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Rifleman Jaswant Singh Rawat: A Study of the Battle of Nuranang and Military Memory

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Abstract

This article studies the historical significance of Rifleman Jaswant Singh Rawat, Maha Vir Chakra (posthumous), of the 4th Battalion, the Garhwal Rifles, who fought at Nuranang in the North-East Frontier Agency (now Arunachal Pradesh) on 17 November 1962 during the Sino-Indian War. It asks how a single soldier of the lowest infantry rank came to stand for a campaign that India lost, and how a documented act of gallantry has been joined, over six decades, to a larger body of local tradition. The article places the subject in its setting: the military culture of Garhwal and its regiment, the strategic and political background of the 1962 conflict, the engagement at Nuranang and the awards that followed it, and the later memorialisation at Jaswantgarh and in the popular figure of 'Baba Jaswant'. It examines the Monpa people of the Tawang region, the role of the Army in shaping memory, and the distance between the recorded battle and the legend. The study argues that the soldier's historical importance rests on verified service and an official honour, that the later legend has its own value as evidence of how a nation remembers defeat, and that the two should be read side by side and not confused.

Keywords: Battle of Nuranang, Garhwal Rifles, Jaswant Singh Rawat, Jaswantgarh, Maha Vir Chakra, Military Memory, North-East Frontier Agency, Sino-Indian War 1962, Tawang

Introduction

War memory is made from records and from stories, and the two do not always agree. Rifleman Jaswant Singh Rawat (19 August 1941 – 17 November 1962) was a twenty-one-year-old soldier of the 4th Garhwal Rifles, service number 4039009, who served for about a year. He was killed in the fighting at Nuranang, near Tawang, and was awarded the Maha Vir Chakra, India's second-highest gallantry award, after his death. The 4th Garhwal Rifles was later given the battle honour 'Nuranang', which is reported to be the only battle honour awarded to any Army unit for the war of 1962.

The war itself is remembered in India mainly as a failure of preparation and political judgement. Against that background the story of one soldier at one post has carried unusual weight. It has been told in army publications, local memorials, newspapers, a feature film and an annual commemoration, and it has gathered details that cannot be traced to any contemporary record. The subject therefore lends itself to historical study: it allows the researcher to separate what the sources establish from what tradition has added, and to ask why the additions were made. This article presents such a study. It uses the form 'Rifleman Jaswant Singh Rawat', as in the official citation and Army usage; the name appears in some popular writing as 'Jaswant Singh' or 'Jaswant Singh Rawat' with varied spellings of his village.

Objectives and Method

The study has four objectives: to explain the military and historical background of the Sino-Indian War and of the Garhwal Rifles; to describe the engagement at Nuranang and the part played by Rifleman Jaswant Singh Rawat and his comrades; to assess how the event has been honoured and remembered through awards, memorials and popular culture; and to examine how writers have interpreted the subject and where accounts differ. The method is descriptive and historical. It is based on official histories, published memoirs of the war, press reports of Army commemorations, regimental and honour-roll profiles, and secondary scholarship such as the work of Maxwell, Guha and Nora. The study claims no fieldwork and has not consulted the original unit war diary or the gallantry citation file, which are held in official archives. Press and online accounts vary in detail and are treated with caution; where they disagree, the article says so. A field study of Pauri Garhwal and Tawang is suggested for later research.

The Garhwal Setting

Jaswant Singh Rawat came from the village of Baryun (spelt Barsyun in some accounts) in the Dhumakot area of Pauri Garhwal, in what is now Uttarakhand. The Garhwal hills have a long tradition of army service. Many households depend on remittances from soldiers, the land is poor and fragmented, and enlistment has long been a recognised route to a livelihood and to respect. The Garhwal Rifles, raised in the late nineteenth century with its regimental centre at Lansdowne, built a name in the First World War: Naik Darwan Singh Negi (1914) and Rifleman Gabar Singh Negi (1915) both won the Victoria Cross, and the regiment came to be a source of local pride.

This background matters for two reasons. It explains why a young Garhwali might join the infantry at about twenty, and it explains why his death was remembered first of all in his own region, among families who knew the regiment and its dead. The regiment, in turn, preserved the memory of its action. A unit tradition, supported by a battle honour, is one of the main ways in which the Indian Army keeps its history alive, and the case of Nuranang shows that process clearly.

Historical Background

The background has three parts. The first is the frontier and the war. The boundary between India and China in the eastern sector, the McMahon Line, was disputed after 1950, and in the late 1950s and early 1960s relations worsened over Tibet, border posts and patrols. India's 'forward policy' placed small posts in disputed areas, often with thin supply and little support. Neville Maxwell (1970), Lieutenant General B. M. Kaul (1967) and Brigadier J. P. Dalvi (1969), who commanded a brigade at Tawang, give accounts that differ in emphasis but agree that the Army was poorly equipped, poorly acclimatised and badly placed. The official history of the conflict (Sinha and Athale, 1992) records the course of the fighting, and the Henderson Brooks–Bhagat inquiry into the defeat has never been officially released in full.

The second part is the course of the war in the east. China attacked on 20 October 1962 in both the eastern and western sectors. The Chinese took Tawang on 24 October, and after a pause renewed their advance in mid-November. The Indian defence was then organised on the Se La–Bomdila axis, with the 4th Garhwal Rifles placed under 62 Infantry Brigade alongside other battalions. On 21 November China declared a unilateral ceasefire and later withdrew behind the line it had held before the war. The battle at Nuranang, fought on 17 November, belongs to this second phase and preceded the fall of the Se La position.

The third part is the Indian system of recognising gallantry. The Maha Vir Chakra ranks below the Param Vir Chakra and above the Vir Chakra, and it may be given after death. Awards of this kind are made on a citation prepared through the chain of command, so they provide the firmest evidence of what the Army itself accepted as having happened. Later popular writing often adds to the citation. A careful study begins with the award and then asks which further claims can be supported.

Origins and Early Life

Rifleman Jaswant Singh Rawat was born on 19 August 1941 in Pauri Garhwal. The surviving record of his early life is brief and comes mostly from commemorative profiles and not from archival documents. He enlisted in the Garhwal Rifles in 1961 and was posted to the 4th Battalion. He therefore had about a year of service when the war began and held the lowest rank in the infantry. Both facts matter, because they set aside any claim that he was a senior or long-serving soldier, and they show that the later fame rests on one day's conduct and not on a career.

The Battle of Nuranang, 17 November 1962

The 4th Garhwal Rifles held a position in the Nuranang area, on the approach to Se La from Tawang, in difficult terrain with cold weather, little cover and long supply lines. On 17 November the battalion was attacked repeatedly. Accounts agree that a Chinese medium machine gun (MMG) had been brought close to the Indian defences and was causing heavy losses, and that Rawat, Lance Naik Trilok Singh Negi and Rifleman Gopal Singh Gusain volunteered to silence it. Negi gave covering fire while Rawat and Gusain crawled forward under fire to grenade-throwing distance. The three-man party is described as having destroyed the gun and as having brought the weapon back, though accounts of the final stage vary. Negi and Gusain were awarded the Vir Chakra and Rawat the Maha Vir Chakra; the citation naming Rawat is the main official source for his part in the action.

After the machine-gun action the narrative divides. The version most often repeated in popular and Army-supported writing holds that, when the battalion was ordered to withdraw, Rawat stayed at his post, moved between several firing positions to give the impression of a larger force, and delayed the Chinese advance for as long as seventy-two hours. Another account, which the writer of one popular summary says cannot be checked, holds that he was captured and killed. Casualty figures given for the Chinese side, sometimes put at about three hundred, appear in popular accounts but are not confirmed in the official history, and the study does not rely on them. What the sources support is that the action took place, that it was of unusual gallantry, that Rawat died at Nuranang, and that the battalion's conduct was judged to merit a battle honour.

Gallantry Awards and Recognition

The recognition given to the Nuranang action followed Army practice. Rifleman Jaswant Singh Rawat received the Maha Vir Chakra posthumously, Lance Naik Trilok Singh Negi and Rifleman Gopal Singh Gusain each received the Vir Chakra, and the battalion received the battle honour 'Nuranang'. The awards show that the Army separated the machine-gun action, which was recorded and rewarded, from the later legend, which was not part of the citation. The pattern is useful to the historian: it gives a fixed point of evidence against which later additions can be measured.

The Role of the Monpa Community

Any account of Nuranang must deal with the Monpa people of the Tawang region. Local tradition says that two Monpa girls, Sela and Nura, helped Rawat by carrying supplies and by passing information, and that he was able to hold his position with their help. In the story Sela was killed and Nura was captured, and the Nuranang waterfall and the Se La pass are connected in local memory with their names. Press accounts repeat this tradition, but they present it as local belief, and a popular summary states plainly that it is not known which account is accurate.

The tradition is important as a record of how the community remembers the war, even if the details cannot be confirmed. It places the Monpa as participants and not as bystanders in a conflict fought on their land, and it ties the memory of a Garhwali soldier to the geography and the people of Arunachal Pradesh. The Army has also worked to build this tie, as with the 2024 Nuranang Day ceremony at Jaswantgarh, which was attended by civil officials, students, ex-servicemen and the soldier's family. Whether the Monpa tradition reflects events or later reflection on them is a question that requires oral-history fieldwork with the local community.

Memorialisation and the Legend

The most visible result of the battle is the Jaswant Garh War Memorial near Nuranang, on the road between Se La and Tawang. The memorial includes a shrine and a museum, and Army personnel and visitors are reported to stop there to pay respects. Each year on 17 November the Gajraj Corps observes Nuranang Day with a wreath-laying at the memorial, in the presence of the Rawat family and local officials.

Beside this documented memorial stands a popular tradition, usually summed up in the name 'Baba Jaswant'. In this tradition the soldier is regarded as still on duty: his bed is made, his uniform is cared for, and he is said to have been promoted beyond his rank, to which the claim that he is the only Indian soldier to rise in rank after death is attached. Such statements circulate widely in newspapers and websites and are not supported by a published official order that this study has seen, so they are treated here as tradition and not as established fact. The tradition draws on a wider South Asian practice of venerating those who die in battle or in service, and it should be read in the same way as shrines to other soldiers and local heroes.

Popular culture has extended the story further. A Hindi film, *72 Hours: Martyr Who Never Died* (2019, directed by Avinash Dhyani), is based on the Rawat narrative, and its title adopts the seventy-two-hour version of the defence. As with all such works, the film shapes public memory more than any official record does.

Spread and Influence

The memory of Nuranang has spread in three directions. First, it moved from the regiment to the region: Uttarakhand honours Rawat as a son of Garhwal, and the Arunachal border district honours him as a protector of Tawang. Second, it moved into institutions, since the Army uses the story in training, commemoration and public relations, and the memorial has become a stopping place for military and civilian visitors on the Tawang road. Third, it moved into national culture through the press, the cinema and the internet, where the legend is retold with increasing detail. Each stage added to the story and made it more difficult to separate from the record. The effect on the ground is a landscape in which a battle site has become both a tourist attraction and a place of worship, a pattern that merits a regional

study.

Key Milestones

Table 1: Major events in the history of Rifleman Jaswant Singh Rawat and the memory of Nuranang

Year	Event
1887	Garhwal regiment raised; Lansdowne becomes its regimental home
1914 / 1915	Victoria Cross won by Darwan Singh Negi and Gabar Singh Negi
1941	Jaswant Singh Rawat born in Pauri Garhwal (19 August)
1961	Enlists in the Garhwal Rifles; posted to the 4th Battalion
1962 (20 Oct)	China opens offensive in the eastern and western sectors
1962 (24 Oct)	Tawang taken by Chinese forces
1962 (17 Nov)	Battle of Nuranang; Rawat killed in action
1962 (21 Nov)	China declares unilateral ceasefire
1962 onward	Maha Vir Chakra to Rawat; Vir Chakra to Negi and Gusain; battle honour 'Nuranang'
Later decades	Jaswant Garh War Memorial established near Nuranang
2019	Film *72 Hours: Martyr Who Never Died* released
2024	Army observes Nuranang Day at Jaswantgarh with the family present

Scholarly Perspectives and Debates

The subject has been read in several ways. A first reading, common in military and regimental writing, treats Nuranang as a clear case of individual courage that saved a position at a time of general collapse. This reading rests on the citation and on the battle honour and stresses duty and sacrifice. A second reading, drawn from the study of memory, holds that nations tend to raise up exemplary figures after defeats. Nora (1989) distinguishes history, which reconstructs the past, from memory, which keeps it alive in the present through places and rituals; Jaswantgarh is a 'site of memory' in that sense. Hobsbawm and Ranger (1983) show that traditions which seem old are often recent and shaped to a purpose, and the 'Baba Jaswant' practices fit this description.

A third reading concerns the war. Guha (2007) and Maxwell (1970) treat 1962 as a defeat that damaged Indian confidence for a generation, and the emphasis given to small acts of heroism can be seen as a way of recovering honour from that defeat. A further debate concerns the evidence. The seventy-two-hour defence, the claim of heavy Chinese losses, the part of the two Monpa girls and the account of his death differ from source to source, and some have the appearance of later growth. These debates matter because they affect how the soldier is remembered: an account that accepts every detail risks losing credibility, while an account that rejects the legend risks taking away from a sacrifice that was real.

Legacy and Contemporary Relevance

The legacy of the event is threefold. For the Army it is a model of initiative and endurance, taught to new soldiers and recalled each November at Nuranang. For Uttarakhand it is a source of regional pride, and it joins Rawat to older Garhwali figures such as the two Victoria Cross holders of the First World War. For the border, it is a reminder of the Tawang sector's importance and of the long relationship

between the Army and the local population. As India's frontier with China remains disputed, the story is repeated in public discussion and continues to carry present meaning. The history also shows that a modern state may keep alive a soldier's memory as an instrument of national feeling and of military morale, and that a historian must therefore read the sources with care.

Military Memory in Comparative Perspective

The case may be compared with other figures who became symbols after a battle. India has other recipients of the highest awards whose acts are better documented in official records, among them those honoured in the wars of 1947, 1965 and 1971, and in each case the award citation anchors the memory. What is unusual in the Rawat case is the extent to which tradition has been added to the record, especially the idea of the continuing service of the dead soldier. Elsewhere, the Unknown Soldier and the saint-soldier have served similar purposes, giving a defeated or grieving community a figure who did not yield. The comparison also shows what Nuranang shares with other cases: a small group acting at a critical moment, a local population drawn into the story, and a later effort by the state and the military to give the event a lasting form.

Strengths and Limitations

The strength of the available evidence is that the core facts are agreed: the date, the unit, the machine-gun action, the three named soldiers, the awards and the battle honour. The commemorative record is also strong, with a physical memorial, an annual ceremony and consistent official recognition. Its limitations should also be recognised. The detailed unit diary and the citation text are not examined here, popular sources repeat one another, numbers of enemy casualties are unverified, and the local Monpa tradition has not been recorded by systematic fieldwork. The present study is limited by its reliance on published and press sources and by the absence of archival and field research. These limits do not reduce the importance of the subject, but they show where further work is needed.

Findings of the Study

The study leads to the following main findings:

- Rifleman Jaswant Singh Rawat, a young soldier of the 4th Garhwal Rifles with about a year of service, was killed at Nuranang on 17 November 1962 and received the Maha Vir Chakra posthumously; these facts are firmly established.
- With Lance Naik Trilok Singh Negi and Rifleman Gopal Singh Gusain he took part in an action to silence a Chinese machine gun, and the two comrades were awarded the Vir Chakra.
- The battalion's conduct earned the battle honour 'Nuranang', reported to be the only one awarded to a unit for the 1962 war.
- The seventy-two-hour defence, the Monpa girls Sela and Nura, and the 'Baba Jaswant' practices rest on tradition and press accounts, and they vary between sources; they are better read as memory than as proven record.
- The memorial at Jaswantgarh and the annual Nuranang Day show how the Army and the region have turned a battle into a lasting site of remembrance.
- Scholars differ on how far such legends help or distort history, and a balanced account includes both the verified record and the tradition.

Significance for Contemporary India

The study suggests that military heroes should be remembered by means that keep the record intact. For policy and for the Army, it points to the value of publishing citations and war diaries, of recording oral testimony from border communities before it is lost, and of separating official fact from folk belief in public information. For research, it points to archival work on the 4th Garhwal Rifles, to oral-history work among the Monpa, and to comparative studies of how defeat is remembered in India.

Conclusion

The history of Rifleman Jaswant Singh Rawat runs from a Garhwali village and a regiment with a long record, through a war lost on the Himalayan frontier, to a memorial on the road to Tawang and a legend that has outgrown its documents. The record shows a young soldier who volunteered for a dangerous task, fought at Nuranang and died there, and whose honour was recognised by his country. The legend shows how a people turn a defeat into a story in which something was not lost. The central lesson is that both belong to the history, but they should be kept apart: the record gives the man, and the tradition gives the meaning that later generations have placed on him. Future work, including archival study of the battalion's records and field research among the Monpa of Tawang, could show how this memory was made and what it has meant locally.

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