

An Account for rescue operations after the 1954 floods in Gyantse

The Tibetan Tragedy

August 1954

Prepared from a personal account of
Capt N.P.P. Thorat, ac, Y Coy at Yatung

From Pune Sub Area as a GS03 [General Staff Officer – Grade 3] on the staff to the Tibetan Plateau is, by any standards, some sort of a record. When Capt [Captain] Thorat learnt that this possibility was very much on the cards, he began acclimatization climbs up and down Sinharh Fort. He was gently reminded by Capt Magan Singh the Adjutant, through correspondence, that his selection for this hard role, (in the footsteps of Anderson and Goddard, Crozier and Marshal, Rerrie and Reid) was because when Capt Thorat was the GS03, Sub Area Poona he caused so many escorts and guards to be detailed from the Unit!!

He responded to these well wishers by saying that he would rather go to Tibet than sit in Siliguri among snakes and scorpions!!

The Yatung detachment of *Jangi Paltan* ['the fighting unit', the name of the 1st Battalion of the Maratha Light Infantry] set off on a very auspicious day, August 15, 1954, having to transship en route because of a landslide on the Sevoke-Gangtok road. The detachment concentrated at Gangtok and was entertained to a barakhana [big meal] by Capt G K Vaze, detachment commander there. Capt Thorat learnt that Y Coy [Company] would be in Tibet for 3 years without any relief of personnel because of political reasons. While in Gangtok, Capt Thorat availed of the opportunity to call on the Maharajah and Maharajkumar of Sikkim where he was given books on the

religion (Buddhism) and customs of Tibet and Heinrich Harrer's famous treatise '*Seven Years in Tibet*'.

Capt Vaze saw the detachment off outside Gangtok with Sub Gulabrao Jagtap and 5 PI [Political Interpreter] in the lead. The first night's halt was at the Karponang IB [Inspection Bungalow], where Sep [Sepoy] Cook Govind Naik set the wooden roofed kitchen ablaze. The second night's halt was at Sherabthang at the foot of Natu-La. Capt Thorat learnt from the Khansamna of the Changu IB that the British used to play football on the frozen Changu Lake. On the spur of the moment, as narrated by Capt Thorat, he left early to climb to the 14,400 ft Natu-La (Pass) accompanied by a lone Tibetan porter. When, at 1100 hours, he arrived at the Chorten on the Pass, he had his first glimpse of the Chumbi Valley in Tibet and the 24,600 ft Chomo Lhari.

He recalls scribbling a post card to the Adjt [adjutant], Capt Magan Singh, to announce that he had reached the highest point on the march without "huffing and puffing" and was about to enter mysterious Tibet. He recalls literally jogging down to Chubithang where the first contact with Chinese troops by any MLI unit was established.

Earlier, when 1/5 Marathas and 4/5th were stationed in Tibet, the detachments only met Tibetan for the night, the detachment, just short of Yatung, halted to spruce up, put on their berets with the distinctive red and green hackle, before entering Yatung. Capt Thorat and Y Coy were escorted to their lines, the home for the next 14 months, by Sub [Subedar] Dharamchand of 2 Jats mounted on a sturdy Tibetan pony. It was a historic moment in that 24 years earlier, the same lines were occupied by the 1st and 4th Bns [battalion] as evidenced from the large sized carvings of the regimental crest on rock faces. The 4th Battalion detachment was located there between 1947 and 1950 commanded by Maj Krishnatry and the late Maj V.P. Shinde.

For the first few days, the PLA [People's Liberation Army] soldiers in Yatung were non communicative but on July 26, as Capt Thorat, Capt Nagpal AMC [Armed Medical Corps] and No 4 PI under Sub Dhondi Jadhav prepared to move out, the civil contractor Kaliram came across to say that of want of clearance from their superiors, the local Garrison Comdr had forbidden the contractors to provide mules and yaks for portorage.

Coincidentally, the only two contingents of Indian troops serving outside India at that point of time in 1954 were commanded by Thorats: Maj Gen S.P.P. Thorat heading the Custodian Force in Korea (NNRC) and his younger brother Capt N.P.P. Thorat in Tibet, both involved with the Chinese. Political considerations prevented the move to Gyantse. And so Y Coy was located in Yatung. During the stay in Yatung, Capt Thorat had a very unusual experience with an English speaking Chinese soldier who used his Rolleicord camera to have a photograph taken with a request to send it to his mother in China, using the diplomatic bag for this purpose. The mother of this soldier wrote via the diplomatic bag gratefully acknowledging the efforts of Capt Thorat but by then this soldier had passed away. Capt Thorat recalls the 26 course dinner hosted by the local Chinese big-wig but this act of hospitality was one time. Parleys between the two Governments about the future of the detachments of the Indian Army in Tibet were in progress may well explain why.

On August 16, 1954, the massive fort of Gyantse and a major portion of the town were washed away because of a flash flood of the Tsangpo River due to breaching of bunds upstream. Capt Thorat was informed by Nk [Naik] Mathew of the Signals detachment that there was a total breakdown of communications with Gyantse not an unusual occurrence but Garjaman, the Tibetan linesmen at Sangong managed to get a message through to the Yatung Civil Telephone Office the massive Gyantse Fort in which the Indian Army escort of 2 Jat [Regiment] and stall of the Gyantse Trade Agency were

located, was not to be seen. Alarm bells rang concerning the fate of 3 officers and 70 JCOs [Junior Commissioned Officer], NCOs, OR [Other Ranks], NCsE [Non Combatants Enrolled] and stall of the Infantry, ASC [Armed Service Corps], AMC [Armed Medical Corps] and Ord. Garjaman further reported that only a few houses of the Gokha Adda on the Southern slopes of the Hill Gompa and the hospital and a few quarters of the PLA were visible; all else had been washed away by the flood waters of the raging Tsangpo, a 20 ft wall of water. Capt Thorat's actions are now best described in his own words thus : "I placed the wireless detachment on a 24 hours listening watch, sent a flash message to 201 Inf Bde [Infantry Brigade] and got some rations and clothing together and despatched them on the early morning of the 17th with Maj. Chibber, Indian Trade Agent [ITA] Yatung. Simultaneously, I organised a rescue party consisting of NK Yeshwant Thamke (a good long distance runner), Sep. Malhari Ghorpade, Sep. Tatyaba Bhargoji of Jangi Paltan and NK. P C Mathew, LNK [Lance Naik] Pappachan and Sep G.K. Rao all of Indian Signals and sent a message to the Bde HQ [Brigade Headquarters] asking them for permission to move to Gyantse. After a lot of telephoning between 201 Inf Bde, HQ 20 Div and HQ Eastern Command, the permission for the rescue party to proceed was received at 2100 hours on August 18, 1954".

The narrative then goes on to say that the mounted rescue party moved out on the morning of August 19. There are 8 stages along the route, the distance between each stage being 12 to 25 miles, depending on the terrain. On reaching Gotsa the same evening, Capt Thorat met NK Bhalle 2 Jats who was able to give details of arms and ammunition left behind in Gyantse, and a PLA detachment sharing the same accommodation who informed him that 1000 Chinese soldiers in Gyantse were missing and that only a handful of our troops who had taken shelter in a hut precariously perched on a pile of stones, had survived: These details of likely casualties were wirelessly to

higher HQs. After overcoming Chinese objections to move forward, Capt Thorat's party met up with the ITA's [Indian Trade Agent] party at Phari Dzong and proceeded forward through inclement weather, covering 3 stages totalling 60 miles to reach Sangong, one stage short of Gyantse, by 1000 hours on August 24. After a main relief base was established at this penultimate stage, Capt Thorat accompanied by Yeshwant Thamke, Ghorpade and Bhargoji pressed forward Gyantse bound with utmost expedition. As the party approached the Tsangpo [River] it came across a large gathering of lamas from Naini Gompa praying for a Chinese Survey Party washed away in the icy and fast flowing waters of the Tsangpo which had risen again. The Prime Minister of Bhutan Shri Jigme Dorji was also held up there. The Head Lama informed Capt Thorat that because of the unruly and unholy behaviour of people in this land of God, the Gods were offended. The Bhutanese PM advised Capt Thorat not to undertake the crossing in deference to the feelings of the Head Lama. As this conversation was in progress, Tatyaba Bhargoji undressed, jumped into the river and crossed over to the far bank followed by the other Jangi Paltanites, notwithstanding the turbulent and cold expanse of the Tsangpo. The scene on the far bank was horrifying was littered with decaying corpses, Chinese and Tibetan, and of yaks and ponies. In the rarefied atmosphere where the going became progressively difficult, the final mile and a half to Gyantse appeared endless. "As we approached the perilously perched hut, Capt Macfarlane jumped down, rushed to me, locked himself in my embrace all in tears and I disbelief of any possibility of such a rescue" wrote Capt. Thorat. There were fourteen survivors with him.

On the morning of the 25th, Capt. Nana Thorat happened to pick up news on an AIR bulletin that "Capt. Thorat and a party of Marathas were seen being washed away in the floods at Gyantse". The report was possibly conveyed by the Bhutanese PM to the Political Officer Gangtok and to AIR's Gangtok

representative. Nana Thorat goes on to say: "I sent out a wireless message to Commander Pune Sub Area Brig. [Brigadier] M.K. Sheriff for conveying about my being still alive and kicking at Sangong to my wife in Staveley Road (Poona)". The good Brigadier, his staff and many others were with Mrs Thorat condoling with her when the message was handed over to the Brig who announced the good news that all was well. Sorrow turned to joy even as Capt Thorat's father and family members were preparing to leave for the final rites. All's well that ends well. Mrs Thorat's message of relief reached her husband at Phari enroute to Yatung!!

The rest of this story is history - a story of intrepid gallantry not against man but nature at its worst. The rescue mission was accomplished. Capt Thorat and his brave Marathas received messages of congratulations from General J.N. Chaudhari the Army Chief and the Government of India, reproduced below for record. The survivors included one officer and 7 OR of 2 Jat, 3 Signallers, one from the ASC [Armed Service Corps] and 2 from the AMC [Armed Medical Corps]. Maj. Nagal, CO [Commanding Officer] designate 2 Jat was cremated. Missing believed dead were 3 Signallers, Capt. Nagpal AMC and 43 others mainly from 2 Jats including NCsE and civilians. A major tragedy indeed. What has never been understood is that the leadership and determination of Capt. Narayan (Nana) Pandurang Patil Thorat and Sep. Tatyaba Bhargoji who jumped into the turbulent and icy waters of the Tsangpo, not really acknowledged by the grant of awards for exceptional leadership, bravery and good service.