

GUARDING LADAKH: RAISING 114 INFANTRY BRIGADE

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My extended posting with the United Nations Emergency Force in Gaza from September 1957 ended in February 1960 and I returned to Delhi. I had served with UNEF in Gaza and the Sinai, first as the commander of the Indian contingent and then from April 1958 also as the Chief of Staff of the force. My orders now were to report to the Army Chief of Staff on the activities of the force and receive my posting orders.

After a five-hour flight from Beirut to Delhi, I arrived late in the afternoon. The Military Assistant to General (Thimmy) K.S.Thimayya, the Army Chief of Staff, met me and I was taken to the Army House. The Chief and his wife, Nina, were attending a reception followed by a diplomatic dinner. I could dine at will at their house and rest for the night. The Chief would see me in the morning.

At 8:00 a.m. I was called to join the Chief at breakfast and found Lt. Gen. (Wad) M.S. Wadalia, the Deputy Chief of Staff, my former divisional commander and the Colonel of my regiment, the Deccan Horse. This was significant, making me somewhat apprehensive. General Timmy, as always, was warm in his reception and expressed pleasure on my work with UNEF. He said that he had a special job for me that he himself wanted to speak to me about instead of having the Military Secretary handle it. Besides which he had asked General Wad to come along. Not only had Wad wanted to see me, but Timmy had thought that it would be better for the Colonel of my regiment, the Deccan Horse, to be present. What the devil was he getting at? I wondered with more concern.

The Chief said that the army had been authorized to raise a new independent infantry brigade group for operations in Ladakh to defend the borders with Tibet and China. He had hand picked three outstanding officers due for promotion to Brigadier's rank, and each had excused himself on compassionate or health reasons. Now he was going to offer the appointment to me and did not want me to turn it down. He realized that I merited a command of an armoured brigade, but none was available for at least a year. If I, an armour man, accepted this most challenging infantry command after three well known infantry officers had found excuses not to accept, the armored corps would be showing its metal. I looked at Wad and he was smiling. Obviously he was in on this and wanted me to accept Timmy's challenge.

Thinking quickly I asked that if none of the armored brigades were available, what about the armored corps centre, where I could be more usefully employed until a command was vacant. Timmy replied that he had already given it to Kuriyan on compassionate grounds. Then Timmy added enthusiastically, "Look, Indar, it is not just another infantry command in the most impossible terrain. There are sensitive political

aspects to this job. Ladakh is mostly Buddhist among a majority of Muslims who run J&K. The second important Lama in J&K, Kushak Bakula from Leh, is a minister of state and has direct access to Nehru. The ceasefire line ends at a point near Kargil and thereafter there is no line of demarcation in the territory in which you will deploy your troops. And then there is a new conflict with China. We intend to push our troops to the line of control without provoking China. Also there is the Buddhist question. The Dalai Lama is in India and the Chinese are massacring his people. You will be involved in assisting refugees, and our intelligence people will follow the army. A political officer will administer the frontier region, and you will have to handle him with care. This is a challenging job, Indar. You have a good record as a soldier; you love the mountains. You have gained political experience with the UN. You are the right man for this job, and I want you to take it."

I was thinking as to what another non-family posting would do to my already shaky marriage after a separation of two years in Gaza. I was even more concerned about my two boys attending Bishop Cotton School in Shimla. I had not seen them for more than a few days in the last three years. Both Thimmy and Wad had anticipated just this, and so Thimmy said that I would definitely be relieved after a year and assured me a good posting. I had no other choice but to accept the appointment. We then turned to arranging my travel, first to Shimla to see my family and then to Udhampur to join the advance elements of my — command the 114 Independent Infantry Brigade Group, and to report to my immediate superior Lt. Gen. Shiv Dev Varma, who was my nominal brigade commander when I served with the Deccan Horse in Jammu. After visiting my boys at school and spending a couple of days with my family, I left for Chandigarh to fly to Jammu and then by road to Udhampur.

I was acquainted with the background of developments along India's northern border with Tibet and Chinese-Tibetan relations. At the time of Indian independence, Tibet demanded that the Indian Government return the territories from Assam to Ladakh, including Darjeeling and Sikkim, which the British had taken over under the Shimla agreement between China and Tibet in 1913. The Indian Government refused and started consolidating its position in the border areas. When the People's Republic of China was established in 1949, concerned with the Indian moves, Chinese troops entered Tibet on October 7, 1950. India initially protested but finally recognized China's sovereignty over Tibet by signing an agreement with China in 1954. Both countries consolidated their positions until 1959 when differences over the boundaries became public. China's proposal for withdrawal of troops for 20 km. along India's side of the border, thus creating a demilitarized zone pending settlement of the boundary question, was refused by India. Chou En lai and Nehru talks, held in New Delhi in 1960, also did not resolve the issues. At this stage India decided to embark on a "forward decisive policy" by building new outposts on the frontier. Thus, the operations that I was made responsible for were part of the overall implementation of this policy.

Major Bansi Lal Kapur was my Brigade Major (BM), and Major Gurcharan Singh was the Deputy Assistant Adjutant and Quartermaster General (DAQMG-usually referred to as DQ). They were both fresh out of staff college, bright eager and wonderful to work

with. The 14th J&K Militia, already in Leh and manning some forward posts, was placed under the command of the brigade. Hitherto, the unit was directly under 15 Corps. A second unit 8th J&K Militia was on its way to Leh from the Kashmir valley. 1/8th Gurkha Rifles was due to arrive in the valley within a week and then be moved to Gurais for acclimatisation to a higher altitude before being flown into Leh at a height of 10,000 feet. The signals, engineers, supplies and ordnance units were expected to arrive at Srinagar within a fortnight. All but a few men for brigade headquarters were already at Udhampur.

I, too, was ready to receive my orders from the Corps Commander and I was delighted to have another opportunity to work with General Shiv Varma. He was among the best in our army and his wife Thelma had included me in her circle of friends. The Varma did not wait for any formalities and asked me for drinks the first evening I arrived. They were equally pleased to have me with them. The next morning I was called for a chat by General Shiv. He said he was aware of my family circumstances and, understanding my desire to obtain an armour command. He assured me that I had a more challenging job and would gain an experience that I would not regret. The eyes of the government were on the deployment of troops in Ladakh. He would do all that he could to save me from visiting dignitaries, but I should be prepared for such visits and organize myself so that there were minimum interruptions in the build up of troops. In addition to a group of Dakotas, consisting of two squadrons of 12 each, the air force would soon receive 100 C 119s from the United States. This would then become the largest troop airlift since the campaign in Burma. I asked permission to move my headquarters to Srinagar so I would be closer to my area of operations and the air force staff controlling the airlift, which was approved. Later, when C 119s were to join the air force, they were to fly directly from Agra, but the control of these flights would be at Srinagar once they were over J&K airspace. I decided to fly to Srinagar the next day in an air force courier flight. General Shiv said that he intended to come up to Srinagar in a few days where he kept his advance headquarters. The next morning I installed my tactical headquarters at the Bund on the Jhelum river in a houseboat.

I flew to Leh in the first week of April. The airfield was unmetaled and dusty and was the first priority for the engineers. The roads, hard in the morning, turned soft and sandy with the sun. The soil of glacial origins froze at night but softened with the heat of the sun. There were a few willow trees and vegetation along the Indus River, which here was only a tiny stream. All food for the troops and for the pack animals would have to come from the valley, an hour's flight or two days by road, which was open from the end of April until the snowfall around October.

The air force plane had flown me over the brigade group's area of deployment. We had first flown to the border with Tibet and seen Chushul from the air. A J&K Militia post already existed here. An immigration and customs post had also been established to take charge of Tibetan refugees. From Chushul to the border with Sinkiang, the land was a high plateau but more or less flat over which the Chinese had built a road, quite visible from the air. I was told to push my troops as far forward as I

could towards this road without provoking a fight. At the Sinkiang border the road climbed a difficult gradient through Karakoram pass.

In Leh I visited the 14th J&K Militia. Lt.Col. Atma Singh, the commanding officer, a rotund, jolly fellow, seemed happier in Tibetan wilderness. It was no wonder that he had volunteered for the militia. He loved walking in the mountains, visiting his troops and he loved his food. He spent most of his time doing both. We had our lunch under the willow trees by the Indus, and it was quite a feast. After lunch he had arranged for me to call on Kushak Bakula at his monastery some five miles above Leh. On arrival there we went through corridors full of prayer wheels, into chambers containing Buddha statues and tapkas (wall hangings). There were more corridors, alcoves for meditation and finally to the chamber of the Lama. Kushak was a young man educated at Varnasi,, articulate and intelligent. I knew immediately that he and I would get along well. After this visit Atma Singh drove me to the Himmis monastery, twenty miles west along the Indus. This was a bigger monastery and its head Lama was away in Tibet, a prisoner of the Chinese. This lama was on a visit to the Dalai Lama when the Chinese invaded Tibet and was unable to escape. Once the Dalai Lama left, the Chinese were "re educating" the Himmis Lama to prepare him to be the next incarnation. At Himmis the Lama was missed, and the monks made sure that we were aware of this fact from the moment we arrived. Himmis was well known for its religious dances, and I gladly accepted the invitation of the monks to return.

I stayed overnight in the militia mess in Leh, located in the old residency building. The British had built an attractive house for political officers to spend the summer here when the silk trade with China opened. Caravans made a stop here where the political officer collected customs duty and valuable intelligence. Atma offered to move out when we arrived, but I told him to remain until I had arranged deployment of the brigade group, which at any rate might require a change of his location. The house had the only lawn and a neglected flower patch. Obviously, flowers not being edible, were not on my host's priority list.

I returned to Srinagar to complete plans for deployment of the troops and pressed ahead with preparations. As soon as new troops arrived, they were sent forward to Gurais for acclimatization. Due to the lack of oxygen at higher altitudes, it was much easier on the human body if about a week was spent at heights below 10,000 feet. The training included climbing to 10,000 after a few days at lower heights and acquiring mountain legs. Then followed a gradual climb to higher altitude and spending a day there. After about a week, troops were ready for higher altitudes without being sick. I was in excellent health and as long as I was careful for the first two or three days could manage to climb and live at higher altitudes.

The Chief was due to come to Srinager to finalize plans for deployment of my brigade group. Shiv called for me to first present my plans to him so that we came to an agreed recommendation to be presented to the Chief. My assessment was based on the Chinese troop deployment and their intentions. In this respect I had to entirely rely upon information made available to me

by the Corps staff. It was scanty, to say the least, a consequence of the disastrous Indian policy of "Hindi Chinese Bhai Bhai" (Indo-China brotherhood) that had led us to the loss of Indian territories and the building of a strategic highway by the Chinese through Askai Chin without our knowledge. Apparently, we only discovered this gross and unimaginable violation of our territories when one morning the Indian Ambassador to Peking, R.K. Nehru, opened his Chinese language newspaper to look at the headlines and photographs. There was a photograph of a Chinese dignitary opening a road through Aksai Chin linking Sinkiang to Tibet. On calling for an atlas, Nehru learned that while he was promoting "brotherly love" between two of the world's largest countries, the Chinese had chewed up a large chunk of Indian territory.

Without going into unessential details, I was told that the Chinese were in strength along the road and were conducting large-scale operations to subdue Tibet. The Tibetan fighters, Khampas, were putting up a strong resistance with some help from the CIA and us. Our plans required that there should be no further Chinese encroachment on our territory, and where possible, we should try to go forward without a fight. Our army resources were scarce. With India's emphasis on national development and with V.K. Krishna Menon, as the Defense Minister, the armed forces had been reduced and their budget cut. The increase in air transport was the first effort to enhance the potential of the forces to cope with the border problems. However, many in the government were opposed to any action, which may cause the Chinese to suspect that India was changing from a close friend to a contestant.

I was allotted two militia battalions, good troops but lightly and poorly equipped, and one first rate Gorkha battalion. Another regular infantry unit possibly would join me later. I had all the services and ancillaries but no machine guns, mortars or artillery. I could call for air support, but considering the distances involved and the range of fighter aircraft, the support would be limited. My troops could only provide a screen, and by keeping the Gorkhas in reserve, I could cope with an emergency. The lay of the land indicated likely approaches and where the forward troops should be located. Some of the troops would take weeks to reach their posts, and their relief presented awesome possibilities. Though we could air drop supplies, most of the loads would have to be carried by pack animals. We would need hundreds of animals and would have to find ways to feed them.

Communications between troops over long distances would require good radio equipment. We should have some helicopters and forward landing strips for emergencies. I would need helicopters in order for me to visit the troops; otherwise once they left Leh, I would never see them again until they returned after relief.

Since the Chinese incursions, the government of India had placed the entire frontier region along China under a frontier administration to be manned by selected officials of all India services to be named the Indian Frontier Administrative Service. A Commissioner based at Leh would thus run the border area in Ladakh. He would be responsible for managing the administration and development of the region, dealing with the J&K government and reporting to Delhi. He was also to coordinate other Indian

agencies, for example, the intelligence bureau, refugees, immigration and customs. I was greatly relieved and delighted to meet Raja, formerly of the Indian Administrative Service. We got along well and I had no problems on civilian matters, such as obtaining porters and ponies for our troop lift forward.

When the Chief came to Srinagar, General Shiv and I were ready with our plan. Shiv had taken care of the J&K government, and we both had talked to the senior air force officer at Srinagar, who had endorsed our recommendations to his superiors but still we had to take them up with the army chief so he may discuss them at his level. It was a good meeting with Timmy. He brought us up to date on the thinking of the government.

Somewhat like the British dilemma for the defense of the north west frontier, the Indian government had two choices, i.e., gain control of territory not yet occupied by the Chinese or go forward aggressively to nibble as much as possible without provoking a war. Timmy favored the former but some of his staff, notably his Quarter Master General, (Biji) B.K. Kaul, a distant relative of Nehru who had managed to enter the inner circles of the prime minister and become a favorite of Krishna Menon, advocated aggressive patrolling and gaining as much territory as possible. Kaul was Timmy's Chief of Staff during the repatriation of Chinese and Korean POWs after the end of the war in Korea and had established good relations with the People's Republic of China. Kaul claimed to know the Chinese well and he maintained that it was equally important to the Chinese to avoid war with India, that Indian troops were superior to the Chinese and therefore the Chinese would avoid a fight.

Shiv and I had already debated this point and had reached the same conclusion as Timmy. Our army had been sadly weakened by neglect and gradually by pervasive political influence among some of the senior officers, like Kaul, who no longer thought in military terms but only politically. It would take four to five years before the army was ready even for the moderate choice in India's defense of its borders with the Chinese. Timmy was a great leader and as usual left us all in good spirits.

Back at Leh we were busily engaged at improving the airfield and also the one at Chushul. C 119 aircraft had started their lift. Everything had to be flown including building materials, which made it possible to start construction of living quarters, a hospital and so on. I was flying two to three times a week between Srinagar and Leh until enough of the brigade had entered Ladakh to make it possible for me to move my headquarters to Leh.

I had moved Atma's batallion to Chushul. He said he loved the place and asked only that I made sure that he had fresh lamb to eat everyday. He was going to scrounge around for chicken. Fearing that Atma was likely to finish the entire chicken population of the Indus valley and then send his men scrounging into western Tibet, I arranged a supply of fresh chicken as well. By now I had completely won his heart and he proved his worth time and again.

I installed the brigade officers' mess at the residency. It was cold at night and our kerosene heaters quickly drained the small quantity of oxygen from the air, forcing us to live without heat. We had received some Canadian parkas (snow jackets), which proved a comfort. All day I was at the airfield watching the unloading planes, construction of quarters and pushing troops to the border as soon as animals became available for their transport until the point where it became routine. However, we were too tired by the evening to mull over our way of life. Our new excitement began with the arrival of two Sikorsky helicopters for trials. Their arrival in turn brought a spate of visitors.

The first was Biji Kaul. Officially, he came to check on the logistics, but actually he came to persuade me to accompany him to the Haji Pir pass, on the route to Sinkiang and establish a post there immediately. He liked doing things on the spur of the moment and whatever made news. I argued against it, because it would take us six weeks to go there and return. If he could spare that much time from his desk in Delhi, I could not. The job of a brigade commander, I said, was at his command post and that he should not leave his Headquarters for more than short periods unless a task demanded such a risk and personal leadership. I firmly said "no" even though he placed our long friendship at stake and tempted me with the idea of the impression I would make on the prime minister. I finally talked him out of it, and instead he accepted my suggestion of a flight on one of the helicopters to look at the gorgeous range of the Karakorams.

Next to come was Nehru. This was the second time I met him, the first being when my armored cars had escorted him to Baramula in 1947. He was much loved by the troops. He gave them a good talk, made a speech in the bazaar and then returned to Srinagar. Then Krishna Menon came. He had terrorized senior military officers. I had met him several times and somehow felt no fear. Shiv had arrived ahead even though he had no time for Menon, but kept his discreet distance to come to my aid if Menon chose to devastate me as he often did others. Some of the staff from Delhi urged that we give him a few pulls at an oxygen bottle when he arrived. I told them that oxygen was always available at the airport, and if the Defense Minister needed it, the doctor on duty would administer it just as he did to any officer or soldier on landing at this height. After he arrived and met the greeting line, I asked him how he felt. In his usual manner he turned to me and said, "Do you think I am going to die eh?" Menon did not look well at all and seemed to have trouble breathing. I said we had oxygen available if he needed it and I did not want him to look uncomfortable in front of the men. It would not go down too well with them if they saw their Defense Minister could not take the height. Menon said rudely, "So you think I should have oxygen?" I said firmly that he should. He suddenly smiled and said, "OK, then bring it." Turning to others within hearing, "This Rikhye has some funny ideas after his service with the UN." And he pulled hard at the nose cap of the oxygen bottle. The color in his face changed from green to his usual color. When he left, Menon told me that he had enjoyed his trip. I was to see a great deal of him in the future, and when he bullied me, it was only in fun.

One day Raja asked if I had met the Rani of Poonch. I had heard that she lived in her mud palace near the town. Her husband, the former Raja of Poonch, had joined the militia and served elsewhere. Raja assured me that the Rani would appreciate a visit by me as she had asked about me. I had heard that the Rani was young and attractive and

suspected that my political adviser was up to something. When I asked why it was important for me to see her, he said that we already had met the lamas. There were remaining old loyalties to the former ruling house, which she represented in the absence of her husband. Yes, it would now be helpful to establish contact with her. Raja arranged for me to call on her the following afternoon.

Somewhat apprehensive and excited at the thought of meeting an attractive woman, I waited in her lobby. It was an ordinary mud baked house similar to structures in Leh. Her personal staff was dressed like everyone else in clothes spun from local wool and in sheepskin coats. Then a woman arrived, but mistaking her for a maid, I remained seated. She came over to me and addressed me in perfect convent style, English. I realized she was the Rani, dressed no differently from her former subjects. She carried the usual smell of uncured sheepskin and yak butter on her exposed skin.

Ladakh barely had an inch or two of rain and snow only fell on the high peaks. With a great variation in temperatures and exposure to the sun at great heights, the skin cracked easily and had to be protected. The locals used yak butter for protection, which had a rancid smell. The Rani offered me tea with yak butter, which I disliked but accepted, as it was the custom. She introduced me to her husband's younger brother. He, too, was dressed like everyone else in the street. I asked after her husband, and she told me what I already knew, that he was away with the militia. Turning to her brother in law she said that he took care of everything. According to the manner in which she looked at and referred to him during our conversation, I assumed that her brother in law was indeed taking care of everything, including her.. This was not surprising as polyandry is common practice in the Himalayas, and the Rani was taking full advantage of the custom. I spent the required time, and after talking about my troops, took leave. When Raja came for his evening meal, he entered the dining room laughing. He had got me interested in the Rani, and then there was a great let down. He had been through it too and he was not going to spare me the same experience. Needless to say, neither of us went back to the palace for tea.

By early July the airfield had improved sufficiently to enable us to increase our troop lift. Regretfully, our helipad in a field near my Headquarters was empty. The two Sikorsky helicopters proved unsuited for operations over 11,000 feet. Lacking oxygen fittings, the crew had to carry bottles, as did the passengers. While this problem could be overcome, the chopper engines gradually lost power at heights above 12,000 feet. We were sorry to lose the choppers and their fine test crew from Connecticut, USA. I was informed by the Indian Air Force visiting officers that Russian helicopters were under trial that were suitable to reach 15,000 feet. Unable to move around to visit my troops, I arranged to accompany supplying aircraft to forward posts. Following the parachute drop of breakables, the aircraft would fly low to drop the remaining load. Since my posts were told that I was aboard, they responded by lining up for the final phase. I stood at the open drop door and waved. It was always a moving experience.

General Shiv had planned a conference for mid-month with the Chief of Staff, Western Army, and a representative from air headquarters. Besides receiving a news

summary from the corps headquarters, we listened to All India Radio news and the BBC. The Belgian Congo had gained its independence, and its army, called *Force Publique*, had mutinied. We were so busy with our work that this news made little impression. On July 13 the evening All India Radio news informed us that the UN Security Council had authorized a peacekeeping operation in the Congo. Kapoor, who prided himself in his prophetic powers, burst out, "We are going to lose our Brigadier. He will be off to the Congo."

"Come on," I said, "It's out of the question." How could I go back into U.N. service when I had just returned to national service after more than two years in Gaza? I mused aloud, "After being hand picked for this job by the Chief and even more the Prime Minister would surely not consider it. As far as I am concerned, I am not going to move."

Then, scolding Kapoor, I said, "Don't you go round predicting such things. And for God's sake don't ever say this to anyone else. Here I am working towards putting together a new formation and building a sense of pride in what we are doing and you start saying that the Brigadier is going to pull out." No more was said on this subject, and the next morning I left for Udampur without knowing that I was not to return.