

FORGOTTEN SOULS

This is the story of their silent sacrifice even as their mortal remains at the Ramgarh Chinese Cemetery continue to languish. They were Chinese soldiers fighting the Japanese alongside the British at the Burma border in 1941-42

SOMEN SENGUPTA

More than 70 years ago, thousands of miles away from their homes and far from the warm affection of their loved ones, they faced death in unknown territory. A death that was silent and painful. It was kept secret for diplomatic purposes. They came back from the jaws of death to a place promising to make them better fit for a bigger battle. Many of them did return to the front and were glorious in victory over the Japanese. But lack of food, medicines and drinking water made most of the soldiers perish. Those who managed to retreat to a dry, dusty and small cantonment town of India named Ramgarh, then in Bihar and now in Jharkhand, arrived hungry, scuffy and mentally drained.

They were not sons of the soil, yet it is Indian soil which holds the story of their silent sacrifice. Their mortal remains continue to languish.

Who were they? They were all Chinese soldiers fighting the Japanese along side with the British at Burma border in 1941-42. Human civilisation was passing through its darkest hours while World War II raged. With the Japanese bombing at Pearl Harbor on 7 December 1941, USA was egged into war. Japan, already at war with China since 1937, was turning into an unstoppable power of Asia, matching the military skill of the Germans in Europe. Both Shanghai and Nanking were bombed by the Japanese army, and China was trying to retaliate with the help of USA. Japan conquered Singapore from the British and also captured Rangoon along with a large part Burma.

In April 1942 Japan was in full control of Rangoon and blocked Burma Road. Chinese soldiers fighting there under British army general Stilwell was forced to retreat. Both armies were defending the front under Sino-British Common Defense Agreement signed between the British government and the Republic of China.

With debacle staring them in the face, many of them tried to retreat to China but a large group continued fighting for three months; they ended up in utter misery without any support. Badly humiliated, this large group of soldiers was called back to India with a plan to be trained by American soldiers.

And this is where the story of US Army Chinese Training & Combat Command of Ramgarh begins. A secret deal was sealed between Chiang Kai Shek and the America to recall these Chinese soldiers from the front and train them under American army at a covert place in India. Consent of New Delhi was easily obtained and Ramgarh cantonment area was selected.

It became the first military training centre by US army anywhere outside mainland America during the World War II years.

In 1940, Ramgarh was a difficult place to find on the map of India though it was not that nondescript a place. Situated very near to Ranchi and well connected with Calcutta by road and rail, it first came in the news when Indian National Congress organised its annual session here under the presidency of Maulana Abul Kamal Azad in 1940.

At almost the same time, Subhash Chandra Bose, erstwhile president of Congress who was then expelled from the party, organised the 'Anti Compromise Conference' in Ramgarh with some other political organisations. When the huge mobilisation of a foreign army commenced there, the history of the place was reshaped overnight.

When Chinese soldiers were coming to Ramgarh via Assam and Bengal, a group of high skilled American army trainers were boarding a ship from South California without them even having an inkling on where they were being dispatched. It was 19 March 1942 and WorldWarII was peaking. They were headed for a dusty place of Bihar in India to spend time with a group of soldiers who had hardly been exposed to any modern warfare of that time.

The first batch of Chinese soldiers arrived in Ramgarh on 17 July 1942 and till September of that year, nearly 9000 of them were slowly assembled. From them, 5000 were from the 38th Division and 2500 from 22nd Division. Subsequently, a fresh lot of soldiers joined them from other parts of China.

Reaching this dusty town after confronting Japan's brutal army in a deadly battle ground had made the Chinese demotivated and physically exhausted. They found Ramgarh almost a haven with access to adequate rations, medical support, earnings and nights of proper sleep.

If Ramgarh was a haven to the war exhausted Chinese, the same place was a nightmare for Americans who arrived from California after a long journey. They found the place dusty, hot, and itchy, almost like a jungle. There was hardly any entertainment though American movies and magazines were plenty in supply. Yet they were committed in their assignment and started training the soldiers with great dedication.

The training was divided into two areas — infantry and artillery. The initial work included housing, rehabilitation, clothing and medical treatment. The British Infantry supplied artillery and tank training equipments while the Americans taught radio signalling, machine operations and rifle handling.

In the next couple of years Ramgarh would see a revolutionary change in the confidence and body language of the war torn Chinese soldiers. They gradually became a force of strong and efficient soldiers.

In the summer of 1944, General Joseph W. Stilwell led his expertly trained Chinese forces into combat against the Japanese in North Burma. In the hard-fought Hukawng and Mogaung valley campaigns and the attack at Myitkyina, the Ramgarh-trained Chinese divisions formed the bulk of the forces and defeated the enemy to ensure a glorious victory over Japanese. The hard work of Ramgarh had paid off.

However, it was not a story with a happy ending. Already exhausted by the long journey from Burma front to Ramgarh, many of the Chinese soldiers were slowly collapsing. Those suffering from extreme malnutrition succumbed to death, and more casualties were reported due to malaria, snake bite, cholera and dysentery. Many were not fit to survive the hot and humid Indian climate. Thus, Ramgarh became the final resting place for many Chinese soldiers.

The large number of deaths in the camp forced the necessity of a military cemetery near the cantonment where the dead could find peace with honour. In mid-1944, a Chinese named Cen Cheng Tung Kuo founded the cemetery for these soldiers in Ramgarh. In 1945, with the end of World War II, when the cemetery became public knowledge, it was found with 667 graves, and surprisingly most of the grave stones were marked "Unknown warrior".

The puzzling part is how could so many graves be in this cemetery? There had been no war in Ramgagh.

Such a number could not have died due to snake bite or malaria whereas there was hardly any reported death of British and American military officers in that camp in the same period. One can conjecture that this large number of "unknown warriors" may be those who perished in the deep jungles of Burma and Manipur while fighting the Japanese. Maybe a thumb was taken from their mortal remains and buried here in a simulated grave. Japan followed this ritual with their dead soldiers in the battle of Kohima and Imphal. However, this is only an assumption to account for the large number of graves. This enigma about Ramgarh cemetery is there even today. It is now locally known as "China Kabarthan"; hardly any local people visit it.

A massive gate with a marble plaque in Chinese script adorns the entrance where a tablet was installed later. It describes the importance of this place in a perplexingly long sentence. It reads “The cemetery is the permanent home of the heroes of the armed forces of Republic of China who sacrificed their lives and died with honour in combined operation with the British and American forces to build the China-India highway and successfully preventing the Japanese forces from occupying India and not allowing them to join the German forces in Middle East”.

From the main entrance a straight tree-lined road enters the cemetery and ends at a tall memorial in white marble with Chinese inscription on it. It is dedicated to various people and regiments. On the back, a tablet in English explains the meaning of Chinese inscriptions on it. The north side of the war memorial contains homage to all "departed martyrs and departed souls" and President Chiang Kai Shek; whereas on the east side, the name of Can Cheng Tung Kuo who built this war cemetery in 1944 is mentioned.

The south side of the monument contains the name of General Lo Cho Ying, while the west side gives details of the heroic contribution of the soldiers. The line in Chinese means "Fought alongside with the Allied forces of India-Burma for justice and freedom. Dead but will ever remain in our fondest memory."

Behind the war memorial stands a

two-storied red roofed Buddhist temple built in typical Chinese style with a statue of the Buddha inside the prayer hall. The first floor has a hanging balcony from where the entire cemetery with the graves and war memorial is visible.

Recently a high profile diplomatic delegation from China visited the cemetery and requested the Indian government to convert it into a tourist spot. They showed great interest in its maintenance. But this led to controversy as the Taiwanese government made it clear that these soldiers belonged to Chiang Kai Shek's nationalist army.

Taiwan iterated that their government had provided the financial support for this cemetery and so China could not have any say in the matter. With this new twist of tension, memories of the Chinese soldiers who perished more than 70 years ago have come into the limelight.

However the dusty road of Ramgarh, the theatre of this drama, looks as indifferent as ever.



Photographs: Somen Sengupta

