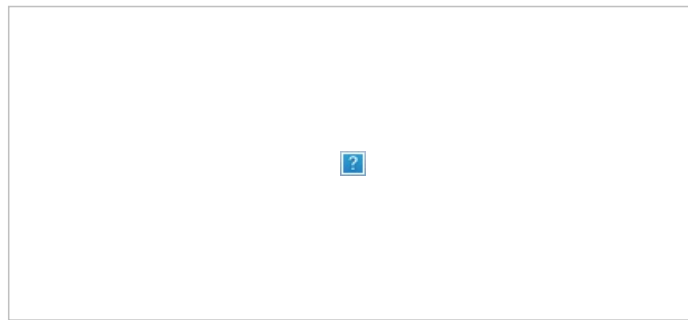


## Chhamb 1965 - The Artillery Battle

### Brigadier MS Chowdhury, VSM (Retd)\*

The area Chhamb – Jaurian is bounded by the Kalidhar Range in the North and River Chenab in the South. Both in 1965 and 1971, Indian Army was caught unprepared in this sector, suffered reverses and lost valuable territory. This state of unpreparedness in two successive wars appears to be inexplicable. The area consists largely of flat plains. Flank protection is provided by hills in the North and River Chenab in the South. The only obstacle is River Manawar Tawi which is fordable by tanks in dry season. The sector is in close proximity to the important Pakistani bases of Sialkot and Kharian. The Indian town of Akhnur with its vital bridge is within easy reach. In short it was the ideal area in which Pakistan could have flaunted its newly acquired Patton tanks, artillery and other military equipment under the SEATO and CENTO treaties. From India's point of view this sector posed many problems – which should have made us all the more wary. It did not! Later we learnt that one of the tasks given to Pakistani forces was to capture Akhnur Bridge earliest.

Taking advantage of the Indian debacle of 1962 and a visibly weak political leadership after Pandit Nehru, Pakistan under the leadership of Ayub Khan and advised by Zulfikar Ali Bhutto planned and launched Operation Gibraltar in the valley followed by Operation Grand Slam in the Akhnur Sector. Pakistan's infiltration operations- Operation Gibraltar- had failed. The area of Haji Pir bulge had been captured by us. It was clear that Ayub Khan must respond. This took the form of Operation Grand Slam. And as Pakistani preparations proceeded, UN observers did alert India. Our response was somewhat less than the minimum required. 191 Infantry Brigade was deployed in the Sector. 14 Field Regiment was located in Pathankot and was under XV Corps. It was placed in direct support of 191 Infantry Brigade. Later one troop (4 guns) of a medium battery was also made available.



The following narration is a record of the personal experiences of Captain MS Chowdhury [later Brigadier, VSM (Retired)] as Adjutant and observation post officer of 14 Field Regiment during the 1965 operations, in the Chhamb – Jaurian Sector. Please refer to Sketch P.

14 Field Regiment had been located in Punch from 1960 onwards. On completion of my Young Officers Course I reported to the unit in Dec 1961. Life was difficult as our picquets were on very high features approachable only along steep pathways. This was a difficult start to a career but an ideal grounding for the future.

Towards the end of 1964 excitement built up. We were due for turnover and were to be moved to Pathankot, which did come to pass in Jan 1965. However, the euphoria of a peace posting dissipated speedily as a representative from station headquarters showed a scrubby piece of ground where we were required to pitch our tents. After some haggling we were allotted two houses for captains. One was for the CO and the second one was to be used as a mess. Besides from Mar onwards we started receiving alerts putting us on four hours notice. In effect we had exchanged a field posting for a posting which had all the tensions of a field area with the added irritations of peace time soldiering. Large working parties were required on a daily basis and there was insistence on starting the much disliked family welfare centre.

In Mar 1965 our somewhat less than idyllic existence was sharply interrupted as we were rushed to and deployed in Akhnur. The area of the Rann was hotting up. Wisdom prevailed and this spat was peacefully resolved and we were back in Apr. By now I had taken over as Adjutant and my first challenge was to find a suitable reply to a letter on my table demanding an explanation for not conducting the laid down training cycles.

In the succeeding few months we were able to settle down well and get into the rhythm of training cycles. But this was too good to last. In Jul we rushed back to Akhnur to redeploy in the same gun area vacated by us earlier. This time our intelligence was bang on. Pakistan began infiltrating Gibraltar Force (9000 men) across the Cease Fire Line on 1 Aug from Kargil to Chhamb.

The tasks allotted to these infiltrating columns are well known. As far as we were concerned the infiltrators began to create confusion, disrupt communications, lay ambushes and attack isolated locations and troops. Our response was astounding. As soon as any information from any source, whether reliable or not, was received, some troops with three guns were rushed post haste to the area of reported infiltration. After a few hours of combing the area and guns firing indiscriminately, this force was pulled back. This happened over several days. Each night the CO, unmindful of the risk (the infiltrators were laying ambushes along the roads) and fatigue accompanied one selected column in order to be with the men. This was well appreciated. Our one notable success was liquidating of some individuals and the capture of one infiltrator. He would have been barely 20 years old, tall and tough with no sign of fear or fatigue on his face. He wore a green shirt and white salwar. He spoke confidently and said, "Saab ek request hai. Humko izzat ki maut dena".

Round about 8 Aug the regiment was moved forward. Regiment less one battery was deployed below Mandiala Heights and one battery near Dewa. From the new locations we continued our random firing in response to

any request made. One such request was, "fire at that grove just to rattle them". All this while not one shell was fired at us from the other side. This made us complacent and we failed to take normal commonsense precautions. Later we learnt that Pakistan was concentrating 4 Corps Artillery against us in addition to the artillery already deployed and dumping huge amounts of ammunition.

While not one Pakistani gun opened up, their observation post (OP) officers in civilian clothes infiltrated into our area, established a grid, carried out silent registration and selected several advantageous OP positions. They also established contact with selected locals.

15 Aug 1965, a Day of days ! It was pleasant, sunny and cheerful. Happily, with no premonition of the morrow, a Mandir function had been planned. Our Mandir squad was active and on a high. It was planned to utilise our piggery resources for the evening meal along with a special issue of rum. At about 0730 hours without the slightest warning a ferocious artillery assault hit 191 Infantry Brigade with 14 Field Regiment being singled out for special treatment. The enemy had concentrated four batteries of medium guns (155 mm howitzers), four batteries of field guns (105 mm guns), possibly one super heavy gun battery along with a huge amount of ammunition including a disproportionate quantity of airburst shells against three batteries of the obsolescent 25 Pounder guns with limited ammunition. Controlled by the infiltrated OP officers and an airborne observer, this artillery assault of about three hours was a demonstration of masterful technical gunnery and artillery tactics. Each position was dealt with telling accuracy - the air burst ammunition inflicting considerable additional casualties. The gun position at Mandiala was in shambles. Guns were damaged, ammunition was exploding, gun towers were on fire and bedlam reigned supreme. The gallant second in command (2IC), who is in charge of the gun position, unmindful of his own safety rushed about attempting to restore order but to no avail. I put all my efforts to succour the wounded. One of the gun position officers had been hit by a flat saucer sized splinter (possibly from a super heavy shell). The front half of his face had been neatly sliced off. Squashed human parts and splashed gore were a ghastly sight.

My own 'H' shaped command post had received a direct hit (there was no overhead cover much less an overhead protection). One technical assistant and an operator on one side of the 'H' were blown to bits. On the other side one technical assistant, one operator and I got away with minor injuries. I was temporarily blinded.

One battery was deployed near Dewa to support operations in the hill sector to the North. I went there on 14 Aug to see how additional protection could be provided to the guns and ammunition. On the nearby Dewa feature preparations were in full swing for the Brigade Commander's Orders the next day. Even under the prevailing circumstances the 'chuna-geru' routine had not been overlooked! Brigadier Masters, Commander 191 Infantry Brigade, was a fine soldier who retained his poise in the all pervasive chaos. Did the enemy get to know about the 'O' group at Dewa? On 15 Aug with uncanny timing and accuracy the 'O' group and the guns were hit. The Brigadier was killed probably by a direct hit from a medium shell. There were other casualties and the gun position was battered with several guns receiving direct hits and the ammunition blowing up.

The ensuing chaos was incredible. Positions were abandoned, command and control broken with no effort to restore order succeeding. In his book, 'September 65', Pakistani Brigadier AAK Chaudhri writes, "Fire was directed with such telling effect that this regiment (14 Field) never recovered from the punishment". It would be difficult to dispute this assertion. Yet the unit continued to function against great odds.

Intermittent shelling continued for the next two days. We vacated many localities, some of which were promptly occupied by the enemy. Additional troops were rushed in to recapture our lost localities. I was the OP officer with 2 SIKH which recaptured two lost localities. It was amazing to see the CO, Colonel Khanna, lead his men by the sheer force of his personality. He led - literally led - his unit in the recapture of Red Hill and Green Hill. Each time the battalion went to ground due to heavy fire, the brave CO was on his feet urging his men on. That is how he lost his life a few days later and was awarded the MVC. One learnt how deceptive initial impressions could be. Colonel G S Sangha (CO 3 MAHAR) and Major Bhaskar Roy (20 LANCERS) appeared to be easy, genial and jolly nice officers. Both were to go on to win the MVCs. But as it often happens in battle, there were many many acts of gallantry which went unrewarded. In the next few days, all the lost positions had been recaptured by us.

We were facing a shortage of manpower, ammunition, spares and defence stores. I was tasked to go back to Pathankot to see what could be done. My arrival at Pathankot had been well advertised. Immediately on entry into the cantonment I was mobbed by families and rear parties of several units. It appeared that gross rumours were afloat, such as, 'CO had gone over to Pakistan; the whole brigade had been wiped out; and that Pakistani forces were racing towards Pathankot, having taken Akhnur'. It appeared that the main culprits behind these rumours were the men who had left their positions and had fled to Pathankot. That day I learnt yet another important lesson pertaining to operations: "rumours are a natural corollary to the fog of war". Very active measures are required to control the corrosive effect of this menace.

The final result of this trip was positive. Not only did I return with some men of my unit, but other units as well; plus the prized booty of defence stores! Much later I was amazed to read in General Musa's book, 'My Version', that 'Indian defences in Chhamb were strongly held, with barbed wire, were heavily mined and the automatics were located in three tiered concrete pill boxes'.

The unit was reorganised and redeployed with the regiment less one battery in area Chhamb (near Mandiala) and one battery further North to support the hill sector. Soon thereafter we received the bad news that the CO (in his substantive rank) and the 2IC had been removed. A wave of dismay swept across the unit. It was clear that they had been made scapegoats since the Brigade Commander was not within easy reach (having probably occupied his place in Valhalla).

Enemy artillery continued to batter us. Our gun area had acquired such a bad reputation as the most dangerous spot on earth that very few visitors ventured upto it. Even senior officers who came to castigate our performance, did so from the safety of our wagon lines (WL). This is a secure area where the gun towing vehicles are

located to prevent them from being hit.

In view of these unhappy circumstances I had devised a unique way of briefing those who required it but were not inclined to savour the delights of an infamous gun area. A mirror map was kept in the WL and briefing was carried out on the line from gun area to WL using this map.

Towards the last few days of Aug enemy artillery action decreased to a tolerable level. After the travails of the past few weeks the euphoria was delightful. Pleasant sun shine, carefree swims in Manawar Tawi, an odd shikar and good quality rations made our existence highly cheerful. But what were our intelligence organisations doing? Chhamb was an ideal area for operations for Pakistan with the vital prize of Akhnur within easy reach. Pakistan was smarting from the failure of its infiltration operation and could not have been expected to idly let bygones be bygones.

In the early morning hours of 1 Sep we were once again subjected to a ferocious artillery assault. And yet again we were caught with our pants down. Enemy artillery fire lasted for a good three hours after which came the assault by infantry and armour. Soon enemy armour was swarming in the area. Later it broke through at Mandiala and came close to HQ 191 Infantry Brigade. Frantic calls for air support were made at about 1000 hours. The response materialised at around 1800 hours in the shape of four aircraft. These aircraft may or may not have annoyed the enemy but they hit us well and proper. Armour, guns and ammunition were attacked and damaged by them. Later all four aircraft were shot down by Pakistani aircraft within our sight. During the next two days of battle the IAF did not make an appearance.

By the evening of 1 Sep troops in the area were ordered to withdraw to Akhnur. Our unit withdrew in good order and was redeployed in the area of Akhnur.

On 4 Sep the situation was:-

- (a) 10 Infantry Division which was under raising was made responsible for this sector.
- (b) 41 Infantry Brigade had partially prepared its defences at Jaurian and was already under heavy enemy pressure.
- (c) 28 Infantry Brigade which was the Corps reserve was at Fatwal Ridge (about 10 km West of Akhnur) preparing a hasty delaying position.
- (d) Area of Kalidhar Ridge was strongly held by us.
- (e) 191 Infantry Brigade was preparing defences in the area of Akhnur.

At Akhnur we got the news that 161 Field Regiment at Jaurian had abandoned their guns and had been decimated. From where we were, we saw the men streaming back in disorder. There was strong criticism against the unit. And there was sharp unease in our unit. We were probably the next who would face the fire storm. We pondered over the issue of how to control the situation in the face of the ferocious artillery assaults we had been subject to inside semi prepared defences. We got plenty of uninformed criticism from the senior officers and very little inspirational leadership. The main reliance was on threats of sacking and court martial. This technique of leadership of "You better do it ..... or else" is not the best thing to do, especially when troops are facing an adverse situation in battle.

6 Sep was a happy day. Our own offensives commenced and enemy artillery activity declined perceptibly! That very night we were ordered to advance and recapture the lost area upto Chhamb. This operation could not make much headway due to heavy enemy fire. Thereafter 10 Infantry Division was reorganised and plans cast afresh.

By the time cease fire was declared we had succeeded in recapturing most of the lost area. However, parts of Kalidhar were still held by the enemy. We were involved in the recapture of these areas post cease fire. Thus 14 Field Regiment which was among the first units to be involved in operations was among last ones which continued to operate even after cease fire. But we got precious little credit for it.

In summation, my own view is that we had been soundly trounced by our Pakistani counterparts. Not only they had better equipment, they used it to best effect. They executed the principle of surprise and concentration in a masterful way - we being the main victims. They showed superior technical gunnery chiefly in predicted fire and accuracy. Occupation and vacation of gun areas was expertly done. Though short of ammunition, which was imported and its resupply in jeopardy, they fired enormous quantity of ammunition to make a telling impact in the initial battles. They appeared to have an abnormally large quantity of airburst ammunition. We were lucky in that quite a few rounds had failed to explode. They showed special skill in the delivery of harassing fire to make it acutely damaging. The emphasis was on a jagged pattern of firing, irregular timing, skillful choice of targets and in firing the right quantity of ammunition. At the end of few days quite a few men in the gun positions were nervous wrecks. We had a job on our hands in preventing the spread of this infection. They used more modern means of communications to great advantage vis-à-vis our good old Radio Set 62. The survey was speedy and accurate which added to the efficacy of predicted fire. Another area where great damage was done to us was in preparatory bombardment. This fire was delivered before every assault and it relied chiefly on the heavy artillery.

Their chief forte was in counter bombardment with retaliatory fire hitting our guns speedily and with accuracy. They had the advantage of availability of gun locating radars which were supplemented by flash spotting, sound ranging, survey, silent registration and innovative and daring OP officers. Such was the effect of their counter bombardment that at a critical stage of battle 41 Infantry Brigade was denied vital fire support. Every major operation began with a heavy counter bombardment and then the fire was shifted to the objectives. Subsequently, during lull in battle and between phases, our guns were again hit repeatedly.

In all honesty it has to be admitted that Pakistani air OP and ground OP officers were a class apart. They

showed high skill in the direction and control of artillery fire. They worked in an unconventional manner which we were not able to emulate. So high was their resolve that they were willing to operate outside the protection of Geneva Convention. Many wore civil clothing and established contact with the locals. They lived in abandoned houses and called for fire from atop trees and houses. They showed special skill and spirit in operating as stay behind OPs. This is not to suggest that our OP officers showed less courage. But they did lack that feeling of elitism as well as training in tactical aspects of gunnery. Up to this point our emphasis had been largely on the technical aspects of gunnery.

Without doubt artillery was their key arm and it did outclass us by a good margin. Happily by 1971 this trend had been reversed and we battered them round for round and in most cases established fire superiority. We had learnt our lessons well!

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Journal of the United Service Institution of India, Vol. CXLIII, No. 592, April-June 2013.