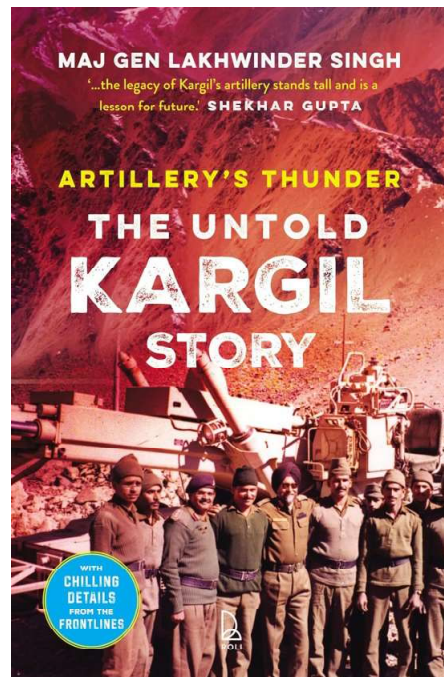


Artillery's Thunder: The Untold Kargil Story

Major General Lakhwinder Singh, YSM



Introduction

Artillery's Thunder: The Untold Kargil Story is a compelling and authoritative account of the 1999 Kargil War, narrated from the vantage point of an artillery commander, who played a pivotal role in the conflict. The book commences with an insight of the Pakistan Army's psyche and their impugned compulsions to alter the ceasefire line. Pakistan operations, even though ended up in humiliating defeat for them, make for an interesting case study for a professional and a nerd.

The author takes the story beyond a conventional war narrative to present a deeply analytical and operationally rich study of modern high-altitude warfare. At its core, the book advances a

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powerful thesis: that artillery, traditionally perceived as a supporting arm, emerged in Kargil as a decisive, battle-winning combat arm that fundamentally shaped the outcome of Operation Vijay.

Blending first-hand experience with strategic reflections, the book offers insights into leadership, jointmanship, technology, and the enduring principles of warfare. It is both a tribute to the soldiers who fought under extreme conditions and a critical examination of the institutional, operational, and strategic lessons arising from the conflict.

About the Author

Major General Lakhwinder Singh, YSM (Retd) brings exceptional credibility to the narrative. A third-generation officer commissioned into the Regiment of Artillery, he has a distinguished operational background, including participation in the 1971 India–Pakistan War. During Kargil, as Commander of the 8 Mountain Artillery Brigade, he demonstrated innovation in the employment of artillery—most notably through the massing of guns and the unconventional use of Bofors in direct firing roles, enabling the gallant infantry men to close in within a hand shake distance of the enemy. His leadership earned him the nick name of ‘Enraged Bull of Dras’ and he was awarded the Yudh Seva Medal.

His operational insights, grounded in lived experience, lend authenticity and depth to the narrative. Unlike purely academic analyses, this unvarnished first-hand account reflects the realities of decision-making under fire, the constraints of terrain and logistics, and the adaptability required in combat.

Overview of the Book

The book situates the Kargil War within a broader strategic and political context. It presents the conflict as a case of strategic surprise arising from intelligence lapses, institutional complacency, and misplaced optimism driven by diplomatic initiatives such as the Lahore Bus Yatra. Pakistan’s Operation Badr, executed with deception and precision, exploited winter-vacated posts and India’s assumptions about limited conflict under a nuclear overhang.

Initial Indian responses were fragmented and costly, marked by inadequate preparedness and coordination. However, the narrative charts a remarkable transition from confusion to operational coherence. Once the scale of intrusion was recognised,

India mounted a coordinated response integrating infantry, artillery, and air power.

The Politics of War

One of the book's key strengths lies in its candid examination of the politico-military interface. The author highlights how diplomatic optimism masked adversarial intent, leading to strategic surprise. The Lahore Bus Yatra is presented as a case where political goodwill inadvertently contributed to complacency.

The decision-making process at the highest levels is critically analysed. Delays in employing air power, restrictions such as not crossing the Line of Control (LoC), and lack of domain expertise within decision-making bodies influenced the conduct of operations. While these constraints ensured escalation control, they also imposed significant operational limitations.

The author raises a fundamental question: whether India's tactical success was matched by strategic exploitation? He argues that while the military achieved its objectives, political caution limited the broader gains. This chapter underscores the need for alignment between political objectives and military capability, and for balancing restraint with strategic advantage.

Higher Leadership in the Army

The book offers a nuanced critique of higher military leadership during the conflict. Pakistan's success in achieving surprise is attributed to Indian complacency, routine practices such as vacating winter posts, and failure to interpret warning indicators.

The initial Indian response suffered from lack of clarity, delayed decision-making, and coordination challenges. However, the narrative also highlights the adaptability of field commanders who recalibrated operations, improved situational awareness, and restored momentum.

An important insight is the impact of leadership gaps and the absence of seamless jointness. The delayed integration of air power and the lack of unified command initially hindered operations. Nevertheless, once clarity of intent was established, leadership at various levels ensured coherence and effectiveness.

The chapter reinforces the importance of decisive leadership, institutional preparedness, and the ability to transition rapidly from a reactive to a proactive posture.

Air Operations in the Kargil Battlefield

The role of the Indian Air Force (IAF) is examined with candour and balance. Air power was initially constrained by concerns over escalation, lack of preparedness for high-altitude operations, and the directive not to cross the LoC.

When air operations commenced under Operation Safed Sagar, the IAF faced immediate challenges—losses due to Man-Portable Air-Defense Systems (MANPADS), reduced weapon effectiveness in rarefied air, and coordination issues with ground forces. Close air support proved difficult due to terrain and altitude.

The eventual induction of Mirage 2000 aircraft with precision-guided munitions improved targeting accuracy, though the overall impact remained limited compared to artillery. However, the IAF's logistical role—airlift, casualty evacuation, and sustainment—proved indispensable.

The chapter highlights a critical lesson: air power must be equipped, integrated, prepared, and doctrinally aligned for specific operational environments. High-altitude warfare demands specialised capability, joint planning, and realistic expectations. Drawing a parallel with the Combined Forces Operations under the United States (US) in Afghanistan in 2002 to clear Taliban from the Tora Bora Heights, akin to Kargil heights, he underscores how the technologically superior US Air Force, suffered the same malaise as the IAF in Kargil. He then goes on to questions the viability of close air support operations in the face of the air denial means like the Surface-to-Air Missiles (SAMs) with the adversary.

The Bravehearts of Kargil

This section stands out as a tribute to the courage, resilience, and leadership of Indian soldiers. The narrative vividly captures the extreme conditions of high-altitude warfare—thin air, steep gradients, and exposure to enemy fire from dominating heights. Initial assaults, particularly at Tololing, were marked by heavy casualties and setbacks. However, as operations evolved, improved planning, acclimatisation, and artillery fire power enabled success. Infantry and Artillery fused well as the body and soul, leaving little choice with the Pakistanis to flee or get perished. As the young officers led infantry assaults, the commanders used artillery like scalpel and sledgehammer in equal measure—a new doctrine of mountain warfare was born.

The battles of Tololing and Pt 5140 are described as turning points, showcasing coordinated operations and exceptional bravery. The narrative revolves around how a feint attack at Tiger Hill turned out to be one of the most fascinating victories, through Infantry's grit and Artillery's prowess, left General Pervez Musharraf red faced and beaten. With the capture of Pt 4875, the last vestige of Pakistan's hold in Dras was decimated. It was to become the culminating moment of enemy's rout. Individual acts of heroism of the three Param Vir Chakra holders—Grenadier Yogendra Yadav, Captain Vikram Batra and Rifleman Sanjay Kumar—and many unsung heroes underscore the human dimension of war. The chapter emphasises that while technology and firepower are critical, the ultimate determinant of success remains the soldier's courage and resolve.

Early setbacks highlighted the inadequacy of conventional tactics in high-altitude terrain. Learning from these reverses, Indian forces dramatically increased artillery deployment, massing over 100 guns to deliver sustained and concentrated firepower. This overwhelming barrage neutralised enemy defences and enabled infantry advances.

A key innovation was the use of Bofors guns in direct firing roles at close ranges, achieving unprecedented accuracy against fortified positions. The integration of direct and indirect fire, night firing, and flexible deployment enhanced operational effectiveness.

The role of Forward Observation Officers, real-time adjustments, and forward command hubs ensured precision and responsiveness. Despite logistical challenges, artillery units maintained sustained fire under extreme conditions.

The psychological impact of artillery was as significant as its physical effect. It eroded enemy morale while boosting the confidence of Indian troops. The chapter establishes artillery as the decisive factor in Kargil, reshaping the conduct of operations.

Artillery as a Combat Arm

Building on operational evidence, the book argues for a doctrinal shift in recognising artillery as a combat arm rather than merely a support element. Historically influenced by colonial structures, artillery's role has evolved with technological advancements.

The Kargil experience demonstrated that firepower, rather than manoeuvre alone, can determine outcomes—especially in terrain where manoeuvre is constrained. The author reinforces this argument by referencing contemporary conflicts such as Ukraine and Azerbaijan–Armenia, where long-range precision fires and drones dominate the battlefield.

The chapter calls for organisational and doctrinal reforms to accord artillery equal status with other combat arms. It also highlights emerging technologies—artificial intelligence-enabled munitions, extended-range systems—that will further enhance artillery’s centrality in future warfare.

Technology and High Altitude

The book provides a balanced assessment of technology’s role in high-altitude warfare. While technology is often viewed as a force multiplier, Kargil demonstrated its limitations.

Surveillance radars struggled to detect slow-moving infantry. Precision munitions had limited applicability due to terrain constraints. Air power faced challenges from MANPADS and environmental conditions.

At the same time, adversaries relied on technologies such as weapon-locating radars. The chapter highlights that technology must be context-sensitive and adaptable.

Emerging trends—drones, advanced SAMs, and networked systems—are reshaping warfare. However, their effectiveness in extreme environments remains uncertain. The fundamental principles of firepower and manoeuvre continue to dominate.

Looking Back: Afterthoughts on the War

The concluding chapter is reflective and critical. It acknowledges the victory but emphasises the systemic failures that led to the conflict—intelligence lapses, complacency, lack of surveillance, and absence of a clear national security policy.

Political hesitation and constraints such as not crossing the LoC prolonged operations and increased costs. The author warns against recurring strategic passivity and highlights the need for accountability and institutional reform.

The chapter also addresses future challenges, particularly the China–Pakistan nexus and the likelihood of a two-front scenario. It underscores the importance of viable and visible strategic deterrence, and the need to move away from the defensive mind set. The role of diplomacy is examined in conjunction with military power, highlighting that effective diplomacy is often underpinned by credible force.

Critical Evaluation

The book's greatest strength lies in its operational clarity and firsthand authenticity. Complex concepts such as fire planning, coordination, and target acquisition are explained with precision and accessibility.

The balanced approach—acknowledging failures alongside successes—enhances credibility. The narrative is neither triumphalist nor overly critical; instead, it presents a nuanced understanding of war. However, the book occasionally reflects a strong advocacy for artillery, which, while justified, may appear to underplay the contributions of other arms. Nonetheless, this focus is consistent with the author's central thesis and the title of the book itself.

Conclusion

Artillery's Thunder: The Untold Kargil Story is an insightful and authoritative contribution to military literature. It not only documents the Kargil War but also provides enduring lessons for future conflicts.

The book reinforces a fundamental truth: while technology evolves, the core principles of warfare—mass, coordination, leadership, and decisive application of force—remain constant. By restoring due recognition to artillery, the author contributes to shaping contemporary military thought.

For military professionals, it offers practical lessons in firepower employment, joint operations, and adaptability. For scholars and general readers, it provides a deeper understanding of modern warfare's complexities.

Ultimately, the work stands as both a tribute to the soldiers of Kargil and a call for strategic clarity, institutional reform, and sustained preparedness in an increasingly complex security environment.

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