

## Looking Back At 25 Years of Kargil: A Saga of Achieving the Near Impossible

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### Introduction

The Ladakh and Kargil Sectors have gone through a tumultuous period since independence and this region has been at the forefront of significant battles in all the wars India has fought. Twenty-five years ago, in 1999 this remote area, isolated by high mountains with hostile climatic conditions was where a military ingress by Pakistan took place across the Line of Control (LoC). The intelligence failure was compounded by a sense of disbelief in the highest echelons that Pakistan had signed the recent Lahore Declaration while its troops had secretly crossed into vacant Indian territory in difficult high altitude mountainous areas with an aggressive intent.

The eviction of the intruders was then carried out as a result of near suicidal frontal infantry attacks due to the restraints imposed by not allowing the LoC to be crossed as the aim was to prevent a wider escalation. Indian soldiers had to attack uphill over rugged, open terrain in the face of aimed fire after long arduous marches in rarefied high-altitude atmosphere. Though these assaults resulted in 527 soldiers making the supreme sacrifice as troops were not permitted to infiltrate behind enemy positions and fighter aircraft were not allowed to engage hostile gun positions, troop concentrations and administrative dumps behind the LoC.

However, by the first week of Jul 1999, the Indian Tricolour was hoisted on Tiger Hill by brave soldiers of the Indian Army by the third week of Jul was flying across all the areas where the intrusions had taken place. It was a heroic fightback against daunting odds. Accounts of their unflinching devotion to duty, relentless determination, leadership and selfless sacrifice in the highest traditions of the armed forces have left a legacy and continue to inspire future generations.

### Operation Vijay

On 03 May 1999, the locals first reported of the presence of unidentified personnel in Kargil Sector. Reconnaissance patrols were expeditiously despatched to investigate the presence of infiltrators. The magnitude of Pakistan's invasion and preparation was quickly revealed, and plans were prepared to evict Pakistani troops from the Indian side of the LoC. [\[1\]](#) To avert escalation of the conflict, the Indian government stipulated that the LoC should not be crossed by the Indian Armed Forces.

It was soon realised that the operations to recapture the ridgelines back from Pakistani regulars would be extremely difficult. Infantry assaults would have to be undertaken at very high-altitudes while facing heavy enemy fire from multiple directions. It is a well-known maxim that the mountains favour the defenders.

Relentless infantry assaults supported by artillery fire support and air then followed and over the course of three months, Indian Army recaptured all the areas that were covertly occupied by the Pakistan Army. Names such as Tiger Hill, Tololing, Point 5140, Point 4700, Three Pimples, Chorbit La, Point 5203, Point 4875, Khalubar Top and Jubar Top were soon well known across the country.

The gallantry of Indian Army stood out. A total of three-hundreds gallantry awards were awarded to the soldiers who fought in the Kargil War, out of which there were four Param Vir Chakras; Captain Vikram Batra (Posthumous), Captain Manoj Kumar Pandey (Posthumous), Subedar

Major Yogendra Singh Yadav and Subedar Major Sanjay Kumar became household names for the display of unparalleled gallantry during the Kargil War. Other officers, Junior Commissioned Officers and Noncommissioned officers such as Captain Anuj Nayyar, Captain Haneef Uddin, Captain Neikezhakuo Kenguruse, Lieutenant Balwan Singh, Subedar Nirmal Singh, Naik Digendra Kumar, Rifleman Imliakum Ao and many others displayed outstanding courage and determination throughout the war in different Sectors.

Stories of the exceptional gallantry of the Indian Army have inspired many books and films as they went from peak-to-peak capturing Pakistani held positions in the Mushkoh, Dras, Kaksar and Batalik Sub-Sectors where they turned the snow in those areas red with their blood. For them, the accomplishment of the task to their Units mattered more. Izzat remains the defining factor for which no sacrifice is too great. In the annals of military history, the sacrifices and valour of the soldiers and leaders remain unmatched in military history.

### **Operation Safed Sagar**

The Kargil Conflict was unique in the decision to employ airpower. What the Kargil conflict demonstrated, however, was that airpower was relevant and was very effective in the utterly demanding context of mountain warfare at high altitudes. The war offers an exemplary case study in the uses of airpower in joint warfare and the difficulties of modern air employment in high mountain conditions.

The Indian Air Force (IAF) began conducting initial reconnaissance sorties over the Kargil heights as early as 10 May 1999, less than a week after the presence of the enemy incursion was first confirmed. On 12 May, an IAF helicopter was fired upon near the most forward-based Pakistani positions overlooking Kargil. In the next few days, IAF conducted Tactical Reconnaissance sorties to gather target information. [\[2\]](#)

On 21 May 1999, the presence of the personnel from the Pakistani 4th and 6th Battalions of the Northern Light Infantry's and their positions was determined by an IAF Canberra bomber of the 106th Photo Reconnaissance Squadron. On the morning of 26 May 1999, IAF commenced air operations by attacking enemy positions and supply lines. The first strike was launched by MiG-21, MiG-27ML and MiG-23BN fighters. MiG-29's provided air defence cover to strike aircraft. Post-strike, Canberra's carried out recce to assess the damage inflicted on the enemy. [\[3\]](#)

In the initial days, the IAF suffered a few losses. Between 27 and 28 May, the IAF lost two aircraft; a MiG-21, a MiG-27 and a Mi-17 helicopter. On 27 May, the MiG-27, flown by Flight Lieutenant Kambampati Nachiketa developed mechanical problems forcing the pilot to eject. The MiG-21, flown by Squadron Leader Ajay Ahuja orbiting in the

area to look for Flight Lieutenant Kambampati Nachiketa was shot down by a shoulder fired heat seeking missile. Squadron Leader Ajay Ahuja was awarded Vir Chakra Posthumously. [\[4\]](#)

On 28 May 1999, Nubra formation, 4 x Mi-17 were tasked to strike 'Point 5140' feature, located two kms North of Tololing'. Nubra formation took off in time and all went on perfectly well. However, Flight Lieutenant Subramaniam Muhilan was flying the Nubra-3 formation which got hit by the Stinger Missile. Despite Flight Lieutenant Muhilan's best effort to control the damaged helicopter, it crashed killing him and all his crew members. He was awarded Vayu Sena Medal Posthumously. Wing Commander (later Air Commodore) Anil Kumar Sinha was the leader of the four aircraft formation. The rocket attack launched by the formation, despite the loss of the

helicopter, was successful and inflicted heavy casualties on the enemy. Wing Commander Anil Kumar Sinha was awarded with the Vir Chakra. [\[5\]](#)

It was the air strikes conducted by the IAF on some of the key locations, including Tiger Hill on 24 Jun where Laser Guided Bombs were used to decimate the enemy. The most prominent among them is the strike on the Muntho Dhalo where the Pakistani's had built a supply camp in a bowl-shaped valley at. Over the days it grew up into a major supply depot. The strike of 16 Jun and 17 Jun by MiG-27s and Mirage-2000s were devastating and later attacks in the area ensured destruction of fresh Pakistani attempts to reuse the base.

Operation Safed Sagar was a steep learning curve for the IAF and prompted an overhaul of weapons and tactics that began almost immediately after the campaign.

### **Operation Talwar**

Operation Talwar involved protective activities such as bolstering our coastal defences and jointly conducting maritime patrols along with agencies such as the Coast Guard. Warfighting assets such as ships, submarines and aircraft fully armed were deployed.

The Indian Navy blockaded Pakistani ports, primarily Karachi, cutting off supply routes and began aggressive patrols and threatened to cut Pakistan's sea trade. This exploited Pakistan's dependence on sea-based oil and trade flows. The Pakistan Navy flew its maritime aircraft and once the scale and span of the Indian deployment sank in, it went into a defensive mode, warning its vessels to steer clear of the Indian Navy. [\[6\]](#)

The Naval operations and activities were not limited to maritime domain. The Navy's Squadron of specially equipped electronic warfare aircraft operated extensively along the LoC in support of land operations. Specialist hydrographic survey teams of the Indian Navy were conjoined with the Army's artillery batteries to pin-point gun locations. [\[7\]](#)

Operation Talwar proved once again that credible maritime power can effectively safeguard national interests. Twenty-five years after the Kargil conflict, our threats in the maritime domain have only increased.

### **Conclusion**

To quote Prime Minister Vajpayee, "Kargil sent the unequivocal message to our adversaries that any military threat to our country will be dealt with swiftly, strongly and effectively". [\[8\]](#)

Though there were analysts who felt that the nuclear tests in May 1998 precluded any conventional conflict, the Kargil conflict had driven home the message to Pakistan that India will not tolerate adventurism, under their umbrella of nuclear weapons, and that there is still room for a short sharp conflict.

A substantial geo-strategic outcome of the Kargil conflict was the turning away of the US from Pakistan as Washington concluded it as irresponsible and unworthy of a partnership. The US chose to support India's entry into the Nuclear Suppliers Group of countries, and thus legitimised India's nuclear status. Moreover, the US began a new set of engagements with India, and particularly its military. The US president was also responsible for forcing Pakistan to vacate the areas occupied during the visit of Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif to Washington on 04 Jul 1999. [\[9\]](#)

25 years later and in the midst of simultaneity in tipping points across the globe ranging from conflicts to covid some things stand out. These are the changing character of warfare and the transformation of the Indian Armed Forces.

Character and conduct of warfare have changed with the growing use of terror and other irregular methods of fighting by non-state actors. Equally important has been the technological advancements in cyber and space domains. Therefore, we must look at the impact of these changed realities on the future. Indian Armed Forces must be prepared for the future conflict with a changed character because these would be very violent and unpredictable.

The importance of human factor will remain undiminished. Soldiers will remain the primary assets. Battlespace will be contested and constrained by indeterminable factors. Recent conflicts have re-emphasised that unconventional and asymmetrical wars are gaining pre-eminence. In the future, even conventional wars are likely to have asymmetric component leading to 'Hybrid Wars'.

In its epilogue, the Knowledge Resource Centre noted that "The Committee has after very wide interactions sign-posted directions along the path to peace, ensuring progress, development and stability of the nation. How exactly the country should proceed to refashion its Security-Intelligence-Development shield to meet the challenge of the 21st Century is for the Government, Parliament and public opinion to determine".

There remains no doubt that the nation can safeguard peace only when we have the strength to make aggression costly and futile. India cannot afford to turn away from that responsibility.

## Endnotes

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