

## Remembering heroes of Rezang La, Gurung Hill

History was rewritten on August 30, 2020, when Kailash Ridge was secured by the Indian Army in response to PLA's unprovoked transgressions to change the status of the Line of Actual Control in Aksai Chin, three months earlier. This action took the Chinese by complete surprise, neutralising gains made by the PLA along the northern bank of Pangong Tso, besides rendering its position at Maldo Garrison untenable.



Epic battle: Most of the personnel deployed at Rezang La fought to the finish. PTI



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ON October 20, 1962, China launched a two-pronged aggression against India. The main offensive was in the east, complemented by a subsidiary in the west — directed towards eastern Ladakh to capture areas up to the 1960 Claim Line and gain complete control over Aksai Chin, which entailed the elimination of 43 Indian military posts.

The People's Liberation Army's (PLA) operations in Aksai Chin were executed in two phases. In the first phase (October 20 to 28, 1962), the Chinese cleared Indian positions at Daulat Beg Oldi, Galwan, Pangong Tso and Dungti-Demchok areas. The second phase was launched three

weeks later on November 18 to capture strategically important Kailash Range — it originates from the southern bank of Pangong Tso and stretches over 60 km from northwest to south. The key features on Kailash Ridge include Helmet Top, Gurung Hill, Spanggur Gap, Muggar Hill, Mukhpari, Rezang La and Rechin La — heights varying between 4,000 m and 5,500 m.

During the lull following phase one, the Indian Army reorganised its defences, including raising of 3 Infantry Division at Leh. Its three infantry brigades — 70 was assigned the Indus Valley sub-sector, 163 was earmarked for the protection of the Leh Garrison and 114 was responsible for the defence of Chushul — were deployed in this way: 1/8 GR (Gorkha Rifles) in the north of Spanggur Gap with two companies on Gurung Hill, a company to the north and fourth company in Spanggur Gap and Battalion Headquarters with an ad hoc company at the Chushul airfield. The 13 Kumaon was deployed south of Spanggur Gap with two companies on Muggar Hill, a company at Rezang La and fourth company along with the Battalion Headquarters south of it. Brigade Headquarters along with 1 JAT, two troops of AMX-13 tanks was located at Chushul. 13 Field Regiment minus a battery (25 pounder guns) was positioned in support.

The Chinese planned to capture Rezang La and Gurung Hill concurrently with three battalions (ex-4 Infantry Division). Attacking troops were concentrated in Retuzong, 40 km from the border. The C Company of 13 Kumaon, responsible for the defence of Rezang La, was deployed two platoons up (strong points 7 and 9) with the third platoon and Company Headquarters at Point 5150 (strong point 8) in the centre, along with detachments of 3-inch mortars, heavy machine guns and rocket launchers.

The Chinese plan was to outflank the position at night from the north and south. Accordingly, the attacking force was divided into two; one task force composed of 3rd Battalion (less a company) of 11th Regiment was to attack strong point 9 from the south and the second comprising two companies (one each from 3rd Battalion of 10th & 11th Regiments) was to attack strong point 8 from the north. The 3rd Battalion (less a company ex-10th Regiment) and 3rd Cavalry (less two companies) were earmarked as reserves.

The two task forces started from Retuzong at 8 pm on November 17 and were in respective firm bases by 6 am the following morning. After brief artillery bombardment, the attack on Rezang La commenced from both directions at 9.15 am. A fierce battle ensued, the defenders beating back successive Chinese attacks. With communication snapped and the position encircled, leaving no possibility of being reinforced, it was a “do-or-die” situation for C Company under Major Shaitan Singh. Finally, the Chinese did manage to break through and Rezang La fell by 10 pm on November 18.

It was an epic battle, literally fought to ‘the last man, the last round’. Of the 141 personnel at Rezang La, 135 ‘fought to the finish’; five were taken prisoner, with one survivor. Major Shaitan Singh was awarded Param Vir Chakra (posthumously). China’s 21 personnel were killed and 98 wounded.

Gurung Hill was held by two companies of 1/8 GR (strong points 16, 5 and 6) located northeast of Spanggur Gap. Strong point No. 16 at 5,100 m was held by a company minus platoon, supported by a troop of AMX-13 light tanks.

The task to capture strong point 16 was assigned to a task force of Ali Detachment, which consisted of eight sections duly reinforced by a platoon each of engineers and flamethrowers, one heavy machine gun, one 57-mm recoil-less gun and 12 82mm mortars. One company of the 3rd Cavalry was to act as reserve.

The attack on strong point 16 commenced at 9.22 am on November 18, preceded by artillery fire. Facing stiff resistance, the Chinese suffered heavy casualties and the attack was stalled, but resumed again at 11 am. After repulsing repeated attacks with no reinforcements coming by, the position fell towards the last light. The intensity of fighting could be gauged from the casualties; 50 personnel of 1/8 GR were killed and several wounded, while Chinese witnessed over 80 casualties and many wounded. The PLA could not capture strong points 5 and 6 i.e. the remainder portion of Gurung Hill.

Whereas only Rezang La and a part of Gurung Hill had been captured, a decision was taken at the highest level to pull back from Kailash Ridge and redeploy the west of Chushul on the intervening night of December 19 and 20. The Chinese did not follow Indian withdrawing troops. Incidentally, the PLA had only division plus at their disposal for the operations in Aksai Chin and were severely constrained to undertake any further operations.

On the other hand, the 3rd Infantry Division had the capability to launch a limited counter-offensive. After declaring ceasefire on November 21, Chinese forces fell back to depth positions due to logistic constraints.

Fifty-eight years later, history was rewritten on August 30, 2020, when Kailash Ridge was secured by the Indian Army in response to PLA’s unprovoked transgressions to change the status of the LAC in Aksai Chin, three months earlier. This action took the Chinese by complete surprise, neutralising gains made by the PLA along the northern bank of Pangong Tso, besides rendering its position at Maldo Garrison untenable. Although, as part of the disengagement

process, Indian troops have pulled back from the Kailash Range, the heroic deeds of our valiant soldiers remain etched in golden letters at Rezang La and Gurung Hill.