

Valour Triumphs: CQMH Abdul Hamid

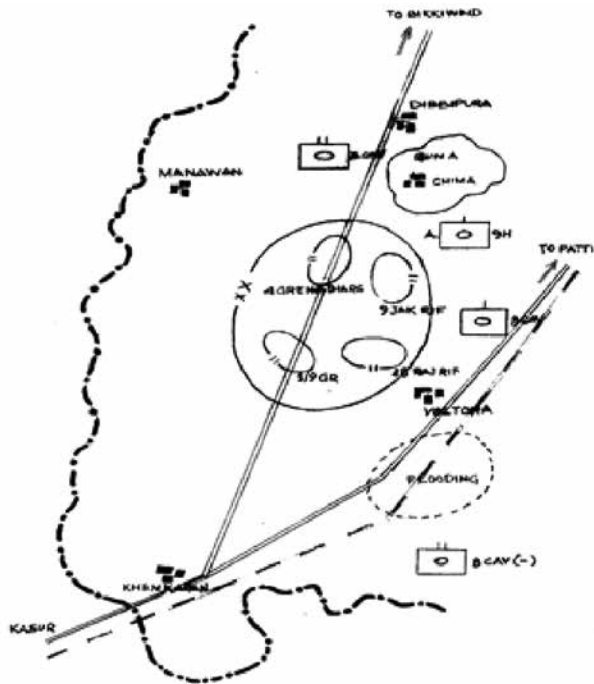
ASHWANI GUPTA



The moonlight showed an eerie silhouette amongst the sugarcane fields. For the soldiers of 4 Grenadiers manning RCL (recoilless gun detachments) on the night of September 07/ 08, the moment of translating their training into rendering a violent blow to the enemy was drawing near. With hastily dug in defences, incessant artillery fire and no armour cover, they waited for the Patton tanks to emerge from the sugarcane fields. The first tanks came into view after daylight and the well sighted RCL guns knocked out the leading tank at barely 50 yards away. The next attack met the same fate, and elements of 24 CAV beat a hasty retreat.

The brave soldiers had beaten back the enviable Pattons with the very basic infantry anti-tank weapon, the RCL gun. The tone was set for a bloody clash which would severely decimate the enemy's 1 Armoured Division in the days to come. The main architect of the carefully planned move and coordinated firing of the RCL detachments was CQMH Abdul Hamid of C Company. Having joined 4 Grenadiers on December 27, 1954, Abdul Hamid had been recently promoted to CQMH. He was tasked to again take over the charge of the RCL platoon as he was the best RCL shot in the battalion. Also, all the specialist weapon commanders had moved to the new location as part of the relief programme of the unit before the battalion was diverted to the plains of Punjab as part of 4 Mountain Division. Being part of a mountain division, no training on RCL guns had been conducted for the last three years. Thus, the detachment commanders had to rely on their training and experience while facing the Pakistani tanks. It was also to the advantage of the battalion that they had five instructors of RCL guns present in the unit. Their collective skill and indepth knowledge of the weapon system would be the most significant element to halt the Patton tanks.

Fig 1



Asal Uttar – A Befitting Reply

India planned to launch a limited offensive opposite 11 Corps zone after Pakistan had commenced hostilities in the Chhamb sector. 4 Mountain Division, as part of 11 Corps, was tasked to secure the area up to the east bank of the Ichhogil Canal and destroy the bridge over it on the road Khem Karan-Kasur. Having achieved partial success on September 06, it was facing heavy odds in the face of a timely Pakistani counter-attack. The Indian position was becoming untenable and the intelligence indicated the presence of Pakistan's 1 Armoured Division in Kasur. It was appreciated by the Indian military hierarchy that the presence indicated a major Pakistani offensive into Indian territory with likely plans to capture bridges on the Beas river and Harike¹ to threaten Amritsar/ cut off the Grand Trunk Road. In view of the overwhelming odds, it was decided that 4 Mountain Division would withdraw and occupy a defended sector north of Khem Karan in the area of Asal Uttar-Bhura Khuna- Chima to deny axes Khem Karan-Patti and Khem Karan-Bhikiwind. By last light on September 07, 4 Grenadiers was occupying a battalion defended area² south of Chima, astride the axis Khem Karan-Bhikiwind and providing depth to defensive position of 1/9 GR as part of 7 Mountain Brigade. 2 (Independent) Armoured Brigade was seconded to 4 Mountain Division to halt the enemy in the vicinity of the division defended area.

Armoured regiments of Pakistani 1 Armoured Division were equipped with the 46-tonne Patton tank. Considered the most modern tank at that time, it contained a 90 mm main gun and over 100 mm of steel armour plating provided it robust armour protection. Having a range of 2,000 m, it was equipped with infrared imaging and was capable of operating at night. In comparison, the Indian Shermans and AMX-13 had 75 mm main guns and a maximum range of 800 m. The only plausible means of defeating the Pattons was steady nerves and a sure shot at eye blink range. It was now time for the Indian 2 (Independent) Armoured Brigade and RCL tank hunting teams to prove their mettle and turn the tide of war.

Abdul Hamid's RCLs: The Wall

The battalion defended area was covered with cotton and sugarcane fields and the battalion was able to camouflage its location, using ploughed fields for field of fire. The 106 mm recoilless guns were deployed along the Khem Karan-Amritsar road. The battalion's recoilless weapons and automatics were effectively sited by Lt H R Jahnu and 2Lt V K Vaid. This was to pay rich dividends in the next three days to irreparably damage the reputation of the Patton tanks forever. In a hastily occupied defended area, the battalion had barely dug three feet and with no

overhead protection when the rumble of tanks was heard on the morning of September 08.

Recce in force began on the forward company localities by Pakistani 4 Armoured Brigade. The first tanks came into view at 0900 hrs on September 08³. Strict fire discipline ensured that the first tank was only thirty yards away when it was fired upon by CQMH Abdul Hamid and it went up in flames. The crews of the follow-up tanks abandoned their tanks and fled. The next attack at 1130 hrs by two troops met the same fate, as Abdul Hamid destroyed another tank. Timely assistance was provided by the engineers by laying anti-tank and anti-personnel mines in the area. September 09 saw three more armour assaults by the Pakistanis, with Abdul Hamid destroying two more tanks.⁴ Thus, by the evening of September 09, 4 Grenadiers had accounted for the loss of over 13 tanks, four destroyed by Abdul Hamid, four being abandoned by the jittery Pakistani crews, and the balance were mine casualties.

Meanwhile, within the Indian defences, the Sherman tanks had been withdrawn as their shells were ineffective against the Patton tanks and the Centurion tanks had been moved to lure the Pattons into a killing ground. Now the only anti-tank element to delay the Pakistani advance astride the road Kasur-Bhikiwind were the RCL gun detachments of 4 Grenadiers. The morning of September 10 indicated the desperation of the Pakistani commanders. The defences of 4 Grenadiers were being shelled since first light. However, the morale in the battalion was sky high and rightly so. Their valiant actions had halted the Pakistani armour advance for over 48 hours. Around 0830 hrs, another desperate thrust was made by the Pakistani tanks. The Pakistani tanks had concentrated around Manawan and launched another thrust towards the forward companies of 4 Grenadiers. One troop was noticed moving along the road to Bhikiwind and the enemy tanks were able to overrun some defences of the forward companies. Witnessing the battle swaying towards the enemy, Abdul Hamid quickly moved into position and destroyed one tank. The RCL guns had managed to yet again frustrate the enemy's plans. The next desperate thrust at 0900 hrs led to the destruction of another tank, a personal tally of six tanks by Abdul Hamid. Despite being vulnerable to heavy enemy artillery shelling, Abdul Hamid moved his jeep to engage his next target and directed his crew to take cover. As he was traversing the RCL gun, he was spotted by the enemy tanks which brought down effective machine gun and high explosive fire on his jeep. Undeterred, he managed to get another enemy tank in his gun sights and engaged it. It seemed that both fired simultaneously; the bravest of the brave, Abdul Hamid losing

his life while managing to destroy his seventh target. However, CQMH Abdul Hamid's act inspired his comrades to put up a gallant fight to defeat enemy tank assault. His sustained act of bravery and disregard of personal safety, in the face of constant fire, was in tune with highest traditions of the Indian Army.⁵ For his brave act, he was awarded the Param Vir Chakra posthumously. It was also to the credit of 4 Grenadiers that its soldiers were able to eliminate almost the entire command hierarchy of Pakistan 1 Armoured Division, when their General Officer Commanding (GOC) moved up with his O Group to witness as to why his tanks were entering the sugarcane fields and not coming out.

Abdul Hamid's citation⁶ credits him for destroying three tanks. According to his unit sources, the citation had been sent on September 09—by then he had already destroyed four tanks. When he was martyred on September 10, information regarding his martyrdom was sent to higher HQ, but the details of the number of tanks destroyed by him were seemingly not amended⁷. Hence, the readers may come across the anomaly while reading the various accounts of the battle. The number of tanks destroyed is not the moot point, the highlight of the battle was the unflinching courage while facing the most superior tanks with only jeep mounted RCL guns and destroying them, with nerves of steel, at impossibly close range—30 yards. It once again proved that superior training combined with audacious actions can overcome any adverse battle situation even when equipped with inferior equipment. A handful of bravehearts armed with RCL guns had managed an unparalleled feat. It was the resolute infantry anti-tank actions, as displayed by Abdul Hamid and engagement by own armour units that halted 1 Armoured Division at Asal Uttar and its formidable arsenal lay destroyed or abandoned around the Indian positions.

Col **Ashwani Gupta** is a former Senior Fellow at CLAWS

Notes

1. PK Charvorty, "Battle of Asal Uttar", *CLAWS Scholar Warrior*, Spring 2014, p. 121.
2. *Official History of Indo-Pak War 1965* (Ministry of Defence, India), p. 172.
3. Ian Cardozo, *Our Heroes in Battle* (New Delhi: Roli Books, 2003), p. 95.
4. Ibid.
5. B Chakravorty, *Stories of Heroism, PVC and MVC Winners* (Allied Publishers, 1995), p 50.
6. [www.indianarmy.nic.in/our-heroes/ CQMH Abdul Hamid](http://www.indianarmy.nic.in/our-heroes/CQMH-Abdul-Hamid)
7. Cardozo, n. 3.