

Turning the Tides at Altitude: Decisive Battles of the Kargil War

The 1999 Kargil War marked a defining moment in India's military and strategic trajectory. Fought under the nuclear overhang and amid international diplomatic scrutiny, this war exposed the vulnerabilities of a presumed peacetime Line of Control (LoC) and underscored the strategic imperatives of high-altitude warfare in South Asia. While political restraint defined the Indian response, it was the success of several hard-fought tactical engagements, many at forbidding altitudes, that cumulatively shifted the operational momentum in India's favour.

This article examines five key engagements—Tololing, point 5140, Tiger Hill, Point 4875, and Khalubar Top—that proved operationally decisive. Each of these engagements illustrates a larger strategic theme—terrain dominance, logistical adaptation, joint force application, and moral ascendancy. Viewed collectively, such battles highlight India's evolving ability to conduct limited war with strategic restraint, precision application of combat power, and a coherent political-military interface that are increasingly relevant in contemporary conflict scenarios.

Battle of Tololing

Tololing, a desolate mountain, stands imposingly near the town of Drass. One of Pakistan's primary objectives during the Kargil War was to obstruct India's access to the Srinagar-Kargil-Leh highway.¹ To achieve this, maintaining control over Tololing held great significance for the Pakistan Army. Pakistani forces, sitting on dominating heights, commanded an unobstructed view of every inch of the track. The operations during the war were executed at night, amidst the harsh, howling wind and biting cold temperatures, ranging from -5 to -11 degrees Celsius, all of which offered no reprieve or advantage. The soldiers painstakingly crawled up the steep incline, advancing inch by inch. With a demanding vertical ascent, where every kilogram of additional weight felt tyrannical, two kilo food packets were relinquished in favour of more ammunition.²

After 1 NAGA, 8 SIKH, and 18 GRENADIERS were unable to dislodge the enemy, 2 RAJ RIF was called in. 2 RAJ RIF, under Lieutenant Colonel MB Ravindranathan, crafted a comprehensive plan to uproot the enemy from Tololing. On 12 Jun, Major Vivek Gupta led a reserve Platoon of his Company to launch an assault on Tololing Top. He was hit by a bullet and made the supreme sacrifice but not before evicting the enemy from Tololing Top. He was awarded the Maha Vir Chakra posthumously. India's relentless three-week assault culminated in the successful capture of Tololing by 0600 Hours on 13 Jun 1999, which served as a pivotal moment in the war. In this three-week-long battle, 18 GRENADIERS endured a total of 66 casualties, which included two officers, two Junior Commissioned Officers (JCOs) and 21 soldiers. Additionally, one officer, one JCO, and 39 soldiers were wounded. 15 individuals from the battalion were recognised for their distinguished service and gallantry during the battle.

Battle of Point 5140

The capture of Tololing changed the dynamics of Kargil War. The next objectives were Point 5140 and Point 4875 as these features provided dominant viewpoints to the National Highway 1 Alpha. Point 5140, the highest point on the Tololing Ridge, was one of the most arduous and crucial peaks in the Drass region. If it fell, it would clear the Pakistanis from that sector and pave the way for further victories. This task was entrusted to the 13 JAK RIF. Lieutenant Colonel YK Joshi, the Commanding Officer of 13 JAK RIF, gave the order for the attack on 03 Jul 1999. Lieutenant Colonel Joshi had tasked B and D Company, under Captain SS Jamwal and Captain Vikram Batra, to capture Point 5140 on 20 Jun 1999.³ Captain Batra-led D Company reached close to the objective despite the treacherous terrain. He, along with his Company, moved from the East while maintaining absolute silence achieving complete surprise. Captain Batra reorganised his column and displayed exemplary leadership as he fought the enemy from the forefront. The officer's action motivated his men to physically attack the enemy positions. In an act of formidable courage, Captain Batra pounced onto the enemy and killed four intruders in the physical combat. It was after the success at Point 5140 that Captain Batra delivered his iconic success signal *Yeh Dil Mange More* (This heart wants more).⁴

During this battle, Lieutenant Colonel Joshi, Captain Sanjeev Singh, Naik Dev Prakash, and Rifleman Mehar Singh were awarded Vir Chakra for their selfless dedication and immense courage in front of enemy. The success at Point 5140 has apparently boosted the morale of Indian troops fighting to evict intruders from other parts of the Kargil Sector, and Drass and Batalik sub-sectors.

Battle of Tiger Hill

Following the capture of Tololing, the focus shifted to Tiger Hill. Tiger Hill gains importance from the fact that it towers above all the other mountains in its vicinity of Drass village. Brigadier MPS Bajwa received orders to relocate the 192 Mountain Brigade to Drass. Assigned to his command were 8 SIKH, 18 GRENADIERS, 13 JAK RIF, and 2 NAGA. A multi-directional attack plan was devised, encompassing three strategic approaches. On 03 Jul, the soldiers of 18 GRENADIERS embarked on their mission. Due to bad weather and extreme conditions, the progress was very slow. Under the leadership of Lieutenant Balwan Singh, the Commando Platoon advanced, coming tantalisingly close to the summit of Tiger Hill. They found themselves thrust into a fierce hand-to-hand battle with the enemy troops. Despite their resistance, Lieutenant Singh and his Platoon were gradually pushed back, ultimately finding safety at the position held by D Company, which lay a mere 30 metres away from the pinnacle of Tiger Hill. On the night of 04-05 Jul, the fire bases moved forward to a position just short of Tiger Hill Top where they were grouped under Officer Commanding (OC) C Company, Colonel (then-Major) Mijar. In a calculated and stealthy manoeuvre, Captain Nimbalkar, accompanied by his resolute D Company and the steadfast Commando Platoon, silently ascended the uphill terrain, successfully reaching the pinnacle of Tiger Hill. On 04 Jul, during the action, Grenadier Yogendra Singh Yadav displayed extraordinary gallantry and was awarded the Param Vir Chakra.⁵ With extensive artillery and machine gun action, 8 SIKH and 18 GRENADIERS effectively brought an end to the Tiger Hill operations.⁶

In this arduous battle, 10 individuals were recognised for their outstanding gallantry during the battle. Grenadier Yadav was honoured with the Param Vir Chakra, while Lieutenant Singh was bestowed with the Maha Vir Chakra. Captain Nimbalker and Havildar Madan Lal (Posthumous) were both awarded the Vir Chakra.

Battle of Point 4875

Point 4875 in the Drass Sub Sector was an important strategic objective during the Kargil War as it consisted of high mountain features, Whale Back, Flat Top, and Shivling that dominated the LoC. The task to recapture Point 4875 was entrusted to the 13 JAK RIF under the command of Lieutenant Colonel Joshi. B and D Company led by Captain Jamwal and Captain Batra respectively were assigned this mission. The latter became a household name with his '*Yeh Dil Mange More*' statement after the capture of Point 5140. The attack was launched on 04 Jul 1999, with Major SV Bhaskar leading the A Company from the Eastern side of Point 4875 and Major Gurpreet Singh assaulting from the Western slopes of South Spur, with a view to capture Flat Top. Major Singh took a bold decision by launching a simultaneous assault at Flat Top with a platoon and Point 4875 with the rest of the C Company. Rifleman Sanjay Kumar and Rifleman Shyam Singh were the leading scouts of the attacking column at Flat Top. Rifleman Kumar was awarded Param Vir Chakra for his conspicuous gallantry. As the operation progressed, Captain Batra led an assault on 07 Jul 1999 from the front and surprised the enemy. Undeterred by his serious injuries, he valiantly destroyed enemy sangars with grenades, inspiring his men to clear the enemy from a dominating position. Later, he succumbed to his injuries. His fearless determination and leadership encouraged his Company men to avenge his death and finally capture Point 4875.⁷ He was awarded the Param Vir Chakra posthumously.

Major Vikas Vohra, Major S Vijay Bhaskar, Subedar Raghunath Singh, and Rifleman Shyam Singh (Posthumous) displayed unmatched gallantry while fighting the intruders during this battle and were awarded Vir Chakra.⁸

Battle of Khalubar Top

The Kalubhar Ridgeline dominates the Batalik Area. The Jubar Complex is to its left and Point 5203 is to its right in the Chorbati La Area, close to the LoC. The highest feature is Point 5287, with Point 4812 in its vicinity towards the south. The enemy had occupied Kalubhar Ridgeline and it was important to evict the enemy to reclaim the lost territory. Following the recapture of Point 5203 in the Batalik Sector, the next objective was Khalubar Top, aiming to handicap the enemy and sever their vital supply and escape routes. The attacks on the Khalubar commenced from 30 Jun 1999 and the initial breakthrough was provided by 22 GRENADIERS.⁹

Under Colonel Lalit Rai's command, 1/11 GORKHA RIFLES was deployed from Yaldor to recapture Khalubar Top on 02 Jul 1999. It was while climbing up the precipitous slopes of the

Khalubar Mountain, the Gorkha soldiers came under murderous fire from well-entrenched Pakistani troops. Gorkhas engaged in a fierce physical combat and evicted the enemy bunker by bunker. It was for the display of indomitable grit during this action that Captain Manoj Kumar Pandey was awarded Param Vir Chakra posthumously.¹⁰ The Battle of Kahlubar went on for three days. As the operation progressed from Ridgeline to the Top many of India's gallant soldiers lost their lives and facilitated the capture of Khalubar Top. With just a handful of soldiers, 1/11 GORKHA RIFLES captured the Khalubar Top on 06 Jul 1999.

Colonel Lalit Rai, Naib Subedar Tashi Chhepal, Lance Naik Gyanendra Kumar Rai, and Havildar Bhim Bahadur Dewan (Posthumous) were awarded Vir Chakra for the gallantry they displayed at Khalubar Top.¹¹

Conclusion

The tactical brilliance and unmatched resolve displayed during each of these battles translated into strategic outcomes that ultimately defined the Kargil War. These battles collectively restored control over dominating features, neutralised enemy positions, and defeated Pakistan—all without crossing the LoC. These engagements validated the enduring relevance of infantry-centric operations in high-altitude warfare.

The strategic payoff of these battles extended beyond territory. It reinforced India's image as a responsible regional power. The Kargil War remains a textbook case in mountain warfare, where constrained politico-military objectives were achieved through tactical adaptation and operational innovation. In retrospect, these battles fought over two months were not just turning points in Kargil, but markers of India's transition to a more agile, politically aware, and strategically restrained military force. They are also a poignant reminder of the bravery, sacrifice, and steadfastness that define the true essence of our soldiers.

Endnotes

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² Amarinder Singh, *A Ridge Too Far*, Motibagh Palace: Patiala, 2001

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¹¹ Gurmeet Kanwal, *Heroes of Kargil*, Army HQ: New Delhi, 2002

Saransh Srivastav is a Research Assistant at the Centre for Military History and Conflict Studies (CMHCS), United Service Institution (USI) of India. He holds a master's degree in history from Ambedkar University Delhi. Prior to joining USI, he worked at the Centre for Community Knowledge as a historical researcher on the Delhi City Museum project in collaboration with the Delhi Archives. His work entailed conducting research and producing dissemination material on the thematic of Delhi's industrial past and developing a 'Then and Now' digital map of 'Shahjahanabad'. At USI, his work includes specific research on Wars and Operations carried out by the Indian Military post Independence and developing an archival repository for a joint project on Gallantry Awardees of India between the Ministry of Defence and USI. His research interest lies in political and social history, urban history, preservation and archiving, and heritage studies.

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