

Battle of Longewala

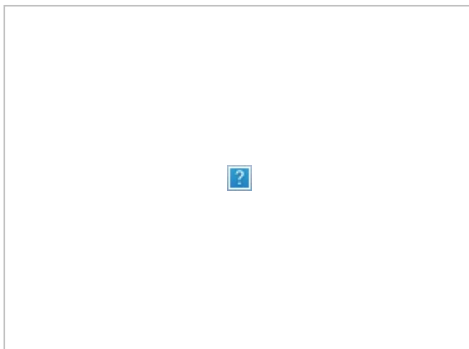
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In the first week of December 1971 a most remarkable battle took place around Longewala in the erstwhile Indian princely state of Jaisalmer in the Rajasthan desert. On the night of 4/5 December a large Pakistani armour-infantry force rather recklessly without air cover advanced across the international border (IB) to capture Ramgarh and neutralise the airfield at Jaisalmer. On the way, 18 km from the IB was the Border Security Force Post of Longewala now held by A Company of 23 Punjab. A platoon strength patrol from this company had shadowed the Pakistani force as it crossed the IB. Despite the knowledge of the large enemy force, the small isolated force at Longewala held firm to provide the anvil for a flight of Indian Air Force (IAF) Hunters from Jaisalmer airfield to inflict crushing losses on the enemy and frustrate its boldly conceived design.

Brigadier (Retd) ZA Khan, Pakistan Army, who commanded one of the cavalry regiments in this operation, in his recently published book 'Indo-Pak Wars 1965 & 71' has given a very forthright and graphic account of Pakistan's Longewala operation. This article recapitulates the Battle of Longewala in the light of the account given by Brigadier Khan in his book.

Situation in the Run Up to the Operation

On the eve of the December 1971 War, Indian 12 Infantry Division in area north of Jaisalmer (India) was facing Pakistan's 18 Infantry Division in area Rahimyar Khan (Pakistan). There was a general belief on both sides that major operations were not feasible in the Rajasthan and Sindh deserts. Nevertheless, in the event of hostilities breaking out, the Indian division had planned to launch bulk of its force from area Sadhewala-Tanot-Kishangarh to capture Rahimyar Khan, and disrupt rail-road link from Lahore to Karachi. Please refer to the map of the area of operations.



Pakistan's intelligence had come to know of the Indian intention to capture Rahimyar Khan. It was also averred that since Indian commanders still believed that large scale military operations were not feasible in the Rajasthan desert, no significant opposition was expected. It was also concluded that since the Jaisalmer air base had not been war activated hardly any hostile air action would be encountered. Based on these assumptions and conclusions, and to pre-empt the Indian attack on Rahimyar Khan, a bold and swift armour-infantry thrust was conceived astride the Reti-Longewala-Ramgarh-Jaisalmer axis to capture Ramgarh and neutralise the air field at Jaisalmer. It was believed that Longewala held by a BSF company could be either bypassed or easily secured to protect the left flank of their advance.

Troops earmarked for this operation were 22 Cavalry (T-59); 38 Cavalry (Shermans) 51 Infantry Brigade (two infantry battalions; the third battalion of East Bengal Regiment, was placed in a defensive box within Pakistan territory and effectively neutralised with mines placed around it); 206 Infantry Brigade, which shed a battalion to cover routes to Rahimyar Khan; one field regiment (25 pr), a mortar battery (120 mm) and later a medium battery (130 mm), deployed near the IB. Air support was assured by Pakistan Air Force (PAF).

Pakistan's Operational Plan

The concept of Pakistan Army's plan was indeed very bold. The original plan was for 38 Cavalry, with a battalion from 206 Bde to capture Ramgarh, and 22 Cavalry less one squadron with a battalion from 51 Bde to neutralise Jaisalmer air field. Later, fearing a tank battle at Ramgarh, for which 22 Cavalry with its better tank state was more suited the roles were reversed; 51 Bde with 22 Cavalry to Ramgarh and 38 Cavalry Group to Jaisalmer. 206 Bde would follow the advance and capture Longewala with one battalion and establish a firm base there. Two of the essential parameters of the plan were to make the approach march to the IB from the concentration area south of Reti at night and the next night advance to the assigned objectives. The next whole day PAF would provide air cover, which was assured by the PAF C-in-C.

The Assistant Chief of Pakistan Air Force (Operations) had advised that to support this operation PAF would require some days advance notice to activate the Jacobabad air strip. Since the Army had decided on 2 December to launch this thrust on night 4/5 December, the PAF Liaison Officer attending the Division Commander's orders had announced that since PAF had not been given time to activate the Jacobabad air strip it would not be able to provide any air cover. When Lieutenant General Gul Hassan, Chief of the General Staff Pakistan Army, was

approached he ruled that since hardly any air action was expected from the IAF, and that the planned operation was in national interest, it should go ahead without PAF air cover.

There were other major flaws and infirmities in Pakistan Army's operational plan. Foremost was the absence of a logistic cover to support the tactical operation. There was no suitable transport for troop lifting and supporting this operation in the desert terrain. A few civilian goods carriers and tractor-trolleys were hired, but they got stuck in the sand. Arrangements for repair and recovery were also inadequate. Many tanks of 38 Cavalry that needed engine replacement enroute had to be abandoned. To make up for inadequate logistics support most of the tanks carried an additional fuel drum strapped on behind the turret, which later proved fatal when attacked by IAF.

There were frequent changes in operational plans. Roles and objectives of cavalry regiments and infantry brigades were often changed in the middle of the battle. Issue of contradictory orders led to utter confusion, mixing up of units and formations and loss of control. Brigadier Khan also highlights lack of motivation of commanders and troops, desertions, and failure to even approach and tackle the assigned tasks with any measure of determination. Throughout the operation Brigadier Tariq Mir, Commander 51 Infantry Brigade, was completely unwilling to implement the operational tasks assigned to his formation.

Indian Plans

Prior to 3 December, 12 Infantry Division had started concentrating in the launch area for its operation to capture Rahimyar Khan. A senior air force officer claims that practically no air effort was included in the planning of this operation. Longewala was a BSF post. In the build up for the ensuing operations in 1971, it was vacated by the BSF and occupied by A Company, 23 Punjab (about 120 soldiers) led by Major (later Brigadier) Kuldeep Singh Chandpuri. Rest of 23 Punjab had moved to Sadhewala to eliminate a Pakistani border outpost, preliminary to the attack to capture Rahimyar Khan. Defences at Longewala were not well developed. No mines had been laid and no barbed wire was erected. A single strand wire was strung around the perimeter by the BSF to keep their camels from straying. This wire later fooled the attackers into believing that a minefield existed around the post.

Besides its integral small arms, A Company, 23 Punjab, had two medium machine guns, two 81 mm mortars; and for anti-tank defence, four shoulder-fired rocket launchers. Two jeep-borne 106 mm recoilless (RCL) guns from the battalion arrived at 0230 hours on 5 December. Three AMX light tanks (no match for T-59 or Shermans in a tank fight) came up at about 0800 hrs on 5 December, much after the first face off with the enemy.

A training flight of four Hunter fighters had been moved from Jamnagar to Jaisalmer and formed into an adhoc squadron. Wing Commander (later Air Marshal) MS Bawa became the base commander. The primary role of this adhoc arrangement was air defence. Any firm allotment for offensive air support was neither envisaged nor made. However, the location of this flight at Jaisalmer was not known to Pakistan's planners, who were so sure of the absence of Indian air opposition that they had decided to undertake this operation without air support including ground air defence of their own. Nevertheless Pakistan had launched a formidable force. While on the ground the balance of force definitely lay in their favour, the absence of air cover proved fatal in the featureless desert.

Indian Patrol at the IB

Pakistan started the war on the evening of 3 December, 1971. On 4 December, soon after dark, a platoon strength patrol sent by A Company from Longewala to the IB, detected that a very large force of tanks and infantry had crossed the border and were headed south. The patrol leader surmised that this force would soon come up against Longewala. He shadowed the enemy and kept passing the southward progress of this force to his Company Commander Major Chandpuri. While Chandpuri had realised the formidable odds stacked against his small isolated force, he displayed true and sustained courage and determination to hold Longewala, and which he did.

Pakistan's Progress of Operations

The approach march to the IB was ordered to commence in the afternoon of 3 December and continue to Ramgarh-Jaisalmer on night 3 / 4 December, an impossible march of 200 kms in the desert. By the early hours of 4 December both the armoured regiments had reached only 30 kms from the IB. The operation so far was a movement fiasco. Besides tanks of both the regiments getting stuck in the sand on the way, none of the infantry battalions could be lifted in transport and were marching.

GOC 18 Infantry Division ordered troops to disperse in this area and commence further advance after last light on 4 December. On a representation from Commander 206 Infantry Brigade, that the tanks of 38 Cavalry were mechanically unsound the Divisional Commander gave the task to neutralise Jaisalmer airfield to 28 Baluch (Recce and Support Battalion of 18 Division less company, with two additional companies from 206 Infantry Brigade, and a mortar battery.) Later at the suggestion of Commander 51 Infantry Brigade the mission to Jaisalmer was abandoned.

Indian Reaction

Information of enemy's ingress was passed through HQ 12 Infantry Division to the Air Force at Jaisalmer. Though there was no specific allotment of offensive (ground) air support, Bawa in laudable anticipation, armed his Hunters for this role and awaited the dawn of 5 December. At first light an unarmed aircraft of the artillery air observation post, manned by Major Atma Singh and Captain Sangha, came up and directed the Hunters, which

came over at about 0730 hrs.

Pakistan's Progress of Operations

Soon after last light 4 December, 22 Cavalry with 38 Baluch mounted on its tanks crossed the IB. It was to bypass Longewala and proceed to Ramgarh. Rest of 51 Infantry Brigade followed. After crossing the IB, Brigadier Tariq Mir had emphatically declared that he had no intention of proceeding beyond Longewala.

38 Cavalry with 1 Punjab from 206 Infantry Brigade was placed under command 51 Infantry Brigade till it reached Longewala. It was tasked to capture Longewala, if there was an opportunity, failing which it would wait for the rest of 206 Infantry Brigade to fetch up and complete this task. After crossing the IB men of Recce Troop of 38 Cavalry sent ahead of the regiment hid their jeeps behind sand dunes and vanished. Bulk of the tanks of this regiment either broke down or got stuck in the sand. Only two tanks reached short of the metalled road from Longewala to Ramgarh. Around midnight GOC 18 Infantry Division visited the forward troops and ordered 22 Cavalry and 38 Baluch to capture Longewala.

By about 0400 hrs 5 December 22 Cavalry and 38 Baluch had practically surrounded Longewala post, and were prepared to launch their attack. There was a considerable exchange of fire with the defenders and one of the tanks was hit by a RCL gun. B Squadron 22 Cavalry and B Company 38 Baluch mounted on the tanks closed up to the defences but the infantry were reluctant to assault the defences; as a result nearly three hours before daybreak were wasted in this procrastination. While the fire fight was continuing, at about 0730 hrs a flight of Indian Hunters came over and started rocketing and strafing the tanks and infantry which had formed up for the attack. Five tanks were destroyed, four men were killed and four wounded. Both tanks and the infantry dispersed.

After the Hunters departed, tanks and troops of 22 Cavalry and 38 Baluch again started forming up to attack the post. A second air strike knocked out six more tanks and inflicted more casualties on the infantry. An impression that the post was surrounded by mines and the sustained accurate fire from the post added to the attacker's reluctance to launch the actual assault.

At about 0900 hrs one squadron of 22 Cavalry and two companies of 38 Baluch had again formed up to attack but Brigadier Mir came over and called it off. He ordered the troops to disperse. Around midday 22 Cavalry and 38 Baluch withdrew some distance to where the rest of 51 Infantry Brigade was deployed. The avenging Hunters kept coming back in waves, and enemy casualties started mounting. The tanks started taking evasive action by driving around in circles to throw up dust to escape from the relentless Hunters. The last air attack came an hour before sun set. During the day 22 Cavalry had lost 17 tanks, 10 men were killed and 17 wounded.

Indian Reaction

Despite being surrounded by a vastly superior Pakistani force of tanks and infantry Chandpuri and his men had resolutely defended their post with sustained and accurate fire, which had deterred the enemy from launching the actual assault. The defenders' stout action had forced the enemy to concentrate for the attack that presented the targets for attack by the IAF Hunters.

Pakistan's Operation

By midday of 5 December extensive damage inflicted by the totally dominant IAF Hunters coupled with poor progress in the movement forward, extensive breakdowns of tanks of 38 Cavalry, logistic failures, and reluctance of Brigadier Mir to implement operational plans had made it increasingly evident to GOC 18 Infantry Division that the ambitious plans of securing Ramgarh-Jaisalmer were out of his formation's reach. He chose to limit his operational plans to the capture of Longewala. He sent orders by helicopter to Brigadier Mir to capture Longewala post, and Ghotaru 10 km from Longewala. Brigadier Mir declared since an Indian infantry brigade had linked up with Longewala, the position had become too strong for 51 Infantry Brigade to capture. The GOC then gave the task to 206 Infantry Brigade.

Commander 206 Infantry Brigade ordered 28 Baluch to advance along road Longewala-Jaisalmer and secure Ghotaru. This battalion just disappeared and surfaced only after the ceasefire. In the meantime 1 and 10 Punjab had arrived and a detailed plan for the attack on Longewala was prepared. 0300 hours, 6 December was chosen as the H Hour. 51 Infantry Brigade was requested to mark the FUP, provide guides and detail one squadron from 22 Cavalry to give fire support. Brigadier Mir refused to provide any assistance and ordered his Brigade to start withdrawing at 1900 hrs to the north of the IB. Since both Brigades were moving in opposite directions, there was considerable confusion. While sporadic fire was exchanged, 206 Infantry Brigade failed to launch its planned attack.

During the night 22 Cavalry had withdrawn north of the IB. 51 Infantry Brigade was between Longewala and the IB. On 6 December the air attacks by the IAF Hunters continued and Pakistan's casualties mounted. Around midday GOC came over and ordered 206 Infantry Brigade to move forward to Longewala-Jaisalmer road and 51 Infantry Brigade to occupy defences behind it. By the afternoon of 6 December, GOC 18 Infantry Division had realised that there was a complete loss of control over the conduct of battle by his HQ. There was utter confusion, and no cohesive and objectively oriented operations were feasible. Consequently, he ordered a general withdrawal across the IB. It was pointed out to him that this would cause utter chaos and many of the troops would disappear. He was persuaded to order a planned withdrawal by 206 and 51 Infantry Brigades stepping back, one at a time, through each other.

Between 7 and 11 December, Pakistan's rather disorderly withdrawal across the IB had slowly continued. During the day Indian Hunters kept up their attacks though the intensity gradually declined. On 11 December, Major General Mustafa, GOC 18 Infantry Division was replaced by Major General Abdul Hamid. To speed up the rearward movement the new GOC had ordered a general withdrawal and the troops moved back in a mad rush. Brigadier Khan compares this withdrawal to the 'Gazala Gallop' of the Second World War and calls it the 'Gabar Gallop'. Some of the men were rounded up from the Punjab Regimental Centre at Mardan. Pakistan Army's foolhardy venture into the Jaisalmer sector had ended up in a crushing defeat and serious losses of men, tanks, and other war materials.

Assessment

Pakistan's losses as counted in the Indian territory were 37 tanks, 200 assorted vehicles, much other equipment, and over a hundred dead. Losses suffered by the Pakistani force in their own territory could not be ascertained. Brigadier Khan in his book has not given an estimate of losses. Undoubtedly these were considerable.

Pakistan Army's operational plan to capture Ramgarh - Jaisalmer with a tank-infantry blitzkrieg was bold and brilliant in its tactical concept but was over ambitious. It was very poorly planned and executed. It was utterly foolhardy to launch an operation in the desert without air cover. A failsafe logistic back up so vital in a desert operation was missing. Commanders and troops were not adequately motivated and failed to deliver. The overall concept of battle and its control as it developed was very poor. While 18 Infantry Division totally failed to achieve its operational objectives and suffered heavy losses in men, tanks, equipment, and war materials, there is some relevance in its claim that its Longewala operation forestalled plans of Indian 12 Infantry Division to advance to Rahimyar Khan.

Viewed from Indian operational dynamics, Longewala was a closely integrated air-ground operation, which could not have achieved such spectacular results without the participation of troops on the ground and the flyers in the air. It is fully evident that Chandpuri and his men of A Company, 23 Punjab, very stoutly and courageously defended the completely isolated Longewala post against an overwhelmingly superior force of Pakistani tanks and infantry, which forced the enemy to concentrate to attack the post and thereby created the targets for the Hunters to attack. In fact, this was an excellent example of cooperation between troops on the ground and the Air Force. Undoubtedly, the Indian Army and the Indian Air Force combined together effectively to win the Battle of Longewala.

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