

ILLUSTRATED HISTORY / INDIA-PAKISTAN WAR, 1965

# Battle of Asal Uttar

The fields that stopped an armoured offensive



Illustrative scene: infantry concealed in the cultivated Punjab landscape.

**8-10 SEPTEMBER 1965**

**KHEM KARAN SECTOR, PUNJAB**

A tank looks formidable on an open road. In a wet field, with an unseen gun waiting on its flank, the balance can change. At Asal Uttar, Indian soldiers turned that possibility into a defensive victory.

Follow the road into the battle, meet the men who held it, and discover why courage needed concealment, coordination and a good reading of the ground.

## CHAPTER 01

# Why this patch of Punjab?

Before the tanks arrived, the war had already widened.

### AUGUST 1965 | OPERATION GIBRALTAR

Pakistan sent infiltrators into Jammu and Kashmir, seeking to stir an uprising. The operation failed to produce the intended result, and fighting intensified.

### 1 SEPTEMBER | OPERATION GRAND SLAM

Pakistan attacked in the Chhamb sector, threatening the route towards Akhnoor. India faced pressure on a strategically important connection to Jammu and Kashmir.

### 6 SEPTEMBER | A WIDER FRONT

India crossed the international border in Punjab. Opening the Lahore front challenged Pakistan beyond Kashmir and forced it to respond along a much wider theatre.

### THE KHEM KARAN COUNTERSTROKE

Pakistan brought 1 Armoured Division into the sector, alongside 11 Infantry Division. The ambition extended beyond taking a border town: bridges and communications towards the Beas were at stake.



Captured Pakistani Patton. Photo: Rachna Bisht Rawat / Penguin Viking, reproduced by Rediff, 10 September 2015.

## A road junction becomes a hinge

Indian 4 Mountain Division fell back from its exposed forward positions and organised a defended sector around Asal Uttar. Holding the approaches towards Patti and Bhikhiwind would obstruct the Pakistani breakout.

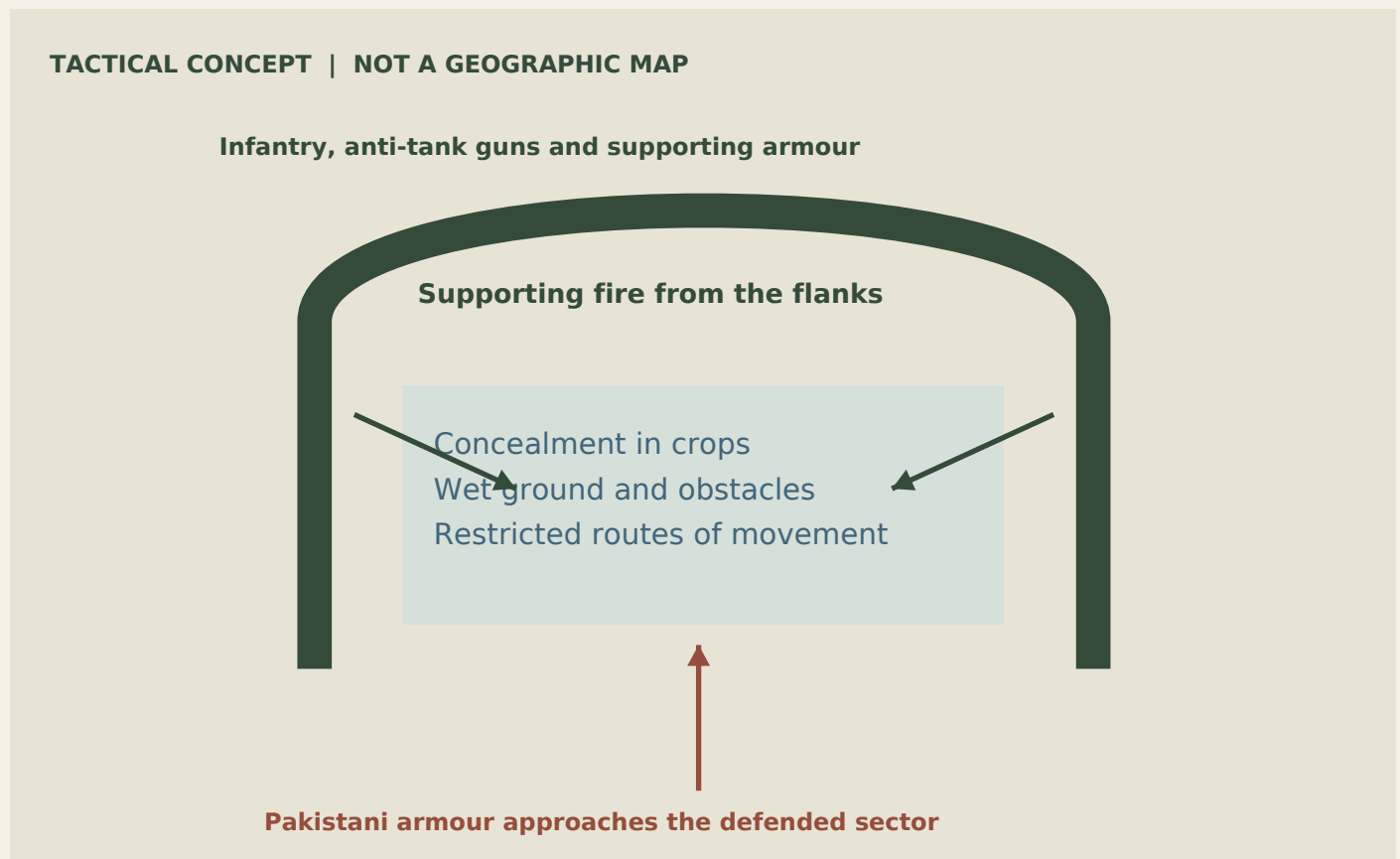
### KEEP THE SCALE IN VIEW

Asal Uttar was a decisive defensive success in one sector. Its significance lies in frustrating a major armoured thrust; the entire 1965 war cannot be reduced to this single battle.

## CHAPTER 02

# The ground joins the defence

The celebrated horseshoe was a system of mutually supporting positions.



**Read the diagram:** the open end represents an approach into a defended area. The sides show how supporting positions could engage an attacker from more than one direction. Actual deployments changed during the battle.

### 1 | MAKE MOVEMENT DIFFICULT

Irrigation channels and flooded patches impeded tanks. This did not immobilise every vehicle; it made routes and timing less predictable for the attacker.

### 2 | MAKE DETECTION DIFFICULT

Tall crops concealed men, guns and tanks. A defender who waited for a favourable shot could reduce the advantage of an enemy vehicle approaching in the open.

**Then combine them:** mines, infantry resistance, artillery and armoured counteraction gave difficult ground its military value. Water alone did not win the battle.

## CHAPTER 03

# The advance meets resistance

The main battle: 8-10 September. Its immediate aftermath continued on the 11th.



Illustrative scenes: Pakistani Patton-type armour and an Indian Centurion-type tank.

### 8 SEPTEMBER | PROBE AND HOLD

Pakistani reconnaissance and tank attacks tested the new defences. Deccan Horse helped check the thrusts. Infantry dug in and laid mines while Indian armour responded to attempts to pass around the defended sector.

### 9 SEPTEMBER | STRENGTHEN THE LINE

2 Independent Armoured Brigade reinforced the sector. Repeated attacks, including night fighting, failed to produce a breakthrough. Positions had to hold while tanks and artillery supported the infantry.

### 10 SEPTEMBER | THE THRUST BREAKS

Attacks near 4 Grenadiers and attempts to outflank the defences met anti-tank fire, artillery and Indian armour. Abdul Hamid fought his final action near Chima. Pakistani formations failed to obtain the intended breakout.

### 11 SEPTEMBER | THE AFTERMATH

Surrenders by men of Pakistan's 4 Cavalry confirmed the scale of the reverse. Disabled, abandoned and captured tanks remained in the sector. The offensive had been checked, although fighting in the wider war continued.

The drama lay in repeated decisions to hold, reposition and support another threatened position.

## CHAPTER 04

# Names behind the defence

Senior decisions mattered. So did the crews and infantry who made them work.



General J. N. Chaudhuri, Army Chief, addresses officers and jawans of 4 Grenadiers. Photo: Rachna Bisht Rawat / Penguin Viking via Rediff.



A. S. Vaidya in a later portrait as General. Photo: Indian Army via Bharat Rakshak.

**Lt Gen Harbaksh Singh** commanded Western Command. **Lt Gen J. S. Dhillon** commanded XI Corps. **Maj Gen Gurbaksh Singh**, GOC 4 Mountain Division, directed the divisional defence. These were different levels of responsibility, not interchangeable titles.

**Brig T. K. Theogaraj** commanded 2 Independent Armoured Brigade. **Lt Col A. S. Vaidya** led 9 Horse (Deccan Horse), and **Lt Col Salim Caleb** led 3 Cavalry. Vaidya's leadership in the sector earned the Maha Vir Chakra; he later became Army Chief.



Soldiers of 4 Grenadiers. Photo: Rachna Bisht Rawat / Penguin Viking via Rediff.

**Across the line:** Pakistan's principal formations were 1 Armoured Division, commanded by Maj Gen Nasir Ahmed Khan, and 11 Infantry Division, commanded by Maj Gen Abdul Hamid Khan. He was a different person from CQMH Abdul Hamid.

## The line was held by units

4 Grenadiers, 18 Rajputana Rifles and 1/9 Gorkha Rifles were among the infantry holding the approaches; 9 J&K Rifles provided depth. Tank crews, gun detachments and supporting arms sustained the defence.

## SPECIAL FEATURE

# The man beside the gun

Company Quarter Master Havildar Abdul Hamid | 4 Grenadiers



Abdul Hamid portrait: reproduced by Rediff, 10 September 2015.

1 JULY 1933 - 10 SEPTEMBER 1965

## A jeep. A gun. An armoured assault.

Born in Dhamupur, Uttar Pradesh, Hamid was 32 when he was killed in action. At Asal Uttar, he commanded a recoilless-gun detachment. His vehicle offered mobility, but little protection against tank fire.

### 10 SEPTEMBER | THE PVC CITATION TELLS THE SEQUENCE

#### 01 | THE LINE IS UNDER PRESSURE

A Pakistani Patton assault, preceded by artillery fire, penetrated forward positions near Chima. Hamid moved his jeep-mounted gun to a flank under fire.

#### 02 | FIRE, THEN CHANGE POSITION

He knocked out the leading tank, shifted position and destroyed another. Repositioning mattered: firing exposed a lightly protected gun detachment to retaliation.

#### 03 | HE CONTINUES TO ENGAGE

The tanks located his jeep and concentrated fire upon it. Hamid continued firing at another tank and was mortally wounded by a high-explosive shell. He received the Param Vir Chakra posthumously.

## CHAPTER 05

# Meet the armour

Different vehicles. Different strengths. The same unforgiving battlefield.



Indian Centurion-type tank: illustrative scene.



Captured Pakistani Patton. Rawat / Penguin Viking via Rediff.

| SIDE / TYPE                 | WHERE IT FITS IN THE STORY                                                                                        |
|-----------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| India   Centurion           | 3 Cavalry; a well-armed medium tank that helped meet the outflanking thrusts.                                     |
| India   Sherman             | 9 Horse (Deccan Horse); an older design used effectively in the defensive battle.                                 |
| India   AMX-13              | 8 Cavalry; light tanks within the supporting Indian armoured force.                                               |
| Pakistan   M47 / M48 Patton | US-built medium tanks formed the principal striking armour; both types appear in official commemorative accounts. |
| Pakistan   M24 Chaffee      | Light tanks used in reconnaissance and probing actions.                                                           |

**What is a recoilless gun?** It vents propellant gases rearwards to counter recoil. An anti-tank round can defeat armour without the gun needing to be mounted in a tank. The rear blast also requires clear space. Hamid's gun made his jeep dangerous to tanks; it did not make the jeep safe.

The lesson: capability depends on crew, ground and coordination.

## CHAPTER 06

# The battle's legacy

The accomplishment is striking enough when told precisely.



Soldiers rest during a lull. Photo: Rachna Bisht Rawat / Penguin Viking, reproduced by Rediff.

### WHAT INDIA ACHIEVED

The Pakistani armoured breakout failed. Captured tanks were collected near Bhikhiwind at the site remembered as Patton Nagar. Khem Karan itself remained under Pakistani occupation until after the ceasefire.

### WHAT THE NUMBERS MEAN

Indian official history records 97 Pakistani tanks lost, including 72 Pattons; the National War Memorial gives 99 tanks destroyed or captured. These are differing tallies, not 97 or 99 Pattons all destroyed.

## Why the battle deserves study

- 1. Terrain changes capability.** A fast tank on firm ground may lose that advantage in wet fields and constrained approaches.
- 2. Defence is active work.** Infantry holding ground and armour answering a flank threat formed parts of the same fight.
- 3. Courage needs a team.** Hamid's gallantry belongs alongside the resistance of his battalion, the gun crews and the tank regiments.
- 4. Leadership is adaptation.** Recovering from early reverses required decisions matched to the situation, rather than faith in equipment alone.

For reflection: How can organisation and terrain offset an opponent's material advantage?