

Indian Wars - As Seen Through Soldiers' Eyes (Based on their personal experiences)

My Experiences in 1947-48 War in J&K

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Background

On 20 February 1947, the British Government announced its intention to transfer power not later than June 1948. On 3 June 1947, Lord Mountbatten, a man in hurry and the new Viceroy, announced the partition of British India into the Dominions of India and Pakistan by 15 August 1947. The Partition of India resulted in splitting up of the Indian Army and consequently the division of Royal Indian Artillery (RIA). In early 1946, the gunners had reorganised the RIA into one class regiments - 8½ out of 27 Artillery units went to Pakistan. Large scale communal disturbances on both sides hastened the evacuation of Indian Artillery units out of Pakistan.

During October 1947, Pakistan organised tribals invaded Kashmir. The Indian Army undertook to throw out the raiders at short notice. The defence of the besieged towns of Poonch and Skardu, defence of Naushera and recapture of Jhangar and the capture of Zoji la and Kargil will forever remain the epics of this campaign. I had the good fortune of taking part in most of these actions.

Introduction

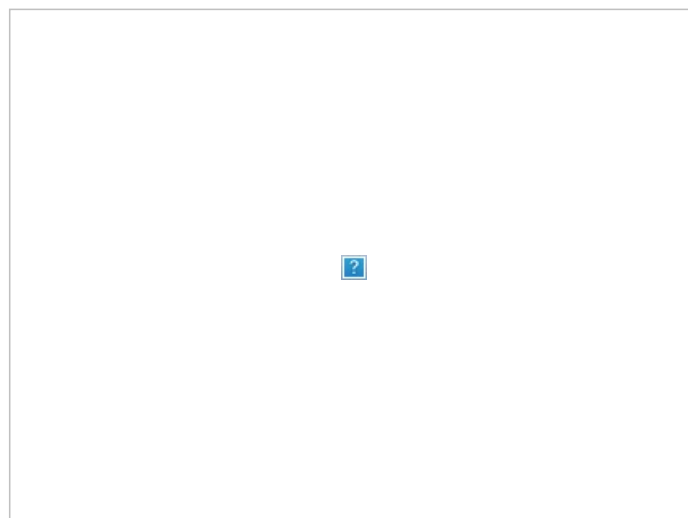
On 12 August 1947, my British Commanding Officer (CO), of the Punjab Mussalman RIA unit located at Rawalpindi, sent me on two months annual leave, during which I got posted to 11 Field Regiment at Pune. On arrival, I reported to Lieutenant Colonel (later Major General) SJ Sathe, the first Indian CO of the unit. He instructed me to leave for Pathankot the next day as OC Advance Party. By the end of the October 1947, the Regiment arrived at Pathankot and I was appointed as 'A' Troop Commander of 30 Field Battery.

I had imbibed the essential ingredients of artillery fire during the strict and harsh war time training and exposure to actual war in Burma. The sole function of an Observation Post (OP) officer was to bring timely and accurate fire on the enemy. This was possible only if the vehicles moved the guns and ammunition to the gun areas in time by day or night and the wireless and line communications between the OP and guns worked without fail.

Therefore, immediately after getting appointed as the Troop Commander, I located my Troop VCO (Viceroy's Commissioned Officer), later designated as Junior Commissioned Officer (JCO) and in a mix of Hindustani and English conveyed to him that I would inspect the vehicles, signal equipment and guns starting at 9 AM next morning. It was late afternoon when I finished with the guns and their tools. Later on arrival at Jammu, the Regiment and 'B' Troop left for Srinagar, leaving the Battery HQ and my Troop at Jammu. We received orders on 09 December to report to 1st PATIALA Battalion at Akhnur, which had been ordered to recapture Chhamb.

Capture of Chhamb - A Model for Battalion in Attack

(Refer to Sketch P). Lieutenant Colonel (later Brigadier) Bikram Dev Singh, DSO, MBE, CO, 1st PATIALA (later redesignated 15 PUNJAB), gave his orders on the evening of 9 December for the capture of Chhamb on 11 December. His plan of attack was to deploy a company after Last Light of 10 December at Chapreal, 5 kms upstream from Chhamb crossing, on the east of Manawar Tawi to guard his rear and right flank against enemy interference. Two companies were to cross the Tawi after midnight 10/11 December north of Mandiala while one company and a troop of armoured cars (7 Cavalry), under Major Sukhdeo Singh, MC, the Second-in-Command, were to 'demonstrate' a frontal attack on Chhamb from the direction of Palanwala. The CO with the defence platoon and sniper section was to move east of the Tawi in line with the advance of the two companies.



My Troop carried out night deployment of guns west of Palanwala after Last Light on 10 December;

meanwhile, I joined the Battalion Commander. After midnight I, along with my OP party, moved with the CO. After about one hour, I found that my men, carrying heavy wireless, batteries were finding it difficult to keep pace with the CO's party. As was customary in the Burma Campaign, I sought some porters to carry my wireless batteries. The CO grunted his annoyance and asked, "How many porters do you need?" I asked for two and he gave me three civilian porters who were carrying reserves of mortar and machine gun ammunition and digging tools of the battalion.

On daybreak wireless silence was broken by the two companies, to report that they were in Mandiala area. About 9 AM, we heard a few stray shots south of Mandiala followed by a report that two enemy snipers had been killed. About 10.30 AM, a couple of rifle shots, from a grassy area about 400 yards from us, went over our heads. The sniper section deployed around us, while the defence platoon probed towards the source of the firing. After a few minutes, we saw a man on a pony galloping away from us. The sniper on our right, missed him firing from a kneeling position. The CO let out an abuse at the sniper, whose second shot felled the man while the horse galloped off to disappear in the scrub and high grass.

Wireless silence having been broken, the CO assumed a tight control over the companies on the move towards Chhamb. The CO's party, including my OP party reached Mandiala; the companies, advancing from Mandiala got involved in a firefight with the enemy in Chhamb. The CO ordered Major Shamsher Singh, the right Company Commander, to cut-off the enemy behind Chhamb village. Soon the company was held- up by heavy LMG and rifle fire and I was asked to engage the enemy. On seeing the first ranging round Shamsher spoke excitedly on his wireless set in Punjabi, "Gola dushman di gichy te laga, isi jagah fire karo" (the shell has hit the nape of the enemy, fire at the same spot). It was planned to bombard the objective for five minutes "On Call" from Shamsher. On my suggestion, it was agreed that 'a smoke shell be fired from one gun to indicate the end of fire'. As the fire started and the assault company moved forward under the artillery covering fire, the CO ordered his Second-in-Command to attack the enemy in Chhamb village with vigour and a bold use of the armoured cars from Palanwala direction. Some of the shells, on hitting the tree tops, produced an airburst effect over the enemy trenches and demoralised him. Soon a "Verey Light" signal indicated the capture of the objective.

In the meantime we had moved forward, from where we could see the 7 Cavalry armoured cars in the river Munnawar Tawi area, moving astride the Palanwala - Chamb track. As the leading armoured car climbed up the narrow track, we heard a loud explosion followed by a wireless broadcast by the armoured car VCO, "Saale topkhana ne apna hi armoured car barbad kar dia". I told the CO, "It could not be an artillery shell. Our guns are firing about 1000 yards away from the armoured car and in any case the guns had not been firing at the time of the armoured car blast". The CO changed direction towards the scene of the explosion, where we discovered that an anti-tank mine on the track had blown the rear tyre of the armoured car. The pioneer platoon was summoned but a 3 tonner was also blown-up on another mine, before the pioneers arrived to clear two more mines.

Thereafter, the CO climbed the double storey burnt house of Honorary Captain Bhola Singh, a retired Gunner VCO, and gave out the deployment orders to his companies, guns and machine guns from the window of the first floor of the house. I still remember the attack on Chhamb as 'a model for a battalion in attack' under effective control of the CO.

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