

Armour Operations: Indo-Pak Conflict 1965

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Hindu morale would not stand more than a couple of hard blows at the right time and place.

– Field Marshal Ayub Khan, Murree,
July 1965, during the planning of Operation Gibraltar.

Introduction

Truth is the first casualty in war – it surfaces only much later when someone decides to bare the facts, irrespective of affiliation. To protect individual reputations and glorify regimental histories, fictionalised accounts tend to creep in, far removed from actual events. This inhibits objective analysis, and we land up repeating history. Remarkably, in the short Indo-Pak conflict of 1965, engagements were decided more by quick thinking, motivated soldiers at troop, squadron and regiment levels, rather than the brilliance of the higher commanders or lofty plans. As one Pakistani defence analyst wittily put it, this conflict was “fought by just 20 Lt Cols and 40 Majors from both sides” – quite believable.

Strategic Setting

The 1965 conflict was the second Indo-Pak conflict, but the first involving large forces. Pakistan's plans at the strategic level have always been bombastic, but not rooted to ground realities; India's have always been defensive—instead of waging all-out war, prosecution is muted. In Western Command, Lt Gen Harbaksh Singh's philosophy was defensive-offence—a mindset that percolated

to the rank and file, evident from the slow pace of operations, and the timidity of Brigade Commanders and above. The conflict (and I use this term instead of war), because its scale and intensity was never above that of a skirmish, lasted just 17 days. It witnessed some of the largest tank battles since World War II. The armour battles ranged from integral armour regiment in a defensive role, as in the battle of Chhamb-Jaurian-Akhnur, to the gritty action of an independent armoured brigade in the defensive battle of 11 Corps at Asal Uttar and, finally, the launch of the ultimate punch, 1 Corps on September 08. The tank battles that followed showcased the determination of own troops while facing superior enemy tanks and ultimately thwarting Pakistan's misguided aims.

Decisive Battle of Asal Uttar: The Turning Point

Pakistan's 1 Armoured Division was positioned at Kasur and, unknown to Western Command, ready to launch an offensive towards the bridges at Harike and Beas, and threaten Amritsar, Jullundur and/or Delhi. It had the latest Patton tanks (with night capability), matched only by our Centurion Mk7; however, no Indian tank had this capability. 1 Armoured Division had on its Order of Battle (ORBAT) 3, 4 and 5 Armoured Brigades (24 CAV, 6 LANCERS, 19 LANCERS, 5 HORSE and 4 CAV – four Patton and one Sherman Regiments) with 12 CAV (Recce Regiment). Armour elements of 11 Corps were 9 HORSE (Sherman), 1 HORSE (Sherman V and a squadron of PT 76), 14 HORSE (Sherman) and 2 (Independent) Armoured Brigade consisting of 8 CAV (AMX 13) and 3 CAV (Centurion).

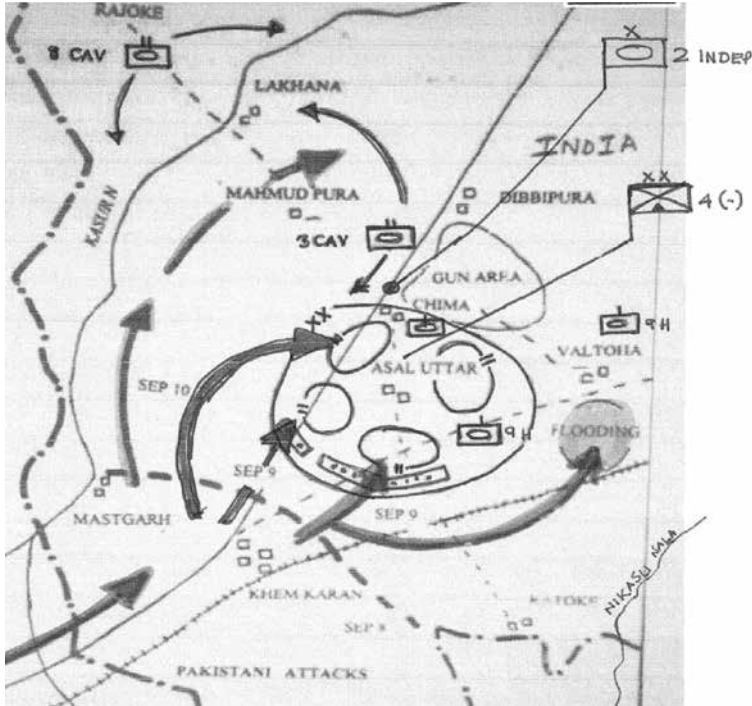
Pakistan's offensive plan was to launch 1 Armoured Division through a bridgehead established by 11 Infantry Division in area Khem Karan. After the success of Phase I, 1 Armoured Division was to break out on three axes: 4 Armoured Brigade along Valtoha-Fatehabad, to capture bridges on the Beas; 3 Armoured Brigade along Khem Karan-Bhikkiwind-Taran Taran, to capture Jandiala Guru, and cut off the Grand Trunk road; and 5 Armoured Brigade on axis west of Kasur–Khem Karan-Bhikkiwind.

The Defensive Plan

4 Mountain Division had withdrawn after the loss of Khem Karan and adopted a horseshoe defensive position, with Asal Uttar as the focal point. Brig Theograj, Commander 2 Independent Armoured Brigade, realised that to stop enemy armour, a strong obstacle was needed – so Rohi Nala and Kasur Drain were breached, making the southeast (SE) area boggy/impassable. Pakistan would then attempt to outflank Asal Uttar from either side, more likely from north of the

Kasur Drain, which was not flooded; so 3 CAV and 8 CAV were deployed northwest (NW) of Asal Uttar, and 9 HORSE in direct support of division defences.

Fig 1



The Battle

The offensive started at 0830 hrs on September 08. Under cover of artillery, two Chaffee squadrons and a squadron of Pattons moved within 900m of the FDLs. Under effective fire, Pakistani armour broke into smaller groups attempting a bold outflanking manoeuvre from the SE. Utilising the cover of standing crops, they were engaged by 9 HORSE, the medium guns and infantry tank hunting teams. Heavy losses in the very first attack compelled the Pakistani troops to retreat. For two days, 1 Armoured Division repeated the attacks against the prepared defences, frontally and from the NW and SE flanks, suffering heavy casualties.

The tactics were astonishing – like a battering ram along the same axis on which they had failed earlier. The consequences were evident. By September

10, Pakistan's plans to cut off the Grand Trunk road lay in the dust at Asal Uttar. 1 Armoured Division had suffered a crushing defeat, losing 97 tanks, including 72 Pattons; 32 were in running condition. All were brand new and had run only 300 km; India, by contrast, lost only five tanks. By then, the situation in Pasrur had become dire, so 3 and 4 Armoured Brigades, were moved out to Kot Daska. The Battle of Asal Uttar was the turning point of the conflict and one of the major defeats of Pakistan in 1965.

1 Corps Operations: Offensive Operations by Indian 1 Armoured Division

Pakistan's grandiose plan of capturing Kashmir once again came to naught with the failure of Operation Gibraltar and a stalemate at Chhamb. XI Corps had opened new fronts towards Lahore and Kasur. It was the right moment for an Indian "riposte". In view of the decision of Army Headquarters (HQ) to launch 1 Corps from Samba, 1 Armoured Division was moved post haste by train on the night of September 04/05 from Kapurthala to concentration area Madhopur–Janglote, and on the night of September 06/07 to forward concentration area at Ramgarh. Due to the urgency of the move, the division had only 24 hours to recce and familiarise itself with the intended area of operations.

Appreciated Enemy Deployment

Pakistan had concentrated substantial forces in the Sialkot sector. The sector was under Pakistan's 1 Corps with 6 Armoured Division and 15 Infantry Division. 6 Armoured Division was equipped with a total of 334 tank, 264 tanks (four Patton regiments and two Sherman regiments) and 70 additional tanks from tank delivery units. 3 and 4 Armoured Brigades were inducted on September 12 from Kasur and were effective in the later part of battle. This increased the armour element by an additional 125 tanks (three Patton regiments and one Chaffee regiment).

15 Infantry Division and 115 Infantry Brigade were deployed in the Shakargarh Bulge; 24 Infantry Brigade was defending Chawinda (18 km from the International Boundary—IB) – Pasrur axis; 101 Infantry Brigade was in the defence of Sialkot and approaches from Jammu, and 104 Infantry Brigade was the reserve, located west of Sialkot.

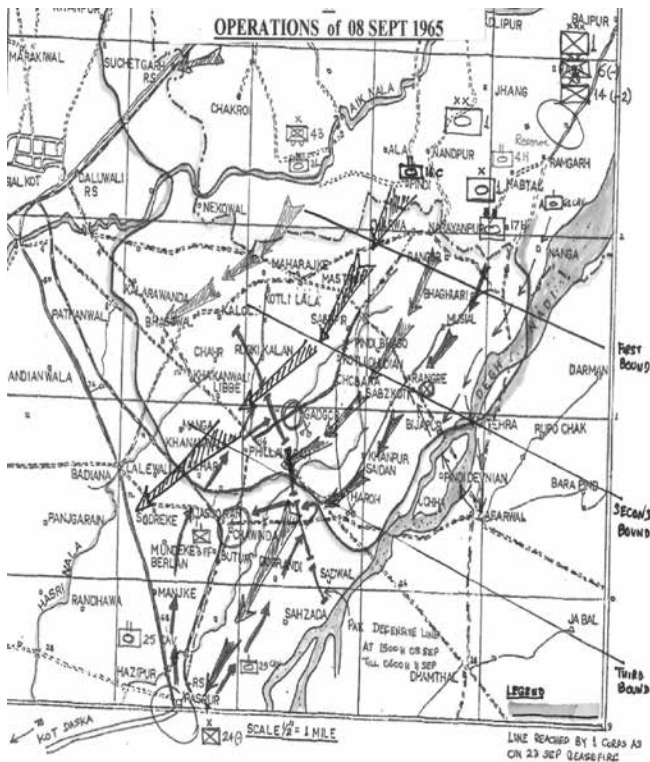
The Plan

1 Armoured Division was tasked to establish the bridgehead in area Bhagowali-Phillora crossroads, advance towards the Marala-Ravi link canal in area Pasrur,

and then secure line Dhallewali-Wuhilam- Daska-Mandhali, all the while protecting Jammu. Commanded by Maj Gen RS Shergill, VrC, the armour element was 1 Armoured Brigade under Brig KK Singh, consisting of 16 CAV, Poona Horse (17 HORSE) and 4 HORSE – all Centurion Mk 7, 62 CAV and 2 LANCERS ex 26 Infantry Division (up gunned Sherman Vs). Other elements of 1 Corps were 43 Lorried Brigade (3 motorised infantry battalions), 6 Mountain Division less a brigade, 14 Infantry Division (less two brigades) and 26 Infantry Division with 18 CAV. The total armour punch was 225 tanks.

1 Armoured Brigade was to advance two regiments up at 0600 hrs on September 08; 17 HORSE on Axis Charwa–Rangre –Tharoh, and 16 CAV on Axis Sabzpir–Libbe with 4 HORSE as divisional reserve. 43 Lorried Brigade with 2 LANCERS (less a squadron) was to advance along axis Maharajke–Bhagowal and protect the northern flank of the 1 Corps offensive. Squadron ex 62 CAV and company infantry were tasked to protect the Degh Nadi flank.

Fig 2



The Offensive Starts

By an extraordinary quirk of circumstance, on the night of September 06/07, Commander Pakistan 115 Infantry Brigade reacted in total panic to XI Corp's diversionary attack in the Jassar sector by own 29 Infantry Brigade. He informed his superior that the Indian main offensive had come into his sector. An equally panicky General Officer Commanding (GOC) Pakistan 15 Infantry Division ordered 24 Infantry Brigade (holding Chawinda) and 25 CAV (the covering force for the Chawinda-Pasrur axis) to move and counter the Indian offensive.

The Pasrur sector was, thus, void of troops, barring 3 FF deployed in screens. That was all that existed opposite 1 Armoured Division, when it crossed the IB. Pakistan was caught totally off guard. Initial orders were reversed, and 25 CAV was tasked to fall back to face the Indian 1 Corps' advance. With low fuel, it only reached Pasrur at 0700 hrs, just as 17 HORSE and 16 CAV were brushing aside the forward screens.

1 Armoured Brigade Operations

First and second bounds, i.e., Charwa-Rangor, and Sabzpir-Pindi Bhago-Chobara-Rangre, were crossed without incident at 0700 hrs and 0900 hrs respectively. At this stage, a chance Pakistani air attack stalled the advance for an hour which proved crucial as enemy 25 CAV got time to regroup and adopt battle formation on line Saboke-Gadgor. CO 25 CAV, Lt Col Nisar, could see plumes of dust on the horizon, and realised he could not oppose the 10 km frontage in strength unless he acted in an unorthodox manner. In a bold move, he spread his two squadrons in a thin extended line to depict a larger presence than actual..... and *the ruse worked*.

First contact between 16 CAV and 25 CAV occurred at 0930 hrs, in area Gadgor (8 km from the IB) at astonishingly close ranges of 50 to 200m, resulting in the loss of 16 CAV leading troop. This caused some consternation and the advance came to a halt. On the left flank, 17 HORSE continued unopposed till Sabzkot, where it too was engaged by the Pattons; two were destroyed, the remainder withdrew in the direction of Chawinda. 17 HORSE's advance continued unopposed till Tharoh railway station (12 km from the IB), reaching at 1030 hrs, and in sight of Chawinda.

Opportunity Missed

By 1500 hrs on September 08, just nine hours after crossing the IB, own threat assessment was of heavy opposition against 16 CAV/17 HORSE (possibly

two regiments) and armour foray of unknown strength from the Degh flank. Instead of taking offensive action to force through at Tharoh, the commander ordered retraction into a defensive box at Sabzpir crossroads. The gains made till then, when Chawinda was in sight, were frittered away due to lack of offensive spirit. It is inconceivable why a formation with such combat power could advance only 10 km on D-Day, then recoil to a defensive perimeter 5 km from the IB. There was also no justification for the operational pause of 48 hours that followed. The caution virtually put paid to the 1 Corps offensive – it could never regain the momentum. The 48-hour delay in executing the next move was sufficient for Pakistan to regroup.

Phillora Captured on September 11

Commander 1 Armoured Brigade gave revised orders for the capture of Libbe-Phillora, with a view to extend operations to Chawinda. The main effort was shifted west of line Gadgor-Phillora. 17 HORSE and 4 HORSE were to isolate Phillora from the SW and SE respectively, and support 43 Lorried Brigade's capture of Phillora, while 16 CAV was to protect the flank towards Badiana. To clear Libbe, 17 HORSE was allotted 9 DOGRA, which unfortunately could not keep pace. Finding 5/9 GR nearby, a quick attack was successfully launched and the position captured. Although not part of its tasking (Phillora was tasked to 4 HORSE), but realising there was no opposition between Libbe-Phillora, C Squadron 17 HORSE made a dash and occupied a dominating height NE of the town. This bold move surprised the seven tanks in defence – two were destroyed, and the remainder withdrew towards Chawinda, and Phillora was taken with minimum effort at 1530 hrs. Despite the confusion, narrow frontages, occasional clash at the boundaries, absence of accurate maps, tall sugarcane (which made direction keeping, command and control and long range firing difficult), the Centurion crews had exploded the myth of Patton superiority. Around Phillora alone, Pakistan lost 60 tanks while India lost 12 Centurions and 6 Shermans. *The main loss, however, was another 24 hours wasted in retrograde movements into harbour and planning.*

Review of Situation on September 13

Pakistan was rattled at finding Indian 1 Armoured Division in the Pasrur sector opposite Kasur, as assessed by General Headquarters (GHQ). On September 09, the situation on the Pasrur axis was precarious and Pakistan had few forces to oppose 1 Corps. Thanks to the 48-hour Indian halt, the situation stabilised

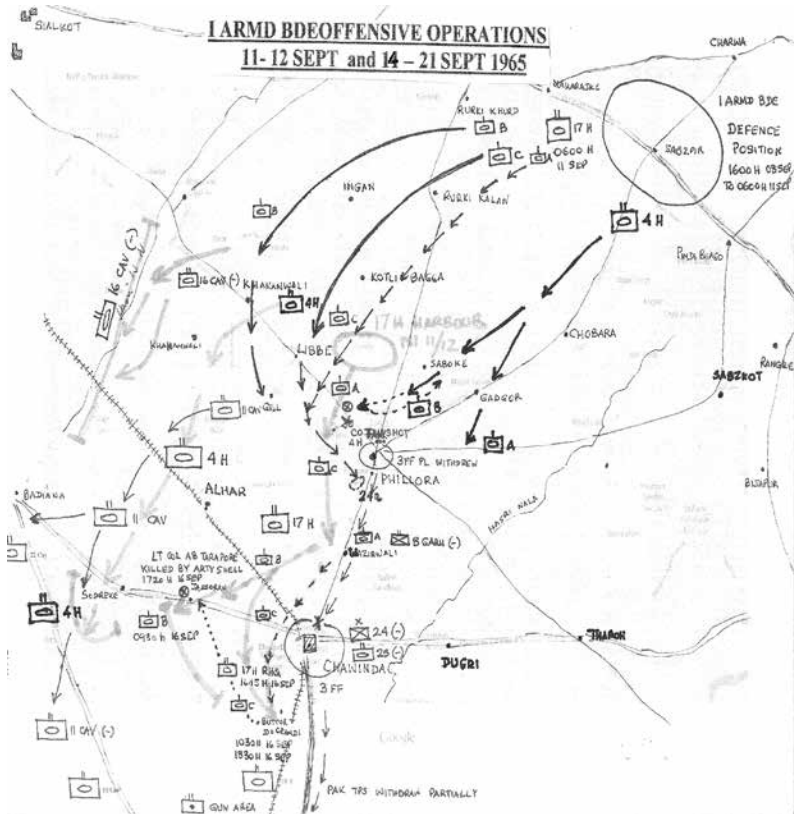
by September 11, with two regiments joining Pakistani 6 Armoured Division and 3 and 4 Armoured Brigades ex Pakistan 1 Armoured Division reaching Kot Daska. Pakistan now had a numerical edge, with nine regiments (five Patton, three Sherman and one Chaffee), albeit at reduced strength, versus three Indian regiments—one Centurion and two Sherman (upgunned). Pakistan's intention was now to box in Indian 1 Armoured Division in the strong defence line of Phillora-Chawinda-Railway track-Badiana.

Battle for Chawinda

1 Armoured Division had failed to successfully exploit its combat potential by advancing only 12 km in the initial days. The next objective now was the capture of Chawinda. It was appreciated that Chawinda was a weak brigade defended sector, supported by a depleted armoured regiment. India had again failed to correctly appreciate enemy strength. However, Pakistani 24 Infantry Brigade in Chawinda comprised 3 FF, 6 FF, 14 BALUCH, 2 PUNJAB supported by two TDU squadrons and remnants of 25 CAV.

The capture of Chawinda entailed isolation by 1 Armoured Brigade from the north, south and west, and providing a firm base for its capture in Phase I. 4 HORSE was tasked to sever roads Chawinda-Pasrur and Chawinda-Badiana, isolate Chawinda from south and west, and prevent reinforcement/exfiltration. 17 HORSE was to isolate Chawinda from the north by establishing a pivot at Wazirali, destroy enemy armour, and support the 43 Lorried Brigade attack on Chawinda. 16 CAV was to protect the western flank from Bhagowal to Hasri (West) Nala. Once isolation of Chawinda was confirmed, 43 Lorried Brigade was to capture Chawinda from the NW.

Fig 3



Execution

The advance to the railway line was successful, but progress ahead met determined resistance. 17 HORSE and 9 DOGRA rapidly cleared Wazirali, killing 35 personnel of 3 FE, destroying eight tanks, and establishing a pivot. At this stage, GOC 1 Armoured Division, noting enemy reaction, felt 43 Lorried Brigade, with its depleted strength would not be able to capture Chawinda. Accordingly he changed the plan and tasked it to mop up enemy pockets between Chobara – Wazirali.

GOC 1 Corps then tasked 6 Mountain Division to capture Chawinda with two additional brigades ex 14 Infantry Division, while 1 Armoured Brigade isolated Chawinda. With limited knowledge of the ground situation, the change of plan tilted the balance in Pakistan's favour. Likewise, 1 Armoured Brigade's plan to

establish blocks at Sodreke (4 HORSE), Jassoran and Butur Dograndi (17 HORSE), and 16 CAV (Hasri Nala West), could not have been more disastrous: instead of concentrating effort, it dispersed the armour power in three directions. Pakistan had actually planned area Jassoran–Mundreke–Butur Dograndi as a killing ground, employing three Patton regiments and Chawinda defences as a pivot. 4 HORSE and 17 HORSE were walking into a trap.

B Squadron 17 HORSE and 9 DOGRA quickly captured Jassoran by 0900 hrs on September 16. Butur Dograndi was meanwhile captured by C Squadron and 8 GARH RIF. By mid-day, Chawinda was isolated. Realising this, Pakistan 24 Infantry Brigade frantically asked to withdraw to Pasrur, since the troops were fleeing in panic. C Squadron 17 HORSE at Butur Dograndi asked RHQ for reinforcements to capitalise on this opportunity and A Squadron 17 HORSE (still holding the pivot at Wazirwali) was quickly moved forward. To control the battle better, Commandant 17 HORSE, Lt Col Tarapore, who always led from the front, decided to move to the area of Butur Dograndi to be with A and C Squadrons. Being in the middle of a planned killing ground, the area came under intense tank, RCL (recoilless) and accurate artillery fire. Col Tarapore's tank, "Kooshab" was hit and the IO injured. Two tanks of C Squadron were also damaged. With nightfall approaching, it was considered unwise to continue holding Butur Dograndi with only one platoon of 8 GARH RIF, so RHQ and A Squadron moved back to B Squadron location at Jassoran by 1645 hrs. Unfortunately "Kooshab" could not be started and was left behind. Then fate intervened at Jassoran—Lt Col AB Tarapore, QM 17 HORSE and two Other Ranks (OR) of 9 DOGRA died on the spot when an artillery shell landed near his tank (he was later cremated at Jassoran at 0930 hrs, on September 17).

However, by the night of September 17/18, since the infantry attack on Chawinda was getting inordinately delayed and casualties had been sustained by the regiments, Commander 1 Armoured Brigade felt overextended and gave orders to recoil behind Alhar-Khananwali. 6 Mountain Division's attack on Chawinda on the following night was a failure—one brigade lost direction and attacked own troops at Phillora; the second brigade could only capture the area up to the Chawinda railway station, then abandoned the assault, and eventually pulled back to Jassoran, with 4 HORSE covering its move. The battle for the capture of Chawinda was effectively over. A stalemate had set in and, in anticipation of a ceasefire on the night of September 22/23, the guns fell silent, ending the second conflict between India and Pakistan.

Lessons Learnt

The main lesson of the 1965 conflict was the fact that both Armies were inefficient in handling large forces. Extreme caution by Indian commanders and reluctance to exploit situations, resulted in non-achievement of even partial aims. On the other side, the Pakistan Army hierarchy seemed to have a disdain for the fighting capability of Indian infantry and tank men. This acted to our advantage as their commanders planned operations on emotion rather than reason, based more on bravado rather than reality; hence, incurred major losses in both manpower and equipment.

Selection and Maintenance of Aim: A major weakness was witnessed during the conflict as Western Command's task to HQ 1 Corps was a horrible overreach, especially when 3 CAV has taken away from 1 Armoured Division. 1 Corp's aim changed thrice, first, as Kot Daska, then, Pasrur, and, finally, Chawinda.

End State: The culmination must be clearly articulated before the issue of the politico-military directive. "Do something", as one Prime Minister ordered the Indian the Chief of Air Staff (COAS), resulted in similar infamous instructions as given by the Commander 24 Infantry Brigade to 25 CAV—this cannot suffice as the basis of action, as it is ambiguous and leaves scope for misinterpretation.

Higher Leadership: Higher commanders succumbed to adversity far too often, and took wrong decisions. For example, the intense engagement between 16 CAV and 25 CAV at Gadgor led to an incorrect assessment of the presence of the larger Pakistani armour, and shooting up of the medium battery at Rangre. Higher direction was found lacking. In 1965, barring one occasion when Brig KK Singh moved forward to Alhar, not one higher commander moved up. No forward HQ were set up to vigorously prosecute Operation Grand Slam, nor by Western Command, which should have been in the vicinity of Pathankot, to oversee the operations of I, XI and XV Corps, rather than at Shimla.

Seizing Initiative and Maintaining Momentum: 1 Armoured Division had numerous opportunities to proceed deep, but frittered these in nightly harbours. It gave Pakistan 24 Infantry Brigade time to reinforce Chawinda and for 6 Armoured Division to enter the theatre in strength. In war, the enemy must not be given any respite. Success can only come from constantly changing the situation, posing new threats and mentally fatiguing the enemy. The momentum of the offensive must be maintained through superiority at chosen points.

Unorthodoxy Pays Always: Pakistan 25 CAV saved the day by the unorthodox tactics of deploying on extended line, confusing 1 Armoured Brigade into believing it was faced by two regiments.

Orthodox Thinking and Execution: Own operations proceeded according to standard teaching which led to occupying harbours, and delays leading of loss of momentum of operations of own 1 Armoured Division and, ultimately, to a stalemate. The initial success required a quick follow-up, taking calculated risks, rather than traditionally clearing each position. When 1 Armoured Brigade seized Phillora on September 11, the defences of Chawinda could easily have been assailed.

Recoiling into harbour may have been warranted during World War II, but was not applicable in 1965, as most tanks in contact could not have expended their ammunition or fuel every day. The Centurion stowed 40 APDS rounds for tank-to-tank engagements. With a three-round firing technique, it was theoretically possible for one tank to destroy 13 of the enemy. Allowing for errors, and assuming a kill ratio of only 40 percent, it meant that each tank could destroy five of the enemy, and a regiment with 33 gun tanks could destroy almost 165 tanks. Hence, at least theoretically, no Pakistani tanks would have remained at the end of D plus 1. Similarly, fuel capacity allowed travel of 350 km in one filling. It is inexplicable why nightly harbours were adopted. Also, there were no night operations which is inexplicable because the Pattons had Infra-Red (IR) devices. Even the Centurion Mk7, though without night vision devices, had the provision for night march on a given heading.

Intelligence Failure: The Indian intelligence agencies failed to discover the massive build-up of the infiltrators, the move of 7 Infantry Division, the heavy concentration of armour/artillery opposite Chhamb, the presence of 6 Armoured Division, and the location of 1 Armoured Division, till contacted in battle. Fortunately for India, Pakistan also failed to analyse the Indian intention to expand hostilities to the IB sector, or the whereabouts of own 1 Armoured Division.

Tactical Air Support: This was totally absent as the GL sections did not marry up in time. The Indian Air Force was mostly engaged in counter-air operations; it missed an excellent opportunity to engage enemy armour in depth, and provide 1 Corps with immediate tactical information. 1 Armoured Division also faulted by not demanding air support.

Professionalism: It varied from regiment to regiment, e.g., 17 HORSE had perfected the three-round rapid fire engagement. The second and third rounds could be fired even through the dust and smoke of the previous rounds' shock of discharge; this gave an immense advantage. Similarly, the repair and recovery procedure of damaged tanks was well honed and, barring one tank captured by Pakistan, all the others returned to the stables.

Conclusion

The 1965 conflict highlighted inadequacies on both sides. Strategic and tactical errors by commanders led to loss of momentum. Decisive leadership would have led to exploitation of key opportunities. Bold action by 1 Armoured Division would have led to spectacular gains and forever changed the contours of India-Pakistan relations due to the decimation of the Pakistan Army. It is imperative that in today's high intensity engagement, commanders chosen to command strategic forces (strike corps and armoured divisions) must be specially selected for resilience and mental strength—men who will not accept defeat, no matter what the circumstances.

Maj Gen **Kuldip Singh Sindhu**, VSM was commissioned into the Poona Horse, but later commanded 15 Armoured Regiment, of which he was also Colonel of the Regiment. He is a veteran of the 1971 Indo-Pak War.

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