

THE SPECIAL FRONTIER FORCE (SFF)

ESTABLISHMENT 22

INTRODUCTION

The Special Frontier Force (SFF) is a special force of India created on 14 November 1962. Its main goal originally was to conduct covert operations behind Chinese lines in the event of another Sino-Indian War.

On advice of the Intelligence Bureau (IB) Chief Bholu Nath Mullik, Nehru ordered for the establishment of Special Frontier Force (SFF) (also known as **Establishment 22** or just “**22**”) for defending against the Chinese army in the Sino-Indian War of 1962 (2). His first Inspector General, **Maj. Gen. Sujan Singh Uban**, commanded the 22nd Mountain Division in Europe during World War II. Uban was a Military Cross holder and a legendary figure in the British Indian Army (3,4).

Based in Chakrata (5), 100 km from the city of Dehra Dun in Uttarakhand, the force was put under the direct supervision of the IB. and later, the Research and Analysis Wing, India's external intelligence agency.

HISTORY

Tibetans have been a part and parcel of the modern Indian Army for as long as it has existed. Independent formations of Tibetan (including Ladakhi, Bön, and Sikkimese) units were to patrol and police the lands they were native to. During the time of the Great Game, the British Indian Army began to employ Tibetans as intelligence agents and even covert militia in northern India and Tibet.

At the time of Indian independence, the Northern Mountain covered region of India remained the most isolated and strategically overlooked territory of the subcontinent. During the 1950s, the American Central Intelligence Agency and the Indian Intelligence Bureau established Mustang Base in Mustang in Nepal, which trained Tibetans in guerilla warfare. The Mustang rebels brought the 14th Dalai Lama to India during the 1959 Tibetan Rebellion.

FORMATION

After the Sino-Indian war and towards the end of 1962, after hectic lobbying by **Intelligence Bureau (IB)**, the Nehru government ordered the raising of an elite commando unit and specialized mountain divisions primarily composed of Tibetan resistance fighters. **Chushi Gangdruk** leaders were contacted for recruitment of

Khampas into this new unit. An initial strength of 5000 men, mostly Khampas were recruited at its new Mountain Training Facility at Chakrata, home base for SFF. The place was home to the large Tibetan refugee population and was a mountain town in the foothills of the Himalayas. Starting with a force of 12,000 men, the SFF commenced six months of training in rock climbing and guerrilla warfare. The Intelligence agencies from India and the US also helped in raising the force; namely CIA and Research and Analysis Wing (R&AW). The SFF's weapons were all provided by the US and consisted mainly of M-1, M-2 and M-3 submachine guns. Heavy weapons were not provided (4).



Figura 1 - Chakrata, Uttarakhand, where SFF personnel are trained in stealth combat and scouting techniques

Established under the direct supervision of the Prime Minister and on the advice of Bhola Nath Mullik, the then director of the Intelligence Bureau of India and Biju Patnaik, a World War II veteran and the then chief minister of Odisha (2), the unit under the operational command of IB and later R&AW, was designated the Special Frontier Forces (SFF) and was primarily used for conducting clandestine intelligence gathering and commando operations along the Chinese Theatre. Initial training was conducted by the CIA paramilitary officers and the IB's own special operations unit. In 1968 SFF, with the help of the Aviation Research Centre which provided airlift facilities, became fully airborne-qualified and a dedicated mountain and jungle warfare unit.



Figura 2 - The snow lion insignia of the Special Frontier Force (SFF)

During this period, the Indian government also formed the Ladakh Scouts and the Nubra Guards paramilitary force on similar lines. Many SFF members are Gorkha Rifles members due to their bodies being able to perform much better in high altitudes against others. SFF was later incorporated in the Special Services Bureau (SSB) of R&AW. By late 1963, inter-service rivalry led to severe criticism by the Indian Army. To prove that the SFF's worth, the Inspector General sent 120 men from the SFF for a field exercise, codenamed **Garuda**, with the Army. The exercise proved to be a dramatic success for the SFF and the Army was now less inclined to criticise the force. In 1964, the SFF led by the Inspector General, began its airborne training at Agra. The SFF then began its own airborne training program at Sarsawa airbase near Saharanpur. By the late 1960s, the SFF was organised into six battalions for administrative purposes. Each battalion, consisting of six companies, was commanded by Tibetan who had a rank equivalent to a lieutenant colonel in the Army. A Tibetan major or captain commanded each company, which was the primary unit used in operations. Females also participated in the force and they were in the signal and medical companies. During this time, the SFF was never used against its intended enemy, China. However, the unit did conduct limited cross-border reconnaissance operations, as well as highly classified raids to place sensors in the Himalayas to detect Chinese nuclear and missile tests (4).

SFF OPERATIONS

SFF was raised with covert operations in mind, mainly along the Indo-China border, however SFF has been fielded by R&AW and the Indian government in various covert and overt operation theatres (4).

CHINA

In 1964 intelligence reports kept indicating that China was preparing to test a nuclear bomb at its Lop Nor nuclear installation in Xinjiang. On 16 October 1964 China tested a nuclear weapon in Xinjiang. It was expected but not enough details were known. Later in November 1964, the CIA launched a U2 flight out of Aviation Research Centre (ARC)'s Charbatia Air Base in Orissa, but its return turned out to be a bit of a mishap (9, 10). The U2 overshot the runway and got stuck in slushy ground caused by heavy rain in the monsoons. Following the normalization of Sino-Indian Relations after Deng Xiaoping's market reform the SFF ceased most of their operations within the PRC.

Getting it unstuck and out of India without being noticed by the Indian press, then even much more subject to leftist influences and hence antagonistic to the USA, was another clandestine operation. This gave all concerned quite a scare and it was decided to rely on other technical means (11). So CIA decided to launch an ELINT operation along with R&AW and ARC to track China's nuclear tests and monitor its missile launches.

The operation, in the garb of a mountaineering expedition to Nanda Devi involved celebrated Indian climber Moan Sing Kohli who along with operatives of Special Frontier Forces and CIA (most notably Jim Rhyne, a veteran STOL pilot), was to place a permanent ELINT device, a transceiver powered by a plutonium battery, that could detect and report data on future nuclear tests carried out by China (12). The plan to install a snooping device was hatched far away in Washington D.C., in the offices of the National Geographic Society. Barry Bishop, a photographer with the magazine, interested Gen. Curtis LeMay of the US Air Force in the idea.

The actual efforts called for to place a permanent electronic intelligence (ELINT) device powered by a nuclear SNAP 19C power pack fuel cell. The first attempt to place this device on the Nanda Devi, by a Kohli-led SFF team under the cover of a mountaineering expedition failed as the team had to retreat in the face of adverse conditions and left the device in a small unmarked mountain cave after having hauled the device to just short of the 25,645 feet peak. When another Kohli-led expedition returned the following year to recover the device, it was found to be missing (9, 13,14)

In the meantime the Chinese not only kept testing nuclear weapons at regular intervals but also ballistic missiles. The urgency to gather information was never greater. Another mission was launched in 1967 to place a similar device on the Nanda Kot. This mission was successful but a couple of years later another problem cropped up; snow would

pile up over the antenna and render it blind. So Kohli and a SFF team were sent once again to bring it down, this time they retrieved it successfully.

In October 1967 the Chinese began testing an ICBM capable of reaching targets 6000 miles away. There was renewed urgency to find out more. So SFF mountaineers went off on one more mission in December 1969 to successfully place a gas powered device on an undisclosed mountain supposedly in Chinese controlled areas. But by the following year, the US had the first generation of the TRW spy satellites in place and did not have to rely on the old ELINT devices.ina border,

BANGLADESCH LIBERATION WAR OF 1981

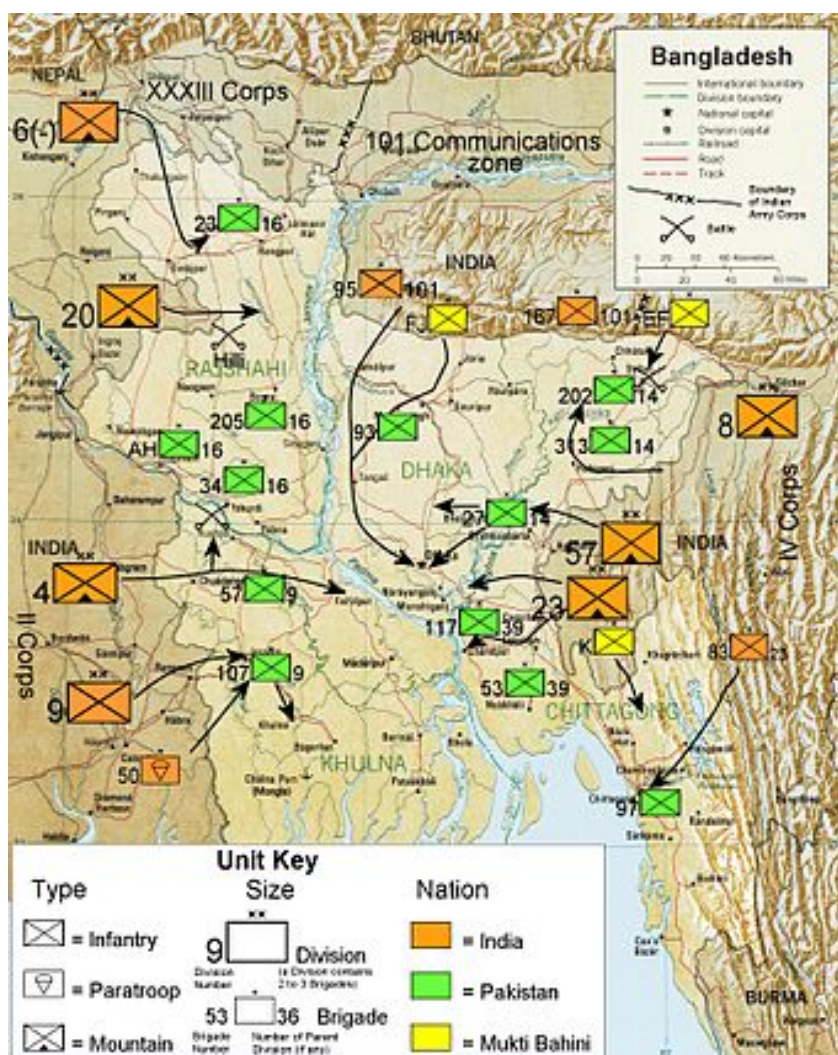
SFF was extremely successful against Pakistan during the Indo-Pakistan Military Conflict of 1971. Elements of the force were sent to Mizoram in late November 1971. A strong Task Force was deployed and conducted pre-emptive strike operations in support of the Indian army formations along the Chittagong Hill Tracts.

1971 saw the SFF being used in major combat in the Indo-Pak war. Elements of the force were sent to Mizoram in late October. By November 1971, around 3000 SFF members were deployed next to the Chittagong Hill Tracts. With cross-border attacks becoming

more frequent, the SFF was then ordered to attack the Chittagong Hill Tracts.

For this operation, code-named 'Eagle', the SFF members were given Bulgarian AK-47s and US carbines. This operation saw the first Dapon, Tibetan equivalent of a Brigadier, to command part of the SFF task force.

With war right around the corner, the SFF was given several mission plans, including the destruction of the Kaptai Dam and other bridges. The Inspector General urged that the SFF be used to capture Chittagong, but this was found not favourable, since SFF members did not have artillery or airlift support



to conduct a mission of that magnitude. After three weeks of border fighting, the SFF divided its six battalions into three columns and moved into East Pakistan on 3 December 1971. After capturing several villages in the Chittagong Hill Tracts, the Tibetans were given mortars and recoilless rifles and also two Indian Air Force Mi-4 helicopters.

With the Pakistani Lt. General A.A.K. Niazi surrendering on 16 December, the SFF had lost 56 men and nearly 190 wounded. The SFF was able to block a potential escape route for East Pakistani forces into Burma. They also halted members of Pakistan's 97 Independent Brigade and 2 Commando Battalion in the Chittagong Hill Tracts.

For their bravery and courage in battle, 580 SFF members were awarded cash prizes by the Indian Govt. In 1973, the original Inspector General of the SFF was replaced and in 1975 a new rule pertaining to the SFF was issued. This prohibited the SFF from being deployed within 10 km of the Indo-Chinese border. This came about after several incidents in which SFF commandos had crossed the border and conducted unsanctioned cross-border operations.

INTERNAL OPERATIONS

SFF was used in combating communal riots in mid 1970s. During the Operation Blue Star in 1984 the force was used to clear up Akal Takht of the Golden Temple (15). It was also used briefly for VIP security in late 1984 around the Prime Minister following the assassination of Indira Gandhi. Later this role fell upon the Special Protection Group.

SYNTHESIS

Founded: 14 November 1962

Country: India

Type: Special Force

Role: Special reconnaissance; Direct Action; Hostage rescue; Counter-terrorism; Unconventional warfare; Covert operations

Size: 10,000 active personnel (1)

Part of: R&AW

Headquarters: Chakrata, Uttarakhand, India

Engagements: Bangladesh Liberation War; Operation Blue Star; Operation Cactus; Operation Pawan; Kargil War; OperatioTESTIn Rakshak

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14. There are many theories about what happened. Most of likely ones are that the device rolled off the mountain and is now lodged at the bottom of the glacier. More imaginative theories speculate that the supposedly indestructible nuclear power pack with a highly toxic plutonium isotope in its core, with a half-life of many thousand years is inching its way into the Ganges. Another plausible theory is that another team of Indian mountaineers came up furtively early the next season and spirited away the device for Indian nuclear scientists to study. Many Americans lean towards this, and with the legendary spymaster, RN Kao in the picture anything was possible.
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