

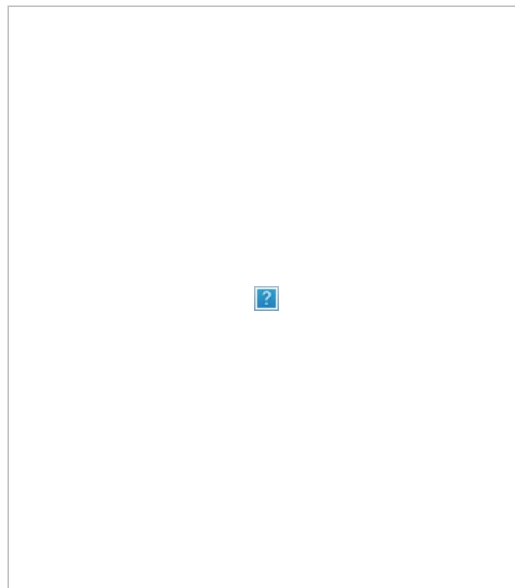
Battle of Phillaurah - 1965 and the Battle of Basantar - 1971 (Leading from the Front)

Lieutenant General Ajai Singh, PVSM, AVSM (Retd)*

Background

17 Poona Horse was part of 1 Armoured Division during the 1965 War and 16 Independent Armoured Brigade during the 1971 War. In both the wars, the Regiment was on the ORBAT of 1 Corps which launched the offensives into the Shakargarh Bulge / Sialkot Sector. Major (later Lieutenant General) Ajai Singh found himself to be in command of a Sabre Squadron ('C' Squadron) during the 1965 War and as the regimental Second-in-Command during the 1971 War. He played a crucial role during both the battles. The narrative that follows describes, (then) Major Ajai Singh's first hand experiences of the two battles. Read on....

In 1965, I was in command of 'C' Squadron of the 17 Poona Horse which formed part of 1 Armoured Brigade of 1 Armoured Division. It so happened that we were pushed into war in the Sialkot Sector with the least preparation, so much so that we moved into battle without maps! The only orientation we knew was that Pakistan was to the South and we were to attack North to South to sever the Shakargarh Bulge. To any professional, this type of operational briefing coming from the Commandant (CO) would seem ludicrous. But my Commandant, Late Lieutenant Colonel AB Tarapore PVC, could not be blamed as that is all what his higher HQ had briefed him about. The two Divisional Objectives were to be the towns of Phillaurah and Chawinda in that order of priority. Please refer to Map 1. It is with these very brief orders and without maps that we went into the offensive. The result was as expected; the entire Division got disorganised right from the start.



Map 1

Courtsey : This map has been copied from 'The Story of the Poona Horse' Lieutenant General Hanut Singh, PVSM, MVC (Retd), Agrim Publishers: Dehradun, 1993, First Edition, Page 201

It is in this total confusion that I went and captured the town of Phillaurah with my "Single Tank" with my Squadron following behind me. Unbelievable! but this is how it happened. As the fire fight was going on between the tanks of the two leading Regiments of 1 Armoured Brigade, our Regiment was given the orders to outflank the contact line. Whether other squadron commanders heard these orders or not I cannot say, but in my eagerness to react with speed, I moved for the outflanking move asking my Squadron to follow. In that otherwise plain area I saw a high ground, an ideal location for a tank position. I rushed for that and to my total astonishment what do I find, I was in the town of Phillaurah! Seeing my tank the enemy troops deployed there were totally surprised and in panic they surrendered.

When I reported the capture of the divisional objective Phillaurah to my higher HQ they could not believe it, till I sent the Phillaurah Police Station board as evidence. The General Officer Commanding (GOC) and the Brigade Commander were overjoyed and wanted to recommend me for an immediate gallantry award, which I vehemently declined, as I felt that I had just performed my duty and no more. Incidentally, the Police Station Board of 'Thanah Phulor' is still with us and is displayed as a War Trophy in our Quarter Guard. The next incident was my capture of Butur Dograndi (approximately 5 kms South West of Phillaurah), where my CO Lieutenant Colonel Tarapore was martyred and was decorated with PVC (posthumous). The next paragraph relates to that.

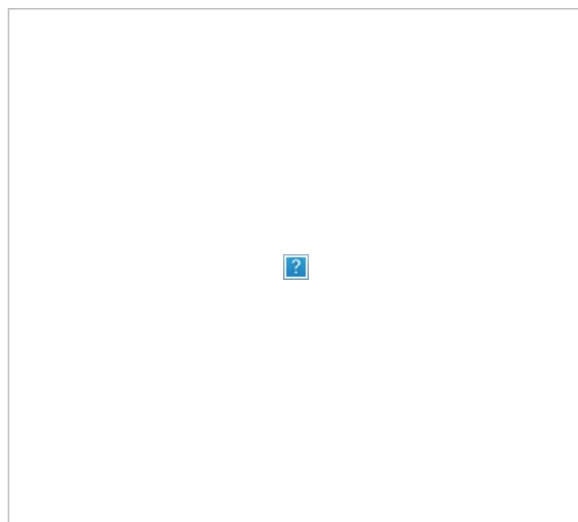
It all happened in the following sequence. After the capture of Phillaurah the next divisional objective was the important communication centre of Chawinda. The plan was that the Lorried Brigade was to attack the town supported by a squadron of armour. My Squadron was nominated to support the attack. Despite our best efforts, we failed to capture Chawinda and the mission was abandoned. Thereafter, a new plan was formulated. It was to encircle the town by capturing Butur Dograndi (which was behind Chawinda) and then attack the town. For this task, my Squadron was again chosen and grouped with 8 GARHWAL RIFLES. This Combat Group carried out the attack with great elan and ferocity and despite a lot of casualties on both sides Butur Dograndi was captured. To assess the situation personally, when my CO Lieutenant Colonel Tarapore joined my Squadron, his tank was hit and he alongwith his Intelligence Officer (IO) Captain Jasbir Singh were killed. The sad part is that the Division did not exploit this brilliant manoeuvre (which had compelled the enemy to evacuate Chawinda defences) and as a consequence we had to abandon the

captured objective of Butur Dograndi. However, alongwith Phillaurah, Butur Dograndi was also allotted as a Battle Honour to the Regiment. Let us now move on to the 1971 War.

The 1971 War for me had a new perspective as by now I was the Second-in-Command under a well-known and reputed soldier like Lieutenant Colonel (later Lieutenant General) Hanut Singh, MVC. Being very good friends, he leaned on me heavily to share my combat experience. If I recall correctly I shared with him two thoughts; first, the only infallible truth about war is that it was – total confusion and the one who draws out order from the same was a winner; and the second, that he should hold his ‘Command Together’ till he gets a suitable opportunity to employ it. The most significant action during this War was the now famous Battle of Basantar River where the Regiment broke the counter attack of a Pak Independent Armoured Brigade destroying as many as 57 of their Patton Tanks. A brief description of this battle as I saw it would be in order. Please refer to Map 2.

It was on the Night of 15/16 Dec 1971 that the stage was set for the ensuing battle. The Indian Army plan was to attack across the Basantar River (which was heavily mined) and threaten the depth defences of Pakistan; namely Zaffarwal and Sialkot. For this an infantry division was to make a bridgehead, engineers were to clear a minefield lane and The Poona Horse was to induct and enlarge the bridgehead. The attack was to go in after last light on 15 Dec. For this operation the regimental deployment was – the CO Lieutenant Colonel Hanut Singh was at the Divisional HQ to monitor the battle closely and the regiment was deployed in the rear under my command to move in for induction when ordered. By about midnight the attack had achieved complete success and the bridgehead had been established. The CO ordered me to move the Regiment for induction which I did. When I approached the entry point of the minefield lane I was stopped by an Engineer officer there who informed me that the enemy had counter attacked the bridgehead, our infantry was reeling back and the clearing of the minefield had been abandoned. I immediately passed this message to the CO who was still at the divisional HQ. His reaction was spontaneous and he made the following transmission which has become historically famous :-

“Hanut for Ajai, never mind what the Engineer officer is saying, you must cross the Basantar River and assist the Infantry to consolidate the bridgehead, otherwise history and posterity will not forgive The Poona Horse”.



Map 2

Courtsey : This map has been copied from 'The Story of the Poona Horse' Lieutenant General Hanut Singh, PVSM, MVC (Retd), Agrim Publishers: Dehradun, 1993, First Edition, Page 260

The above message launched the famous Battle of Basantar. Disregarding the Engineer officer’s warning, I entered the uncleared minefield ordering the Regiment to follow my tank tracks, to level their guns and keep firing at random just to convey to the enemy that our tanks had arrived to save the bridgehead. The tactics worked. First, the withdrawing infantry took courage to return back; and secondly, our random fire hit a few enemy tanks and created panic in their ranks. A major battle had already commenced.

Here is a short description of the Battle. As luck favoured us, the entire Regiment crossed the Basantar River behind the tracks of my leading tank. It was a pitch dark night but as I got across the river, I realised that I had hit a village called Saraj Chak where in the light of burning enemy tanks, I could see the enemy infantry holding the village, running helter skelter in panic. Just then my CO came on the radio to ask me for the situation report. On receiving my report he profusely congratulated me and gave out his plan as under : –

“I am right behind you with the following squadron, I will take over Saraj Chak, meantime you swing right and occupy Ghazipur Reserve Forest as the the Right Pivot and I will send the third squadron to occupy the Left Pivot at the villages of Jarpal and Barapind; with this deployment we will facilitate our infantry battalions to consolidate the bridgehead”.

This was then the setting for the fierce battle that ensued next morning at the crack of dawn. I will now briefly describe the Battle at Ghazipur Reserve Forest and fill in the details of other sectors which I got to know later.

My Squadron had entered the Reserve Forest just before first light, while it was still dark. When the first light came we were shocked to see Pak soldiers running around in total panic. Luckily, I had a company of 18 Rajputana Rifles (Mechanised) as a part of our Combat Group. I ordered them to round up all Pak soldiers and take them as

prisoners. When this action was in progress, an artillery smoke screen started being made in front of my tanks. Military sense cautioned me that an enemy tank counter attack was to follow, which did materialise. Soon, against early morning horizon a mass of Pattons in assault formation came rushing towards my squadron. I asked my crews not to panic and open fire only on my orders, which they obeyed. Just when the Pattons were within range I gave orders to open fire. My well trained gunners in the first wave of attack shot seven tanks. Thereafter, there was total massacre of the Pak assaulting force and within half an hour the attack petered off. I reported this to Lieutenant Colonel Hanut and he was totally thrilled. Before he could get over his elation an attack developed on Barapind and Jarpal. Here also the Poona Horsemen stood their ground valiantly. It was here that our youngest brave officer Second Lieutenant Arun Kheterpal sacrificed his young life for the honour of the Regiment and was awarded PVC (posthumous) for his gallant action beyond the call of duty. At the end of the day when ceasefire was declared the battlefield was strewn with the wreckage of 57 enemy Patton Tanks.

I can mention here – two basic lessons that emerged. First, ‘leading from the front is irreplaceable’ and secondly, ‘leadership is infectious’. Of course, above all ‘courage’ is the most important factor in battle.

* **Lieutenant General Ajai Singh, PVSM, AVSM (Retd)** was commissioned into the 17 Poona Horse in Jun 1956 and retired from service on 30 Nov 1993 as Director General Combat Vehicles. He participated in both the wars of 1965 and 1971 with Pakistan in the Western Sector. Post retirement, he was Governor of Assam from

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