

# ‘Huntie’ was Special

*A nostalgic recall of Lt Col (later Lt Gen) Hanut Singh, PVSM, MVC  
in command of the Poona Horse*

**RAJ MEHTA**

Fig 1



Lt Col Hanut Singh with his *Kooshab* tank crew

My first recall of Lt Gen Hanut Singh, PVSM, MVC, is of an operational discussion at HQ 16 Armoured Brigade, where, as young officers, we first heard

him speak. Though he had just taken over the Poona Horse in September 1971, 'Huntie' was already being spoken of with awe. His professional reputation; lean, wiry physique; Caesar's nose, charisma and no-nonsense speech; his no-nonsense deportment and body language mesmerised us. We saw him in the mould of the great cavalry heroes of World War II: Manstein, Guderian; Rommel, Patton. It helped that he was a Master Gunner; a tactician extraordinaire and was, in all senses, a Prussian General Staff Officer in his outlook and expectations from himself and the soldiers and men around him. .

Deployed in the Samba sector, Jammu and Kashmir (J&K), by October 1971 for operations, we young officers compared notes whenever we crossed paths in the operational area. Poona Horse was our common object of envy because of the relentless, critical thinking driven training and brainstorming that Hanut generated each day for his regiment to fight and win in the coming war. The war, when it took place in December 1971, was itself a great validation of the "fighting tight" Hanut school of pragmatic war-fighting.

## **Growing Up Years**

IC-6126 Lt Gen Hanut Singh Rathore was born on July 6, 1933, to Lt Col Arjun Singh, who famously commanded the Kachawa Horse. Hanut comes from Jasol, a village in Pachpadra Tehsil, Barmer District. It was established by the Rathore rulers, descendants of the 13th century Rawal Mallinath, a Rajput warrior-saint who was the eldest amongst all the houses of Rathores in Rajasthan. The royal houses of Jodhpur, Bikaner, Ratlam, Sitamau, Sailana, Idar and Alirajpur trace their lineage to Rathore Rajputs. Jasol Rajputs have historically been fiercely independent, chivalrous, brave and proud.

Hanut studied in Colonel Brown's School at Dehradun and was brilliant at studies; reading up on Rajput history as a hobby. He joined the first course the Joint Services Wing (JSW), which, later, became the National Defence Academy (NDA). He stood out for his Spartan outlook, mental grooming, discipline, intellect and character—unusual qualities in a cadet. He was a Polo 'Blue'. In December 1952, he was commissioned into the Poona Horse, a distinguished cavalry regiment which had won four Victoria Crosses since its raising in July 1817. Hanut's father had also served in it on attachment.

In a delightful, fascinating biography of Hanut in his book, *Leadership in the Indian Army: Biographies of Twelve Soldiers*, Maj Gen VK Singh, Signals, writes about how Hanut modelled himself after the "German General Staff, particularly their total dedication to the profession of arms, and their unmatched expertise

*in the art of war. He sought to emulate these qualities himself, and motivated other officers in the Regiment to do the same.” He adds, “As a result, qualities like professionalism, personal rectitude and total dedication to the Regiment and the service became distinctive hallmarks of its officers...”* During his time, the Poona Horse, as Hanut himself writes in his wonderfully descriptive and elegant book on its history, developed a spirit over and above its professionalism and élan, which can be described in one word – camaraderie – a spirit of brotherhood, caring, feeling, and belief that soldiers seek above all.

A diehard bachelor by choice, “*Gurudev*” Hanut’s commitment to soldiers and soldiering was total. Selected for a Centurion tank gunnery course in 1958 in the UK, he topped the course and, on his return, rewrote the gunnery instruction manuals at the Armoured Corps Centre and School, Ahmadnagar. It was our superior tank gunnery in 1965 and 1971 that helped turn the scales against Pakistan. A few years later, he was to write our tank war-fighting manuals for the Armoured Corps, their value being validated by the fact that these remain standard Army teaching till date. On staff during the 1965 Indo-Pak War, Hanut served as Brigade Major and later in the Military Operations Directorate before he was posted to teach tactics at Ahmadnagar prior to assuming command of the Poona Horse.

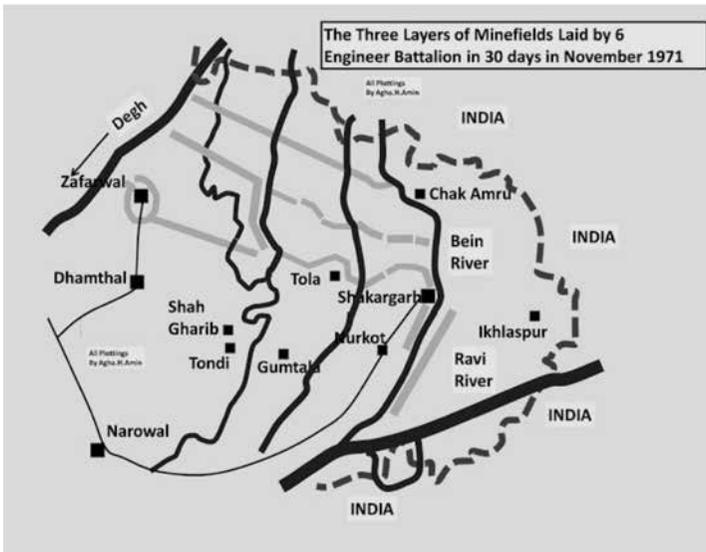
## **A Pakistani Perspective On Hanut’s Finest Hour**

Readers are familiar with Indian accounts of how Hanut commanded the Poona Horse during the battle of Basantar in the 1971 Indo-Pak War. The Pakistani account – they call it the Battle of Barapind – makes not just for fascinating reading but commands our respect, being unsolicited. The only caution is that it is, after all, an enemy perspective and can (and does) vary in some detailing. The paraphrase that follows is culled from the writings of veteran Pakistani military historian, retired Maj AH Amin, 11 PAVO Cavalry (FF). In his “A Collage from Memories of the Past and Battle of Barapind-Jarpal; 16 December 1971”, from his book *Indo-Pak Wars: A Strategic and Operational Analysis: 1947-71*, Amin grimly compares the infamous Crimean War *Charge of the Light Brigade* to the decimation of Pakistani cavalry by the Indians—with Poona Horse leading:

**“Into the Valley of Death, Rode the 600,  
Theirs not to question why, Theirs but to Do and Die  
The stench of burnt human flesh many miles around  
In those dark Rakhs (Forests) of Shakargarh Bulge”.**

He writes that Pakistan's I Corps consisted of three infantry divisions, an armoured division and an armoured brigade. Two infantry divisions were deployed to defend the Ravi-Chenab corridor. 8 Infantry Division was to defend Shakargarh Bulge and 15 Division, Sialkot. 8 (Independent) Armoured Brigade comprising three tank regiments (13 Lancers, 27 Cavalry and 31 Cavalry), one self-propelled artillery regiment (15 SP) and a mechanised infantry battalion (29 FF) was to assist both divisions in the defence of the Ravi-Chenab corridor. 6 Armoured Division and 17 Infantry Division were the Pakistan Army's strategic reserve and were located in the Pasrur-Daska-Gujranwala triangle. Pakistan had selectively mined the most likely Indian tank runs (minefields marked in Fig 1 below)

**Fig 2: 6 Engineer Battalion was commanded by the author, Maj Amin's father**



India's I Corps comprised three infantry divisions (36, 39 and 54 Divisions), two armoured brigades [2 and 16 (Independent) Armoured Brigades], two independent artillery brigades and two engineer brigades. In armour, the Indians enjoyed qualitative superiority (Centurions versus Pattons) but not in numbers. The Shakargarh Bulge permitted Pakistan to cut Indian lines of communications into Kashmir at any point between Kathua to Jammu by advancing a few kilometres and figured prominently in Indian offensive strategic thinking. It had no major water obstacles to restrict manoeuvre; those present being easily

crossable in winter. Visibility was limited to 600 to 1,200 metres (m) due to crops and 'rakhs' or 'reserve forests'.

The Pakistani plan for the defence of Shakargarh was built around Shakargarh and Narowal towns being held as strong points. The '*Changez Force*', consisting of two tank regiments and 13 Punjab were tasked to fight a delaying battle at each minefield to cause attrition and facilitate counter-attacks. Road Zafarwal-Shakargarh was designated as the limit of penetration and 8 (Independent) Armoured Brigade assigned to ensure its sanctity.

The Indian I Corps plan as finally executed was to advance into Shakargarh Bulge from the north and east with an infantry division each spearheaded by an independent armoured brigade, to secure Pathankot and deny access to its logistics corridors to 15 Corps in Kashmir; and tie down Pakistani strategic reserves to homeland protection. It involved a two-prong advance by 54 and 39 Infantry Divisions supported by 16 and 2 (Independent) Armoured Brigades. 54 Division with 16 (Independent) Armoured Brigade was to advance southwards in the area between Degh and Karir Nala and capture the Zafarwal-Dhamtal complex. The plan was extremely conservative and deployed four out of the available nine infantry brigades and two tank regiments for guarding the flanks of its offensive into Shakargarh.

54 Infantry Division advanced slowly, two brigades up, supported by tanks from 16 (I) Armoured Brigade; 47 Brigade on the right and 91 Brigade on the left, with 74 Brigade in reserve. By December 15, 47 Infantry Brigade closed with Basantar Nala opposite Lagwal and made a successful crossing on the night of December 15/16. 47 Infantry Brigade was tasked to establish a bridgehead in the general area of Sikandarpur-Lalial-Barapind. It captured Siraj Chak and Lalial forest by 2030 hours and Jarpal by 2330 hours. Stiff fighting forced the Commander to ask the Commanding Officer (CO) Poona Horse to move urgently into the bridgehead. 'C' Squadron boldly got across the minefield without waiting to clear it. Crossing the forest at night, the Poona Horse tanks led by Hanut were effective across it by first light.

### **(Independent) Armoured Brigade Counter-Attacks**

On December 15, 8 Armoured Brigade was poised for a counter-attack east of Bein Nala to recover lost territory up to the Ravi river when it was suddenly informed at 0430 hours on December 16 that the Indians had breached the minefield on Basantar Nala at Lagwal. The Commander ordered 13 Lancers to deal with what was wrongly assessed as a counter-penetration task around west of village Jarpal

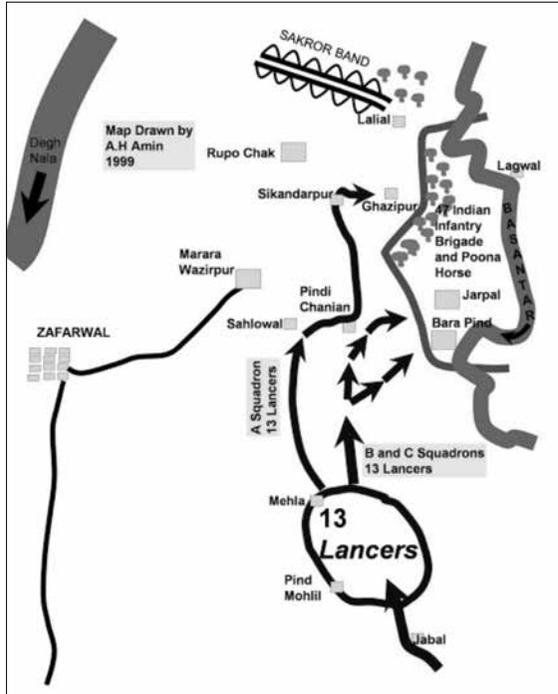
where the Pakistani troops in contact had achieved some stability. 'A' Squadron 13 Lancers was briefed by the CO and crossed road Zafarwal-Shakargarh at 0800 hours. While moving, it was ordered by the CO to move towards area Sikandarpur and intercept enemy tanks breaking out from area Lalial. 'A' Squadron formed up and attacked, losing 8 tanks to Poona Horse. The rest withdrew into Sukror Bund (Supwal DCB for Indians).

Fig 3



Meanwhile, even as 'A' Squadron was moving, the CO handed over its initial counter penetration task to 'C' Squadron. As 'C' Squadron commenced, he changed his orders yet again, ordering both 'B' and 'C' Squadrons to 'proceed to Barapind and attack the Indian combat team in Jarpal area.'

Fig 4



Disaster followed, with 13 Lancers losing 20 tanks with three officers killed and two wounded. It was during this action that 2nd Lt Arun Khetarpal exhibited exceptional valour, being awarded the Param Vir Chakra (PVC) posthumously. Ironically, 13 Lancers, on partition in 1947, had exchanged its Sikh squadron for the Poona Horse Kaimkhani squadron; combating this regiment with savage losses in both the 1965 and 1971 Indo-Pak Wars.

It was 'C' (Sikh) Squadron Poona Horse which faced 'A' Squadron 13 Lancers and 'B' (Jat) Squadron Poona Horse which faced 'B' and 'C' Squadrons of 13 Lancers. Once 13 Lancers brought in its two remaining squadrons, the Poona Horse reinforced Jarpal with two troops 'A' (Rajput) Squadron ex Siraj Chak.

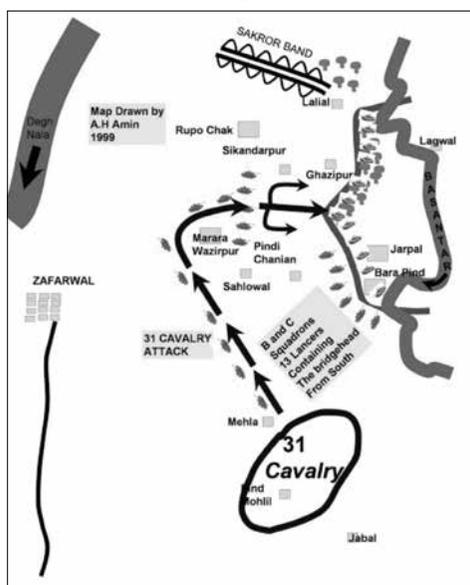
Amin quotes Maj Gen GS Sandhu, who authored the Indian Armoured Corps history thus: "The only occasion that a breakthrough could have occurred was when two squadrons of 13 Lancers led by Maj Nasir attacked together but a gallant last-ditch stand by 2/Lt Arun Khetarpal's troop (ex-'A' squadron) averted the danger". Maj Nasir was, of course, the officer who shot up Khetarpal's tank and later informed Brig Khetarpal, Arun's father, about his son's deathless bravery during the Brigadier's visit to Pakistan. Once 31 Cavalry attacked, launched thoughtlessly by the Commander to reinforce the 13 Lancers fiasco, the Indians

brought the balance tanks of 'A' Squadron into Jarpal. By 1200 hours, Hanut had ensured that 31 Cavalry ceased to exist as a cohesive unit.

**Fig 5: Burning Patton tank: Ghazipur-Barapind-Jarpal area**



**Fig 6**



Overall, 13 Lancers lost Capt Alam, and Lts Malik, Qureshi, Akbar and Aslam and 31 Cavalry lost Maj Ahmad and Lt Mirza – a staggering seven officers – in the Basantar battle against the loss of Lt Arun Khetarpal.

## **Walking His Talk**

Hanut did not just set matchless standards of professionalism, probity and character; he lived them in his daily life. Post command of the Poona Horse, Hanut commanded 14 (Independent) Armoured Brigade with distinction. His sterling qualities were on display on more than one occasion when he fell out with his seniors, expressing disagreement with faulty tactical and strategic reasoning and conduct modalities; eventually having his logic and reasoning accepted as correct. As a mountain Division General Officer Commanding (GOC), he was uncompromising in walking the razor's edge of professionalism and probity over compliance and accommodation. His focus remained on soldiering in its noblest form, as also welfare that was based on training hard and intelligently for winning, and then having basic creature comforts and living conditions as well as self-esteem. Nominated by the Chief for command of 1 Armoured Division, Hanut relished the opportunity to pitch himself to learn and teach at the operational level by educating his command how to think and act; then lifting all constraints to learning and unlearning and only, at the end, personally visiting his command in the desert to assess whether they had learnt right. This was revolutionary in a highly structured Army. The environment expected him to be sacked but, instead he rose to command 2 Corps in Exercise Brass-Tacks, yet again setting standards.

## **Hanut's Legacy**

Much of what the Mechanised Corps is today is directly traceable to Hanut and the professional edge he gave to it when in service. Gen Hanut Singh is one of the key contributors to the war-fighting doctrines that have shaped the corps as also their conduct criteria right down to the tank Commander. His ideas of 'welfare' and man-machine interface; and on the corps unique officer-man bonding are not just current but flourishing, because these are deathless. In the final analysis, while there are many pretenders and claimants to the crown, Hanut is remembered as a true, transformational, iconic '**Soldier's General**'. Huntie, now long retired is still special.

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