

ASAL UTTAR

DECISIVE DESTRUCTION OF PAKISTAN'S PATTONS

The Battle at Asal Uttar turned into a catastrophic failure for Pakistan, with the area becoming a veritable graveyard for the much vaunted Patton tanks. The ill-conceived assault collapsed in the face of Indian resilience, superior planning, and the indomitable courage of outgunned Indian troops.

Backdrop

The **Battle of Asal Uttar**, one of the largest post-World War II tank battles, proved to be a pivotal moment in the 1965 Indo-Pak war. Following Pakistan's aggression in Jammu and Kashmir, India launched a limited offensive under **Operation Riddle**, deploying 11 Corps in the Lahore Sector and 1 Corps in the Sialkot Sector.

In the Lahore Sector, Pakistani defences were anchored along the Ichhogil Canal, and the Indian assessment was that advancing to and capturing the Eastern bank by 11 Corps was a viable objective. In response, a potential Pakistani counterattack was anticipated in the Khem Karan Sector. However, there was a significant intelligence gap regarding the presence and movement of Pakistan's 1 Armoured Division, the force most likely to launch a mechanized offensive into the plains of Punjab. Pakistan's 1 Armoured Division was a formidable force, destined to play a central role in any offensive.

Pakistan's 1 Armoured Division was equipped with modern American-made Patton tanks, many of which, including the M47 and M48 models supplied by the United States, still displayed their original American markings. These tanks were part of the Cold War-era military aid provided to Pakistan by the United States. The distinctive American markings on these tanks became particularly notable in the aftermath of the battle, as many Patton tanks were destroyed and left abandoned. The wrecks of these tanks were collected near Bhikhiwind in Punjab, and the site was later named '**Patton Nagar**,' or the '**Graveyard of the Pattons**.'

The Indian Army initially underestimated the division's strength and movements, which led to some initial setbacks.



Smt Rasoolan Bibi, widow of CQMH Abdul Hamid, PVC, pays tribute at his bust



Map Showing area of operations and Pakistan's progress on 08 September (Credit strategicfront.org)

However, the tide turned at Asal Uttar, where innovative tactics, superior training, and the bravery of Indian soldiers overcame the initial intelligence shortcomings.

The Intent

The plan devised by the Pakistan Army envisaged a bold and audacious breakout along the Kasur-Khem Karan axis, with its 1 Armoured Division tasked to encircle Indian 11 Corps by capturing the vital Harike and Beas river bridges. Once isolated, Indian 11 Corps could then be annihilated at will, with Pakistani mechanized forces free to advance towards Delhi. While audacious, this plan proved foolhardy, as the Pakistani Army failed to recognize the fine line between boldness and recklessness.

Pakistan aimed to capture Khem Karan, which would then open the path for a swift advance towards the Beas River, which had two bridges, one of which Pakistan intended to capture before turning Northwards. If successful, this manoeuvre would have isolated eleven Indian Army divisions, more than half of India's effective strength at the time, in Punjab, Pathankot, Jammu & Kashmir and Ladakh, while also opening the road to Delhi for a rapid advance-almost a leisurely one-day drive.

This vulnerability arose because India had no reserves and there were no troops stationed East of the Beas River. Had Pakistan succeeded, a fourth Battle of Panipat could have become a reality, as noted by Pakistani historian Major Agha Humayun Amin.

Pakistan's Attack Plan and Strategy

The attack plan for this ambitious riposte envisioned two Infantry Brigades from Pakistan's 11 Infantry Division, supported by 5 Armoured Brigade ex 1

Armoured Division, establishing a bridgehead in the Mastgarh - Bhura Kohna area, through which 1 Armoured Division would break out for the battle in depth.

3 Armoured Brigade, comprising two Armoured Regiments and an Infantry Battalion in armoured personnel carriers, would advance Northeast to capture Jandiala Guru on the Grand Trunk (GT) Road, effectively cutting off Amritsar.

4 Armoured Brigade, consisting of two Armoured Regiments and a Motorized Infantry Battalion, would advance along the Kasur - Khem Karan - Valtola - Nabipur axis, securing the Harike Bridge over the Beas River and moving towards the GT Road to capture the Beas Bridges.

5 Armoured Brigade, with one armoured regiment and an infantry battalion in armoured personnel carriers, would assist 11 Infantry Division in establishing the bridgehead, then advance along the Khem Karan - Bhikhiwind axis to protect the left flank

of the offensive and isolate 7 Infantry Division.

Situation on the Indian Side

As part of **Operation Riddle**, in the 11 Corps offensive, India's 4 Mountain Division was tasked with capturing the area East of the Ichhogil Canal from Ballanwala to Theh Pannun, Northeast of Kasur, and demolishing the bridge on the Khem Karan - Kasur axis. The division achieved early success on 06 September. However, Pakistani forces responded with an unexpectedly aggressive armoured counterattack. In response, Major General Gurbaksh Singh, General Officer Commanding 4 Mountain Division, prudently withdrew and established a defensive position North of Khem Karan. This new sector covered the Khem Karan - Patti and Khem Karan - Bhikhiwind axes, with the primary defensive line formed around Asal Uttar, Bhura Kohna and Chima Khurd.

At the time, 4 Mountain Division was under strength and trained for high



President Dr S Radhakrishnan during a visit to Patton Nagar



Destroyed Pakistani Army Patton tanks littered in the fields of Punjab (Photo swarajyamag.com)

altitude warfare, not for mobile armoured engagements in the plains. In contrast, it faced Pakistan's best-trained and most heavily equipped armoured formation, supported by an infantry division. Despite this apparent mismatch, General Gurbaksh Singh's leadership and tactical acumen would turn the tide of the war, culminating in a decisive Indian victory.

The Defensive Battle

Facing Pakistan's onslaught, General Gurbaksh Singh ordered his artillery commander, Brigadier Jhanda Singh Sandhu, to deliver concentrated fire on the advancing forces, effectively slowing them down. It helped that Pakistan's 1 Armoured Division suffering from poor coordination and logistical delays, were sluggish in their advance. This delay provided critical time for 4 Mountain Division to redeploy to a new divisional defended sector. General Gurbaksh employed several innovative tactics, including the strategic flooding of fields and exploiting the dense sugarcane crops for concealment. That the Pakistani forces, despite their numerical and technological superiority, failed to breach Indian defences is a testament to the competence of his planning and the

horseshoe formation, enabling the effective encirclement and entrapment of enemy forces. The synergy of natural topography, terrain modification, and tactical foresight proved pivotal in securing India's victory.

Pakistan's planned axis of advance aligned well with the lay of the land, and no major bridging operations were anticipated. The objective was to capture Harike Bridge by 8 September and reach the Beas Bridge by the evening of 9 September. Confident of success, President Ayub Khan openly mocked the Indian Army's World War II era Sherman and Centurion tanks, claiming they would be no match for Pakistan's modern, American-supplied Patton tanks. He envisioned a swift armoured thrust that would roll into Delhi.

By morning of 8 September, elements of 4 Mountain Division had taken up defences in Asal Uttar.

9 HORSE (Deccan Horse) the integral tank regiment of 4 Mountain Division less a squadron was deployed to deal with Pakistani tank assaults. The third squadron of 9 HORSE was assigned to protect the gun areas immediately behind the divisional defended sector where one Field Regiment (25 Pounders), One Medium Regiment (5.5 inch guns), one Light Regiment (120 mm mortars) and two Mountain Composite Regiments (3.7 inch howitzers) were deployed. 2 (Independent) Armoured Brigade was placed in support of 4 Mountain Division, with its 3 CAVALRY Regiment deployed to the rear, covering the area Chima - Dibbipura while 8 CAVALRY, the second regiment, was deployed on the flanks forming a horseshoe to ambush the advancing Pakistani tanks. In all, there were three regiments of armour, one had Centurions, the second Shermans and the third AMX-13 light tanks.

On 8 September, Pakistan carried out Reconnaissance (Recce) in

extraordinary resolve of the troops under his command.

The terrain around Asal Uttar played a decisive role in shaping the outcome of the 1965 Indo-Pak War. Characterized by flat agricultural fields dominated by sugarcane cultivation, the region lent itself to defensive ingenuity. Indian forces strategically flooded the fields, transforming them into swampy quagmires that bogged down advancing Pakistani tanks. This deliberate manipulation rendered the ground muddy and slushy, severely hampering the movement of heavy armoured vehicles. The Indian Army also constructed its defensive position in a

Force designed to probe Indian positions and gather intelligence, with a Combat Group consisting of two squadrons of Chaffee (light) tanks, a squadron of Pattons and some motorised infantry. The battle action involved engaging Indian positions to assess their strength, capabilities and dispositions - the goal being to provoke a reaction that would lead to tactical information.

The Recce in Force by the Combat Group ran into a squadron of Deccan Horse concealed in the tall sugar cane fields. In the ensuing tank battle the enemy withdrew with 11 tanks lost; struck down with sniper like precision. Minor skirmishes took place throughout the day as Pakistani forces carried out probing attacks and ran over some defended localities in their attempt to enlarge the bridgehead to launch the armoured division. The day long armour assaults along with infantry had no worthwhile success while quite a few of Pakistan army tanks were destroyed or damaged. The attack continued during the night and at least five assaults were beaten back by the valiant 18 Rajputana Rifles supported by some very accurate artillery fire including guns firing in the *'direct fire'* role.

Pakistan does deserve credit for the audacious use of such a large number of tanks for a night assault on a battalion defended area which had mines laid on all important approaches. Their bravado perhaps stemmed from overconfidence in the superior weapons at their disposal or desperation to stick with an increasingly unviable operational plan which was torn to shreds by the defender. At this stage, 2 (Independent) Armoured Brigade was ordered to deal with the Pakistani tanks attempting to outflank the defended sector. Indian tanks were cleverly sited behind tall sugarcane so that the Pakistani tanks could not see them till it was too late. Brigadier

Thomas Krishnan Theogaraj, Commander of the Brigade issued strict instructions to his tank crews to wait until the Pakistani tanks had approached quite close to their hull-down positions before opening fire; the adage *'shoot them when you see the white of their eyes'* described the situation well.

On 9 September, Pakistan Air Force and Artillery tried to soften the defenders followed by renewed tank assaults. Persistent attacks achieved no success, and it was expected that having failed to overrun the defended sector, Pakistan would make a final effort to break out by attempting broader outflanking manoeuvres.

One of the most iconic episodes of the battle is of Company Quartermaster Havildar Abdul Hamid of 4 GRENADIERS. On 10 September, armed with a jeep-mounted recoilless gun, Abdul Hamid displayed extraordinary courage by taking out in rapid succession several Pakistani Patton tanks, and refusing to retreat even when under heavy enemy fire. Tragically, he was killed in action. For his heroism, he was posthumously awarded the Param Vir Chakra, India's highest military honour.

By midday on 10 September, the Pakistani Combat Group attacking 4 GRENADIERS attempted a Northern outflanking manoeuvre, in the process running into an ambush laid by a squadron of 3 CAVALRY. As the Pakistani tanks moved forward, they were caught completely off-guard by well-camouflaged Indian tanks that opened fire with devastating effect. Simultaneously, tanks from the Deccan Horse struck from the flank as the enemy pushed Eastward. The result was a classic hammer-and-anvil action that decimated the Pakistani force.

With the Northern hook thwarted, Major General Nasir, the Pakistani 1 Armoured Division commander, attempted a broader Southern flanking manoeuvre. He deployed 4 Armoured Brigade, led by 4 Cavalry and supported by a motorized infantry battalion. But Indian forces were once again a step ahead. The Centurion tanks of 3 CAVALRY were lying in wait, while the Shermans from Deccan Horse delivered fire from the Northern flank. Selected areas had been deliberately flooded, forcing the advancing Pakistani armour into a narrow semi-circular kill zone. From three directions, Indian tanks opened devastating fire, while divisional artillery saturated the area with concentrated shelling. The Pakistani tanks, caught in a perfect ambush, were annihilated—much of 4 Cavalry Regiment was destroyed in what became a textbook execution of armoured warfare.

Major General Nasir, observing the battle from his helicopter, was visibly dismayed by the unfolding debacle. He landed and proceeded along the Khem Karan-Bhikhiwind road to personally rally his troops for one final, desperate push. In direct communication with the Brigade Commander and the Commanding Officer of 4 Cavalry, he urged them to continue the offensive at all costs. However, his radio transmissions were intercepted, and by 6:00 pm, General Nasir and his recce party came under intense artillery fire. Brigadier Shammie, the Artillery Brigade Commander of Pakistan's 1 Armoured Division was killed, and General Nasir himself was wounded. With this, the Pakistani offensive effectively collapsed.

In sum, Pakistan's 4th and 5th



Farmers wade through a field, filled with abandoned Pak Army tanks near Khem Karan
(photo bharat-rakshak.com)

Armoured Brigades launched no fewer than five, and possibly up to eight, determined attacks during the course of battle. While the 5th Armoured Brigade initially succeeded in overrunning Khem Karan, subsequent assaults were repelled by the Indian Army with remarkable effectiveness. Indian commanders demonstrated keen battlefield acumen—flooding key areas, funnelling enemy armour into carefully prepared killing zones, and executing ambushes with precision. Indian tank crews, though operating older equipment, proved superior in manoeuvre and gunnery, their skill and training overcoming the technological advantage of Pakistani tanks. Equally vital were the Indian infantry regiments, who contributed with disciplined anti-tank fire and sharp marksmanship.

Between 8 and 10 September, Pakistan's elite 1 Armoured Division—considered the pride of its army—was decisively defeated by the Indian Army. Pakistan lost 97 tanks, including 72 of its much-vaunted Pattons. In contrast, Indian losses were minimal: only 10 tanks from

the Deccan Horse and two from 3 CAVALRY. The gallant Commanding Officer of the Deccan Horse, Lieutenant Colonel AS Vaidya, who would later become Chief of the Army Staff, was awarded the Maha Vir Chakra for his leadership. The same honour was bestowed upon Major General Gurbaksh Singh, Brigadier Theogaraj, and Lieutenant Colonel Salim Caleb, Commanding Officer of 3 CAVALRY. In what became the largest tank battle since World War II, the Indian 2 (Independent) Armoured Brigade had overcome a better-equipped but poorly coordinated adversary through ingenuity, discipline, and tactical brilliance.

Conclusion

At the conclusion of the war, approximately 100 destroyed or damaged Pakistani tanks—many of them American-made Pattons—were recovered and collected near Bhikhiwind in Punjab. The site came to be known as '**Patton Nagar**' or the "*Graveyard of the Pattons*." These captured tanks stood as enduring symbols of India's victory in one of the largest post-World War II armoured engagements. Several of them are now preserved and displayed as war trophies in military museums and cantonments across the country.



Major General Harvijay Singh, SM (Retd) is a third-generation soldier, and his two sons are also Army officers. An alumnus of National Defence Academy, Pune, he was commissioned in the Corps of Signals in 1981. He is a specialist trainer and has trained soldiers in military training establishments at various stages of his career. As the Chief Instructor of the Military College of Telecommunications Engineering, he was strategizing issues and training professional soldiers on Communication Networks, Cyber Security and Electronic Warfare. A prolific writer, he contributes regularly to various professional journals. He has written three books related to Military History and Leadership and is the recipient of the prestigious 'Scholar Warrior Badge'.



Maj Gen Harvijay Singh