

Battle of Longewala

On the evening of 03 December, Pakistan launched a pre-emptive strike on Indian Air Force (IAF) air bases and radar stations in the Western Sector, primarily in Punjab, Jammu and Kashmir, Haryana and Rajasthan. This attack was, in effect, an act of war. India was prepared for such an eventuality, and offensives against Pakistan by land, air, and sea were launched the very next day. The first wave of attack was followed by the second and third wave of attacks. In addition to these air attacks, the Pakistan Army launched offensive action along the Line of Control in J&K and started artillery shelling of forward positions of the Indian Army. The Pakistan Army also resorted to artillery shelling at forward Indian positions in Punjab and Rajasthan, and a day later on 04 December they launched an ambitious attack in the Longewala Sector in Rajasthan.¹

The Indian strategy was to launch an offensive in the East and to undertake defensive operations in the West with limited offensives. The Pakistan strategy was to undertake defensive operations in East Pakistan and to launch limited offensives in the West.²

This pivotal engagement, which occurred in the Thar Desert of Rajasthan from 04 December to 07 during the 1971 war, stands as a testament to extraordinary valour of Indian soldiers. In this gripping tale of bravery, the Indian Army and the Indian Air Force gallantly defended against a formidable Pakistani force, including tanks. The enemy's aggressive offensive was aimed to advance towards Jaisalmer and Jodhpur, with the objective of capturing a significant portion of Indian territory.

Geography

The battle unfolded amidst the terrain of the Thar Desert in Rajasthan, which stretches approximately 50-60 kilometres into Pakistan's territory. Jaisalmer, a key city in the region, lies roughly 120 kilometres from the India-Pakistan border. This vast expanse is characterised by ever-shifting sands occasionally punctuated by rocky outcrops. The sands, prone to continuous movement, form dunes that extend in a northeast-to-southwest direction, mirroring the prevailing wind patterns. These dunes, often resembling sharp-edged swords, continually shift, their locations cannot be marked on the maps. The sand dunes in this area are of loose sand and huge with steep gradients thereby making it difficult for even tanks, known for their cross-country mobility, to manoeuvre around these slippery sand dunes.

¹ Man Aman Singh Chhina, How the Indo-Pak War of 1971 began 50 years ago on this day, the Indian Express, 04 December 2021 <https://indianexpress.com/article/explained/india-pakistan-1971-war-events-explained-7653653/>

²Rana T.S. Chhina, Last Post Indian War Memorials Around the World, Centre for Armed Forces Historical Research United Service Institution of India 2014, https://www.me.gov.in/Uploads/PublicationDocs/23460_IWM_Book_11-06-2014_.pdf

Pakistan's Plan

- 1) 18 Infantry Division to conduct an approach march covering a distance of approximately 60 miles to reach the International Border (IB) on the night of 03 December.
- 2) Subsequently, a further movement of 40 miles was carried out from the IB to reach Ramgarh. This movement was led by the 51 Pakistani Infantry Brigade, accompanied by the 22 Cavalry and the 38 Baluch units. Upon capturing Ramgarh, the Brigade's next objective was to proceed to Jaisalmer with the aim of neutralising the airfield.
- 3) The 22 Cavalry received orders to bypass Longewala and establish a strategic position to counter any potential counteroffensive actions by India's 12 Infantry Division.
- 4) Simultaneously, the 206 Infantry Brigade was assigned the task of leaving one Battalion behind for the defence of Rahim Yar Khan while securing Longewala as a firm base.
- 5) Furthermore, the 38 Cavalry, with one Squadron less a Troop and accompanied by 1 PUNJAB and a Mortar Battery, was instructed to follow the 51 Infantry Brigade until reaching the metal road leading to Jaisalmer. Afterward, their mission was to continue in Jaisalmer, focusing on neutralising the airfield.

The Pakistani Brigade Commander, Brigadier Tariq Mir, exuded confidence with a brash and resounding statement: "we will have breakfast at Longewala, lunch at Ramgarh, and dinner at Jaisalmer."

Sequence of events

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) Kuldip 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 parameter by the BSF to keep their camels from straying. This wire later fooled the attackers into believing that a minefield existed around the post.³

The Indian force stationed at Longewala was remarkably modest, consisting of just one Infantry Company comprising fewer than 100 soldiers. 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

³ Major General Kuldip Singh Bajwa (Retd), Battle of Longewala, Journal of the United Service Institution of India, Vol. CXXXVIII, No. 574, October-December 2008.

battalion arrived at 0230 hours on 05 December. Three AMX light tanks came up at about 0800 hrs on 05 December, much after the first face off with the enemy.

At approximately 0100 hours on 05 December, the sound of tanks became audible near the International Border. This development was subsequently verified by Company Commander Major Kuldip Singh Chandpuri, who was in charge of 'A' Company, 23 PUNJAB, responsible for defending the Longewala post.

During the same night, at 0030 hours, Pakistani artillery commenced firing in support of the advancing Pakistani armoured units. Major Chandpuri's troops engaged the Pakistani armour and infantry using their anti-tank weaponry and small-arms.

In stark contrast, the Pakistani force arrayed against them was considerably substantial. It included the 51 Infantry Brigade Group, featuring the 22 Cavalry equipped with T-59 Patton Tanks, along with elements from the 28 Reconnaissance and Support Battalion, 10 Punjab, and 38 Baluch units. This force was positioned to the north of Longewala.

In the depth, the Pakistani 206 Infantry Brigade, accompanied by the 38 Cavalry utilising Sherman Tanks, was tasked with securing Longewala after the Pakistani 51 Infantry Brigade had departed for the capture of Ramgarh. This significant disparity in both numbers and equipment added to the formidable challenges faced by the Indian defenders at Longewala.

To stop the Pakistan offensive at Longewala 17 RAJPUTANA RIFLES and a Troop of armour of 80 Armoured Delivery Regiment located at Sadhewala manned by 20 Lancers personnel was the first to arrive by 0800 hours on 05 December. It checked any Pakistani effort to cut the road North of Longewala connecting it with other Brigade Sectors, a vicious tank battle took place between a far superior T-59 and small light weight but skillfully handled AMX-13. Dafadar Harvir Singh engaged enemy tanks which acted as a remarkable dampner on other enemy tanks but was hit. In recognition of this unparalleled display of gallantry Dafadar Harbir Singh, was awarded the Vir Chakra posthumously. ⁴

Major General RF Khambatta, the General Officer Commanding (GOC) of the 12 Infantry Division contacted Wing Commander (later Air Marshal) MS Bawa stationed at Jaisalmer, with the urgent request for close air support to aid the beleaguered company at Longewala. However, the aircraft available at the Jaisalmer air base – the Hawker Hunters – were not equipped for night-flying operations. Consequently, air support could only be provided in the morning.

Undaunted by this limitation, the Company Commander, Major KS Chandpuri, rallied his troops and inspired them to maintain their steadfast defensive positions until the Indian Air Force (IAF) could come to their assistance. Despite facing overwhelming numerical superiority from the Pakistani forces, the soldiers of the 23 PUNJAB held their ground resolutely

⁴ Cavalry Officers Association; Armour 71 published by DefStrat Mar2023

throughout the night. For his leadership, bravery, and determination in the face of overwhelming odds, Major Chandpuri was awarded the Maha Vir Chakra, India's second highest military honour.

During the operation, throughout the period from 05 December to 11 December Captain Prithvi Pal Singh Sangha spent most of the time carrying out air borne missions of observing the enemy movements, passing back valuable information and directing the strikes by own tanks and guns. He was awarded Vir Chakra for his gallant action. Subedar Ratan Singh was commanding a platoon of a Company when on the 05 December, 1971, the enemy attacked this position in strength. Subedar Ratan Singh moved from trench to trench and led by his personal example infused courage and enthusiasm in his men and was of great help to his Company Commander in holding the post against the enemy attacks. He was awarded Vir Chakra.

On 05 December, Sepov Jagjit Singh was manning a Light Machine Gun Post in the forward defended locality, when the enemy was closing in fast. During the attack, his bunker was badly damaged by enemy fire. Realising the importance of maintaining a heavy volume of fire against the enemy, he with utter disregard to his personal safety, came out in the open and started firing his gun, till he was killed by enemy fire. He was awarded Vir Chakra posthumously.

Major (later Brigadier) Ravender Datt Law was commanding an Independent Armoured Squadron. He deployed his tanks effectively to stem the enemy advance. During the battle from the 06 December to the 10 December, Major Ravender Datt Law inflicted heavy casualties on the enemy armour and provided valuable support to the Infantry. He was awarded Vir Chakra.



23 Battalion of the Punjab Regiment at the Longewala Post

Source: <https://m.rediff.com/news/special/the-hero-of-the-battle-of-longewala/20211203.htm>

In the meantime, air strikes were requested. Indian Air Force immediately mounted a series of attacks from the Jaisalmer airfield, commencing at 0700 hrs on 05 December, Indian Airforce Fighters at dawn started what the pilots described as ‘Turkey Shoot’, and destroyed over 100 vehicles and twenty-two tanks by noon. Air recce reported that the advancing Pak column, which had crossed into Indian territory was stretched over a distance of 20 km along the track Kharotar BP 638-Masit Wari Bhit-Gabar and included one armoured regiment of T-59 tanks and one infantry brigade.

On the morning of 06 December, the Pakistani forces initiated intermittent shelling of the Longewala post using medium artillery. At 1145 hrs, reports indicated the presence of Pakistani tanks once again in the Kharotar area. In response, the Indian Air Force (IAF) executed a strike mission that proved highly effective. During this mission, the IAF managed to destroy two additional tanks and twenty vehicles belonging to the Pakistani armoured column.

Reports from the battlefield indicated that the majority of the invading force, which included the 51 Infantry Brigade, 22 Cavalry with their T-59 tanks, and one squadron of Sherman tanks, were bogged down along the Kharotar-Gabar axis. Recognizing this strategic opportunity, the Army Commander urged Major General Khambata to capitalise on this situation and eliminate this immobilised enemy force.

Simultaneously, the Indian Air Force (IAF) missions wreaked havoc on the Pakistani column, causing significant damage and destruction. Longewala, in the District of Jaisalmer in Rajasthan, became the biggest graveyard of Pakistani armour.



A Destroyed Pakistani Tank during the Battle

Source: <https://m.rediff.com/news/special/the-hero-of-the-battle-of-longewala/20211203.htm>

The GOC of Pakistan's 18 Infantry Division, Maj Gen BM Mustafa was removed from command, on 06 December 1971, "for his total loss of sight of his aim, incompetence, and utter failure."

Role of Indian Air Force

In a classic air action in the Western Desert, The IAF's relentless efforts and ability to inflict crippling losses on the enemy were key factors in the Indian Forces' achievements during this critical phase of the battle. . Although Pakistan had initiated the war with pre-emptive air strikes against major forward air bases, the IAF rapidly gained the initiative and had thereafter dominated the skies over both fronts.⁵ Pakistan launched Operation Chengiz Khan on the evening of December 3, when the PAF attacked numerous IAF airfields and radars—Jaisalmer was, however, not targeted.⁶

⁵Our Operations, OPS 1971, Indian Air Force, <https://indianairforce.nic.in/ops-1962/>

⁶ Bharat Kumar, The Battle of Longewala: The Quick Response and Decisive Impact of Air Power, journal of the centre for air power studies Vol. 11 No. 1 October-December 2021 <https://capsindia.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/DD-Journal-Oct-Dec-2022.pdf>

A total of eleven air strike missions were flown. Seventeen Pak tanks were knocked out and 23 damaged. Early in the morning of 6 December, the invaders intermittently shelled Longewala with medium artillery and at 1145 hrs their tanks were again reported in area Kharotar. A strike mission by the Indian Air Force knocked down two more tanks and twenty vehicles. The armoured column was broken up. The IAF rose to the occasion on very short notice and inflicted crippling losses on the enemy tanks and vehicles. The company defending Longewala also held out tenaciously against heavy odds until reinforcements arrived.⁷

The Indian Air Force flew five more strike missions on 6 December and played havoc with the Pak column(203).

On 07 December, the Air Base launched twenty sorties, intensively targeting the region encompassing Longewala, BP 638, and Ghabbar. Depriving the enemy of its much-needed vehicles and guns, which lay burning.

On 08 December, the Air Base continued its offensive with a total of fourteen sorties, aiming to further weaken the enemy's capabilities. During these missions, they claimed the destruction of one tank and sixteen vehicles. To bolster their forces, additional aircraft from Jamnagar were brought in, increasing the total number of Hunter aircraft to fourteen. In light of their increased capacity, the Base Commander communicated a message, expressing the need for better utilisation of the available resources.

On 09 December, the Air Base launched a staggering twenty-two Hunter sorties. During these missions, the Squadron reported the destruction of nine tanks, three artillery guns, thirty-two vehicles, and one armoured personnel carrier. Additionally, they inflicted damage on three tanks and six vehicles, continuing their efforts to neutralise the enemy's forces and assets.

During the war, Wing Commander Donald Melvyn Conquest was commanding the Operational Training Unit. He was instrumental in neutralising heavy enemy armoured thrust in the Longewala section and in setting on fire numerous goods trains. He was awarded Vir Chakra for his action.

Similarly, Squadron Leader Ravindra Nath Bali was a senior pilot in a Fighter Bomber Squadron. He led three strike missions on the 5th December, 1971 and one on the 6th December, 1971. During these attacks he destroyed three tanks and caused extensive damage to a number of other tanks and vehicles despite heavy ground fire and on some occasions intense enemy air opposition. On the 7th December 1971 he again led a strike mission to the same area and destroyed two tanks. He was awarded Vir Chakra for his professional skill and devotion to duty.

⁷ History Division, Ministry of Defence, Government of India: History of the 1971 India Pakistan War, ed. S. N. Prasad et al., New Delhi 1992.

Squadron Leader Jagbir Singh, Squadron Leader Dalip Kumar Dass, Flight Lieutenant Kukke Sreekantasastry Suresh, Ramesh Chander Gosain played major role during the Battle of Longewala and were decorated with Vir Chakra. ⁸

The Indian Air Force was instrumental in precluding major Pakistan offensives in Longewala. The back of the Pakistani offensive was broken by the evening of the first day. Not a single aircraft was lost despite some intense ground fire by the Pakistani tank crews. The duration of the battle and its outcome could be have been different if the Pakistani intruders had been engaged by the Indian 12 Infantry Division on its own. It was the effort put in by the Hunters from Jaisalmer that brought about this resounding victory. The Battle of Longewala thus, remains a unique one in the annals of aerial warfare where the intruding armour forces were decimated by air power alone. It will always be remembered as one of the proudest moments in the history of the Indian Air Force. ⁹



The soldiers Celebrate over Pakistani Tank at the Battle of Longewala

Source: <https://m.rediff.com/news/special/the-hero-of-the-battle-of-longewala/20211203.htm>

Conclusion

If India had not emerged victorious in the battle on the night of December 4 and 5 , 1971, Pakistan would have had a clear path towards capturing Ramgarh and Jaisalmer, potentially giving them a stronger position during negotiations. The main goal of the Pakistani forces was

⁸ Awardee List for the 122 Sqn <https://www.bharat-rakshak.com/IAF/Database/Awards/awards.php?qunit=122%20Sqn>

⁹ Bharat Kumar, The Battle of Longewala: The Quick Response and Decisive Impact of Air Power, journal of the centre for air power studies Vol. 11 No. 1 October-December 2021 <https://capsindia.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/DD-Journal-Oct-Dec-2022.pdf>

to maintain their presence in East Pakistan until they could secure strategically significant areas in the Western region, which could then be used as leverage in negotiations.

This battle shall find its place among the greats — 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. 23 PUNJAB, who were outnumbered on the first day, held courageously against the Pakistani forces. The crucial role that the Air Force played in this battle is remarkable. Lieutenant General JS Aurora, who played a crucial role in the creation of Bangladesh and served as the Eastern Army Commander during the 1971 Indo-Pak war, would later describe, “The Battle of Longewala in the Western Theatre stands out as a classic example of well fought and well-coordinated ground and air battles which have no parallel in the post-Independence history of Indian Army.”

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