decided to exploit the river and personally reconnoitred the watercourse, wading many times across the three to four feet deep, icy cold, boulder-strewn, swift flowing water, until he had located suitable crossing places for the tanks. By 1000 hours, 'A' Squadron tanks, after crossing the river twice, had outflanked Chingas to the East and with their support the engineers had succeeded in opening the road through to Chingas for light vehicles. The enemy put up light resistance and the hills around Chingas were captured soon. The road was made fit for movement of the guns and other stores by 37 Assault Field Company by 1100 hours on 11 April 48.

Brigadier Yadunath Singh, the Brigade Commander held a conference at Chingas to chalk out the future course of action. There were alarming reports of

massacres from Rajouri. The obstacles on the road ahead were reported to be even more formidable. The Commander surmised that the Rajouri garrison would be reinforced by the enemy thus making its capture difficult. Speed of advance was thus of utmost importance and a bold plan was adopted. A task force was formed which was to be self-contained for the next forty-eight hours. The force, under the direct command of Commandant CIH, consisted of 'A' Squadron plus the two RHQ tanks and 'B' Company, 1st Kumaon Rifles, under the command of Major Bisht and the Sapper platoon.

The tanks with one company of infantry and the platoon of engineers

would leave the road and proceed to Rajouri along the bed of the Tawi River as fast as possible. The risk of some tanks getting stuck in the watery river bed was accepted. The task force was on the road from Chingas at 1130 hours on 11 April, led by the squadron commander, Major Karam Singh, and despite coming under mortar and machine-gun fire, it was able to maintain the tempo of advance by engaging hill features held in some strength by the enemy. In this movement, the force was greatly assisted by the Indian Air Force (IAF) whose Tempest fighters operated in the ground attack role, coming in pairs to rocket and strafe with their cannon positions indicated to them by HE (high explosive) tank gunfire. In addition the pilots were able to keep the task force informed about enemy activity in the Rajouri area as they over flew the battlefield.

By the evening of 11 April, the tank column reached Kallar. The tanks crossed the river no less than eight times in varying conditions and depths. The advance resumed next morning and the tanks entered Rajouri by 1730 hours the same day. Immediately intense and accurate fire from the tanks was directed at all important targets, including Dhanidhar Fort, the town and the surrounding hills from where enemy fire was coming. The element of surprise created bewilderment and confusion among the enemy, the sudden arrival in their midst of an armoured force caused dismay as was apparent in an intercepted radio message which read: *'Tawi River full of Buffaloes [the code word for tanks] from Chingas to Rajouri. Impossible to hold Rajouri.'*

The enemy fled in panic. But before doing so they had destroyed most of the town and slaughtered every man, woman and child they could find. The barbarism of the Pakistani raiders in Kashmir in 1947-48 was unmatched in the history of the twentieth century and perhaps in

the history of civilization. The residents of Rajouri have set up a Balidan Bhavan in Rajouri, in the memory of those who had been massacred by the Pakistani *Kabailies*.

Meanwhile 37 Assault Field Company worked day and night to make the road fit for traffic. The initial estimates were that it may take up to two weeks. The Brigade Commander put the troops on half rations. But the first one-ton vehicle reached Rajouri in five days and by April 21, the first convoy reached Rajouri. Some of the locals including women and children, who had fled to the hills, returned to the town. Rajouri was a remarkable victory. 2nd Lieutenant Rane was awarded the Param Vir Chakra for his gallantry while clearing the roadblocks continuously for three days under enemy fire in spite of being wounded. The Bombay Sappers were awarded the **Battle Honour Rajouri** for the magnificent performance of 37 Assault Field Company in the battle.

### Takeaways

The capture of Rajouri within five days after an advance of 48 kms through thickly wooded hills along a poorly maintained road denied at almost every km by landslides, road blocks and mines was a remarkable feat. *How was this achieved?*

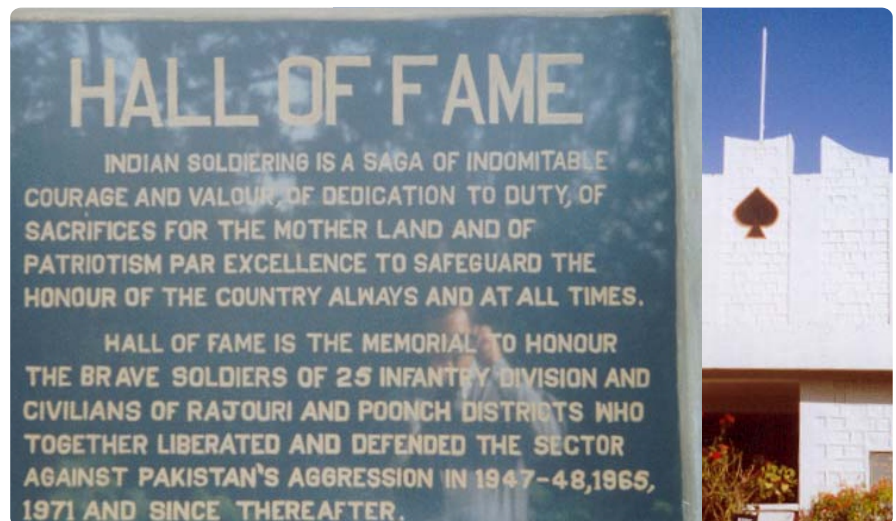
**First**, the Indian troops achieved surprise as the enemy was expecting an Indian advance along the road. But the enemy had not considered the movement of tanks along the bed of the Tawi River. By doing the unexpected, Commander 19 Infantry Brigade completely upset the battle plan of the enemy. The enemy got no time to move reinforcements and defend Rajouri or Chingas. The speed of advance was also largely possible due to the ability of the Army Engineers under the gallant leadership of Rama Raghoba Rane to clear the obstacles and mines under enemy fire in quick time.

**Secondly**, in moving the tanks along the river bed, the Indian Army was able to overcome limitations of terrain and move with speed. They were able to advance over 20 kms in 24 hours and recapture Rajouri without a fight. It often pays to adopt terrain-wise difficult routes for movement rather than advancing along expected directions well defended by the enemy.

**Third** and a major factor was the use of tanks in terrain considered less than suitable. Armour is characterized by mobility, fire power, protection and shock action. Armour commanders are reluctant to employ tanks in terrain where mobility and manoeuvrability is restricted. But fire power, protection and shock action can be exploited in the hills and mountains. Direct fire from the tank guns is most effective in destroying enemy strong points in hills and mountains. Their machine guns add to the firepower during assault. The protection provided by the armour demoralizes the enemy and all except

the most determined, well-trained infantry tend to bolt at the sight of approaching tanks. No doubt, close country increases the vulnerability of tanks to hand held anti-tank weapons. But that should not deter commanders from using armour in hills and mountains. The exceptional courage, dynamism and leadership of Lieutenant Colonel Zorawar Singh, MC, Commandant CIH and the offensive spirit of the tank crews must be lauded.

**Finally**, I would like to salute the outstanding courage and devotion to duty displayed by Lieutenant R R Rane, PVC. He was wounded by a splinter from a mortar bomb at the start of the advance but refused to be evacuated. For 72 hours, he cleared one road block after another under enemy fire and completely upset the enemy's plan of battle. And, the toil of the 37 Assault Field Company to clear the road from Chingas to Rajouri in less than half the time anticipated played an important part in the success.



Hall of Fame, Rajouri (photo credit nawang.com)





Major RR Rane, PVC (photo credit wikipedia.com)

### The Editor Recalls His Memories of Major RR Rane, PVC

Ajit, Pratap and Rajendra – the three sons of Major Rama Raghoba Rane, PVC were my schoolmates, and Pratap is my friend and classmate. As kids, we often went over to their house to play and met Rane Uncle at times. Ajit and Pratap were excellent athletes (sprinters) and the school champions. In one of the school athletics meets, Major RR Rane, PVC was the Chief Guest – I vividly remember the sons receiving awards from their father. As children, we could make out that Major R R Rane was an excellent person. We queried him on the award of PVC, and he told us how he kept clearing mines on the track to Rajouri - at times, he would be crawling below and ahead of a tank which covered his actions, as he removed mines ahead of the tank tracks. So who was Major RR Rane?

Born on 26 June 1918, Rane went on to join the British Indian Army. On 10 July 1940, Rane enlisted in the Bombay Engineer Regiment, and passed out as the "Best Recruit" with the Commandant's Cane. Rane was posted to the 28th Field Company of the 26th Infantry Division

which was deployed in Burma at that time. As the division retreated from the Japanese after the failed Arakan Campaign, he was tasked to stay back at Buthidaung along with his two sections, to destroy key assets and then be evacuated by the Royal Indian Navy. Though the objective was soon achieved, the expected pickup did not happen. Rane and his men hence crossed a river that was patrolled by the Japanese, expertly evading the Japanese troops, and joined the 26th Infantry Division at Bahri. After the war at the time of independence, he was commissioned in the Bombay Sappers Regiment of the Corps of Engineers

on 15 December 1947. Four months later, he became the first living recipient of the Param Vir Chakra. During his 28 years' service till his retirement in 1968, he was mentioned-in-despatches five times. He passed away at Pune on 11 July 1994. It would be apt to reproduce the citation of his Param Vir Chakra award.

### C I T A T I O N

On 8 April 1948, Second Lieutenant Rama Raghoba Rane, Bombay Engineers, was ordered to be in charge of the mine and roadblock clearing party at Mile 26 on the Nowshera-Rajouri road which passes through very hilly country. At 1100 hours, on that date near Nadpur South, just as Second Lieutenant Rane and his party were waiting near the tanks to start the work of clearing the mines ahead, the enemy started heavy mortaring of the area, with the result that two men of the mine-clearing party were killed and five others including Second Lieutenant Rane were wounded. The officer at once reorganized his party and started work for the tanks to go on to their position. Throughout the day he was near the tanks under heavy enemy machine-gun and mortar fire. After the capture of Barwali Ridge at about 1630 hours, although knowing that the enemy had not been completely cleared of the

area, Second Lieutenant Rane took his party ahead and started making a diversion for the tanks to proceed. He worked on till 2200 hours that night in full view of the enemy and under heavy machine-gun fire. On 9 April he again started work at 0600 hours and worked on till 1500 hours when the diversion was ready for the tanks to proceed. As the armoured column advanced, he got into the leading carrier and proceeded ahead. After proceeding about half a mile he came across a roadblock made of pine trees. He at once dismounted and blasted the trees away. The advance continued. Another 300 yards and the same story was repeated. By this time it was getting on to 1700 hours. The road was curving round the hill like a snake. The next roadblock was a demolished culvert. Second Lieutenant Rane again got on with the job. Before he could start work, the enemy opened up with their machine-guns, but with super courage and leadership he made a diversion and the column proceeded ahead. The roadblocks were becoming numerous but he blasted his way through. It was now 1815 hours, and light was fading fast. The carrier came across a formidable roadblock of five big pine trees surrounded by mines and covered by machine-gun fire. He started removing the mines and was determined to clear the roadblock but the armoured column commander appreciating the situation got the column into a harbour area. On 10 April 1948 at 0445 hours, Second Lieutenant Rane again started work on the roadblock in spite of machine-gun fire with the support of one troop of tanks. With sheer will power he cleared this roadblock by 0630 hours. The next thousand yards was a mass of roadblocks and blasted embankments. That was not all. The enemy had the whole area covered with machine-gun fire but with superhuman efforts, in spite of having been wounded, with cool courage and exemplary leadership and complete disregard for personal life, he cleared the road by 1030 hours. The armoured column proceeded ahead and got off the road into the riverbed of the Tawi but Second Lieutenant Rane continued clearing the road for the administrative column. The tanks reached Chingas by 1400 hours. Second Lieutenant Rane appreciating that the opening of the road was most vital, continued working without rest or food till 2100 hours that night. On 11 April 1948, he again started work at 0600 hours and opened the road to Chingas by 1100 hours. He worked on that night till 2200 hours clearing the road ahead.

*Colonel Bhaskar Sarkar, VSM (Retd), a civil engineering graduate from Kolkata University joined the Indian Military Academy, Dehradun in April 1963 and was commissioned into the Corps of Engineers. After attending the Defence Services Staff College Course, Wellington, he served as Brigade Major of a Mountain Brigade in Nagaland, and went on to command an Engineer Regiment. He has qualified on a management course at College of Defence Management in Secunderabad and served as an instructor in College of Military Engineering, Pune. He has been decorated twice for distinguished service – with a Visisht Seva Medal as commanding officer and with a COAS Commendation Card while on staff in HQ Eastern Command. He has also been a Chief Engineer of a Border Roads Project. After 28 years of distinguished service, Colonel Sarkar hung up his uniform and joined the construction industry as a civil engineer and management consultant. A versatile writer, he has over a hundred articles published in Journals, has fifteen published books in print and another 12 “e” books.*



**Col Bhaskar Sarkar**



# THRUST TO TITHWAL

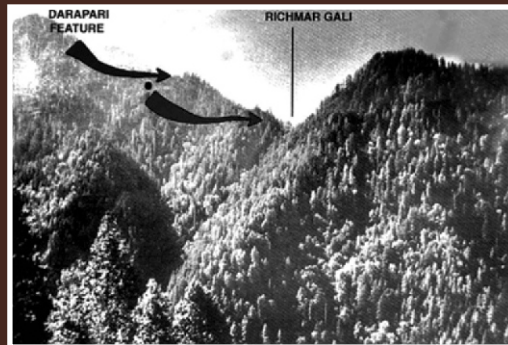
After resolutely holding on to Srinagar, and reinforcing the Indian Army presence in Kashmir, it was necessary to expand the presence and secure the outlying areas. 163 Infantry Brigade moved Northwards from Srinagar into the Kupwara region and captured valuable terrain upto the Kishan Ganga River. The Battles around Tithwal were fought fiercely to retain control after initial success.

*“One cannot permit unique opportunities to slip by for the sake of trifles” – Rommel.*

## Introduction

The Battle of Tithwal was one of the fiercest and longest battles fought during the Indo-Pakistan War of 1947-48. This conflict is a saga of bravery in which both sides fought vicious battles for the control of dominating key terrain features. In the 10 months long operations carried out over formidable mountains, two Param Vir Chakras, the highest gallantry decoration, were awarded for actions in this Sector, in addition to many other awards and Battle Honours.

Tithwal is a village in Karnah Tehsil of Kupwara District across the famous **Nastachun Pass** (popularly called ‘Sadhana Pass’). Nastachun Pass literally means a **“Cut Nose Pass”**, as people don’t feel their nose here due to strong and cold winds blowing throughout the year. The Kashmiri name of this Pass is **“Nathi Chapa Gali”** which means **“Numb Nose Pass”** due to the same reason. Nastachun Pass is most popularly known as the **SADHANA PASS**, named after the famous Bollywood actress Sadhana Shivdasani who visited the Pass after the 1965 War to interact with soldiers. Overlooked by the formidable Shamsabari Range to the East, Tithwal is located on the Eastern bank of Kishanganga River (called Neelam in Pakistan) which marks the Line of Control between India and Pakistan occupied Kashmir (POK). Originally named **“Teerath Bal”** after the holy confluence of Kazinag, It was a major centre for trade and commerce providing the shortest route from Rawalpindi to Srinagar via Muzaffarabad over the Nastachun Pass. It is also the gateway to the famous Sharda Peeth temple in POK where prior



*Richbmar Gali and Darapari Ridge, where CHM Piru Singh and Lance Naik Karam Singh were awarded PVCs (photo credit defstrat.com)*



*Mule train carrying pack howitzers moves up to support the Indian infantry*

to Partition, pilgrims from all over the subcontinent paid obeisance after a holy dip in the Kishanganga.

### Precursor to the Operations

After the Battle of Shalateng in November 1947, which was the decisive battle to save Srinagar in Jammu & Kashmir (J&K), the Pakistanis were on the run. 161 Infantry Brigade under Brigadier (Later Lieutenant General) LP Sen was in hot pursuit with the ultimate objective of reaching Domel. As soon as *Chillai Kalan* (the coldest part of winters in Kashmir) got over, the enemy once again launched an invasion into the valley through Pharkian Gali in February 1948. The Pashtun tribal militia invaders numbering in thousands overran the Trehgam – Karalpura area and reached Handwara. A battalion plus a company (1 Sikh) along with a troop of armoured cars of 7 Cavalry supported by a section of 25 pounder guns were ordered to deal with the threat. It took this force over a month to liberate Handwara and dominate the areas up to Kupwara.

### Summer Offensive of 1948

With the opening of the Handwara front, a new Brigade Headquarters (HQ), called “Z” Brigade was set up at Srinagar. It was later renamed as HQ 163 Infantry Brigade. As the troops strength increased further, the J&K Force was split into two division viz ‘Sri and Ja’ Divisions (later redesignated as 19 & 26 Infantry Division respectively). The former operated in Kashmir and Ladakh while the latter carried out operations South of Pir Panjal Range in Jammu, Rajouri and Poonch Sectors. Major General KS Thimayya (later Army Chief) became the first General Officer Commanding of Sri Division comprising 161 Infantry, 163 Infantry and 77 Parachute Brigades.

Immediately on assuming command,

Thimayya planned a ‘**Summer Offensive**’ to liberate the remaining territory under enemy control. 161 Infantry Brigade would form the division’s main thrust on the Uri-Domel axis along the Jhelum River with Domel as the terminal objective. A diversionary attack would be launched by 163 Infantry Brigade on Handwara, Nastachun, Tithwal axis to draw away the enemy reinforcements from Muzaffarabad thereby reducing opposition against the main thrust. Meanwhile, 77 Parachute Brigade was tasked to defend Uri. The appreciated enemy strength in the Sector was a brigade group comprising of Swaties and Mahsud tribals along with Pakistan Army personnel.

### Plan of 163 Infantry Brigade

163 Infantry Brigade under Brigadier (Later Lieutenant General) Harbakhsh Singh comprised of 1 Sikh, 1 Madras and 3 Royal Garhwal Rifles. The brigade was tasked to capture Tithwal.

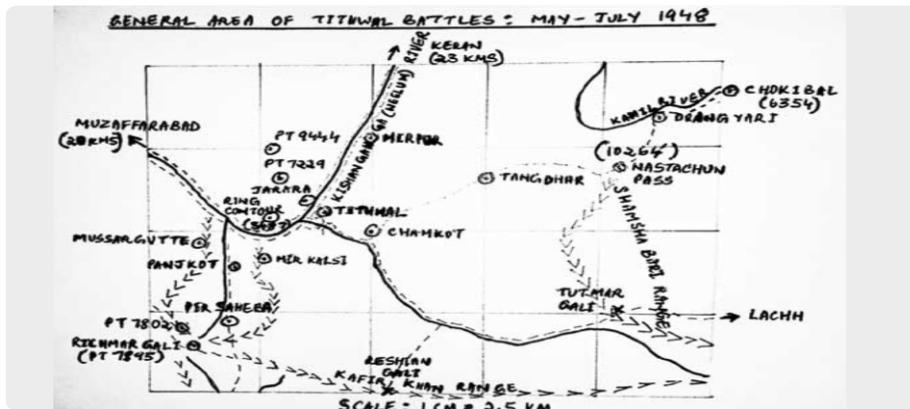
Prior to this, it had to secure Dogarpur and Trehgam ridges, clear Chowkibal and capture Nastachun Pass.

It was felt that provided complete surprise was obtained, the enemy would not put up any concerted opposition. Once he was on the run, speed was more important than the force ratio. In order to achieve surprise, Harbakhsh tasked 3 Garhwal to attack Trehgam ridge by night frontally from Pethabir, it being the most difficult and least expected route. The aim was to lure the enemy to stick on to his position and fight while the other two battalions advanced to Dogarpur ridge and cut him off from behind. Complete radio silence was ordered and to maintain secrecy, ponies required for follow up logistics were mustered from distant areas and kept hidden at Handwara.

To maintain speed, troops were to carry their provisions on person for a period of one week. Harbakhsh came up with a novel idea and ordered “*panjiri laddos*” to be prepared at the scale of



*Indian troops in the Tithwal sector*



Map showing area of operations in Tithval Sector (Credit [www.indiandefencereview.com/news/learning-from-our-enemy-an-analysis-of-the-losses-in-the-1948-indo-pak-kashmir-war](http://www.indiandefencereview.com/news/learning-from-our-enemy-an-analysis-of-the-losses-in-the-1948-indo-pak-kashmir-war))

three per person per day for seven days along with tea leaves and condensed milk. The Sikhs were tasked to prepare these ladoos for the other two units and also teach them the recipe. With this significantly reduced 'bandobast' of just '21 ladoos', a groundsheet/ waterproof cape and blanket on each man, the brigade was ready to advance towards Tithwal.

### Nastachun Pass Captured

3 Garhwal Rifles commenced the operation on the night of 17/18 May. The movement got delayed due to the difficult going and they encountered stiff enemy resistance. The battalion fought fiercely and the feature overlooking Trehgam was taken after mid-day, thereafter the enemy opposition reduced. Trehgam ridge was secured by last light on 18 May. Meanwhile, the 1 Madras infiltration column started moving for Dogarpur ridge at last light on 17 May and surprised the enemy completely. Thus by 19 May, both Dogarpur and Trehgam ridges, objectives for the Phase 1 were in Indian hands.

The Sikhs passed through 1 Madras position and advanced towards Chowkibal, lying at the foothill of Nastachun Pass. Panzgam fell on 19 May and the next day 1 Sikh captured Chowkibal without much of a fight. Determined not to allow the enemy any respite, Harbakhsh pushed 1 Madras to take the lead and capture the formidable Nastachun Pass, situated over 10000 feet above sea level. When 1 Madras formed up for attack, it emerged that the guns supporting them from Chowkibal were out of range. Providence came to their rescue as the battery commander discovered that some of his guns were over shooting by about 4-500 yards; that was just the extra

range required by attacking troops. By 1400 hours on 21 May, Nastachun Pass was captured. The enemy was evidently surprised and demoralized at the speed of our advance.

### Lightning Thrust to Tithwal

1 Sikh now took the lead and advanced towards Tithwal, the enemy's main base in that sector. 1 Madras followed in its wake after detaching a company to defend the pass against any counter attack. By last light on 22 May, the leading troops reached Naichian village at the end of Nastachun defile, six miles short of Tithwal. 1 Sikh advanced further by night along the track Chhamkot – Saltal and by 0900 hours on 23 May secured the spur overlooking Tithwal from the North. Meanwhile 1 Madras too advanced along the main axis and secured the high ground South of Tithwal taking the enemy by surprise.

At 0930 hours, 1 Sikh entered Tithwal village shouting their war cry of 'Bole So Nibal'. The enemy fled leaving behind huge stocks of ammunition and supplies including canned food which was a god send for our troops who had for a week been on bare survival diet; the brigade administrative echelon had not been able to keep pace with the fighting troops. 23 May 1948 marked the high water mark of our success in the operations. Ever since, this day is celebrated as "Tithwal Day" by 104 Infantry Brigade, also called Shakti Vijay Brigade, now deployed in that sector.

To strengthen the defence of Tithwal against any counter attack, the dominating heights overlooking Tithwal had to be secured. While 1 Madras provided the perimeter defence to Tithwal, 3 Garhwal secured the dominating Ring Counter feature across the Kishenganga River and point 7229 by last light of 26 May. Meanwhile 1 Sikh captured Richhmar



Gali to the South West by early morning of 28 May, and by 30 May they also captured Pir Sahiba and Mir Kalsi in the South after a stubborn fight. These actions as it transpired later had been taken in the nick of time as the enemy had started arriving in the sector to take up defences.

### Pakistani Reinforcements Arrive

The divisional main thrust on Uri - Domel axis unfortunately came to a standstill short of Chakothe. The diversionary operation on the other hand had yielded promising results and General Thimayya, explored the possibility of converting it into the main thrust. A reconnaissance in force was planned before launching any offensive. Accordingly on 14 June, 3 Garhwal Rifles, attacked the enemy's strongly held position on Buni ridge beyond Tithwal and captured it. The enemy launched three counter attacks but was repulsed with heavy casualties. Lieutenant Colonel Kaman Singh, the Commanding Officer, was awarded the Maha Vir Chakra in this operation.

The capture of Tithwal with Domel only 29 km away had become a dangerous salient for the enemy. It was at this stage that 9 Frontier Division of Pakistan Army moved into Kashmir to reinforce his beleaguered troops. One brigade of this division was deployed at Chakothe opposite Uri, another rushed towards Tithwal and the third was retained as a reserve at Domel. With a division pitted against division coupled with the difficult going on a road less terrain, the offensive was postponed. Moreover surprise had also been lost and the enemy had reinforced his positions with fresh troops. In retrospect, a reserve brigade to exploit the success of Tithwal and reinforce the diversionary thrust may have got us to Domel, before the enemy reinforcements poured in.

### Stalemate

The Battle of Tithwal went on for another six months wherein both sides made numerous attempts to capture features. While the Indians were consolidating their gains, the enemy occupied a dominating feature Point 9444, which provided good visibility over Tithwal and the lodgements gained across Kishanganga River. He shelled 1 MADRAS deployed on both sides of Kishanganga River. Given this split deployment, 'Ring Contour' lacked adequate depth. On 08 July, the enemy attacked Ring Counter and overran it, the loss of which made logistics for the other localities across the Kishanganga difficult. Own troops were forced to fall back onto the home side of Kishanganga River and finally settled on holding a defensive line at the Tithwal Ridge.

On 18 July, an attempt was made by 6 Rajputana Rifles, recently inducted into Tithwal sector, to capture the Chhamkot - Dara Pari ridge ahead of the 1 Sikh troops. During the battle, CHM Piru Singh leading his section was killed in action after destroying three enemy Machine Gun positions. He was awarded the Param Vir Chakra posthumously. This operation was later called off due to heavy resistance.

Coinciding with the Eid festival, the Pakistanis launched a brigade attack on 1 Sikh position on 13 October. The objective was to recapture Richhmar Gali, outflank the Indians and occupy Nastachun Pass. The determined Sikhs beat back multiple attacks and the battle ended with no headway to the attacker; the enemy offensive was called off and Tithwal saved. During this battle, Lance Naik (later Honorary Captain) Karam Singh commanding a forward outpost was

attacked eight times. Twice wounded, he refused evacuation and continued to hold on to the first-line trenches. He became India's second living recipient of the Param Vir Chakra, after 2nd Lieutenant RR Rane (of Bombay Sappers).

### Courage and Resolute Will - The Line Holds

Following an appeal made by the United Nations, the ceasefire was declared on 01 January 1949 and the cease fire line (later renamed as Line of Control) became the de-facto border thereafter.

The Battle of Tithwal is a saga of inspirational gallantry on the part of 163 Infantry Brigade which first seized the initiative from the enemy, then pushed him out of Kashmir Valley and finally held on to dominating heights around Tithwal. In six days, starting from Handwara, this Brigade had in a lightning strike advanced over 60 km through mountains and jungles and across a formidable pass. In the process it liberated 350 square miles of territory up to the Kishanganga River. This was despite the shortage of supplies and logistics and against a formidable Pathan enemy adept in mountain warfare. The myth of the tribesman's reputation for invincibility lay shattered. **All battalions of the Brigade were awarded the Battle Honour of Tithwal.**

This herculean effort is best described in the words of Major General K S Thimayya, General Officer Commanding 19 Infantry Division in a message to 1 Sikh in November 1948:

*"On the night of 16 /17 May in a lightning advance from Handwara you surrounded the enemy HQ at Dogarpur and*



Brigadier Harbakhsh Singh in action

*then continued to capture Chowkibal, the Nastachun Pass and finally entered Tithwal on 23rd May 48. This was an amazing advance under very difficult conditions and in very mountainous country against a Pathan enemy who was highly skilled in mountain warfare. When you pushed through the Nastachun Pass, snow and ice still lay all over it.*

*From then onwards you held the most vital part of the Tithwal area for six months. You occupied a forward position which was constantly under enemy pressure and heavy mortar and artillery fire. The enemy made repeated attempts to drive you from this position and the last effort of the enemy on 13 October when he used over three Battalions accompanied by heavy Artillery and Mortar support, you beat him back causing very heavy casualties on him.*

*The enemy knew who you were and decided that it was no use trying to fight a fine Battalion like yours”*

Brigadier Harbakhsh Singh deserves a special mention in this battle. He assumed command of 163 Infantry Brigade on 06 May 48 just before the summer offensive commenced as

the crossing points opened for movement of residents of J&K and POK. It has been adopted by the Indian Army as a “Model Village” and provides basic amenities to its inhabitants.

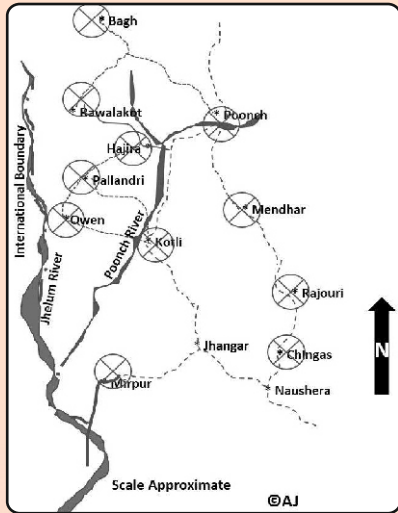


*Col HP Singh, VSM, (Retd) an alumnus of The Lawrence School Sanawar and NDA Pune is a fourth generation soldier commissioned into the Regiment of Artillery in 1993. A graduate of DSSC Wellington, he is an experienced helicopter pilot with 1400 hours of flying to his credit. The officer has served with the Indian Army Contingent in Democratic Republic of Congo. A veteran of the Kargil war, he has had three tenures each in Siachen glacier and Kashmir valley. He was awarded Vishisht Seva Medal for his distinguished services while commanding his Regiment in Siachen Glacier. The officer is a prolific writer and can be reached on Email: harrypal71@yahoo.co.in.*



Col HP Singh





*Locations which were attacked by Pakistani Raiders in October - November 1947*

# POONCH LINK-UP

## VALIANT AND PERSISTENT OPERATION

From the very beginning of the conflict in October 1947, Kashmir remained the priority for the decision-makers. Consequently, most efforts were dedicated to controlling the situation in the Valley and in pushing the intruders out. At the same time, because of the activities of the Muslim Conference in Poonch and its vicinity to Pakistani Punjab, the Poonch situation was slipping out of hand.

13 November 1947 was the day when the first phase of operations in Kashmir got over with the recapture of Uri by Indian Forces. By then, the situation was critical in the Poonch region. Rajouri, Jhangar, Mendhar, Chingas and Bhimbar had fallen to the enemy, thus, cutting off possible approaches to Poonch from Jammu-Akhnur-Nowshera. The adjacent map depicts the prevailing dispositions and skirmishes taking place in those early days.

The Jammu & Kashmir (J&K) State Forces under the Poonch Brigade included 1 J&K Infantry less one company (which was at Srinagar) under Lieutenant Colonel Hira Nand Dubey; a company and a platoon of 4 J&K Infantry from Kohala; two companies of 7 J&K Rifles while two more were still being raised at Srinagar; 8 J&K Infantry under Lieutenant Colonel Maluk Singh; 9 J&K Infantry less two companies at Kotli under Lieutenant Colonel Shiv Ram and some elements of the Garrison Police. These forces were commanded by Brigadier Krishna Singh of the State Forces.

Because of desertions as well as attrition, the actual strength was almost half of what appears to be on paper. The actual strength of companies, including all elements, was seldom more than 50 heads. Such strength was simply inadequate to defend the town that was now getting surrounded by the enemy from virtually all directions. A thin deployment on the ground could have allowed the defenders to keep the enemy at bay and away from the town, but the shortage of manpower meant gaps



*Indian soldiers ready to defeat the Pakistani Raiders*





*Indian soldiers poised and alert - ready to take on the enemy*

Poonch, therefore, was advocated by three British Cs-in-C of the Indian Forces during the meeting. Evacuation of Poonch was, thus, an option that was required to be explored rather than fighting against odds during upcoming winters. But Pandit Nehru put his foot down and the decision of the Defence Committee of Cabinet to evacuate Poonch was reversed within the next 48 hours. By the end of the conflict, Poonch had withstood the longest siege ever experienced by the Indian Army. Three attempts were made to link up and/or reinforce Poonch in the days and months that followed.

between the piquets. A closer ring of the piquets would mean tighter defence with no uncovered gaps, but that allowed the enemy to crawl in close and snipe at the residents and troops inside the garrison. The two options were balanced by having a bigger ring around the town and gaps covered through regular patrolling.

Post capture of Uri on 13 November, the Defence Committee of the Cabinet met at Army Headquarters (HQ) in New Delhi on 14 November 1947. It was discussed and agreed that the enemy was likely to employ different tactics in the Poonch area. Having faltered by operating like a regular army in Kashmir and having been dislodged by Indian Forces, the enemy was likely to build on his core strength which was in guerrilla warfare. Unlike in Kashmir, therefore, the enemy was likely to infiltrate into Poonch in small numbers. The presence of the Poonchi-Punjabi Muslims in the Pakistani Army and the fact that many Muslim servicemen of the State Forces had deserted along with weapons from Poonch led to the conclusion that Poonch would have insurmountable problems in the days to come. No permanent commitment in

### The First Attempt

On 16 November, the General Officer Commanding of J&K Division, Major General Kalwant Singh, issued orders for the speedy relief of Poonch. The plan envisaged a two-pronged approach to Poonch, both from Jammu and Uri as under: -

- A force consisting of 50 Parachute Brigade and attached troops, under Brigadier Paranjape, was to move at 0600 hours on 16 November with the utmost speed on axis Akhnoor-Beri Pattan-Nowshera-Jhangar and thence to Kotli and Mirpur. Nowshera was to be secured on 16 November, a firm base established at Jhangar on 17 November, Kotli was to be relieved on 18 November, with Mirpur being relieved latest by 20 November.
- A force consisting of two battalions of 161 Infantry Brigade and attached troops, under Brigadier LP Sen, DSO, was to start from Uri on 18 November towards Poonch, arriving at Poonch the same day. A detachment of 161 Infantry Brigade and attached troops were to advance South from Poonch and affect junction at a place called Puri with 50 Parachute Brigade troops. After reinforcing the Poonch garrison with one battalion, the rest of the Brigade was to withdraw to Uri.
- The troops from Uri were to move in a motorised column of 200 vehicles (including 60 civil buses and many lorries) via Haji Pir and reach Poonch, where 1 (Para) Kumaon was to stay back to hold the garrison while the rest of the force would return after linking up with 50 Parachute Brigade at a pre-determined point to the South of Poonch.

The advance of 50 Parachute Brigade couldn't progress beyond Kotli because of a shortage of troops and strong enemy resistance. The

column from Uri, having taken a night halt near Haji Pir Pass, reached a blown-up bridge on Betaar Nala (burnt down by State Forces troops deployed for its protection because of lack of any communication and information of the incoming relief column) between Poonch and Haji Pir on 21 November 1947. Then, the rear half of the column between Uri and Haji Pir Pass was ambushed and Brigadier LP Sen rushed back, leaving 1 (Para) Kumaon less one company to walk 11 miles to Poonch. Hajipir Pass was not secured and it became a formidable obstacle later on, thus, neutralising any attempts to link up from Uri. The shortest road route to Poonch was now blocked for good.

On 10 December 1947, Commanding Officer (CO) of 1 (Para) Kumaon, Lieutenant Colonel Pritam Singh was appointed as the Poonch Garrison Commander and given the local rank of Brigadier. There were fewer than 2000 soldiers, including the Indian Army regulars, State Forces' infantry, Garrison Police personnel and auxiliaries while the town had more than 40000 refugees in addition to the native population, all boxed in a three square km territory and surrounded by the enemy. As the town stared at a tragedy in the making with virtually no rations, medicines and even ammunition, an air bridge linking Poonch with Jammu was established on 12 December 1947.

**The Second Attempt: Operation Gulab**

Life in Poonch, isolated and overflowing on its brims, was a big challenge. The credit for saving Poonch during the harsh months that followed goes to Brigadier Pritam Singh's unorthodox and bold leadership and an unprecedented level of civil-military cooperation. Sadly, not many of those day-to-day struggles have been documented by many.

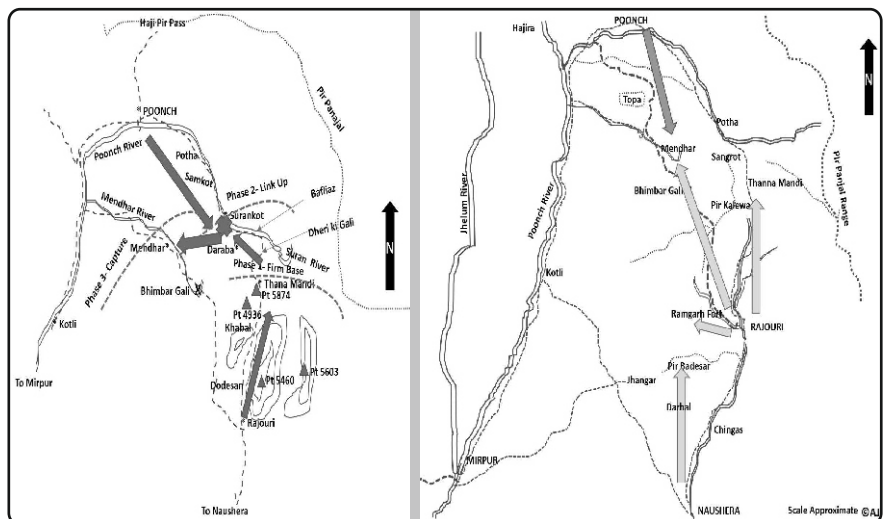
After the re-capture of Rajouri on 13 April 1948 and the cleansing of Thana Mandi of any enemy presence on 02 May 1948, **Operation Gulab** was launched to link up with Poonch from the Jammu side. A column from the Poonch Brigade would move South to Surankot to await the arrival of 19 (I) Infantry Column, receive reinforcements and fall back to Poonch. 19(I) Infantry Brigade would undertake the operation in three phases:-

- Phase 1** - Establish a firm base at Thana Mandi on D Day.
- Phase 2**- Link-up at Surankot on D plus 1.
- Phase 3**- Capture Mendhar in conjunction with the Poonch Brigade.

The Phase 3 of the operation was to be led by Brigadier Pritam Singh who was to be the commander of the adhoc brigade sized Task Force. Mendhar had a large training camp set up by the Pakistan Army to train volunteers without any service background. The adhoc Task Force was to destroy the

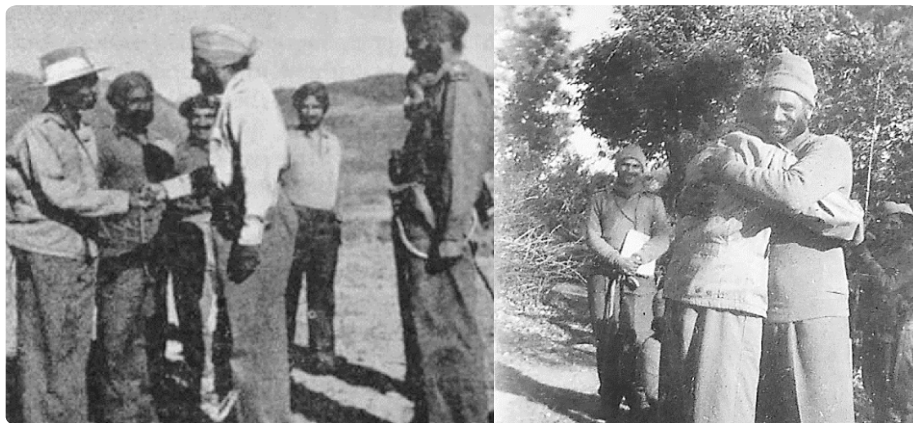
training camp and exploit further to the West.

The operation began from two ends, almost simultaneously, on 14 June 1948. Intense battles were fought by both the columns as they cleared height after height on their way. By the time the column of 19(I) Infantry Brigade reached Surankot at 1300 hours on 17 June 1948, the column from Poonch was already in a harbour at Surankot. The link-up took place, as planned. Brigadier Pritam Singh now assumed the command of all the troops at Surankot for the final phase of the operation. 1 Kumaon Rifles and 1/2 Punjab joined the troops deployed at Poonch; the mood of the garrison and the sense of security of the civilians went up by many notches. The link-up had taken place but the axis to Rajouri via Surankot or via Bhimbar Gali was still not secure since no troops could be left behind after the clearance of the areas to the South of Poonch. Poonch remained isolated; reinforced, nevertheless!



(Left Map) The second attempt - Operation Gulab.

(Right Map) Operation Easy



Left Photo. Major General Atma Singh congratulating Brigadier Yadbunath Singh (extreme left) after the successful link-up operation. Right Photo. Brigadier Yadbunath Singh (to left) bugs Brigadier Pritam Singh (right) at the link-up point. (Photos credit Military History Research Foundation)

### The Third Attempt: Operation Easy

Lieutenant General SM Srinagesh took over as the Corps Commander of the J&K Corps in October 1948. A decision was taken to relieve Poonch before the winters set in. Broadly, there were two options that could be used for the link-up. The Northern one would be from Uri via Haji Pir and the Southern one would be via Rajouri. The Southern route had three routes which could be considered, as under:-

- **Nowshera-Jhangar-Kotli-Poonch route:** Kotli was still with the enemy and the operation involved the clearance of the well-trenched enemy in Kotli. Further, the axis ran close to the border and despite an obstacle in the form of the Jhelum River, boat-based crossings were available in plenty in addition to existing bridges. The option was ruled out.
- **Nowshera-Rajouri-Bhimbar Gali-Mendhar-Poonch route:** A brigade-sized enemy force was holding Mendhar area and could be reinforced by more forces from Kotli and from across the border. Efforts to

Valley. But Operation Bison was also being planned in Kashmir to capture Zojila – Dras - Kargil and link up with the Leh Garrison. Two more battalions would have to be inducted into Srinagar Division, if both the operations were to be undertaken. With Uri firmly in control and the distance between Uri and Poonch being way shorter than any of the Southern routes, the Corps Commander felt that the Northern option via Haji Pir could still be the better option. Lieutenant General KM Cariappa, the Army Commander, however decided that the link-up with Poonch would be tried via the Southern route, at a place called Potha, South of Poonch.

On 09 October, Brigadier Yadhunath Singh, Commander 19 Infantry Brigade was nominated as the overall force commander for **Operation Easy**. A total of six infantry battalions, one field battery and one mountain battery were earmarked for the operation. The overall force was divided into two columns—one column under Brigadier Umrao Singh, Commander of 5 Infantry Brigade and the other one under Lieutenant Colonel JS Aurora, CO of 1/2 Punjab. Further, 268 Infantry Brigade was tasked to carry out a deception plan involving securing of Pir Badesar.

After a bit of rescheduling, the preliminary operations began on 13 October. The initial plan for Operation Easy was modified, and it was decided to link up with Poonch via Mendhar instead of Potha. The force under Brigadier Yadhunath Singh was now named **Durga Force**. The composition of the Force was 5 Infantry Brigade, 19 (I) Infantry Brigade and troops from Rajouri Garrison. No change in artillery support was made. For air support, No 10 Squadron of Tempests and No 12 Squadron (Transport) of Dakotas and No 1 Air Observation Post Flight of Austers were made available.

tie-down this force from interfering in any action happening further to the East, along the third approach would also have to be planned.

- **Nowshera-Rajouri-Thana Mandi-Poonch route:** An enemy brigade was reportedly holding heights between Thana Mandi and Potha. Holding down this brigade and preventing a co-ordinated defence between it and the Mendhar Brigade was an imperative.

While weighing the Northern option, it was realised that such an option would be feasible after beefing up the strength of the troops in the



**Operation Easy** turned out to be a long slog with multiple battles fought by different units along the axes of advance. A number of modifications were made to the plans, and deception measures were put in place to ensure success. Suffice to say that it took over a month for the troops from the two sides to link up, which took place at 1200 hours on 20 November 1948. The much-awaited link-up with Poonch was now complete.

**Operation Easy** was actually a difficult operation. The enemy had enough strength, more than three brigades in the area and enjoyed the edge that defenders enjoy in such terrain.

Against a desirable ratio of 6:1 in favour of the assaulting force, Indian Forces were actually pitched unfavourably 1:2 against the enemy. There were deficiencies in artillery, especially, towards the crucial phase just prior to the link-up. The enemy had a better artillery profile, he enjoyed an unlimited supply of weapons and men from across the Jhelum River. The local people too were siding with the enemy after non-Muslims had been driven out. And yet the Indian troops pulled off the mission because of correct application of mind by higher commanders and show of courage and grit by the bayonet wielding Indian Infantrymen.

By executing deception manoeuvres in Pir Badesar and Pir Kalewa, the enemy was initially made to believe that a threat would develop towards Kotli and then some of his forces were tied up in the Thana Mandi area. The deception was duly supported by fake air drops and deliberate spread of misinformation. As a result, the enemy poised himself to block the threats developing towards Kotli and when the action started in Thana Mandi area, he was forced to disperse his resources in confusion. It was later claimed that the enemy had no clue of the real intent of the

Indian commanders even after the link-up had been established.

The success of the link-up also meant the permanent removal of a threat to the garrison. Even though Haji Pir Pass was still under enemy occupation, a secured axis of maintenance and reinforcements had been opened with the mainland. The capture of Pir Margot Ghazi Ridge not only removed the threat from the South but also resulted in the isolation of the enemy scattered in areas like Thana Mandi and beyond. A total of 2100 square km of territory was liberated in the process, and more than 10000 Muslim refugees were re-settled after the eviction of the enemy from the area.

The Poonch-Mirpur belt, as a look at the map shows, is the underbelly of J&K State. For centuries, this region

stood between Kashmir and invaders from the West, including Alexander and Mehmood Ghazni. For the newly-created state of Pakistan, capturing the whole belt South of Pir Panjal and West of Chenab was a compulsion since the erstwhile border between J&K State and British (now Pakistan) Punjab ran along the Jhelum River and Rawalpindi and Islamabad (the future capital of Pakistan) fall within long-range artillery fire from this side of the Jhelum. It goes to the credit of our troops (both the Indian Army and the J&K State Forces) who held their nerves with resilience while holding crucial terrain and also to those who fought valiantly against the odds to relieve their beleaguered brothers in arms – after a year-long isolation of Poonch. □ □ □

*Colonel Ajay K Raina, SM (Retd), is a Poonchi Dogra whose parents had migrated from Bagh and Pallandri (now in PoJK) during the 1947 crisis. Growing up listening to the stories of those days from his parents and grandparents, he developed a passion for the history of those times leading him to author five books solely on the 1947-48 conflict. He joined the Indian Military Academy, Dehradun and was commissioned into 93 Field Regiment in December 1990. He was awarded Sena Medal (Gallantry) during his tenure in 6 RR (SIKH). He is a graduate of the Long Gunnery Staff Course, Technical Staff Course and is also a PG in Business Administration (2-year regular course) specialising in Finance. An adventure enthusiast, he and his family have been mentioned in the Limca Book of Records 2011. During one such adventure trip, he was hit by a landslide and severely injured. With his medical category permanently downgraded, he took premature retirement in 2017. He is now a successful hospitality professional and consultant. He has authored 22 books including the book 'Hold at All Costs: Siege & Relief of Poonch 1947-48' which covers the Poonch operations in greater detail.*



**Col Ajay K Raina**

# SUMMER OF 48

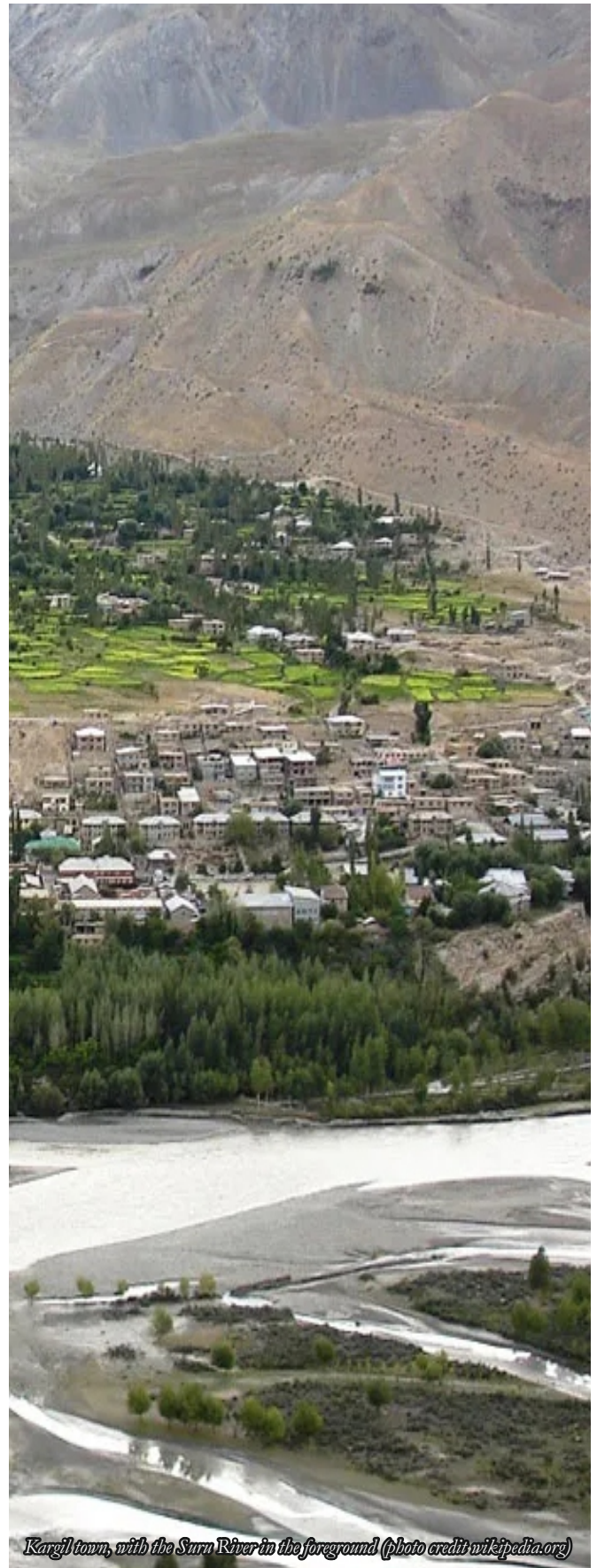
## DEFENDING LADAKH

After annexing Gilgit – Bunji, the Pakistanis headed for Skardu, where Sher Jung Thapa and his men from the Jammu & Kashmir (J&K) State Forces held them at bay till August 1948.

Ladakh too was isolated, and the Pakistani raiders headed to Leh in May 1948 simultaneously. The Leh Air-bridge enabled us to push in reinforcements and supplies, and we held on. My unit, 2/8 Gorkha Rifles (GR) joined the Garrison, and a classic example of offensive defence punctured the Pakistani designs.

**January 1, 1949.** This wasn't just the beginning of another new year for a freshly-minted Independent India. It was also a watershed moment for the country, heralding the victory secured by 2/8 GR, who took part in the J&K operations in the Ladakh sector. Major General DK Palit, VrC penned down the words of Colonel Parab, my father in an account of this episode of the Kashmir War. *"It is a story not so much about heroism or acts of individual gallantry, but of sustained physical and mental effort, of sustained morale and sustained loyalty to a cause, in the face of countless hardships and dangers. It is a story of how a demoralised and disorganised band of men, besieged by overwhelming superior odds, facing a barbarous and fanatic enemy who held every tactical and strategic advantage, short of supplies and ammunition, nevertheless succeeded in retaining for their country 400 square miles of vital territory in the region of 'Little Tibet'."*

In early 1948, Skardu was surrounded by Pakistani marauders, while Dras and Kargil had already been lost. Leh, the capital of Ladakh, was being defended by a handful of J&K State Forces, local militia and the LEHDETT (40 Indian Army volunteers from 2 Dogra). Leh is on the Northern Bank of the



*Kargil town, with the Suru River in the foreground (photo credit-wikipedia.org)*



Indus River between the Zaskar and Ladakh ranges. Ethnographically, it is inhabited by Buddhists of a Tibetan race. Politically though, it is a province of J&K, after having been conquered by Maharaja Gulab Singh's Army nearly two centuries ago.

The enemy began reinforcing its forces with a view to capturing Leh. For a while it seemed like they would be successful, so it became essential to reinforce the Leh garrison. In end May, Major General KS Thimayya, DSO, Srinagar Division Commander, flew in at 23000 feet without oxygen in an IAF Dakota piloted by Air Commodore Mehar Singh, and landed on an improvised bumpy airstrip at Leh, at a height of 11554 feet. He knew that immediate action was needed. 2/8 GR (though serving in the 43rd Lorried Brigade in Ferozepur) became involved in the defence of this high altitude area.

A couple of days later, Lieutenant Colonel HS Parab, Commanding Officer (CO) 2/8 GR received a message from the Brigade Commander of 43 Lorried Brigade, Brigadier Chargalkar. Colonel Parab later penned down, "He ordered me to send one company to Ladakh Valley by Manali to help the garrison in Ladakh, which consisted of a company of 2/4 GR and a militia Battalion being formed under Lieutenant Colonel Prithvi Chand, 2 Dogra. Major Hari Chand with D Company left Ferozepur for Manali on the 28th of May and arrived on 5th June. On the 9th June, Do Bahadur arrived at Kelling after crossing the famous passes Bara Lachba (16600 feet) and Taglangla (17000 feet)."

Lieutenant Colonel HS Parab, Captain Tikaram, 2nd Lieutenant GA Nagle, a section of 3-inch mortars and one platoon of A Company were flown to Leh after the Colonel was briefed by General Thimayya at Srinagar. In the meanwhile, D Company under Major Hari Chand set off from

Manali on foot and reached Leh in early July, after a strenuous march of 25 days. They were appropriately named 'Arjun Column'. Other than General Zorawar Singh's famous Dogra Column, no army column of such magnitude had ever entered Leh via this route. The main route to Leh from the Kashmir valley via the Zojila Pass, Dras and Kargil was in enemy hands and had been cut off by them, so the company had to march the distance of 267 miles, across the hazardous passes. The track lay along one of the most rugged mountainous terrain of the world, and involved crossing innumerable mountain streams, deep gorges and three high passes between 13500 feet and 17000 feet. The Indian Army had little or no experience of mountain warfare up until then. Comforts like snow clothing were unknown to them. The march required great endurance, determination and a high standard of discipline and leadership.

The first task given to this company

by Lieutenant Colonel Prithvi Chand, was to occupy Khaltse. The company was followed by the rest of the battalion marching under the Second-in-Command Major WS Nene. After the troops finally assembled, there were about 1000 men to defend a border of over 200 miles, extending from Shyok River in the North to Zaskar River in the South. This force faced an enemy whose strength numbered well over 4000. The control of the force was in itself a gigantic task; most of the communications were by runner, and this called for a high standard of junior leadership. Also, the force was pitted against a fanatical irregular enemy operating mostly in civilian garb, well-versed in guerrilla warfare and accustomed to moving over the high and rugged terrain.

By 17th September 1948, the whole battalion concentrated in Ladakh. Maintenance was by air supply and the aircraft had to fly at 25000 feet to reach this high plateau; it was difficult



The Nubra Guards - volunteers who joined to fight the Pakistani Raiders (photo credit thebetterindia.com)





*Khaltse Bridge over the Indus River, as it existed in 1948 (photo credit wikipedia.org)*

to stock up the garrison for the severe winter ahead, and the battalion was mostly short of rations, equipment, arms and ammunition.

My father recollected an action that occurred as soon as the D Company column reached Leh, and were asked to go straight to Hemis with all their bag and baggage. *“On 8th July, the whole column - when halted for food - was surrounded by the enemy and they had no other alternative but to retire towards Leh. Lieutenant Colonel Prithi Chand disguised as a ‘Budh’, went to Leh to make arrangements for the retiring column. Major Hari Chand withdrew the whole column to a place called Tharu 9 miles from Leh. On the suggestion of a bright Gorkha Jemadar Ganga Ram, Major Hari Chand ordered him to take up a defensive position. The enemy thought the whole column had withdrawn to Leh, advancing through the Tharu defence when they were fired by Jemadar Ganga Ram’s platoon. The Pakistani column suffered heavy casualties and withdrew towards Nimu.”*

Colonel Parab was appointed Military Governor for Ladakh and was given executive and judicial powers by the State Government. He had the same

authority vested in him as that of the wazir of the State. He later narrated the incident in a matter-of-fact way, *“On 18th August, I arrived in Srinagar with my dilapidated MT Convoy, which arrived in single vehicles. On the 19th August I was taken to the 19 Division Commander, then Major General KS Thimayya. He told me that I was appointed Military Governor of Leh and there would be no appeal to my doings in Leh so long as I save Leh.”*

There was no appeal against his orders. He had under him the **‘Sikand Aite’**, one company of the 2/4th GR, one platoon of the J&K State Forces, a few local J&K Militia personnel and volunteers from the Indian Army.

Despite this lofty post, Colonel Parab remained down-to-earth and focussed on his goal. He never asked the guerrillas or anyone else to carry out a task which he could not carry out himself. B Company under Major RC Mathur was sent to Shyok and C Company under Captain DS Subha took over Tharu. A Company (Captain EJ Engineer) was sent to Chilling.

My father, Colonel Harishchandra Sakharam Parab was fondly called ‘Napoleon’ because of the part he played in a play in Indian Military Academy in his Gentleman Cadet days. General KS Thimayya, who was very fond of him, always called him ‘Napoleon’ and so did many of his contemporaries. My father was a great man, admired and adored by all those who came in contact with him. He was a believer in the policy of **‘Fire and Forget’**. That was the main reason people came to love him. Grandfather was in the Royal Indian Medical Corps and retired as an Honorary Captain. Incidentally during the Second World War, both served together in the Middle East! He then joined the 2nd Royal Marathas. In 1947, the Mahars were raised and he joined the 2nd Mahar as Second in Command. At that time, my father was marched up to the Army Commander Lieutenant General John Harding for firing Mark V ammunition without permission to help out a Gorkha patrol which belonged to 2/8 GR! He got away with a mere firing. When later, General John Harding was the Chief of the British Armed Forces, he visited 58 Gorkha Training Centre where my father was the Commandant. General Harding had great memory and remembered the ‘firing’ he had given and was thrilled to note that Dad incidentally took over command of the same Battalion in 1947 – a great coincidence.

After showing tremendous resilience for over six months, Skardu fell in August 1948. The hostiles, known as *Kabailies* in those days, headed for Leh and were within twelve miles of Leh on the Indus front, and 60

miles on the Shyok front when **'Sikand Aite'** effectively checked further movement. The *Kabailies* were flushed with their success against the Skardu Garrison and looked forward to the easy capture of Ladakh. They advanced towards Leh, along the Indus and Shyok rivers.

But Dad had already formed a guerrilla force with the regular army, the Buddhists, the Sikhs, Muslims and the Dogra State Forces. These men were trained at Leh. *"I trained them to carry out offensive patrolling tasks deep into enemy territory. I felt that the only way to restore military morale would be to make the garrison assume the offensive. Strict ammunition control was enforced on all fronts. 'Trigger-happiness' was made a major crime."*

Father decided to spread the word that he had one complete brigade under his command, and made his small force 'show the flag' all over the Northern and Eastern routes into Ladakh, by sending long range patrols towards the enemy. He certainly succeeded in his intention and made them more cautious. In his recollections he said, *"In a situation like this, I had to 'show off' myself all along my front with a sprinkling of troops. I formed long range patrols equipped with light machine guns, who 'wandered' across the defence line displaying their fire power. I let it be known to the enemy, through our agents, that all the Indian Air Force Dakotas, which were flying in with our supplies and ammunition, were bringing fresh troops to Leh, and that the intention was to increase the garrison strength to a brigade. General Thimayya backed me up in this deception measure by conferring upon my garrison the title of Leh Brigade".* This show of force all along the defence line kept the enemy at bay temporarily and kept them guessing as to the quantum of force earmarked for the defence of Leh.

One of the 2/8 GR platoons was taking part in an operation with another company. Due to certain circumstances the

Company Commander withdrew his Company from a post, in view of the threat from the raiders. The Junior Commissioned Officer and his platoon withdrew from the post but stayed at the base and informed the Battalion Headquarters. When Colonel H S Parab heard of this, he rode his white/grey horse to the base. The Platoon Commander said he withdrew but it was a 'stupid' order. Dad then asked the Platoon Commander to attack the post and capture it. The Platoon Commander was apprehensive, stating that by now a Raider Company would be there on the objective. My father told the Platoon Commander that he has to attack and that as he moves, they should shout **'Major Saab' - 'Captain Sahab'**. The platoon under the cover of darkness used this tactic. The raiders thought a battalion attack was coming. So, they left the post and the **'Gorkha Platoon'** was victorious. This type of attack could only be done by a Gorkha!

Until now, the *Kabailies* had only been using mortars, light machine guns

and rifles, but intelligence reported that a section of two 3.7-inch howitzers were being sent to a village named Basgo to take on the defenders of Leh. This gun became the target of the local guerrilla force organised by Colonel Parab under Major Hari Chand of D Company. They were determined to retrieve and destroy these guns before they could be used. Along with Subedar Nardhoj, Major Hari Chand located this gun at Basgo after marching 60 miles for three days and nights over high mountainous country involving climbing passes at 16600 feet. He received information from a friendly local that the Pakistanis had arrived at Basgo and were resting. The guerrillas entered the Rest House, and carried out a raid. They destroyed the guns, killed the entire crew and the guerrilla band proceeded to harass the enemy lines of communication. They found about 40 mules being unloaded with about 8 or 9 soldiers acting as mule leaders and escort. The guerrillas killed all the escorts except one, whom they took



Map of area of operations





Dakota aircraft on Leh airstrip, with airmen sitting in the jeep in the foreground (photo credit thebetterindia.com)

prisoner. They destroyed 100 boxes of 3” mortar ammunition and some 20000 rounds of .303 ammunition. They also brought back over 100 coats and blankets which were part of the load. All the escorts were killed, barring one, who was taken Prisoner of War.

In the meantime, attacks to capture Zojila (11578 feet) from the Pakistanis were going on. The Leh garrison remained on its own till November 1948, when the troops broke through the Pakistani defences at Zojila with the help of tanks. To take the tanks up, a proper track had to be built that took until the end of October. By November 14th, Zojila had been cleared. 77 Parachute Brigade crossed Zojila and advanced towards Kargil. The leading companies continued to chase the enemy down the Dras valley. By mid-November, 77 Parachute Brigade had captured Dras and moved towards Kargil.

My father decided to attack the Nimu position of the Pakistanis on the Northern bank of the Indus with three rifle companies, keeping one company in reserve. Another company would go round the South flank of the Chilling

used to push across the small guerrilla band to chase the retreating enemy to Marol to the North.

When Dad was at Mulbekh, he learnt that our troops had reached Kargil. Along with Major Hari Chand, he made his way to the historical link-up that took place on 23rd November. Lieutenant Colonel HS Parab marched Westwards to meet the Commander 77 Parachute Brigade. The first troops to enter Kargil and link up with the Leh Garrison were the 1/5th Royal Gorkha Rifles (Frontier Force).

After this link-up, the Pakistanis on both the Indus and Shyok fronts beat a hasty retreat. Major Hari Chand went towards the Hamboting La to get into the Indus valley, while my father rode along the river bank to see the progress of the Indus column, which stopped eight miles short of Marol. It was short of rations and salt. Colonel Parab recognised the importance of capturing Marol in order to secure Ladakh. However, his request for a battalion remained pending. As he was still awaiting news, the New Year dawned. Cease fire had been declared on January 1, 1949 and a military demarcation line was to be drawn. My father’s only lament was that Marol was lost for good.

‘Sikand Aite’ had freed the Ladakh tehsil, which had a population of 36000. It had inflicted over 150 casualties on the enemy and captured weapons, equipment, clothing and rations. The unit had also built a Krishna temple at Khaltse, a cemetery in Leh and started a widow’s fund. These measures helped boost the morale of the Leh garrison.

General Thimayya said in a special order to them, *“The account of your achievements would not be complete without including in it the two outstanding guerrilla actions undertaken by a small force under the command of one of your officers Major Harichand. In one, you penetrated 6 miles behind the enemy lines at BASGO and destroyed a 3.7 Howitzer which was in transit, killing the crew and in the other*

position and lay an ambush near Khaltse to execute a worthwhile ‘kill’ while the enemy was withdrawing. He launched the attack on November 22nd. A and D companies of his battalion supported by four 2” and 3” mortars, were sent in shortly after daybreak. The retreating Pakistanis fought a half-hearted action between Khaltse and Saspol.

At Khaltse, the bridge over the Indus was burnt, cutting off the road communication with Kargil. It had been swept downstream and got stuck in a narrow gorge. A makeshift bridge had to be created by the guerrilla troops who literally chiselled it out. Named the ‘Lucky Bridge’, it was immediately





War Memorial at Leh (photo credit kesari.in)

*you penetrated 60 miles behind the enemy lines and destroyed a large convoy of arms, ammunition, rations and clothing at LAMAYURU and you brought a Prisoner Of War.”*

Subedar Ranjit Pun held a piquet for six months on the Tharu front without relief. During this period, his piquet was attacked nearly 20 times with continuous shelling of a 3-inch mortar, but he defended it tenaciously. When his ammunition was exhausted and air sorties were not forthcoming, at one stage he exhorted his command to fight with khukris if necessary and held the post for two days without ammunition. As his citation records, *“In fact, he saved the Ladakh Valley”*. Lance Naik Trilok Singh Thapa was instrumental in capturing nearly single-handedly, an enemy post, when he opened up against it first with his sten gun and later with a Bren gun, which he literally snatched from one of his comrades. This action took place when only one company had reached Ladakh. Subedar San Bahadur Gurung, MC, won his Vir Chakra in a sharp encounter near Leh on 15th November 1948 and Lance Naik Jas Bahadur Thapa in an action on 2nd December. Major Harichand received the Maha Vir Chakra. Recipients of the Vir Chakra included Subedar Ranjit Pun, Subedar Sunt Bahadur Gurung, Lance Naik Trilok Singh Thapa,

Lance Naik Jas Bahadur Thapa and Captain Kartar Singh, AMC.

On reflection, Colonel HS Parab spoke about the complete turning of fortunes, given how things were at the time that **'Sikand Aite'** was entrusted with the task. Although the military picture was neither as confusing or as hopeless as the civil state of affairs in Leh, there was little one could be cheerful about. The enemy were in greatly superior numbers, and the fact that Leh had not already fallen was due more to a lack of co-ordinated and determined offensive on the part of the enemy, than any great defensive effort on the part of the besieged garrison.

He added, *“There are those who will say that where there are mountains, there must also be beauty. But then, they have not lived in anxiety nor fought in hardship among those mountains of Ladakh... When you have read the story of our struggles in the fortress of Leh, you will agree that if we failed in our aesthetic appreciation of the mountains of Ladakh, we had reason enough.”*

(This article has been compiled from the personal notes of Lieutenant Colonel HS Parab, reminiscences as recalled by me and other inputs received from Colonel Jeremy Ismael (Retd), an officer of Sikand Aite)

Colonel D H Parab (Retd) has an illustrious Army background, with his grandfather serving in both the World Wars in the Royal Army Medical Corps. His father was the first Indian Commanding Officer of 2/8 GR and was the Military Governor of Ladakh in 1948. An alumnus of Rashtriya Indian Military College (RIMC), Dehradun, Dileep Parab joined 2/8 GR, his father's unit in 1967. An exceptional sportsman, he excelled in boxing and was the President of the Maharashtra Boxing Association. Besides serving as an instructor at National Defence Academy, Pune and at Officers Training Academy, Chennai, he has been the Commandant and Principal at RIMC, Dehradun for seven years. In his second innings, he held charge of Maharashtra Government's Services Preparatory Institute at Aurangabad, and later helmed the Sainik School of the DY Patil Educational Trust. Colonel and Mrs Parab are presently running “Colonel Parab's School”, the first and only ICSE School in Ahmednagar – a school where good manners, moral values, respect for elders and teachers is inculcated and imbibed.



Col DH Parab (Retd)

# ZOJILA

## THE TOUGHEST BATTLE

Zojila was the most formidable key terrain feature, controlling the land access to Kargil and Ladakh. Pakistan occupied it in strength, and the Indian Military Leadership had to bring in the Stuart light tanks of 7 Cavalry to break through the Zojila impasse – they were the ‘game changers’ indeed. Tough going, a tough victory!!

### Saving Ladakh – A National Necessity

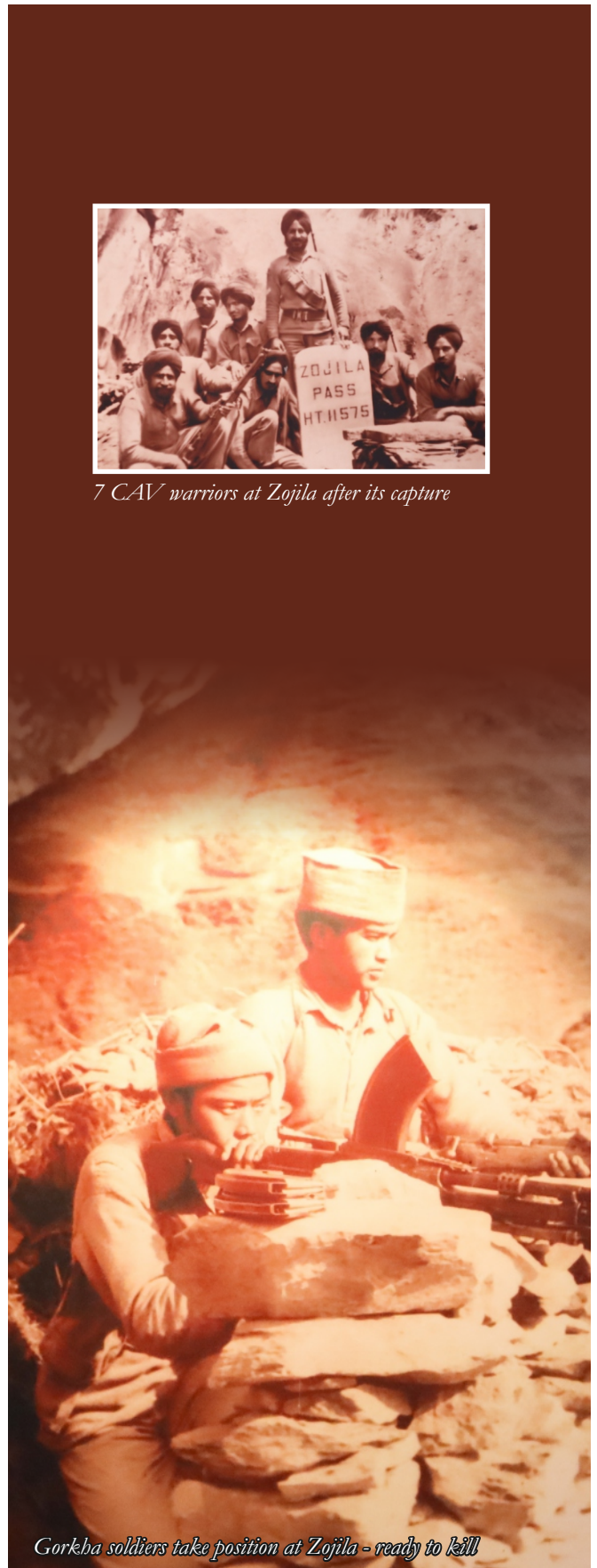
The hard earned victory at Zojila enabled land route access to the Kargil- Ladakh region. Gilgit had been annexed easily when all the Muslim troops of Gilgit Scouts<sup>1</sup> along with their British Officers decided to join Pakistan. The Muslim personnel of the State Forces and the Gilgit Scouts under the guidance of Pakistani Forces then marched on towards Skardu. The Leh garrison and the entire population therein were isolated, while Skardu remained under siege. Saving Ladakh became the major worry. The Pakistani tribal raiders despatched three columns towards Gurez, Leh and Kargil. These three columns bypassed Skardu and commenced operations towards Gurez, Kargil – Zojila and Leh. By May 1948, Burzil and Gurez were captured. In the Kargil - Zojila sector, Kargil, Dras and Machoi also fell to the Pakistani Forces and the third column was threatening the small Leh Garrison. The land route to Leh from Srinagar was cut-off.

Leh was connected to India only through the precarious 400 km long land route from Manali to Leh. In short, Indian Armed Forces were staring at a possible take-over of Ladakh.

<sup>1</sup> Colonel Sarkar, B. 2021. “Battle of Zojila 1948”. Indian Defence Review. August 23, 2021. <http://www.indiandefencereview.com/spotlights/battle-of-zoji-la-1948/> (accessed April 30, 2023). Gilgit Battalion comprised predominantly Muslim troops. Its garrison commander was a British Officer, Major William Alexander Brown, MBE (Most Excellent Order of the British Empire). Pakistan also awarded this officer decades later after the war in 1993 with Sitara – 1 – Imtiaz. The actions of the British Officers during the war a big handicap for the Indian Army as they were privy to plans of both sides which led to loss of surprise or getting surprised on several occasions during the war.



*7 CAV warriors at Zojila after its capture*



*Gorkha soldiers take position at Zojila - ready to kill*



Seeing the criticality of the situation, Major General KS Thimayya, General Officer Commanding (GOC) 19 Infantry Division personally took charge of the operations for liberation of Ladakh and pushing back the enemy from Zojila Sector. There were two major criticalities before General Thimayya, first regaining the Zojila pass before the onset of winters and second the security of Leh.

Accordingly, a detachment of 2 DOGRA under Major Prithi Chand with 40 volunteers left Srinagar and reached Leh on 8 March 1948 after a month-long march across Zojila (which had not yet fallen in enemy hands in February 1948) through snowstorms, blizzards, and treacherous terrain. A small makeshift airfield was constructed at Leh by end April 48 and additional forces were flown in to further strengthen the defences at Leh. Attention was also focussed towards the critical operational situation developing in the Zojila area.

### Initial Operations in Zojila Area

The Operational Situation in May 1948 in the Kargil – Zojila Sector was extremely precarious and it was imperative to capture Zojila before the pass closed in winters.

**Action of 1 PATIALA Battalion.** 1 PATIALA Battalion commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Sukhdev Singh, MC was inducted from Jammu to gain control of Zojila Pass. The battalion concentrated in Baltal, Sonamarg in May 1948 and commenced its operations towards Zojila on May 21, reaching Zojila the next day. The battalion advanced further to Gumri and then on to Machoi where the leading platoon of the battalion came under enemy fire. The gallant soldiers of 1 PATIALA pressed on and evicted the enemy from the Machoi area. In this action Major J S Sidhu was awarded Vir Chakra. The leading

company was reinforced with the second company of 1 PATIALA and tasked to defend Machoi area. By the end of May 1948, the entire battalion had occupied the Zojila pass.

**Counter Offensive by Pakistan.** The Zojila pass remained with 1 PATIALA for a short duration only. By mid-June 1948, the Pakistanis had occupied the dominating heights around the Pass making the positions held by 1 PATIALA vulnerable and untenable. The Zojila – Baltal road was totally under observed mortar fire of the Pakistani troops. The enemy launched a fierce attack on Machoi and Gumri supported by heavy mortars and machine guns. Despite all odds the Patiala warriors beat back the attacks with the support of the Indian Air Force. Sepoy Amar Singh was awarded the Maha Vir Chakra, India's second highest gallantry award. But the enemy persisted with his attack on Gumri and Machoi as they had marshalled mountain guns (artillery) to support their attacks.

Gumri and Machoi could not be

supported tactically or logistically and had to be vacated. 1 PATIALA was pulled back to locations in the depth of Zojila pass. Lieutenant Colonel Sukhdev Singh, MC, the Commanding Officer (CO) was awarded Vir Chakra. Meanwhile, the Pakistanis had reached the outskirts of Leh and launched their first attack on 11 July 1948. Opening of Zoji La before winters set in became a national military objective for survival of the people of Ladakh. Given the extreme vulnerability of Indian positions in the Leh – Ladakh sector, General Thimayya assigned 77 Parachute Brigade, commanded by Brigadier K L Atal, the task to recapture Zoji La at the earliest.

### An Extreme Challenge – A Hard Nut To Crack

**Daunting Terrain and Hostile Weather Conditions.** Zoji La, located on the Great Himalayan range at an altitude of 11570 feet, is surrounded by dominating mountains rising to 5000 metres on either side of the pass. The



*Supplies at Baltal enroute to Zojila*





*A view of Zojila as a truck (in the foreground) moves up on the winding road*

Western Face of Zojila is extremely steep, almost vertical with the area being prone to landslides making construction of tracks and roads exceedingly difficult. Similarly, the weather remains very hostile with frequent snowstorms, heavy snowfall and rains especially from October to April making any attack operations virtually impossible to mount. Also, the air operations were severely restricted due to weather conditions. Moreover, the impact of air strikes was minimal due to the mountainous terrain and existing folds and caves obtaining in the area. It would not be out of place to state that mounting any attack in the terrain and the weather condition prevailing at that point in time was the ultimate test of a soldier's will, courage, and determination.

**The Enemy.** The enemy positions very well fortified; he was well dug into the mountain side exploiting the natural caves and folds in the ground. The strength of the enemy believed to be holding Zojila was initially only a company but as it turned out later it was held by one battalion strength. As the battle progressed, the Pakistanis reinforced it

with an additional company. The Pakistanis were holding the heights dominating the pass, Mukund Ridge and Chabutra Ridge – on the right and left shoulders and a depth position on Machine Gun Ridge. In addition, the enemy had moved up 3.7-inch howitzers.

**Own Troops.** 77 Parachute Brigade had 5 MARATHA LI, 5/11 GORKHA RIFLES (GR) and 3 JAT as part of the Brigade. 1 PATIALA which was holding the firm base was also placed under command with a battery of 3.7 inch howitzers in direct support of the Brigade. Although, air support was dedicated but the fighter aircraft could only operate during the day.

### Two Failed Attacks

77 Parachute Brigade had planned to capture Zojila by a two-pronged attack. 5/11 GR less one company was to attack from the flanks via Botkulganj Pass and Dras. The fourth company of 5/11 GR was to conduct a diversionary operation from Khanabal via Sum towards Kargil. 5 MARATHA LI and 3 JAT were to attack Zojila frontally. 5/11 GR proceeded to capture Dras via Botkulganj on 03 September 1948. Botkulganj was secured on 06 September but as they moved forward towards Dras, they encountered a massive glacier and could not proceed further. They reverted back to Baltal. 5 MARATHA LI launched the frontal attack to capture Zojila on 05 September 1948, but the attack failed in the face of a well-entrenched enemy, sustained artillery fire, inhospitable terrain, and weather conditions. 5 MARATHA LI suffered heavy casualties. Despite the major losses, a second attack was launched with two battalions, i.e., 5 MARATHA LI and 3 JAT on 14 September 1948, but this attack too failed. 3 JAT suffered 135 fatal casualties. The fallen soldiers' bodies could only be recovered after a year as they were buried in the snow. Losses of such a magnitude had rarely been witnessed, akin to the "*Charge of the Light Brigade who rode into the valley of death*".

### Operation Bison: Achieving the Impossible

In the face of an almost impossible situation, Major General Thimayya thought '*out of the box*' and decided to employ tanks to lead the assault of the infantry - a masterstroke. It was a feat never tried before at such high altitudes. Impossibility of the battle situation notwithstanding, the third attack was planned to capture Zoji La supported with a

squadron each of tanks and armoured cars of 7 Cavalry.

But there were many difficulties which had to be surmounted to bring the tanks into that arena. These problems were, **firstly** to move the tanks from Jammu to Sonamarg. **Secondly**, to make the jeepable, fair-weather road comprising steep gradients, twists, and turns from Baltal to Zojila suitable for movement of tanks. **Thirdly**, it was necessary to achieve operational surprise for the success of the operations. **Fourthly**, the entire operation had to be completed before the closure of the passes in winter and time was running out. These hurdles were formidable, but for the ingenuity of Lieutenant Colonel Rajinder Singh Sparrow, CO 7 Cavalry and Major Thengaraju, the Engineer Company Commander, who organised their task in such a manner that the *“impossible became I am Possible”* in the lexicon of the Indian Army<sup>2</sup>.

**Movement of Tanks.** The Squadron of Stuart Mark 6 tanks of 7 Cavalry were dismantled for the movement from Akhnur to Zoji La. The turrets were removed and moved separately so that the enemy would mistake the tanks as tracked T 16 carriers. This measure was also necessary to reduce the weight of the tanks so that they could cross over the weak bridges on the Jammu – Srinagar road. The tank chassis were camouflaged to make them look like the T - 16 weapon carriers. Bogie wheels of the tanks were fixed on the front of the tank hulls, the tank guns were removed from the turrets to eliminate all indications of presence of tanks in the sector. The turrets and guns were carried concealed in 3-ton lorries. The movement was conducted during night; curfew was imposed in the areas through which the tanks passed. At Sonamarg, a specially secluded spot was selected for

concentration of the tanks and the armoured cars. On the Kashmir side of Zoji La, a long cave was dug into the mountain near the road to hide the tanks. The induction of the tanks from Akhnur to Sonamarg started on August 24 and was completed by September 14/15th night. Normally the task of refitting the tanks is undertaken by Command Base Workshop then located at Delhi, however in this case it was done by the Light Armoured Detachment (the integral workshop of the regiment) with some outside assistance at Baltal. The armoured cars squadron, which was operating in Uri – Chakothi Sector also reached Baltal on the night of September 23/24th.<sup>2</sup>

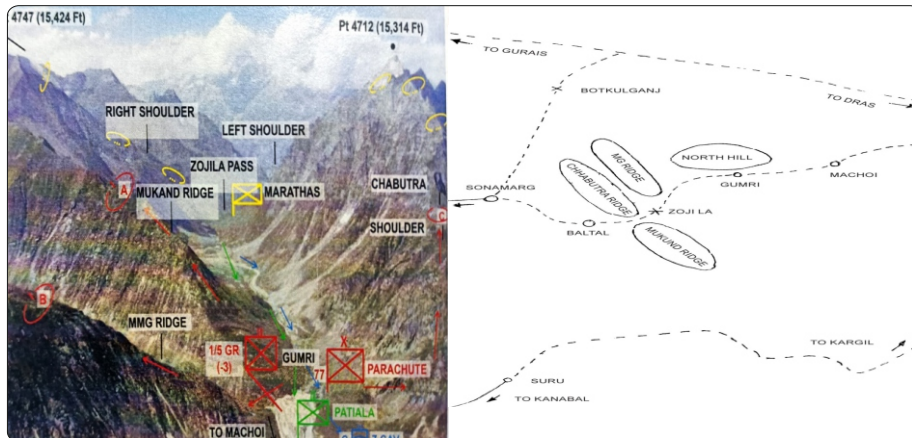
**The Sappers In Support.** The Engineers worked remarkably, they were the Hanuman of Zojila who brought the Sanjivani (tanks) for the Indian troops to regain the pass. The Baltal – Zojila track was only a mule track of 8 km length. The Madras Sappers had improved this into a jeepable track for the operations

of 1 PATIALA. While the tanks were moving from Akhnur to Baltal, 13 Field Company of the Engineers under Major Thengaraju with 433 Field Company less one platoon under command worked day and night to make the track wide enough for the tanks. The task was extremely difficult as the area was under observation and fire of the enemy. Most of the work was done by night. Over 18 tonnes of explosives per kilometre were used to blast the rocks. As the road work reached near Zojila, the enemy interference increased. The bravery of Jemadar Thangavelu deserves a special mention. Despite effective enemy fire, with utter disregard for personal safety, he continued blasting the rocks obstructing the passage of tanks till his task was finally completed on October 15. For his heroic acts Jemadar Thangavelu was awarded the Vir Chakra. The route for the tanks up to Gumri was ready by 16 October 1948. The road was named Thengaraju Road after Major Thengaraju, the Task Force



*Indian Bravehearts march up to Zojila - steely eyes, confident countenance*

<sup>2</sup> Op cit. Colonel Sarkar, B.



Left Photo. The operational plan marked on an image of Zojila.  
 Right Photo. A sketch, showing the plan view of important localities

### The Juggernaut Moves

The attack was postponed due to bad weather and heavy snow fall several times but finally it commenced on November 1. Even on the day of the attack, the weather played truant with low hanging clouds and heavy mist masking the movement of the tanks, but it also provided them necessary cover from enemy observation. Lieutenant Colonel Sparrow took a calculated risk and boldly moved forward under covering fire of the guns at 1045 hours, half an hour later than the planned time. Due to the steep gradient and heavy snow fall breakdown of tanks enroute to the pass

Commander. While talking about the performance of the Sappers, Thimayya said “I consider this is a record in any military operations”.<sup>3</sup> MADRAS Sappers (Hanuman) had delivered the route for the Sanjeevani Booti (the tanks) to the Commander 77 Parachute Brigade.

**The Assault Plan.** With the arrival of 7 Cavalry on the battle scene, the chances of breaking through the enemy defences at Zojila improved. Indian Army troops for the capture of Zojila, as part of Operation Bison comprised of 1 PATIALA, 4 RAJPUT, 1/5 GR (Frontier Force), 7 Cavalry less B Squadron (tanks and armoured cars), two batteries of field guns and one battery of 3.7-inch mountain gun. 77 Parachute Brigade plan to capture Zoji La was as under: -

- 7 Cavalry less a Squadron with a company of 1 PATIALA to capture Zoji La.
- 1/5 GR (Frontier Force) to capture Mukund Ridge by night D/D plus 1.
- 1 PATIALA less one company to capture Machine Gun Ridge and North Hill by night of D/D plus 1.
- 4 RAJPUT – Brigade reserve.

was expected, accordingly a Dodge recovery vehicle under Dafadar Nahar Singh moved ahead of the tank column. This was nothing short of suicidal but he cheerfully volunteered. With only one tank breaking down which was taken care of by the recovery detachment under Dafadar Nahar Singh, the tank column closed in with the pass. The tank commanders and drivers disregarding the danger from enemy’s small arms and artillery fire kept the hatches open to see the enemy positions and commenced shooting at their fortifications and destroyed 25 strongly held bunkers located in the caves above the pass.

The Pakistanis were completely surprised. They were shocked and could not believe that tanks could come to Zoji La that too in such bad weather conditions. Many fled their locations to higher reaches of the mountain ridges but later returned and surrendered to the Indian troops as they could not bear the extreme cold climate. By the evening of 01 November, the entire Gumri basin was secured. Machoi was captured on 02 November. 7 Cavalry had created a history in mechanised warfare. The Indian Army did not suffer any casualty. Similarly, 1 PATIALA’s effort in Zoji La right from the time they occupied the Pass the first time to subsequent operations till the recapture of the entire Gumri Basin was nothing short of heroic. Following the success at Zoji La, the ‘gung ho’ Indian troops simply swept down from Zojila into Dras Valley like a Juggernaut. They captured Kargil by 23rd November and the same day linked up with the eagerly awaiting Leh garrison. A month later, the UN brokered cease fire came into effect on December 31, 1948, and all operations ceased. Unfortunately, the ceasefire prevented the Indian Army from recapturing Skardu and the Northern Areas, otherwise the history and geography of J&K may have been entirely different.

<sup>3</sup> ibid





General KM Cariappa talking to 7 CAVALRY warriors at Zojila after their victory

### Final Perspective

The Battle of Zojila is replete with military lessons. We have often seen that surprise is a battle winning factor, often achieved by thinking ‘out of the box’ and doing the unexpected. The appearance of tanks at an altitude of 11300 feet was unimaginable for the Pakistani troops. Maintaining secrecy of the operational design is extremely vital for achieving surprise. The way the entire operation was planned, and the movement executed in secrecy led to the enemy getting completely surprised. It was the shock and awe factor that crushed the Pakistani resistance.

The Kargil conflict of 1999 showed us how difficult it is to launch a successful attack in high altitude terrain, and highlighted the need for massive observed direct and indirect fire assaults. Air support too is critical for success in such terrain and weather conditions. Zojila was ‘Vijay’ in the same terrain and conditions – but was achieved four decades earlier with lesser fire support.

The Battle of Zojila was a saga of unparalleled gallantry, courage, and determination. All participating units of 77 Parachute Brigade (1st PATIALA, 1/5 GR (Frontier Force), 4 RAJPUT), 7 CAVALRY and Madras Sappers were awarded the

**Battle Honour ZojiLa.** 1 PATIALA earned eight Maha Vir Chakras and 17 Veer Chakras. The sacrifices of the warriors of 5 MARATHA LI and 3 JAT were no less heroic. But any account of the Battle of Zojila would be incomplete without recalling the drive, determination and resolute will of General KS Thimayya, who decided to

employ tanks for the capture of Zojila. The bold leadership of Lieutenant Colonel Sparrow during the capture of the pass was also exemplary. But for them the history and geography of Ladakh would have been entirely different. **Surprise, ingenuity and valour were the high points of the Battle of Zojila.**



*Lieutenant General Dushyant Singh, PVSM, AVSM (Retd) was commissioned into 9 MARATHA LI in December 1981. He is an alumnus of NDC, DSSC, CDM and Naval Post Graduate School, California, USA. He has attended the Regional Defence Counter Terrorism Programme with specialization in Terrorist Operations and Financing in US. Besides his service in varied operational areas, he has been an instructor of Human Resource Development in College of Defence Management, Secunderabad and also commanded the Army War College at Mhow. The General Officer has commanded an Infantry Battalion, Brigade and a Division in Jammu and Kashmir. He also holds the distinction of having served twice in the elite National Security Guards. He contributes regularly in various defence journals and newspapers, has written chapters in two books namely, “Understanding Suicide Terrorism (chapter on Detering Terrorism)” and “Countering Terrorism: Psychological Strategies (Chapter on Impact of Virtual world in Creation and Sustenance of Terrorism)”. He also has a website dushyantspeaks.com*



Lt Gen Dushyant Singh

# ADVANCE TO KARGIL

## NOVEMBER 1948

The Kargil War of '99 caught the imagination of the Indian public because it was the first war which was literally streamed into our homes from the front line. However little is known of the battles which were fought on these icy heights and across freezing rivers in November 1948. A bold offensive by the 77 Parachute Brigade cleared the path to Leh - resulting in Ladakh remaining a part of India when the borders were fluid in the state of Jammu & Kashmir (J&K) after Maharaja Hari Singh signed the Instrument of Accession.

### Backdrop

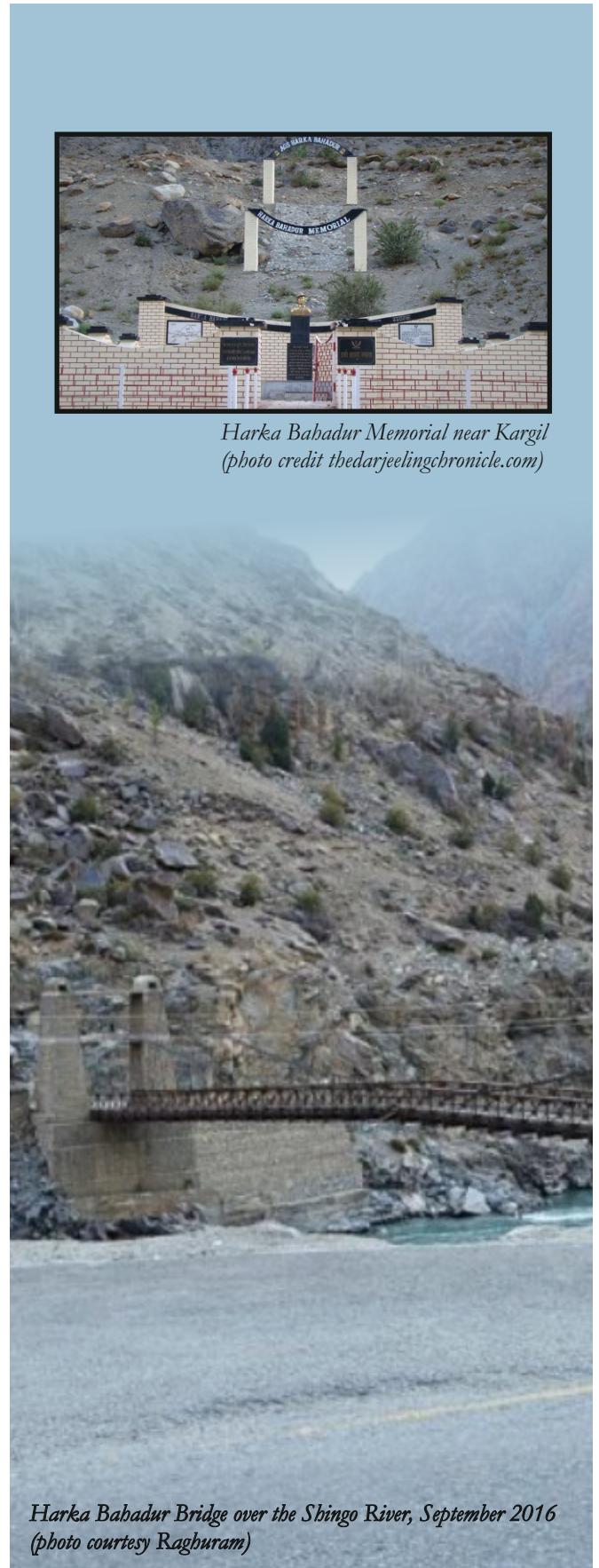
The **Gilgit Scouts** were a Paramilitary Force raised by the Government of British India in 1913, on behalf of the princely state of J&K, to police the Northern Frontier of India. In November 1947, under the command of Major WA Brown, the Gilgit Scouts overthrew the Governor of Gilgit appointed by the Maharaja of J&K, and declared accession to Pakistan. The Muslim components of the State Forces joined the rebels and executed the non-Muslim troops. The combined force surrounded Skardu, the capital of Baltistan and threatened Ladakh by descending into the unheld areas of Ladakh along the Line of Communication from Leh to Kargil and beyond to Dras and Zojila. The area from where they were not evicted before the Cease Fire came into effect continues to be under Pakistan control, and is called Gilgit - Baltistan.

### Capture of Zojila and Build Up

The fate of Ladakh hinged on an early capture of the Zojila Pass and induction of troops to link up with the depleted garrison in Leh. Realising the importance of Zojila, the Pakistanis captured Zojila immediately after the winter of 47-



*Harka Babadur Memorial near Kargil  
(photo credit thedarjeelingchronicle.com)*



*Harka Babadur Bridge over the Shingo River, September 2016  
(photo courtesy Raghuram)*



48, whereas the inhospitable terrain made the going very difficult from the Kashmir side. In the summer of 1948, it was realised that dislodging the resistance at Zojila was extremely difficult considering the steep rock faces, narrow ridgelines and limited approaches. Finally, the pass was only captured after the induction of light Stuart tanks which facilitated the capitulation of the Pakistani irregulars. After the capture of Zojila, progress to Dras was also relatively slow primarily due to the extremely difficult terrain compounded by the slow forward build-up of logistics. Dras could only be captured by about mid-November. As per conventional wisdom, the campaigning season in Ladakh was well-nigh over by the time Dras had been captured. But the status of our garrison in Leh was getting critical.

As the old saying goes, *Fortune favours the Brave*. The weather gods smiled, and there was a respite from the snowfall which had already taken place in and around Zojila, Dras and areas ahead. A short tactical break was taken for supplies to fetch up and the advance to Kargil commenced. The plan was to move with speed towards Kargil and establish a link up with the troops of the Leh garrison in the area of Kargil. The capture of Kargil was entrusted to 1/5 Gorkha Rifles (GR) (Frontier Force) and coincidentally the link up at Kargil was planned with troops of another Gorkha battalion, that is, 2/8 GR from the Leh Garrison.

### The Terrain

As far as the terrain is concerned, to put it simply, there are two parallel ridges generally aligned East to West from Dras to Kargil. The heights vary from 12000 to 15000 feet with the valley floor being at about 9000 to 10000 feet. Between these two ridges runs the Dras River which joins the Shingo River, which in turn flows on to

Kargil before turning Northwards. The Dras River is a snow fed river flowing Eastwards with its source to the West of Dras, while the Shingo emanates to the North near Burzil Bai (presently in Pakistan held Kashmir). Near Kargil, the Suru River joins the Shingo. The rivers being snow fed are fast flowing with freezing waters almost through the year. In November 1948, the water was ice cold and crossing the river without proper expedients or bridges was almost impossible.

The terrain dictated the plan, so the movement perforce had to be conducted along the narrow valley floor with the troops being vulnerable to firing from the heights. There was the option of exploiting the Umba La pass on the ridge to the South, generally opposite Dras village. This option was ruled out due to the snow conditions and time of the year, after reconnaissance by a column of 1/5 GR (Frontier Force).

A word about the administrative back up for the advance to Kargil. The mules allotted to the 77 Parachute

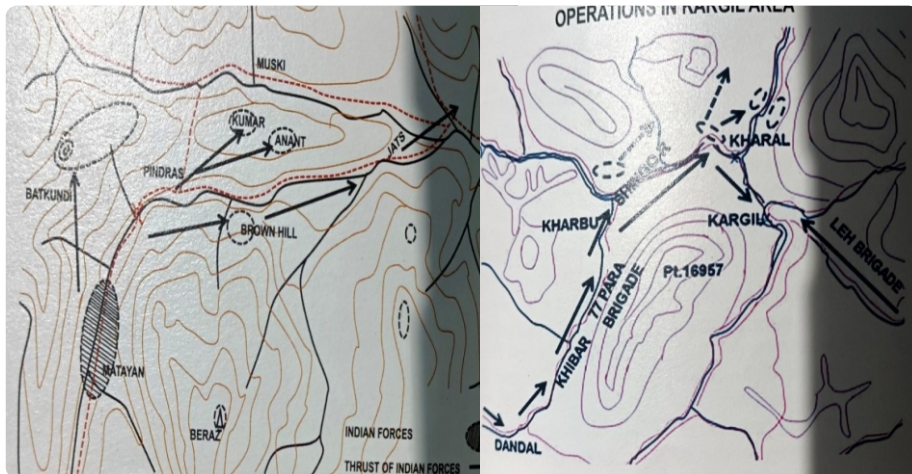
Brigade were barely sufficient to maintain the column which was already stretched out up to the area of Dras. To maintain momentum, there was a requirement of air supplies to be organised at Dras for about 2500 men and 500 animals for a minimum period of six days. First and second line ammunition for two infantry battalions and one mountain battery which was to be in support of the advance was also required. General K S Thimayya, the General Officer Commanding, ensured that all available engineer and pioneer resources were utilised to improve the long line of communication. For the logistic needs of 77 Parachute Brigade, Army Headquarters planned that approximately 25 Dakota loads would be dropped at Dras and the balance were to be dropped at Kargil. Hence the urgency to secure Kargil and be in a position to receive the balance resupplies which were also to take them through the heaviest snowfall and the ensuing harsh winters.

4 RAJPUT took over all the



*A mule train moves up with supplies, and porters accompany too*





Left Map. Operations of 77 Parachute Brigade towards Dras.  
 Right Map. Operations near Kargil, to secure Kharal across the Shingo River

which was to lead to Kargil. Two companies were advancing on the valley floor with B Company led by Subedar Harka Bahadur Rana, MC moving along the left bank of the Dras river and C Company led by Lieutenant Iche Gurung, MC advanced on the main track running along the right bank of the Shingo river. B Company was soon held up where the Shingo River joined the Dras river - a water obstacle ahead, a fast flowing river with icy cold waters and therefore it was not possible to cross without a bridge. B Company handed over this sector to 1 PATIALA and came back to Kharbu, crossing over to the right bank of the Dras River and followed C Company along the main track.

piquets in the area of Dras while protection of the line of communication from Baltal to Pandras was given to 5 MARATHA LIGHT INFANTRY. 1/5 GR (Frontier Force) and 1 PATIALA were tasked to advance to Kargil, which resumed on 18 November 1948. Around 21st November, the Parachute Brigade reached the junction of Dras and Shingo Rivers and troops concentrated in the general area of Tasgam. The wooden bridge across Dras River near Kharbu had been burned by the retreating enemy, however the Sappers quickly erected another bridge at the same site. 1/5 GR (Frontier Force) which had concentrated at Kharbu quickly crossed over and led the advance leaving 1 PATIALA to form the firm base.

Keeping the urgency in mind, Lieutenant Colonel AS Pathania, Commanding Officer of the Gorkhas decided to advance with three companies up with D Company being the Southernmost company advancing along the hills South of the Dras/Shingo River along a foot track, obliterated by the snow,

### Securing the Kharal Heights

Both the companies made good progress along the Southern Bank till Kharal where the bridge across the Shingo River had been burnt by the enemy. They had laid a well-planned ambush on the hills to the North, across the Shingo River. There was no way to dislodge them nor could the area be bypassed. The enemy waited in well concealed positions and they allowed the leading platoon of C Company to come right out in the open stretch before opening fire and the company suffered 18 casualties in dead and wounded.

Any further advance along the main axis from Dras to Kargil would be possible only after clearing the hostile positions across the river at Kharal. A number of attempts were made on 22nd November to cross the Shingo and drive away the raiders from the North however they were unsuccessful due to the fast current of the Shingo River. At this point, it is pertinent to mention the heroics of Captain AK Kochhar, the Adjutant of the battalion. He was successful in swimming across the river and took a telephone wire tied to his waist with the help of which he pulled a rope across and was able to secure it on the far bank. Cold, shivering and alone he rushed towards the village which fortunately was not occupied by the raiders and he was looked after by the villagers and survived the ordeal. The rope which was tied by Captain Kochhar eventually guided the troops across the river and enabled B Company to cross over in improvised rafts.

Mindful of the casualties suffered by C Company, Lieutenant Colonel Pathania tasked Subedar Harka Bahadur Rana, MC to lead the advance with his B Company. Harka Bahadur was told that as soon as he

had even one platoon across the Shingo River, he was to make for the hills above the Kharal bridge site. The rest of the company would follow. He was to carry the light machine gun of his company so that when he opened fire at first light he could give the impression of being in strength. The Junior Commissioned Officer (JCO) showed excellent initiative in preparing improvised rafts, initially the smaller ones could not withstand the fast current of the Shingo River. Eventually they were able to secure larger sized logs and a bigger raft was prepared.

Meticulously crossing two persons at a time, Subedar Harka Bahadur was able to put across one of his platoons commanded by Naib Subedar Lal Bahadur Pun on to the far bank of the Shingo River. Lal Bahadur and his platoon swiftly climbed up the hill feature overlooking the enemy with 15 men and assaulted the enemy entrenched on the Ridge overlooking the site of the broken bridge. As the “**Ayo Gorkhali**” war cry shattered the stillness at dawn, the audacious attack rattled the enemy and they fled leaving behind 10 dead bodies. The blooded Khukris had undoubtedly pierced through flesh and bone, as the Gorkha warriors nimbly struck at the raiders. Naib Subedar Lal Bahadur Pun was awarded VrC for his courage and bold leadership.

Subedar Harka Bahadur, the Company Commander too displayed excellent leadership qualities as well as tactical and good field craft in organising the crossing over the Shingo River. The enemy was holding heights across the Shingo River to deny any crossing on the Shingo River. Therefore the selection of a suitable site was imperative and the lack of resources was the other major limiting factor. The JCO displayed great ingenuity and was able to gather adequate logs to prepare a suitable raft.

In the meantime, A Company under

Captain RN Sen climbed the feature to the South and crossed over to the Suru valley and proceeded towards Kargil, reaching the area of Kargil by about 0400 hours on 23rd November. Subsequently, D Company which was already marching along the foot track on the Southern ridge line also reached Kargil. The raiders fled the area of Kargil when they learnt of the successful crossing of the Shingo River and occupation of the heights to the North by B Company of 1/5 GR (Frontier Force).

#### The Link -Up

On 24th November, 1/5 GR (Frontier Force) less B Company (which continued to hold heights North of Shingo) concentrated in the area of Kargil. The same evening, the column from Leh led by Lieutenant Colonel Parab and Major Hari Chand of 2/8 GR arrived in Kargil with a small patrol of 2/8 GR and militia troops. This very

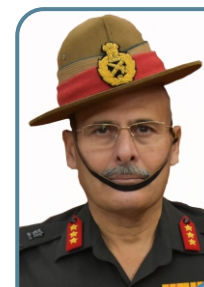
important and strategic link up had taken months of planning and was undertaken boldly before the onset of winters. Ladakh was secured for posterity. The intended push towards Marol to the North of Kargil where the Shingo River joined the Indus was not affected due to the heavy snowfall and adverse weather conditions.

#### Harka Bahadur Bridge

The ceasefire was declared effective from 01 January 49 and thereafter we remained in ‘as is where is’ basis. Subedar Harka Bahadur, MC ensured the crossing over the Shingo, resulting in timely movement and securing of Kargil. There is a memorial dedicated to him and the bridge constructed over the Shingo River near Kharal village is called the Harka Bahadur Bridge. **This is a tribute to the valour and selfless commitment to nation building of the unsung Infantry Soldier!!**



*Lieutenant General Ravin Khosla, UYSM, AVSM, SM, VSM (retd) was commissioned into the 5th Gorkha Rifles (Frontier Force) in December 85. He has served in counter insurgency operations in Sri Lanka, J&K as well as in the Northeast. He commanded his unit in Shopian in J&K as well as in Port Blair. He commanded a brigade and division on the Line of Control and a Corps on the Northern Borders. The officer has held several prestigious command and staff appointments.*



**Lt Gen Ravin Khosla**

# BAPTISM BY FIRE

## AIR OPERATIONS IN 47-48

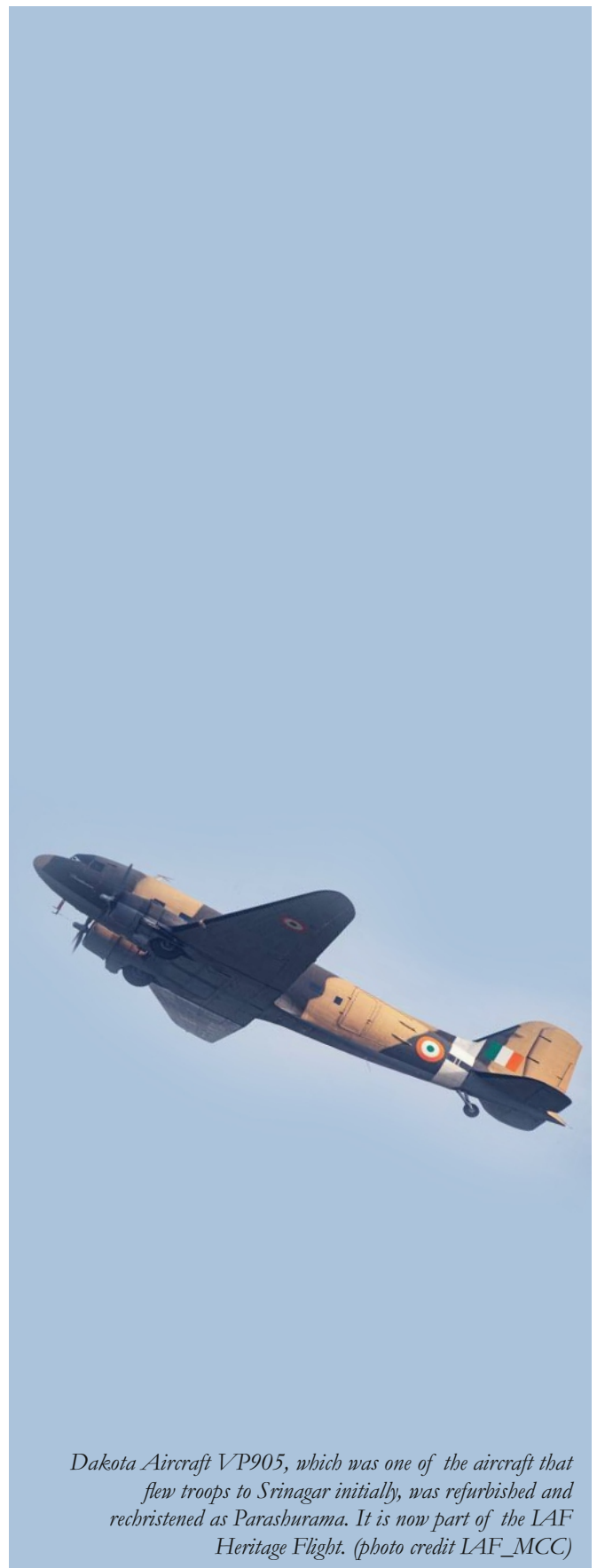
438 days of Restrained,  
Yet Battle Winning Action

Responding to the urgent crisis that developed in Jammu & Kashmir (J&K) immediately after Pakistani Kabbalies raided across the State's frontiers, the Royal Indian Air Force (RIAF) played a critical role, doing supply-dropping, strafing, bombing, ferrying troops and evacuating refugees. The newly independent Air Force fought its longest war lasting 438 days, alongside the Army in J&K.

While the RIAF was exclusively used in the Army Cooperation role during the Burma Campaign, the story was no different in Kashmir. The Army knew the vital contribution that the Air Force could make and the first demands for air strikes were initiated as soon as Lieutenant Colonel Dewan Ranjit Rai, Commanding Officer 1 SIKH, landed in Srinagar on 27 October 1947<sup>1</sup>, highlighting the inherent and embedded jointmanship existing between the Army and air warriors at the tactical level.

The air warriors took to the skies, committing almost the entire fighter resources of the RIAF into the operations during which Tempests of Nos 7, 8 and 10 Squadron took part in the fighting, as well as the sole transport squadron, No.12 flying the venerable Dakota<sup>2</sup>. The feats performed by RIAF were incredible when one considers heroic and pioneering breakthrough events like **"Leh Landings"**, the innovative use of available resources like **"Bomber Dakotas"** or supply drops by Tempest aircraft which paid rich dividends. These set the standard for others and proved that air power is the battle winning factor even in rugged terrain and high altitude.<sup>3</sup>

Timely air intervention saved Kashmir for India on more than one occasion in this operation. But for the RIAF, Kashmir would have been lost on 27th October 1947 itself and thereafter during the Battle of Badgam and Battle of Shalateng. Poonch could not have survived without air maintenance. Leh would have been lost if the RIAF had not flown in reinforcements<sup>4</sup>. So let us fly through some of the crucial actions of the RIAF.



*Dakota Aircraft VP905, which was one of the aircraft that flew troops to Srinagar initially, was refurbished and rechristened as Parashurama. It is now part of the IAF Heritage Flight. (photo credit IAF\_MCC)*



### “Churn”

In order to fully comprehend and analyse the 438 days of joint operations, especially the air campaign, it is important to find out - *What happened? What was the air campaign? What did the air campaign achieve? Who ran the air war? What were the conditions in the theatre? What were the instruments of air power? Which technology worked?*

To start with, please note that during the initial years of independence, Indian and Pakistani Air Forces were not led by their own citizens but by Englishmen, nationals of a third country. While the two newly born nations were fighting their battles in J&K and suffering battle casualties, officially the two countries were still at peace, part of the Commonwealth.

The Air Force of undivided India, then designated RIAF, was in the process of being partitioned. All permanent stations / bases of the RIAF were located in what was to become Pakistan. The total force, already undergoing demobilisation after the Second World War, consisted of 10 under-strength fighter squadrons – including one transport squadron, with most of the British officers returning home. After partition, RIAF got six fighter squadrons and a transport squadron, with one third of the available spares package<sup>5</sup>. The Pakistan Air Force got the balance of the resources.

Air Marshal Sir Thomas Walker Elmhirst was appointed India's Chief of Air Staff (CAS) on 15 August 1947. Air Headquarters (HQ), functioning from “**H Block Hutments**”, New Delhi, had Air Commodore (later CAS) Subroto Mukerjee, MBE as the Senior Air Staff Officer (SASO), Group Captain (later Air Commodore) Mehar Singh, DFC as the Director Operations, Wing Commander (later Air Marshal) HC Dewan as the Wing Commander Operations. Group Captain (later Air Marshal) Aspy Engineer

was Senior Officer in charge Administration (SOA). Two Group Headquarters were created – No 1 Operational Group at Palam was housed in various hutments at the airfield and was tasked to conduct and oversee all RIAF operations and support the elements in the Northern Theatre, which later evolved into Operational Command and then into Western Air Command (WAC).<sup>6</sup>

The RIAF went into Kashmir with little or no choice and operated from airstrips like Srinagar, and Jammu where no infrastructure existed and lacked administrative and maintenance facilities. Air Operations from Jammu, Srinagar and Amritsar were controlled from 3 Wing at Palam, till that time<sup>7</sup> under the command of Wing Commander (later Air Vice Marshal) E W Pinto. No 1 Wing at Jammu was raised on 01 March 1948, with Advance HQ at Srinagar. Advance Landing Grounds (ALG) at Amritsar and Pathankot also came under 1 Wing. There was a severe

shortage of spares as the storage depots went to Pakistan. Against a Unit Establishment of 16 aircraft, squadrons had on an average only 8 aircraft. No 12 Squadron had only 10 Dakotas on strength.

### The First Airlift Into Srinagar

Operation Gulmarg was launched on 22nd October by Pakistan with tribesmen charging into the J&K State. By the 24th of October, the invaders were at Baramulla, 35 miles West of Srinagar. For the next few days, Baramulla bore the brunt of the raiders' greed and lust. They halted their advance towards Srinagar for booty and pleasure.

India could intervene militarily only if J&K was a part of the Indian Union. The Indian Government involvement commenced on 25th October 1947, when Mr VP Menon, the chief negotiator for Government of India, Colonel SHFJ Manekshaw, MC and Wing Commander HC Dewan



*Newly arrived troops at Srinagar Airfield*



*Left photo. Troops ready to board an LAF Dakota. (photo credit LAF Archives 1947 - 48).  
Right photo. A wounded soldier being evacuated in a Dakota aircraft*

flew down in a Dakota to Srinagar to assess the situation personally. The rapid advance of the raiders towards Srinagar made the possibility of Srinagar falling in the next few days imminent. The Prime Minister of J&K flew back to Delhi with them, and the Instrument of Accession was signed on 26th October.

Considering the poor road connectivity to Srinagar from the Indian side, the Indian Army had to be urgently airlifted into the Srinagar valley. Despite the uncertainty of the security situation of Srinagar airfield for landing troops, Dakotas started airlift of troops and material from the crack of dawn the next day itself (27th October), flying 1 SIKH into the battle ground. This was not easy, because the airstrips both at Srinagar and Jammu, made for the small, light, personal aircraft of the Maharaja, were short and unpaved. There were no navigational or landing aids, no crash tenders, proper refuelling facilities were not there. High ranges, often covered with clouds or mist would have to be negotiated by Dakotas with their limited ceiling capacity. Each landing and each take-off would raise a cloud of dust thereby reducing visibility.<sup>8</sup>

Flight C from Palam was scheduled for 1100 hours comprising 8 Dakotas (Patiala Mountain Battery) while Flight D, also from Palam would follow at 1300 hours comprising 11 Dakotas (second company of 1 SIKH). The civil Dakotas were to carry 15 men plus 500 lbs while the RIAF Dakotas had a capacity of 17 men along with the additional 500 lbs. ‘Men’ included personal arms, equipment and bedrolls. After take-off from Palam, the aircraft refuelled at Amritsar prior to landing at Srinagar, a total flying time of 3 hours and 10 minutes one way<sup>10</sup>. The first Indian troops landed at Srinagar airfield at 0930 hours on 27th October. At that time it wasn’t even known whether the airfield had fallen to the tribesmen or not, but the risk was taken. On the first day, RIAF and civilian Dakotas flew 28 sorties airlifting 1 SIKH. The entire 161 Infantry Brigade was airlifted within the next five days.

### The Crucial Fortnight Thereafter

On 28th October, Tempests from Ambala attacked enemy positions at Pattan. Keeping in mind their limited range, Spitfires and Harvards were moved to Srinagar. Refuelling was a major problem; at times fuel had to be drained from the Dakotas to supply the fighters. Then a maintenance unit had to be set up at Srinagar airfield. Tempests were able to operate with more efficiency from Ambala or Amritsar. On 3 November, a decisive battle was fought in the immediate vicinity of Srinagar airfield where the enemy managed to launch a surprise attack. Their numerical superiority was overwhelming. At this stage, the Spitfires pitched in and saved the day and the airport, forcing the tribal hordes and the Pakistani troops to call off their attack on the airfield. The next day’s major fighting was at Badgam, a small village Southwest of Srinagar and a few kilometres from the airfield. The attack was fought off successfully by an Army-Air Force combined operation—the Air

An Air Bridge was engineered to put boots on ground, directly inducting troops into battle through the solitary airfield at Srinagar. Given the very small size of RIAF’s fleet of Dakotas, assistance from civil airlines was resorted to, to reinforce the airlift.<sup>9</sup> The total number of Dakotas available on October 27th were listed in an Operational Order issued to 1 SIKH. Flight A from Willingdon, Delhi, due to take off at 0500 hours, included 6 civil Dakotas (to transport one company of 1 SIKH). Simultaneously, Flight B from Palam, Delhi, would also depart at 0500 hours, comprising 3 RIAF Dakotas (ferrying the Battalion’s Tactical HQ).

Force using the Brigade Commander's maps! Tempests of No.7 Squadron played an important part. According to Brigadier (later Lieutenant General) LP Sen, scores of bodies were counted between Srinagar and Baramulla, almost all due to air action<sup>11</sup>.

The next major action was at Shalateng, which lies just 7 kms outside Srinagar on the Baramulla Road. The battle commenced around noon on November 7 and was over by 1700 hours in the evening. The raiders were taken completely by surprise. Shot up from all sides and subjected to heavy shelling, including strafing by the Tempests, the tribals were in full retreat towards Baramulla by the evening<sup>12</sup>. Pattan was recaptured by 2000 hours the same day. The Indian casualties were light. The enemy left 472 dead on the battlefield and 146 more bodies were counted on the road to Baramulla. Baramulla was cleared on the 8th and Uri on the 13th, although this last area changed hands even after this date. At each step, the Army had the help and cooperation of the Air Force - in reconnaissance as well as fighting, the aircraft using rockets, guns as well as bombs<sup>13</sup>.

### Poonch November 1947

In the meantime, the raiders and Pakistani troops captured Mendhar, South of Poonch on 03 November. Their next target was Poonch, situated South of the Haji Pir Pass. This became the arena of the longest siege and battle in Kashmir which tested the courage, tenacity and guts of both the Army and the Air Force<sup>14</sup>.

Poonch is of strategic importance, as Poonch provides an alternate access to the Kashmir Valley through Surankot - Pir Ki Gali. The Pakistani raiders surrounded Poonch on 21 November 1947, and cut off its communications from the rest of India<sup>15</sup>. 40000 refugees, mainly Hindus and Sikhs took shelter in the town. Though

supplies were airdropped, it was not sufficient for the army plus forty thousand refugees. Lieutenant Colonel Pritam Singh, commanding the Army troops in the area decided to build an airstrip in Poonch. A large number of refugees teamed up with the Army personnel and built a 600-yard dirt strip in six days. While the construction activity was taking place, RIAF Spitfire and Tempest aircraft engaged the Pakistani raiders, to make sure they did not interfere in construction efforts<sup>16</sup>.

On 12 December 1947, when the strip was ready, Air Commodore Mehar Singh, the intrepid and expert pilot landed the first Dakota there, carrying Air Vice Marshal Subroto Mukerjee and a large load of essential supplies. The landing was more of a test for the pilot, since the area was surrounded by hills on three sides, which were occupied by the Pakistani raiders. Many aircraft were hit and damaged in the area. The airstrip was constantly targeted by the Pakistani raiders, especially when an aircraft was about to land. It required courage and

piloting skills to land while under enemy fire. No. 12 Squadron pilots rose to the occasion. They flew not just for a day or a week but the whole year round. In the first week, they averaged a dozen trips per day; on the return journey, they evacuated casualties and refugees. Mehar Singh, the first pilot to land in Poonch also became the first pilot to land in Poonch at night, with the help of oil lamps. He did so without any landing aids<sup>17</sup>. It was observed that at night the raiders used to move their convoys around freely because during the day Tempests would harass them repeatedly, inflicting heavy losses. As Air Marshal Grewal recalls "*Mehar Singh then had this bright idea - why not load a bomb into the cargo compartment of a Dakota aircraft and roll it out of the door. So we began to do just that, live-fusing in the aircraft with a torch and rolling out the bomb, which could land anywhere within the radius of half a mile, but it created a big bang... and the man on the ground did not know where it was going to land either.*"<sup>18</sup>

Poonch was under siege for a year,



*An IAF Dakota flying over the mountains (photo credit [www.bharatrakshak.com](http://www.bharatrakshak.com))*





LAF Spitfires at Ambala, before they flew into Srinagar (photo courtesy Polly Singh)

and Indian troops finally linked up with the soldiers holding out in November 1948. When the prolonged “Punching Operation” was going on, several other battles were being fought simultaneously. In December 1947, the Army and Air Force cleared the sensitive area of Chhamb (which later suffered the brunt of Pakistani attacks in two successive Indo-Pak wars as well). Battles raged in many of the places mentioned earlier right through the winter. By end January and early February 1948, the enemy concentrations near Jhangar and Nowshera were defeated. The RIAF, as usual, gave excellent support, a memorable action being that of the Tempests strafing enemy positions at Chingas, while Indian troops were fighting their way to Rajouri in April 1948.

### Leh May – November 1948

To the East of the Kashmir valley lies the district of Ladakh with its HQ at Leh on the banks of the Indus, roughly 360 km East of Srinagar and 400 km North of Manali. Kargil is the major way point along the Srinagar - Leh route. The invaders

started making plans for the invasion of Ladakh in early 1948. By then, they had already occupied most of Baltistan and the Gilgit area, with Skardu coming under attack in December 1947. It was apparent that there was no way out but another airlift operation would be required, if the Indian Army was to reach the remote region in time, along with their weapons and equipment, food, clothing, medical stores, tents and whatever else was necessary<sup>19</sup>.

British trained Sonam Norbu, the first engineer from Ladakh, as a part of relief party, reached Leh on 08 March 1948. Under his supervision, construction of an airstrip between the Indus river bed and the town

commenced on 12 March 1948 and a 2300 yards long makeshift airstrip was ready by 6 April 1948 through sheer physical labour. No one had landed piston engine transport aircraft at such altitudes at that time. The airfield was aligned in a bowl with only one direction for approach and landing. The hills on the other side precluded any scope for ‘going around’ in case the approach was not right – in short it had to be right the first time. With no pressurization, no oxygen equipment, no maps, no navigation aids and no prior familiarization with the landing strip, Mehar Singh took off in a Dakota on 24 May 1948 with Major General Thimayya on board. Flying above 18000 feet and after negotiating the Zojila, Namikla and Fotula they landed at Leh, establishing beyond doubt that the Dakota was capable of opening an air bridge to Leh<sup>20</sup>. Within the next few days a company of 2/4 Gorkha Rifles was inducted into Leh to strengthen the Leh Garrison. Skardu remained under siege for six months and fell on 14 August 1948 and more Pakistani forces were freed to attack Ladakh. From 15 August onwards the weather improved, reopening the air-bridge into Leh. From 23 August onwards, Lieutenant Colonel HS Parab, commanding 2/8 Gorkha Rifles and his unit began arriving in Leh. The Dakotas also helped evacuate casualties on their return flight out of Leh. On 24 November 1948, 77 Parachute Brigade which had advanced across Zoji La and Parab’s troops linked up at Kargil<sup>21</sup>. The land access to Leh was finally achieved.

### “Cautious and Restrained”

The decision to save Kashmir with all the resources at hand by the government on 26th October 1947 was indeed a bold and momentous one without any dithering at all. It is apt to recall General McArthur’s words, “*The History of failure can be summed up in two words, Too Late*”. By

taking the decision quickly and without dithering, India was able to save a major portion of Kashmir<sup>22</sup>.

The air campaign during the 1947 – 1948 operation in Jammu and Kashmir was fought bitterly in terrain unprecedented in modern warfare and sometimes at altitudes at which no wars had been fought earlier. The RIAF fought in an ‘unconventional’ manner within the political constraints imposed on it in the form of stringent Rules of Engagement and terrain imperatives that had never been encountered before, and their associated impact on targeting. This was the first limited war where participants decided, for various reasons, to restrict the war to J&K State. The use of air power was restricted and not given freedom to attack targets not only across the border but even within the boundaries of J&K<sup>23</sup>. The RIAF pilots were repeatedly warned of serious consequences, including Court Martial, if they attacked any civilian targets, intruded into Pakistani territory or engaged enemy troops with incendiary weapons.

The overall strategy for use of airpower in Kashmir was overly cautious and totally defensive. The policy flouted the lessons learnt and advocated during the Second World War. It may be argued that with the raiders catching the defenders napping, there was very little choice but to stick to close air support initially. There is also no denying the requirement of close air support, but the raiders could have been thrown out much more quickly if an offensive strategy had been followed. The plan for interdiction, which would have proved to be effective, especially considering the long lines of communications, was not cleared. Targets within three miles from the border could not be attacked<sup>24</sup>.

Lieutenant General (later Chief of Army Staff), S M Srinagesh, aptly summed

up the situation of the RIAF in his address to the Staff College on 26 October 1949<sup>25</sup>, stating,

*“The effectiveness of air effort had already been limited due to the political considerations, and the RIAF was unable to function in one of its primary roles, of indirect support and the isolation of battlefield by attacks on enemy’s supply bases and main lines of communication by interdiction. Air Commodore AM Engineer, Commanding No 1 Operational Group was now forbidden to attack installations near the towns of Muzaffarabad and Mirpur and the vital bridges of Lachman Pattan and Kobala. This meant that the Air Force in Jammu and Kashmir was not allowed full scope of action.”*

### The Track Record

There is no doubt that our Army successfully executed one of the most glorious military operations in the most difficult circumstances<sup>26</sup>. But it was also the finest hour for the Indian Air Force (IAF) and the brave Kashmiris who collectively contributed in their own way to the ‘rescue’ of Kashmir<sup>27</sup>.

The overall estimate of air armament expenditure during the war included 244 x 1000kg bombs, 1100 x 500kg bombs, 5334 rockets, 458319 rounds of 20 mm gun ammunition. Considering the carriage capacity of Tempest aircraft and numbers deployed, it was a considerable effort. Between January and April 1948, Dakotas of No 12 Squadron delivered over 3.5 million lbs of load in the form of supplies, evacuated 10000 refugees from Poonch and 4000 troops and 1000 casualties. This effort is estimated to have multiplied twice before the end of war. The Squadrons’ effort during the bombing missions is estimated to be around 40000 lbs<sup>28</sup>. In October 1948, besides other tasks, the squadron’s aircraft were utilised on two occasions for reconnaissance of Zoji La. Dummy paradrop trials were also practiced over Skardu in an integrated attack with eight Tempest aircraft<sup>29</sup>.

In this period, the No 7 Squadron flew over 600 operational hours. For its war effort, the unit was awarded one



Civilians awaiting evacuation in a Dakota aircraft from Poonch Airstrip (photo credit LAF Archives 1947-48)



LAF Dakota coming in to land (photo credit LAF Archives 1947 - 48)

MVC, four VrCs and one Kirti Chakra. Four pilots from No 8 Squadron were awarded Vir Chakras for their gallantry displayed during the conflict. No 10 Squadron clocked more than 300 sorties in support of the ground force and expended more than 20000 lbs of bombs, 500 rockets and 20000 rounds of 20mm cannon. The Unit earned four Vir Chakras<sup>30</sup>.

The air warriors executed one of the most brilliant military campaigns in its history under the most daunting circumstances - moving troops into critical battles and providing extensive combat support in uncharted areas to

turn the tide. Within the IAF, the deeds of pilots, engineers, technicians and other personnel during that war became legendary and have inspired succeeding generations. But little has been written or known in and outside the service about how our inheritance was shaped by so few<sup>31</sup>.

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- 30 *Ibid* P 357
- 31 *Ibid* P



*Air Marshal Suresh Chandra Mukul, PVSM, AVSM, VM, VSM (Retd) was commissioned in the fighter stream of the LAF in January 1972. A 'Qualified Flying Instructor' and a 'Fighter Combat Leader', he has an experience of over 4200 hours of flying on various fighter aircraft of the LAF. He is a graduate of the Defence Services Staff College and is an alumnus of the Air War College (USA). The Air Marshal has held a number of operational and staff appointments during his career including command of a fighter squadron, Chief Operations Officer and command of a frontline airbase. He has been Air Assistant to the CAS, Assistant Chief of the Air Staff (Operations), Senior Air Staff Officer and Air Officer Commanding-in-Chief of a Command. He retired as the Chief of Integrated Defence Staff to the Chairman COSC (CISC).*



**Air Marshal  
Suresh Chandra Mukul**



# REMINISCENCES OF A BRAVEHEART

## MEHAR TO THE RESCUE

Few names in the Indian Air Force (IAF) evoke such awe and inspiration as the mention of Air Commodore Mehar Singh, MVC, DSO. Mehar Baba, as he was known, aroused instant admiration and respect, and was the daredevil pilot who landed first in Poonch and Leh.

Once the history of any war is diligently imbibed, certain deeds of individuals get imprinted so firmly in memory, that they resurface time and again. So it was that the mere mention of a school child's last name, a few days ago, brought to mind in a flash her late uncle, the indomitable Air Commodore Mehar Singh, DSO, MVC.

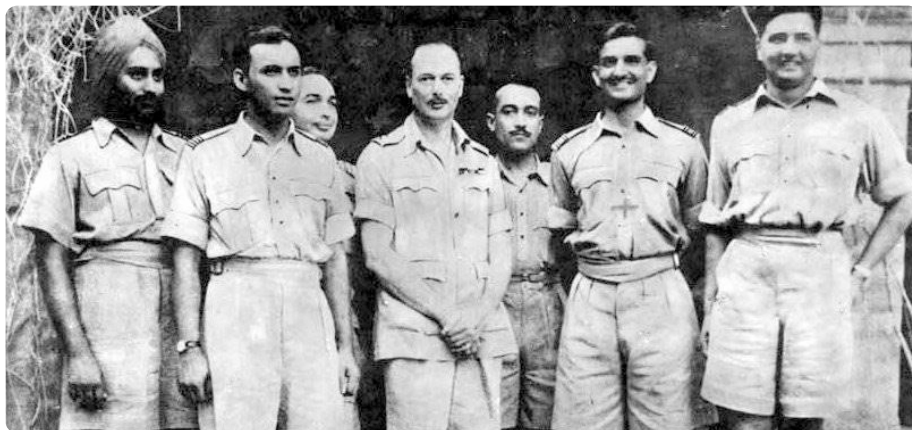
Mehar Singh was born on 20 March 1915 at Lyallpur (now Faisalabad in Pakistan). While in the final year of College, he was selected for the Royal Air Force College (RAFC), Cranwell, England and joined the RAFC in 1934. Mehar Singh proved to be a first-class pilot. The Commandant, RAFC wrote about him, *"Keen, cheerful, hardworking and popular. An exceptionally good pilot, keen on games and has represented the college at hockey, of which he is an excellent player."*

Mehar Singh was commissioned in August 1936 and posted to No. 1 Squadron, which was then based in the North West Frontier. He immediately went into action against the Frontier Tribesmen, building up substantial operational experience and a reputation. It was not unusual to find entries in Mehar Singh's Log Book, flying upward of one hundred hours a month, time and again.

After the outbreak of World War II, Mehar Singh was assigned to raise and lead No. 6 Squadron, Royal Indian Air Force (RIAF). The squadron was equipped with the Hawker Hurricane fighter aircraft. The squadron was assigned the role of reconnaissance, and, after formation, was deployed to the



*Air Commodore Mehar Singh with Air Marshal Subroto Mukerjee  
(photo credit [www.bharatrasbak.com](http://www.bharatrasbak.com))*



*The Cranwell-ians : L to R: Mehar “Baba” Singh, Subroto Mukerji, Habib Ullah “Bul Bul” Khan, Duke of Gloucester, Henry Runganadban, A B “Zaidi” Awan, K K “Jumbo” Majumdar. Photograph taken around mid 1942 during the Duke’s visit to India (photo credit www.bharatrankshak.com)*

North East on the Burma front. The Hurricanes of 6 Squadron carrying out reconnaissance missions deep into enemy territories soon became a familiar sight.

His friend and contemporary, Aizad Baksh Awan, who at Partition chose to go to Pakistan, regarded Mehar Singh as a fearless flier endowed with supernatural senses and abilities. Awan credits Mehar Singh with the heart of a Bengali tiger, stamina and guts of a Punjabi bull and flying ability of a Himalayan eagle. On lone sorties Mehar Singh would penetrate hundreds of miles over Japanese territory photographing troop movement and concentrations from 20000 feet.

Perhaps an incident would best illustrate his calibre as a flyer and leader. Shiv Dev Singh, one of his flight commanders, while flying a mission, was hit by ground fire but luckily landed his Hurricane in a clear patch of elephant grass. His formation member landed back and showed Mehar exactly where Shiv had force landed. Mehar lost no time in taking-off in a Harvard with a mechanic, spare parts and tools. Shiv tried to stop him from landing by waving his arms but

Mehar Singh touched down and after a few bad bumps came to a stop.

Shiv frantically warned his squadron commander that a whole Japanese brigade was only two miles away. Both were aware of the horrendous beating that the Japanese inflicted on Indian pilots to break their morale. However, Mehar Singh calmly inspected the Hurricane and after confirming that only the propeller was damaged, took off with a great deal of bumps and bounces. Shiv and the mechanic followed in the Harvard. Though the Hurricane vibrated like crazy due to the damaged propeller, it made it back. For Shiv, it was a new lease of life; for Mehar, it was just another

day’s work commanding a fighter reconnaissance squadron. There are not many examples of such exceptional display of poise, skill and courage in the face of the enemy.

By the time Field Marshal William Slim launched the re-invigorated XIV Army to defeat the Japanese in the India-Burma Theatre of World War II in 1944, Squadron Leader Mehar Singh’s actions and deeds had already placed him in the league of legends. His reputation was so aptly and amusingly summed up by the Field Marshal in his memoirs, recounting an impromptu visit to No. 6 Squadron of the RIAF in the Arakans (Burma) thus:

*“.....the last air-patrol had run into a bunch of Zeros (Japanese fighter aircraft) and been shot down. The Sikh Squadron Leader, an old friend of mine, at once took out the next patrol himself and completed the mission. His methods, rumour had it, were a little unorthodox. It was said that if any of his young officers made a bad landing, he would take them behind a “basha” and beat them. Whatever he did, it was effective, they were a happy, efficient and very gallant squadron.....”*

Flight Lieutenant Asghar Khan, who later became the Chief of Air Staff of Pakistan said, “...with the solitary exception of Squadron Leader Mehar Singh, a pilot of exceptional ability, no one was able to inspire confidence among us.” One of his Flying officers recalled that, in one instance, during the mango season, Squadron Leader Mehar Singh authorised a flight back from Delhi by the hack Harvard to divert, and collect a plane load of mangoes for the Squadron from an orchard owned by a relative. You have to have lived in India to understand what access to fresh mangoes in the mango season can mean to men in an inaccessible forward area! It did wonders to the morale.

On 28 March 1944, Air Marshal Sir John Baldwin, who headed the

3rd Tactical Air Command in Field Marshal Slim's Army, made an unscheduled visit to No. 6 Squadron. Officers and airmen in their working overalls were hastily gathered under a cluster of teak trees to listen to their Chief, who, *"at the conclusion of his short speech, reached for the DSO in his pocket, and pinned it on Mehar Singh who was, 'slightly staggered,' for it was the first and the only DSO, the RIAF received!!"*

The DSO (Distinguished Service Order), a military decoration of the United Kingdom, is awarded for exceptional meritorious service during wartime, typically in actual combat. The citation for Squadron Leader Mehar Singh, read as follows:-

*"This officer has completed a very large number of operations, and has displayed great skill, courage and determination. He is a most inspiring leader, whose example has been reflected in the fine fighting spirit of the squadron. This officer has rendered most valuable service."*

Two months after Independence and Partition, a surprise attack was launched by Pakistan on 22nd October 1947 in the princely state of Jammu & Kashmir (J&K) with the aim of wresting it and making it a part of Pakistan. Once the Maharaja of J&K signed the Instrument of Accession on 26th October 47, India took on the task of throwing out the raiders. The airlift of 1 SIKH into Srinagar on 27th October 47, followed by the airlift of 161 Brigade, and the valiant push back resulted in the situation in the Kashmir valley reversing to a significant extent.

### Landing at Poonch

By end November 1947, Pakistan's armed misadventure was fully contained in the Srinagar valley. However, the garrison town of Poonch was in dire straits. Besides approximately 3000 personnel of the State Forces and the Indian Army, there were about 40000 refugees in

Poonch. The enemy was well dug in on surrounding hills, and laid a siege to starve them of food and fire power. All the ground routes were blocked. The only possibility for supplies was from the air. Air drops by Dakotas were inadequate to sustain the large population. Besides, sometimes the dropped supplies were lost.

The dynamic Garrison Commander, Brigadier Pritam Singh mustered the resources available to him, including the refugees, to make a 600 yard airstrip in Poonch. It was a difficult airstrip to land even in normal circumstances. With the enemy at vantage points on the surrounding hills, who lost no opportunity to take pot shots at the aircraft, it made aircraft operations to and from Poonch more difficult.

Air Marshal Grewal, who was a young pilot with the only Dakota squadron (12 Squadron RIAF) at that time, recalls, *"Landing an aircraft there under any circumstances would have been very difficult but at that time we had an extremely capable leader - Air Commodore Mehar Singh. But for him, I think that the operations would have been quite impossible for the Air Force."*

On 12 December 47, Air Commodore Mehar Singh landed at the Poonch airstrip in a Harvard aircraft. Thereafter he piloted a Dakota loaded with vital supplies and landed at Poonch. He was also the first to land a Dakota by night at Poonch. This marked the beginning of an air bridge lasting many months, for sustaining besieged Poonch.

The idea of using the Dakota as a bomber, using 250 lb / 500 lb bombs, is also attributed to the innovativeness of Mehar Singh. They would fuse the bombs in the aircraft and roll them out of the aircraft, creating a big bang on hitting the ground.

### Saving Leh

The moment of his ultimate glory was when he created aviation history by landing the first aircraft on the outskirts of Leh, by the banks of the river Indus! After the fall of Khaltse, Northwest of Leh on 22nd May 1948, the danger to Leh was real and the situation desperate.

The lack of road and aerial access to Ladakh, was a cause of serious concern. At that time, airlift of troops and materials to Ladakh was the only viable course. Sometime in March 1948, Shri Sonam Norbu, the first engineer from Ladakh, had been assigned the onerous task of constructing an airstrip at Leh. He completed the construction of a 2300 yard runway in April 1948.

However there were major problems in carrying out air operations. The runway was at an elevation of approximately 11000 feet, the highest in the world at that time. Nobody had landed at an airfield at this altitude. The Dakota had no super charger. The altitude of the airfield meant that the engine would not develop full power, forcing the pilot to take off with a reduced payload. It had no pressurisation in the cockpit, no de-icing equipment, no navigational aids onboard and no maps either. The available maps were not very accurate. Most importantly, the aircraft had no oxygen system fitted. There was a chance of aircrew succumbing to hypoxia. The ceiling of the aircraft was 19500 feet, whereas the aircraft would have to fly at much higher altitudes to clear the mountain ranges. There were no landing grounds enroute to put the aircraft down in case of an emergency. The enroute weather was also unpredictable.





*On the Burma Front : Squadron Leader Mehar Singh, as CO of No.6 Squadron with Air Commodore Alexander Gray during a visit to Cox Bazaar (Photo courtesy Tim Cornish)*

surveyed route map. A great pity that no photo-record was made of the first landing, especially General Thimayya's first step in Ladakh. No airlift was feasible in the next few days for various reasons, including bad weather. On 31 May, the aircraft did get airborne but had to return due to enroute bad weather. On 01 June 1948, six Dakotas, personally led by Air Commodore Mehar Singh, carrying one company of 2/4 Gorkha Rifles and 29000 lbs of load, landed at Leh. Mehar Singh was the first to land, who then proceeded to control the other aircraft on circuit, till all of them landed safely. The troops were off-loaded, while keeping the engines running lest they gave starting problems for the return.

But Leh had to be saved. And for that, despite the enormous risks and difficulties, an aerial link had to be established.

The only man who could pioneer the aerial landing at Leh was Mehar Singh. In a one-to-one meeting, Major General K S Thimayya emphasized that *"the fall of Leh would be a strategic blow to India. It had to be saved at all cost... that he was prepared to risk his own life with the IAF to save Leh..."*

Mehar Baba explained that *"the Dakota was not designed to fly at such high altitude...."* General Thimayya knew that Mehar Singh *"never asked his subordinates to undertake a task that he himself had not first carried out,"* and so he closed the discussion on a positive note: *"I will be on that flight in your cockpit. So let's go!"*

The stage was thus set and on 24 May 1948, Air Commodore Mehar Singh landed the first Dakota at Leh. His passenger was Major General K S Thimayya. To land at Leh, he had to negotiate mountains towering up to 24000 feet in a Dakota with no heating facilities, no pressurization and without any

Characteristically, for the return leg, he was the last one to take off, having ensured that all the other aircraft are safely airborne. Had it not been for his courageous intervention, Leh would surely have fallen.

On 26 January 1950, Air Commodore Mehar Singh received the first Maha Vir Chakra of the IAF. As it happens with most geniuses, Mehar Singh could not suffer "fools". Four months after the Leh landing, he resigned his commission on 28 September 1948. And on 11 March 1952, nine days short of his 33rd birthday, he died when his Bonanza aircraft, caught in a freak, sudden storm crashed on the outskirts of Delhi, snuffing out a charmed life.

*Death! Be not proud  
For, Mehar Baba flies for ever,  
In his immortal shroud!*



*Lt Gen Baljit Singh, AVSM, VSM (Retd)  
was commissioned into the Regiment of  
Artillery in 1956. He superannuated from  
service in 1992 after a distinguished career  
spanning 36 years. He was invited to the Board  
of Trustees of World Wildlife India in 1990  
and served two terms therein.*



**Lt Gen Baljit Singh**



*Major General Syed Ahmed El Edroos, Hyderabad Army  
surrendering to Major General JN Chaudhuri on 18 September  
1948 at Hyderabad (photo credit siasat.com)*

# OPERATION POLO

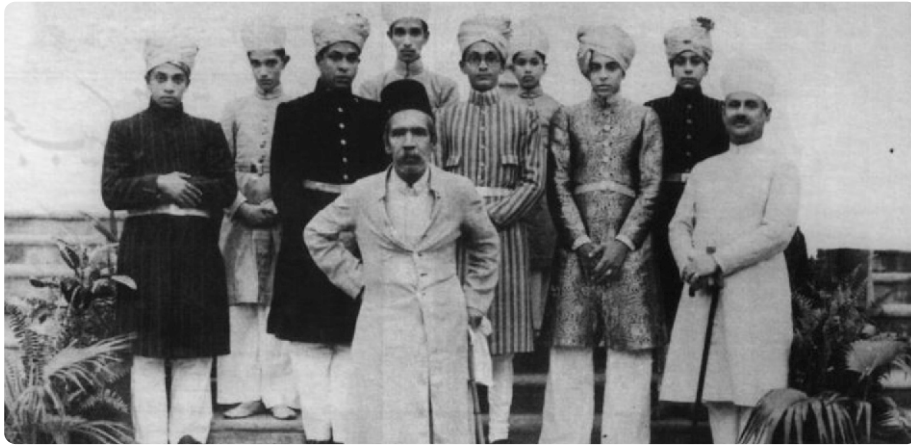
## THE HYDERABAD ANNEXATION

### A Socio-Politico-Military Commentary

While researching to write on Operation Polo (occasionally referred to as Operation Caterpillar), the author realised that the events leading up to application of military force were equally relevant, and important to understand. This article highlights the turbulent socio-politico environment, ongoing communist revolution which turned into a Telangana rebellion, violence perpetuated by the Razakars under Qasim Razvi, which were at play when Prime Minister Nehru and Home Minister Patel decided to call in the Army to ensure Hyderabad's accession to India. And, of course, the professional Indian Army rolled up the Nizam's Forces without much resistance/operational difficulties.

#### Political Backdrop

Most Indians know about the statesmanship of Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel, India's first Home Minister after independence, who was mainly responsible to get the 565 Indian Princely States to accede to the Dominion of India, in a largely smooth and organised manner. Except for the States of



Osman Ali Khan, Asaf Jah VII, the last Nizam of the state of Hyderabad. (photo courtesy: Wikimedia Commons)

Hyderabad, Junagarh and Jammu & Kashmir all others had acceded by 15 August 1947. Hyderabad with a largely Hindu population was ruled by the Nizam, Mir Osman Ali Khan. The Indian Government offered a Standstill Agreement<sup>1</sup> to the Nizam, which was applicable for one year, and gave an assurance that the status quo would be maintained. According to this Agreement, India would handle Hyderabad's foreign affairs, defence and communication, but Indian Army troops stationed in Secunderabad Cantonment would move out. The Nizam signed the Standstill Agreement on 29 November 1947, but continued to harbour hopes of staying independent.

The Standstill Agreement meant different things to different dramatis personae; the Nizam bought time to strengthen his military<sup>2</sup> by importing considerable quantum and type of armaments, and gain international acceptance for staying independent; Nehru felt it would purchase communal harmony; Lord Mountbatten while wanting Nizam to accede to India, wanted a special connect with UK; Home

their official surrender on 17 September 1948, which is considered the Date of Accession.

Those were indeed tumultuous days, with a fluid security environment and fast-moving events; evoking numerous narratives on the events leading up to the annexation of Hyderabad State with the Union of India.

**Hyderabad State.** Situated on the Deccan Plateau in Southern India, Hyderabad was the richest, largest and most populous princely state of the British Raj<sup>4</sup>. It accepted British ascendancy in Hyderabad by the Treaty of Masulipatam in 1768, and was the first state to seek and sign for British protection in 1798. The state had a patrimonial system with the Nizam of Hyderabad as the ruler and the British maintaining complete authority over it. Multi-ethnic in composition, its 17 districts were divided across three linguistic regions:

- **Hyderabad - Karnataka** consisted of three districts; Kannada speaking.
- **Marathwada** consisted of five districts; lingua franca Marathi.
- **Telangana** consisted of nine districts; Telugu speaking. More than half the population, Eastern half of the state including Hyderabad city.

**Feudal System.** A feudal system was followed in the agrarian economy due to the illiterate peasantry, with two main types of land tenancy: *diwani* (or *kbalsa*) and a distinct category of land called jagir. Jagirs were granted to jagirdars (aristocrats) based on their rank and order, while a portion of the jagir lands were held as the crown lands (*sarf-e-kbas*) of the Nizam. The civil courts had no jurisdiction over the jagir lands, allowing jagirdars to impose various forms of exorbitant arbitrary taxes, and extract revenue through private agents. The

Minister Patel doubted the bona fides of the Nizam; Qasim Razvi<sup>3</sup>, Head of Majlis-e-Ittehadul Muslimeen (MIM, now AIMIM) took it as an opportunity to build his Razakars as a formidable force and make Hyderabad a land for Muslims; the Socialists, Communists and most peasants of Telangana considered it as a sell out to the Nizam. When the security, social and humanitarian situation became untenable, and outside the control of the Nizam, an Indian Army operation codenamed '**Operation Polo**', officially called a 'police action' was launched on 13 September 1948. It led to the defeat of the Nizam's Forces and



deshmukhs and deshpandes performed land registration, as they had access to land records, turning them into a hybrid between a 'feudal lord and a bureaucrat'. They acquired more lands from the peasants and forced them into the status of tenants/landless labourers at will. The feudal system was particularly harsh in the Telangana region of the state. They also doubled up as money lenders and as the highest village official. **Their power kept consolidating as it was hereditary! They could even determine taxation rates and managed land surveys.**

**Communism Movement in Telangana.** The Communists had been active in the Telugu speaking Godavari-Krishna delta region of the neighbouring Madras Presidency since 1934, and were largely organised through peasants' organisations such as the Andhra Mahasabha (Madras), the All India Kisan Sabha and the Indian Peasant Institute. The first incursion of the communist movement in Telangana occurred in the Madhira-Khammam area of Warangal district, and first organisations were established in Warangal and Nalgonda districts through the efforts of Chandra Rajeswara Rao, a peasant working in Mungala. The Regional Committee of the Communist Party of India in Telangana was established in 1941. The students' movement contributed significantly to the growth of the communist movement, disillusioned with Gandhian satyagraha politics. The Andhra Conference, which was a cultural-literary forum acting as a front organisation for the Hyderabad State Congress, was overtaken by communists. Convinced that the expulsion of the Nizam along with all the elites was a necessity for effective democratic gains, the left-wing faction decided to fight the feudal system, began embracing communism and started

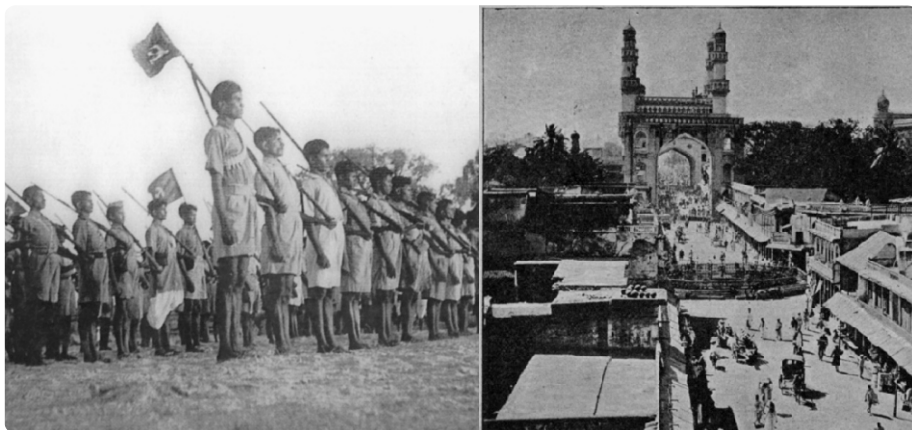
building up the organisation in the villages from 1941 onwards. They reduced the enrolment fee by one-fourth, encouraged participation by the landless and impoverished sections of the population, and took up peasants' causes. Locals started referring to it as the Andhra Mahasabha (AMS) in Telangana, which slowly transformed into a militant mass organisation opposed to the Nizamate with a coalition of peasants, the working class, middle class and youth as its members. The agrarian distress was further aggravated by rising prices and food scarcity after World War II.

**The Telangana Rebellion.** Was popularly known as Telangana Sayuda Poratam, and was one of the many reasons for launch of Operation Polo. The rebellion was historically assigned the definitive period from 1946–51, when the communist-led insurrection of peasants against the princely state of Hyderabad in the region of Telangana was fought. The revolt began on 04 July

1946, when a local peasant leader was killed in the village of Kadavendi, Warangal, by the agents of a *dorra*. Beginning in the districts of Nalgonda and Warangal, the rebellion evolved into a revolution across Telangana in response to continued repression by the Nizam Mir Osman Ali Khan and later Qasim Razvi. The Hyderabad State Forces and the police, combined with the paramilitary Razakars were extremely harsh, but were defeated using guerrilla warfare tactics by rebels. The rebels established a parallel system of governance composed of gram rajyams (village communes) that caused a social revolution where caste and gender distinctions were reduced; women's workforce participation increased and the conditions of the peasants significantly improved with land redistribution. At its peak in 1948, the rebellion covered nearly all of Telangana and had at least 4,000 villages directly administered by



Hyderabad State in 1947. Courtesy Imperial Gazetteer



Left photo. Telangana Rebels in 1948. (photo credit wikimedia commons)  
 Right photo. Charminar area in 1947 (photo credit wikimedia commons).

added merger with India into its list of demands and aligned itself with the Indian National Congress which had started pressuring the Nizam to accede. The Government of India made several concessions in their negotiations with the Nizam of Hyderabad, Mir Osman Ali Khan, even providing time extensions to his administration on the accession question. Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru ensured his government's adherence to the principles of the Standstill Agreement of November 29, 1947, even while the Nizam's administration failed to keep its end of the bargain.

communes. After the annexation of Hyderabad State, the military administration led by Major General JN Chaudhuri (later Army Chief), on the orders of Pandit Nehru, who was ostensibly under pressure from USA to root out communists (the beginnings of cold war, and outcome of the McCarthy movement), used military force to control the communes. The Communist Party of India ordered the rebels to lay down their arms on 25 October 1951.

**The Merger Movement with India.** In February 1947, the British administration announced the transfer of power to the Indian leadership and gave the princely states the option of either joining India or Pakistan or becoming independent. The Nizam of Hyderabad, the Muslim aristocrats and the Majlis-e-Ittehadul Muslimeen (MIM, now AIMIM) wanted Hyderabad to become an independent state but the vast majority of people wanted the state to merge with India in hopes of political freedom and participation in self-governance. The Nizam even issued a farman on 11 June 1947 that Hyderabad would neither join India or Pakistan. The Communist Party

**The Rise of Qasim Razvi.** The MIM succeeded in creating a sectarian divide, and encouraged jihadist and fanaticism amongst the Muslims; the Arya Samaj and Hindu Mahasabha reactions fuelled the Hindu population. The situation created widespread fear and uncertainty, leading to political instability and a sudden deterioration of law and order across the state. The Nizam, who had isolated himself from the common population and their politics for years, perceived himself to be surrounded by a hostile Hindu population and started to rely increasingly on the MIM for support. The leadership of the MIM had by then passed to Qasim Razvi, a small-time lawyer from Northern India who had supported the Pakistan movement and wanted Hyderabad to become a refuge for Muslims in the South. Gradually, Razvi was able to wrest control over the Nizam government and was managing its day-to-day functioning. Razvi formed a paramilitary force called the Razakars. They were deputed alongside the police and grew to 150000 men (Muslim refugees within India also arrived in Hyderabad on MIM's invitation), double the police force itself, contributing significantly to public disorder and a complete collapse of civil authority as they embarked on a campaign of political repression. Hindu-Muslim tensions and communal violence in Hyderabad reached its highest point closer to Indian independence.

**Hobson's Choice.** It was truly a very complex and vexed situation; while the police, Razakars and Nizam's forces were committing violent acts and using force indiscriminately: the communists were retaliating in kind and both were sowing sectarianism. The Indian Government was in a bind; they decided to take military action to ensure Hyderabad joins the Indian Union, but simultaneously had to listen to USA's diktat of eliminating communism from the region. Historical records and articles in media do talk of



government firstly subjugating the Hyderabad State forces, and concurrently breaking down the communist communes which had some areas under their control.

### Operation Polo

**Casus Belli.** The tragic consequences of Partition had engulfed the nation and Hyderabad State was equally affected. By mid-June 1948, negotiations between Nizam and Indian Government had broken down. Mountbatten, who supported extension of the Standstill Agreement (considered unviable) left, and C Rajagopalachari became the Governor General. There was widespread violence within Hyderabad State, and border raids from and into the State continued. The Government was hesitant to resort to military action, as the use of force was associated with colonisers and not a democratic government. Some historians feel that the term was used to pacify any UN objection of India carrying out military action against another state, as Hyderabad had not yet signed the Instrument of Accession.

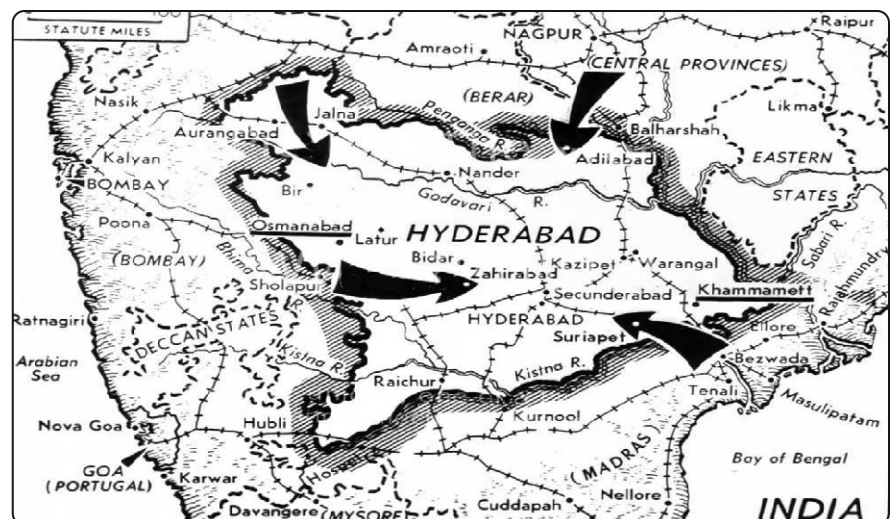
However, given the fraught security situation a contingency plan was prepared, which became the basis for Operation Polo. The plan would come into effect only if the Razakars continued their atrocities, beyond the control of the State. The initial plan drawn by Lieutenant General Eric Goddard, General Officer Commanding-in-Chief (GOC-in-C), Southern Command was focussed on supplying and evacuating the military forces stationed in Hyderabad State, and NOT on liberating Hyderabad. While the State was not considered a military threat, the increasing probability of State Forces and the Indian Army clashing was a factor. Plans to construct airstrips inside the State were also made. **Severe economic sanctions were put in place to coerce Hyderabad to accede**<sup>5</sup>. The

monsoons put a stop to early intervention, which while giving time to the Nizam, also allowed India to focus on Jammu & Kashmir, handle the United Nations (UN), and further stabilise the security situation within India (partition, migration, newly formed union assimilating princely states)<sup>6</sup>. **Public Law and Order situation was already critical, and when the Nizam approached the UN to remain neutral as an independent state under the Standstill Agreement**<sup>7</sup>, the die was cast and precipitated the launch of **Operation Polo on the orders of Sardar Patel**<sup>8</sup>, and reluctant acquiescence by **Pandit Nehru**. The operational plan was modified and fine-tuned by Lieutenant General Rajendrasinhji, the new GOC-in-C Southern Command, for the liberation of Hyderabad.

**The Task Force.** The Task Force was commanded by Major General JN Chaudhuri, GOC (General Officer Commanding) 1 Armoured Division

and had a Strike/Shock Force of Stuart and Sherman tanks (1 Armoured Brigade commanded by Brigadier SD Verma, 3rd Cavalry and a troop of 18 Cavalry) with seven infantry battalions (including 9 Infantry Brigade, which had moved from Ranchi to Bengaluru). Three regiments of Field Artillery, and one anti-tank regiment provided the requisite fire support. The Indian Air Force contingent under Air Commodore AN Mukherji was tasked to provide air support. Approximately 9700 police personnel from numerous States were placed under command mainly for law and order tasks.

**The Thrusts.** The main offensive would move towards Hyderabad along the Sholapur – Hyderabad Road from the West, with another subsidiary force of 1st Armoured Brigade advancing along the Bezwada – Hyderabad Road from the South East. Another thrust from the Northwest would capture Aurangabad and Jalna, while a fourth Force would move from Nagpur to the



Indian Army advance towards Hyderabad during Operation Polo (photo credit wikipedia.org)





Left to right. Major General JN Chaudhuri, Major General Syed Ahmed El Edroos and Qasam Razvi (photo credit *siasat.com*)

Northeast and capture Adilabad. From the South, an attack would be launched to secure Kurnool too.

**Preliminary Operations.** An interesting operation was carried out by two companies of 7 PUNJAB to capture the vital railway bridge at Balharshah. Some troops boarded a flat bogie loaded with wheat bags and managed to surprise the State Forces at the bridge, thus capturing the bridge with minimum casualties. A few other tactical operations were also conducted.

### Operation Commences

Operational surprise was achieved by multiple thrust lines and some sudden tactical manoeuvres. The Nizam's forces and Razakars were no match for the professional, highly trained and combat experienced Indian Army. Except for some stiff resistance on the first day and a few defensive battles along the route to Hyderabad, there were no long pitched battles either in urban or rural areas. This was corroborated by Hyderabad Forces Commanding General Edroos, in his memoirs, who claimed to have ordered his forces to withdraw three kms behind the

State boundaries to avoid pitched battles. Some records state that Operation Polo commenced at 1345 hours on 12 September, while the official date is 13 September with the State Forces surrendering on 18 September 1948. So, how did the State Forces collapse?

**Day 1, 13 September.** 9 Infantry Brigade attacked along the Sholapur-Secunderabad Highway at 0400 hours, and the first battle was fought at Naldurg Fort held by the 1st Hyderabad Infantry. Using speed and surprise, 9 Infantry Brigade secured a vital bridge on the Bori River intact, following which the Hyderabad positions at

Naldurg were assaulted by the 2nd Sikh Infantry. An armoured column of the 1st Armoured Brigade, part of the Force quickly took up positions in and around the town of Jalkot, 8 km from Naldurg, at 0900 hours, paving the way for 9 Dogra (a motorised battalion) to pass through. The armoured column continued its advance reaching Umarge, 61 km inside Hyderabad State by 1515 hours, where it quickly overpowered resistance from Razakar units defending the town. Meanwhile, another column consisting of a squadron of 3rd Cavalry, a troop from 18th King Edward's Own Cavalry, a troop from 9 Para Field Regiment, 10 Field Company Engineers, 3/2 Punjab Regiment, 2/1 Gorkha Rifles, 1 Mewar Infantry, and ancillary units attacked the town of Tuljapur, about 34 km Northwest of Naldurg, where they encountered resistance from a unit of the 1st Hyderabad Infantry and about 200 Razakars who gave dogged resistance for two hours before surrendering. Further advance towards the town of Lohara was stalled as the river had swollen.

The Eastern Advance met with fierce resistance from two armoured car cavalry units (2nd and 4th Hyderabad Lancers) of the Hyderabad State Forces. The Eastern Force equipped with Humber armoured cars and Staghounds reached Kodar by 0830 hours. Pressing on, the force reached Mungala by the afternoon. There were further incidents in Hospet, where the 1st Mysore assaulted and secured a sugar factory from units of Razakars and Pathans, and at Tungabhadra, where 5/5 Gorkha Rifles (Frontier Force) attacked and secured a vital bridge from the Hyderabad Army. The first day ended with the Indians inflicting heavy casualties on the Hyderabadis and capturing large tracts of territory.

**Day 2, 14 September.** The armoured thrust advanced from Umarge to the town of Rajeshwar, 48 km east. Interestingly, aerial

reconnaissance was undertaken to provide intelligence to advancing columns. In this tactical move, Tempest fighter aircraft were called up for air support, which successfully cleared entrenched enemy defences, allowing the armoured column to reach Rajeshwar by afternoon.

The assault force from the East was meanwhile slowed by an anti-tank ditch and later came under heavy fire from hillside positions of the 1st Lancers and 5th Hyderabad Infantry, 6 km from Suryapet. The positions were assaulted by the 2/5 Gorkhas, veterans of the Burma Campaign and were neutralised, with the Hyderabadis taking severe casualties. Simultaneously, the 3/11 Gorkha Rifles and a squadron of 8th Cavalry attacked Osmanabad and took the town after heavy street combat with the Razakars who determinedly resisted the Indians.

A force under the command of Major General DS Brar was tasked to capture the city of Aurangabad. The city was attacked by six columns of infantry and cavalry, resulting in the civil administration emerging in the afternoon and offering to surrender. There were further incidents in Jalna where 3 Sikh, a company of 2 Jodhpur Infantry and some tanks from 18 Cavalry faced stubborn resistance from Hyderabad Forces.

**Day 3 and 4, 15 – 16 September.** The multi-directional thrusts made steady progress barring some resistance by well entrenched State Forces and Razakars at Latur, Mominabad and Surriapet. Both days saw air strikes being launched to soften Nizam Forces positions' along the advance. The retreating Hyderabad Forces destroyed the bridge at Musi to delay the Indians, but did not defend the far bank, allowing the bridge to be quickly repaired. Another incident occurred at Narkatpalli where a Razakar unit was decimated by the Indians. A column under Lieutenant

Colonel Ram Singh undertook mine clearing operations beyond Zahirabad. The armoured thrusts moved with considerable speed bypassing urban resistance nodes, leaving the infantry to clear the axes, duly supported by artillery. In some instances, 75mm guns were employed in direct firing mode very effectively. The Hyderabad Forces and Razakars did show tactical acumen and skill by using known terrain positions, especially in urban populated areas, and sprang numerous ambushes. By night fall, the Indian Army units had reached 15 kms beyond Zahirabad.

**Day 5, 17 September.** By the early hours of 17 September, the Indian Army were close to Hyderabad from the North, North East, East and West. By the morning of the 5th day of hostilities, it was clear that the Hyderabad Army and the Razakars had been routed on all fronts and with extremely heavy casualties. At 1700 hours on 17 September, the Nizam announced a ceasefire, thus ending the armed action.

**Day 6, 18 September.** Major General JN Chaudhuri led an armoured column into Hyderabad at around 1600 hours on 18 September and the Hyderabad Army, led by Major General El Edroos surrendered.

**The Nizam's Radio Broadcast.** Interestingly, Mir Osman Ali Khan, the Nizam in his radio speech on 23 September 1948, said *"In November last [1947], a small group which had organized a quasi-military organization surrounded the homes of my Prime Minister, the Nawab of Cbbatari, in whose wisdom I had complete confidence, and of Sir Walter Monkton, my Constitutional Adviser, by duress compelled the Nawab and other trusted ministers to resign and forced the Laik Ali Ministry on me. This group headed by Qasim Razvi had no stake in the country or any record of service behind it. By methods reminiscent of Hitlerite Germany it took possession of the State, spread terror ... and rendered me completely helpless."* The Nizam, smartly and some say wisely absolved himself of all actions by the Razakars, strategically paving the



Razakars assemble at Hyderabad in 1948. (photo courtesy LIFE magazine)



Left Photo. Morning Newspaper of 18 September 1948 announcing the Nizam's Ceasefire. Centre Photo. Major Generals Syed Ahmed El Edroos and JN Chaudhuri (photo credit LIFE photo collection). Right Photo. Sardar Patel being received by the Nizam of Hyderabad

way for a smooth annexation of Hyderabad State.

**Major General Syed Ahmed El Edroos Memoirs.** Some historians believe that General El-Edroos perhaps saved many lives both of the State Forces and civilians, as he quickly realised that his troops were no match for the professional, well trained and armed Indian Army. In spite of the Hyderabad Prime Minister Laik Ali stating that Nizam's Forces will take on India's might, Edroos had decided to capitulate even as the Indian Army was mobilising, by ordering his troops to withdraw three kms behind the state boundary. Edroos in his memoirs<sup>9</sup>, writes that communists were better prepared and more formidable with good ground intelligence. He even asserted that "*Laik Ali and his ministers thought it best to take over defences of Hyderabad in their own hands and organise the Razakars*"<sup>10</sup>.

**Post Operation Polo Situation.**

The military intervention was perceived by the peasant communes as a positive development and not as an attack on them. The villagers believed the Army was helping them defeat the Nizam's

Government. They launched parallel assaults against the remaining military camps of the State Forces, outposts of state agents and garrisons in *durra* estates, accompanied by victory celebrations. The rebels came across large stores of arms and ammunition during the assault. Many of them were handed over to the Army after their objectives were accomplished, as the peasants returned to their villages with the belief that the armed conflict was over.

Major General JN Chaudhuri was appointed as Military Governor and he set up a military administration after the Nizam's capitulation. The Communist Party was banned. The military administration did not induct any local police personnel or civil servants, including those affiliated with the Hyderabad State Congress, who were sidelined. Vallabhbbhai Patel distrusted them and justified it with the claim that they had a partisan character. They deployed officials and personnel from outside the State, as it was feared that locals might be apprehensive of conducting violence against their own, and might even be covert communist sympathisers. Political and security considerations made the Indian Government nominate the Nizam as the Rajpramukh of Hyderabad. Qasim Razvi was arrested, tried and jailed but soon released and forced to migrate to Pakistan.

By ALL accounts the military government with the assistance of the Civil Administrator and administration played a pivotal role in restoring normalcy in the erstwhile Hyderabad State. On 25 October 1951, the Central Committee of the Communist Party officially declared the end of the rebellion. In the state election and national elections, communist leaders, who were formerly part of the rebellion, were elected from almost all the rural constituencies they contested in Telangana. In 1956, the long-standing demand of the



Andhra communists for Visalandhra was fulfilled through the States Reorganisation Act. Hyderabad State was dissolved, and the region of Telangana merged with Andhra State to form Andhra Pradesh. The Telangana movement however continued and Telangana State was carved out of Andhra Pradesh on 02 June 2014.

**End Note.** Annexation of Hyderabad was a pivotal, strategic event in the history of modern independent India. Geo-strategically-politically-economically it synergised and cemented the idea of India. The military action for its merger is justified on many counts; justice for the majority, economic growth, pivotal relevance to India's stability and unity by merger of princely states. The Indian Armed Forces carried out a swift, professional, operational manoeuvre to liberate Hyderabad State which they can be proud of.



**Lt Gen PR Kumar**

*Lt Gen PR Kumar, PVSM, AVSM, VSM (Retd) was commissioned into the Regiment of Artillery and served in the Indian Army for 39 years. He has been DG Army Aviation and DG Military Operations prior to his retirement in end 2015. He continues to write and talk on international and regional geo-political, security and strategic issues. He can be contacted at [prkumarsecurity.wordpress.com](mailto:prkumarsecurity.wordpress.com) and [kumapa60@gmail.com](mailto:kumapa60@gmail.com)*

- 1 *Wikipedia – Standstill Agreement signed on 29 Nov 1947 between the Government of India and Nizam of Hyderabad, available at [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Standstill\\_agreement\\_\(India\)#:~:text=Agents%20would%20be%20exchanged%20between,Nizam%20on%2029%20November%201947](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Standstill_agreement_(India)#:~:text=Agents%20would%20be%20exchanged%20between,Nizam%20on%2029%20November%201947).*
- 2 *Paraphrased from 'The Last Nizam' by VK Bawa, Centre for Deccan Studies, Hyderabad, First published in Viking by Penguin Books India P) Ltd, 1992, and 'Selected Works of Jawaharlal Nehru' pp 241, Encyclopedia Britannica- Increase in authorized strength of State Forces from 7000 to 13000 in 1947 alone, and Apr 1948 to 22,393, with additional 11000 under training within, and 4870 men undergoing training under different names such as Customs, Constabulary. The police force was raised to 38000, and 15000 Home and Civil Guards.*
- 3 *Qasim Razvi – by most accounts and as paraphrased from 'The Last Nizam' by VK Bawa, Centre for Deccan Studies, Hyderabad, First published in Viking by Penguin Books India P) Ltd, 1992; was like a 'medieval hero', with 'fiery eyes and passionate oratory', a fanatic with a one track mind. His mission was to liberate the Muslims of the Deccan from the Indian Union, annex Circars, Madras Presidency, and finally the Muslim crusaders were to march to Delhi to plant the Asaf Jahi flag on the Red Fort. The Hindu was a hated 'Kafir'.*
- 4 *Encyclopedia Britannica and Wikipedia - A princely state (also called native state or Indian state) was a nominally sovereign entity of the British Indian Empire that was not directly governed by the British, but rather by an Indian ruler under a form of indirect rule, subject to a subsidiary alliance and the suzerainty or paramountcy of the British crown. There were officially 565 princely states when India and Pakistan became independent in 1947, but the great majority had contracted with the Viceroy to provide public services and tax collection. Only 21 had actual state governments, and only four were large (Hyderabad, Mysore, Jammu and Kashmir (some say largest in terms of area) and Baroda).*
- 5 *'History of Modern Telangana' by Bhangya Bhukya, Orient BlackSwan Publications, 2017, pp193. Excerpts "The Indian Government imposed economic sanctions on Hyderabad. Hyderabad faced total blockade, and the necessities of life including salt and medical supplies were stopped. Indian air services were cut down and license of the local airline, 'Deccan Airline' was suspended. Trains passing through the state were reduced. Exports to Hyderabad from India were banned. The transaction and arrangement between Hyderabad State Bank and Reserve Bank of India were suspended. Trade to Britain was stopped in Indian ports. Petrol supply was cut off."*
- 6 *'Conquering Hyderabad: Operation Polo', February 28, 2021, Defence Archives, available at <https://www.thedefencearchive.com/post/operation-polo>. Accessed on 15 Apr 23.*
- 7 *'History of Modern Telangana' by Bhangya Bhukya, Orient BlackSwan Publications, 2017, pp194.' Nizam spoke about approaching UNSC on 21 Jul 1948, and case submitted on 21 August 1948, under the article 35 (2) of the Charter of the Council; which empowered the UNSC to deal with non-members' cases.*
- 8 *'The Last Nizam' by VK Bawa, Centre for Deccan Studies, Hyderabad, First published in Viking by Penguin Books India (P) Ltd, 1992, pp 336 to 338. When Sardar came to know of the appeal to the UNSC he acted promptly and ordered the execution of Op Polo (Nehru was ambivalent being concerned about the international reaction). It is said that Patel remarked sarcastically when asked if Indian government would provide facilities for Hyderabad delegation in UN, that he would give similar facilities as would be made for delegation of Zamindars of Madras State appealing to UN against the takeover of their estates. Interestingly, after the initial hearings, the Indian Army had annexed Hyderabad State prior to the date fixed for final hearing of plea. The Nizam too withdrew his plea to the UN on 17 September 1948. It is also a fact that increasingly the Nizam was no longer in control, and had become subservient to Mir Laik Ali's government and Qadir Razvi's MIM.*
- 9 *"Hyderabad of "the Seven Loaves", by Maj Gen Syed Ahmed El Droos, Laser Prints, Hyderabad, 1994.*
- 10 *Sep 13, 1948, 'Operation Polo: When the Army marched into Hyderabad' by Yunus Lasania, 14 Sep 2022, The Siasat Daily, Hyderabad, available at <https://www.siasat.com/sept-13-1948-operation-polo-when-the-army-marched-into-hyderabad-2412317/>. Accessed on 27 Apr 2023.*

# GRIT, GUTS AND RESILIENCE

## TOMY'S GOLDEN GLOBE RACE

On 29 April 2023, an Indian quietly made history as he re-entered the French port of Les Sable d'Olonne on his rather battered sailboat, from where he had left 236 days prior. His weather beaten face covered with an untidy overgrowth broke out in a delighted smile as he received a rapturous welcome. As he leaned out to shake hands with a familiar face on the receiving boat, he made the first human contact in eight months

The boat had been his home for nearly eight months while he singlehandedly sailed her 30000 nautical miles (nm) non-stop around the earth, battling storms with screaming 60 knot (Kt) winds and terrifying 7 metre waves that tossed his boat like a leaf while he clung on tenaciously. He had spent days without sleep, suffered knockdowns and breakdowns, breakages and defects, ripped sails, loneliness, exhaustion, hunger and everything that nature and circumstance threw at him, doggedly repairing the boat with the meagre resources he carried. When spares ran out, he used bits and pieces of the boat, tackling each problem over and over again, till the problems exhausted themselves.



Abhishek Tomy on board his sail boat Bayanat (photo credit rediff.com)

On 29th April 23, Commander Abhilash Tomy completed the Golden Globe Race (GGR) in a podium finish, the first time for an Indian or an Asian in a sport traditionally dominated by the Europeans, Australians, Americans and others of the white western world. The winner, Kirsten Neuschäffer from South Africa, and he had raced each other across the vast expanses of the earth's great oceans, going neck to neck for nearly a month, trading places along the way, till she managed to break away, entering Les Sables d'Olonne (LSO) one day prior. The winner was on the receiving boat holding an Indian flag to welcome the competitor who had pushed her to the extreme.

### The Race

The history of the Golden Globe Race is as fascinating as the colourful characters who participate in what is the most gruelling, physically and mentally demanding race on earth. In August 1966, Francis Chichester set out from England to sail solo around the world to Australia and back in a bid to beat the Clipper ship records. He completed the voyage in 274 days with a 48 day stopover in Sydney. This attracted huge interest and inspired many others. There remained only one challenge – solo, non-stop, unassisted sailing around the world.

In March 1968, the Sunday Times sponsored the first GGR announcing prize money of £5000 for the winner. The rules were simple – sail solo, non-stop around the world. Sixteen competitors entered and only one, Robin Knox Johnson, completed. The rest either retired, sank or committed suicide along the way.

### Retro Sailing

The GGR was first conducted in 2018 and thence every four years. In the tradition of that first race, no modern sailing and

no navigational aids are allowed. Navigation must be done as it was back in '68. That means no GPS, chart plotters, electronic wind instruments, electric autopilots, electronic log, iPhone, satellite phones, digital cameras, computers, CD players, pocket calculators, electronic clocks and watches, water makers, carbon fibre, Kevlar, spectra etc... so it is back to film cameras, cassette tapes, sextants, wind up clocks, trailing logs and Dacron sails, wind vanes and typewriters.<sup>1</sup>

Essentials are traditional sailing skills, ingenuity and determination to cross the finish line first. Similarly, only boats of specific designs (pre 1988) are allowed. Competitors are tracked by satellite and may obtain weather information from passing ships and may communicate with family and friends by radio.

The GGR is as tough as it can get. Risks are real. Eight months of isolation! It's harder and more excruciatingly painful than entrants can imagine.

### Abhilash –The Indefatigable Mariner

Abhilash Tomy, a Dornier pilot in the Indian Navy, learned the art of ocean sailing under the tutelage of Captain (IN) Dilip Donde, who was the first Indian, to sail solo around the world in May 2010, albeit with stops along the way. His was an Indian made yacht *Mhadei*, constructed in Goa. The entire expedition was done under the gaze of the *Bhishma Pitamah* of modern Indian sailing, Vice Admiral MP Awati (Retd) who was determined to maintain the tradition of salt and spray in a modern navy.

To prepare him for this role, in 2011, he and Donde participated in the Cape Town to Rio Race. On the return leg, Tomy sailed double handed from Rio to Cape Town and single handed from Cape Town to Goa. He also sailed to Malaysia and Thailand, with a team of three people<sup>2</sup>. By mid-2012, Abhilash was ready.

On 01 November 2012, Abhilash sailed out of Mumbai harbour on *Mhadei*, to undertake a voyage no Indian



GGR Route (photo source <https://goldenglobrace.com/the-route/>)





Abhilash Tomy on his sailboat Thuriya in the 2018 GGR (photo credit goldengloberace.com)

had attempted, and few had dreamed of- a solo, non-stop circumnavigation of the earth. The route took him around the three “Great Capes” - Cape Leeuwin in Australia, Cape Horn in South America and Cape of Good Hope in Africa. On 31 March 2013, then Lieutenant Commander Abhilash Tomy tied up alongside the Gateway of India to a rousing welcome by dignitaries that included Shri Pranab Mukherjee, the President of India.

### The 2018 GGR

With the experience gained in solo sailing, adventurer Abhilash set his sights on the GGR commencing 1st July 2018. Sailing a replica of *Subaili*, Robin Knox Johnston’s 1968 boat, named *Thuriya*, on the 82nd day, Abhilash was caught in a severe storm in the Southern Indian Ocean with 130 km/hour winds and 10 metre waves. Having climbed the mast to undertake repairs, the storm tossed his boat so violently that he lost his grip and was hanging briefly from his watch strap. He fell, injuring his back badly and it was a superhuman effort to crawl into the cabin

vertebrae were fused into one. His legs were also badly injured and he had to learn to walk again. Walk he certainly did, and even got back to flying. In January 21, Abhilash took premature retirement from the Navy, in order to concentrate on the 2022 race.

### The 2022 GGR

For the 2022 race, he was sponsored by Bayanat, an Abu Dhabi-based geospatial, data analytics and AI company. Supported by Bayanat, he purchased a Rustler 36 class boat in France, and named it ‘*Bayanat*’. But he had just five months to complete the refit and undertake a 2000 nm solo voyage to qualify for the GGR. He was the last entrant in the race.

And then disaster struck. During a voyage, *Bayanat* collided with a bulk carrier and her bow was severely damaged. The mast had to be taken off for a complete check. Dutch designer and boat builder Dick Koopmans sacrificed his holiday to check and supervise boat repairs. With most of Europe on vacation and a €50000 repair bill staring him in the face, the race could have ended before starting. Bayanat generously stepped in, and with local support, Abhilash came back from the brink.

The race started on 04 September 2022 from LSO with all competitors heading for the Canary Islands 4000 km away, the first film drop point.

### The Windvane

A critical piece of equipment in ocean sailing is the windvane or windpilot. This is a type of autopilot, mechanical self-steering system that is essential in solo sailing. It gives the skipper a much-needed break

to send out a distress signal. For three and half days, he lay on his back unable to move. In his own words, “*The remoteness? Couldn’t have been worse. The Antarctic was the nearest continent. We were exactly between Australia and South Africa, and South of India.*”<sup>3</sup>

International rescue was launched and he was picked by the French fisheries vessel *Osiris* who transferred him to a hospital on the isle of Ile Amsterdam. During that time, he was presented a cap, which he promised to wear when he completed the race. On Day 9, INS *Satpura* arrived and took him home to Mumbai. At INHS *Asvini*, the Naval hospital, MRI scans revealed multiple spinal injuries. Titanium rods were inserted into his spine; five

from the helm when conditions allow. Without it, the skipper would need to physically hold the tiller, which is impossible in a round-the-world expedition. It has a servo rudder that acts like a power steering with a mechanical windblade to steer the boat. Because of rough seas and a rudder hanging on the transom (at the end of the boat), the rudder receives big backlash forces on it.<sup>4</sup> This was the equipment that Abhilash repaired over and over again, which earned him the nickname “Mr DIY of the Sea”.

### The Adventures Begin

Within a few days of setting out, windvanes began creating issues for sailors. The strong headwinds and rough seas of the Bay of Biscay were taking a toll. Leaks, electric shorts, radio and weatherfax problems were common. One sailor, Guy de Boer was violently seasick for a while. Later, he narrowly avoided a collision with a trawler and suffered a gash to his leg. Another lost his footing due to a wave, hitting his head and was knocked unconscious. Both recovered to continue the race. Unfortunately, after the first film drop, Guy de Boer, who had been up for 30 hours, fell asleep out of sheer exhaustion. A drop in wind velocity caused his boat to drift and hit some rocks on the East side of Fuerteventura, ending his challenge.

### The Doldrums and Crossing the Equator

By 22nd September, Abhilash was in 4th position with Simon Curwen and Tapio Lehtinen being the race leaders. Kirsten in 5th place, was determinedly chipping away at the miles between Abhilash and her, and moved to 4th position by the 24th / 25th. The race leaders had begun entering the doldrums which would be their first real test.

The doldrums are a windless belt around the equator where the NW trade

winds of the Northern Hemisphere collide with the SE trades of the Southern Hemisphere. The heat forces the hot, humid air into the atmosphere where it transforms into pouring rain after cooling down. This zone of weak, erratic winds, hot weathers, squalls and showers was feared in ancient times where ships could stay for weeks at a time. Today the doldrums are no longer a danger, but for the GGR entrants with little outside communications, they can still play with the nerves<sup>5</sup>.

The entry into the doldrums provided the first taste of loneliness for many, with skippers reporting missing their families and friends. Wear and tear on the boats began to tell with electrical problems, short circuits, failed batteries, worn sails, broken deck and other fittings becoming the norm. One skipper, who found himself too far behind and unable to catch up, decided to retire. And then another.

Then the barnacles hit. The only way to get rid of them was to dive

overboard and scrape them off - a risky business with sharks around.

### Film Drop At Cape Town

Crossing the Equator into the trades presented fresh challenges. An unwelcoming South Atlantic brought confused seas and 4 metre high waves and 20 Kt winds. More and more sailors began discovering barnacles. Cape Town would be the last place where they could scrape off barnacles and carry out repairs before the solitude and loneliness of the Southern Indian Ocean. Once they turned left, with the strong winds and swell and complete lack of shelter, there was no turning back till the next drop at Hobart, Tasmania, 6483 nm away, where hull scraping is illegal anyway. In Cape Town, Pat Lawless (Ireland) and Damien Guillou (France) also dropped out because of defects.

### Tapio's Rescue

A few days out of Cape Town, on



Abhilash Tomy returns to LSO (photo source <https://goldenglobetrace.com/day-237-abhilash-tomys-remarkable-comeback-from-broken-back-to-2nd-place-in-the-golden-globe-race/>)





Commander Abhilash Tomy (left) with Sir Robin Knox-Johnston, the first winner of the Golden Globe Race in 1968. (photo credit [www.goldenglobrace.com](http://www.goldenglobrace.com))

18 November, Tapio Lehtinen (Finland) activated his EPIRB beacon, indicating that he was in trouble. Shortly, his Personal Locator Beacon (PLB) also activated, meaning that he had possibly abandoned ship. MRCC Cape Town contacted nearby vessels to divert to his rescue. GGR informed Kirsten and Abhilash who were 105 and 170 miles respectively from his position. Abhilash responded first and altered course towards Tapio. Subsequently, Kirsten received the message and began motoring towards Tapio's position while Abhilash was asked to stand down. Kirsten located him, brought him on board and offered him a glass of rum. Subsequently MV *Darya Gayatri* reached the spot and Tapio transferred to the merchant vessel.

Both Kirsten and Abhilash received a 35 hour and 12 hour advantage for the rescue. Kirsten modestly commented, "No congratulations needed for the rescue,.....".

### More Drop Outs

Elliott Smith had to pull in to Cape Town for assisted repairs, relegating him to Chichester class. Shortly after, Arnaud

Hobart. South of the 45th parallel was the no-go zone. For Abhilash, sailing the deep South was an exhilarating experience and he was able to exorcise the devils of 2018. This was the area where he had suffered a near death injury then and he was finally sailing new seas. Simon, Kirsten and Abhilash had firmly established themselves as the race leaders, sharing the same weather pattern.

Simon entered the Hobart gate on 24 December, with Kirsten close behind on 25 December. Abhilash entered on 27 December, having made good speeds initially but later got stuck in a high pressure bubble (low wind speed area) which slowed him down. The experience tired him out and on one occasion, he suddenly woke from a dream to find himself heading straight for a huge cliff 500 metre away. Abhilash used the time in Hobart to rest and repair the boat.

After Hobart, Simon the fast cruiser, broke away heading for Cape Horn 10000 nm away, increasing the gap to 900 Nm, while both Kirsten and Abhilash struggled with low winds. Back in the mid fleet, the barnacles made a savage comeback slowing down Jeremy Bagshaw as well. He too entered Hobart for hull scraping and as a result left the GGR, moving to Chichester class. The size and numbers of barnacles alarmed all.

Water shortage was fast leading to rationing as there had been no rain since leaving the tropics and on board reserves were falling low. Sea state and boat motion made it difficult to catch water. Abhilash managed on one litre of water per day, cooking food in sea water.

On 27 January, 1200 nm West of Cape Horn, Simon with 70% of the race under his belt and a 1200 nm lead on the pack, had his share of bad luck. He reported total breakdown of the windvane and was forced

Gaist, who was still on his way to Cape Town, reported that his mast was bending and it became difficult to sail into the wind. Later he retired from the race. Guy Waites, who had been plagued by barnacles, gave up trying to scrape them off at sea and decided to take the boat ashore for hull cleaning in Cape Town.

Abhilash also suffered a fall on his back during a gale and had to manually steer for 12 hours straight, which led to immense strain on his back muscles. He spoke to his doctors in India, who advised exercises that helped his back to recover.

### Sailing The Southern Ocean

All boats were now heading for



to limp into a port in Chile for repairs, effectively relegating him to Chichester class.

Kirsten and Abhilash now became the lead pair as they raced, two specks on the vast expanses of the loneliest places on earth, trading places for the next few weeks, giving no quarter and asking for none.

### **Cape Horn – The Mount Everest of Sailing**

1100 miles North West of Cape Horn, a massive low pressure system developed. It was a frightening monster beast the size of Brazil. It jumped out of the exclusion zone and began heading up the Chilean coast<sup>6</sup>. Both Kirsten and Abhilash were forced to turn their boats away from Cape Horn and head North for two days, till the storm passed.

On 15th February, Kirsten and *Minnehaha* managed to round the last of the infamous capes and the Diego Ramirez islands where Sergeant Jose Luarte of the Chilean Navy maintained a lonely vigil at the lighthouse. Abhilash was further up the coast grappling with 40 kt gusting to 60 kt winds that were pushing him dangerously close to the coast. Around that time, his windvane failed again.

As a seasoned mariner and pilot, he lashed the tiller and began considering all options. Unable to turn away from the coast he would have reached the coast in about 10 hours. He had used up all his spare pendulum vanes long ago. His chart table had also been used to fabricate a vane, and was now gone. The possibility of dropping out of the GGR into the Chichester class became real.

But first, he had to get away from the coast at all costs. Some hours later, he reported that he had fabricated a windvane from his emergency rudder as his attempt to use the toilet door had also failed. He also reported that he had hit his head in the rough conditions but was ok, which highlights how important it is for lonely

skippers to stay fit to survive. On 16th February, just 11 miles off the coast, he finally managed to tack away towards Cape Horn 250 miles away.

Cape Horn is part of international folklore. Most know of its fearsome reputation for ships and lives lost and the emotional relief of finally sailing past. It has been like that for years. For solo sailors it is the biggest single objective of any planned circumnavigation and it is not gained easily<sup>7</sup>. On 18th February 23, Abhilash sailed past the infamous Cape, 10 years and 23 days after his first rounding. He had summited the Mount Everest of sailing for the second time.

Don McIntyre, the founder and underwriter of the GGR wrote, *‘Abhilash is continuously working to service and fix things. All entrants do, on a regular basis, but it appears Abhilash may have more than usual. Will his windpilot go the distance? He now thinks it will! He sacrificed his chart table and then toilet door for windvane parts and finally his yacht’s emergency rudder, even dismantling an anchor for more bits. His repairs*

*however, have not been limited to the windvane and have also included stitched sails, broken Halyards, repaired spreaders with various trips aloft, dismantled wind generators, electrical system blackouts, fixed water and diesel tank leaks and various issues as explained in his voluntary safety call. He is happy if not a little tired himself, but for sure, he is a real MacGyver of the Seas when it comes to fixing things. He keeps things going, so let’s hope it continues!’<sup>8</sup>*

### **Racing Up The Atlantic**

By 3rd March both, Kirsten and Abhilash had left the roaring 40s and entered the horse latitudes, enjoying warmer conditions. Both were racing against each other but unaware of the other’s positions. It wasn’t easy for either of them. Kirsten had chosen an Easterly course and despite her 400 nm lead, she was facing 35 kt head winds, forcing her to a crawl. Abhilash had chosen a Westerly course that took him closer to Brazil, and while he managed to reduce Kirsten’s lead, he was plagued



*Abhilash Tomy. (Photo Twitter/ abhilashtomy)*



*Abhilash Tomy's Rustler 36 holds the fleet's 7-day distance record, sailing 1,140 miles at an average speed of 6.8 knots. (photo credit John Stickland. Yachting monthby November 22)*

with electrical problems. On the plus side, he managed to collect 30 litres of fresh water, which made life easier. The race was now wide open.

### Back To the Doldrums

Kirsten decided to use an Easterly 200 year old route used by clipper ships of yore. That choice paid dividends and she reached the South-East trades ahead of Abhilash. By 14 March, GGR reported that while Kirsten was stuck in a (HP) hole and was barely able to manage a few knots, Abhilash was flying ahead, having clocked 120+ nm in the last 24 hrs. Simon Curwen now in the Chichester class race was sailing hard, catching up on Abhilash. The distance to finish (DTF) of the two leaders kept changing depending on the course each was able to make good in the prevailing wind conditions.

Fortunately Abhilash, enjoying favourable winds for a few days was able to reduce the distance between them to a little over 300 miles. On the other hand, having been stuck in low wind conditions for a few days, Kirsten was possibly ruing her decision to choose her route

based on the square riggers' 200 year old rules. However, she was able to improve her progress by 20th March. By the 21st, Kirsten had reached the edge of the doldrums and her speed dropped to 2.5 kts.

*Bayanat* continued to suffer defects, while Abhilash continued to tackle them. His backstay parted and he had to climb the mast to repair it, badly bruising himself in the process. To repair the backstay, he used a guard rail and to replace the guard rail, his HF radio set's wire antenna. His HF radio wasn't working anyway. Then his main sail tore right through. Abhilash hand-stitched it – **Tinker Tailor Soldier Sailor!**

Meanwhile, on the other side of South America, British sailor Ian Herbert-Jones on *Puffin*, was dealing with his share of problems. On 22nd March, he reported that his rudder had snapped in two and he was heading to Puerto William for repair. With Ian in Chichester class there were only three in the GGR – Kirsten, Abhilash and Captain Mike 'Guggs' Guggenberger.

### Mind Games Begin

Kirsten had been in frustratingly light winds longer than any other sailor, bleeding miles every day. Her lead had fallen from 300 miles to 50 miles. In her mind, she thought Abhilash was ahead and was trying to chase him, which played on her more than the barnacles and the broken bowsprit. Abhilash, had no weather inputs as his HF radio was broken and he had no weather fax, relying on passing merchant ships for weather info. However, Kirsten was not about to give up and clawed back some of the lead she had lost.

In the South Atlantic, Ian Herbert-Jones, was caught in a storm with winds gusting to 70 kts; he called race control. He was having trouble keeping his stern to the sea to avoid being rolled over. Eventually, Ian sent

out a distress call. His boat had rolled over and although righted, the mast was now hitting the boat's side and he was unable to cut it loose. He was himself hurt with a gashed head and possible back injury. MRCC Argentina received the call and, three Taiwanese fishing trawlers in the vicinity were diverted to Ian's last position. Eventually, he was rescued by the Taiwanese flagged trawler *Zi Da Wang*. The tradition of the sea had been upheld.

For Kirsten and Abhilash, who were now trading positions, after 230 days at sea, with only 800 nm to go, there was no letting their guard down. Each had to skilfully gauge the weather and use the prevailing weather conditions for the run to Cape Finisterre and thence into the Bay of Biscay, a challenging zone in itself. Simon, although out of the GGR, had shown some very fine sailing despite the time lost in repairs in Chile, and had doggedly pursued the leaders all the way up the Atlantic and was now leading the fleet, albeit in another class.

### Les Sable d'Olonne

Kirsten was expected to cross the finish line on 28th April with Abhilash a day later on 29th April. Although leading by 90 miles on Abhilash, both sailors had to negotiate the tough conditions of the Bay of Biscay, besides crossing the **"Wall of Steel"**, the giant merchant ships passing in what is perhaps the world's busiest channel. One miscalculated move and the tiny boats would be crushed by the behemoths.

Simon reached LSO on 27th April and was accorded the same welcome as for the GGR. As expected, Kirsten reached on 28th and instantly joined the ranks of legendary South African women and world beaters.

The next day, demonstrating a superb spirit of sportsmanship, she was in the welcome boat holding an Indian flag. As a

beaming Abhilash crossed the line wearing the beanie from Ile de Amsterdam of five years ago, his doughty competitor stepped on board *Bayanat*, where the two hugged each other. Then, allowing Abhilash to savour his moment, Kirsten handled the mooring lines of *Bayanat* as the most repaired boat of the race came alongside.

Abhilash had done the impossible. From the trauma of 2018, the man with five welded vertebrae, had taught himself to walk again, then to fly aircraft and finally to sail, narrowly making it in time for the start, tackling problem after problem, till the problems themselves gave up, keeping his mind and body under control to complete the most gruelling race on the planet in a creditable 2nd position with barely a day separating him and the winner. On 12th May, the third competitor, "Guggs" also crossed the line to mark the finish of a

race where there are no gold, silver and bronze medals. Every entrant who completes is a winner.

Modest as ever, when asked by a reporter, what message he had for the average Indian guys back home, he retorted, *"There are no average guys in India, only a large number who haven't had the opportunity"*.

- 1 <https://goldenglobe.com/retro-sailing/>
- 2 [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Abhilash\\_Tomy](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Abhilash_Tomy)
- 3 Tweet by Commander Abhilash Tomy, KC, NM @abhilashtomy dated Mar 22, 2022
- 4 Indian Express April 28, 2023, 'Using a toilet door to make windvane' Abhilash Tomy, the DIY master of ocean sailing, Article By Shivani Naik
- 5 <https://goldenglobe.com/golden-globe-fleet-dive-into-doldrums-frustrating-first-test-for-many/>
- 6 <https://goldenglobe.com/storm-alert-golden-globe-race-leaders-face-a-big-one/>
- 7 <https://goldenglobe.com/day-170-golden-globe-abhilash-rounds-cape-horn-and-two-more-struggling/>
- 8 *Ibid*



*Commodore Sanjay Kris Tewari (Retd), who writes under the pen-name of Kristee is an alumnus of National Defence Academy, Pune. After initial training at INS Shivaji, Lonavala, INS Valsura, Jamnagar and the erstwhile carrier INS Vikrant, he served on board INS Brahmaputra, and the missile destroyers Rajput, Rana and Ranvijay. He has served at the Naval Dockyards at Vishakhapatnam and Mumbai, besides other establishments. He has commanded two technical units, Naval EMI/EMC Centre, Mumbai and the Naval Underwater Ranges, Goa. He has authored three books titled "In the Wake Of The Swordfish", "Through The Labyrinth of History" and "The Baby Burped On My Battledress". Tewari has participated in an All India Car Expedition and an ocean sailing expedition from Mumbai to Jaigarh Fort. He now works for a private company and frequently writes on marine matters and speaks on leadership topics.*



**Commodore Sanjay Kris Tewari**



# ALL ABOUT HOME LOANS

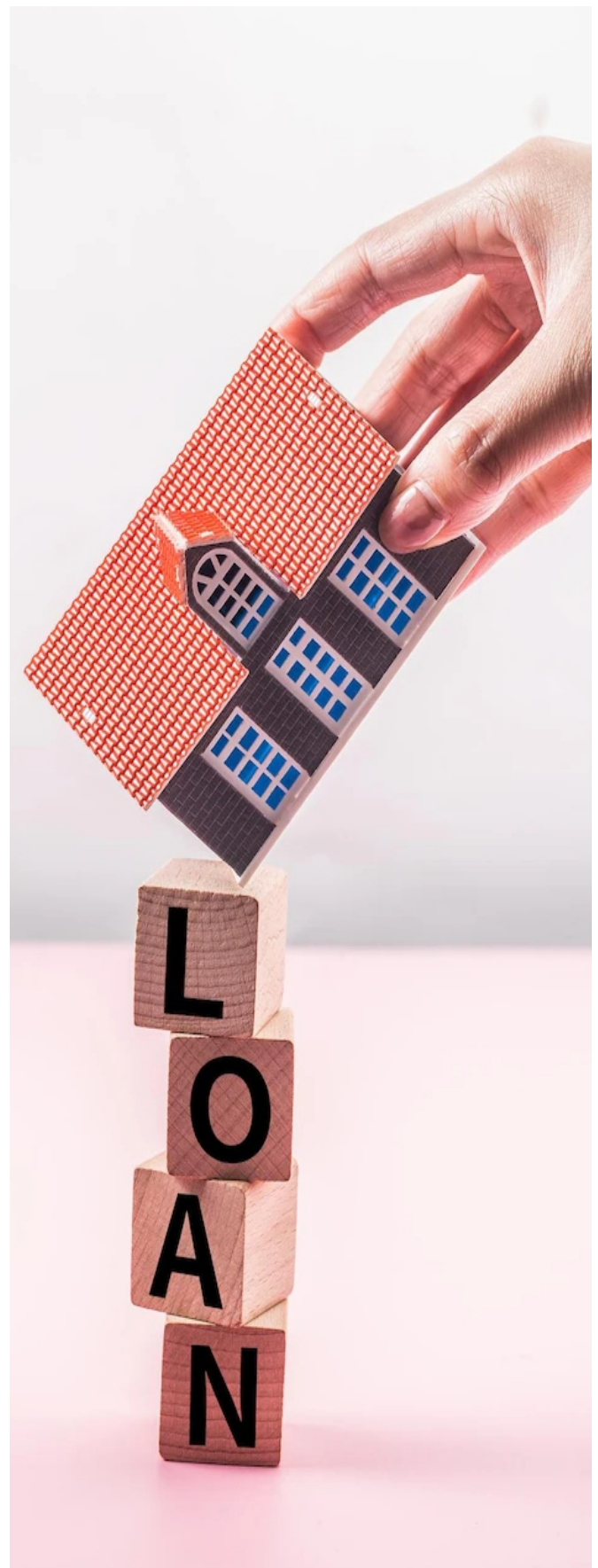
Owning a home is not merely a dream but an emotion too, often a life-long aspiration. It is also a big financial decision and would arguably be the biggest loan in the borrower's portfolio. Deciding whether to close the home loan or not is always a tough decision.

## What is a home loan?

A sum of money borrowed from a financial institution by an individual to purchase a house is termed home loan. Today even a basic 2BHK (Two Bedroom-Hall-Kitchen) will cost Rs 50 lakhs to 100 lakhs in most cities in India. For most of us, we are unlikely to have such a large sum of money needed for the purchase. Also normally one wants to invest in their home within the age of 35 years, they are unlikely to have been able to accumulate such a large sum. A home loan comes as a means to acquiring a home for the young family. Since home loans are part of the priority sector lending and financial institutions providing home loans also can seek refinance from National Housing Bank (NHB), the home loan interests are the lowest amongst all the categories of loans available.

## Benefits of taking home loans

1. Useful in funding high ticket purchases like Apartments or homes which is otherwise not affordable.
2. **Tax benefit on home loan.** In order to encourage people to buy their own house, Government of India provides tax deduction on the principal as well as interest on home loan. An individual is eligible to claim a deduction of up to Rs 1.5 lakh of principal repayment under Section 80C of Income Tax of India 1971 Act in a financial year. While a deduction of up to Rs 2 lakh is allowed on the interest portion under Section 24B of Income Tax of India Act in case of self-occupied house.



- Interest rate.** When compared to other loans, home loans are much cheaper;
- Due Diligence.** When you apply for a home loan, the bank will check whether the property title is clear and valid as well as it also checks on the legal position. This provides an added level of protection to the property buyer.
- Long term.** Generally home loans are for long term 15, 20 or 25 years. Hence your interest and principal payment are spread over for long term. Long term loans have lower monthly instalments, which will give you an option for managing repayment plans.

**How rate hike impacts the home loan:**

Interest rates prevailing in a country are dependent on a variety of domestic and international factors including inflation, international price of Crude oil etc. Home loan interest rates move in sync with the interest rate. When the Reserve Bank of India hikes the rates, we can see the changes in interest rate of home loan. EMI becomes costlier due to the rate hike.

Things to keep in mind while facing higher interest rate on home loan.

- Fixed Rate Vs Floating Rate loan.** When it is anticipated that the interest rate will rise, it is better to opt for a Fixed Rate of loan. In the Fixed interest rate option, your rate will not change as per the changes in rate hike. The interest rate would be the same throughout the tenure. However, the disadvantage is that when interest rates are really low, your fixed rate will remain what had been committed, and one may not benefit therefrom. On the contrary, Floating Rates move in tandem with the general economy and when rates are low, the home loan

borrower will enjoy low rates and when it moves up, he ends up paying a higher rate. It is best to lock in your interest at a Fixed rate when the interest rates are at an all-time low, else go for floating rate.

- Longer Vs Shorter tenure.** If you borrow 50 lakhs from any financial institution at an annual interest rate of 9%, the EMI Burden would be higher in shorter tenure but you will save substantial interest burden in the long term. You can compare between the 10 & 20 year options in the chart shown below, one gets to save almost Rs 31 lakhs on a Rs 50 lakh loan.

Tenure (in years)	Monthly EMI (in INR ₹)	Total Repayment (in INR ₹)
30	40,231	1,44,82,908
20	44,986	1,07,96,377
15	50,713	91,28,022
10	63,338	76,00,075
05	1,03,792	62,26,734

- Increase your down payment.** If you are making a larger down payment, you will need to borrow that much less, so plan well so that at least 25% of the total home value is your down payment, this will help keep the interest impact lower.
- Keep an eye on interest rate.** It is always important to keep an eye on the interest rate so that you can prepay a part of your loan to benefit from lowering the interest cost or look for other ways to refinance your loan.

**Effect of Interest Rate Change on Home loans:**

Effect of a 2% higher interest rate can be quite large in a housing loan when looked at over a 20-year period. On a 75 lakhs loan over a 20-year period the higher interest rate that one pays would be Rs 22.77 lakhs as per the illustration given below.

SCENARIO OF HOME LOAN PAYMENTS DUE TO INTEREST RATE CHANGES			
Interest Rates	7.50%	9.50%	
Amount of Loan (in Rs)	75,00,000.00	75,00,000.00	
Tenure of the Loan (in years)	20	20	
EMI	60,419.00	60,910.00	15%
Total Interest Payable	70,00,677.00	92,78,361.00	
Total Payment to be made	1,45,00,677.00	1,67,78,361.00	
Incremental Payout		22,77,684.00	

**Understanding How Home Loans Work:**

The composition of your home loan EMI is an important aspect in determining how to manage your loan smartly. It is important to make the prepayments of your principal in parts or full in the first half of your loan tenure ie if your loan is for 20 years, you would benefit the most if you made prepayments in the first 10 years. In fact if you plan well, you may even close a 20 year loan within the 15th year itself.

As per the chart below, in a 20 year loan, during the first 10 years EMI consists mostly of your interest and less of principal, so your interest burden does not reduce much unless you make prepayments. It is only post the 10th year that the proportion between principal & interest changes in the EMI.

EMI composition in a 20 year loan		
Year of Repayment	Principal	Interest
Year 1	15%	85%
Year 10	36%	64%
Year 15	60%	40%
Year 19	85%	15%

**Smart ways to close your home loan early.**

1. **Go for shorter tenure.** Home loan tenure is the primary factor which decides the interest one is required to pay. Longer the tenure, more the interest paid and shorter the tenure, lesser the interest paid.

Loan Calculation		
Loan Amount	50,00,000	50,00,000
Tenure	20 Years	15 Years
Interest	7.50%	7.50%
EMI Amount	40,280	46,351
Total Amount Paid (Principal+Interest)	96,66,868	83,42,823
Total interest paid	46,67,118	33,43,111

2. **Prepayments are good options.** Most lenders won't charge for prepayment of loan. Try to do some prepayment so that it will drastically reduce the interest. This is because in the first few years of the loan, you pay more towards the interest compared to the payment made towards the principal amount. Making frequent prepayment will

substantially reduce the principal amount and will reduce the interest amount.

Loan Calculation		
Loan Amount	50,00,000	
Tenure	20 Years	
Interest	7.50%	
EMI Amount	40,280	
	Interest	Principal
First 10 years (Interest paid)	34,73,377	18,43,578
From 11th year (Interest paid)	11,93,741	31,56,212

- 3. **Home Loan Balance Transfer can be an Alternative.** When you have taken a loan with one financial institution and feel that the interest rate has been changed and your current lender has done slight changes, then you have an option to transfer your home loan to another lender where the interest rate is less compared to your current lender.
- 4. **Increase the EMI.** Your income may not be the same year on year or you may have got a raise in income, you can always go for higher EMI to reduce the tenure. When you increase your EMI the tenure would get decreased and the overall interest that you have to pay against your loan would also get reduced.

Home Loan Calculation	
Loan Amount	50,00,000
Tenure	20 Years
Interest	7.50%
EMI Amount	40,280
Total amount paid in 20 years	96,66,868
Total amount paid in 60th Month (Principal+Interest)	24,16,780
Opening balance in 6th year	43,45,105
If you increase your EMI to	53,873
Tenure decreased to	10 Years
Amount to be paid to bank in 10 years	64,00,000
Total amount paid in 15 Years	88,80,000
<b>Total interest Amount saved</b>	<b>7,86,868</b>

**Points to note:**

- It is important to not miss any single EMI payment as this will affect your credit score. It will be very difficult if you are planning to have a further loan if your credit score is negative.
- Tax benefit is available for both principal and interest.



**Sources of Cashflow to pre close a home loan:**

1. Spare cashflow lying in the bank, namely Savings account or low interest Fixed Deposit.
2. Bonus from employment or lump sum profits from Business or profession or ESOP encashment etc...
3. Booking of Profits from Existing Mutual Funds or Shares with good profits and low taxation (withdraw part of the amount, not fully).

3. Don't be obsessed with closing your entire home loan within a year or two... keep a realistic estimate of when you would like to close it.. for most people it is between 12-15 years.
4. Rule of thumb, if your EMI has gone up by 15% as in the above example, find upto 15% to prepay your principal, if you can.

A sample of the home loan Amortisation schedule is provided below for one to understand how the loan outstanding and the interest burden change on a year-on-year basis during the entire tenure of the home loans.

Home Loan Amortisation Schedule @9.50% interest rate					
Years	Loan O/s	EMI *12	Interest Paid	Principal Paid	Closing Bal
1	75,00,000	8,38,918	7,06,848	1,32,070	73,67,930
2	73,67,930	8,38,918	6,93,740	1,45,178	72,22,752
3	72,22,752	8,38,918	6,79,331	1,59,587	70,63,165
4	70,63,165	8,38,918	6,63,493	1,75,425	68,87,740
5	68,87,740	8,38,918	6,46,082	1,92,836	66,94,904
6	66,94,904	8,38,918	6,26,944	2,11,974	64,82,930
7	64,82,930	8,38,918	6,05,906	2,33,012	62,49,917
8	62,49,917	8,38,918	5,82,780	2,56,138	59,93,779
9	59,93,779	8,38,918	5,57,359	2,81,559	57,12,220
10	57,12,220	8,38,918	5,29,415	3,09,503	54,02,717
11	54,02,717	8,38,918	4,98,697	3,40,221	50,62,496
12	50,62,496	8,38,918	4,64,931	3,73,987	46,88,510
13	46,88,510	8,38,918	4,27,814	4,11,104	42,77,406
14	42,77,406	8,38,918	3,87,013	4,51,905	38,25,501
15	38,25,501	8,38,918	3,42,162	4,96,756	33,28,745
16	33,28,745	8,38,918	2,92,861	5,46,057	27,82,688
17	27,82,688	8,38,918	2,38,666	6,00,252	21,82,435
18	21,82,435	8,38,918	1,79,092	6,59,826	15,22,609
19	15,22,609	8,38,918	1,13,606	7,25,312	7,97,297
20	7,97,297	8,38,918	41,621	7,97,297	0
		1,67,78,360	92,78,361	74,99,999	

**To Sum Up**

Buying a home is an important dream for every young adult and home loans make this dream a reality. If you are disciplined and consistent, then you can handle the burden of a home loan pretty comfortably. Always remember that you are taking a loan to buy an asset (home) that will provide security to your family and provide long term value appreciation too. So All the Best!



**Babu Krishnamoorthy**

*Babu Krishnamoorthy has spent the past 25 years as a financial adviser and entrepreneur, and is the Chief Sberpa at Finsberpa Investments Pvt Ltd. A money coach, he helps people dream big and achieve life goals. He helps them plan and execute their financial plans in a manner that is predictable. He loves meeting people and spends his spare time reading non-fiction & is an amateur runner (with over 15 half marathons and one full marathon completed). He has authored many books including "Unlock Secrets to A Wealthy Life". He is available at Babu.k@finsberpa.com ( www.finsberpa.com)*

**What one must avoid while planning pre payments of home loans**

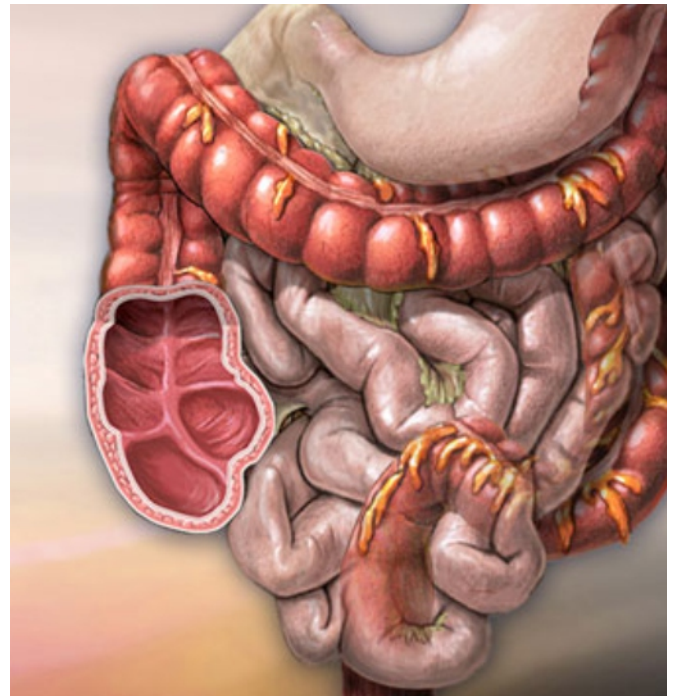
1. When using your bank deposits or free cash to prepay, do not use up your emergency cash.
2. If you have invested in Equity Mutual

Funds (they have not yet yielded gains) or stocks, then you need to consider whether you want to close a 9.50% loan by moving out of an asset that may generate 12-15% per annum in the long term.

# COLON CANCER

## THE SILENT KILLER

Colon cancer is on the rise in India, making it one of the deadliest digestive cancers in both men and women. The first in her series on digestive cancers, Dr Renuka David addresses all one needs to know about the colon and colorectal carcinoma.



There are a lot of queries coming in about the varying aspects of stomach and digestive cancers, which have been steadily rising over the last decade. In fact, colorectal cancer is the third-most common cancer among men and women both worldwide and in India. In 2021, a survey revealed that over 40000 colorectal cancer cases were detected in India alone. This is also a topic I am personally invested in, having lost my own mother to this disease. It is of utmost importance to recognise the symptoms and to know, what kind of screenings would help. For this issue, here are some of those questions that I handpicked, to ensure you get the complete picture!

### What is colon cancer?

Colon cancer begins in the large intestine, which is the final part of the digestive tract. Adults at any age can be affected with this disease. Sometimes, this is also referred to as colorectal cancer, when it begins at the rectum and then spreads to the colon thus affecting both. Colon cancer starts off as small non-cancerous polyps in the colon or large intestine. Over time, if left undiagnosed and untreated, these polyps eventually become cancerous.

### How do I know if I may have colon cancer?

Watch out for the following symptoms, which could be indicative of colon cancer - change in bowel habits, consistency of the stool, rectal bleeding, persistent abdominal discomfort, gas, the feeling that the bowel hasn't completely emptied out, weakness, tiredness and unexplained weight loss. If these symptoms persist for over two months, it's time to get yourself medically examined.

### Who is at risk for colon cancer?

Anyone who is 45 years old or above, is at risk for colon cancer. High risk candidates with a family history, should consider 40 as the cut-off age for increased risk. It has generally been seen in people who are older than 60, but an increasing number of younger people have been diagnosed with it in recent years. People with inflammatory intestine diseases, such as ulcerative colitis and Crohn's disease are at a higher risk. Those with gene mutations passed through generations could be at risk as well, since colon cancer is linked to inherited genes. As far as lifestyle causes go, people with a low-fibre, high-fat diet, a diet low in fruits and vegetables and rich in red meat and processed food, and those who are sedentary and lack regular physical activity are at risk. So are those who are diabetic or insulin resistant, obese, smoke or drink heavily. All people with a genetic syndrome such as familial adenomatous polyposis or having Lynch syndrome are at a higher risk.

### How can I change my lifestyle to minimise the risk?

Eat fruits, vegetables and whole grains that contain vitamins, minerals, fibre and antioxidants. Studies have shown that this is linked to a lower risk in colon cancer cases. Cutting out red meat, sugar and processed foods can also help prevent the cancer. Drink alcohol in moderation. Smoking has been found to increase one's risk of colorectal cancers! So, it is time to drop that cigarette at once especially if there is a family

history of colon cancer! Exercise regularly. This is absolutely non-negotiable. It isn't just good for the prevention of cancer, but also for various other lifestyle ailments. At least 30-40 minutes of exercise every day is enough and mandatory. Maintain a healthy weight, one that is right for you. Obesity can cause many complications, including colorectal cancer. Of course, if one is over 40, it is important to get screened regularly.

**What are the diagnostic tools for colon cancer?**

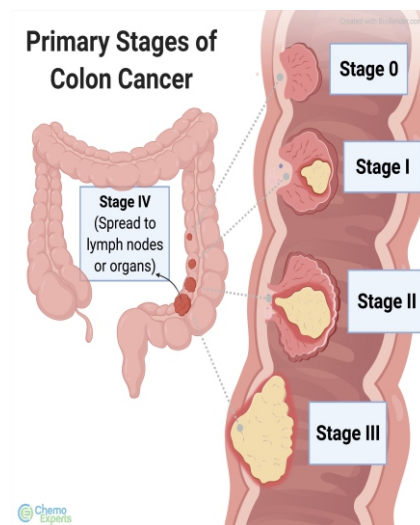
Unfortunately, this kind of cancer doesn't show up on a regular stomach ultrasound. Stool examination for occult blood, along with a sigmoidoscopy (a basic invasive tool) or colonoscopy (an advanced invasive tool), conducted through the anus is the first diagnostic step. A visual colonoscopy, also called CT colonography is sometimes employed with special graphics. Blood-based DNA tests, CA Markers and testing for the altered gene SEPT9 are used to screen adults. Some doctors recommend a blood test to check for Carcino Embryonic Antigen (CEA), a chemical produced by colon cancer. The first step though, if you suspect you might have this cancer, is to visit a specialist and discuss your symptoms with them.

**How is colon cancer treated?**

Based on the extent of the disease and the overall health of the patient, doctors may recommend a mix of surgery to remove the cancer, along with radiation or chemotherapy. Polyps can be surgically removed during a colonoscopy, using specific tools. For those polyps which cannot be removed during a colonoscopy, laparoscopic surgery through the abdomen is usually conducted. In some cases, a partial colectomy is performed, where a part of the colon is removed. Surgical intervention may then be used to create a

way for waste to leave the body. The lymph nodes draining the surrounding areas are removed as well. In very advanced cases, targeted Drug Therapy focuses on specific abnormalities within the cells. Also, Immunotherapy is used for monoclonal antibodies, where one's own immune system is used to fight the cancer.

I hope this has been informative and useful and answered some of your queries. Remember, early detection is the key. Visit your doctor periodically for check-ups and if you start showing any symptoms, don't worry about false alarms – paranoia is better than late detection and a difficult and uncertain treatment journey thereafter.



Stages of Colon Cancer (photo credit chemoexperts.com)

In our next issue, we will continue shining a spotlight on the gamut of digestive and stomach-related cancers for men and women. Please send in your queries to [md@radiantmedicalservices.com](mailto:md@radiantmedicalservices.com) or [chiefeditor@medalsandribbons.com](mailto:chiefeditor@medalsandribbons.com) by August 10, 2023.



*Dr Renuka David, MBBS, PGD (MCH), USA-PbD (HC) is the Managing Director of Radiant Medical Services and an alumnus of the Coimbatore Medical College. She has been a frontier doctor, working extensively with women and young adults in urban, rural and tribal India. She has also been a contract doctor with the Indian Army for three years. Dr Renuka dons many avatars as an entrepreneur, doctor, professional speaker, television show host, TEDx speaker and wellness expert. She is the Founder-Curator of the immensely successful Radiant Wellness Conclave.*



**Dr.Renuka David**

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# HERITAGE, HISTORY AND MILITARY MUSIC AT OTA

The narration of historic events at places with a heritage tag is often depicted through 'sound and light' shows. These have a better appeal to the audience. Officers Training Academy (OTA), Chennai has started such a heritage based show. And the role of military bands in ceremonial pageantry at OTA is also highlighted in this article.

## The 'White House' Talks

Every grand institution eagerly desires to tell its tales with pomp and show, one such unheard tale is of the 'White House' of Officers Training Academy (OTA), Chennai, which happens to be the epicentre of the training activities in OTA. Since 2022, the story of this heritage building is being highlighted through a light and sound show called 'The White House Talks'. It is a story of a temple of valour that has gifted more than 30000 Gentleman Officers and 2500 Women Officers to our Nation.

And as any grandparent with a bag full of stories to regale the younger generations, the **White House** had a number of tales to tell. We know that there are two facets of culture, the Heritage and the History. In the **White House Talks**, the heritage narrates the history, beckoning us all to embark on a voyage down memory lanes, showcasing the timeline of events as they occurred, in doing so, moulding OTA Chennai to what it is now, from a place where it all began.

The story of the **White House** begins with its existence in 1861 as the Headquarters (HQ) of Madras Artillery in the Madras Presidency Army. The structure which is now known as the **White House**, used to serve as the HQ of various garrison units located at St. Thomas Mount till 1962. Due to its



*A scene from the 'White House Talks' Sound and Light Show*

distinctive white facade, it became popular as the **'White House'**. The Neo-Classical Gravitas with porticos all around gave the **White House** a mystical charm.

Like all fascinating stories **'The White House Talks'** narrates the humble beginnings of the OTA, when the need arose to establish a structure to train officers during the turbulent World War II. After the war, only two Officers Training Schools were retained, one at Ghorpadi in Pune and the second at Madras. The OTA which was earlier known as OTS (Officers Training School) was formally inaugurated on 15th January 1963 by Shri C Subramaniam, the then Union Minister for Steel and Heavy Industry. Thereafter as the nation and world evolved and geopolitics went through crests and troughs, ever changing dynamics gave way to many modifications to the training structure at the OTA.

Throughout this wonderful presentation, the audience is entertained and informed about the evolution of OTA over the years, be it introduction of the women entry into the folds of OTA, be it the accolades won in sports by our cadets or the gallantry awards won by many of our brave hearts who sacrificed their lives for the mother land. The main motive of **'The White House Talks'** is in celebrating the saga of the heroism by its alumni at various fronts. Be it War, Adventure Sports or whatever life had to throw, the alumni of the OTA have shone like a blazing sun at times amidst grim clouds of despair. The vintage pictures of a golden era and the zooming sounds of War Planes, thumps and shots of Bombs and Machine Guns, recreate the scenes from the past and make the viewers sit on the edge of their seats, awaiting excitedly as chapter after chapter unfolds.

The mellifluous narration of **'The White House Talks'** holds the audience with rapt attention whereas the ethereal

lights, live galloping horses, dramatic background score and the soul stirring enactment by the Cadets, transports the viewers back in time. The live enactment of the glorious past of OTA Chennai, made the **White House** an unforgettable treat to behold. The voice of **White House** reminds us all, that the grandeur which the Academy at Chennai holds is the cradle of valour and leadership, and has been nourished with the untiring efforts of many devoted souls who have time and again enriched the motherland with their blood and sweat.

There have been a number of occasions when **'The White House Talks'** has been enacted but a very special moment arrived when it was screened for a gathering of veterans in a recent Reunion. This had a different, deeply emotional impact on the gathering at large. Most of the veterans were nostalgic during the show while appreciating the efforts and enactment of the cadets during the show. The **White House Talks** will continue to

enchant the hearts of many in future, it is a story which will be narrated by generations to come and leave them in complete awe.

### Military Band Symphony

And while we cherish the sound and light show in the **White House**, military music adds to the aesthetic show. The relation of music and soldiers is as old as the profession of arms. A Military band is a group of personnel who perform musical duties in military functions of the Armed Forces. A typical Military Band consists mostly of wind and percussion instruments. The first Military Band is believed to have been raised in Germany, in the 17th century. In due course, Military Bands gradually spread across all armies in the world.

Military Bands are primarily for ceremonial functions, but they play an important part in instilling a sense of pride and motivation amongst the men and women of the Armed Forces and in accomplishing sustained excellence.



*OTA Military Band Symphony enchants the audience*



White House Talks - the show begins

The OTA Military Band established in 1973 performs at all routine and Ceremonial Events including the delightful Band Symphony which is performed on special occasions. The OTA Band is a symbol of pride for every Cadet and Officer, and with a morale boosting effect, it shines throughout the Band Symphony which is staged at the Chanakya Auditorium of OTA Chennai.

A standard Military Band comprises of three sections: -

- **The Wood Wind Section.** It comprises of the Flute, Piccolo, Oboe, Clarinet, Alto Saxophone and Bassoon. The tone is produced, by a column of air, vibrating within a pipe with small vents across its length.
- **The Brass Section.** It comprises of the Horn, Cornet, Trumpet, Trombone, Euphonium and Tuba. They contribute to the musical climax.
- **The Percussion Section.** It has a variety of instruments that are made to sound by striking or shaking.

The Band Symphony is a sheer audio delight and it begins with the introduction by the Academy Adjutant who sets the tempo by introducing to the audience a brief history of Military music. The curtains open with the ever passionate 'Vande Mataram' composed by Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay which sets the mood for all the upcoming performances. This ever-nostalgic tune reminds us of the national struggle of independence and knits us with the fabric of patriotism that binds all Indians together. Thereafter, the mystical melody of 'Radetzky', composed by Johann Strauss Junior, takes over our senses and this popular tune leaves the gathering

humming as if someone just stumbled upon an old forgotten song. The ever-thrilling melody of 'Deb Shiv Var Mobe', composed by H B Brall, leaves goosebumps, its divine lyrics sing through one's conscience and leaves one invigorated.

As the evening progresses, the Military Band performs a delightful musical piece 'Abide with Me', composed by W H Monk, that appears to be a balm to one's soul, this soothing hymn was immortalized in the trenches of First World War and has become an integral part of Military Music. Performances like 'Jai Ho' and 'Challa' are performed by Cadets, who with their zest add magic to these performances and keep the feet of the audience tapping with josh. It is a scene to behold when the charismatic performances by the cadets rub off their energy on the audience as well.

Numerous musical pieces are played throughout the evening by the band, which finally concludes with one song 'Antim Pagon Ke Nishan', which gives a befitting musical tribute to the Alma Mater. The OTA Band Symphony concludes thereafter ensuring that the enchanted audience leaves the hall with delightful hearts full of optimism and sentiments for the nation. The music is a delight to every heart and needless to say that the Band Symphony staged by OTA is extremely special. Many distinguished guests have expressed their heartfelt praise to the OTA Band for their performance and it is certainly an inseparable part of their visit to the OTA.

The Military Band Symphony elevates the listeners for the moment but charms them for a lifetime, justifying Susan Pepper's quote "May music charm me last on Earth and greet me first in heaven".

Lt Gen JS Sandhu (Retd) Editor



# INSV Tarini Returns Home



INSV Tarini was flagged-in at INS Mandovi, Goa on 23 May 2023 after a gruelling 17000 nautical mile voyage from Goa to Cape Town to Rio -de- Janeiro and back to Goa via Cape Town. The crew included two lady officers who took part in the complete voyage. Remarkable Spirit and Josh Indeed!!!

## ARTICLES FOR PUBLICATION

Readers interested in contributing articles/poems/cartoons/humour/anecdotes for publication may kindly email to [chiefeditor@medalsandribbons.com](mailto:chiefeditor@medalsandribbons.com) . Some of the authors of content selected for publication will be suitably remunerated, between Rs 1000/- to Rs 5000/-, depending on the length and content value. The decision of the Editor would be final in this respect.



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