

A Chennai Man Remembers an Earlier Chinese Skirmish

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Map of Doklam and the surrounding area. Source: Wikimedia Commons.

(Regimental Medical Officer).

We were located in eastern Sikkim almost at the junction of Tibet, Sikkim, and Bhutan. It was high altitude and our HQ was at 14,200 feet and the highest picquet was 15,500 feet. The famous Dokalam which made news last year was a few kilometers east of our location. We referred to it as Dokala then. Sikkim was just then annexed by India as an Indian state from a protectorate. The army was always there. We were part of 27 Div with HQ in Kalimpong.

We had a massive infection of infectious hepatitis (jaundice) in our battalion in August-September 1975. Nearly a third of the troops were affected. Being a waterborne infection, we enforced strict water discipline. The water was generally picked up from a mountain stream and in winters, we melted snow. Safe water points were established, making sure they were not in line with deep trench latrines high up, including closed ones. Every evening I made it a point to go around the HQ area, checking whether water was collected properly and boiled before consumption. One evening in

In the light of the present imbroglio in Ladakh, my memory takes me back to an incident, albeit a trifling one. In November 1975, a routine Assam Rifles patrol was ambushed by the Chinese in NEFA, now called Arunachal Pradesh in Tulung La (La is “pass” in Tibetan), and 4 Indians were killed. If I remember right, a couple of officers were also captured by the Chinese in the event. Tulung La is a pass in Tawang region, through which the Chinese entered Bomdi La and captured large areas in 1962. Brig. J.P. Dalvi, who wrote *The Himalayan Blunder*, was taken as a POW. He was the commander of the Tawang brigade. Michael Dalvi, who played cricket in Madras in the seventies, is his son. It is a coincidence that Brig. Dalvi commanded 4 Guards (4th battalion of The Brigade of Guards), a very famous and one of the oldest battalions of the army in 1954, of which I would in 1975-76 be the RMO

November 1975, as I was going across to check one of the cook houses, I found Guardsman (Sepoy) Ajaib Singh collecting water from a unauthorised water point, a stream running behind the officers' mess. Ajaib was a waiter in the mess. He was a Garhwali and a tough chap. Where a normal jawan struggled to carry one pakhal (an aluminium water container), he would march along with a pakhal on each shoulder. But he was dumb and how dumb, I was to learn later. It was about 4 pm and in the east in winters, it gets dark by that time. I hauled him up and fired him. Readers may excuse if I go back to another prelude to the ensuing episode.

When we first moved into a high altitude location, there was a lot of confusion. After a Bangalore tenure, the troops were finding it difficult with weather, terrain and a huge workload. Adjutant Major Randhir Sethi let himself go at the Signals NCO because his telephone was not working. At his belligerent best, he ordered the NCO that the signal platoon would take seven days ration and climb Kanchenjunga the next day. When reporting to the company, commander Major D.V. Sharma the NCO repeated the orders of the adjutant. Major Sharma burst out laughing and asked him to sort out the adjutant's problems.

I remembered Sethi's episode and wanted to emulate him in giving a funny order. I told Ajaib Singh that he would run up to the command post and say, "Ram Ram" (greetings) to Major Mann in Sher. This may sound strange to the readers. The command post is the place from which the commanding officer directs operations if there is a war. It was located right where we were, a little hillock with a view of all the posts. Sher was our farthest post about 3 or 4 kilometers away on the watershed, the McMahan line. The commander of that post was Major Pup Mann. Ajaib Singh was to understand that he had been ordered to climb the hillock and come down, a task of about 15 minutes. But lo and behold that was not to be, as I learned later.

I went back to my bunker in another hillock and soon my orderly Moti came running to admonish me ('kya kiya aapne!') and inform me that the mess staff had taken off to Sher on my orders. I panicked and ran to the mess. Dumb Ajaib thought I had ordered him to go to meet Major Mann at Sher. Since he did not know the way, he took the masalchi to come along. Cook Mohan who never left the kitchen anytime also saw an opportunity to see an outpost that he had only heard about. He also joined them. The trio took off and it was nearly dark by that time.

I immediately rang up the Hanuman post which was on the way to Sher. Whoever picked up the phone told me that the trio had just crossed after asking them the password. There were strict orders that there would be no movement after sundown. I really panicked because the trio were mess staff and only familiar with ladles, utensils and nothing else. The path beyond the Hanuman post was a treacherous footpath with a thousand feet fall if one takes a wrong step. There was moonlight, but it was dangerous even then. And then, the other immediate problem was dinner. There was no waiter, no cook, and no mess staff. The old man, as the Commanding Officer is fondly referred to, would be in the mess in an hour or two. Officers mess cooks and waiters are as different from other langar cooks as the Taj Coromandel is to a roadside dhaba. Actually Mohan was trained at Thangam Philip's school in Bombay and could actually cook a Venezuelan delicacy if one gave him the inputs. Quickly I did the homework and got a cook and waiter with some officers mess experience. After managing that, I ran to the adjutant's office.

There was a lot of commotion as I entered. I learned the reason when I was given the top-secret signal that had just arrived. This was about the ambush of Indian petrol in NEFA with which we referred to earlier on. It further reiterated that there would be strictly no movement after last light. I narrated the mess incident to Capt. Surinder Singh, who was the officiating adjutant. He put his hands on his head. To assuage him, I told him about the dinner arrangements I had made. The next fear was that of the kitchen warriors straying into enemy territory on the way and getting captured. There was an incident during snowtime the year before that. Pup Mann was told about this and he sent a patrol party to catch them. From the Hanuman post, another search patrol was sent. We waited. Dinner time was 7pm at the mess. Being the HQ, only the CO, adjutant, SP company commander and the RMO dined in the mess, the rest ate at their own posts. Lt. Col. Freddy Muthanna walked into the mess stroking his mustache with the back of his right hand. Everyone was sitting on bricks and I was asked to broach the topic to inform him. I got up and played Vivaldi's Four Seasons record even before the old man came. He was quite a western classical buff. When I played a Neil Diamond record on other days, he would ask me politely whether we could have some music. He was that type. I took a deep breath and told him the happenings of the evening. He told me very curtly, "Officers do not give orders like that. You

should have put him in the quarter guard (the battalion's prison)." There was no further talk and dinner was quietly eaten, quieter than usual. The Tiger got up to leave. He turned towards Surinder, saying that he wanted everyone connected with the incident marched up to him in the morning. It included the Subedar Major, the Alpha company commander, senior JCO, and the adjutant. RMO was not mentioned. It was at about that time we also got a message on the radio set that the search party from Sher was successful in getting to the trio. They were to stay the night and come back the next morning. For my unofficer-like mistake, everyone else was put on the mat the next morning.

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