

**By Sidharth Mishra**



On February 14, Chief Minister of Arunachal Pradesh Pema Khandu would lay at Tawang the foundation stone for a memorial to be built in the remembrance of Major Bob Khathing, an Indian Army officer who played a great role in establishing Indian sovereignty in then North Eastern Frontier Agency (NEFA), now Arunachal Pradesh. It was on this day 70 years ago that Maj Khathing saved Tawang for India.

After Independence, re-establishing Indian sovereignty in NEFA was not an easy task and here Maj Khathing and his guardian angel, Jairamdas Daulatram, played a big role. About Daulatram historical references are limited to him being a representative from Sindh and later East Punjab in the Constituent Assembly. It was, however, after Independence — during his tenure as the Governor of Assam between 1950 and 1956 — that he played the role of being a nation-builder.

An astute statesman, Daulatram understood well the strategic importance of Tawang and realised that whoever controlled Tawang would control North-East. In the autumn of 1951, Maj Khathing, who on retirement from Army had joined the Indian Frontier Administrative Service (IFAS), then working as an assistant political officer, was summoned by Governor Daulatram.

The Governor shared his view with Major Khating and told him that neither the Centre nor he had the ability to get the Commander-in-Chief, Field Marshal Roy Boucher, to agree to a military expedition for the task to control Tawang. Thus he wanted Khating to lead a 'quiet' operation to take control of Tawang.

After appointing Maj Khathing as a serving officer of 2, Assam Rifles, the Governor allowed him to collect Rs 25,000 from the treasury and requisition any stores or personnel he felt necessary for the expedition. Khathing asked the Governor to give two months to conclude the

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operation. Daulatram, however, gave him just 45 days.

In 1914, Henry McMahon, the then British Foreign Secretary, had managed then Dalai Lama's envoy to come to Simla to sign a free trade agreement between Tibet and India. They also signed a treaty demarcating the southern boundary of Tibet.

Under the Simla agreement, the border between India and Tibet had three buffer kingdoms — Nepal, Sikkim and Bhutan. East of Bhutan was a large stretch of sparsely populated and utterly inhospitable land, referred to as the Dirang Dzong of Tawang. Dzong, in Tibetan, stands for fort. It officially became the North East Frontier Agency in 1954 and Arunachal Pradesh still later. Tawang, which is clearly south of McMahon line, became a contentious territory only in 1951, when China advanced into Tibet and the ruler of Tawang decided to pay allegiance to the Chinese-backed Tibetan authority in Lhasa.

### Getting Battle Ready

To make his men battle-ready, Khating got down to arranging stores and arms. What he got from the army stores was brown US Army-issue Angola shirts, which he accepted, though they were mostly of awkward sizes. He travelled to Chabua and Dinjan where the US Air Force had left behind large metal containers of stores when they withdrew their operations six years ago. There were hundreds of containers kept in safe custody of the Army and the Air Force. When he broke open these containers, he found camping gear, tents, Irwing Jackets, woollen gloves and socks, inners, just about everything that he wanted for his expeditionary force. He got them repacked into four of the same containers and had them transported to the Tinsukia railway station, from where he sent them to Tezpur via Guwahati — this was the only road and rail crossing across the Brahmaputra river.

Bob himself caught a routine ferry from Dibrugarh to Majuli island and crossed over to the north bank of the river on elephant back. Once across the river, he requisitioned an old war surplus jeep from a British tea planter and drove down to Tezpur, arriving several days before the men and material actually arrived there.

At Tezpur he made arrangements for around 200 mules and donkeys, 400 odd porters from the plains, and another 200 from the hills. He also requisitioned 10 odd tailors and cobblers to

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go with him on the expedition. He procured food supplies locally. As the men and material arrived, he moved his base camp to a large clearing at Lokra, about 20 km north of Tezpur.

For three weeks he drilled his men and took them on long endurance runs, carried out rifle shooting practice. He formed small teams of porters, each hundred men, in charge of a Naik of the Assam Rifles, and sent them with the men and animal ported packed stores in relays to establish forward camps. He also sent scouts towards Tawang to not only reconnoitre easy mountain trails, but also gather intelligence.

Due to the sudden nature of Bob's activities, the expedition came to the notice of Major TC Allen, the last British political and intelligence officer of the East, based in Dibrugarh. Allen visited Bob, who told the former to either come with him to Tawang or face arrest till the expedition was over. Allen, a keen mountaineer, applied himself with zest as Bob's second-in-command.

### **Expedition Begins**

The expedition started from Lokra on January 17, 1951, with 200 soldiers. There were no regular roads or bridges over the rivers and streams; one just had to walk cross the region. Because of physical endurance of troops and staging of camps 20-25 km apart over inhospitable terrain with just goat tracks, Bob was able to move his expeditionary force at great speed. Within nine days they were able to reach the Dzong at Bomdila. Bob camped right at the closed gates of the Dzong, which was held by local feudal lord Katuk Lama, who owed allegiance to Dzongpen of Tawang.

The next day, on January 26, 1951, Bob hoisted the Indian flag in front of the Dzong and invited all the inhabitants to a feast. The Governor sent a Dakota from Guwahati to survey Bob's progress. The aeroplane flew low over the monastery and while the soldiers waved, it did several rounds of the monastery. The show of force was enough to make Katuk Lama panic and despatch runners to warn all Dzongs towards Tawang.

After three days of rest, the expedition moved out on February 1, 1951, to Chakpurpu and Senge Dzong at the base of Sela Pass. The five-mile climb to Sela Pass sapped their energy and wits. Undaunted, they moved further up to Nauranang. On February 4, they camped at

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Jang village. Two locals and some troopers were sent out by Bob to collect information and gauge the feelings of the local people towards the expedition, besides inviting them for another feast. The next day, the headman and elders of Rho Changda and the surrounding villages of Jang visited Bob.

Through an interpreter Bob explained the purpose of his visit and advised them not to pay obeisance to Lhasa as they were now free citizens of India. Bob then detached Capt Limbu, Subedar Bir Bahadur and Jemadar Udaibir Gurung, tasking them to scout around the Sela tract to find a militarily defensible site and construct a permanent check-post and barracks to establish an Indian frontier post. He left behind some of his troops as well as porters and advised Limbu to take the help of the locals to carry out his task.

Bob moved his task force further. On February 6, they camped at Gyankar and the Dzongpen of Lhau came to meet them. They brought presents and offered Bob incentives in gold and women if he would go back. Bob smiled and welcomed them as fellow citizens of the new republic to enjoy the new-found freedom. Next day was Lhosar, the first day of the Year of the Iron Horse. In the evening, it snowed heavily and the weather turned extremely cold. However, the entire force, including the porters, were warm in American war surplus clothing due to Bob's foresight.

### **The Voice Of God**

Bob and his troops reached Tawang on February 7, 1951. They spent two days scouting the area for a permanent site where both civil and military lines could be laid out with sufficient area for a playground. A place was chosen north-east of Tawang Monastery and Bob camped his force at that location. He put his soldiers and porters to build a semi-permanent military camp with wooden logs and stones. He then sent emissaries to the Dzongpen for cordial meetings. For two days there was no reciprocity. The small population remained indoors.

After three days, Bob ordered his men to fire 20 rounds of two-inch mortar at the hill sides and fire off 1,000 rounds of .303 Ammo in the air. In the closed confines of the mountain, on a dark and silent night, the fireworks sounded like frightening thunder claps, echoing and reverberating, one placating message after another, "The voice of God."

The next morning, Bob lined up his troops, fixed bayonets and marched his troops up and down Tawang for four hours. He also planted the Indian flag in front of the monastery. This had the desired effect and the Dzongpen sent emissaries. Bob put Maj Allen, his second-in-command, to negotiate armistice and draw up a parchment for the formal accession.

On February 13, as Allen was making no headway, Bob sent out patrols to round up the Chhgergans (officials) of the Dzong and bring them into the camp. For several days, they were wined and dined with great hospitality and respect. Thereafter, Bob issued a general order that they were henceforth not to accept the suzerainty of the Dzongpens or pay tax or tribute to them.

Finally, on February 20, Bob ran out of patience. He was also running out of the time that the Governor had given to him. Along with Allen, the Chhgergans and a hundred troops, he marched directly to the palace of Nyertsang, the Dzongpen of Tawang. He did not meet with any resistance and there was no violence. All proceedings were done with traditional cordiality and respect.

Nyertsang wanted to seek advice from the Dalai Lama in Lhasa. "What Government? The Chinese army has invaded Tibet," Bob interjected. "Have you ever heard of Col Younghusband?" Allen asked Nyertsang. "There is a treaty with the Government of Tibet, and as per that treaty the area south of the McMahon Line is in India, not Tibet. Tawang is part of India. Since India is a republic now, you really have no business here," Allen said.

Because of his awkwardness in sitting on the cushions placed on the ground and because his pistol butt was poking his hip, Allen suddenly took out his Smith & Wesson pistol and placed it on the ground in front of him. Nyertsang's visage fell immediately; he deflated like an air pillow. Allen took out the parchment from his map case and the treaty accepting sovereignty of India was signed by Nyertsang without much ado. Maj Khating signed the treaty on behalf of the Republic of India. As a token of appreciation, a nazrana of Rs 1,000 was paid to Nyertsang.

Allen renamed the kingdom the North East Frontier Agency. Bob appointed Allen as a Lieutenant Governor, accountable to the Governor of Assam, to administer the area till the Government of India could send its representative.

### Reward

Once the expedition was over, Bob had a final task to do — to go back to the Governor and inform him that he had carried out his duty without firing a shot (except for the fireworks to create the 'Voice of God'). So, he set out downhill to Tezpur with a small retinue, leaving the expeditionary force in charge of Allen. The Governor sent a Dakota to pick him up from Tezpur and they flew to Delhi to see Jawaharlal Nehru.

It took Nehru another four years of tough negotiations with Zhou En-Lai to come to terms and sign an eight-year agreement over Tibet and form the first Sino-Indian pact. In April 1954, after the pact, the Government announced its sovereignty over NEFA and appointed an Indian overseer team to replace Allen.

The country acknowledges Arunachal Pradesh as an integral part of India. Major Khathing went back to IFAS to serve the Union of India in consolidating its position in the Northeast in different capacities and his contributions were also acknowledged with a Padma Shri. The Government, however, is still to de-classify his valorous deeds in Tawang. As for Daulatram, he served as Governor of Assam till 1956 and was thereafter nominated to the Rajya Sabha.

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