

# 1971 – Challenge in Sind : Munabao to Naya Chor

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## Background

*After my marriage in July 1971, I reported to 68 Field Regiment – supporting unit of the School of Artillery, Deolali from the Air Observation Post Flight located in the same station. The Regiment was to form part of 330 Infantry Brigade of 11 Infantry Division. My Commanding Officer (CO), Lieutenant Colonel Tirlok Singh soon after told me to leave my wife somewhere and to board the military special train. I left my wife in Mumbai and boarded the train which moved on 'red-hot' priority to Barmer. We detrained at Ramsar, where we did intensive affiliation/artillery training. My battery (194 Field) was in direct support to 2 GRENADIERS, commanded by Lieutenant Colonel (later Lieutenant General) YN Sharma. The narrative that follows describes a young Captain's personal experience, as an Observation Post (OP) Officer, during the advance from Munabao (last Indian railway station) to Naya Chor. Read on.....*

**D**uring the Night 3/4 December 1971, we crossed the International Border (IB) and captured the reinforced Pakistan's border out post – Ghazi Camp. Same night, Khokhrapar (Pakistan's first railway station across the IB), was also captured. However, by then the last Pakistani train had departed in a hurry.

At Khokhrapar railway station we found one 10-15000 litre water tank filled with water. I debated whether to use that water or not, as it could have been poisoned. It could, however, be used for other purposes, if not for drinking. However, I decided 'not to use the water for any purpose' and ordered my OP party not to go anywhere near the water tank. It was very difficult to implement the order, as water (most precious commodity in the desert) was

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an inescapable necessity for everyone throughout the operations. At Khokhrapar, I noticed a very old woman moving around fearlessly at the railway station. Straightway, I thought of killing her, suspecting she may be a spy or a 'stay behind' artillery OP. We kept a close watch on her and restricted her movement. Hesitatingly, I had spared her. These were the first moments on the battlefield!

Unfortunately, our Forward Air Controller (FAC), Squadron Leader AN Mulla was captured with signal instructions. We changed the radio frequency and passed messages using Tamil/Telugu language. Our unit's class composition, based on South Indian personnel, proved to be very useful as we could safely pass our artillery orders on the new radio frequency.

The desert terrain was devoid of any road or well developed tracks and it was very difficult to move (25 Pounder) guns. I was ordered to move with the guns and assist in their cross country movement. During this struggle, we got the idea of moving them on the metre gauge railway track. The idea was very successful, inspite of the risk of air attacks during the day. One morning (at about 0900 hours) our Gun Position at Akli and its Wagon Line (Wagon Line is where vehicles are kept for security) were attacked by two Sabre jets resulting in serious casualties. It was very sad to find two jawans killed, Adjutant's 3 Ton lorry destroyed and one gun damaged. It affected our whole unit seriously. We had to recover quickly as by now we had realised that such incidents do happen in war.

Next day, I was totally surprised to receive a bunch of 15 letters from my wife. It was exciting, enjoyable and a great morale booster. I read them again and again and that encouraged me to give off my best in the war.

One day, I got a call from my battery commander, Major GS Attariwala informing me that I should accompany him and 2 GRENADIERS CO Lieutenant Colonel Yogi Sharma for a special reconnaissance mission. At the last moment I was left out due to lack of space in the jeep. Later, after two hours, the CO's radio operator called to say that their jeep had run over a land mine, seriously injuring everyone. Quickly, all of them were brought back. Yogi Sharma was very seriously injured – his foot was bleeding profusely and application of many First Field Dressings could not stop it. Attariwala was also injured and the Intelligence Officer,



Lieutenant Atma Ram, had lost one eye. Luckily, by the God's grace, one helicopter landed beyond the authorised time of 'last light' and took all the casualties to the Military Hospital at Barmer/Jodhpur. A sense of dismay had swept through the whole unit. However, as the sun was setting, I saw a few lights moving towards the Pakistani defences – likely a convoy of vehicles. I quickly engaged the area with an airburst shoot and the lights were gone. I thought our artillery fire was very effective and that lifted our spirits.

Next afternoon I, along with another OP officer Captain P Krishna Kumar, took some shoots but with difficulty because of inaccurate survey. The Artillery Survey was out by a few thousand yards due to lack of latest maps. On the Night 10/11 December, the screen position, Naya Chor was contacted. 'A' Company 2 GRENADIERS attacked a Pakistani locality and we captured a Naik of 22 BALUCH. At the Company HQ, I talked to him informally. He told me, "Aap afsar lagte hain. Hamare afsar itne nazdik nahin aate." He added that he was handling a Light Machine Gun. All others (young soldiers) had run away when he was captured.

Suddenly, I felt that some object had passed by my right ear with speed followed by a loud sound, rendering me motionless. I did not know what had happened. Later, I learnt, it was a round from a Pakistani RCL gun. I get nightmares even today, whenever I recall that incident.

During the operations, Parbat Ali (a very dominating feature), was captured by us. We had fired 3003 artillery rounds. After a few years, our unit was awarded the Battle Honour for capturing 'Parbat Ali'. I was lucky to be a part of the attacking force for its capture. Naya Chor defences were strongly held. In the meantime, on 17 December 1971, the Cease Fire was announced.

Being newly married, I got casual leave and left my location for Jodhpur by a goods train, travelling in the engine. During the journey from Jodhpur to Delhi, I was overwhelmed by the enthusiasm and 'recognition' shown by the young girls and boys. They implored me to narrate accounts from war – which I did with aplomb. I cannot express in words, how elated I felt by their expression of 'gratitude' to the Army for winning the War with Pakistan as also the 'recognition' accorded to us by our citizens. These experiences of the 1971 War will remain with me forever.