

New Documents on the Sino-Soviet Ussuri Border Clashes of 1969

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Soviet and Chinese documents regarding the military clashes of 1969 were long kept secret. With the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Russian side began to declassify and leak materials. In the 1990s, some high-level Chinese materials also began to become available.¹ But much is still unknown. As a result of this regime of secrecy there are many myths about the events of March 1969. These myths wander from one article to another and create an inaccurate picture of what had happened on the Sino-Soviet border. Until further declassifications take place, the only more or less reliable sources of additional information about those bloody events are the memoirs of the participants in the battle (mainly of the Soviet veterans because Chinese participants of the events prefer to keep silent about the clash) and documents held in private hands, often by the participants themselves. Among the major issues that still require careful consideration and more documentation are the role of the Chinese military, the process and results of the Soviet State commission of 1969 (headed by Generals N.S.Zakharov and V.A.Matrosov) that studied the events of 2 March 1969, and exact information about the dead and wounded, both on the Soviet and Chinese sides. It is this last question that is examined in this research note, making use of the appended documents and others gathered by the author.

The Soviet losses during the Damanskii/Zhenbao conflict are fully accounted for.² In total, between 2 and 22 March 1969 the Soviet side lost 58 killed. Forty-nine of them were border guards and 9 – servicemen of the Soviet Army (SA). If broken down by days : 32 border guards perished in the battle 2 March (31 on the battlefield and 1 in Chinese captivity), 24 border guards and soldiers of the SA perished 15 March, 1 soldier of the SA was killed 17 March and one more soldier of the SA perished 22 March. During the conflict 94 Soviet servicemen were wounded (among them 61 from the border troops and 33 from the SA). All these figures are reflected in official Soviet documents, backed up by Soviet-era documents in Russian archives, both central and local. The documents contain names, ranks, positions, home addresses and other data that are beyond any doubt and may be easily checked by anyone.

As to Chinese losses, information about them is very discrepant. Chinese officials hide the true figures, while the data of Western and Russian researchers can't be considered reliable.

¹ Christian Ostermann, "East German Documents on the Sino-Soviet Border Conflict, 1969" *Cold War International History Project Bulletin*, 6-7 (1995/96), 186-193; Yang Kuisong, "The Sino-Soviet Border Clash of 1969: From Zhenbao Island to Sino-American Rapprochement" *Cold War History*, 1,1 (2000), 21-52.

² D.S.Ryabushkin, *Mify Damanskogo* (Myths of Damanskii), AST-Moscow, 2004. 78-81, 152, 327-333, 345-351. From here on, I will use the name "Damanskii," without "Zhenbao" to save space and because the Russian documents introduced here all use this place name.

Unfortunately, one unlikely figure without a source was given in the recent memoirs of V. D. Bubenin, a decorated hero of the battle of 2 March, where he claimed 248 Chinese dead³. Others extrapolated from there to even higher numbers.⁴

The former Chief of the Political Department of the Iman Border Detachment A. D. Konstantinov in conversation with the author of this article remembered that the command of the Iman Border Detachment, analyzing results of the battle on 2 March 1969, estimated the losses of the Chinese at approximately 100 men and this figure contained both killed and wounded. If we take into account that in modern warfare the number of wounded is usually about 2-3 times more than the number of those killed, one may suppose that on 2 March the Chinese lost 20-40 men killed. These estimated figures match with the graves at the Memorial Cemetery in Baoqing city, the nearest large city to Damanskii island. Here is a list of those Chinese servicemen who perished 2 March 1969 (total 20 names): Yu Qingyang, Chen Shaoguang, Wang Qingrong, Chen Mingduo, Duo Jinrong, Li Canrong, Li Hongben, Chen Lijian, Xiang Wenbin, Wen Dengjin, Bai Zhicheng, Chen Jingli, Wang Shanyuan, Lu Zhexiang, Mei Yunxuan, Zhou Guoshu, Nong Yuping, Li Zhongrong, Guo Zhunyi, Xiang Shunguo. Besides these, in the same cemetery there is a grave for a serviceman named Yao Junxiang with the date of death given as 4 March 1969. There were no clashes or shooting on Damanskii on 3 and 4 March, so one can suppose that Yao Junxiang died from wounds that he got during the battle on 2 March 1969.⁵ But Bubenin and other creative writers could know nothing of this, for Document One makes clear that only one Chinese corpse was found on the island. On what basis then, could Soviet writers estimate Chinese casualties on March 2 in the hundreds? We will return to this question shortly.

Document Two is also valuable both for what it says and what it doesn't. The information about brutality of the Chinese in relation to the wounded Soviet border guards was announced for the first time on 7 March 1969 at the press-conference in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the USSR. From that point on - and continuing to appear in Internet and mass-media until the present - a lot of gossip about such atrocities as cutting off ears and poking matches into eyes has made it into print.⁶ Document Two, an external medical examination of the 31 Russian corpses recovered from Damanskii after the 2 March 1969 engagement, makes no mention of such atrocities.

But what the military medical experts found is equally shocking – nineteen of the 31 men had only been wounded during the engagement, but were then summarily dispatched by the Chinese by rifle-butt blows to the head, by a point-blank shot into the brain, or, most commonly, by stabbing/bayonetting in the head, chest and neck area. This brutal handling of prisoners and wounded

³ V.D.Bubenin, *Krovavyi sneg Damanskogo* (Bloody snow of Damanskii), M.; Zhukovskii: Granitsa; Kuchkovo pole, 2004

⁴ I. I. Plugatarev, Chinese Glory of Damanskii Island, *Independent Military Review*, 27 March 2009 (Internet address: http://nvo.ng.ru/realty/2009-03-27/10_damanskiy.html). This source claims 350-400 Chinese dead.

⁵ The list was submitted to the author by a teacher of history from Amursk city A.A.Sabadash who visited the Cemetery and made photos of all the graves there. His Chinese guide and translator also wrote down all the names from the tombs.

⁶ <http://www.specnaz.ru/istoriya/415> (last consulted on 28 December 2011);

<http://sh-kray.narod.ru/arhive/2004/9/po14.htm> (Last checked in 2011; now no longer functioning)

was mentioned already in the first Soviet statement regarding the ambush on March 7, but without the graphic details now available. The fact that only one prisoner – Corporal P.A.Akulov – was taken and no first aid offered suggests that the Chinese soldiers were following direct orders to kill without mercy all Russians who fell into their hands. This cold-blooded military and political decision, in violation of all the rules of war, is something for which Mao, his generals and the Chinese state must still answer to nineteen bereaved families. The unusual ratio of wounded (15) to killed Soviets in battle (31) shows that Chinese attack came unexpected for the Soviet border guards.⁷

Documents Three, Four and Five are letters from actual participants of the battle of 15 March 1969. The first letter provides the view from Damanskii itself, as N. I. Popov, the junior lieutenant (in 1969) who is one of the signatories of Document One, led his men mounted on four armed vehicles into a pitched battle. Both Popov's detailed chronology and Document Four, a letter from an artillery officer make it clear that although Soviet artillery was in readiness, it was kept on a tight leash by the commanding generals. Orders were not to fire until 1700, when the order to fire required that no shells fall on Chinese territory. After silently watching their comrades fight and die all day, the artillery officers objected to the restriction, expressing the impossibility of striking the Chinese troops without hitting the Chinese side of the river. Although the restriction was not explicitly removed, the order was repeated without the restriction, allowing the artillery unit to shell the Chinese banks to great effect. Document Five is a letter from an artillery officer whose howitzers shot the Chinese bank of the Ussuri river.

At 1700, as the light was fading, the Soviet artillery and, in particular, the first combat use of the rocket artillery "GRAD" ("Hail"), delivered a deafening and devastating blow to the Chinese side of the river ending the engagement of March 15, as Popov remembers.⁸ Popov also remembers Colonel Leonov trying to get permission to use artillery to support the battle for Damanskii, but not being able to get authority for this from above. This begs the key question, who, in the end, really did give the order to fire that one salvo at 1700 hours, that apparently mowed down several hundred amassed reserves? Nowhere is there a document suggesting that anyone in Moscow was prepared to make a decisive move towards war with Russia's largest neighbor. L. I. Brezhnev, the General Secretary of the Soviet Communist Party, was not even in Moscow.

A recent study making use of wide-ranging interviews with men who participated in the Damanskii event, suggests that two men claim to have made this correct decision that saved the day, actually ending the conflict rather than leading to escalation. The first is General P. M. Plotnikov, who at that time was the Deputy Commander of Soviet Far East Forces and the senior officer at Damanskii at the time of the battle on 15 March. Only minutes after the ten minute salvo ended, Minister of Defense A. A. Grechko called Plotnikov to the telephone with the startlingly brief message, "Save ammunition," clearly meant to sound like a warning against shooting, should the salvo turn into a general war. With Cultural Revolution China, no one was really sure what to expect.

⁷ Thorough investigation of the quantity of killed and wounded in all wars and military conflicts of Russia and USSR may be read here: <http://lib.ru/MEMUARY/1939-1945/KRIWOSHEEW/poteri.txt>

⁸ The GRAD fires a salvo of 40 rockets which explode directly over a "destruction zone" of 3.5 hectares. The projectiles from the sky give this equipment its name, "hail"

But there is also testimony that suggests that the Commander of the Soviet Far Eastern Forces General O. A. Losik made the decision. Neither of them was decorated for their patriotic deeds at Damanskii, so this does not help us solve the issue of who gave the order. But it does make it clear that Moscow was not altogether happy with this local initiative into foreign affairs, whether the decision was taken at Khabarovsk, at Damanskii, or in the discussions between those points and men, engaged in a life or death struggle for a tiny piece of icy real estate.⁹

Thus, the letters from those involved in the March 15 clash shed new light on the Soviet strategy to end the fighting by inflicting decisive casualties on the Chinese reserves and the likelihood that the Chinese dead ultimately outnumbered the Soviet losses by a large margin. Kushnirenko's memoirs relate the Chinese reaction after the deafening roar of the artillery had died down.

[After the salvo,] we changed our position once more. Now the Chinese bank was already fully visible. From that side a woman's voice spoke through a powerful loudspeaker: "Get lost!", "Band of Nesov,¹⁰ go away!" and "Vashchenko, Vashchenko, don't fire a volley!"¹¹

Interestingly, the Chinese knew the names of the most local commanders, but never knew the names Losik and Plotnikov, whose decisions rained a true "hail" of explosive razor-sharp shrapnel down upon the hundreds of Chinese reservists shivering in the cold on the wrong side of the Ussuri.

Officially, the Chinese only recognize that twelve men perished on 15 March 1969. Their names are marked on graves in Baoqing, just like those who died on March 2. But in 1970, a Chinese deserter crossed the Ussuri river and during debriefing testified that the Chinese who died on March 15 were secretly buried in three large mounds, each containing "several hundred bodies."¹² Our ability to count and honor those who gave their lives for their country, now depends on the willingness of the present Chinese archival authorities and/or Chinese participants in the clashes to make available new documentation or memoir material either to confirm or refine these estimates.

⁹ The question of the decision to fire the Grad rocket barrage is examined in detail in D. S. Ryabushkin, *Vospominaniya o Damanskom* (forthcoming).

¹⁰ Commander of the 135th Division, Major-General V.K.Nesov

¹¹ Commander of the rocket battalion, Major M.T.Vashchenko

¹² Interview conducted in July 2001 with A. D. Konstantinov, Chief of the Political Department of the Iman Border Detachment in 1969. He personally took part in the debriefing.

DOCUMENT ONE (Prepared by Borderguards and stored in Central Borderguard Archive, Pushkino, Russia)

List

of the items, left by the Chinese servicemen on Damanskii Island on 2 March 1969

As a result of examination of the territory in the area of the armed provocation of the Chinese 2 March 1969 by representatives of the border military unit 2488 Lieutenant-Colonel Konstantinov Aleksander Dmitrievich in presence of Junior Lieutenant Popov Nikolai Ivanovich and Junior Lieutenant Koleshnya Mikhail Illarionovich it is found out:

1. Corpse of a serviceman of China in warm wear of field type, without a hat, with laceration in the area of the back of the head on the right side. Into the right pocket of trousers there are two keys on a wire and crumbs of bread.
2. 7.62 mm carbine type SKS № Xa-9957 of Chinese manufacture with a bayonet – 1 piece.
3. Little digging tools – 5 pieces.
4. Clips for carbines with cartridges – 3 pieces, without cartridges – till 20 pieces.
5. Field telephones type TAI-43 of Chinese manufacture – 3 pieces.
6. Field cable of Chinese manufacture, black color – till 2000 meters.
7. Bobbins for rolling cable, wooden – 5 pieces.
8. First-aid packs of Chinese manufacture in factory packing and used during provocation – 50 pieces.
9. Army flasks: empty, full with alcohol – 10 pieces.
10. Bottles: empty, half-empty and full with alcohol of Chinese manufacture.
11. Various mats (reed, wooden) – 25 pieces.
12. Various warm wear (hats, jackets, mittens) of Chinese manufacture.
13. Dry biscuits and other breads of Chinese manufacture.
14. A lot of splinters of grenades and mines of Chinese manufacture.
15. Boxes for amerces for shooting of grenade launchers of Chinese manufacture.
16. Cartridge belt without cartridges for shooting of machine gun.
17. Straps for carrying of wounded servicemen of Chinese manufacture – till 5 pieces.
18. Camouflage cloaks, white, of Chinese manufacture – 2 pieces.

Any documents, identifying the killed serviceman of China, were absent. All items of Chinese manufacture were packed and forwarded to military unit 2488.

Officer of the military unit 2488
Lieutenant-Colonel

(Konstantinov)

In the presence of :

Junior Lieutenant

(Popov)

Junior Lieutenant

(Koleshnya)

17 March 1969

DOCUMENT TWO (Prepared by Borderguards and stored in Central Borderguard Archive, Pushkino, Russia)

Statement

of the medical examination of the corpses of the servicemen of the military unit 2488, perished during repulsing of the armed intrusion of Chinese servicemen into the territory of the USSR 2 March 1969

“ ” March 1969

Nizhne-Mikhailovka

The Commission of the chief of the military medical service Major of Medical Service Kvitko V.I., army doctors of the medical post Lieutenant of Medical Service Fotovenko B.Ya., Lieutenant of Medical Service Kostyuchenko N.I., journalist Petrov D.A. examined 31 corpses of the servicemen of the military unit 2488, during the examination it is found out:

1. Sergeant Ermalyuk Viktor Markiyanovich, Russian, was born in 1948.
On the body there are multiple shrapnel wounds, marks of burns, both lower extremities are amputated – probably, with a splinter. Death came because of sharp loss of blood.
2. Private Zmeyev Aleksei Petrovich, Russian, was born in 1948.
On the body there are multiple shrapnel wounds, a shrapnel wound in the area of the left shank. In the occipital area there is an inlet bullet hole from a shot point-blank. Death came because of injury of brain.
3. Corporal Korzhukov Victor Kharitonovich, Russian, was born in 1948.
There are bullet wounds in the area of chest, waist area, left shoulder. Death came because of the injury of chest.
4. Private Izotov Vladimir Alekseyevich, Russian, was born in 1949.
Bullet wound in the area of chest, marks of blow with a blunt item on the front abdominal wall and the left hip (blow with a butt). Death came because of the injury of the organs of abdomen.
5. Private Ionin Aleksander Filimonovich, Russian, was born in 1949.
Two bullet wounds in the area of chest, smashing of the soft tissues and bones of the skull from a shot point-blank. Death came because of injury of brain.
6. Private Nasretdinov Islimgali Sultangaleyevich, Tatar, was born in 1949.
Bullet wound in the area of the right shoulder and the left half of chest. Death came because of the injury of the organs of chest.

7. Private Vetrich Ivan Romanovich, Russian, was born in 1949.
Shrapnel wound in the area of the left shoulder and multiple wounds with a cutting item (bayonet, knife) in the area of spine and neck. Death came because of sharp loss of blood.
8. Private Gavrilov Viktor Illarionovich, Russian, was born in 1950.
Bullet wound in the area of the left shoulder and chest. Death came because of the injury of the organs of chest.
9. Private Syirtsev Aleksei Nikolayevich, Russian, was born in 1948.
Bullet wounds in the area of the front abdominal wall and chest. Death came because of the injury of the organs of chest and abdomen.
10. Sergeant Rabovich Vladimir Nikitovich, Ukrainian, was born in 1948.
Tangential wound of the left shoulder, penetrating chopped wound in the area of forehead. Bullet wound in the occipital region of head from a shot point-blank. Death came because of injury of brain.
11. Private Nechai Sergei Alekseyevich, Russian, was born in 1948.
Bullet wound of the waist area, in the area of chest and the right shoulder. Death came because of injury of the organs of chest.
12. Private Pasyuta Aleksander Ivanovich, Ukrainian, was born in 1948.
Bullet wound of the left shank. There is a cut wound (bayonet, knife) in the area of chest. Death came because of sharp loss of blood.
13. Private Kamenchuk Grigorii Aleksandrovich, Russian, was born in 1949.
Multiple knife wounds in the area of chest and front abdominal wall. Death came because of injury of the organs of chest and abdomen.
14. Private Ovchinnikov Gennadii Sergeyeovich, Russian, was born in 1948.
Multiple bullet wounds in the area of chest, the right shoulder and the right hip. Death came because of injury of the organs of chest.
15. Private Zolotarev Valentin Grigoryevich, Udmurt, was born in 1949.
Bullet wounds in the area of the front abdominal wall. Cut wound of neck (bayonet, knife), fracture of the bones of skull with a blunt item (a butt). Death came because of injury of brain.
16. Private Shusharin Vladimir Mikhailovich, Russian, was born in 1947.
Multiple bullet wounds in the area of chest and the front abdominal wall. Death came because of injury of the organs of chest and abdomen.
17. Junior Sergeant Loboda Mikhail Andreyevich, Russian, was born in 1949.
Bullet wounds of the front surface of neck, stab and cut wounds of face and neck (bayonet, knife). Death came because of sharp loss of blood.
18. Private Isakov Vyacheslav Petrovich, Russian, was born in 1948.
Multiple shrapnel wounds of upper extremities, a bullet wound of the front abdominal wall, smashed wound of occipital area. Death came because of injury of brain.
19. Private Denisenko Anatolii Grigoryevich, Ukrainian, was born in 1949.
Bullet wound of the chest. Bullet wound of face from a shot point-blank. Stab and cut wounds of skull. Death came because of injury of brain.

20. Private Shestakov Aleksander Fedorovich, Russian, was born in 1949.
Shrapnel wounds in the area of knee-joint, chest, the left shoulder. Chopped wound in the area of the back of the head (stick, bayonet, knife). Death came because of injury of brain.
21. Junior Sergeant Kolodkin Nikolai Ivanovich, Russian, was born in 1948.
Bullet wounds in the area of the front abdominal wall, lower extremities. Fracture of the left shoulder, stab and cut wound (bayonet, knife) in the area of front surface of neck. Death came because of sharp loss of blood.
22. Sergeant Dergach Nikolai Timofeyevich, Russian, was born in 1948.
Bullet wound in the area of chest, bullet wound in the back of the head from a shot point-blank. Death came because of injury of brain.
23. Corporal Mikhailov Evgenii Konstantinovich, Russian, was born in 1948.
Bullet wounds in the area of chest and the front abdominal wall. Shrapnel wounds in the area of pelvis. Death came because of injury of the organs of chest and abdomen.
24. Corporal Egupov Viktor Ivanovich, Russian, was born in 1947.
Bullet wounds of the left shoulder and the left hip. Stab and cut wound (bayonet, knife) in temporal area. Death came because of injury of brain.
25. Private Kiselev Gavriil Georgiyevich, Russian, was born in 1950.
Bullet wounds in the area of chest and the right upper extremity. Stab and cut wound in the area of skull. Death came because of injury of brain.
26. Corporal Davyidenko Gennadii Mikhailovich, Russian, was born in 1947.
Bullet fracture of the right shoulder, cut wound (bayonet, knife) in the area of front surface of neck. Bullet wound in the occipital area. Death came because of injury of brain.
27. Private Kuznetsov Aleksei Nifantsevich, Russian, was born in 1948.
Through bullet wound of chest and pelvis. Death came because of injury of the organs of chest.
28. Private Petrov Nikolai Nikolayevich, Russian, was born in 1947.
Shrapnel wounds of the right shank, left groin area, bullet wounds of the right shoulder and hip, stab and cut wound in the area of skull. Death came because of injury of brain.
29. Private Danilin Vladimir Nikolayevich, Russian, was born in 1950.
Bullet wounds of upper extremities and head. Death came because of injury of brain.
30. Senior Lieutenant Strel'nikov Ivan Ivanovich, Russian, was born in 1939.
Bullet wounds of lower extremities, bullet wound in the area of face. Death came because of injury of brain.
31. Senior Lieutenant Buinevich Nikolai Mikhailovich, Russian, was born in 1944.
Bullet wounds of lower extremities and chest, skull. Death came because of injury of the organs of chest and brain.

Almost on all corpses there are marks of fatal traumas and severe injuries, mangled with cut and blunt heavy items. Nineteen men perished because of injuries, mangled with bayonet (knife), butt, shot point-blank already after bullet or shrapnel wound, when wounded were in helpless state, so:

1. Private Zmeyev Aleksei Petrovich after wounding by a splinter was killed by shot point-blank.

2. Private Izotov Vladimir Alekseyevich after wounding was killed by blow of butt.
3. Private Ionin Aleksander Filimonovich after bullet wounding was killed by shot point-blank in head.
4. Private Vetrich Ivan Romanovich after wounding of the left shoulder was killed by blows of bayonet (knife) in the area of spine and neck.
5. Sergeant Rabovich Vladimir Nikitovich after wounding was killed by blow of bayonet (knife) in the area of forehead and shot in the back of the head.
6. Private Pasyuta Aleksander Ivanovich after wounding in leg perished because of some blows of bayonet (knife) in the area of chest.
7. Private Zolotarev Valentin Grigoryevich after wounding in stomach was killed by blows of bayonet (knife) and by butt on head.
8. Junior Sergeant Loboda Mikhail Andreyevich after wounding was killed by blows of bayonet (knife) in the area of face and neck.
9. Private Isakov Vyacheslav Petrovich after wounding was killed by blow of butt on head.
10. Private Denisenko Anatolii Grigoryevich after wounding was killed by blows of bayonet (knife) and shot in head.
11. Private Shestakov Aleksander Fedorovich after wounding in leg was brutally killed by blow of bayonet (knife) in the back of the head.
12. Junior Sergeant Kolodkin Nikolai Ivanovich after wounding got fracture of arm and was killed by blow of bayonet (knife) in neck.
13. Sergeant Dergach Nikolai Timofeyevich after wounding was killed by shot in the back of the head.
14. Private Egupov Viktor Ivanovich after wounding was killed by blow of bayonet (knife) in temporal area.
15. Private Kiselev Gavriil Georgiyevich after wounding was killed by blow of bayonet (knife) in head.
16. Corporal Davyidenko Gennadii Mikhailovich after wounding was killed by shot point-blank.
17. Private Petrov Nikolai Nikolayevich after wounding was brutally killed by blow of butt on head.
18. Senior Lieutenant Strel'nikov Ivan Ivanovich after some bullet woundings was killed by shot in face.
19. Senior Lieutenant Buinevich Nikolai Mikhailovich after wounding was killed by shot in chest.

Mayor of Medical Service

(Kvitko)

Lieutenant of Medical Service

(Fotovenko)

Lieutenant of Medical Service

(Kostyuchenko)

Captain

(Petrov)

March 15.

Document Three

Letter from N. I. Popov, Borderguard Junior Lieutenant, to D. S. Ryabushkin, 27 December 2007

On the night 14-15 March, at 23.30AM, I was summoned to the chief of the border detachment Colonel Leonov D.V. Besides me, for receiving an order arrived Lieutenant-Colonel Yanshin Ye.I., Senior Lieutenants Solov'yev V.I. and Man'kovskii L.K., Lieutenant Klyiga A.F. (though before that we even didn't know the reason of the invitation). We were informed about the situation and a conclusion was done about possibilities of the Chinese to start new provocations. It was ordered to move on Damanskii with a group of border guards on four BTRs and if the Chinese are there, than to dislodge them (14 March all our details were taken from the island). If the Chinese are absent there, than to settle on Damanskii and to take up a defensive position closer to the southern part near the bank. At 1.30AM I with my group began to move from the outpost Nizhne-Mikhailovka towards the island (we left the outpost all together, in one column).

Before boarding there was a formation. Lieutenant-Colonel Konstantinov A.D. told a speech. After that, when everyone sat in BTRs already (I was into my BTR number 02), he came and told: "Look, Popov, I need all of you to be alive."

We took a lot of cartridges and grenades (everything proved useful for us later). So, each of four officers had 10 soldiers. The fifth officer, Lieutenant-Colonel Yanshin Ye.I., was a commander of the detachment. Totally there were 45 servicemen and 4 BTRs.

Road itself was absent, there was only direction to the island in the forest. At 5.30AM 15 March the groups arrived to the northern part of the island and moved on towards the southern part through a little creek. My group (9 border guards and driver of the BTR Smelov) and Lieutenant Man'kovskii's group settled at an extremity of a marsh that was located not far from beginning of the bank. The distance between our groups was about 50 meters, may be a little more. The space between all groups were covered by BTRs. Later, during the battle, BTRs moved all the time, didn't stand on one place.

I commanded to disperse along the marsh and prepare shallow trenches for shooting in the lying position. The soldiers used ice, snow, branches of the trees. Two other groups (Klyiga's and Solov'yev's) settled behind us.

There were no Chinese on the island. We heard no voices, saw no lights. Nothing was seen on hills on the Chinese bank of the river, too. We were lying in the trenches, heard the area. I wanted to drink but we didn't have water and therefore I ate sugar candies called "Dushes"¹³.

At dawn Lieutenant-Colonel Yanshin Ye.I. sent Senior Lieutenant Man'kovskii L.K. and 4 border guards to the southern part of the island for to find out the Chinese are there or no. In half an hour they returned and reported that there are no Chinese there. At full dawn the Chinese switched on

¹³ Very popular sort of candies, with the name reminiscent of pears in the USSR.

a loudspeaker and began propaganda for us in Russian language. Seems, a tape was recorded beforehand because two texts were repeated some times.

The first one: “Officers and soldiers of the Soviet Army, you violated the border of the People’s Republic of China. It is an armed provocation against the Chinese people. You must leave the Chinese territory otherwise you will be answerable for all that happens.” The second was a long speech that Damanskii island and other islands were Chinese ones. Last words of the speech were “Down with new tsars! Down with Brezhnev!”

At 9.30AM 15 March Yanshin Ye.I. sent Man’kovskii L.K. and 4 border guards to the southern part of the island again. At the same time our loudspeaker, located at hill Krasnaya, relayed in Chinese language, proving, that Damanskii and other islands on the river are the Soviet ones. Concluded treaties were mentioned, too.

At 9.45 I heard a long burst of submachine gun fire. Those were Chinese who moved forward from their positions to Damanskii. They saw our reconnaissance group and opened fire. 10-15 minutes before that I heard a phrase (command) from the Chinese loudspeaker. Immediately after that burst of fire the Chinese began powerful mortar and artillery bombardment of the island. Two groups (Klyiga’s and Solov’yev’s) got under that fire but we were out of the shelling. The Chinese, using a method of “infiltration”, began to occupy the southern part of the island and their artillerymen tried not to hit them. Chinese spotters were on trees and adjusted the fire.

My group, as the last on the left, joined the battle the first, after that – Man’kovskii’s group. Four BTRs opened fire from turret machine-guns. They moved all the time to avoid being hit. Such a battle continued about an hour and a half. Our ammunition was running out (though we had take plenty, we had thought), the Chinese began actively to press. It was decided to leave the island (otherwise it would be the end of us). Connection with our bank was interrupted because aials on BTRs were brought down by fire. Continuing shooting, we began boarding the BTRs. Six soldiers were wounded, two of them – in my group (one man had wound in his arm, another – in his leg). Senior Lieutenant Solov’yev got contusion of his head during the artillery bombardment. I myself survived by a miracle. During the battle there was a machine gunner near me, he shot according to my commands. We opened a box of F-1 grenades. The Chinese spotted the place where we lay and intensified fire. We changed the position. At that moment a long burst from a machine gun tore my fur coat but didn’t hit me. A large group of the Chinese attacked us but Yanshin Ye.I. saw it and covered us by his BTR. We boarded the BTR through a side hatch. All BTRs, shooting back, left the island. My BTR had all wheels damaged, it barely moved. When we reached the river’s edge on the Soviet side, the driver stopped the engine. The BTR sat on rims.

We carried the wounded out of the BTRs. Our reserves arrived and we regrouped our forces. Some counterattacks were organized but they had no success because the Chinese fired at the river, the southern part of Damanskii was occupied by them, too. We returned to the spit. Lieutenant-Colonel Konstantinov A.D. ordered me to use machine gun and grenade launcher crews for firing on the channel with the aim of giving the Chinese no possibility to send new reserves from their bank of the river to the island. It was not easy, but we were successful in that.

After noon three of our airplanes flew over at different heights. They didn’t fire.

Approximately at 14.00 the battle faded away. We began to dine (a field kitchen arrived). Evidently the Chinese on hills noticed us, their mortars opened fire at the spit. A mine fell on a BTR, one more mine hit an SPG-9¹⁴ crew. One border guard was dead on the spot. Later we put his remains in a box from shells).¹⁵ All of us ran to our places. Other mines made no damage. We began to eat millet kasha again. Before that day I never ate it but now hunger had its effect.

A tank company of T-62s arrived. Several times, Colonel D.V. Leonov asked the army command to support the border guards by artillery fire but got nothing. Leonov boarded one tank and the three others moved on, following Bubenin's path on 2 March. Simultaneously, the border guards and a company of motorized infantry men (from the 2nd Battalion of the 199th Verkhne-Udinskii Regiment) attacked the Chinese. The battle burst out again.

And only at 17.00 did our artillery and the "Grad"¹⁶ (hail) battery strike a blow at the Chinese bank, hills and the channel. That blow decided the outcome of the battle.

After the bombardment and annihilation of the Chinese riflemen, the survivors ran from the island. About 20.00 on 15 March the Chinese were totally dislodged from the island. Our sappers mined the southern part of Damanskii. That night (it was already 16 March) I returned to my outpost...

Document Four

Letter from N. A. Zadorozhnyi (Major, Chief of Staff of Rocket Troops and Artillery of 135th Motorized Infantry Division) to D. S. Ryabushkin, 7 December 2007.

[Question] 1. Who gave the order to open fire on the Chinese bank [of the Ussuri] on 15 March 1969?

Noone personally (lichno nam nikto) gave this order to us. We got all orders from our commanders by telephone. Our staff was located near Kafyila mountain, an observation post – on Kafyila, a command post of the Division (where representatives of the army corps and military district were present) – at the outpost Nizhne-Mikhailovka. I and the chief of the rocket troops and artillery of the Division were at the observation post all the time. There was a telephone to the staff of the Division there. 16 March we got a secret telephone equipment to the staff of the military district and Moscow.

At 10.00, 15 March, our artillery was at the fire positions, the commanders – at the

¹⁴ Type of recoilless gun.

¹⁵ Obviously, author of the memoirs means Private Bil'dushkinov.

¹⁶ "Grad" is a rocket artillery system, the lineal descendant of the legendary World War II "Katyusha". The GRAD has 40 gun tubes. One volley (40 rockets) totally annihilates infantry inside a 3.5 hectare area, about 8 acres. Eyewitnesses observing from the Soviet side of the river with an unobstructed view reported that before the salvo there was a "bustling about and shooting" in the area where reserves were grouped not far from mortars firing on the Russian forces on Damanskii. Afterwards, there was no movement anywhere. For more details on the GRAD and its effects, see Ryabushkin, *Mify*, 149, 232.

observation post. We had an order not to shoot without permission therefore we only observed the battle on the island and regretted that couldn't help the border guards.

At 16.30 we got an order by telephone: "At 17.00AM Smirnov's battalion will attack. Support the attack by 10-minute fire blow of the western bank of the island. No shell must fall on the Chinese bank." We discussed the last restriction with the Commander of Rockets and Artillery and he answered: "I can't fulfill the order, revoke the restriction." The fact is that dispersion of the shells of the rocket artillery was about 500 meters (both overshoot and undershot), but the island itself had the width 500 meters. Therefore we had no belief that the shells would not fall on the Chinese territory. Besides that there was a high probability that we'd hit our soldiers on the island – and that is blasphemy.

At 16.45 we got the [new] order: "Fire on the western bank of the island and the channel."... As to the restriction, I don't know who revoked the restriction or whether it was revoked at all.... We fulfilled the order after adjustment of fire for every battery.

My memory keeps a lot of details of that battle. I remember our border guards leaving the battlefield. They were going and it was seen that they had no forces. Suddenly all of them fell down on snow. After some time they stood up and went on. But one of them continued to lie... It was a joy when he stood up and went, too!

Document Five

Letter from L. G. Kushnirenko (Artillery Senior Lieutenant) to V. D. Pavlyuk, 30 September 2008

2 March 1969 we had a military training with battle shooting. The training was headed by the chief of the rocket troops and artillery of the 45th army corps Major General Smyik. Shooting took place at a firing ground near Tamga village. In the day we were returned to our military unit. We were informed that in the region of Damanskii island a chief of an outpost and some border guards perished.

On the night 14-15 March our battery was raised an alarm and sent to Damanskii. 15 March we were met by a topographer and got information about our fire position. Occupied the position and directed the guns toward west from where thunder of guns and machine guns was coming.

The position was on a swamp. There were a lot of tussocks there. We were forced to saw them down.

After noon I got an order to open barrage fire. Some time after got a new order: to fire a volley with increasing of gun sight. So, it was something like a fire wave.

We shot objectives on the island itself and approached the Chinese bank. But didn't shoot into Chinese territory.

Conditions were very difficult: we didn't sleep at night, had no meals (because, as became known later, the field kitchens had been pushed in a ditch by those armored cars that moved behind them). I and a sergeant major of the battery divided the contents of my alarm bag among the soldiers. The swamp was covered with ice and therefore after each shot the guns broke out of the ground and

turned. Every time we had to restore the right position.

During shooting we used full charges. The soldiers worked as a mechanism, took every hint.

On the night 15-16 March we changed the position. Now it was a flat glade with a little forest around. All night we equipped the position. Got the information that the chief of the border detachment Colonel Leonov and some border guards perished. Finally, we received meals and some trucks with shells. Unloaded them.

16 March was a day of elections to the Supreme Soviet. Political leader of the battery, Captain Vlasenko, arrived to the position and organized voting near every gun.

17 March an evacuation group, headed by Captian Kuz'min, moved to the island to tow away the hit armored cars and pick up the killed. One of the trucks had a white flag with a red cross on. Nevertheless, when the group approached Damanskii island, it was fired on. At that moment I got an order: "A mortar battery. Annihilate." That battery shelled the evacuation group and was well seen from an observation post of the commander of the battery.

At that moment a long column of men stopped near the position. Their commander, a General, came to me and asked about the situation. I reported that I had received an order to eliminate a mortar battery located on the Chinese territory. He asked: "Can we help you?" I asked to carry shells to the guns. It was done immediately.

Opened quick fire. After annihilation of the mortar battery I hardly fulfilled the order "Stop! End shooting" because lost my voice. During shooting the Chinese territory one more battery of our regiment (to the right of us) fired together with us. The rocket battery (to the right and behind us) took part in bombardment, too.

After that deafening roar suddenly silence fell. During next 3-4 days there was not a single shot.

We changed our position once more. Now we saw the Chinese bank [clearly]. From that side we heard a woman's voice through a powerful loudspeaker: "Get lost!", "Band of Nesov¹⁹, go away!" and "Vashchenko, Vashchenko²⁰, don't fire a volley!"

20 or 21 March a special detachment arrived at our fire position. They had shells filled with propaganda leaflets. We prepared for shooting and when everything was ready, opened fire at the Chinese territory. The command was very satisfied with the shooting.

At the end of March we left the position and moved, by train, to our usual duty station.

¹⁹ See footnote 10

²⁰ See footnote 11

