

Longewala battle hero files defamation suit

Controversy over the authenticity of the famous battle of Longewala in India's western sector in 1971 refuses to die down. The war hero credited with the splendid victory at that time has gone to court saying people were trying to tarnish his image.

Brig (ret'd) Kuldip Singh Chandpuri, who has filed a defamation suit of Re.1 against Air Marshal (ret'd) M.S. Bawa and Maj Gen (ret'd) Atma Singh, says 'the two of them were not there' while he was fighting the war.

'My only ground for filing the suit is that I was there fighting the war and the two of them were not there. I do not want their money - that is why I have demanded Re.1 as compensation. I just want justice,' Chandpuri told IANS on phone from Chandigarh where he lives.

A Chandigarh local court issued a notice to the defendants on July 19.

'Bawa made scandalous and malicious statements, tarnishing the image of not only the plaintiff but also the entire Alpha Company,' Chandpuri said in the petition.

The Longewala battle was fought in the western sector - in Rajasthan - during the India-Pakistan war in 1971.

Chandpuri, at that time a major who was leading just 100 men, had frustrated a formidable attack by a Pakistani brigade (some 2,800 troops) backed by an armoured regiment of 45 tanks. Chandpuri was given the Maha Vir Chakra. His company 23 Punjab won six gallantry awards.

However, a controversy was sparked off in February this year after Maj Gen Atma Singh, who won the Vir Chakra at Longewala, alleged that no ground battle was fought and the army had merely rehearsed it on a sand model after the ceasefire to cover up the incompetence of senior military commanders.

He also claimed that it was the Indian Air Force (IAF) that actually crushed the enemy forces.

Air Marshal Bawa, who was commanding the Jaisalmer base from where IAF Hunter fighter aircraft operated in the battle, also contested the army's claim and reportedly said: 'The services were the only organisation with some credibility. The army has turned that apart by faking the entire operation.'

According to army records, Chandpuri and his men - equipped with recoilless guns, medium machine guns, 81 mm mortars and small arms - had engaged enemy armour at the post of Longewala in Rajasthan on the intervening night of Dec 4 and 5, 1971.

The battle is part of the curriculum taught to senior officers in the higher command course at the Army War College and has been immortalised by the Bollywood super-hit 'Border'.

Taking note of this, Chandpuri said in his petition: 'For over two decades, from 1971 to 1997 (when the film 'Border' was released), no controversy was ever raised on the battle by anyone...Perhaps the limelight given to me created heartburn with the defendant (Air Marshal Bawa).

'In order to give vent to this heartburn, he in the year 1997 made malicious and scandalous statements against me and the Alpha Company, doubting the factual status regarding the battle.'

According to the petition, Bawa and Singh repeated their 'malicious and scandalous remarks' against Chandpuri and Alpha Company regarding the battle in February following the commemoration given to Chandpuri by Defence Minister A.K. Antony.

Ritu Sharma (© IANS / India eNews)