

The Battle of Hilli: Tactical Lessons

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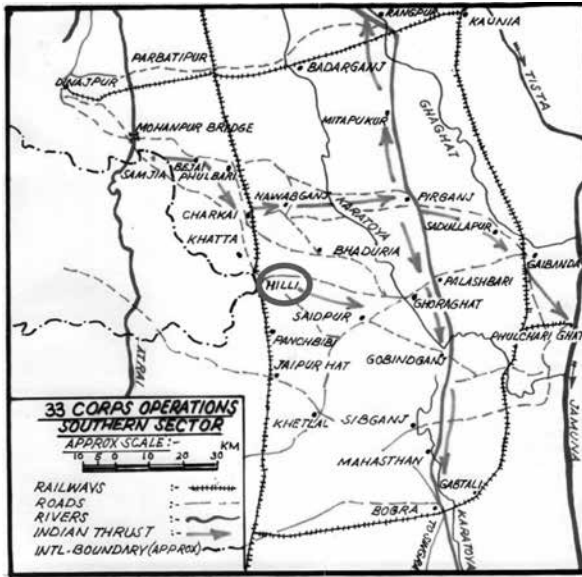
General

The Battle of Hilli was inarguably the most savagely fought battle of the Indo-Pak War of 1971. As observed by the then Army Commander, Eastern Command, Lt Gen JS Arora, PVSM, “*Hilli was the bloodiest battle in the then East Pakistan*”. The operations of Hilli comprised two battles: the first Battle of Hilli was fought from November 22 to 24, 1971, and the second from December 10 to 11, 1971, although the final surrender took place on December 18, 1971.¹ The first battle was much more fierce in comparison to the second one, since it was fought before the Indo-Pak War was officially declared on December 03, 1971, and the morale of the Pakistani forces defending Hilli at that time was high.

Indian Force Composition

20 Mountain Division, which was tasked for the operations in Bogra Sector was commanded by Maj Gen Lachhman Singh Lehl, VrC, a hero of the 1947 Indo-Pak conflict. 20 Mountain Division constituted 66 Mountain Brigade, 165 Mountain Brigade, 202 Mountain Brigade and 340 Mountain Brigade (all infantry formations) besides 3 Armoured Brigade, 471 Engineer Brigade and two artillery brigades augmented by 33 Corps Artillery. 202 Mountain Brigade was assigned the task of capturing Hilli, a strategic border town on the western side of the East Pakistan border.

Fig 1



The Brigade Commander of 202 Mountain Brigade was Brig Farhad Bhatti, VSM, former Commanding Officer of 4 Grenadiers, which had repulsed repeated attacks at Assal Uttar in the 1965 Indo-Pak War. Out of the three infantry battalions under 202 Mountain Brigade, 8 Guards was assigned the task to capture the northern defences of Hilli in the form of village Morapara with 5th Battalion of the Garhwal Rifles as the reserve unit. 22 Maratha Light Infantry, the third battalion of 202 Mountain Brigade, later captured Biagram, north of Hilli. For the attack on Morapara by 8 Guards, a medium artillery regiment less a battery, two field artillery regiments, a light battery and a squadron of 63 Cavalry with T-55 tanks were in support. Lt Col Shamsher Singh, who was awarded the Mahavir Chakra (MVC) for his role in the operations at Hilli, was the Commanding Officer of 8 Guards

Layout of Hilli

The international border divided Hilli town into two parts, with the Pakistani railway line running along the north-south alignment. The town was on the Indian side, while the Pakistani side was sparsely populated and consisted of a number of villages with open paddy fields. The villages of Basudeopur, Chandipur, Moaoana and Morapara were located around Hilli. 205 Infantry

Brigade of the Pakistan Army was holding the defences in the Hilli complex. Hilli was held by 4 Frontier Force with one Reconnaissance and Support Platoon of 34 PUNJAB, six field guns of 80 Field Regiment, three M-24 tanks ex 29 Cavalry, two jeep-mounted anti-tank recoilless rifles, one platoon of the East Pakistan Civil Armed Forces and 50 Mujahids.² The Pakistanis had prepared and stocked their defences and strengthened them over a protracted period of time. The Pakistan Army's 4 Frontier Force manning these defences was the erstwhile pre-partition regiment of India's then Army Chief, Gen Sam Manekshaw. All in all, the enemy was very well entrenched and was awaiting the Indian assault.

The First Battle of Hilli

The main objective of the Indian Army was to capture Bogra, thereby cutting off Pakistani forces in the north from the rest of East Pakistan. The best way of reaching Bogra was through Hilli. The attack was launched by 202 Mountain Brigade on the night of November 22/23, 10 days before India and Pakistan formally declared war. Prior to the midnight attack on November 22, the Indian artillery pounded the Pakistani defences, however, it was later discovered that the Pakistani defences were so well fortified that only an odd bunker had collapsed due to the artillery fire. At around 0100 hours, under the cover of artillery bombardment, the assault commenced with leading two companies of 8 Guards. Murderous machine gun fire was coming from the well entrenched defences of the Pakistanis as the troops approached the objective. The assaulting Company Commanders of 8 Guards were indeed the epitome of grit and courage and led from the front, exhorting their men to follow them. They were always at the head of their companies, encountering mines, wire obstacles, booby traps and waist deep water. The hand-to-hand combat continued throughout the night of November 23/24, with the situation still being fluid.³

Bitter fighting continued during the night as the Pakistanis managed to retain control of most of Morapara, with the Guards holding only a small pocket. By the morning of November 23, the situation was uncertain, with the Guards running out of ammunition and the enemy carrying out intense shelling. The heavy T-55 tanks got bogged down in the paddy fields and were, thus, not able to provide valuable fire support, which, if available, would have turned the operations in the favour of the attacker. However, it was clear that some element of the Guards had a tenuous hold in Morapara; but had to withdraw under intense fire and shelling and, along with the rest of the battalion, organised itself at Naopara and kept engaging the enemy.

Towards dawn, Brig Bhatti ordered 5 GARHWAL to capture a locality from which the Pakistanis had been supporting Morapara. In a gallant assault, the battalion captured the enemy locality. Throughout the day on November 23, a stalemate continued. On the night of November 23/24, all the three infantry battalions of 202 Mountain Brigade carried out probing actions by vigorous patrolling and commando raids. All attempts to achieve a breakthrough from the north and west met with stiff enemy resistance. However, by first light of November 24, the Guards managed to secure a foothold on the eastern side of Morapara and exploiting the opportunity, the Commanding Officer, Lt Col Shamsher Singh quickly reinforced this foothold.

The enemy launched a counter-attack to evict this foothold; however, the Guards stood firm and repulsed the enemy attempts with the support of artillery and tank fire of the light PT-76 tanks of 69 Armoured Regiment, which had fetched up by now, and were much more manoeuvrable in comparison to the T-55 tanks. Thus, Morapara finally fell at 1000 hours on November 24; though the casualties strewn on and around the objective told their own story and reflected the savagery of the action.⁴

The Second Battle of Hilli

The second Battle of Hilli commenced on the night of December 10/11, 1971, and was fought by 202 Mountain Brigade, with the Guards fighting most of the actions along with the intrepid Marathas who captured Biagram in the north of Hilli, and Garhwalis cleared the enemy from the Hilli complex. The Guards fought five battles in Chandipur, Dangapara, Hakimpur, Pak Hilli and High School. The Guards Roll of Honour in the two Hilli battles included 70 killed, including four officers, and two Junior Commissioned Officers (JCOs). The Pakistani Brigade too suffered heavy casualties, believed to be one officer, six JCOs and 100 other ranks. Comparison with own casualties brings out the stark difference between the quality and style of the officer leadership of the opposing Armies. With the assistance of the Engineer Field Platoon and Pioneer Platoon, it was ensured, in the face of enemy fire and mines and booby traps, that the body of every Indian soldier was recovered and given a befitting cremation.

Tactical Lessons

Fighting in Built-up Area (FIBUA)

Hilli was a classic example of converting a built up area into classical defensive

position. The Pakistan Army had created a safe belt by destroying villages close to the international border and evacuating their population, so that the Mukti Bahini could not get any shelter. The abandoned villages had been fortified to create formidable obstacles. Each house was fortified into a strong point with bunkers having two layers of Over Head Protection (OHP). Morapara, the stronghold of the Pakistani defences in Hilli, with its mud houses, had been converted into solid bunkers using railway tracks and sleepers and was sited for all round defence. It was linked to Chandipur and Basudeopur with communication trenches for movement of reinforcements. The fields around the villages had not been attended to since April and had become marshy, with waist deep water at places providing a natural obstacle for the movement of tanks. The water-logged and overgrown paddy fields and the fortifications were buffered by mines, booby traps and barbed wire. A large number of heavy machine guns were suitably deployed, some even on top of houses and trees. Thus, the Pakistani troops could contest the Indian assault till the Indians decided to bypass Hilli and establish a block in its rear. The Pakistanis then withdrew the forces in Hilli to avoid being cut off and to defend the route to Bogra.⁵

Flexibility and Initiative

Relentless offensive action, quick identification and exploiting of opportunities, determination, superior leadership, decentralised execution under the initiative of junior leaders, cooperation with other arms, flexibility and surprise and display of personal bravery in the face of a tenacious enemy were some of the hallmarks in the capture of Hilli, which is accepted to be one of the fiercest battles fought between the Indian and Pakistani Armies in 1971.

Innovative Application of Force and Mind

The conversion of a group of villages into a formidable defended locality was innovative planning by the Pakistanis. This brought out an important lesson that, although raw courage and unflinching determination can bring success, frontally assaulting strong defended localities can be very heavy in terms of own casualties as witnessed in the first Battle of Hilli, with limited success coming the Indians' way. Innovative methods need to be employed to keep own casualties low and still achieve one's aims. The same was evident later when Indian commanders decided to keep Pakistani troops at Hilli engaged with a smaller force and then bypassed the location and established a block in its rear. This action forced the Pakistanis to relocate their troops and, thus, paved the way for own advance towards Bogra.

Correct Grouping of Forces

The Battle of Hilli will go down in the annals of the history of the Indian Army as one of the most ferocious battles ever fought by a gallant band of soldiers from highly motivated units. It speaks volumes of the tenacity and fortitude of the units that, despite heavy odds and fighting a protracted battle for over 42 hours, emerged victorious at Hilli. However, the large number of casualties suffered may have been possibly reduced had the light PT-76 tanks been grouped and deployed with the first assaulting companies of 8 Guards instead of the heavy T-55 tanks which were unable to negotiate the paddy fields.

Leadership, a Decider between Victory and Defeat

Victory is achieved by the side where leaders are courageous men, rise above dangers and display epic heroism and self-sacrificing gallantry to leave glorious and inspiring examples for posterity. Only great leaders and commanders have the qualities which make others follow them at the risk of death to achieve the aim. This was indeed exhibited by both the attacker as well as the defender. The brave officers and men of 8 Guards exhibited exemplary courage to take on a defender with nearly impregnable defences. There were some tense moments in the attack on Morapara when the men crossed the Forming Up Place (FUP) and a large number of enemy machine guns, tactically deployed on the flanks, opened up. It was here that the officers leading these men stood their ground in the face of a hail of murderous fire and set personal examples of unstinting courage and commitment. The motivation levels of the assaulting companies of 8 Guards can be gauged from the fact that three officers of the leading company attained martyrdom. Young leaders at all levels displayed exceptional levels of leadership. Junior leadership was at its very best; as leaders fell, others sprang up to lead the assault against a well entrenched enemy.

Psychological Warfare and Belief in Cause

Another important lesson learnt was that the morale of the troops is contingent on the cause. The Pakistani forces defending Hilli during the first battle, were well entrenched and were awaiting the Indian assault as they still believed in their cause and the actual war had still not commenced. However, when the second Battle of Hilli started, it was December 10, and the Pakistani forces had already started losing ground to the Indian forces, and were wary of the operations of the Mukti Bahini, besides realising that owing to their unjust cause, the local support of the populace was not with them and, hence, the Pakistani force's will to fight had dwindled.

Conclusion

The Battle of Hilli may well be considered a classic example of sheer guts, sacrifice and determination to win against all odds by a gallant band of soldiers of highly motivated units of the Indian Army pitted against a well entrenched adversary. It was, indeed, a hard slogging match between the Indian Army units and the defenders. This battle was also unique in that it began before the official start of the India-Pakistan War in 1971 and continued even after the formal surrender of Pakistan. Unlike other battles in the east where the Indian Army dominated, the Pakistan forces gave a good account of themselves before the combined might of the Indian military and the Mukti Bahini fighting for a just cause brought an end to this battle. The battle was also significant as it involved great personal valour on both sides. This was highlighted by the fact that soldiers on both sides won their nation's highest military honours.

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Notes

1. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Battle_of_Hilli. Accessed on December 24, 2015.
2. <http://www.dawn.com/news/1222553>. Accessed on December 25, 2015.
3. Brig Prakash Tularam Ghogale, "The Battle of Hilli", in *In Quest of Freedom* (Bloomsbury Publishing India Pvt Ltd, 2015).
4. OFFICIAL 1971 WAR HISTORY © History Division, Ministry of Defence, Government of India, accessed from <http://www.bharat-rakshak.com/LAND-FORCES/Army/History/1971War/PDF/>
5. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Battle_of_Hilli. Accessed at 1735 hours on December 24, 2015.