

6. Battle of Basantar- History

Story of 2nd Lt Arun Khetarpal & Battle of Basantar, picturised in the movie 'Ikkis'. The Battle of Basantar (1971) was a pivotal tank battle in the Shakargarh Bulge where Indian forces secured the Jammu-Pathankot highway against a major Pakistani offensive. It is celebrated for the tactical brilliance of the Indian Army and the supreme sacrifice of 2nd Lt Arun Khetarpal, who was posthumously awarded the Param Vir Chakra.

Introduction to the Battle of Basantar

The Battle of Basantar was one of the most decisive and fierce engagements fought on the Western Front during the Indo-Pakistan War of 1971.

1. **Location-** Fought in the Shakargarh Bulge region, specifically near the Basantar River.
2. **Significance-** It is regarded as one of the largest tank battles since World War II.
3. **Outcome-** A decisive Indian victory that secured the vulnerable Jammu-Pathankot axis and halted Pakistan's offensive plans.

Strategic Context- The Shakargarh Bulge

Understanding the geography is crucial to understanding why this battle was fought.

Definition- The Shakargarh Bulge is a wedge-shaped stretch of Pakistani territory in the Sialkot sector that protrudes (juts out) towards India.

Boundaries- It is naturally bounded by the Ravi River and the Chenab River.

Terrain Features- The land is predominantly flat and open, making it ideal terrain for mechanized warfare and large-scale tank movements. It possesses a strong network of roads and railways, facilitating rapid troop mobilization.

Strategic Importance

Proximity to Vital Links- The bulge is dangerously close to the Jammu-Pathankot highway, which is the primary land link connecting Jammu and Kashmir to the rest of India.

The Threat- If Pakistan launched a successful offensive from here, they could sever this link, effectively cutting off J&K.

Background of the 1971 War (Western Front)

While the eastern theatre focused on the liberation of Bangladesh, the stakes on the Western Front were equally high.

Pakistan's Strategy- The Pakistani military command believed that capturing Indian territory in the West (specifically in Punjab and J&K) could be used as a bargaining chip to compensate for their inevitable losses in East Pakistan.

India's Counter-Strategy- India aimed to launch a preemptive offensive to neutralize this threat, protect the national highway, and degrade Pakistan's war machine.

The Battle Operations- Strategy and Tactics

The Offensive

Surprise Element- Indian forces launched an offensive into the Shakargarh Bulge to catch the enemy off guard.

Crossing the Basantar- The operation required Indian troops to cross the Basantar River, which was heavily fortified with extensive minefields and defended by entrenched Pakistani positions.

Operational Tactics

1. **Night Movements-** The Indian Army utilized darkness to move troops and armour, minimizing visibility to enemy air observation.
2. **Rapid Bridging-** Engineering units executed rapid bridging operations to clear minefields, creating safe lanes for tanks to cross.
3. **Deception Plans-** Strategies were employed to mislead the enemy regarding the main axis of attack.

The Tank Battle- Indian armoured units engaged in intense, close-quarter tank-versus-tank combat.

Destruction of Armour- Indian forces successfully destroyed a massive number of Pakistani Patton tanks (over 60 knocked out), effectively crippling their armoured capability in the sector.

Comparison of Forces and Objectives

Feature	Indian Forces	Pakistani Forces
Primary Objective	Secure Shakargarh Bulge; Protect Pathankot–Jammu link; Degrade enemy armour.	Cut off J&K from India by capturing Pathankot; Use gains for post-war bargaining.
Key Formations	54 Infantry Division, 16 Independent Armoured Brigade, 75 Medium Regiment (Artillery).	Heavy concentration of Armoured Divisions and Infantry support.
Key Armour (Tanks)	Centurion and AMX-13 Tanks.	Primarily Patton Tanks (US-made).
Outcome	Successfully repelled attacks; Captured territory; Destroyed enemy offensive capability.	Failed to breach Indian lines; Suffered heavy losses in armour and territory.

Heroism of 2nd Lt Arun Khetarpal

The battle is immortalized by the supreme sacrifice of 2nd Lieutenant Arun Khetarpal of the Poona Horse regiment.

Profile

1. Age- 21 years old.
2. Service- Had been commissioned into the Army for just six months.
3. Regiment- The Poona Horse (17 Horse), a unit with a distinguished history.

The Action

1. **The Situation-** On December 16, Pakistani armour launched a fierce counter-attack to overrun Indian positions at Jarpal. The Indian sector was outnumbered.
2. **The Response-** Despite being under heavy fire, Khetarpal moved his tank forward to engage the incoming enemy tanks head-on.
3. **The Sacrifice-** Even after his tank was hit and caught fire, and he was severely wounded, he refused to abandon his vehicle or retreat. He famously transmitted, *"No, Sir, I will not abandon my tank. My gun is still working and I will get these bastards."*
4. **The Result-** He destroyed several enemy tanks single-handedly, breaking the momentum of the Pakistani attack before succumbing to his injuries.

Legacy

Param Vir Chakra (PVC)- He was posthumously awarded India's highest wartime gallantry award. He remains the youngest officer to ever receive this honour.

Symbol of Courage- His tank, *Famagusta*, is preserved as a memorial. His name adorns the parade ground at the National Defence Academy (NDA) and the auditorium at the Indian Military Academy (IMA).

Significance and Conclusion

Strategic Victory- The battle neutralized the threat to the Jammu–Pathankot corridor, ensuring the safety of the link to Kashmir.

Diplomatic Leverage- The territory captured and the military dominance asserted at Basantar gave India a stronger hand during the Shimla Conference negotiations.

Military Excellence- The engagement highlighted the superior coordination between the Indian Infantry, Armour, and Air Force, as well as the tactical brilliance of commanders in crossing minefields under fire.

Final Summary- The Battle of Basantar prevented a major Pakistani thrust into Indian territory and remains a shining example of grit and valour in the annals of Indian military history.

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