

Western Front: Turtok Sector⁹²

The “extremely broken and rugged terrain in the Turtok area is among the most difficult in the world,” notes an Indian military historian.⁹³ With arid, rocky slopes climbing steeply up to heights of 18,000 to 23,000 feet, it is almost completely devoid of vegetation. Even the Shyok River valley rests at approximately 9,000 feet. Subzero winter temperatures and a near total absence of motorable tracks exacerbated the effects of the altitude, making military operations extraordinarily challenging.

Pakistan defended this desolate northern end of the Kashmir CFL (loosely from Kel to Turtok) with six battalions (called “wings”) of paramilitary troops belonging to the Frontier Corps. These units reported to the Director General of the Frontier Corps in Gilgit, who in turn reported directly to Army headquarters. The Turtok sector itself was held by two or three companies of Karakoram and Gilgit Scouts recruited from mountain peoples on the Pakistan side of the CFL.

The Indian troops in the area consisted of three companies of semi-regular Ladakh Scouts and 500 hastily raised local militia called Nubra Guards. In both cases, the Indian troops were hardy men, predominantly Buddhist, who had been born in the region and were at least somewhat inured to its extreme conditions. They operated under the command of 3 Infantry Division with its headquarters at Leh; the division was also responsible for the boundary with China to the east.

