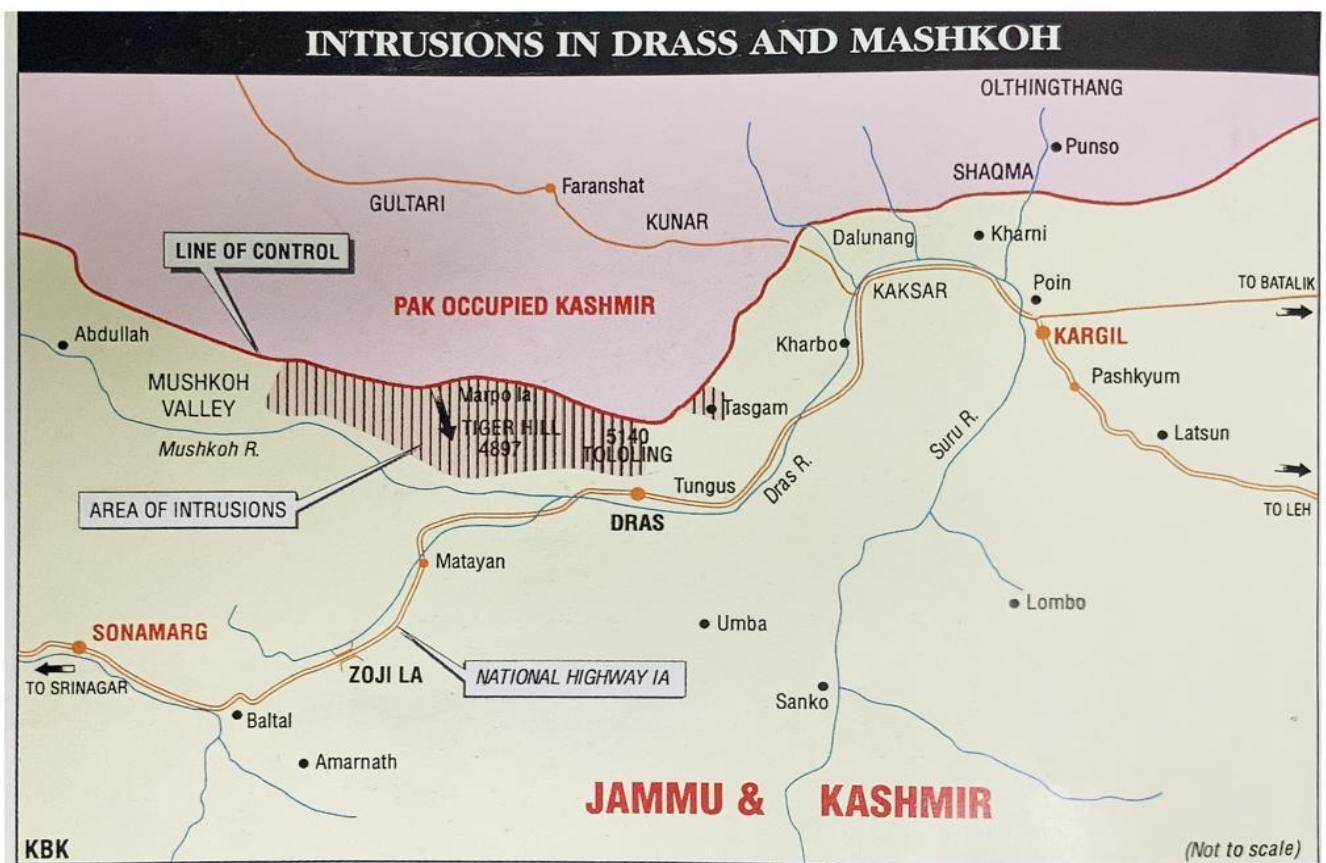


The Battle of Tololing

22 May to 16 June 1999

Introduction

Twenty-four years ago, India and Pakistan engaged in a conflict in the Kargil District of India. The conflict was a result of a Pakistani military intrusion, prompting the Indian Armed Forces to take action and repel the intruders. This was a major clash between the two countries since the 1971 Bangladesh Liberation War. Apart from attempting to alter the alignment of the Line of Control (LoC) East of the Zoji La, Pakistan's primary aim during the Kargil War was to obstruct India's access to the Srinagar-Kargil-Leh highway. To achieve these objectives, maintaining control over Tololing held great significance for the Pakistan Army. Conversely, reclaiming Tololing from Pakistan was of paramount importance for India, as it could allow India to get a foothold in the enemy's defensive layout and then proceed to clear the other intrusions.¹



Pakistani Intrusion in Drass and Mashkoh

Source : Heroes of Kargil, Army Headquarters, New Delhi

¹ Gen VP Malik , Kargil: From Surprise to Victory

Geography

Casting its formidable silhouette over the town of Drass, Tololing, a desolate mountain, stands imposingly at 16000 feet. A solitary, steep trail snakes its way to the summit. It offers no respite or concealment to the advancing troops. Mountain's favour those who command dominating heights. From their sturdy concrete bunkers and fortified *sangars*, the Pakistani forces commanded an unobstructed view of every inch of the treacherous track.

Tololing is connected with Point 5140 via another hill feature called Hump, forming a complex. The ridge is located between two *nalas*, Bimbat *nala* and the Tololing *nala*.

The operations were executed during the night, amidst the harsh, howling wind and biting cold temperatures — ranging from -5 to -11 degrees Celsius — all of which offered no reprieve or advantage. The soldiers painstakingly crawled up the steep incline, advancing inch by inch. With a demanding vertical ascent, where every kilogram of additional weight felt tyrannical, two kilo food packets were relinquished in favour of more ammunition. However, their efforts were rendered futile as the adversaries positioned on the heights refrained from expending their ammunition, opting instead to pelt stones and roll down boulders upon the Indian Army. The brave and hardy soldiers of the Naga Regiment bore the brunt of such tactics, falling victim to this unconventional strategy.

Initial Operations

The 56 Mountain Brigade of 8 Mountain Division which had been inducted into this Sector on 17 May 1999 was given the responsibility of eviction operations in this sub Sector which included Tololing. 8 SIKH and 1 NAGA spearheaded preliminary operations in the Drass sub-sector. While 8 SIKH succeeded in establishing the extent of intrusions in the Tiger Hill complex and occupied Pariyon ka Talab with a view to cutting off the supply route to Tiger Hill, 1 NAGA launched a series of determined attacks on the Pakistani troops occupying defences in the Tololing and Point 5140 complex. Despite the stiff enemy resistance faced by them, the NAGAS notched up several notable successes and suffered many casualties. These two battalions were assisted by 16 GRENADIERS, the battalion that had been originally responsible for the defence of the Drass sub-sector.



Rocket Launcher employed to destroy the Pakistani Sangars

Source : Heroes of Kargil, Army Headquarters, New Delhi

On 27 May 1999, 1 NAGA launched a company attack to secure Point 5140 with a view to cutting off Tololing. Contrary to the available information, there was an enemy post on Point 5140 that was well stocked and fortified. The NAGA company moved boldly and soon closed in with the objective. At this stage, the enemy sprang up from the defences in large numbers and brought down accurate and heavy Universal Machine Gun(UMG), and Heavy Machine Gun(HMG) and small arms fire on the assaulting troops. Due to the heavy volume of fire and the complete absence of cover, the Company Commander and 13 other jawans were injured, including Lance Naik Khushman Gurung. Unmindful of his injuries, Lance Naik Khushman Gurung continued to fire back though he was in an exposed position. He urged his comrades to extricate themselves while he provided effective covering fire and killed several enemy soldiers. Using fire and move tactics, he gradually pulled back and assisted his colleagues in evacuating the Company Commander and other wounded personnel to a safer area. This gallant act of Lance Naik Khushman Gurung in the face of the enemy resulted in saving many lives and also ensured safety of own casualties. For his fearless display of a tenacious fighting spirit and selfless devotion to duty under daunting circumstances, Lance Naik Khushman Gurung was awarded the *Vir Chakra*.

18 GRENADIERS — previously engaged in counterinsurgency operations in the Valley — were deployed to expel the intruders. Despite their immense efforts, 1 NAGA and 8 SIKH were unable to dislodge the enemy from their positions. 18 GRENADIERS required sufficient time for acclimatisation and to readjust to conventional attack strategies. Colonel Kushal Thakur,

the Commanding Officer (CO) at the time, requested a two-week period to plan the assault, facilitate logistical preparations, and conduct ground reconnaissance. Despite the higher command's desire for Colonel Thakur to expedite the process, it was recognized that ample time was necessary due to the enemy's preparedness and strong determination to resist. As a result, the required time was granted to ensure thorough preparations. On 20 May, Colonel Thakur embarked on a reconnaissance mission to the Drass area. Based on his findings, the CO deduced that Tololing could be accessed via three spurs: one from the West, and the others from the South and South East directions.



An Arduous Climb to Tololing

Source : Heroes of Kargil, Army Headquarters, New Delhi

Operations of 18 GRENADIERS

Colonel Kushal Thakur devised a plan that involved the Ghatak (Commando) Platoon led by Captain SA Nimbalker advancing up the South-East Spur. They would be followed by A Company under Major RS Rathore. B Company — under Major Adhikari — would initially serve as a reserve for A Company but would later capture Point 4590 along the southern approach after the recapture of Tololing. Meanwhile, C and D Company, led by Captain Joy Dasgupta and Major Vishal Sharma respectively, would advance through the South-West Spur to disrupt the enemy's reinforcement line from Point 5140 and Hump. Subsequently, they would launch an attack on the targeted feature.

By 1500 hours on 22 May 1999, all troops had reached the fire base of 16 GRENADIERS. At precisely 1930 hours, Captain Nimbalkar bravely led his commandos forward along the South-East Spur. However, despite their best efforts, they were met with heavy defensive fire, which pinned them down just 300 metres short of their objective. The challenging situation was compounded by rain and fog, further hindering the troops' progress.

On 23 and 24 May, the enemy launched intense fire, forcing the troops to seek cover wherever available. Recognizing the need to disrupt the enemy's reinforcement route from the North, the CO initiated the deployment of C Company under Captain Dasgupta and D Company under Captain NS Rathore along the South-Western approach on 25 May. Sadly, they too encountered fierce enemy fire, compelling them to halt their advance 400 metres away from Point 4590.

On 27 May, the Indian Air Force's Mi-17 attack helicopters, including one with Major Adhikari on board, launched an attack on Point 4509 and Tololing. However, this initial attack proved ineffective. Four Mi-17 helicopters launched a more successful assault on Tololing using rockets the following day, on 28 May. Despite facing enemy missiles and machine gun fire, three helicopters managed to deflect the attacks and safely returned to the base. Tragically, the fourth helicopter was struck by a missile from Point 5140 while engaging the enemy position, resulting in the loss of all four crew members.(names of the crew)



General VP Malik meeting the men of 18 Grenadiers

Source : Heroes of Kargil, Army Headquarters, New Delhi

Stalemate in Operations

Consequently, the attack on Tololing was temporarily halted from all directions, and the troops were instructed to establish a secure base around the feature. There was no let-up in the fighting. Only the night brought some relief and then it was time to launch one more assault. No matter what the enemy hurled at them, they clung on to their precarious perch.

On the night of 30 May, at 0130 hours, a renewed attack was launched. B Company, led by Major Adhikari, and the Ghatak Platoon divided into two groups under the command of Captain Nimbalkar and Lieutenant Balwan Singh, advancing towards Point 4590 along the South Spur. While Captain Nimbalkar's group encountered heavy enemy fire and became pinned down West of Barbad Bunker, Major Adhikari's Company managed to come within 25 metres of the objective. Tragically, Major Adhikari was fatally struck in the head by an enemy bullet, and two other soldiers also lost their lives. He was posthumously awarded Mahavir Chakra for his bravery. Despite their valiant efforts, the heavy defensive fire prevented the troops from penetrating the objective.

From 01 to 02 June the soldiers endured harsh conditions, lying in the bitter cold and under continuous heavy fire. The situation was exacerbated by relentless rain, which rendered their circumstances even more unbearable.

Under immense pressure from higher authorities to capture Tololing swiftly, Brigadier AN Aul, Commander 56 Mountain Brigade directed Colonel Thakur to undertake another assault on Tololing at the earliest opportunity. On the night of 03 June, a fresh attack commenced at 2100 hours, taking place along the Southern ridge. Lieutenant Colonel Vishwanathan personally led the assault. In the ensuing intense firefight at close quarters, Lieutenant Colonel R Vishwanathan sustained injuries from a burst of machine gun fire, while several other assaulting troops were also wounded. Despite his injuries, he refused to be evacuated and exhorted his troops to continue fighting. In a close hand-to-hand confrontation, he charged at opposing defences, demolishing three enemy positions and eliminating four intruders. In a complete disregard of his personal safety, he preferred being where his men were fighting and led them from the front during assaults on well-fortified enemy positions in Tololing. He, however, succumbed to his injuries making the supreme sacrifice for the nation in the best traditions of the Indian Army. He was posthumously awarded Vir Chakra for his gallant actions.²

Recognizing the need for additional troops and firepower to neutralise the enemy, Colonel Thakur requested reinforcements, and his request was approved. They were then ordered to consolidate their positions. Subsequently, the operation remained in a stalemate for the next twelve days.

² Prolife of Lieutenant Colonel Ramakrishnan Vishwanathan
https://cdn.gallantryawards.gov.in/gallantry/assets/uploads/styles/awardee_img/public/sites/default/files/RVishwanathan_compressed-2022-09-07-0202-0909.pdf

The Capture of Tololing

As part of the Operation, 2 RAJPUTANA RIFLES and 18 GARHWAL RIFLES were assigned specific roles. 2 RAJPUTANA RIFLES took over from 18 GRENADIERS and launched an assault on Tololing. Lieutenant Colonel M B Ravindranathan, CO, 2 RAJPUTANA RIFLES, sought six days to prepare for another frontal assault, as also it will provide enough time to build a much larger number of artillery regiments, so that the enemy can be subject to heavy fire assault. They had done a thorough reconnaissance of their objective and had been well briefed by the 18 GRENADIERS.

The fire plan for the assault of 2 RAJPUTANA RIFLES was made by Colonel Mediratta, CO, 1889 Light Regiment, and was coordinated by Brigadier Lakhwinder Singh, Commander, 8 Mountain Artillery Brigade. Ranging began under Colonel Meddiratta's supervision at 1430 hours on 12 June 1999. He was assisted by Major Amrinder Singh Kasana, VrC, the Battery Commander (BC), and Captain A Saxena, an Artillery Forward Observation Officer (FOO). As the first Bofors shell exploded on Tololing, scoring a direct hit, the troops of 18 GRENADIERS still in close contact with the enemy, fell back. Over 100 guns rained down death and devastation. Many *sangars* were destroyed. The Pakistani soldiers were taken by surprise by the unexpected artillery fire.

On the night of 12 June, C Company led by Major Vivek Gupta and D Company under Major Mohit Saxena set out for assault, while the A and B Company were nominated as reserves. C Company's objective was Tololing Top, and D Company's objective was Point 4590.

D Company went in first along the southwestern approach to Point 4590, when it closed in with the enemy it came under effective small arms fire, despite that the company succeeded in establishing a foothold. The enemy started readjusting their defences to face the attack. C Company launched its assault at this stage, they soon closed in with Tololing Top and the adjacent Flat, the flat was taken. Major Vivek Gupta now himself led the reserve platoon of his company to launch an assault on Tololing Top from the Flat. Despite being grievously wounded, this gallant officer continued to lead his men, he fearlessly engaged the enemy in fierce hand-to-hand combat and killed three enemy soldiers. He was hit by another bullet and made the supreme sacrifice but not before evicting the enemy from Tololing Top. For this gallantry, Major Vivek Gupta was posthumously awarded the *Maha Vir Chakra*.

Captain Mridul Kumar Singh, SM, a young artillery FOO from 197 Field Regiment, took over the company at this very crucial hour, and deployed the troops on the objective to thwart any counter-attack. Enemy tried launching a counter offensive but were met with accurate artillery fire from the Indian soldiers. The CO decided to launch A Company – which was in reserve – to capture Point 4590. Simultaneously, B Company was asked to clear the northern slope of Tololing. With extremely effective artillery fire Point 4590 and Barbad Bunker were brought down. Tololing was successfully captured by 0600h on 13 June 1999.

Subedar Bhawar Lal, a valiant soldier, commanded his platoon in a mission to capture Tololing Top. As they advanced towards their objective, he was hit by a burst of Light Machine Gun fire. Despite sustaining severe injuries and losing a significant amount of blood, he unwaveringly pressed on, determined to lead his men to victory. Subedar Bhawar Lal rallied his troops for one last assault, which culminated in the successful capture of Tololing Top. Tragically, he made the ultimate sacrifice in the line of duty, laying down his life for the mission. In recognition of his extraordinary bravery and selflessness, he was posthumously awarded the *Vir Chakra*.



On Tololing Top after its recapture

Source : Heroes of Kargil, Army Headquarters

Afterwards, 18 GRENADIERS prepared to launch an attack on the Hump. However, the unit encountered enemy artillery fire, resulting in significant casualties. Consequently, C and D Company, which had been held in reserve, were tasked with capturing the Hump. The Hump, a whale-shaped feature connected to Tololing by a ridge, consisted of approximately ten bunkers that extended to the base of Point 5140. On the morning of 14 June, the Hump was captured, but the troops faced heavy fire from Point 5140. The successful acquisition of the Hump provided a solid foothold for 13 JAK RIF, who were subsequently assigned the mission of seizing Point 5140.

India's relentless three-week assault culminated in the successful capture of Tololing, which served as a pivotal moment in the war. In this three-week-long battle, 18 GRENADIERS endured a total of sixty six casualties, which included:

- Two officers.
- Two Junior Commissioned Officers (JCOs).
- Twenty-one soldiers.

Additionally, one officer, one JCO, and thirty-nine soldiers were wounded.

Fifteen individuals from the battalion were recognized for their distinguished service and gallantry during the battle. The honours awarded to them are as follows:

1. Major Rajesh Adhikari (Posthumous) - *Mahavir Chakra*
2. Major Vivek Gupta (Posthumous) - *Mahavir Chakra*
3. Naik Digendra Kumar - *Mahavir Chakra*
4. Lieutenant Colonel R. Vishwanathan (Posthumous) - *Vir Chakra*
5. Subedar Randhir Singh (Posthumous) - *Vir Chakra*
6. Lance Havildar Ram Kumar (Posthumous) - *Vir Chakra*
7. Havildar Udham Singh (Posthumous) - *Vir Chakra*
8. Lieutenant Colonel MB Ravindranath - *Vir Chakra*
9. Subedar Bhawar Lal (Posthumous) - *Vir Chakra*
10. Company Havildar Major Yashvir Singh (Posthumous) - *Vir Chakra*
11. Havildar Sultan Singh Narwaria (Posthumous) - *Vir Chakra*
12. Major Amrinder Singh Kasana - *Vir Chakra*
13. Captain Praveen Tomar - *Sena Medal*
14. Havildar Ranbir Singh - *Sena Medal*
15. Havildar Shri Bhagwan - *Sena Medal*
16. Subedar Sumer Singh Rathore (Posthumous) - *Sena Medal*
17. Captain Joy Dasgupta - *Sena Medal*
18. Naik Samunder Singh (Posthumous) - *Sena Medal*
19. Lance-Naik RK Yadav (Posthumous) - *Sena Medal*
20. Grenadier Raj Kumar (Posthumous) - *Sena Medal*
21. Grenadier Dalip Singh - *Sena Medal*
22. Grenadier Kalyan Singh - *Sena Medal*
23. Grenadier Munshi Kumar (Posthumous) - *Sena Medal*
24. Grenadier Pravin Kumar (Posthumous) - *Sena Medal*

This historic battle shall forever be etched in the annals of history, serving as a profound testament to the unwavering courage and unyielding spirit of these brave warriors. Confronted with insurmountable challenges, including the enemy firmly entrenched in advantageous positions and the relentless, biting cold winds that tested their mettle, the indomitable Indian soldiers emerged triumphant, overcoming every obstacle with unwavering determination. Their remarkable achievement resonated deeply within the ranks, revitalising the troops' morale and fortifying their resolve.

Furthermore, the capture of Tololing opened up opportunities for securing other strategically important terrain features, thereby setting the stage for further advances in the conflict. The intrusion in this region was the deepest into territory on the Indian side of the LoC. Hence it was imperative, tactically as well as psychologically, to expel the intruders from Tololing as early as possible.

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