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## The Battle of Thuda: A Historical Perspective

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### **Abstract**

*The Battle of Thuda is considered as one of the most significant battles in the history of the Naga struggle for freedom. Thuda was an outpost of the 14<sup>th</sup> Assam Rifles, located above Phor village in Meluri sub-division under Phek district. This historic battle was fought between the two opposing forces of the Naga Army and the Indian Army from the 25<sup>th</sup> to 28<sup>th</sup> of August 1960. During the course of the battle, the Indian Air Force Dakota supply plane bearing the No. HJ-233, that was flown in to drop relief materials, arms and ammunitions for the besieged soldiers was fired upon by the Naga Army personnel and it consequently had to crash land at the nearby Zathsu valley paddy field on the bank of Tizu river. It holds the unique record of not only shooting down the aircraft, but also capturing all the nine (9) crew members alive by the Naga Army. However, they were subsequently released unharmed on 5<sup>th</sup> May 1962, as a gesture of the Naga good will towards the Indian government. In the light of this momentous landmark, an attempt will be made on the detailed study of the battle and its impact within the purview of the Naga freedom movement.*

## **Introduction**

**T**huda, an outpost established in October 1957 was based in the village of Phor, 130 Kms away from Meluri town. It was one of the army posts targeted by the Naga Army with an aim to flush out the Indian armed forces from the Naga territories. More so, it was carried out in retaliation against the 16 Point Agreement signed between the government of India and the Naga People's Convention (NPC) in July 1960. This Agreement completely sidelined and bypassed the Federal Government of Nagaland; the banner under which the Naga nationalists were struggling for freedom. Three days after the agreement was signed, Phizo the president of Naga National Council (NNC) officially and out rightly rejected it on the grounds that the 19 signatories did not have any mandate of the Naga people (Iralu, 2000).

The government of India with an intention to sabotage the Naga national movement, encouraged the moderate Naga leaders to set up the Naga People's Convention (NPC); a platform to facilitate the various Naga tribes to come together and settle the Naga issue 'within the constitution of India.' The writing of B.N. Mullik (1972), the then personal secretary of the Prime Minister of India, Jawaharlal Nehru, strongly supports this viewpoint. In his book titled *My Years With Nehru 1948-1964*, he writes thus;

Having got the principle of separation of the Naga Hills from Assam accepted, Dutt tried to pick up the old threads and pressed on the moderate Naga leaders his idea of a convention of the representatives of the various tribes to nullify the resolution of plebiscite adopted at the first Naga convention in 1951. ... Dutt worked hard and we gave him our fullest support and both the Prime Minister and the Home Minister as well as the governor were keen that this convention should be held. The

commissioner and deputy commissioner of Naga Hills district also gave their full cooperation (315 - 316).

S.M. Dutt, the then deputy director of Intelligence Bureau Assam, therefore played an instrumental role in the setting up of the NPC just as A.O. Hume did for the birth of the Indian National Congress.

The Battle of Thuda was fought between the Naga Army and the 14<sup>th</sup> Assam Rifles from 25<sup>th</sup> to 28<sup>th</sup> of August 1960. The battle was at the centre of events that led to the massacre of Matikhru men folk which remains to this day as one of the worst punitive attacks against the Naga public for their alleged support to the Naga Army. This is in stark contrast to the humane treatment given by the Naga Army to the prisoners of war from the Dakota plane that was shot down during the battle.

The Battle of Hoshepu, the first Indo-Naga battle fought in 1955 had sown the seed that planned and co-ordinated combat against the Indian forces was not only possible but also necessary to send out a message of resistance against the forceful occupation of the Naga territory. The daring exploit of the Naga Army in the Battle of Satakha in 1956 sparked the belief that, ill-equipped as they were, the Nagas stood a chance against the far superior military strength and size of the Indian Army. The Nagas knew that their love for their motherland and freedom cannot be suppressed that easily. The fight for their rights was thus relentless against all odds.

The battle of Thuda is an important historical point of reference from the perspective of the Nagas' struggle for freedom. However, no substantial work has been done on this topic so far. The objective of the study is therefore to bring out the detail account of the event and its impact on Naga Nationalism. It primarily aims towards a clearer understanding of the Naga freedom movement. This research work is based on

oral history relying on interviews and discussions with the actual participants of the event, apart from the secondary sources.

### **The Battle**

Lt. Gen. Zuheto, the commander of the Naga forces as General Officer Commanding – Eastern Command had planned to attack the Thuda outpost with the help of two Burmese Naga soldiers serving in the Indian army in the outpost as inside men, unfortunately the company commander of Thuda suspecting foul play had the men transferred (Aye, 2017). Deciding to proceed nonetheless he chalked out plans and sent Lt. Col. Zukiye and Capt. Zhevishe Aye as recon units. Commandant Vighoto Swu was also sent in on the pretext of applying for the post of a teacher in a primary school near the army post. He further surveyed the layout after a conversation with the post commander and reported his findings to Gen. Zuheto (Swu, 2017). To cover the attack, various units of the Naga army were deployed around the camp to ambush the reinforcements of Indian Army. It was during the monsoon season so all the major rivers like Tizu, Lanyie etc., were in full spate. Before the attack was launched, all the six bridges were destroyed to prevent any reinforcement of the Indian Army (Iralu, 2000).

Taking up positions according to the spy reports the attack on the camp began on the 25<sup>th</sup> of August at 0400 hrs by strength of fifty eight Naga Army personnel. The four pronged attack was supplemented by kerosene missiles on the thatched barracks. With 3 LMGs, 4 Sten Guns, 33 Rifles (Aye, 2019) and an assortment of petrol and kerosene missiles the four-day siege on the outpost was “...one of the heaviest gun fights ever fought in Nagaland” (Swu, 2013). With the water supply cut off as well, the Indian personnel at Thuda were badly out manoeuvred. On 26<sup>th</sup> August, supply of rations and ammunitions were airdropped for the besieged Indian army but most of these fell in the hands

of the Naga Army. Capt. Pikiye Yepthomi who participated in the event remembers locating a parachute with a bullet box which he snagged down with a long stick from the tree where it laid hanging. Inadvertently the air drops resupplied the Naga army who were almost out of ammunition (Yepthomi, 2016). Likewise, Capt. Zhevishe Aye affirmed that they collected a good number of rations and bullets and water which was meant for the Thuda outpost personnel (Aye, 2017).

Captain Toshiho Naga vividly recollects the spontaneous firing at the three Dakota planes that came to drop relief materials for the besieged soldiers. After being hit, two of the planes flew towards Burma and never returned but one flew back and dropped the ration again. This time around, everybody shot at it randomly and it eventually crashed down at *Zatshu* paddy field near Tizu River (Naga, 2017). To check the enemy's advance, captain Zuhoshe along with a section of the Naga army was stationed near the Tizu river bridge, in which vicinity, the Dakota airplane had crash landed. No sooner did it land, the captain and his squad swiftly went ahead and captured all the nine crew members alive (Aye, 2019). Scato Swu reaffirms that the Thuda post was about to surrender but eight jet fighters came to their rescue. Their supply plane, Dakota cargo carrier bearing No. H.J. 233 (G), along with 9 air crew was shot down around 1400 hrs on 26<sup>th</sup> August 1960 successfully by the Naga army (Swu, 2013).

After the shooting down of the Dakota plane, fighter planes were flown in with the hope to finish off the Naga Army. Capt. Zhevishe Aye narrates the incident in his own words;

“...on the 4<sup>th</sup> day, ie the 28<sup>th</sup> of August 1960, jet planes came and surveyed our defence. Reinforcement of the Indian Army had also almost reached there by tying the ropes across the river. From Leshi our food suppliers came fleeing and informed us that the Indian



Army is fast approaching and so we must escape fast. Therefore, we fled to the mountain nearby and waited to see what would happen. Then 2 jet planes came and fired continuously at our defences and went away. Again 2 more came and flew away only after heavy bombarding. Had we been there, we would have all been finished.”

Thus, while the camp could not be captured due to the arrival of reinforcement, it was burnt down and successfully besieged by the Naga Army for four days and when the Naga army moved away on the 28<sup>th</sup> of August the following arms and ammunitions were captured as recorded by major Khehoto Zhimo and captain Atoi Swu; 1000 rounds of 303 rifle bullets, 2 hand grenades, 4 parachutes with full load of ration and ammunitions, 9 tins of kerosene.

The casualty tolls on the Naga Army side, was that one was killed in action and four were injured. Hd. Const. Suhoto of Zhekiye was killed while Major Khughoto of Hoshepu, Corporal Zhekheto of Shoixe, Corporal Izheto of Zungti and Corporal Khehovi of Sutimi were injured. An Indian soldier, Lance Naik Kalu Rai was killed in the battle while another 9 crew members of the Dakota were taken captive. (Morung Express, July 31, 2015)

### **The aftermath**

Following the battle both sides essentially had survivors of the battle either as prisoners of war like the 9 crew members or the village folk around the Thuda outpost. The Naga army released 5 of the 9 Dakota crew in no time but four officers, namely; Flt. Lt. A.S. Singha, Flt. Lt. Raphil, Flt. Officer Choudhary and pilot Nevason were detained for security reasons till May 5, 1962 (Swu, 2019). The captured crew members were kept at Sati camp in the forest towards Pangsa in Somra Tract. In an

interview conducted on 10<sup>th</sup> May 2017, Major Vihoi Aye of the Naga Army narrates;

“I was the camp commander there at Sati camp. Sumis use to fight all around Nagaland but it became over-flooded with Indian Army in order to crush down the movement. So, we went towards safety area to Sati camp in Burma-Naga area. The flight crew suffered as they had to suddenly adapt to a new culture. They ate corn meal with us which was all we had to eat. They were kept in lock up but were allowed to go out under supervision. However, they were taken good care of by the Naga Army. They were neither abused nor treated with vengeance or cruelty but, with dignity.

They insisted the plane crashed only due to mechanical failure, totally ignoring the fact that it was shot down by the Naga fighters. This prolonged their release. At last they admitted that the plane crashed because the engine was hit by the bullets of the Naga fighters and they were released without any harm. Later on, when I joined the Border Security Force, I met the flight commander Singha who had then become the Air Field Commander and, he was very glad to see me” (Tuccu, 2017).

This account is further corroborated by Flt. Lieut. A.S. Singha whose account of his plane being shot down and subsequent treatment reads;

“We were treated very nicely by the Naga Home Guards and Officers were given due respects. Whatever food the Naga Home Guards were eating we were given the same. I would like to mention here that at no time were we treated badly or abused in any other way. We have no complaints of any treatment given to us. ...I have made this statement voluntarily and without duress.”  
(Statement by Indian Air Crew)

The four air crews were released in good condition of health on 5<sup>th</sup> April 1962, after being in captivity for 1 year and 6 months. Their release order was issued by Scato Swu (Swu, 2013), the Kedahge of the Federal Government of Nagaland which reads:

On humanitarian basis the Federal Government of Nagaland are releasing the four Indian Captive Airmen this day the 5<sup>th</sup> May, 1962 in sound condition of general health, who were captured on August 26, 1960. They are handed over to Burmese Government to let present them to the International Red Cross Society, and finally to be handed over to India by the IRCS. We found Flt. Lt. A.S. Singha to be a competent Officer who deserves sympathy and gratitude from the Government of India. His subordinate officers are all efficient as well (42).

It was perhaps with the hope of letting the world know about their struggle that the FGN desired the release of the captives to be done through the custody of the International Red Cross Society (IRCS). It is also noteworthy that the Nagas were never inhuman towards their captives but they were in fact treated with care so long as they were in their custody. It therefore proves beyond doubt that the Nagas were fighting for a genuine cause; their freedom, which was very dear to their hearts and that, the Naga Movement can only be settled politically and can never be crushed down through the use of brutal force.

It is unfortunate that on the other hand, the Indian Government's response to the battle was horrifying. In *A Brief Historical Account*, Z. Katiry, the author states that "The people of Pochury observes Black Day on 6<sup>th</sup> September every year because on this day in 1960, the entire menfolk of Matikhru village was massacred by the Indian Army by beheading them one by one" (25<sup>th</sup> Anniv. of PWOK souvenir 65). Following the battle, the Government of India declared the whole of Pochury

area as a disturbed area and martial law was imposed. Safe behind the shield of the Armed Forces' Special Powers Act (AFSPA) 1958, and the media being blind to the atrocities taking place the punitive action against the Pochury villagers for their alleged consort with the Naga Army during the Battle of Thuda.

At Phor in particular, 6 village elders who went to speak with the Assam rifles officers were mowed down by machine guns by sentries on duty while random passers-by coming to meet their relatives in Phor were also caught and tortured to death (25<sup>th</sup> Anniv. of PWOK souvenir).

On the 6<sup>th</sup> of September 1960, the 16<sup>th</sup> Punjab regiment surrounded the village of Matikhru in three circles around 1000 hrs and called out all the villagers. The army began to manhandle them mercilessly all the while demanding that the villagers reveal where the freedom fighters were hiding and where the guns were kept. The men were tortured for the whole day being kicked and butted with the guns. Rev. Zhiwhuotho Katiry recalls how one of the men who knew a little Hindi pleaded for mercy but had his folded hands smashed with a wooden block while another man, Pongoi, lying on the ground with his ribs broken when brought water by his wife had the container knocked away. As evening fell all the women and children were chased out of the village and only one Risapa was woken by one kind soldier as he lay unconscious and told to flee. Still later, Thah, the village chief and eight other men Muzitso (Rev. Katiry's father), Pongoi, Eyechu, Pogholo, Kezukhwelo, Zasiatuo (a travelling pastor), Thitu and Kekhwezu were all brutally beheaded and their bodies burnt by the army (25<sup>th</sup> Anniv. of PWOK souvenir 69). Miraculously one man, Kekhwezu, ran past the door of the village chief's house where all of them were herded in at gunpoint and despite being shot at by a barrage of gunfire escaped with just a finger blown away. It is a commonly held belief among the Nagas that in such a situation of danger, one man always survives to tell the tale to

those living, and perhaps such was Kekhwezu's fate although he died days later from the trauma after sharing his experience to the others.

Rev. Katiry recalls

“The pitiless Indian army jawans did not even allow the bereaved families to perform the last rites and give a decent burial, Instead, all the dead bodies were dumped inside the house and set on fire. All the houses and granaries were razed to the ground. The women and children who fled to the jungle to evade the dreaded horror came back the next morning to find heaps of ashes only. In the debris of ashes, they found one of the victims Thitu, in semiconscious state as though he was waiting to utter a few last words to his wife. Pastor Zosituo was also lying on the ground with fatal wounds and breathed his last when his mother put him on her lap. Then the women scurried away after burying the dead bodies, fearing that the soldiers might come back and torture them. After a few days the Indian soldiers came back and exhumed the dead bodies and burnt them to ashes” (25<sup>th</sup> Anniv. of PWOK Souvenir 69).

## **Conclusion**

The Battle of Thuda, which is one of the many wars fought between the Naga army and the Indian forces, brought into stark contrast the treatment of war survivors. The Nagas fought the battle with the intention of flushing out the Indian army and personnel stationed in Naga territories. The Nagas fought for their freedom and independence which was their birth right and unequivocally due to the Nagas. Therefore, there was no malice in the treatment of the prisoners from the fallen Dakota, if anything; Flt. Lieut. Singha's statement is an irrefutable proof

of how the Nagas treated even their oppressors. Not long after the battle, in 1961, Gavin Young, a British Journalist and foreign correspondent for *The Observer* of London, visited Nagaland and wrote the pamphlet “*The Nagas: An unknown war. India’s threat to Peace.*” It presented the inside story of the Indo-Naga war for the first time to the outside world since India had censored the press from the Naga territory hitherto.

The battle also reveals how the legitimacy of the freedom movement was slowly being eroded by India’s divisive policy who chose to negotiate with the moderate NPC group which was willing to accept the conditions set by the Indian government. Thus, the treatment of the Matikhru villagers, though not new, was simply reinforcing the threat of retributive action by the Indian army in case the Nagas continued their support of the FGN’s activities. The impartial journalism of Young threw light on the atrocities being committed by the Indian armed forces as well as the actual nature and sufferings of the Naga Army and the Naga public found fair representation. The battle of Thuda will remain in memory as the fight that proved the Nagas believed in their worth and humanity and respected and valued human lives even those of their enemies despite the terrible sufferings and treatment the innocent Nagas faced while the Indian side of the story exposed the duplicity and colonialist outlook of the very same people who had themselves fought centuries to throw off the yoke of foreign rule.

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