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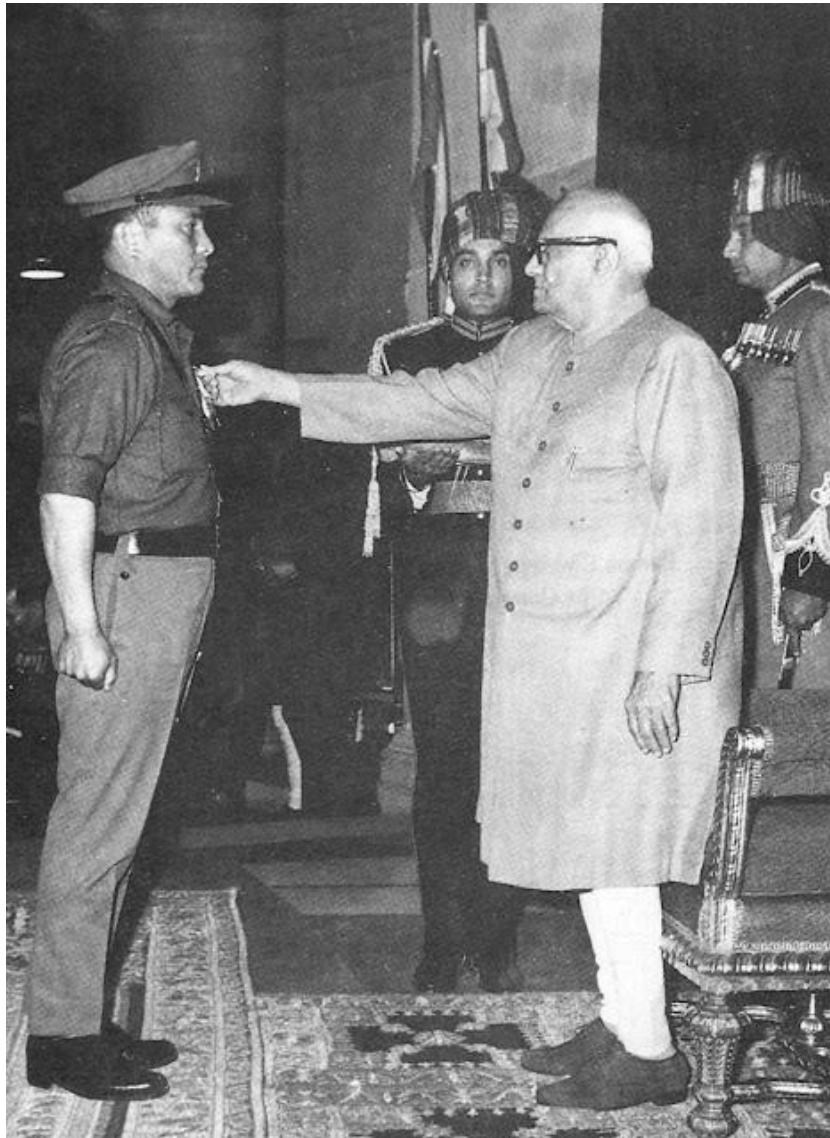
COLONEL (THEN MAJOR) CHEWANG RINCEN**

SERVICE NUMBER	IC-16244K
RANK	Colonel (Then Major)
NAME	Chhewang Rinchen
SON OF	Kunzang Dorje
RESIDENT OF (Village/District/State)/ DOMICILE	Sumur, Nubra Valley, Ladakh
UNIT/REGIMENT/CORPS	Ladakh Scouts
SERVICE	Indian Army
DATE OF ENROLMENT/ COMMISSION	25 July 1948/ June 1960
AWARD/DATE OF ACTION	Maha Vir Chakra** / 08 December 1971
WAR/BATTLE/OPERATION	1971 Indo-Pak War
OTHER AWARDS WITH DATE	Maha Vir Chakra / 01 July 1948 Sena Medal 1965



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Colonel Chhewang Rinchen was born on 11 November 1931. He was the first-born of parents Mr Kunzang Dorje and Mrs Jamyang Dolma. Chewang Rinchen could have spent his entire life in the remote village of Sumur at the confluence of the Shyok and Nubra rivers. But the visit of the Kalon (minister) of Ladakh changed the course of his life. The official spotted the spark in the 13-year boy and after gaining the approval of his parents, decided to take him to Leh to educate him. Chewang Rinchen had a younger brother P Namgyal, who went on to become a popular activist and politician of the region. He was a union minister, three times Member of Parliament and Member of Legislative Council of Leh.



Colonel Chewang Rinchen receiving Maha Vir Chakra from then President of Indian V.V Giri
(Source: Blogspot Claude Apri)



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Four years later, following operation Datta Khel, which saw the revolt by Major Brown in Gilgit, Pakistan under Major Aslam Khan (carrying the pseudo name Colonel Pasha) organised three forces, Ibex, Tiger and Eskimo to head for Skardu and Leh; Gurez and Bandipora; and Kargil and Zoji La. As there was only 6 J&K Infantry deployed between Leh and Bhunji, of which a majority were Muslim soldiers, who joined Pakistan, Major Sher Jung Thapa moved the balance troops to Skardu, while a column of 2 Dogra under Major Prithi Chand walked to Leh from Srinagar on 16 February 1948 through heavy snow and blizzards, with undaunted courage and determination. Arriving at Leh on 8 March 1948, they soon lowered the Union Jack and raised the Indian flag at Karzo Palace on 13 March, with the chanting of hymns by lamas and asked for local volunteers to join them. Colonel Chhewang Rinchen, who was only seventeen years old then, was the first person to volunteer.

In May 1948, tribal raiders from Pakistan captured Kargil, leaving Leh susceptible to further raids, and possible occupation. With the passage of winter came melting snow and open mountain passes, paving the way for tribal raiders from Pakistan to converge on Leh. Their mission was driven by the promise of hidden treasures and wealth stored in Buddhist monasteries and the belief that the peace-loving people of the region weren't capable of fighting back. There was no significant Indian army presence in the region. Among those defending Ladakh then, were 33 men of the J&K State Forces, a Leh-based garrison, along with a team of 20 volunteers led by Lieutenant Colonel Prithi Chand, who had crossed the extremely harsh climes of the wind-swept Zoji La pass in winter with his band of men. In one of the most daring operations of the 1947-1948 War, Captain Prithi Chand and a few of his Lahauli companions saved Leh by reaching the Ladakhi capital before the Pakistani raiders. They had done the impossible, crossing the Zojila pass in winter. The captain soon became the mentor of the young Rinchen, who underwent a short military training under him. Rinchen then recruited twenty-eight of his friends from the Nubra Valley and after undergoing 13 days of training, the Nubra Volunteer Force was created. They played a crucial role in the win of 1947-1948 War.

The first Indo-Pak war fought between the independent countries of India and Pakistan began in 1947. The bone of contention between India and Pakistan were the attempts by Pakistan to annex the erstwhile state of Jammu and Kashmir by any means. On the map of India, the state of Jammu and Kashmir appeared as a somewhat rectangular projection in the extreme North-West corner of the sub-continent. In size it was the largest of the Indian 'Princely States' during the pre-independence era. It was 222,870 sq km or roughly double the area of Denmark, the Netherlands, Belgium and Luxemburg combined. The state was important because of its strategic location. Even before the birth of Pakistan, Jammu and Kashmir was surrounded on almost three sides by foreign states. Today, its importance has been accentuated by recent international developments. To the East lay Tibet; to its North lies Chinese Turkestan or Sinkiang (Xinjiang); to West is Afghanistan;



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to South-West and South was Pakistan; and to the South and South-East lay the states of Punjab and Himachal Pradesh of India.¹ The narrow Wakhan corridor, a narrow strip of territory in Afghanistan, extending to China and separating Tajikistan from Gilgit-Baltistan, was to the North West. Some of the significant battles that took place in Jammu and Kashmir were, the Battle of Badgam, capture and recapture of Jhangar, battle of Naushera, the advance to Tithawal, the relief in Punch and the fight of Chhamb to Tithwal. The Nubra Volunteer Force fighting in the icy treacherous terrain of Leh and Ladakh, played a crucial role in the win of 1947-1948 War.

On 01 June 1948, Colonel Chhewang Richen and his column set out on a nine-day march over treacherous terrain crossing the Karakoram; with pieces of cloth tied to their feet as their shoes had given way, and attacked an enemy position at Chumik La on 10 June, killing 20 enemy soldiers, keeping up the pressure they soon captured Dzongpolas. By 12 July, once the invaders had reached Nimu, literally at Leh's doorstep and it was decided to pull back the troops from Nubra Valley, Chhewang realising that this area would fall, organised the defence of Nubra Valley with local volunteers and soon marched to Skuru. On 25 August 1948, he was formally recruited into 7 J&K Militia as a Jemadar, since a non-Matric could not be made an officer. One of his major successes in September 1948 was the capture of Lama House, located at 4,500 meters, where taking advantage of bad weather and in an approach, march lasting many days devoid of any path or track attacked the post through heavy snow captured the objective after killing 10 enemy soldiers. In December 1948, he was instrumental in clearing "Black Rock" with his "Nonnos" (name affectionately given to the soldiers of Nubra Volunteer Force by the locals of Nubra Valley).

In August 1948, the enemy had engaged all of his reserves to seizing the Nubra Valley. At Kharu Nullah, Colonel (Then Jemadar) Chewang Rinchen kept the enemy at bay for 23 days with just 18 untrained nationals. He was assigned to seize the enemy position at Lama House in September 1948. This was a very challenging task that required a four-day march across dangerous terrain, including crossing a mountain peak that was over 17000 feet high. He was able to take the target with significant enemy casualties and the capture of three firearms. When given the mission to take control of a hill feature close to Biagdangdo. On 15 December, he walked through snow for three days and was able to drive the enemy away. Again, on 22 December 1948, he was assigned to attack the enemy's last position in the Leh tehsil Region. In the span of just six days, he succeeded in completing his mission. Even though a large portion of his unit suffered from frost bite casualties while crossing a 23000-foot mountain feature, he maintained his soldiers moving forward with his excellent and great leadership. He attacked the opponent's station and overran it, heavily damaging the adversary in the process. Under the most challenging circumstances, this

¹ Operations in Jammu and Kashmir S.N. Prasad. Dr. Dharam Pal (2005). Natraj Publishers and Ministry of Defence, Government of India



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JCO showed exceptional bravery, leadership, initiative, and the capacity to plan and execute his designs successfully.

For his display of courage and leadership, Colonel Chewang Rinchen was awarded Maha Vir Chakra pinned by Sheikh Abdullah, then Prime Minister of Jammu and Kashmir in September 1952. Till date he remains the youngest recipient of the Maha Vir Chakra.



Nubra Guards (Source: Claude Arpi)

Colonel Chewang Rinchen married his wife Mrs Chhukit Dolma on 01 June 1950 at the age of eighteen. The couple had five children, four daughters and one son. Dr Phunsog Angmo being the eldest was born in 1956, followed by Dechan Angmo (1957), Tundup Dolma (1961), Sonam Dolkar (1966), Tsering Angmo (1968), finally their son Rinchen Wangchuk in 1969. As a devoted soldier, he wanted his son to join the Indian Army and serve the nation. However, his son Rinchen Wangchuk chose wildlife conservation and excelled in the field. He was co-founder of Snow Leopard Conservatory in the Himalayan belt. Unfortunately, he was diagnosed with a rare and incurable Motor Neuron Disease and passed away in 2011. He is survived by his wife, son and a daughter.

Colonel Chewang Rinchen was promoted to the rank of Subedar in 7 J&K Militia at the age of twenty-five years. In 1959, he was deployed in north of Batalik, when a CRPF patrol was ambushed in Hot Springs. He then force-marched all the way to Leh in just four days. Tasked to set up posts over a vast and difficult terrain along the southern bank of Pangong Tso and carry out



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probing and patrolling, he saluted and said “Julley”. Covering over 400 km and crossing passes such as Chang La in peak winter, in almost uncharted territory, the Nonnos successfully carried out their mission. In these actions, Subedar Chewang Rinchen displayed personal bravery, resourcefulness, leadership, and dedication of duty of a high order. Later in June 1960, he was commissioned as a Second Lieutenant in Indian Army. He was first commissioned officer from the region. He was posted in 14 Jammu and Kashmir Militia which later turned into Ladakh Scouts.

The Ladakh Scouts known as the “Snow Warriors” were initially raised as a paramilitary force formed of the Ladakhi locals known as Nubra Guards to save Ladakh from intruders in 1948. It comprised of Ladakhi locals who are physically fit and attuned with the rugged terrain and hostile climate. In 1952, the Nubra Guards were merged as the 7th Battalion of the Jammu & Kashmir Militia, which later became the Jammu & Kashmir Light Infantry (JAKLI) Regiment. The Ladakh Scouts was raised in 1963, following the Indo China War of 1962. It was formed by spinning off the 7th and 14th battalions of J&K MILITIA. LADAKH SCOUTS had two wings- the Karakoram Wing, defending the eastern front facing China and the Indus Wing facing Pakistan. They fought in the 1965 and 1971 India Pakistan War and were also part of Operation Meghdoot in 1984. They also played a significant role by marking one of the earliest victories during the Kargil War of 1999. The Ladakh Scouts was converted into a regiment in the year 2000 and currently consists of 5 battalions.

In 1962, he was part of a patrol to Sumdo, where they established a post at 4,998 meters and reconnoitered a direct route between Sumdo and Daulat Beg Oldi. On one occasion they walked non-stop for 18 hours through an unknown snow covered stretch, as a result of which they were disoriented and all they had to eat was sattu and the water had to be extracted from ice. Unknown to them they spent the night next to a Chinese post. Such missions aimed to check the Chinese intrusions and then establish small posts opposite them though these had negligible defence potential. There is no doubt that the Nonnos could outrun and outclimb any Chinese conscript. He was awarded a Sena medal for his brave actions during the war.

During the 1965 War with Pakistan, he was deployed in DBO as a Captain, from where he marched to Partapur, covering a distance which normally takes ten days in half the time taking no halts. He was, therefore, called “the Lion of Nubra”. He conducted long-range patrols into Baltistan and though they planned to capture Turtuk and Chulunkha, the plans were not executed due to the China factor. He then raised additional Nubra Guards and crossing Saser Brangsa La at an unbelievable pace on 25 September 1965 they arrived at the Tri-Junction mainly due to his indefatigable spirit and unflagging stamina. His contributions were duly recognised but because of lack of actual combat he was only Mentioned-in-Despatches.



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In the India-Pak War of 1971, Colonel (then Major) Chewang Rinchen was with Nubra Guards, a part of 3 Infantry Division commanded by Major General (later Lieutenant General) S.P. Malhotra.



Major Rinchen receives the Sena Medal from the then Chief of the Army Staff, General J N Chaudhury

(Source: Claude Arpi)

India gained Independence in 1947, and the partition resulted in the creation of Pakistan. The foundation of Pakistan was laid by the Muslim League based on the two-nation theory. Pakistan comprised two wings- East and West Pakistan which were geographically separated by 1600 kms Indian territory. The two wings of Pakistan were culturally and linguistically different and the diversities between the two wings could not be bridged by an emotional appeal to religion. Consequently, fissures started erupting in the political body of Pakistan soon after the Independence and with each passing year it widened. In the absence of appropriate defence arrangements, the people of East Pakistan felt isolated and abandoned. Finally, the malfeasance of Pakistani leadership during Cyclone Bhola and the overwhelming support for the Awami League in the 1970 elections, proved the proverbial last straw on the camel's back. 1 The Awami League led by Sheikh Mujibur Rahman (of East Pakistan) secured an absolute majority in the general elections held in December 1970. This entitled the League to form a Government in Pakistan. However, Pakistan's military rulers denied this democratic right to the Awami League, in connivance with the PPP, led by Zulfikar Ali Bhutto. This arbitrary act of government caused deep resentment among the population of East Pakistan resulting in widespread protests. When the slide became unmanageable, the Pakistani rulers resorted to a midnight crackdown on 25 March 1971. The government ordered a military crackdown and the Pakistan army under Lieutenant General



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Tikka Khan unleashed a reign of terror and massacred thousands of Bengalis in a genocide code-named 'Operation Searchlight'. Pakistan launched its attack against India on 03 December 1971. The Indo-Pak War of 1971 was the first war when the Indian Government engaged all three services on a large scale. India unfolded its plan of attack in East Pakistan following pre-emptive air strikes from Pakistan on 03 December 1971.

During the 1971 war, Colonel (then Major) Chewang Rinchen was commanding the force assigned the task to capture the Chalunka complex of enemy defenses in the Partappur Sector which entailed capturing Point 18402. On the night of 08 December 1971, he along with In an extremely cold night he along with Major Thapa and Major Ahluwalia's troops stormed this formidable feature, They killing five Pakistani soldiers and capturing one. Each of the nine enemy strong points were held by one to two platoons and fortified with mines and wire obstacles. This operation was planned and executed with professional competence and great zeal. Under most adverse weather conditions, when pinned down by accurate and intense fire from MMGs, two brave Nonnos crawled forward and silenced the enemy bunkers by lobbing grenades. Ultimately, they captured 44 prisoners of war and then went on to seize Turtok on 13 and Thang by 16 December 1971. During the action Major Rinchen led his command with great leadership, displaying aggressive spirit, fighting from bunker to bunker, exhorting, and encouraging his men to destroy the enemy thus making the operation a complete success. In this action, Major Chewang Rinchen displayed inspiring leadership, indomitable courage, initiative and exceptional devotion to duty in the highest traditions of the Indian Army and was awarded Maha Vir Chakra, the second time.



Colonel Rinchen addresses the local population

(Source: Claude Arpi)

Colonel Chewang Richen, the youngest ever recipient of the Mahavir Chakra for his role in the 1948 conflict with Pakistan, he remains one of only six service personnel to have been awarded



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the Mahavir Chakra twice for displaying inspiring leadership, indomitable courage, initiative and exceptional devotion to duty. He retired as a Colonel in 1984. He was appointed Honorary Colonel of the Ladakh Scouts. He breathed his last in 1997 at the age of 66 years.

Incidentally, on 21 October 2019, Defence Minister Rajnath Singh inaugurated the Colonel Chewang Rinchen Setu, India's highest altitude all-weather permanent bridge, in Eastern Ladakh. The 1400-ft long bridge on Shyok River at 14,650 ft is strategically located on the Darbuk-Shyok-DBO Road. It is indeed a befitting tribute to a soldier who had crisscrossed this area under challenging conditions. Staying true to his name Colonel Chewang Rinchen lived a life of 'hero'.



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CITATION

Jemadar Chewang Rinchen, 7 JAUMMU AND KASHMIR MILITIA
(Effective date of Award: 28 December 1948)

In August 1948, the enemy had thrown all his reserves to capture the Nubra Valley. Jen Chewang Rinchen with only 18 untrained nationals held the enemy at Kharu Nullah for 23 Days.

In September 1948, he was detailed to capture the enemy position at Lama House. This was an extremely difficult task and entailed 4 days march through a treacherous country including crossing a mountain feature over 17000 ft. he succeeded in capturing the objective, with heavy casualties to the enemy and the capture of 3 rifles.

On 15 December when ordered to capture a hill feature near Biagdangdo, he walked through snow for 3 days and succeeded in forcing the enemy to withdraw.

Again, on 22 December 1948, he was detailed to attack the enemy's last position in Leh tehsil Area. It took him six days to reach his objective. He had to go over a mountain feature 23000 ft. and though his platoon suffered 50 per cent casualties from frost bite, he kept his men going through his outstanding and exemplary leadership. He attacked the enemy's post and captured them; the enemy suffering heavy casualties.

This JCO displayed exemplary courage leadership, initiative and the ability to plan and carry out his schemes successfully under the most averse conditions



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CITATION

Major Chhewang Rinchen (IC-16244K) The Ladakh Scouts
(Effective date of Award: 8th December, 1971)

Major Chewang Rinchen of Ladakh Scouts was commander of the force assigned the task of capturing the Chalunka complex of enemy defences in the Partappur Sector. Each of these nine enemy strong points was held by one to two platoons and fortified with mines and wire obstacles. This operation was planned and executed with professional competence and great zeal. Under most adverse weather conditions, Major Rinchen led his command, displaying aggressive spirit and cool courage, fighting from bunker to bunker, exhorting and encouraging his men to destroy the enemy, making the operation a complete success.

In this action, Major Chewang Rinchen displayed inspiring leadership, indomitable courage, initiative and exceptional devotion to duty in the highest traditions of the Indian Army.

Reference: Gazette Notification: 22 Pres/72,12-2-72



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