

The Battle of Haji Pir

The Battle of Haji Pir, which took place from 26 August 1965 till 28 August 1965, was one of the most spectacular battles in the Indo-Pak War of 1965. Haji Pir Pass was a vital link in the scheme of Pakistani infiltration into Kashmir. Pakistan's obsession with Kashmir has, more often than not, backfired. The four wars that India has fought with Pakistan have always, unambiguously, resulted in a victorious India and a defeated Pakistan.

The war in 1965 was the second war fought between India and Pakistan. As India had suffered a defeat against China in 1962 and thereafter the Prime Minister Pandit Jawahar Lal Nehru had passed away in 1964, Pakistan felt that India was militarily weak and believed that invading Kashmir would be an easy undertaking — a wildly inaccurate assessment of the courage and determination India's defence forces.

On 24 April, 1965 a full-scale military attack with tanks and artillery, were launched by Pakistan Armed Forces on four Indian Posts namely —Point 84, Sardar, Vigokot and Chhad Bet, six to eight miles deep into Indian territory south of the Gujarat-West Pakistan (Kutch-Sind) border. Pakistan Army had deployed an Infantry Brigade which was using Armoured Personnel Carriers supported by tanks and heavy artillery. In the few months before the full-scale attack, Pakistan had been resorting periodically to firing and clashes at several points in the Indo-Pakistan border, both in the East as well as in the West. There were also intrusions of Pakistani personnel into Indian territory south of the Kutch Sind border in the Kanjarkot area.

Earlier on April 09 1965, the Pakistan armed forces mounted a heavy attack on a small Indian border police post at Sardar. The post was subjected to heavy artillery and mortar fire by the Pakistan Army. Subsequently, on the same afternoon, the Indian Police Post at Vigokot, South of the Kutch-Sind border, was also subjected to heavy attack.

On 30 June, 1965, an Agreement was signed between India and Pakistan. The Agreement restored the status quo as on 01 January 1965, which included vacating Kanjarkot, Biar Bet and other points by the Pakistani Army. However, the battle at Kutch and the ceasefire declaration gave Pakistan a false sense of victory, this led to the Pakistanis to launch Operation Gibraltar.

In 1965, Operation Gibraltar was launched by Pakistan to create chaos and incite rebellion against Indian rule in Kashmir; the desired end goal was to capture Kashmir. The Gibraltar forces consisted of close to 7000 mujahids— trained, raised, and equipped by Pakistan. The operation, however, was met with a full-scale attack on Pakistan by Indian troops.

The first phase of the operation Gibraltar was meant to create a shock wave by launching raids on selected targets, thereby preparing the ground for a civil uprising due to the chaos and consternation that would be caused in the state. The second was the fusion of the civil uprising with the infiltration operation.

Geography

Haji Pir Pass, a 2637-metre high mountain, is located eight kilometres from the Cease-Fire Line, South of Uri in the state of Jammu & Kashmir. The pass was dominated by three adjoining hill features, namely, Bedori – 3760 m high in the North-East; Ledwali Gali – 3140 m high in the North-West; and Sank – 2895 m high in the North. The capture of these features was considered necessary for advancing on to Haji Pir Pass. Bedori is about four km to the South of the Cease-Fire Line while Haji Pir Pass is about ten km to the South-West of Bedori.

Planning

It had become important to capture Haji Pir Pass as it was being used as a route to infiltrate into the Indian side. The Haji Pir Operation was planned in a pincer-like move, involving an offensive along the general axis Uri-Haji Pir Pass and a thrust along the Punch-Kahuta axis. The operation was called Operation Bakshi, named after Brigadier (later Lieutenant General) Zorawar Chand Bakshi, Brigade Commander of 68 Infantry Brigade—which was placed under 19 Infantry Division to carry out the task.

The following troops were placed under 68 Infantry Brigade:

- a) 1 PARA.
- b) 19 PUNJAB.
- c) 4 RAJPUT.
- d) 6 JAMMU & KASHMIR RIFLES.
- e) 4 SIKH LIGHT INFANTRY.
- f) 164 Field Regiment less one Battery.
- g) 144 Mountain Battery.
- h) B Troop 39 Medium Regiment.
- i) 18 Field Battery.
- j) One Section 4.2-inch Mortars.

The Indian pincer was to advance on the Haji Pir Pass from two sides:

Right Arm: Uri-Sank-Ledwali Gali-Haji Pir Pass

Left Arm: Uri-Bedori-Kuthnar Di Gali-Kiran-Haji Pir Pass.

The operation was planned to be carried out in three distinct phases.

In Phase 1, the objectives were set for the 19 PUNJAB regiment to capture the ring contours and Pathra by 0100 hrs on 25 August, while 1 PARA was tasked with securing the Sank Ridge up to Ledwali Gali and Sawan Pathri by 0500 hours on the same day.

In Phase 2, 19 PUNJAB was assigned to capture Bedori and Kuthnar Di Gali by 0600 hours on 25 August. Simultaneously, 4 RAJPUT had been tasked to secure the Ring Contour and capture Haji Pir Pass, by 1200 hours on the same day.

Finally, in Phase 3, 19 PUNJAB, along with one Company from 4 RAJPUT under their command, was designated to carry out the mopping up. Meanwhile, 4 SIKH LI and 6 JAK RIF were tasked with providing troops to establish firm bases in the captured territories.

The two pronged attack was given to 1 PARA on the right and 19 PUNJAB on the left; these battalions were to be relieved by 4 SIKH LI and JAK RIF on 23/24 and 22/23 August for launching the attack on 24 August. As per the plan, 6 JAK RIF relieved 19 PUNJAB, but heavy rains prevented 4 SIKH LI from relieving 1 PARA in time. As a result, the operation was postponed by twenty-four hours. Further, instead of moving behind 1 PARA in Sank area, the Rajputs had to be shifted to move behind 19 PUNJAB, over suspicions of the Lagma village being infested by enemy agents. So 4 Rajput was now moved behind 19 PUNJAB along the right prong on the axis Uri–Bedori–Kuthnar Di Gali–Kiran–Haji Pir Pass, instead of the original plan to move behind 1 PARA in the left prong along Uri–Sank–Ledwali Gali–Haji Pir Pass.

As per the plan, 1 PARA, under the command of Lt Col Prabhjinder Singh, was to attack along the left prong to capture three intermediate features, namely, Sank (also known as Point 9591), Sar and Ledwali Gali, while 19 PUNJAB was to advance along the right flank and capture Bedori, the prominent feature east of Haji Pir Pass. Once the latter was taken, 4 RAJPUT was to pass through and make for the final objective of Haji Pir Pass, while 6 JAK RIF was to hold on to captured territory.

Operation Bakshi

After a delay of twenty-four hours, the operation commenced on 25 August 1965 at 2150 hours. The attack was preceded by the shelling of suspected enemy positions at Point 9591, Sawan Pathri and Agiwas in the vicinity of Sank. During the early hours, 1 PARA launched an offensive on Sank Ridge, deploying two Companies; 'A' Company, closely followed by 'C' Company, advanced towards the base of Sank. The terrain was challenging due to heavy rainfall from the previous night, which made progress slow and slippery. The strategic importance of Sank was evident as it lay on the enemy's vital communication axis from Bagh to Bedori. Realising its significance, the Pakistani forces held the position with a Company of Rangers, supported by Machine Guns and Mortars. The enemy, well aware of the approaching threat, maintained a stealthy silence until the leading troops came within a mere 45 metres of their perimeter fencing, and then they relentlessly started firing with all their weapons. 'A' Company's No 3 Platoon confronted the alert enemy head-on but endured heavy casualties during the intense battle. The engagement persisted near the enemy's trenches until 0930 hours when the attack had to be called off. On the morning of 26 August, contact with the enemy was temporarily broken to prepare for a second attack later that night.

On the night of 26 August, 1 PARA launched another attack on Sank Ridge. 'B' Company, led by Major (later Lieutenant General) Ranjit Singh Dayal, charged up the hill first, followed by 'D' Company with artillery support. The enemy soldiers came out of their hiding spots and

started shooting with MMGs and LMGs. But the attacking soldiers fought back well, and the enemy had to retreat to their trenches. By the next morning, around 0430 hours on 27 August, 'B' Company had got very close — just 450 metres away — to the enemy positions. They stood point-blank in front of the enemy's stronghold at Sank and charged straight at them. It was a daring move, and as they got close, the attacking troops threw grenades and shot at the enemy's hideouts, silencing their guns and other weapons. The Pakistani troops withdrew to Sar feature, leaving behind sixteen dead.



Artillery Guns in action in Uri – Poonch sector

Source: Sainik Samachar

After successfully driving out the Pakistani forces from Sank Ridge, the position could not be fully secured due to heavy and threatening gunfire from Sar, another location. To address this, 'D' Company was assigned the task of clearing Sar. They swiftly captured Sar and continued their advance towards Ledwali Gali, where the remaining Pakistani troops made a final stand to ensure a safe retreat for their forces from the surrounding area. Meanwhile, 'B' Company secured Sawan Pathri and Agiwas with little resistance by 1400 hours. At the same time, 'C' Company, which had reached Sank, received orders to clear the area to the South of Sank. They accomplished this task by the end of the day, just before darkness fell.

The Battle of Haji Pir Pass

On the night of 27 August, a combined Company comprising soldiers from 'A' and 'D' Companies of 1 PARA was assembled under the command of Major Ranjit Singh Dayal. Their mission was to advance towards Haji Pir Pass, which required climbing over 1220 metres at night. The column's starting point was Ledwali Gali, and their plan was to discreetly move

through Hyderabad Nallah on the night of 27/28 August. Further, their objective was to capture Ring Contours 1194 and 1094 consecutively during the operation.

On the afternoon of 27 August, the column began its descent from Ledwali Gali towards Hyderabad Nallah at 1530 hours. At this point, the enemy started firing with MMGs from the Western side of the Pass, and they also directed small arms fire from the area east of Ledwali Gali. To counter this, the Company Commander ordered the accompanying Forward Observation Officer (FOO) from the artillery to register these enemy Posts on the Eastern and Western shoulders of the Pass. After successfully silencing the enemy fire, the column proceeded along the left bank of Hyderabad Nallah, next to the hill, before crossing over to the other side of the Pass.

Around 1730 hours, the journey was rendered even more challenging due to a heavy downpour. Despite the difficult conditions, the Company continued the climb. By 1900 hours, when they reached Hyderabad Nallah, it was completely dark. However, the Commander decided to press on and continue the ascent towards the Pass. Along the way, the column surrounded a house and captured one Light Machine Gun (LMG), nine rifles, and ten personnel from the Azad Kashmir (POK) Militia. At 0430 hours the next day, the column reached the old Uri-Punch road, approximately ten km below the Pass. Here, the troops took some much-needed rest for two hours, even though it was raining heavily and very cold.

At 0700 hours, the column resumed its march towards Haji Pir Pass. By 0900 hours, they were just 700 metres away from the Pass when they encountered Pakistani troops, who were surprised to see 1 PARA right on the Pass. The Pakistanis had lost track of the Indian column the previous night due to heavy rains and darkness. The enemy responded by opening fire with MMGs from the Western shoulder of the Pass, and using LMGs and rifles from the Pass area itself. To capture the enemy's position, Major Dayal ordered two Platoons to climb up the Spur and launch an assault on the Pakistani troops from the Western side of the Pass. They then rolled down to eliminate the LMG position at the Pass. The Pakistani troops couldn't withstand this bold daylight attack and withdrew in confusion to a feature West of the Pass. As a result, the LMG at the Pass was silenced, and by 1000 hours on 28 August, Haji Pir Pass was fully under the control of 1 PARA.

On 29 August, the Pakistani soldiers launched a fierce counterattack in an attempt to recapture the Pass, but 1 PARA repulsed them. To strengthen their position, the Battalion captured Ring Contour on 30 August and Point 8786 the following day.

Major Ranjit Singh Dayal radioed back the information that the Haji Pir Pass was in Indian hands. Throughout this campaign, Major Ranjit Singh Dayal displayed remarkable bravery and creativity, especially during the final assault on the Pass. He surprised the enemy by advancing from an unexpected direction, earning him the Maha Vir Chakra for his exceptional courage and leadership.

However, the attack on the left flank did not go so well. 19 PUNJAB was met with heavy enemy MMG fire, and it was appreciated that the Ridge along which the troops were to advance was extremely narrow. Thus, any advances from the north-west direction was considered nearly impossible. Attempts by 7 BIHAR and 4 RAJPUT also failed.

The Commanding Officer (CO) of 19 PUNJAB volunteered to make another attempt to capture Bedori from the North-East direction, following a route through Kunrali, Gagrhill, Tilpatra, Jabar, and Bedori Spring, ultimately leading to Bedori Pass. On 28 August, at 0500 hours, the 19 PUNJAB, less one Company, started their march and reached Heman Buniyar at 0715 hrs using transport. From there, they proceeded to Bedori Springs, which had already been secured by 7 BIHAR, and gathered there to prepare for the assault.

Upon reaching Bedori Springs, 19 PUNJAB discovered that the enemy had built stone sangars at Bedori, taking advantage of the rocky terrain of the area. Recognising the challenge, the Battalion requested the 3.7-inch mountain gun, which had arrived in the Brigade Sector on the evening of 28 August, to engage the enemy positions. The mountain gun proved highly effective, destroying the enemy sangars and severely demoralising the enemy troops.

At 0300 hours on 29 August, the troops of 19 PUNJAB crossed the forming-up place (FUP) to begin their assault on Bedori, which was situated at an altitude of 3,760 metres above sea level and 600 metres above the FUP. Finally, 'B' and 'C' Companies of 19 PUNJAB managed to capture the commanding feature of Bedori by 0600 hrs on 29 August, 1965. The CO of 19 PUNJAB, Lieutenant Colonel Sampuran Singh, was awarded the Maha Vir Chakra for exceptional leadership.

Brigadier ZC Bakshi Commander 68 Infantry Brigade was tasked to capture Basali, Haji Pir Pass and Kahuta to effect a linkup between Uri and Punch was decorated with the Maha Vir Chakra for his leadership, tactical skills, and high standard of planning.



First photograph of the Hijipir Pass taken immediately after capture
Source: Sainik Samachar

Operation Faulad

The Battle of Haji Pir concluded with the decisive success of Operation Faulad. It sealed the Haji Pir bulge from the South. The enemy had numerous well-fortified pickets on various hill features between Poonch and Kahuta. These positions effectively controlled the Poonch–Haji Pir track and were equipped with cemented weapon emplacements, shell-proof bunkers, and coordinated MMG and LMG fire. The approaches to these Posts were heavily mined and covered with automatic fire.

The 93 Infantry Brigade of the 25 Infantry Division was assigned the task of securing the Poonch–Haji Pir linkup by capturing these pickets en route to Kahuta. Among these, the most formidable and crucial enemy posts were Raja and Chand Tekri pickets, both strongly defended with wire and mine obstacles. Despite some initial setbacks, the 93 Infantry Brigade displayed gallantry and determination, capturing Raja and Chand Tekri, which were previously considered virtually impregnable.

On the night of September 5/6, 1965, a simultaneous attack was launched on Raja and Chand Tekri by 2 SIKH and 3 Dogra, respectively. The battle began with an intense artillery bombardment, but it had little effect on the heavily fortified positions. The troops faced challenging terrain, crawling on all fours along steep and slippery slopes. As they approached the pickets, they were met with heavy automatic fire. However, with courageous leadership, the leading troops managed to breach the mines and wires, engaging in a fierce hand-to-hand battle for over two hours before capturing the pickets.

The defenders fought tenaciously, and the garrison at Raja picket fought until the last man. During the assault, Major GC Verma and Captain GS Bawa of 3 DOGRA fell while personally

leading the charge. The Commanding Officer of 2 SIKH, Lieutenant Colonel Narindra Nath Khanna, was also fatally wounded as he led his Battalion into the attack and was posthumously awarded the Maha Vir Chakra (MVC) for his bravery. As his troops famously remarked; Raja litta the Raja Ditta.

Raja and Chand Tekri were strategically crucial features dominating a significant area East of Betar Nullah, with a track linking Poonch to Haji Pir Pass. The enemy posts on these features were pivotal for infiltrator activities in the Poonch sector. Capturing these pickets was essential not only to seal off the Haji Pir Pass area but also to disrupt enemy operations from their main bases.

The linkup with the 93 Infantry Brigade was eventually achieved on 10 September, with the successful capture of the entire Haji Pir Bulge. This achievement closed the mouth of the bulge and effectively sealed the Haji Pir Sector, bringing an end to all enemy resistance east of Betar Nullah.

Major General SS Kalaan, General Officer Commanding 19 Division, was awarded the Maha Vir Chakra for his contribution in containing the infiltrators and sealing the entry points in this sector.

Apart from winning the Battle Honour of 'Hajipir', 1 PARA (PUNJAB) also earned one MVC, one Vir Chakra (VrC), two Sena Medals (SMs) and four Mentioned-in-Despatches.



Unfurling of the Indian Tricolour at Hajipir

Source : Sianik Samchar

Conclusion

Since Haji Pir was being used as an infiltration zone, it became imperative to choke it in order to stop the influx of the Gibraltar forces. Subsequently, the Uri-Poonch road was restored, and the strategic Jammu-Rajouri-Srinagar road — dormant since 1947 — became operational again. Following this triumph, the 68 Infantry Brigade and 93 Infantry Brigade of the 19 and 25 Infantry Divisions continued capturing enemy posts, advancing up to Kahuta, which was ultimately seized through the joint efforts of 19 PUNJAB and 6 DOGRA.

This battle has rightfully found its place among the greatest battles — a testament to the indomitable spirit and courage of the brave warriors who partook in the quest to save their motherland from terrorists and enemies. Facing challenge upon challenge head on — in disastrous weather conditions and disadvantageous and inconvenient positions to fight from — these Indian brave hearts emerged victorious, letting absolutely nothing deter them. This noteworthy achievement reinvigorated the troops' morale and further strengthened their resolve to go on and win the war.

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