

Alpine Glory but at a Cost

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Gen VP Malik, the Army Chief during the Kargil War has publicly said that Tiger Hill was the greatest victory of the Kargil War, 1999.

Introduction

TIGER HILL WAS ABOUT GUTS, GRIT, HEROISM AGAINST DAUNTING ODDS

Its loss signalled the beginning of the end for Pakistan.

Due to Pakistani 12 Northern Light Infantry (NLI) held Tiger Hill's sheer dominance over Dras-Kargil highway movement, capturing this precipitous peak, spread 1 km north-south/2.2 km east-west, was accepted by General Mohinder Puri and allotted to 192 Mountain Brigade/Brigadier MPS Bajwa. 18 GRENADIERS/8 SIKH/Team HAWS were nominated; IAF/Artillery providing admirable fire-support.

18 GRENADIERS commenced 031900 hours assaulting along the eastern/northeastern spurs; 8 SIKH providing the firm-base. Later, the SIKHS boldly launched repeated attacks to capture India Gate/Helmet; thereby cutting off 12 NLI/SSG operational-logistics. Grenadier/Ghatak Yogendra Yadav, PVC, repeatedly showed death-defying courage/grit in scaling heart-stopping gradients despite multiple wounds; destroying successive bunkers/refusing evacuation till Tiger Hill capitulated.

The 100 word write-up above covers the essence of the Tiger Hill battle as displayed in the Punjab War Heroes Memorial and Museum, Amritsar. The Kargil Gallery (Gallery No 8) is about to be commissioned and reflects the achievements of the main protagonists that made the recapture of Tiger Hill a feat that has never before been achieved in the annals of alpine warfare. The write-up was written by this writer during the 2015-18 period when he and his research team not just provided research content for 2,500 years of Punjab's heroism since the

BCE period but, more importantly, drew conclusions from the Kargil War that showed how India fought back, from being surprised to gaining a position of dominance best represented by the recapture of Tiger Hill.

In a personal recall published on July 26, 2002 titled “The Capture of Tiger Hill: A First-Hand Account”, Army Chief Gen VP Malik wrote about the concluding hours of the battle in a gripping manner:

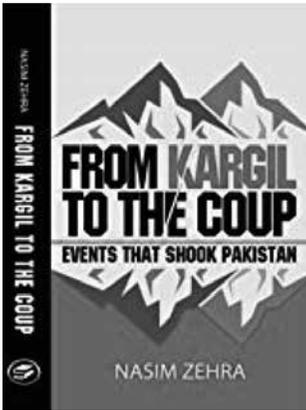
In New Delhi, I remained anxious all night till Lieutenant General Krishan Pal, GOC 15 Corps rang up at 0600 hours on July 4, 1999, to inform me that 18 GRENADIERS had reached the Tiger Hill top and heavy fighting was going on... We decided to wait for confirmation from General Puri (GOC 8 Mountain Division). At 0730 hours, General Puri confirmed that the enemy would not be able to dislodge 18 Grenadiers from the Tiger Hill top. By then the Defence Minister was on his way to Amritsar, where I gave him this exciting news. I also informed the Prime Minister...

July 4, 1999, was an important date because the Prime Minister of Pakistan, Mr Nawaz Sharif, was to meet President Clinton. We made sure that the whole world came to know about the capture of Tiger Hill... It was a hard psychological blow to the enemy who, to start with, on July 4, denied even the existence of such a feature and labeled the entire operation as a figment of the imagination. In reality, this victory broke the back of the entire Pak resistance. In India, a wave of jubilation and relief overtook us. This was the greatest victory of the Kargil war.

Why Kargil? A Pakistani Analyst Explains Some Nuances

It is almost 20 years since Kargil (and, therefore, its climatic battle, Tiger Hill, happened) and, by now, the story of its key battles is pretty much known in India. What is not so well known is the Pakistani story of why Kargil unfolded in the way it did, from a small, local foray into what, through “mission creep” and excessive Pakistani jingoism and misreading of the Indian martial psyche, became a war which ended up being fought on a razor’s edge against a nuclear backdrop.

Let us get glimpses of the Pakistani thinking through Professor Nasim Zehra, a Pakistani national security specialist and prominent journalist. Ms Zehra holds a Master’s degree from the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy, USA, and has been a Fellow of the Harvard University Asia Centre. She is on the Visiting Faculty of Quaid-i-Azam University, Islamabad. Her 2018 book *From Kargil to the Coup: Events that Shook Pakistan* is well written in the main and clinically documents the Pakistani Kargil plans codenamed Operation Koh-e-Paima (Op KP) and the



military and political environment in which Op KP ballooned out of Pakistani hands into national shame, peaked by the loss of Tiger Hill. She writes that the operation went through six phases:

- **Euphoria Phase:** In which Musharraf's favoured/planted clique of Generals planned the operation in secrecy. The euphoria was premised on the belief that the 1998 nuclear blasts had made Indian war-like responses to Pakistani intrusions irrelevant and deterred them from stopping Pakistan from cutting off Leh/Siachen.
- **Excitement Phase:** Where the only enemy that the NLI intruders faced was the weather, not the Indian Army which had vacated the higher posts in the winter.
- **Expansion Phase:** Where Pakistani planners allowed "mission creep" to take on greater operational challenges in seemingly unoccupied Indian territory.
- **Encounter Phase:** Which began in early May 1999 and left both sides initially confused: Pakistan, because no resistance was expected, and India, because of lack of awareness of the extent/depth of Pakistani intrusions.
- With Pakistani euphoria having altogether disappeared by early June (it was the June 21, 1999, Indian Tololing victory which turned the tide for India) Ms Zehra writes, "These iconic (Pakistani) combatants—on hostile peaks in vicious weather, with depleting supplies, deafening sorties; unending mortar fire—were lodged in imperiled zones, but with no victory formula."
- India had hit back with overwhelming military, political and diplomatic resolve, and put the Pakistanis under severe military and psychological pressure from disrupted supply routes. This led to the **Exit Phase** due to eminently practical military reasons and severe international pressure.
- Zehra writes that in a June 12, 1999 meeting, the Pakistan Prime Minister sought ways for making "an honourable escape" including a "back-channel" settlement attempt with Delhi. This finally resulted in the infamous (for Pakistan) flight to Washington by the Pakistani Prime Minister to meet US President Clinton, where, in the shadow of the "*Tiger Hill has been captured and Pakistanis routed*" announcement by India to the world media, Pakistan was compelled to capitulate "under US cover".
- This led to the **Effect Phase**, when, on the same day (July 4, 1999), the US statement issued by the White House announced Pakistan's exit from Kargil.

India, in the measured response by the Army Chief after this announcement was made, had conveyed to Pakistan and the world, “We are no more a soft state and we are not a push-over when it comes to national security concerns.”

An Overview of Op Koh-e-Paima Conduct Leading to Tiger Hill

Ms Zehra says the operation was launched in mid-October 1998, with Musharraf appointing his clique of Generals [all of whom had served on the Line of Control (LoC)] within hours of taking over as Army Chief on October 7, 1998. The operation was hinged on Maj Gen Javed Hasan, whom Musharraf retained as Commander, Force Command Northern Areas (FCNA) with the 11 battalion-strong NLI (of which he was the Inspector General) and 80, 62 and 323 Infantry Brigades reporting to him. He was not just the main planner but also the executor.

Using a three-dimensional terrain map, the operation was presented at the FCNA Headquarters (HQ), launched to cover the area from Zoji La to the Chinese border. By December 1998, the Pakistani troops had begun crossing over in seven directions using 3, 5, 12, 13 NLI and Sindh Regiment troops; the far smaller earlier intrusions having exploded due to “mission creep” bravado. Formal approval of Army Chief Gen Musharraf was obtained on January 16, 1999, well after the operation was under way. The unprofessional take-away line of the Commander, FCNA, at the briefing, as per Ms Zehra, was: “*Hindustani kadi jang nahi laray ga ... pi ja'ay ga*”, (“The Indians will not fight back”) as a response to the scepticism that some Pakistani officers showed about the briefing content.

Tiger Hill ... A Victory Like No Other

Called Point 5062, dagger shaped Tiger Hill at 16,608 feet was the most important objective just north of Dras that India recaptured during Op Vijay. Its occupation by 12 NLI/SSG, assisted by artillery and engineer support, had given Pakistan complete dominance over the strategic road connecting Srinagar-Leh and Siachen connectivity, besides allowing interdiction of all troop and war material movement. Due to its overwhelming importance, efforts to retake it had been made right from the beginning. After the initial surprise had been overcome, 8 Sikh, moved from Udhampur in early May 1999 and was diverted to Dras. It was launched to capture Tiger Hill but with inadequate preparation, poor intelligence and without acclimatisation and clothing, suffering heavy

casualties. Post the failed effort, it was ordered to remain in contact around Parion Ka Talab on the southeast fringes of Tiger Hill and take time off to prepare for another assault.

At the same time, there was frenzied activity all around this feature, Point 4875 and Tololing, to downsize the Pakistani intrusions and regain free strategic movement which the intrusions had made almost impossible. To keep the enemy's head down, intense shelling was carried out almost non-stop for weeks preceding the final assault on all key features held by Pakistan, including Tiger Hill. The artillery's contribution is best summed up in another 100 words written for the Amritsar War Museum by this writer and his research team:

AT KARGIL, THE GUNNERS WERE A KEY FORCE-MULTIPLIER FOR VICTORY

The Gunners brought 300 gun-tubes/rockets to war across 105 mm/130 mm/155 mm/160 mm calibres/GRAD BM-21/Rocket Regiment firing 2, 50,000 rounds/projectiles—and triumphed at Kargil.

Facing daunting Himalayan challenges in on/off-road movement/deployment/gun areas/dumping/wagon lines, they met all with panache, integrating their fire with Infantry assaults and fighter operations through the spectrum of initial losses, stabilization, proactive assaults; thereafter resounding success for which the Gunner's contribution was unparalleled. Improvisation/Jugaad in using Bofors for 'indirect/direct' fire; drastically reducing safety distances without fratricide losses; establishing single grids/obtaining met data from live firing/maintaining sustained ROF/firing three second lines/night/using cargo ammunition resulted in effective pre-bombardment/covering fire/ destruction of enemy positions.

Ms Zehra, in her book, describes the Pakistani perspective on the shelling thus: "... By mid-June, it was raining fire and brimstone onto Pakistani troops occupying posts on the Tololing and Tiger Hills. Op KP was facing sharp military reversals and singularly on account of accurate and timely delivery of TNT. The Gunners' fire assaults became the principle battle-winning factor. An Indian account of the intense and lethal use of artillery was that 9,000 shells were fired the day Tiger Hill was regained. This intensive artillery firing sustained through the three weeks was uncommon, almost unparalleled in military history. This intensity of artillery fire devastated both men and mountains."

A contributor to the overall Kargil War victory and certainly to Tiger Hill was the Indian Air Force (IAF). Another 100 words from the War Museum read:

**OUR TOP-GUN KARGIL AIR WARRIORS SHOWED THEY CARED...FOR
SOLDIERS ON TERRA FIRMA**

Op Safed Sagar (26 May-12 July 1999) started, commenced with the Ides of May... Post successful dawn strafing/rocket runs by MiG-21/23/27 aircraft, 27 June brought MiG-27/MiG-21 flameouts, capture/death of brave-heart pilots, followed by a Mi-17 helicopter loss with crew. IAF girded its loins with 460 AD missions using MiG-29/21M/27ML from Srinagar/Avantipur/Udhampur for day/night all-weather domination of the gaunt Himalayas.

ACM Tipnis ordered Paveway-2 LGB/1000 pound GPB armed Mirage-2000's to strike Jubar/Mushkoh/Tololing/Point 5203/Muntho Dhalo Pakistani positions/logistics bases, helping turn the tide. Effective 24 June onwards, Tiger Hill was struck with Mirage-2000 LGB's; thereafter Dras/Batalik/Muntho Dhalo. The seemingly aloof, haughty aviators showed they cared...

Tiger Hill drew to closure when General Office Commanding (GOC) 8 Mountain Division Maj Gen Mohinder Puri informed the Army Chief at HQ 56 Infantry Brigade, Dras, during an operational review, that he was about to launch 192 Infantry Brigade under Brig MPS Bajwa to retake Tiger Hill and his attacking troops were being positioned for this climactic assault.

The attack plan was for 18 Grenadiers to assault the formidable feature, with 8 Sikh skillfully providing the firm base and 2 Naga ready to assist when called for. The Grinders had desperately been looking for a chance to make up for not being able to take Tololing earlier and an understanding GOC gave them the much needed psychological boost that finally gave them that edge which won the them Tiger Hill ... an urge, an inner calling to make amends. Twenty-two batteries, already pounding the razor back peak for weeks, once again let fly, with Bofors guns leading in direct engagement. Beginning at 1900 hours, the multi-direction attacks began in freezing rain, commencing with a 12-hour near vertical southern/northeastern climb using fixed ropes. 18 Grenadiers achieved surprise and made initial gains, yet the assault stalled near the top under heavy resistance. The Pakistanis were unable to read the Indian intent to attack the top from the easterly direction because the Sikhs were advancing along the westerly and obvious direction for which the Pakistanis had equipped them well. They were deceived even as the southern/

northeastern prongs of 18 Grenadiers went on 80 degree slopes to edge on to the top.

Lt Balwan Singh, MVC, heading the Ghatak Platoon of 18 Grenadiers on the hazardous northeastern probe, used amazing alpine climbing skills to reach the top at pre-dawn. Catching the NLI, already pulverised by shelling and aircraft hits of the previous days with shock and awe. In the brutal close fighting that occurred, both sides lost heavily as no quarter was asked for or given. The bravery on display was best exhibited by Grenadier Yogender Yadav, who, though seriously wounded in his initial Ghatak charge, being Lt Balwan's lead Ghatak, hung on, performing his death defying Param Vir Chakra (PVC) act despite more gunshot injuries. The Indians were on top but fighting heroically to ensure Pakistani capitulation.

At this critical point, the success of the operations hung in balance and the Pakistanis on the western approach that linked 12 NLI on Tiger Hill peak to their logistics, seemed to be stabilising the situation much to 8 Sikh's chagrin. Sensing the loss of initiative, Maj Ravinder Singh of 8 Sikh launched a daring attack. He and a detachment of 52 soldiers climbed up the side of the adjoining Western Ridge (Helmet; India Gate), splitting the Pakistani defence on the night of July 3. The bravehearts, left with no food or medical aid for 48 hours and counting and with depleting ammunition, held off several fierce counter-attacks. Most of them attacked without cold weather gear, and many of the wounded died from exposure. This was where Capt Karnal Sher Shah of Pakistan also fought to his brave end, dying at the Sikh trenches and being honoured later, with Pakistan's highest gallantry award.



Brig Kushal Thakur (centre), CO 18 Grenadiers with Grenadier Yogender Yadav, PVC

Tiger Hill finally fell on July 8. The Grenadiers lost 44 soldiers, and many were injured, with the Sikhs matching them in bravery and casualties. Tiger Hill had been won but at huge cost.

A post-war apex meeting in Pakistan's General Headquarters (GHQ) summed up what the war brought to Pakistan, as per Ms Zehra. Gen Musharraf, his May 16, 1999 pizzazz and panache, when his buzzword was "win-win", gone, coldly said: "It's all over."

It was.

Tiger Hill had broken the Pakistani backs.

Maj Gen **RS Mehta**, AVSM, VSM (Retd) is currently Chief Mentor Sarathi Museum Consultants; a consultancy which he set up in January 2018 along with his Research Team and which is now creating a War Museum for a famous old Infantry Regiment. He can be contacted at raj_s_mehta12@yahoo.com