1947-48 Indo-Pak War: Fall of Gilgit and Siege and Fall of Skardu

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About The Author

Col Tej Kumar Tikoo (Retd) was born at Srinagar (Kashmir) on 15 April, 1950. After completing his school and college education at Srinagar, he joined the Indian Army; being commissioned into 1st Battalion of the newly raised Naga Regiment, on 22 August 1971. Soon thereafter, he found himself fighting the 1971 Indo-Pak war in the eastern sector, which resulted in the creation of Bangladesh.

As an infantryman, Col Tikoo spent a major portion of his thirty four years of service in the Army, on the Line of Control in Jammu and Kashmir or fighting insurgency operations. This includes deployment in present day southern Siachen Glacier and counter-insurgency operations in Nagaland, Manipur, Assam, Punjab, Sri Lanka (as part of IPKF) and later in Jammu and Kashmir.

Col Tikoo also raised the counter-insurgency training school in Jammu and Kashmir which, over the years, has contributed immensely to the success of Army, Para Military and Central Armed Police Forces in fighting insurgency in the State. He retired in 2004.

He is a M.Sc. in Defence Studies from Madras University. He was awarded Ph.D. in Defence Studies in 2012.

Col Tikoo’s recently authored book, Kashmir; Its Aborigines and their Exodus (Lancer Publishers and Distributors, New Delhi), is considered to be an authentic and authoritative account of the exodus of Kashmiri Pandits from Kashmir in 1989-90.
India has fought many conventional wars since independence; it has also been involved in fighting insurgency and proxy wars during this period. Many heroes that these wars produced have become household names. However, these wars also produced heroes who remain unsung; whose stories of bravery and gallantry are not so well known. One such story is recounted here. It is a story of indomitable spirit in the face of impossible odds. This story is about Lt Col Sher Jung Thapa, MVC, whose tenacity, courage, commitment and ability to motivate his troops under most adverse conditions, over a prolonged period of time, has few parallels in the annals of military history. Though his exploits of bravery are confined to the siege and fall of Skardu, the battle itself cannot be divorced from what happened in Gilgit, prior to the commencement of siege of Skardu, which lasted for four months. Therefore, as a background, Part-I covers in brief, the fall of Gilgit, which served as a prelude and set the stage for the siege and fall of Skardu.

Terrain

During the first Indo-Pak war of 1947-48, the northern front saw some intense fighting. On most occasions, even though the fighting was in progress simultaneously in most of the area, the terrain imposed such severe restrictions on the movement and switching of forces, that the battles were, by and large, fought in each sector in isolation. This, however, changed later when Pakistani forces, ably led, turned this handicap into an advantage.

The terrain of the Northern areas (now re-named Gilgit-Baltistan) was extremely rugged and broken. Its main features were high mountain tops with steep gradients and deep river valleys, leading into numerous narrow and inaccessible gorges. Gurez, Dras, Kargil and Leh were its main towns, with Gilgit being the headquarters of the Governor, appointed by the Maharaja. These towns also represented the sectors into which the northern battle field was divided. Due to low mountains on its south-west, criss-crossed by many tracks, the natural outlet of the area followed this lie-of-the-ground; much along the mighty Indus River. Gilgit had another advantage: it dominated one of the caravan routes from Srinagar to Kashgar, passing through Gurez-Burzil or Kamri-Mintaka Pass. Gurez also dominated an equally important route that took off towards east, followed the Indus to Skardu and then on to Kargil and Leh. Importance of this route in strategic terms, at the outbreak of the hostilities, was obvious as Kargil was connected directly to Srinagar via Dras, Zojila and Baltal. There were other shorter and tactically invaluable tracks which crossed over the Deosai Plateau, a table top plain stretch at 4270 meters, lying between Korakoram and Himmalayan Ranges. These tracks provided enough scope for outflanking maneuvers by
foot infantry, provided the leaders were willing to take the risk. Another track that emanated from the junction of Indus and Shyok Rivers went eastwards along Shyok River and followed the old caravan route to Leh and Yarkand.

Rough and desolate terrain with limited means of communication for movement made these tracks militarily very important. For an inept military commander it was a severe handicap, but for a bold and imaginative leader these provided an excellent means to outflank and isolate the enemy.

**Gilgit in July 1947**

Gilgit region, which had been brought under Dogra rule in the 19th century, was inhabited by a turbulent and an overwhelmingly Muslim population, distributed in semi-feudal principalities of Chitral, Hunza, Nagar, etc. In July 1947, with their departure from India imminent, the British terminated the 60 years lease over Gilgit and handed it over to the Maharaja. Brig Ghansara Singh, one of the senior most officers of the State Forces, was immediately appointed as the new Governor. He took over the charge of his office on 01 Aug 1947 from Lt Col Bacon, the Political Agent appointed by the British. The event took place in the midst of a joyous welcome accorded by the local people. Brig Ghansara Singh had the Mirs of Hunza and Nagar and Raja of Punial and Chieftains of Koh Gizar, Yasin and Askoman as his subordinate chiefs. Out of all these influential heavyweights, the new Governor enjoyed the support of all except that of the Mirs of Hunza and Nagar, who were decidedly hostile to him. Their hostility was soon to prove disastrous to the Governor, as 75% troops of Gilgit Scouts belonged to these two principalities. What proved even more
damaging was that the Sub Major of the unit (the highest ranking appointment other than officers, rising through ranks from within the men composing the unit. In British Indian Army - to a large extent even today- he is the most important functionary in a unit, next only to the Commanding Officer, and exercises great influence over the rank and file), Babar Khan, happened to be related to both Mirs; he was an uncle of the Mir of Nagar and married to the sister of Mir of Hunza. As if this was not enough of a handicap, Maj W A Brown and Capt Matheson, whose services had been retained by the State, proved to be inveterate foes of the Maharaja and played a treacherously pro-Pakistan game, which ultimately sealed the Governor’s fate.

Deployment of Troops

Brig Ghansara Singh had at his disposal 6 J&K Infantry, less two companies, which, along with Battalion Headquarter, was located at Bunji, 54 kilometers from Gilgit, on the road to Srinagar. Lt Col Abdul Majid Khan commanded the Battalion which had Sikhs and Muslims in almost equal proportion. However, the Sikh element, consisted of raw recruits, who were not fit for battle and needed additional training of 6 months to be battle-worthy. A detachment of these raw Sikh troops, numbering roughly a platoon (35 Men) was stationed at Janglot. It was ironical that even as local people and Gilgit Scouts appeared untouched by the communal passions let loose by the communal violence that engulfed the north western region of India, same thing could not be said of the Muslim troops of 6 J&K Infantry. Having learnt of the communal flare up in Punjab from some of their colleagues hailing from Poonch, they were deeply infected by the religious passion. Brig Ghansara Singh realized the dangerous situation he was in, but went about his work with true soldierly courage and dignified poise. His repeated requests to Srinagar for urgent help elicited no response, perhaps because his requests never reached there in the first place; the telegraph office at Gilgit was manned by a Muslim officer and the wireless station was controlled by Peshawar Radio Station. To add to his woes, the Governor did not enjoy executive powers like operating the budget or even having an adequate stock of essential commodities at his disposal with which he could buy local favour.

The End Game

It did not take long for the Governor to realize that both the British officers and Babar Khan were upto some serious mischief. But his options to deal with them were strictly limited. He could not call for Muslim troops from Bunji as he no longer trusted their loyalty; and his request to Lt Col Abdul Majid Khan to send him two companies of Sikhs, was flatly turned down, though on purely professional grounds, as they were not battle-worthy as yet.

Around midnight of 31 Oct- 01 Nov 1947, about 100 men of Gilgit Scouts under Maj Brown, Lt Hyder Khan and Sub Maj Babar Khan, surrounded Governor’s house. Some of them tried to steal inside to capture the Governor in sleep. However, the gutsy Brigadier, along with his orderly and driver drove away the intruders by using whatever weapon they had; Governor used his pistol, whereas the other two used a twelve- bore shot gun and a
sports gun, respectively. The skirmish resulted in the death of two Scouts men. The Scouts now resorted to machine gun fire, which continued till early morning. In the late morning, Maj Brown sent a terse message to the Governor to surrender or else, he threatened, that all non-Muslims in Gilgit would be massacred. With practically nothing or no one available to defend his position Brig Ghansara Singh surrendered and was immediately put under arrest. When people learnt about it, they flocked to Gigit and protested vehemently. However, they were pacified by the Scouts’ leaders and they dispersed. It is certain that it was this sentiment of the public that saved the Governor and other non-Muslims of Gilgit from sure death.

But the raw Sikh recruits were not so lucky. Except one, the complete complement of Sikh troops manning the Janglot post was treacherously attacked by the Muslim soldiers of their own unit, in connivance with scouts’ men, and mercilessly killed. The lone survivor jumped into the icy cold Indus River and managed to hold on to a log of wood, which he used to ferry himself across to safety. On learning about the massacre at Janglot, the Sikh troops at Bunji dispersed to find their way to Gurez, via Astor. But Capt Matheson, with troops from Scouts stationed at Chilas, laid an ambush and prevented their escape, killing many of them. A few, who managed to break the ambush wandered through the desolate wilderness of snow covered mountains for days on end without food or water, before they were captured or killed. Lt Col Abdul Majid Khan was also subsequently put under arrest.

In this manner, by early Nov 1947, Gilgit region passed into Pakistani hands. The provisional government formed by Pakistan immediately thereafter, included Major Brown, Capt Hassan, Ehsan Ali, Muhammad Khan, Sayeed, Lt Hyder and Sub Maj Babar Khan. Not a single Raja, Amir, Mehtar or a notable public figure was included in the provisional government. On 03 Nov 1947, Maj Brown hoisted the Pakistani Flag in the Scout Lines.

**Part-2: The Siege of Skardu Begins**

Skardu, though only a Tehsil headquarter, drew its importance from the fact that the district officer, in order to avoid the bitter cold of Leh, would move here in winter. The Tehsil was of gigantic proportions in size, inhabited almost entirely by Muslims. It included the jagirs of Rondhu, Shigar, Khapalu, Kharmang and Skardu; each having its own Raja, who exercised great influence over the people. Being mostly illiterate and living a secluded life defined by narrow prejudices, it was easy for any rabble rouser to incite people to rise violently in the name of Jihad. With the arrest of Lt Col Abdul Majid Khan and the treachery at Gilgit, the command of 6 J&K Infantry now devolved on Major Sher Jung Thapa, with the local rank of a Lt Col.

**Major Sher Jung Thapa**

Major Sher Jung Thapa was born in the family of distinguished soldiers in Abbotabad on 8 June 1908 (now in Pakistan and recently in the news in connection with Operation GERONIMO, launched by the U.S. to hunt down Osama bin Laden). He did his schooling
At Dharamsala, where he earned a name for himself as an excellent hockey player. He would be a regular member of his College Hockey team, which took part in the local tournament. Ist Gurkha Rifles Regimental Centre, which was located at Dharamsala, also used to take part in the tournament. The Adjutant of the Centre, a smart British officer, soon took a liking for Thapa and impressed upon him the desirability of opting for a career in the Army, in tune with his family tradition. In due course, this British officer became a kind of mentor to the young Thapa. As was expected, Thapa joined the Army and got commissioned into The Jammu & Kashmir State Forces on 01 Sept 1932. During the routine soldierly life, Thapa had an opportunity of attending a Wireless Telegraphy (WT) Course, in which he did very well. In due course of time, his expertise on handling a wireless set was to fortuitously come very handy to him.

Available Troops

6 J&K infantry, or whatever was left of it after the disaster at Kargil, was spread out thinly in penny packets from Leh to Bunji. At Leh, there was a company (less a platoon), functioning directly under Thapa; Capt Ganga Singh commanded two Platoons at Kargil, comprising entirely of Sikhs. They were supposed to act as a mobile column and had the only WT set that 6 J&K Infantry possessed. Skardu itself was held by two Platoons under Capt Nek Alam; their troops were entirely Muslim. Remainder of the Battalion, which was at Bunji, had now been completely lost after it passed into the enemy hands.

Scene at Skardu when Thapa Arrived

With Skardu under intense threat after the fall of Gilgit, Thapa was ordered to move to Skardu with as many troops as he could possibly spare from Leh and Kargil. On 23 Nov, 1947, Thapa, in pursuance of these instructions, moved towards Skardu with a column of two officers, two JCOs and 72 Other Ranks; the column included three Muslims who operated the WT set which Thapa had got along from Kargil. On 02 Dec, while moving from Parkutta to Gol, a Harvard aircraft circled over his column and then moved towards Gilgit. Even though the arrival of aircraft overhead created an uneasy feeling among the column, it nevertheless kept a steady pace and reached Skardu the next day. The first thing that struck Thapa on reaching Skardu was the sullen and sulky demeanor of the locals, who appeared shifty and bad tempered. He also learnt that the Raja of Rondhu had already turned hostile and was egging on the raiders to attack Skardu without any delay. The Raja had also detained two dak (postal) runners and prevented them from delivering any official mail. In the meantime, Capt Nek Alam of Skardu garrison intercepted a letter sent by Capt Hassan Khan of 6 J&K Infantry, who had defected to the enemy side, inciting the former’s Muslim troops to revolt. Capt Nek Alam dutifully sent the letter to Srinagar.

Terrain

Lt Col Thapa’s reconnaissance of Skardu revealed that it was located in a small valley, through which flowed the mighty Indus River. Area to the north, measuring roughly 19 Kms, had a width varying between two Kms at its narrow end and six Kms at its widest.
The flat and sandy river bed had a small hillock in the middle, called Blukro. Shigar River flowed at its foot before draining out into Indus. Skardu proper, at a height of 2285 meters, was located at the south end of the Valley with a maximum width of eight Km. The town, with abundance of greenery, appeared quite prosperous with a large number of public utilities and government offices located there. A dominating hill, called Point 8853, with a height of 2700 meters, dominated and overlooked the town. Having an egg shaped base whose circumference measured roughly five Km. The top of this hill could only be accessed either from north or from south west; other directions being covered by sheer cliffs. Skardu Fort, a prominent landmark of the town, happened to be on the eastern slope of the hill, but was hidden from Point 8853, by an intervening hill. Indus River skirted it from North West, west and south east. The River, however, could be crossed at any point in the valley by rafts. Skardu town was encircled on three sides by high snow-covered mountains. In winter, heavy snow fall blocked nearly all routes, except those along Indus River, which led to Gilgit and Kargil.

Prelude to Siege

On December 3, when Thapa reached Skardu, Nek Alam was out. When he returned on December 4, he brought along four wounded Sikh soldiers who had managed to avoid death and capture at Bunji and had somehow reached Skardu, where Nek Alam found them in a disheveled state. Being badly wounded and sick, they were not in a fit state to take part in the ensuing battles. Sensing trouble, Thapa set about deploying his insufficient troops as best as he could. As a first step, he decided to block those routes which had not been blocked by the snow. Anticipating an advance on his posts from Gilgit, Thapa decided to block the route leading from there along the Indus, in order to gain enough warning time of incoming attack. Accordingly, he deployed a Muslim Platoon under Capt Nek Alam at Tsari, on the right bank of Indus, 32 Km from Skardu and another platoon (Sikhs) on the left bank opposite it, under Capt Krishna Singh. Runners being the only means of communication between him and his outposts, Thapa was conscious of the fact
that it was a rather unreliable means in times of emergency. But he had no alternative. Skardu proper now was left with a total of 71 troops; 40 Sikh and 31 Muslim soldiers. Thapa made strenuous efforts to strengthen its defences, as best as he could. But the sheer magnitude of defending a big town with meager resources available to him, was itself a herculean task. Srinagar, in the meanwhile, was also making efforts to rush as many troops as they could muster to reinforce Skardu. As a result, the first reinforcements from the State Forces, comprising 2 companies left Srinagar on 15 Jan, 1948, reaching Sonamarg on 20 Jan. In a desperate undertaking, showing exemplary courage and determination, the column crossed Zojila in the thick of winter on 30 Jan, 1948. After that, keeping up a steady pace through frozen heights of Matyan and Pindras, they first reached Dras and then Kargil. Due to difficult terrain, narrow tracks and lack of shelter after crossing Zojila, the column got split in several parties, with the leading column under Parbat Singh reaching Bagicha on 7 Feb. The last column to enter Skardu was on 10 Feb. The arrival of fresh troops into the defences elicited joyful shouts from the garrison. Thapa now had 130 non-Muslim and 31 Muslim troops.

The Siege Begins

By the beginning of Feb, the 600 strong enemy forces, made of tribal raiders, Chitralis and nearly 80 deserters of J&K Infantry, and well equipped with modern rifles, 2” and 3” mortars, had completed all the preparations for the capture of Skardu. Among the prominent officers who led them were, Maj Ahsan Ali, Capt Mohammad Khan and Lt Babar Khan (obviously, now promoted). The former two had defected from J&K Infantry. The Force marched, as appreciated by Thapa, along the Indus route in strength. The last message he received from the outposts at Tsari was on 9 Feb, 1948, a few hours before the post came under attack. The total surprise gained by the enemy can be gauged from the fact that the message gave no inkling of the impending disaster that struck them. The Sikh Platoon at Tsari suddenly found itself under attack by an overwhelming numbers. But it put up a stout resistance; as best as it could under the circumstances. The result was a foregone conclusion. The survivors were captured and led off towards Gilgit. Thereafter, the Sikh troops, including Capt Krishna Singh, “were murdered in cold blood”. Capt Nek Alam and his Muslim troops offered no resistance and simply walked over to the other side. All this happened while the Skardu garrison was blissfully unaware of the fall of its two vital outposts. The attackers then moved towards Skardu. There is no denying the fact that the people living in the villages en-route to Skardu, knew well enough about the raider’s movement, but the garrison did not even get the whiff of it.

Part-3: The Siege Continues But Thapa Refuses To Give In

At first light on 11 Feb, a terrifying shouting accompanied by heavy firing woke up the garrison. Troops jumped into their trenches and bunkers just in time to repulse the attack that was launched under the covering fire of the best infantry weapons available at that time; the 2” and 3” mortars. Even though the attackers had gained near total surprise, their attack was blunted by a determined effort of the defenders who fought bitterly to prevent
any ingress into the defences. The attackers reorganized themselves and assaulted the defences twice thereafter. But, in the meantime, the defenders too overcame the initial disadvantage of having been surprised and succeeded in repulsing both the attacks. The enemy, realizing that their best chance, the first surprise attack, had failed, withdrew in disorder after a 6 hour long battle. While withdrawing, they sacked the town in their impotent rage at being defeated by a smaller and poorly equipped garrison. They left behind 10 of their colleagues dead. One of their men was also captured alive. However, to convey a chilling message; they left behind the dead bodies of Wazir Amarnath and several other non-Muslims in the town they had sacked during their retreat. The defenders lost 7 men and 1 officer and 15 Other Ranks were wounded. What was even worse; the WT set was left without an operator as all three Muslim troops who were qualified and tasked to handle it, had deserted. But Lt Col Thapa, being an adept at handling WT sets, decided to operate it himself.

The interrogation of the POW revealed that for some tactically inexplicable reason, Capt Ahsan Ali had used only half the strength of 600 available to him during the attack. To add to this blunder, he evacuated his troops from the whole area after the attacks had been beaten back. This permitted two more batches of reinforcements, totaling to 140 men, under Capt Ajit Singh, to enter the garrison on the night of 13 and 15 Feb. The total strength available to Lt Col Thapa was now 285 all ranks. Even though the complement of troops available to Thapa was now double the number that repulsed the first attack on 11 Feb, it was still woefully inadequate to guard the mountainous terrain, which usually “eats up defender’s troops”. Fort, pickets, perimeter, high ground, Point 8853, the formidable wall of the fort; all of these had to be physically held against the much stronger enemy to achieve a fair degree of tactical balance. But Thapa did not have the luxury of holding every bit of ground in strength. Therefore, he deployed his troops as best as he could. Thapa had also provided shelter within his garrison to the entire population of non-Muslim refugees of the town, numbering 229. In addition, he had 19 Muslim refugees and 22 Muslim civilian POWs. All of them could be used for logistics purposes.

The raiders now renewed the attack on the night of 14/15 Feb by first occupying Point 8853 and the village of Nansok and Bulkro. The next few days were spent by the enemy in reinforcing these positions to nearly 500 men. This enabled them to make their presence felt in many adjoining villages, namely Sondus, Gomba, Skardu and Kapashna. From the high ground occupied by the enemy, they kept up the observed shelling and sniping of the Fort, particularly between 21 and 24 Feb. Even though the strength of the enemy was increasing by the day, they however, chose to maintain a discreet distance from Thapa, preferring only to continue its tactics of softening up the defences by constant shelling/sniping. In order to keep up the morale of his troops, dominate the area around his position and infuse in them a degree of offensive spirit, Thapa resorted to aggressive patrolling, sending out his fighting patrols on hit and run missions to a distance of eight Kms around his defences. All these activities resulted in a number of skirmishes; the most serious of these occurred on 24 Feb, when a platoon of Thapa’s troops got ambushed. But
the platoon did not lose nerve, fought bravely, broke the ambush and extricated itself with just two casualties.

The attackers now became bolder; between March 4 and 6, they increased the frequency and timing of shelling on Thapa’s position. On March 6, they attacked one of his pickets with a strength of 70 men, but were beaten back, leaving behind one dead; the defenders suffered no casualty. On 14 March, one of Thapa’s patrols inflicted heavy casualties on the enemy when it succeeded in getting them ambushed. But for the intervention of a machine gun placed on Point 8853, which intervened effectively, the entire enemy lot would have been completely decimated. This intervention permitted them to extricate themselves, enabling them to carry their dead and wounded along.

Reinforcements do not make it

On persistent demand of Lt Col Thapa, a company of State Forces, along with two 2” mortars and two 3” mortars was dispatched on 17 Feb. Another platoon joined the column, nick named ‘Biscuit Column’, at Kargil, under Brig Faqir Singh and accompanied by another officer, Maj Coutts of the Indian Army. From Kargil, they moved towards Parkutta and Gol in intense cold which made their movement very difficult and progress extremely slow. In the circumstances prevailing then, it was difficult to keep any movement secret for any reasonable length of time. The enemy having learnt about the movement and direction of this column, thinned out at Skardu, leaving a small number to keep Thapa’s men under constant fire, and with about 100 men laid an ambush near Gol, 32 Kms from Skardu on a narrow track passing through a gorge, covered on both sides by high and inaccessible cliffs. According to the information available with Thapa, Brig Faqir Singh’s Column was supposed to reach him on 18 March, but on 15 March, his informers told him that the enemy had thinned out from around his defences and were seen heading for Gol. Appreciating correctly that the enemy was moving to intercept the Biscuit Column, he immediately tried to establish contact with it on the WT, but the column was without communication as its WT set had broken down at Kargil. In desperation, he contacted Srinagar and requested it to organize an immediate air strike on the enemy column before the ambush was sprung. But no air strike materialized. In the meantime, blissfully unaware of the happenings in Gol and Skardu, Faqir Singh’s column walked into the ambush. The raiders, having occupied heights surrounding the gorge, were invisible to the reinforcing column moving directly below. Midway through the gorge, they were greeted by a sudden and heavy volume of fire that inflicted many casualties and resulted in utter confusion. The column lost its cohesion under the merciless fire from the raiders occupying dominating ground. The column broke up and retreated, leaving behind 26 dead, seven missing (believed killed) and 18 wounded, including the column commander, Brig Faqir Singh. What was even worse, the raiders descended into the gorge and looted the baggage train. This enabled them to lay hands on huge quantities of precious arms, ammunition and rations. The column somehow managed to re-assemble at Kargil, where the Brigadier handed over the charge to Maj Coutts. Having done that, he left for Srinagar, reaching there on April 2.
In the meantime, Thapa, not knowing about the fate that had befallen the Biscuit Column, managed to assemble two platoons and marched out of his defences to receive the incoming column. However, even before he had marched a few Kms, he was informed by the villagers about what had happened to the reinforcing column. Dejected and demoralized, Thapa and his men returned to the defences; but not before being ambushed on the way back. But the veterans broke the ambush and fought a running battle with the enemy for eight Kms, before they managed to enter into their defences, unharmed.

The raiders were under no illusion that even though they had defeated the reinforcing column, Srinagar would soon try to send another one to reinforce Skardu. This thinking forced them to try and capture Skardu at the earliest. But they also realized that Thapa’s troops were a tough nut to crack, having seen so many of their attacks repulsed, one after another. Nevertheless, there was no alternative but to launch another attack, as best as they could. On 28 March at 3 AM, a well-coordinated attack was launched. Bulk of the enemy fury was directed at Picket 6. Even though massively outnumbered and out gunned, the attack was repulsed by Thapa’s brave soldiers. Two hours later, a swarm of enemy troops now attacked the garrison from all directions. Relentless Machine gun fire and a barrage of high explosive bombs rained on the defenders. But the defenders fought back with great courage and bravery. The enemy too did not give up. The assaulters came back with renewed vigour, but were thrown back with equal determination. The ferocious fighting that took the shape of hand to hand fighting continued for many days. The southern picket under Capt Ajit Singh and Jemadar Piara Singh held out against all odds, despite the former having been seriously wounded on 30 March. For several days, Capt Ajit Singh’s men did not have a single drop of water, but still they did not give up. On the night of 3/4 April, Thapa was able to establish contact with Ajit Singh’s picket with the help of two runners who, despite the whole area being swarmed by the enemy, managed to evade them and crawled stealthily into the defences, unharmed.

On April 7, the enemy made another attempt to capture Skardu, but the defenders again broke up the assault and threw back the attackers, though they managed to cut off the School picket. Thapa, however, realized that in the absence of any reinforcements, the tactical importance of the School picket in the overall scheme of his defended location was such, that its capture by the enemy, would compromise the whole defences of Skardu. Under no circumstances could he afford to let it fall. He, therefore, requested Srinagar for an immediate air strike. The situation was critical.

On April 10, at an early dawn, Nk Chatru of 6 J&K Infantry led a fierce sortie that cut its way through the enemy positions and reached the School picket. The raiders now found it difficult to capture the post. Having suffered a great number of casualties in numerous assaults launched on the Picket, they now decided to withdraw.

**Enemy Displays Bold and Innovative Tactics**

Srinagar seemed to be seized of the desperate situation at Skardu and despite the fiasco of Brig Faqir Singh’s column; it was making its best efforts to put together a worthwhile
force to move to Skardu at the earliest. By April 8, approximately two battalions worth of troops were winding up their way across the barren mountains to reach Skardu. By April 14, a number of columns were stretched between Srinagar, Ghumri, Matyan, Dras and Kargil. But disaster struck the strong force soon enough. Lack of centralized control and low morale of the reinforcing force was exploited to the hilt by the raiders, who showed exceptional tactical innovation, brilliant coordination and determination to move quickly across difficult terrain over long distances with perfect coordination. Having been made to eat a humble pie every time they attacked Thapa’s defences, the raiders had appreciated well enough that any additional reinforcement reaching Skardu would make it impossible for them to capture it. Therefore, they hit upon a bold and tactically brilliant plan; it revolved around outflanking the reinforcing column and capturing important centres of communication before the reinforcements reached there. This, they felt, would result in the capture of Kargil and prevent the reinforcement from reaching Skardu, making its fall eventually, inevitable. The fact that the route from Srinagar to Kargil ran parallel to the battle front, made it tactically easier for the raiders to intervene themselves between Skardu and the reinforcing column at tactically suitable places. The raiders’ tactical plan involved moving self-contained columns, with well-defined objectives separately, but under a centralized control. The first one interposed itself between Srinagar and Dras at Gund; the second column was to cross the formidable Himalayan Range at Kaobali Galli and position itself at Pindras; the third and fourth columns were to climb up the Deosai Plateau, move down the Shingo Valley and reach Gultari. From here, the third column would move to Dras and capture it; and the fourth column, 250 strong, would march along Shinkho River, then head for Kargil and capture it. Every column was to hit at their respective objectives on 10 May. As a ruse aimed at achieving deception, the raiders at Parkutta were to move back towards Skardu rather gradually and openly, to draw the Indian column after them and away from the raider’s column heading for Kargil.
The daring stroke launched by the enemy achieved enormous success and proved decisive. Without going into details, Kargil and Dras both fell in the beginning of July. As bulk of the troops gathered by the enemy for this enterprise had been picked up from among those having laid the siege of Skardu, Thapa’s troops had some respite between the middle of April and beginning of July, though shelling and sniping of his positions remained a constant feature. In fact, on one occasion, 200 shells were fired at his position in quick time, resulting in the death of two of his gallant soldiers. But by this time, the food and ammunition stocks at Skardu were running dangerously low; food grain stocks were just enough to feed 70 to 80 men, whereas Thapa had nearly 600 mouths to feed including the refugees. This forced Thapa to resort to rationing; 250 grams of wheat flour and 30 grams of Dal per day. The wounded and the sick suffered silently without complaining as medicines ran out during the prolonged siege. As a matter of fact, all the wounded and sick, who could barely sit, were ordered to man the trenches.
Slowly, the raiders started closing in on the garrison, reducing it to just 1350 x 550 meters. During the period when enemy was dealing with the Kargil/ Dras sector, Thapa utilized his time in improving his defences; laying down effective arcs of fire, strengthening the overhead protection of bunkers, connecting the defence-works by communication trenches, etc. In due course of time, this effort was to save precious lives. Nevertheless, with every passing day, his position was becoming increasingly untenable.

Fall of Kargil had been a great blow to India and Gen Thimmaya was determined to recapture it. As a part of that plan, Gen Thimmaya ordered Thapa to abandon Skardu and break out from the siege and reach Olthingthang, near Marol. However, Thapa’s men were too weak to undertake that mission, particularly because his garrison contained hundreds of refugees: women, children, old men, sick and the wounded, as also some of his own soldiers, who were badly wounded and could barely walk. When Thapa put across his case, Thimmaya did not need much convincing. He saw the reality and cancelled his orders.

Thapa’s repeated requests to have supplies air dropped to him were not met as the only available planes with the RIAF to undertake the mission, the Dakotas, were not suitable to fly at 4670 meters. To add to his general state of despondency, by the middle of June, Thapa learnt about the fate that the reinforcing columns had met. The disastrous news dealt a terrible blow to his garrison’s morale.

On 17 June, Col Shahzada M Mata ul Mulk, son of Mehtar of Chitral, sent a communication to Thapa through a messenger, Sepoy Amar Nath, a captured POW of 5 Jammu & Kashmir Infantry, asking him to surrender and assuring him that the POWs will be treated fairly. This missive is reproduced below:-

To

Officers and men of Kashmir State Forces, Skardu Garrison.

From: Col Shahzada M Mata ul Mulk Comd Azad Chitral Forces Skardu (.)

ONE(.) All attempts to relieve your Grn by Brig FAQIR SINGH, Lt Cols KIRPAL SINGH and SAMPURAN BACHAN SINGH have resulted in utter failure resulting in numerous killed and prisoners taken(.) Azad Forces are now operating from KANGAN-SONAMARG and BANDIPUR area also in some cases within 15 miles from SRINAGAR .)TWO(.) you have done your duty as every soldier should do(.) now that it is clear that no relief can reach you in this mountainous area there is no doubt about it(.) it is no use to carry on a struggle which will result in your total annihilation(.)THREE(.) I therefore advise you to lay down arms and I take full responsibility to give protection to one and all (.)You must trust me and believe me as I am not only a soldier but also possess royal blood (.) I have given instructions to my officers and men that any one approaching with a white flag will not be fired at but taken into safe custody (.)FOUR(.)Lastly as a proof of my goodwill I wish to inform you that not a single Sikh or Hindu resident of CHITRAL has been hurt and not a single non-Muslim property looted or damaged and up till now
they carry on their business as if nothing at all has happened. I therefore advise you again to lay down arms and thus save your lives. An Officer should accompany back the white flag if you consider my words sincere and honest.

Thapa read the message contemptuously and would have none of it. He returned the messenger with his reply.

The Siege Continued.

On 19 June, two RIAF Tempests came over Olthing and Sondus and fired rockets and shells over the raiders, inflicting some casualties. The air attack was repeated the next day too. On 28 June and 1 July, some supplies were dropped over Thapa’s garrison by RIAF Tempest aircrafts. As these aircraft were not designed for this purpose, the ‘drops’ did not make any substantial difference to the garrison. It was, in fact, really getting desperate. Now that the ration and ammunition stocks were running dangerously low, they had to use it most sparingly. On 8 July, the last bag of ration was consumed. On the same day, Tempests dropped some supplies. Thapa’s troops were able to retrieve four out of the six containers; the remaining two falling into the river. The next day, the enemy at Point 8853 came under attack by three Tempests. On 16 and 17 July, the drops and attacks were repeated. But these made no substantial difference to the garrison’s ability to hold out. Thapa’s requirement of ammunition and rations was huge, but the tiny Tempest could carry very little, particularly when they had to carry their own primary loads; shells and rockets to fire at the enemy. Sending unarmed planes was just out of question. It was, as the adage goes, too little too late. The situation in the garrison was now grim.

The Siege continued.

Early August saw the blooming of cherry trees in the Valley, with its many orchards wearing green cover of tender shoots. Ironically, while the Valley throbbed with new life, the garrison presented a grim picture of desperation and despondency, with the inevitable staring the men in the face. Every morning, people within the encircled garrison woke up with dire premonition. Break out was impossible, with the nearest friendly post being at Gurais, across Deosai plateau, a distance of 240 Kms, almost entirely infested with enemy troops. It would be expecting too much of the men and women in the garrison, reduced as they had been to bones and skin, and for whom even a small stroll was a labored ghost-like walk. For weeks now, they had been surviving on barley, collected to feed the animals and 90% of them were sick; prolonged mal-nutrition had reduced their immunity levels so much that they easily fell victims to malaria, dysentery and fever. To add to their misery, the constant shelling and sniping by the enemy continued to inflict casualties on the beleaguered troops.

The Siege Continued.

On 7 August, the Tempests appeared overhead again. They attacked the enemy positions and dropped two containers for the garrison. But the situation did not materially change for Thapa and his garrison. On August 9, for the first time, Pakistanis used 3.7” Howitzers.
Even though the unusually loud boom and intense shelling created an alarm at first, the
damage to the garrison in material terms was little, as the overhead protection of their
bunkers withstanded even these powerful blasts. The shelling was resumed on August 12,
though it was directed mostly on one picket. Within a short period of the shelling, the
picket itself came under attack by a strong force of 200 men. Thapa’s men fought like
wounded tigers. Their ammunition ran out. Thapa sent them the last ammunition box
available with the garrison. The momentum of the assault carried the attackers to the edge
of the bunkers, where hand- to- hand fighting ensued. This lasted for four hours. Finally,
the attack was repulsed and enemy retreated leaving behind a number of their dead around
the perimeter of the picket. This battle proved to be the last success of the Garrison. A
quick stock-taking of the ammunition revealed that the garrison was left with just 10
rounds of ammunition per rifleman.

The veterans now realized that the game was up.

On August 13, it was apparent to Thapa that no amount of heroic defiance or indomitable
determination could make up for the serious military and tactical weaknesses they
suffered. When the night came, the garrison evacuated in twos and threes to make good
their escape, as best as they could. They felt it worthwhile to gamble with their lives than
to wait for the inevitable massacre, which would follow their surrender. Thapa now sent
his last signal to Thimmaya, stating that he had no option but to surrender.

When the morning of August 14 arrived, Lt Col Thapa was left with 4 officers, 1 JCO and
35 Other Ranks. The refugees huddled themselves in a corner. That day Skardu
capitulated.

“The siege had lasted six months. The civilian refugees, men women and children, had
cheerfully endured all the dangers and privations of the long siege, and knew what was in
store for them. The men had fought like heroes and now the time had come to meet their
fate with calm resignation.” The capitulation sealed the fate of officers and men of the
Garrison. The Muslims were led away and many among non-Muslims were murdered in
cold blood. Same fate was met by the males among the refugees. “The women were saved
to serve an expected purpose. “Capt Ganga Singh, the Adjutant of the Battalion, was tied
to the ground and shot. The only survivors were Lt Col Thapa and his orderly, Sepoy
Kalyan Singh”.

Part: 5 – The Epilogue

Fate of Lt Col S.J. Thapa

Despite being outnumbered and outgunned, Lt Col S J Thapa showed exceptionally
staunch leadership and held out for six months against overwhelming odds, beating back
one assault after another right till the end. But for the boldness and skillful execution of
the right hook launched by the enemy, which succeeded in destroying all the
reinforcements sent to Thapa, Skardu would have held out till the end of the war. Even if
only one of the two battalions sent to reinforce Skardu had reached the destination, the fate of the northern areas would have been different.

The mystery of why Lt Col S J Thapa, who heaped humiliation on the raiders by repeatedly defeating their numerous attacks, did not meet the same fate as Capt Ganga Singh and other soldiers had met, can only be explained by a conjecture; a conjecture that should stand the test of deep scrutiny. Pakistan Army during the 1947-48 war was commanded by Gen Sir Douglas Gracey and he was, as would be expected, keeping himself apprised of the progress of his Army’s operations on the northern front. When he learnt about the defiant stand of Skardu Garrison over a period of six months, he was naturally keen to know the name of the gallant officer who commanded the force. That is how he learnt that it was none other than his old hockey colleague at Dharamsala, whom he, as the Adjutant of 1st Gorkha Rifles Regimental Centre, had motivated to join the Army. Having known Thapa, he was not surprised by the stubborn resistance that his far superior troops met with, again and again. As an Army Chief, he was unhappy, but as a mentor, he must have been full of pride. It is fair to assume that Gen Douglas Gracey would have given strict orders to ensure that no physical harm came to Thapa and all courtesies of war were extended to him. There was no way such orders could have been violated. “Fate thus intervened to give Thapa a reprieve from what would have been a certain death.”

A soldier’s greatest tribute can come only from his enemy whom he had fought tenaciously despite the end result being known beforehand. Major Agha H Amin of Pakistan’s Tank Corps writes in his well-researched book, 1947-48 Kashmir War:

“Despite all their tangible inferiority, the Dogras led by Lt Col Sher Jung Thapa, an extremely resolute commander and a very chivalrous human being as far as treatment of non-combatants was concerned, held on till Aug 14, 1947”.

A few weeks after the war, Lt Col Thapa returned from Pakistan and was awarded a richly deserved Maha Vir Chakra. He was also promoted to the rank of Brigadier. He retired in 1961 and settled in Dharamsala. During his retirement, Brig Thapa took keen interest in the development of this small hill station and became one of its eminent citizens. But the government and the nation at large, by and large forgot him. He passed away in Aug 1999, unsung and unwept.

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