

Battle of Asal Uttar: 1965 Indo-Pak War

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Introduction

India has fought three wars with Pakistan. All these wars have been initiated by Pakistan, and India has responded with alacrity and military precision. Out of the three wars, the war of 1971 was a classical victory for India. It also witnessed the dismemberment of East Pakistan and the creation of Bangladesh. Pakistan ceased to be in the same league as India after this war. Prior to the 1971 War and after the Sino-Indian debacle of 1962, a major war was initiated by Pakistan in 1965. It commenced with operations in the Rann of Kutch in April 1965, followed by Operation Gibraltar which witnessed Pakistani irregulars trying to capture Kashmir by infiltration and gaining a few areas in Uri, Tithwal and Poonch, while India captured the strategic Haji Pir Pass. To continue the operations Pakistan launched Operation Grand Slam to capture Akhnoor and cut off the communications in the Jammu region on September 1. The Indian Army also launched operations in the Sialkot sector as also on to the eastern banks of Ichogil canal which brought it to the doorsteps of Pakistan's second biggest city, Lahore. Pakistan launched its ultimate offensive with its 1 Armoured Division and 11 Infantry Division in the Khemkaran sector to reach the bridges on the Beas river and thereafter threaten Amritsar, Jullundur, or as visualised by President Ayub Khan, onwards to Delhi. It was in these operations that the one of the biggest tank battles was fought at Asal Uttar. The resounding defeat of the Pakistani forces at Asal Uttar tilted the balance of war in India's favour.

Prelude

The launch of Operation Grand Slam by Pakistan resulted in the Western Army Commander Gen Harbaksh Singh launching offensive action by 1 Corps and 11 Corps. 1 Corps, comprising 1 Armoured Division, 6 Mountain Division, 26 Infantry Division and 14 Infantry Division, launched an offensive in the Jammu-Sialkot sector on the southern bank of the Chenab. 11 Corps with 15 Infantry Division, 7 Infantry Division and 4 Mountain Division was to launch operations to lean on the eastern bank of the Ichogil canal and destroy important bridges. The thrust lines for 11 Corps were as under:

- 15 Infantry Division to attack along the Grand Trunk Road on Axis Amritsar-Lahore.
- 7 Infantry Division to attack along Axis Bhikkiwind-Khalra-Barki.
- 4 Mountain Division less 33 Mountain Brigade to attack along Axis Khem Karan-Kasur.

Force Levels: 4 Mountain Division

The Battle of Asal Uttar was fought by 4 Mountain Division along with the following troops:

- 7 Mountain Brigade had three battalions. These were 4 Grenadiers, 7 Grenadiers and 1/9 Gorkha Rifles.
- 62 Mountain Brigade comprising 18 Rajputana Rifles, 9 Jammu and Kashmir Rifles and 13 Dogra.
- Deccan Horse equipped with Sherman tanks.
- Artillery Brigade with one Field Regiment (25 pounders), two Mountain Regiments (3.7 inch howitzers), one Medium Regiment (5.5 inch Guns) and one Light Regiment (120mm mortars).
- 1, 77 and 100 Field Companies along with 41 Field Park Company.
- Corps Reserve, 2 Independent Armoured Brigade comprising two Armoured Regiments, 3 Cavalry (Centurions) and 8 Cavalry (AMX).

The Plan

4 Mountain Division planned to undertake its operation in two phases. In Phase 1, 62 Mountain Brigade with an additional infantry battalion from 7 Infantry Division (1/9 Gorkha Rifles) and Deccan Horse, less two squadrons, were to capture territory up to the East Bank of the Ichogil canal and destroy bridges on the Ichogil canal. The additional battalion was primarily placed for the destruction of the bridges. In Phase 2, 7 Mountain Brigade, less a battalion,

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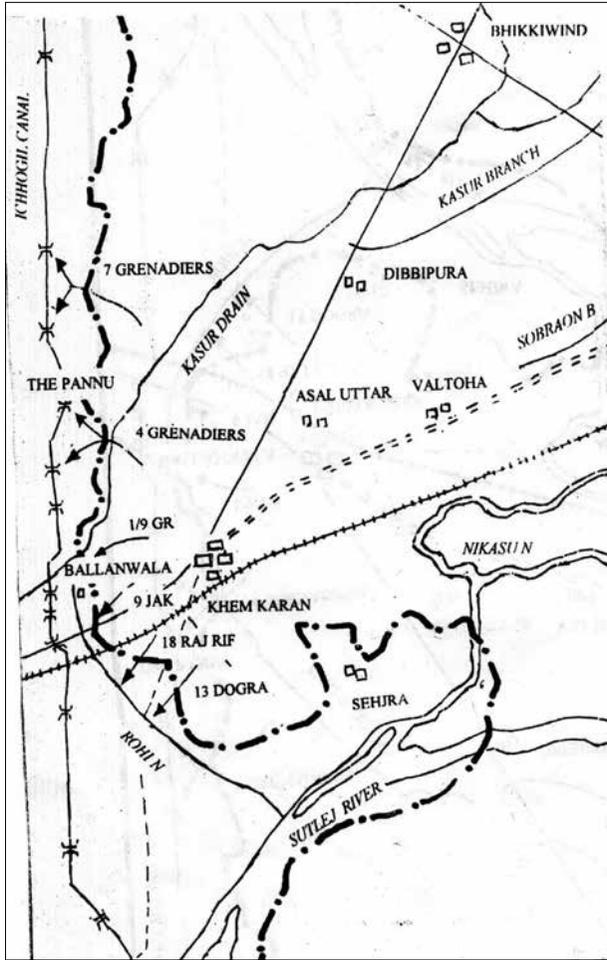
with one squadron of Deccan Horse was to secure east of Ichogil canal from Ballanwala to the bridges north of Theh Pannu.

The Battle

62 Mountain Brigade reached Valtoha from Ambala at 2200 hours on September 5, 1965. They were launched into operations at 0500 hours on September 06. The brigade captured its initial objectives. 13 Dogra captured its objective by 1100 hours. A company of 18 Rajputana Rifles occupied Shejra Bulge. 9 Jammu and Kashmir Rifles succeeded in taking the bandh on Rohi Nala. Phase 2 of the operation under 7 Mountain Brigade was launched at 0830 hours on the same day. 4 Grenadiers was given the task of capturing the Pannu bridge on the Ichogil canal. The objective was about 11 km from the area where the battalion was assembled at Dibbipura. The battalion launched the attack at 0830 hours. The Pakistanis detected their move and shelled them effectively with artillery. As regards armour, two tanks of the Deccan Horse joined them at the forming up place, while the third one was stuck at Kasur Nala. The troops waded through knee-deep water but despite all odds reached the objective by 1000 hours. They were unable to blow up the bridges as the Field Company had not turned up and efforts to blow up the bridge with recoilless guns failed.

Meanwhile, 1/ 9 Gorkha Rifles failed to capture Ballanwala. The Pakistanis were initially unbalanced but gradually regained their composure and counter-attacked all positions, resulting in permission being given by General Officer Commanding 11 Corps to 4 Mountain Division to readjust positions and adopt a defensive position astride Khem Karan- Bhikkiwind in Area Asal Uttar. The withdrawal took place on September 07, and our troops were able to dig defences and lay mines. The three field companies laid mines and the areas to the south and west of the divisional defences were flooded. Pakistan allowed the division to prepare its defences methodically by not disturbing it on September 07.

Fig 1



Enemy Offensive Plans

Pakistan had a bold plan to be launched through this sector to reach the bridges at Harike and Beas which would give it multiple options of threatening Amritsar, Jullundur or Delhi. It is also apparent that the Western Army was not certain of the location of Pakistani 1 Armoured Division which was positioned at Kasur ready to spearhead the offensive into India's critical bridges on the Beas river. Force level applied for the operations comprised 1 Armoured Division with three armoured brigades, with the armour component comprising Patton tanks

The delay in D-Day assisted Indian 4 Mountain Division to prepare defences, lay mines and undertake flooding south of Valtoha.

and the combat commands and the reconnaissance regiment equipped with Chaffee tanks. The M 47 and M 48 Patton tanks were the latest tanks of that period. They had good sighting systems and stabilised gun platforms enabling them to engage targets at a range of 2,000 m. Further, they had infrared sights and were capable of operating by night. The Indian armoured regiments were mostly equipped with Sherman tanks. These could engage targets up to 800 m and had no night sights. There was one Armoured Regiment from

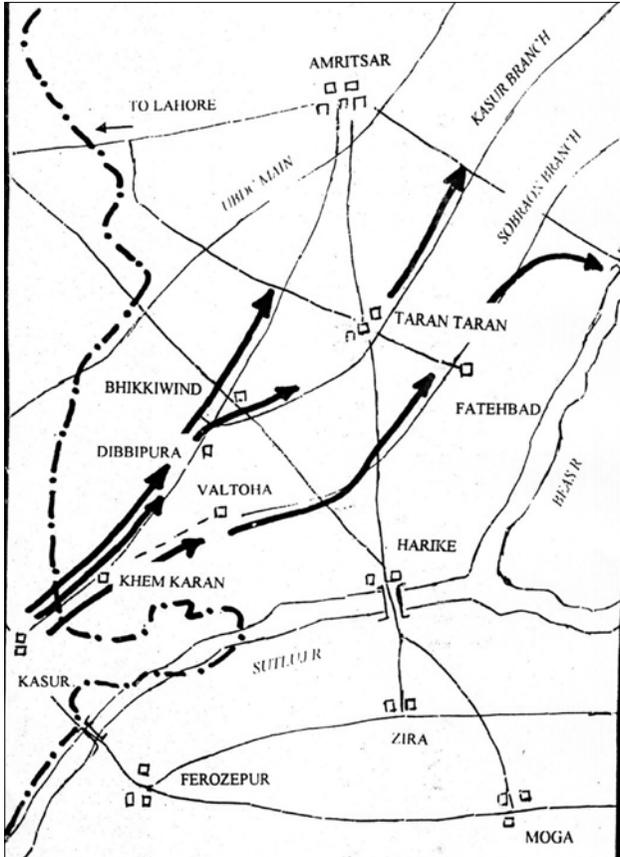
2 Armoured Brigade which had Centurion tanks that could match the Pattons in range. Indian Reconnaissance Regiments were equipped with AMX light tanks. All our tanks were of World War II vintage and had no night sights.

Pakistan's Offensive Plan

The Pakistani offensive was to be launched in two phases. Phase 1 entailed 11 Infantry Division to establish a bridgehead across the obstacle system in the area of Khem Karan by first light D plus 1. In Phase 2, 1 Armoured Division was to break out from the bridgehead in three axes. The first was by 4 Armoured Brigade with two armoured regiments and a motorised infantry battalion along Valtoha-Fatehabad and then astride the Sobraon branch canal, to capture the bridges of the Beas. The second axis was 3 Armoured Brigade with two armoured regiments and an infantry battalion along Khem Karan-Bhikkiwind-Taran Taran astride Kasur branch canal, to capture Jandiala Guru as also cut off the Grand Trunk road. The third axis entailed providing flank protection by 5 Armoured Brigade with one armoured regiment and an infantry battalion advancing west of axis Kasur – Khem Karan- Bhikkiwind. The arrows in Fig 2 indicate the projected offensive by 1 Armoured Division.

The D day for the operations was initially September 07, 1965. It was delayed to September 08. The delay, as per the Pakistanis, was due to the damage caused to the bridge on Rohi Nala. India attributes the delay to the success of operations by 11 Corps and effectiveness of artillery fire. The delay assisted 4 Mountain Division to prepare defences, lay mines and undertake flooding south of Valtoha.

Fig 2



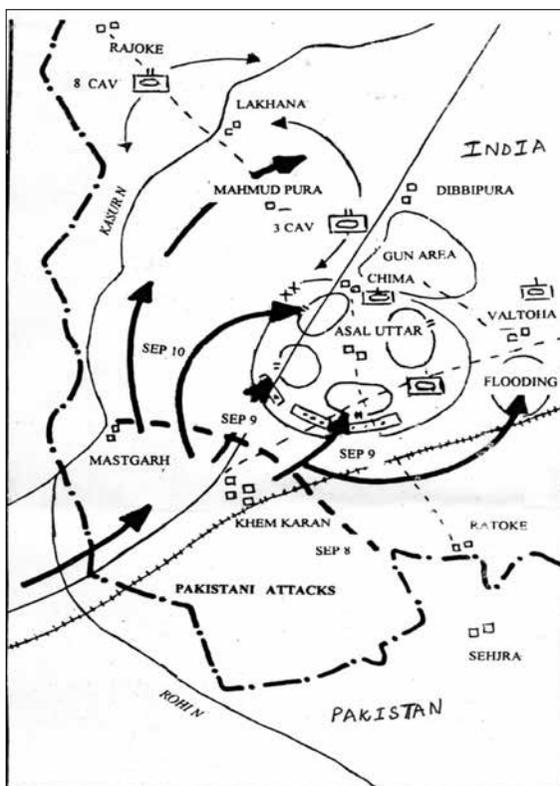
Deployment of 4 Mountain Division

The deployment of units of 4 Mountain Division was as shown in Fig 3 below. 18 Rajputana Rifles was deployed in the area south of Asal Uttar covering Axis Khem Karan- Patti; 1/9 Gorkha Rifles in area Road Track Junction covering Axis Khem Karan- Bhikkiwind and 4 Grenadiers in area south of Chima covering Axis Khem Karan- Bhikkiwind provided depth to 1/9 Gorkha Rifles. 9 Jammu and Kashmir Rifles provided depth to 18 Rajputana Rifles. The remnants from 7 Grenadiers and 13 Dogra were used to strengthen the battalion defended areas. As the units had been operating for about 72 hours, the effective utilisation was reduced to approximately four infantry battalions. Deccan Horse was deployed forward of the defences to the southeast of the divisional defences to be redeployed as the

battle progressed. The two regiments of 2 Independent Armoured Brigade were deployed effectively. The headquarters were placed at Dibbipura. 3 Cavalry was deployed south of Dibbipura and west of the Divisional Gun Area. In as much as 8 Cavalry was concerned, a squadron was located at Valthoia. The rest of the regiment was located a few kilometres northeast of Valthoia.

Ingenuity pays a lot in winning a battle. 4 Mountain Division realised that the terrain would impose little restrictions to move of armour. A crucial step was taken to breach Rohi Nala and the distributary canals to flood the area to the south and southwest of the divisional defended sector. This would automatically impose restrictions on the move of enemy armour. The delay of a day in launching the operations gave 4 Mountain Division valuable time to chalk out a plan to tackle Pakistani attacks with courage, guile and fortitude. Fig 3 indicates the details of the divisional defended sector and the ensuing Pakistani attacks.

Fig 3



The Critical Battle

The Pakistanis launched their offensive at 0830 hours on September 08. The bridgehead operations were undertaken as a reconnaissance in force with two squadrons of Chaffees and one squadron of Pattons. Under cover of artillery fire, the advancing columns moved within 900 m of the Indian defences. At this point, they were engaged by tanks of Deccan Horse. The Pakistani armour broke up into smaller groups and tried to infiltrate into the Indian defences by carrying out an outflanking manoeuvre. At one stage, 1/9 Gorkha Rifles, 9 Jammu and Kashmir Rifles and Headquarters 62 Mountain Brigade were surrounded. Utilising standing crops, the tanks were engaged by Deccan Horse, medium guns and tank hunting teams. Deccan Horse managed to destroy 11 tanks while losing four of their tanks. Three other tanks were damaged by medium guns and tank hunting parties. Such heavy losses compelled the Pakistanis to retreat. The Pakistanis, despite possessing night fighting capabilities, did not attack by night and gave a chance to the Indian units to regroup and be ready for the next assault.

The next attack was launched by Pakistani units after a considerable gap at 1130 hours on September 08. The attack was led by a regiment of Pattons, a squadron of Chaffees and a motorised battalion of the Pakistani 4 Armoured Brigade. They attacked 1/9 Gorkha Rifles and 4 Grenadiers. The attack was partially successful in 1/9 Gorkha Rifles location but unable to make headway in 4 Grenadiers. The enemy again attacked 4 Grenadiers at 1200 hours. Despite some of their trenches being overrun, the battalion with its anti-tank gunners comprising Subedar Mool Chand and Company Quarter Master Havildar (CQMH) Abdul Hamid knocked out four tanks. The enemy attacked again at 1400 hours but lost two tanks. The armour tried to outflank the divisional sector from the north but this was countered by the prepositioned tanks of 3 Cavalry ably deployed by Brig Theograj, Commander 2 Armoured Brigade.

On the night of September 08, at 2100 hours, the enemy attacked the defended area of 18 Rajputana Rifles with armour and infantry. The tanks were disabled on the minefields and effectively engaged by the artillery. Pakistan used limited sorties of its Air Force which had negligible impact on the overall situation. Attacks were made at dawn on September 09, along both the axes. Two tanks were blown up on the minefield and another was destroyed by the recoilless gun of 4 Grenadiers. During the afternoon, the enemy made an attempt to outflank from the southeast but failed as they got bogged down in the flooded area at Valtoha and were destroyed at leisure. Later, fierce armour attacks from three directions were undertaken on 18 Rajputana Rifles. The battalion, artillery and

The main offensive of Pakistan's 1 Armoured Division and 11 Infantry Division was blunted by shrewd planning and determined response.

Deccan Horse resisted and held them for some time before they overran the trenches and were subjected to the anti-tank fire of all battalion weapons. In the battle, some Pakistani tank Commanders who had their heads out of the cupola were killed and the battalion dug in its heels, compelling the Pakistanis to disengage by 2200 hours. There were numerous tank and human casualties.

By September 10, the Pakistanis were in a desperate situation. They tried to outflank the defences from the west with two regiments of Pattons and a squadron of Chaffees with a motorised battalion. They were encountered by the tanks of 3 Cavalry and 8 Cavalry that were camouflaged in the sugarcane fields. Further, 4 Grenadiers was attacked with a battalion of infantry and a few Patton tanks. The tanks managed to overrun the forward trenches. CQMH Abdul Hamid who had been shifted to the anti-tank platoon, destroyed three tanks and was shot by the fourth tank. For this act of gallantry, he was posthumously awarded the Param Vir Chakra. The attack on 4 Grenadiers failed, and at 1530 hours, the Pakistani outflanking armour charged on Mahmudpura and they were decimated by the Centurions lying in wait, crushing Pakistan's 1 Armoured Division. On the evening of the same day, an attempt was made on the eastern axis by enemy armour penetrating close to Headquarters 62 Mountain Brigade and 7 Grenadiers, which fought relentlessly, compelling withdrawal by enemy armour at 2200 hours. On September 11, 8 Cavalry spotted some Pattons near Mahmudpura. These were engaged and the crew fled. Many Pakistanis, including the Commanding Officer of Pakistan's 4 Cavalry, were captured in the sugarcane fields. Asal Uttar was a great victory for 4 Mountain Division. Pakistan had suffered a crushing defeat due to the resolute stance of the Indian troops. It lost 97 tanks, including 72 Pattons; 32 tanks were captured in running condition. Some of the tanks had been moved only for 300 km. India in contrast lost only five tanks.

Lessons

The Battle of Asal Uttar was the biggest tank battle fought after World War II. The major lessons are enumerated below:

- Strategic planning must be bold while employing an armoured division. Pakistan had correctly appreciated the situation and made a workable plan to capture the bridges of the Harike and Beas, thereby threatening Amritsar

and Jullundur as also cutting off the Grand Trunk Road heading towards Delhi. However, poor, execution coupled with the bravery of Indian soldiers, thwarted their plans.

- Speed is the essence of mechanised operations. The Pakistanis delayed their D day by 24 hours, giving time to 4 Mountain Division to prepare their defence with two-third of their strength and also deploy the corps reserve comprising 3 Cavalry and 8 Cavalry of 2 Independent Armoured Brigade.
- The man behind the weapon is more important than the weapon itself. The Pakistanis had the Patton tank which had night fighting capabilities but were unable to handle it effectively. Deccan Horse and regiments of 2 Independent Armoured Brigade were adept in handling Shermans, Centurions and AMX tanks which were of World War II vintage.
- In assaults led by armour, infantry must move with armour and not be separated. This leads to tanks falling prey to anti-tank weapons which was craftily exploited by CQMH Abdul Hamid of 4 Grenadiers.
- Senior Commanders must have faith in their Commanding Officers. The Western Army Commander Gen Harbaksh Singh did not carry out mass sackings after the Ichogil operations and directed 4 Mountain Division to defend the Khem Karan area to thwart the operations of Pakistan's 1 Armoured Division.

Conclusion

The Battle of Asal Uttar was the turning point of the 1965 War. The main offensive of Pakistan's 1 Armoured Division and 11 Infantry Division was blunted by shrewd planning and determined response. 4 Mountain Division foiled Pakistan's grand strategy by timely actions and tactical skills coupled with raw courage. The battle proved that the man behind the weapon system was the greatest asset to an army and not the weapon itself.

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