

Operation Safed Sagar

Introduction

The Lahore Declaration signed by the then Indian Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee and Pakistan Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif on 21 February 1999 brought prospects for intensified efforts to resolve all contentious issues between India and Pakistan, including on the issue of Jammu and Kashmir. It, at the same time, offered a glimmer of hope of restoration of peace and tranquility in the sub-continent. The declaration came on the heels of the nuclear tests conducted by the two nations in 1998.

However, within three months of signing of the Lahore declaration, there came a military surprise for India. The Pakistan Army continuing with its aggressive gesture and hostile policy towards India sent regular and irregular armed invaders into the Indian territory. A large number of heavily armed infiltrators occupied the Indian bunkers and fortified themselves with arms and ammunition and provisions to last them for several months.¹ The fourth Indo-Pak war, and the first under the nuclear umbrella commenced in May 1999 with the foray of nearly 1500 Pakistani intruders into Indian territory of Kargil District, inviting a military response from India.

The Indian Army's response was very rapid within weeks of discovery of the intrusion, and by 09 May, two well acclimatised battalions returning from Siachen were concentrated in the Batalik Sector to contain the intrusion. In the next few days, three more battalions were moved from the Valley into the Kargil Sector to counter known and possible intrusions in other sub-Sectors. By 24 May, two additional Brigades had moved into the area and the Indian Air Force was committed on 26 May.²

The primary aim of Indian military offensive was to dislodge the Pakistani intruders and restoration of status quo ante. The use of air power is potentially escalatory in nature, that too close to the LoC could result in escalation of war. Therefore, Indian government held back the use of air power till the scale and intensity of the intrusion and its implication was clear. Secondly, Indian Air Force was asked not to cross the LoC. The mandate contained the scope of the Air Force response to the war, in order to keep the war limited and restricted to evicting the intruders; therefore curtailing the possibilities of escalation.

Prelude to the Operation

Indian Army had on 08 May 1999 projected the requirement of Attack Helicopters for use against the intruders, and also Helicopters for transport of troops. This came for consideration to the Indian Government between 12 May 1999 and 17 May 1999 and it was decided not to use this option as it may lead to escalation. On 25 May, 1999 after an in-depth appreciation of the emerging situation the Cabinet Committee on Security (CCS) took the decision to deploy

¹ SM Kumar, Resounding Success of Operation Vijay, Press Information Bureau, GOI 20 July 1999, https://archive.pib.gov.in/archive/ArchiveSecondPhase/FEATURE/1999-FEATURES/PDF/FEA-1999-07-20_145.pdf

² From Surprise To Reckoning Kargil Committee Report, Executive Summary, tabled in Parliament on February 23, 2000.

the Indian Air Force. Finally on 25 May, 1999 the CCS gave the go ahead for use of air power.³ Once the CCS approved the deployment of the Indian Air Force, the operations commenced on 26 May 1999. The approval came with a limitation that the IAF would not cross the Line of Control (LoC).



Mi-17 of No.152 HU lifting off from Drass in the shadow of the Tololing Ridge
Source: Vayu Aerospace and Defence Review

Although, the IAF was not deployed during the initial phase of Operation Vijay, it had not only alerted its fighter Squadrons, but some aircraft were moved to the Valley for the impending operations.⁴ IAF also commenced a large scale airlift of troops, ammunition and stores into the Sector. It also commenced aerial reconnaissance-and-strike familiarisation. The rapid mobilisation ensured that the IAF was ready for undertaking wide-ranging full-scale military operations by the morning of 15 May.⁵

The IAF began conducting initial reconnaissance sorties over the Kargil heights as early as 10 May 1999, less than a week after the presence of the enemy incursion was first confirmed. On 12 May, an IAF Helicopter was fired upon near the most forward-based Pakistani positions overlooking Kargil and landed uneventfully with a damaged rotor. In the next few days, IAF Jaguar fighters conducted Tactical Reconnaissance sorties in the Kargil area to gather target

³ Statement by Shri Pranab Mukherjee, Minister of Defence regarding news item "Air-strike delay cost lives: Kargil Report" Parliament Digital Library, 09 June 2004

<https://eparlib.nic.in/bitstream/123456789/727164/1/71.pdf>

⁴ Phadke, R. V. (1999). Air offensive in the High Himalayas. Strategic Analysis, 23(9), p. 1606

⁵ A Subramanian, Kargil Revisited: Air Operations in a High Altitude Conflict, CLAWS Journal Summer 2008.

information using their onboard long-range oblique photography systems.⁶ On 21 May 1999, the presence of the personnel from the Pakistani Northern Light Infantry's 4th and 6th Battalion and their positions was determined by an IAF Canberra bomber of the 106th Photo Reconnaissance Squadron. The aircraft was tasked with flying over the Kargil sector and identifying the enemy, who were likely to have been hiding inside igloo like entrenchments.⁷ The Photo Reece Canberra was effectively used in the Kargil conflict and brought the first photographic proof of enemy intrusion in our territory. Despite taking a missile hit, the aircraft managed to land back safely at a nearby base.⁸

While there was considerable pressure from outside the IAF to operate only Attack Helicopters, the Chief of the Air Staff (CAS) succeeded in convincing the Government that in order to create a suitable environment for the helicopters, fighter action was required.⁹

Operational Challenges

The Kargil War came with a unique challenge to the Indian Air Force, as conducting operations at a high altitude as high as between 14,000 and 18,000 feet is a tremendous challenge for any Air Force in the World. In Indian context, use of Air Power in such mountainous terrain had no precedence in the past.

Due to the very different attributes of the atmosphere, weapons performance gets affected. Variations in air temperature and density, altering drag indices and a host of other factors cause weapons to go off their mark. Secondly, totally unfamiliar surroundings in the Kargil area made target recognition difficult from the ground, let alone from a fast moving aircraft. As a result, the initial few sorties from high levels were not effective as desired. However, once revised and modified, the accuracy of the airstrikes improved dramatically. Any time the target was spotted, a very high success rate invariably resulted.¹⁰ The lack of availability of accurate intelligence about the positions occupied by the Pakistan Army was also a major handicap. To overcome this challenge, Indian Air Force spent twelve days in carrying out detailed reconnaissance of the area of intrusion.

Similarly, high altitude operations always come with challenges like severe degradation of aircraft and weapon performance. At high altitudes, a crucial factor in aircraft performance is the reserve of power available, which, for the MiG and Mirage fleets, was a strong point in their favor.¹¹

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⁶ Lambeth, B., 2012. Airpower at 18,000': The Indian Air Force in the Kargil War, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. United States of America. Retrieved from

<https://carnegieendowment.org/2012/09/20/airpower-at-18-000-indian-air-force-in-kargil-war-pub-49421>

⁷ Indian Air Force Twitter handle, May 21, 2019 https://twitter.com/IAF_MCC/status/1130562318104899584

⁸ PIB, The IAF Canberras Retire After Fifty Years of Glorious Service, Ministry of Defence, 11 May 2007.

<https://pib.gov.in/newsite/erelcontent.aspx?relid=27761>

⁹ Ops Safed Sagar, Indian Air Force, <https://indianairforce.nic.in/ops-1962/>

¹⁰ Ops Safed Sagar, Indian Air Force, <https://indianairforce.nic.in/ops-1962/>

¹¹ Ibid

The Western Air Command was given the responsibility to conduct operations during the Kargil War. The task assigned to the Indian Air Force was not to use air power, as an extended artillery but only in assistance to the Indian Army. The primary task of the use of air power was to degrade the offensive capabilities of the intruders by targeting their gun positions, dug-in bunkers, defence on mountain tops, destroy their supply lines, supply camps, and distribution centres.¹² On the morning of 26 May 1999, IAF commenced air operations by attacking enemy positions & supply lines. The first strike was launched at 0630hrs by MiG-21, MiG-27ML & MiG-23BN fighters. MiG-29 on Combat Air Patrol provided Air Defence cover to strike aircraft. Post-strike, Canberra carried out recce to assess the damage inflicted on the enemy.

In the initial few days, the IAF suffered a few losses. Between 27 and 28 May, the IAF lost two aircraft—a MiG-21, a MiG-27 and a helicopter — Mi-17. On 27 May, the MiG-27, flown by Flight Lieutenant Kambampati Nachiketa developed mechanical problems forcing the pilot to eject. The MiG-21, flown by Squadron Leader Ajay Ahuja orbiting in the area to look for Flight Lieutenant Kambampati Nachiketa was shot down by a shoulder fired heat seeking missile. Squadron Leader Ajay Ahuja was awarded Vir Chakra Posthumously for displaying exceptional courage in going beyond the call of duty while searching for a downed brother officer.

On 28 May 1999 Nubra formation, 4 x Mi-17 were tasked to strike ‘Point 5140’ feature, located two kms north of Tololing’. Nubra formation took off in time and all went on perfectly well. However, Flight Lieutenant Subramaniam Muhilan was flying the Nubra-3 formation which got hit by the Stinger Missile. Despite Flight Lieutenant Muhilan's best effort to control the damaged helicopter, it crashed killing him and all his crew members.¹³ He was awarded Vayu Sena Medal Posthumously. Wing Commander (later Air Commodore) Anil Kumar Sinha was the leader of the four aircraft formation. The rocket attack launched by the formation, despite the loss of the helicopter, was successful and inflicted heavy casualties on the enemy. Wing Commander Anil Kumar Sinha was awarded with the Vir Chakra.

Earlier, on 21 May a Canberra Reconnaissance Aircraft operating in the Kargil Sector, had got one engine damaged by a SAM. It was clear that the intruders had access to man-portable missiles, hitherto not used in the valley. By 28 May, IAF had identified most of the enemy encampments and heights held by them and the air strikes were having the desired effect. In Batalik Sector, the administrative camp of the intruders was effectively engaged with air strikes and artillery and one height had been cleared.¹⁴

It was the air strikes conducted by the Indian Air Force on some of the key locations, that dramatically altered the equation in favour of India. The most prominent among them is the strike on the Muntho Dhalo. The Pakistani had built a supply camp in a bowl-shaped valley at Muntho. Over the days it grew up into a major supply depot. The strike of 16 June and 17 June by MiG-27s and Mirage-2000s were devastating and later attacks in the area ensured destruction of fresh Pakistani attempts to reuse the base.¹⁵ In the recce missions carried out in

¹² Vayu. Aerospace and Defence Review, Volume V, 1999

¹³ Nubra Formation October 15, 2009 Air Commodore A K Sinha, <https://www.bharat-rakshak.com/IAF/history/kargil/nubra-formation/>

¹⁴ Amberish K Diwanji, 4 IAF men die as Pak shoots down helicopter, The Rediff, 28 May 1999 <https://m.rediff.com/news/1999/may/28kash5.htm>

¹⁵ Tiwary, Air Vice Marshal Arun Kumar. ‘The Kargil War:1999,’ Indian Air Force in Wars. Lancer Publishers LLC, 2013, p 264.

the end of May, initial 20 to 25 structures were noticed in the region, which in the next fifteen days had risen to over 80. ¹⁶ On June 24, 1999, the IAF used LGBs to decimate the enemy on Tiger Hill. The IAF continued to mount search and destroy missions when on 05 July a large Nissan hut in the Tiger Hill area was destroyed. Two days later, on 07 July, the IAF struck a logistics camp in the same area. Earlier, despite bad weather restricting flying, on 03 June, three enemy camps were destroyed. With Indian troops in very close proximity to the enemy, air attacks had to be carefully executed or on occasions even called off till a confirmation was received from the army that Indian troops were out of harm's way. On 08 June, the IAF engaged targets in the Mushkoh Valley where the Pakistan Army had many storage dumps and bunkers. ¹⁷



IAF Reconnaissance Sorties over the Kargil heights
https://twitter.com/IAF_MCC/status/1131115866907529216

The Indian Air Force strike operations ended on 12 July 1999. Overall during the air campaign, the IAF flew 550 strike missions, 150 reconnaissance missions, and over 500 escort flights. The IAF also flew 2185 helicopter sorties, logging 925 flying hours, for casualty evacuation and air transport operations. ¹⁸

Conclusion

This was the first-time combat air power has been used in the high mountain ranges above 15,000ft altitude. The Indian Air Force was equipped with supersonic fighter aircraft. India had not used the combat components of its air force either in the 1962 War with China or in the Siachen conflict with Pakistan. The decision to deploy Air Force and the sheer professionalism

¹⁶ 6 Pak officers die in attacks, The Tribune, 23 June 1999 <https://m.tribuneindia.com/1999/99jun23/>

¹⁷ R.V. Phadke (1999) Air offensive in the High Himalayas, Strategic Analysis,

¹⁸ Heroes of Kargil, Colonel Gurmeet Kanwal, Army Headquarters, New Delhi p. 122

of the Indian Air Force rapidly adapted itself to the challenge of offensive air operations in the high Himalayan terrain while ensuring that Indian own troops did not become victims of "friendly fire" as has happened so often in other air forces.¹⁹ At the operational level, IAF's air operations during the Kargil conflict clearly stand out amongst many other significant achievements. It showcased IAF ability to adapt, prioritise and deliver in a hitherto new operational environment. The images of the pinpoint LGB attacks on Tiger Hill by Mirage aircraft as well as the destruction of main logistic node at Muntho Dhalo will forever remind us of IAF's professionalism and resolve.²⁰

The action of the Indian Air Force had considerable impact on the politico-military sphere in Pakistan. First, it raised alarm in the Pakistan Air Force; however, PAF avoided raising the stakes, giving air superiority to IAF during the war.

The major contribution of the IAF during the war was to curtail the overall duration of the war. Had the Air Force not been deployed during the crucial phase of army operations, the war could have extended for few more months. Secondly, the use of Air force ensured the Army's action were decisive, incurring fewer losses, and in a shorter duration. Most importantly, the Indian Air Force achieved its primary objective of degrading the enemy's offensive capabilities, softening its defence and denying essential supplies.²¹

Overall there were five Air Force personnel killed during the Kargil conflict, all during the initial phase of the Air Operations.

¹⁹ Singh, J. (1999). Pakistan's fourth war. *Strategic Analysis*, 23(5), p. 701

²⁰ "On-going strategic transformation" VAYU Exclusive Interview with Air Chief Marshal NAK Browne, PVSM, AVSM, VM, ADC, Chief of Air Staff, Indian Air Force on eve of the IAF's 80th Anniversary. *Vayu Aerospace and Defence Review V/2012*.

²¹ *Vayu Aerospace and Defence Review*, Volume V/1999