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## **TALES OF GRIT AND FORTITUDE FROM THE PEAKS OF KARGIL: AN OVERVIEW**

Field Marshal Sir Philip Walhouse Chetwode's motto, "The safety, honour and welfare of your country comes first always and every time" is imbued in the heart and soul of every soldier of the Indian Army. The history of wars fought by India is infused with many tales of fortitude and of dauntless determination. In addition, the Kargil War is also remembered because of the challenges posed due to high altitude and difficult terrain and the fact that it was India's first televised war.

The antagonistic relation between the two countries has its origin in the independence of the two countries. Prior to the Kargil war, the two countries were involved in three all out wars fought in- 1948, 1965 and 1971. The diplomatic exchanges between both the countries following the signing of the Lahore Declaration of 1999 were highly appreciated both nationally and internationally. However, what the world wasn't aware of was Pakistan's devious plan of occupying the winter vacated posts on the Indian side of the Line of Control (LC). As summer arrived the shepherds began to graze their cattle and were the first ones to detect the suspicious movement of infiltrators. The first intelligence on the infiltration was reported by Tashi Namgyal, a shepherd from Gharkon village near Batalik sub-sector in Kargil. He had gone out looking for his missing yak on 3 May 1999, when he saw about six people dressed in pathani suits digging a bunker and breaking the snow.<sup>1</sup> He immediately rushed to the nearest Army post to report what he witnessed. Namgyal's report alerted the Indian Army which eventually kick-started the Kargil war.



*Image of Tashi Namgyal*

Source: DNA Web Team, <https://www.dnaindia.com/india/interview-meet-forgotten-kargil-hero-tashi-namgyal-the-local-shepherd-who-saw-pak-getting-ready-2775819> (Accessed on 09 May 2022)

<sup>1</sup> Ieshan Wani, "Meet Forgotten Kargil hero Tashi Namgyal- the local shepherd who saw Pak getting ready", DNA Web Team, 26 July 2019 .



The infiltration had begun along the LC in Mushkoh valley, Dras, Kaksar and Batalik sub-sector. Pakistan's Northern Light Infantry (NLI) had trained for years for the intrusion. After receiving the intelligence on enemy infiltration, India soon launched Operation Vijay to evict the intruders from the Indian territory. After two months of violent confrontation, the war came to an end on 26 July 1999. One of the primary reasons for the intrusion was to cut National Highway 1A that connects Srinagar to Leh. The ridgelines along this highway were occupied by Pakistani troops equipped with arms and ammunition to launch a military operation.



*Map on Pakistan Army's intrusion plan*

Source: Kargil 99: Blood, Guts and Firepower. Lancer Publication

The Kargil War of 1999 was fought in high-altitude terrain in hostile climatic conditions. The steep slopes and falling temperatures made fighting battles even more challenging. After the locals reported about the suspicious movement, troops were sent to recce the area. One of the first patrol teams sent out was led by Captain Saurabh Kalia. The 22-year-old officer along with five sepoy's contacted the enemy and fought valiantly till they ran out of ammunition. The enemy captured them and they were tortured for 22 days until they were finally shot and killed. Later their mutilated bodies were sent back to India. <sup>2</sup> The Nation was shocked to hear about the inhumane action of the Pakistani Army disregarding the Geneva Convention while dealing with the prisoners of war.

<sup>2</sup> India Today Web Desk, "Capt Saurabh Kalia: Story of first Kargil martyr", 26 July 2019,(indiatoday.in)



The heinous crime committed by Pakistan clearly reflected their intention and soon Op Vijay was launched by India to recapture the Indian posts illegally occupied by Pakistan. What placed Kargil different from the previous wars fought by India was the leadership of young officers, highly motivated, some of whom laid down their lives in fighting to save the honour of their motherland.



*An Image showing all the major hill tops in Dras Sector*

Source: Tribune India, <https://www.tribuneindia.com/2014/20140720/edit9.jpg> (Accessed on 09 May 2022)

Dras was one of the most important sub-sectors because of its proximity to the National Highway 1A. Two of the fiercest battles that took place in this sector were that of Tololing and Point 5140. On 17 May 1999, 56 Brigade of 8 Mountain Division was inducted into Drass and tasked to evict the intruders.<sup>3</sup> The battles in this sector narrate the tales of many valiant warriors who displayed conspicuous courage in the face of the enemy and braved the challenging environment. 18 GRENADIERS, 2 RAJ RIF and 1 NAGA with firm base provided by 16 GRENADIERS were responsible for evicting the enemy from Tololing. The victory at Tololing changed the dynamics of the war and paved the way for numerous other battles to be won in this sector. Securing Tololing was extremely crucial as it served as a befitting reply to the enemy who was otherwise counting its successes. 2 RAJ RIF was later tasked to capture Area Three Pimples Complex. It was here that some of the brave hearts from 2 RAJ RIF laid down their lives in the line of duty.

<sup>3</sup> Col Gurmeet Kanwal, "Heroes of Kargil", Army Headquarters, 2002, Pg-9

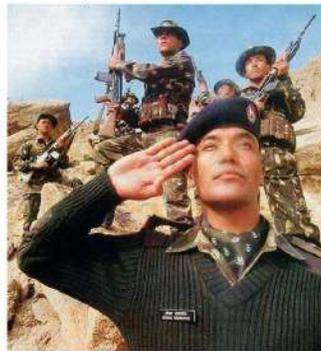


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The story of Major Padmapani Acharya, Captain Vijayant Thapar and Captain Neikezhakuo Kenguruse are written in golden words in the records of history. Major Acharya led his company from the front while trying to capture a formidable enemy position. A devoted officer, he was married for three years but never got a chance to meet his daughter who was born three months after his death. Major Acharya had turned 31 years on 21 June 1999 and died while fighting the enemy on 28 June 1999.<sup>4</sup>

When Major Acharya was killed, his Second-in-Command (2IC) Captain Vijayant Thapar led the platoon. A young officer just out of the Academy, displayed raw courage as he climbed up a steep slope and charged at the enemy. Despite being seriously injured he did not yield and later succumbed to his injuries. On the other hill top at Lone Hill, Captain Kenguruse did the most unimaginable thing. While braving through the hail of bullets, his platoon managed to reach a point where their advance was halted due to a massive stone wall. In the freezing cold weather, Captain Kenguruse, removed his shoes and scaled the wall barefoot to capture the objective.

The challenges at the Batalik sub-sector were manifold as the enemy had intruded almost 8-10 km from the LC and occupied an unheld area west of the Chorbat La Pass. The stories of grit and fortitude of the Ladakh Scouts at Chorbat La will be recounted in the times to come. The Ladakh Scouts under Major Sonam Wangchuk had been assigned to recce the area. The patrol parties were taken aback by the level of intrusion by Pakistan. The team under Major Wangchuk fought valiantly at 18000 feet braving the harsh climatic conditions. Although the unit lost a non-commissioned officer Havildar Tsewang Rigzin, they ultimately emerged victorious. Major Wangchuk received the Mahavir Chakra and the unit received the 'Chief's citation' from the then Chief of the Army Staff, General VP Malik.



*Major Sonam Wangchuk, Ladakh Scouts*

Source: International News Corp, <https://www.facebook.com/228998501154665/posts/chorbat-la-war-memorial-handanbrot-away-from-media-glare-batalik-chorbat-la-sect/410682119652968/> (Accessed on 09 May 2022)

<sup>4</sup> Shambhavi Anand, "Family recalls an officer & a gentleman", 27 July 2009, Times of India



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In the beginning of 1990s, Mushkoh Valley was used by the Pakistan Army as an alternative route for infiltration into the Kashmir Valley. So, every year counter infiltration operations were launched to evict the enemy during the summer. However, in the summer of 1999, the enemy had already crossed the LC and occupied the high mountain tops.<sup>5</sup> Of the varied features in this sector the most important was Point 4875 which was held by the enemy. The task to clear Point 4875 was given to the 13 Jammu and Kashmir Rifles (13 JAK RIF). The legend of Kargil, Captain Vikram Batra, was part of this operation. He had already achieved success at Point 5140 in Dras sub-sector, where he gave his iconic success signal, “Yeh Dil Maange More”. The “Shershah of Kargil,” Captain Batra single-handedly killed five enemy soldiers at point blank range. He led his team from the front and while dealing with the enemy counter attack at Point 4875, he was killed in action. His famous quote “ Either I will come back after hoisting the Tricolour or I will come wrapped in it, but I will be back for sure” reflected his intense passion and love for his nation.

While the Indian Army fought on the ground, the Indian Air Force provided aerial assistance through reconnaissance and surveillance. During Operation Safed Sagar, the story of two IAF officers continues to inspire young generations. As the officers flew their MiG fighter jets on 27 May 1999, Flight Lieutenant Kambampati Nachiketa’s aircraft was hit by a Stinger missile and he ejected and landed on the enemy’s soil. He was grilled by Pakistanis for many days until he was released back to India.<sup>6</sup> When Squadron Leader Ajay Ahuja who was part of the same operation got to know about Flt Lt Nachiketa, he volunteered to launch a rescue operation to look for his brother officer. Sqn Ldr Ahuja’s MiG-21 was also hit by a Stinger and he gave a radio call- “Hercules, I suspect a missile hit”. He ejected from his aircraft and landed in the enemy territory. He was shot and killed.<sup>7</sup> But, their story of conspicuous bravery and camaraderie is an inspiring tale for many.

There were many symbolic elements that became synonymous to the Kargil War and ‘letters from the peaks of Kargil’ were one of them. Letters played a very significant role during the Kargil war. Post-war they have become a source of first-hand accounts about the depiction of the war, as witnessed by the soldiers. Letters served as an emotional link between the soldiers and their families. They represented both happy and sad experience, of pride and of loss, of passion and of endurance. A number of letters sent to the family members from the war zone

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<sup>5</sup> Col Gurmeet Kanwal, *Heroes of Kargil*, Army Hq, 2002, Pg-87

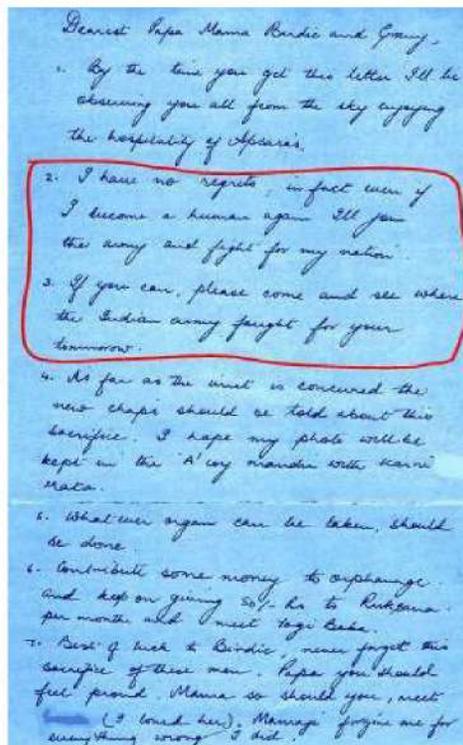
<sup>6</sup> G Parthasarathy, “Captured in Conflict: The Case of Flight Lieutenant Kambampati Nachiketa”, *Economic Times*, 28 February 2019.

<sup>7</sup> Kargil Martyr Squadron Leader Ajay Ahuja inspires air warriors even today, *Aviation & Defence Universe*



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were shared by the families and they reflect the sheer passion of the soldiers and, their tales of grit and fortitude, while fighting the enemy. An excerpt from Captain Vijayant Thapar's letter to his family reads- "I have no regret. In fact, even if I become a human again, I will join the Army and fight for my nation". Captain Anuj Nayyar in his last letter to his father wrote, "Fear was never in the dictionary you gave me as my dad... Don't worry because nothing ever worries your son." These letters are proof of these young officers' resilience and courage to face the enemy.



*Captain Vijayant Thapar's Last Letter*

Source: Reddit.com

[https://www.reddit.com/r/IndiaSpeaks/comments/klvn0h/last\\_letter\\_that\\_kargil\\_war\\_hero\\_capt\\_vijayant/](https://www.reddit.com/r/IndiaSpeaks/comments/klvn0h/last_letter_that_kargil_war_hero_capt_vijayant/)  
(Accessed on 09 May 2022)

The humane face of the Army during the Kargil War was reflected in the activities of the Army Wives Welfare Association (AWWA). They worked incessantly in maintaining the morale of the soldiers fighting the war by lending support to the families of the soldiers. From caring for the young widows to attending funerals and taking care of the wounded soldiers at the hospitals, the AWWA did everything. During the Kargil War, it was Dr Ranjana Malik, President of AWWA and wife of the Army Chief, who coordinated with the



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different units during the war. In the chapter titled, “The Army Family Support System”, from the book Kargil: From Surprise to Victory, Dr Malik writes, “War leaves an indelible mark on each family.” The AWWA stood as a strong support system during the war managing the emotional and psychological aspects of the war.

The Kargil War of 1999 was filled with many ‘firsts’. It was the first war in the region to be live telecasted. The sound of Bofors guns and rockets lit up the skies providing glaring images from the war zone. The intensity of the war was immense but what was equally inspiring were the stories of valour and devotion to duty coming from the mountain tops of Kargil. However, the lessons from Kargil are filled with tales of inspiration to drive the young generation. The then Chief of Army Staff General VP Malik in his book, “Kargil: From Surprise to Victory” writes “A reflection on the Kargil War will never be complete without a mention of the brilliant junior leadership that we witnessed during the battles”.



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### **INDIAN FILMS MADE ON KARGIL<sup>9</sup>**

1. LOC Kargil (2003) film by JP Dutta
2. Dhoop (2003) film by Ashwini Chowdhury loosely based on the life of Capt Anuj Nayyar (MVC)
3. Lakshya(2004) film by Farhan Akhtar was inspired from the events at Kargil.
4. Mausam (2011) film by Pankaj Kapoor was about an IAF officer on Duty, during Kargil.
5. Gunjan Saxena: The Kargil Girl (2020) film by Sharan Sharma was based on the life of Flt Lt Gunjan Saxena who was the first woman of IAF to go to war
6. Shershah (2021) film by Vishnuvardhan is based on the life of Capt Vikram Batra (PVC)

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<sup>8</sup> Disclaimer: The content mentioned under the Listicles constitutes fair-use of any copy write material and is used for information and research purpose only. The content is in no way promoting or branding an individual, organisation, book or film.

<sup>9</sup> Films are fictional representations but the essence or idea behind each of these films have been inspired by Kargil



## EXHIBITIONS PUT UP ON KARGIL

1. On the 16<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Kargil Vijay Diwas (2015), an exhibition titled, “Kargil Diwas-Kargil... Lest we Forget” was put up at Select Citywalk Mall in New Delhi. The Exhibition was set up on the discarded vehicles of Indian Army. It exhibited Graffiti Art, weapons and last letter written by the soldiers to their families.  
<https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/exhibition-graffiti-art-for-honouring-martyrs-of-1999-kargil-war/articleshow/48223087.cms?from=mdr>

