

Macro View of Operations in Jammu and Kashmir and the Sialkot Sector

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Abstract

This article provides a macro-level analysis of military operations conducted in Jammu and Kashmir and in the Sialkot sector during the 1965 Indo-Pakistan War. It chronicles the aftermath of Pakistan's infiltration attempt under Operation Gibraltar, India's counter-offensives in the Kishanganga–Tithwal and Hajipir sectors, and Pakistan's subsequent launch of Operation Grand Slam in the Chhamb region. The narrative highlights the challenges faced by Indian formations, the leadership decisions taken under pressure, and the attrition endured during intense armoured and infantry engagements. It further examines India's counter-thrusts in the Lahore and Sialkot sectors, culminating in the major tank battles at Phillaura and Chawinda. Drawing on first-hand staff perspectives, the article evaluates operational planning, leadership performance, and the overall strategic outcomes. While the war did not yield an outright victory, it restored the Indian Army's confidence and laid the foundation for future operational successes.

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Introduction

The 1965 Indo-Pakistan War was marked by a sequence of audacious offensives, hard-fought defensive battles, and leadership decisions taken under extreme tactical pressure. This article, a transcript of the lecture delivered by Lieutenant General Satish Nambiar (Retd) at the United Service Institution of India, provides an insightful, experience-based overview of key operations in Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) and the Sialkot sector. It examines the build-up to the conflict, the unfolding of Pakistan's Operations Gibraltar and Grand Slam, India's counter-measures, and the conduct of major battles that shaped the campaign's outcome.

Collapse of Pakistani Infiltration and Indian Counter-Moves

By 21 Aug 1965, the Pakistani infiltration had been crushed and the last remnants of the *Khaled Force*, the most stubborn force, had retreated suffering heavy casualties. After conducting mopping-up operations for a few days, the Western Army Commander at the time, General Harbaksh Singh—known for being a no-nonsense and aggressive leader with very high expectations of his subordinate commanders, perhaps at times excessively so—decided to complete some unfinished business from 1948. Encouraged by the success of his counter-infiltration campaign, he pushed for two major offensives to seal J&K from further infiltration.

Operations in the Kishanganga–Tithwal Sector

The General first turned his attention to the Kishanganga–Tithwal sector area where, as a brigade commander in 1948, he had notched up significant successes that could not be consolidated, at that time, in terms of territorial gains. 2 RAJPUT, 3/8 GORKHAS, and 1 SIKH captured four significant heights in the sector, which overlooked the Muzzafarabad–Kel Road that linked the Western areas in Pakistan-occupied Kashmir with the northern areas. After a series of tough battles extending for almost a month, this operation formally got over on 20 Sep 1965 with the capture of two heights overlooking the vital Mirpur bridge over the River Kishenganga.

Capture of Hajipir Pass and the Strategic Bulge Operations

The second offensive was concentrated in the strategic bulge between Uri and Poonch, with the intention of capturing the Hajipir Pass and several surrounding heights. The task was assigned to 68 Infantry Brigade under Brigadier ZC Bakshi, along with 1 Para. Between 29 and 31 Aug 1965, Hajipir Pass and seven additional posts in the strategic bulge were captured after fierce fighting. The exploits of Major Ranjit Singh Dayal, a company commander with 1 PARA during the assault on Hajipir Pass, are the stuff of legend; he was awarded the Maha Vir Chakra (MVC) for the same.

Pakistan's Operation Grand Slam: Conception and Opening Blows

If Operation Gibraltar had gone as per plan, the nail in India's coffin would have been Operation Grand Slam, planned to be a swift and surgical armour, it led thrust into the Chhamb bulge for the capture of the vital town of Akhnur. Major General Akhtar Hussein Malik, General Officer Commanding of Pakistan's 12 Infantry Division, the architect of both Operations Gibraltar and Grand Slam, had cleverly woven in an artillery plan to provide overwhelming support to the southern thrust lines of the offensive. The prelude to this plan was to cause heavy attrition to the lone artillery regiment that supported India's Akhnur-based 191 (Independent) Infantry Brigade, which was supported by only a single squadron of light AMX-13 tanks. In the event, as the unsuspecting batteries of the Indian Army's 14 Field Regiment celebrated Independence Day on 15 Aug, they were struck at multiple locations by well-directed and concentrated fire from Akhtar Malik's artillery brigade because of which the regiment was crippled with the loss of about half of its guns and considerable ammunition stockpiles. Worse still, the Brigade Commander, Brigadier Masters was killed during one of the bombardments. Though General Harbaksh speedily replaced the loss with a battery of medium guns, and moved Brigadier Manmohan Singh post-haste from the Miransahib-based 162 Infantry Brigade to assume command of 191 (Independent) Infantry Brigade, damage had been done. The Akhnur sector was in considerable disarray. Pakistan had scored a significant preliminary success, thanks to the superior use of its artillery, before the battle had even begun.

Launch of Operation Grand Slam and India's Defensive Battles

While the Indian Army was hunting out infiltrators and initiating action to effect the Poonch-Uri link up—notwithstanding the failure of Gibraltar, and given the fact that the Pakistan Army had suffered significant losses in the Tithwal, Uri, and Kargil sectors—Mohammed Ayub Khan, the then-Pakistan' President, no doubt prodded by his Foreign Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto and some sections of the Pakistani military leadership, decided to launch Operation Grand Slam anyway. On 01 Sep 1965, well before the crack of dawn, the hamlets around the Indian border town of Chhamb awoke to the rumbling of Patton tanks and a thundering artillery barrage from 105 and 155 mm guns. Pakistan had launched Operation Grand Slam with almost three brigades supported by two regiments of armour and an entire artillery brigade comprising all elements, including large number of field and medium artillery guns, gun locating regiments, and an air defence regiment. From accounts available, it appears that by about 1100 hours, faced with the ominous prospect of being overrun by the enemy, Brigadier Manmohan Singh, the Indian Brigade Commander, asked for air support to check the enemy's advance. Why it took almost five hours after sunrise to do so is inexplicable; and even more so is the fact that it took another six hours for the first Indian Air Force aircraft to arrive on the scene. Despite being taken by surprise, bearing the brunt of the Pakistani artillery bombardment and armoured attacks, units of 191 (Independent) Infantry Brigade, like 3 MAHAR and 15 KUMAON acquitted themselves admirably under adverse conditions. For his grit and bravery in a defensive battle under trying conditions, Lieutenant Colonel GS Sangha of 3 MAHAR was awarded the MVC. As all three battalions of the Brigade and the lone squadron of AMX tanks withdrew, first to Jaurian by early morning on 02 Sep, and then to Akhnur by the same evening, they caused significant attrition to the advancing Pakistani Army. Inexplicably, as it seemed at the time, though Pakistani forces had crossed the Munnawar Wali Tawi during the night of 01/02 Sep, they delayed resuming advance till 03 Sep.

Indian Reorganisation and Defence of Akhnur

This provided the breather for the Indian forces to reorganise. 10 Infantry Division was made responsible for the sector with two additional infantry brigades (28 and 41). While 191 Infantry Brigade

was tasked to organise defences at Akhnur, 41 Infantry Brigade was tasked to take up defences around Jaurian. This it successfully did till it withdrew on the night of 04/05 Sep, apparently due to overwhelming Pakistani pressure. But it had achieved its purpose by allowing 28 Infantry Brigade to be inducted into a delaying position at the Fatwal Ridge, thus, further ensuring adequate time for the preparation of defences at Akhnur. The squadron of 20 Lancers, under the intrepid leadership of Major Bhaskar Roy, did a great job and was acknowledged by the award of the MVC.

Pakistani Loss of Momentum and Shift of Strategic Balance

While the Pakistani offensive caught the Indian Army by surprise, it seemed there was also some disarray within the Pakistani senior leadership over the depth to which the offensive was sustainable. The delay in exploiting the surprise gained on the launch of operations, and crossing of the Munnawar Wali Tawi, was possibly occasioned by the change in command on the Pakistani side with Akhtar Hussein Malik being replaced by Yahya Khan on 02 Sep. By the time the Pakistanis resumed the offensive and reached the forward defences around Akhnur on 06 Sep, they had run out of steam and were decisively beaten back. By late evening on 06 Sep, seeing the writing on the wall, Pakistani forces started moving much of their armour and artillery out of the Chhamb sector to deal with an Indian counteroffensive that was under way in the Lahore and Sialkot sectors, leaving just about enough forces in Chhamb to blunt any Indian counterattack. The Indian forces in the sector, having stalled the Pakistani offensive and recovered balance, then launched operations to evict the Pakistanis but with limited success, before the ceasefire came into effect.

Fighting Continues After Ceasefire in the Northern Sectors

Notwithstanding the ceasefire, the Chhamb, and adjoining sectors to the North, were the scenes of some intense battles to beat back Pakistani forays as also to retake positions that had been lost. A few significant ones were for the capture of Point 3776 in the Chhamb sector, for Observation Post Hill in Mendhar, and for the destruction of Shakot and Jura bridges in the Kishanganga sector. Such operations carried on till almost the end of Oct 1965.

India's Opening of International Border: Lahore and Sialkot Offensives

The success achieved by Pakistan in its surprise offensive in the Chhamb sector and her refusal to implement the United Nations Security Council's call for an immediate ceasefire prodded Prime Minister Lal Bahadur Shastri and the Government of India into clearing the launch of operations by the Indian Armed Forces against Pakistan across the international border at places of their own choosing. The move was not anticipated by the Pakistani leadership, who believed that the Indian political leadership would not have the political gumption. India had planned simultaneous thrusts in the Lahore and Sialkot sectors, as also further south in the deserts as a response to Pakistan's Chhamb offensive. The operations in the Lahore sector were launched before first light on 06 Sep.

Build-up for the Sialkot Sector Battle

Operations in the Sialkot sector, to be undertaken by 1 Corps under Lieutenant General PO Dunn, needed to be staggered to enable the forces to get into position in the Jammu-Samba area, and in the event, were launched just before midnight of 07 Sep. Though impressive in terms of the number of formations under command, the 'Strike' Corps was in fact an ad-hoc arrangement put together hurriedly for the operation. The Corps Headquarters itself had commenced raising only in May 1965; 6 Mountain Division was a two-brigade formation raised in Mar 1963 for operational tasks on the Uttar Pradesh-Tibet border, and was neither equipped nor trained for operations in the plains; 14 Infantry Division was under raising and had done no training as a formation; 1 Armoured Division (whose equipment state left much to be desired) and the Jammu-based 26 Infantry Division were the only cohesive formations, though they had never trained together. 1 Corps, therefore, had neither trained for, nor even war-gamed the operational contingencies together. This was done by the General Singh shortly after the arrival of the formations in operations and a couple of days before they were launched into operations.

Inside View from Corps-Level Planning and Execution

As a young General Staff Officer-3 (Operations) on the staff of Headquarters 26 Infantry Division, the author, who was privileged to accompany the General Officer Commanding, Major General ML Thapan to the preparatory planning meetings, and later to the formations and units in battle, witnessed what transpired at that time, both at the planning stages and in execution at various times. In retrospect, with the benefit of years of experience to follow, the author can state quite unequivocally that, under the circumstances, what was achieved by the formations and units of 1 Corps was quite incredible. Obviously, much more could have been achieved had there been better training, planning, coordination, and so on, including exploitation of the initial successes.

The Tank Battles of Phillaura and Chawinda

Most military historians and analysts are unanimous about one feature of the battles in the Sialkot sector; the largest tank battles were fought here at Phillaura and Chawinda as both armies hammered at each other for control over a few hundred square kilometres of Pakistani territory. Sialkot (though only about 14 kms from the nearest point on the border) was always going to be an objective too far for India's strike corps, considering the strength of the opposing forces.

Armoured Action and Heroism at Phillaura

26 Infantry Division and 6 Mountain Division, which crossed the International Border just before midnight on 07 Sep in areas Bajragarhi and Unchewains and Charwa and Maharajke respectively, made slow progress in establishing a foothold across the International Border from 08 to 10 Sep. Even so, 1 Armoured Division was launched to exploit the limited space, and breakthrough towards Phillaura and Chawinda as initial objectives. On 11 Sep, even though 1 Armoured Division achieved initial success at Phillaura and managed to destroy many Patton tanks in what were bruising tank battles of fire and attrition, progress on the ground was slow. Two of the commanding officers of the tank regiments, Lieutenant Colonel MMS Bakshi of 4 Horse (with whom the author had the honour of working with in later years) and Lieutenant Colonel Ardesir B Tarapore of 17 HORSE, performed

admirably, knocking out several Pattons themselves. Colonel Bakshi was awarded the MVC for gallantry, while Lieutenant Colonel Tarapore would go on to blaze a trail of glory in the battle for Chawinda. Having secured Phillaura, 1 Corps made the same mistake that the Pakistanis made at the Munnawar Wali Tawi in the Chhamb Sector; they paused to regroup before attempting to take Chawinda.

Chawinda: A Corps-Level Deadlock

As it turned out, 14 Infantry Division ran into tough opposition and by the time the Corps gathered itself for assaults on Chawinda and Zafarwal, the battle in the Sialkot sector turned into a corps versus corps battle with near parity in all respects. The much-heralded strike corps offensive had fizzled out; the element of surprise having been lost. Holding battles were being fought in adjoining sectors with very little prospects of any significant territorial gain, and Chawinda was a 'Do or Die' situation for Pakistan. The battle see-sawed for over six days, with division-sized forces jostling for control of a few villages, tactically important crossroads, and other key ground. The pattern of battle was predictable and involved armoured led thrusts with infantry following; counterattacks and periods of lull in the battle, wherein, both sides licked their wounds, took stock of their losses, and waited for a moment of operational brilliance or folly that never came. These were the battles in which numerous commanding officers lost their lives, foremost amongst them was one of the heroes of the battle of Phillaura, Lieutenant Colonel Tarapore, Commanding Officer of Poona Horse. He went down in the battle for Chawinda with his guns firing despite being wounded and refusing to abandon his crippled Centurion tank. For his sustained heroism, he was awarded the Param Vir Chakra.

Outcome of the War and Strategic Legacy

By 19 Sep, 1 Corps had given up hopes of capturing Chawinda, leaving the Western Army Commander despondent and rueing the lost opportunities. Though the outcome of the 1965 War cannot, therefore, be considered an outright victory for the Indian Armed Forces, it went a long way in restoring the pride, confidence, and self-esteem of the forces that had taken a battering in 1962. It also restored the image of the forces in the eyes of the public. Therefore, the Indian Army units responded with added

determination to the provocations along the ceasefire line in J&K in later years, at Nathu La in 1967, in securing the outstanding victory in 1971, at Sumdorong Chu in 1987, and, more recently, during the Kargil operations.

The Enduring Role of Junior Leadership and the Indian Soldier

The performance of the junior leadership was outstanding, as always. It is a measure of the commitment and dedication of the junior leaders that the officer to rank and file casualty ratio during the 1965 War was 1:14 against a rank structure ratio of 1:60.

The war proved (if such proof is necessary) that it will always be the man behind the weapon that matters and not so much the weapon system itself. The Indian Army jawans proved their mettle once again.

Conclusion

Although the 1965 War did not produce a decisive military victory for India, it revitalised the army's confidence and restored national pride after 1962. The exceptional courage of the junior leadership, reflected in the aforementioned officer-to-rank casualty demonstrated the enduring importance of the soldier behind the weapon. The battles in J&K and Sialkot showcased immense grit, resilience, and the ability of Indian formations to stabilise, counterattack, and hold ground under severe pressure. These operations—especially the iconic engagements at Hajipir, Phillaura, and Chawinda—stand as a testimony to the Indian Army's professionalism and determination.