

Preventing a Breakout at Beriwalla

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Abstract

On 03 December 1971, Pakistan launched preemptive strikes on the Western Front as they felt the defence of the East lay in the West, whereas the Indian strategy in the Western Theatre was defensive. One sector where the Pakistani troops launched a surprise attack and gained initial success was Fazilka which lay just across Pakistan's strategic Suleimanke Headworks. Thereafter, there was a bloody battle fought in this area, with numerous counter attacks being launched, which prevented the ingress from being expanded and witnessed determination, courage, and sacrifice by the troops of both sides. This article analyses both the strategic and tactical aspects in great detail and brings out the relevant lessons, some of which are even applicable today.

Introduction

Fazilka, is a historical town 85 km south-west of Ferozepur and 200 km south of Amritsar. It is approximately ten km from the International Border and situated on the rice growing and cotton rich belt of the state. Before partition, the town was the biggest wool market in undivided Punjab. It lies close to the Suleimanke Headworks in Pakistan which tap the remaining waters of the Sutlej, the longest river of Punjab. From here, complex of canals emanate and irrigate sandy tracts of Pakistan. Being at the border, Fazilka has had to bear the brunt of the two Indo-Pak wars of 1965 and 1971. In 1971, Fazilka assumed a special significance because of the potential threat posed by Pakistan's concentration of forces, by its Army Reserve South comprising 1 Armoured Division and one or two Infantry Divisions in the general area of

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Montgomery-Okara. This force could be employed to develop thrusts towards the sensitive depth areas. Being a vital communication centre from where road and rail arteries ran to Ferozepur, Malout and Abohar, its capture would offer Pakistan the options to develop thrust lines into Indian Territory. It was, therefore, imperative that its defence be assured at all costs.

Foxtrot Sector

In April 1971, Foxtrot Sector—now re-designated as 16 Infantry Division—was raised in Ambala by Major General Ram Singh. It was to assume responsibility of the Ganganagar – Fazilka area and moved to its operation location at Abohar in August. 18 Cavalry commanded by Lieutenant Colonel HS Mann equipped with T-54 tanks and 70 Armoured Regiment commanded by Lieutenant Colonel RK Dewan equipped with SS11B1 Missiles (less A Squadron under Major VS Mehta which was placed under command Southern Command and deployed in Kutch), were placed under its command. These Regiments were part of 14 (Independent) Armoured Brigade.

14 (Independent) Armoured Brigade commanded by Brigadier Reggie Christian was part of 11 Corps which was responsible for the defence of Punjab, the brigade though having four Armoured Regiments, a Mechanised Infantry battalion, a Missile Regiment, and an Independent Recce Squadron was completely spread out with only 64 Cavalry commanded by Lieutenant Colonel (later General) BC Joshi remaining with it at Fatehgarh Churian.

Foxtrot Sector was responsible for the area from BP 225 near Jalalabad to the District boundary between Ganganagar and Bikaner — a very vast frontage. It had 67 (Independent) Infantry Brigade at Fazilka commanded by Brigadier SS Chaudhary, 51 (Independent) Parachute Brigade commanded by Brigadier EE Rozario at Ganga Nagar and 163 Mountain Brigade less a battalion commanded by Brigadier (later Lieutenant General) Sushil Kumar which had been moved from 3 Infantry Division to Suratgarh.

18 Cavalry and 70 Armoured Regiment moved to the operational area in August 1971 and in addition 4 (Independent) Armoured Squadron ex Deccan Horse equipped with Sherman tanks commanded by Major Sucha Singh moved from Mhow and was placed under command 67 (Independent) Infantry Brigade at

Fazilka. 67 Brigade had 3 ASSAM, 4 JAT commanded by Lieutenant Colonel (later Major General) RK Suri (who was awarded a Vir Chakra for this action) and 15 RAJPUT, on its orbat. Two battalions' worth of the Border Security Force was holding BOPs along the border with about two companies in reserve in each case.

18 Cavalry was at Abohar with A Squadron under Major HM Patel at Ganganagar, B Squadron under Major Baldev Bawa at Fazilka under command 67(Independent) Infantry Brigade and C Squadron commanded by Major (later Brigadier) Ranjit Talwar at Abohar, these moves were completed by end October when the Army Commander Lieutenant General KP Candeth, visited the Sector. 70 Armoured Regiment was also at Abohar, with B Squadron less a troop commanded by Major (later Brigadier) RS Randhawa under 67 (Independent) Infantry Brigade, C Squadron less a troop under 51 Para Brigade and two troops were with 163 Mountain Brigade. Preparations included extensive recces, coordination for air support and Tactical Exercise without Troops for the defence of this Sector. As part of the overall concept of the 11 Corps defence plan, the brigade was required to organize a fortress defence in the Fazilka sector.

Accordingly, the built-up area of Fazilka town was organised into a fortress with about two battalions. 3 ASSAM was a covering force to man the strong points of Choriwala Chisti, Pakka and Qadir Baksh with one Company each. 15 RAJPUT less two companies was also a covering force in the Shatriwala area (covering the southern approach to Fazilka) with about one battalion's worth of a composite BSF formation. The Sherman squadron was deployed to cover the Muazzam approach (northwest of Fazilka), with early warning elements of about one platoon's worth in Muazzam town itself. In brief the brigade was deployed in two tiers with 3 ASSAM on the Northern portion of Sabuna Distributary with elements ahead, 15 RAJPUT less two Companies in the Central portion and a BSF battalion on the Southern portion. 4 JAT and two Companies of 15 RAJPUT were in Fazilka which had been developed as a fortress.

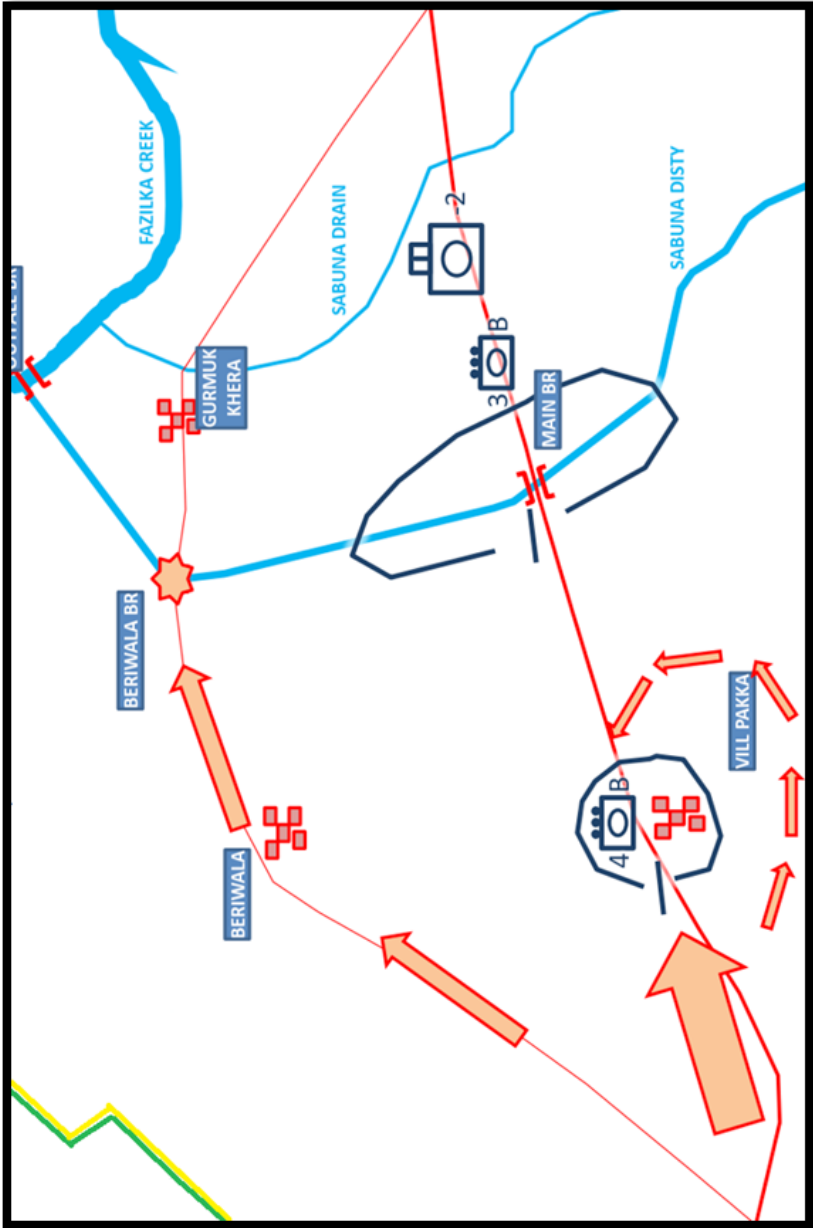
B Squadron 18 Cavalry was split, with the squadron less two troops near Fazilka town disposed southwards, and the two troops located in the Chananwala area. These plans were war-gamed

and approved by the Corps Commander, and the GOC F Sector. The brigade group moved to Fazilka on 9 October as part of the precautionary measure.

On the Pakistani side there was 105 Infantry Brigade with 6 Frontier Force (FF), 7 PUNJAB and 28 BALUCH, in addition there was a Squadron of armour and a Ranger Battalion. The main Pakistani offensive was visualised in the Ganganagar sector by their Strike Corps along with local offensive operations in selected areas by enemy holding formations. One such offensive was planned by 105 Independent Infantry Brigade Group opposite Fazilka. Pakistan had a large enclave east of the Sutlej in the area of Suleimanke Head works, “[...] which not only provided depth to the head works but also enabled her to launch an offensive into India if she so desired” (Major AH Amin). This was essential to ensure the safety of the most crucial Suleimanke head works which was just about 1500 metres from the International Boundary. The Indian strategy was to defend Fazilka at all costs, prevent enemy from capturing territory near the International Border and contain the Suleimanke Enclave.

The Conduct of the Battle

At last light on 03 December, B Company 6 FF under Major Shabir Sharif (elder brother of the 9th Pak COAS General Raheel Sharif who was later commissioned in the same battalion) launched a surprise attack and captured the Beriwalla Bridge on the Sabuna Distributary. Initial reports were received from border out posts (BOPs) that tank noises had been heard from across. At about 1800 hours, Major BS Bawa received orders to move two troops to their screen positions with the infantry. Lieutenant DS Sirohi moved to Pakka across the Distributary and one troop was moved to the bridge on road Fazilka - Pakka. At about 1845 hours, the enemy opened artillery fire and soon after last light the enemy attacked several BOPs over running Jhangar BOP which was ahead of the bridge. 3 ASSAM which was holding the defences at Beriwalla Bridge withdrew. The impression conveyed to 67 Infantry Brigade due to the fog of war was that the enemy had occupied ‘Outfall’ near the Creek, the northern most point of the distributary in an area which is the back flow of the Sutlej River. Major BS Bawa was ordered to counterattack area ‘Outfall’ and ‘D’ Company 4 JAT was placed under him. The counterattack



Pak 6 Frontier Force (FF) Attack on 03 Dec 1971

began at 2045 hours, however, as the assaulting force of a Squadron less two troops moved, they came under fire from the Beriwala Bridge area and lost two tanks near Village Gurmukh Khera and Major Bawa was also injured due to artillery shelling. However, he was ordered to ignore the enemy and move for 'Outfall'. This was a costly error. B Squadron less two troops led the assault to 'Outfall' and re-captured and secured the bridge on the creek at 0330 hours on 04 December but two tanks got bogged down and D Company of 4 JAT suffered casualties due to heavy artillery fire at the FUP.

The Attempts to Prevent Pak Breakout from Beriwala

They were now re-tasked to capture Beriwala Bridge, however due to heavy enemy fire no progress could be made and Major Bawa was hit in the forehead by a splinter and had to be evacuated, Captain RKV Reddy now took control till Major (later Brigadier) AP Bhargava, the Second-in-Command of the Regiment, assumed command of the Squadron later in the day. 3 ASSAM were in a process of stabilizing the situation on Sabuna Distributary. The exact extent of enemy encroachment was not known. While Major Rana of 3 ASSAM was moving up in a tank to indicate an enemy MMG post, the tank was hit by a direct medium gun shell. Major Rana and two members of the crew were not able to bail out before the tank went up in flames.

While the counterattack was in progress the strong point at Pakka reported an enemy attack post-midnight and all three strong points were withdrawn. This vacation of screen positions/ strong points and loss of BOP's created panic and alarm resulting in Brigadier Surjit Singh Choudhary issuing orders on 04 December 1971, at 1100h to blow up all bridges on the Sabuna distributary. The importance of retaining them for counterattacks was lost sight of. One tank remained across the Ditch cum Bundh (DCB) at Pakka, as part of the troop under command 3 ASSAM; this tank was captured by the enemy.

Engagements continued all day but by the evening, the enemy had held his ground and was occupying approximately 700 yards of the Sabuna distributary including the Beriwala Bridge intact. He had also expanded his bridge head into Gurmukh Khera village. There were only five tanks in the Squadron on road, as five were bogged down, including three which were close to defences

occupied by 3 ASSAM. Three tanks had been hit and one captured at Pakka.

Orders were also given to abandon the defences along the obstacles during the night for which B Squadron was tasked to cover withdrawal. At about 2030 hours, 3 ASSAM reported an enemy attack on their right flank; contact was established with the crew of bogged down tanks. The crew had strayed far to the left and hit the enemy defences. After a gallant fight by the troop using the machineguns of their bogged down tank, the enemy in overpowering strength captured them. Naib Risaldar Noor Mohammed Khan, who was the troop leader, was awarded with the Vir Chakra for his courage and valour in the face of the enemy.

That night A Company 4 JAT was tasked to capture Village Gurmukh Khera in Phase 1 and the Ditch cum Bundh (DCB) North of Beriwalla Bridge in Phase 2. The armour was in fire support role. However, while Gurmukh Khera was cleared by 0145 hours, the Company suffered heavy casualties at the bridge — including Lieutenant (later Lieutenant General) BS Nagal who was a leading Platoon Commander and who was injured.

Counterattacks on Beriwalla on Night 05/06 December 1971.

By the evening of 05 December, two tanks were placed in support of 3 ASSAM. They engaged the bund occupied by the enemy effectively. The remaining three tanks under Captain RKV Reddy were placed West of Sabuna Drain to support the counterattack by B Coy 4 JAT. This was led by the fearless Major Narain Singh and as per some reports he engaged in a hand-to-hand conflict with Major Shabir Sharif. Due to his courage and bravery, he was awarded the Vir Chakra posthumously. During the night several attempts were made by enemy tanks to cross the Beriwalla Bridge and tank noises were reported by A Coy 4 JAT, however, own the tank firing effectively prevented movement across the bridge. Later that night another counterattack by a company of 4 JAT was launched but it also failed. Major General Ram Singh who was close to the leading tanks was hit by a bullet in his leg early next morning. During the day tanks were employed for neutralizing MMG posts and destroying bunkers.

On 06 December, 4 JAT planned an attack on Beriwalla Bridge. Tanks of B Squadron began to engage identified enemy

targets and followed the assaulting infantry, bringing down effective fire so that the enemy could not engage any of our troops. The account of this fight was brought out clearly by Fazal Muqeen in his book "Pakistan's Crisis in Leadership. "That night (5/6 December 1971) in the counterattack the Indian tanks closed up to 20 yards of the 6th Frontier Force positions after having destroyed all the anti-tank guns in the area". The drill for calling for tank fire support was so accurate that fire could be put down within minutes of infantry calling for the same. As per an account of the battle by Brigadier Farooq Afzal; Major Shabir died on 06 December when the RCL he was engaging the tanks with was hit by a direct tank round, for his bravery he was awarded the country's highest gallantry award the Nishan-e-Haider.

Actions On 07 December 1971. On 07 Dec 1971, while trying to engage the enemy anti-tank gun Naib Risaldar Bashir Khan's tank was hit by an enemy RCL gun. Although the tank caught fire the crew bailed out. In the meanwhile another troop moved up towards the Sabuna to take on the enemy anti-tank weapons. They destroyed an RCL gun at 1100hrs that morning. However, a tank in support of 3 ASSAM was hit. The same day a Missile Detachment of 70 Armoured Regiment, commanded by Dafadar Uttam Singh, observed an enemy Sherman opposite OP bunker, approximately 1200 yards to the left of Beriwala Bridge. Sowar (Pilot) AD Varied fired an SS11B1 missile on the tank and earned the Regiment their first tanks kill. The Sherman was seen bursting into flames, post this hit. On hearing the news of a successful engagement, the Commandant, Lieutenant Colonel RK Dewan along with the Adjutant, Captain (later Lieutenant General) Kapil Vij rushed to Sabuna DCB to congratulate the crew.

Lieutenant Colonel RK Dewan congratulated the Squadron Commander, Major (later Brigadier) RS Randhawa and the missile pilot. As the envelope of fog suddenly lifted, another enemy Sherman presented itself in front of bunker. Lieutenant Colonel Dewan decided to himself direct the shoot at this tank. However, as the tank was closer than 1000 yards, the second missile fired but missed the target. Another Sherman tank in close vicinity of the target tank spotted the bunker on the DCB with the missile launcher. It fired its main gun onto the bunker; one of the rounds entered the bunker from the loophole which grievously injured all the officers inside the bunker. Sowar (Pilot) AD Varied, the gunner,

who had made history for the Regt, died on the spot due to a splinter injury. The Regiment in a short duration of three hours had drawn enemy blood and had also been blooded in war. The missile had proved its worth and successfully halted the enemy armour advance towards Fazilka. Thereafter, there were no enemy tanks seen in this area. Unfortunately, Lieutenant Colonel RK Dewan, in spite of being evacuated speedily succumbed to his injuries in MH Delhi on 17 December, he was the senior most Armoured Corps officer who made the supreme sacrifice in the conflict. The Second in Command Major (later Major General) KM Chengappa, officiated for a few days till Lieutenant Colonel (later Brigadier) KD Issar was posted in from Mhow and took over command of the Regiment on 10 December. Major (later Brigadier) RS Randhawa and Captain (later Lieutenant General) Kapil Vij were both injured.

Final Attempt to Recapture Beriwal Bridge. On 09 December, the Corps Commander Lieutenant General NC Rawlley and Major General Ram Singh visited B Squadron, which was tasked to recapture Beriwal Bridge with 15 RAJPUT. Tanks began to engage known targets and the attacking battalion made several attempts to close with the enemy. But the first light brought an end to a very gallant but hopeless effort.

Actions after 10 December 1971

On the evening of 10 December, a troop of tanks under captain RKV Reddy with a platoon ex 4 JAT went to Qabul Shah to occupy bunkers which may have fallen into enemy hands. However, short of the village they were engaged by the enemy. The troop took up fire positions to cover the area north of the creek which was held by the enemy. A section strong patrol was sent by Captain Gautam of 4 JAT to ascertain if the bunkers were held by the enemy, on confirmation that the bunkers were not held by the enemy, the platoon occupied these.

On 11 December Brigadier Piara Singh, MVC took over command of the Brigade and decided to stabilize the situation. By this time 3/11 Gorkha Rifles had also been placed under command and along with a Company of 15 RAJPUT guarded the northern approach. On 12 December they re-captured Muazzam Post and 15 RAJPUT occupied Alam Shah and on 13/14 December 3/11 Gorkha Rifles captured Ghazi Post. Lieutenant Colonel NN Rawat,

Commanding Officer 166 Field Regiment supporting 67 Infantry Brigade was awarded the Vir Chakra. The action which resulted in Lieutenant Colonel Rawat getting his Vir Chakra took place on 14 December when own troops, due to intense pressure from the enemy counterattack, started falling back. He, along with Brigadier Piara Singh, was standing on an embankment nearby witnessing the situation when reported that the withdrawing troops had left behind an anti-tank RCL gun. He thereafter along with ten men from the withdrawing battalion, 15 RAJPUT, and a platoon of 3/11 Gorkha Rifles personally led the charge on the enemy. This attack, coming from the flank was so fierce and sudden that the enemy which had a short while ago overrun the position, was thrown into confusion and fled from that area. The RCL gun was retrieved and brought back.

After suffering heavy casualties and equipment loss, A Squadron was moved to relieve B Squadron, which was sent to Ganganagar on 13 December and launched another counterattack that night. This was the fifth counterattack launched which was again unsuccessful mostly due to the overwhelming artillery support, accuracy of Pak anti-tank weapons coupled with the difficult terrain of the area. A Squadron held its positions till ceasefire and engaged the enemy locations.

Conclusion

Post 04 December, the troops took Counter Penetration positions and continuously engaged the enemy and destroyed his tanks, weapons and equipment and did not allow him to expand his Bridge Head or induct his armour. They had held off an enemy brigade attack supported by armour in the face of intense artillery fire from 03 December till 17 December on the Sabuna Distributary and did not allow the enemy to break out beyond the first obstacle.

Presence of tanks and missile detachments at either side of the breach was perhaps one of the biggest deterrents to the enemy for offensive employment of armour. Successful engagement of a tank by a missile on 07 December established the effectiveness of the weapon system and forced sufficient caution on the enemy's mind. Had there been no presence of tanks and ATGMs at Sabuna, the enemy could have gone in for a bolder employment option and used the tanks for expansion of the breach. If he had been successful, history would have been very different.

Unfortunately, all Indian counterattacks failed miserably as troops were committed piecemeal from the expected direction and over ground having a funnelling effect on the assaulting troops. These unimaginative attacks resulted in inordinately heavy casualties and eroded morale.

There are also many reasons given as to why Pakistan failed to exploit the bridgehead, one ascribed to by most analysts is the setback it suffered in Longewala forcing GHQ to sidestep troops from Army Reserve South. Another could be the presence of the Indian First Armoured Division at Kot Kapura – Malout which would have resulted in a clash between the two formations and finally is the prevention of the expansion of the breach by troops in contact.

Though there are many lessons to be learnt the major ones brought out by Lieutenant General Candeth in his book 'The Western Front' were, poor battle management to include faulty deployment on the front tier; large gaps between the front and main defences; premature withdrawal of troops ahead of the DCB; demolishing of bridges; reinforcing failures by counter attacking from the same direction (which is a cardinal sin); lack of supporting fire for counter attacks; poor reading of the battle; poor intelligence and lastly an apparent lack of coordination. There is also the larger question and that is — in view of the proximity of Suleimanke Headworks only 1500 m from the IB, should we not have had offensive plans to seize this strategic asset of Pakistan rather than being on the defensive, knowing fully well that Pakistan would be compelled to take steps to improve its defensive posture?

Amidst all this, what stood out was the determination, courage and bravery of the junior leaders and men, there was fierce and intense fighting at close quarters and both sides saw heavy casualties. The maximum casualties on the Indian side in the 1971 war in both theatre of operations were those suffered in the Battle of Chhamb by 10 Infantry Division, and the second highest were of 67 Independent Infantry Brigade at Fazilka.

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