

# The Battle of Garibpur

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*The 'Lightning Campaign' to liberate Bangladesh during the 1971 Indo-Pak War was one of the finest moments in Indian history. The 'Battle of Garibpur' fought on 21–22 November 1971, before the Indo-Pak War was officially declared on 3 December 1971, was a key battle in East Pakistan where a single infantry battalion, 14 Punjab (Nabha Akal) supported by a squadron of armour and intimate artillery support, successfully fought a Pakistani attack by infantry and armour. Since Pakistan suffered extensive damage and heavy losses in this first encounter with India, it left a significant impact on the Pakistan Army's ensuing operations and adversely affected their morale.<sup>1</sup>*

Keywords: 1971 War, Garibpur, Preliminary Operations

The infantry battalion of 14 Punjab (Nabha Akal), raised as Nabha State Force on 24 October 1757, not only fought with distinction during both the World Wars, but also in most of the wars and operations fought by the Indian Army post independence. It also handed India its first victory in the Battle of Garibpur, a precursor to the 1971 Bangladesh Liberation War.

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### 1971: PREVAILING SCENARIO

Indian Army's 14 Punjab, as part of 42 Infantry Brigade, 9 Infantry Division, was deployed on the border in the Krishnanagar, Krishnaganj and Gede area in April 1971, to prevent the illegitimate ingress of refugees and to check the East Pakistan troops chasing the refugees.

The battalion later moved to Kalyani for infantry-tank cooperation training with 'B' Squadron of 45 Cavalry equipped with PT-76 amphibian tanks. Operationally oriented training was also carried out for launching an attack deep into the enemy territory on foot, self-contained for 24 hours; as well as negotiating riverine terrain.

The battalion was concentrated near village Bamandanga in the Bayra salient on 16 October 1971, and subsequently moved to Gobardanga, where intensive training was carried out with engineer expedients and improvised means to cross water obstacles. Bunker clearing/bursting drills were also perfected during day and night.<sup>2</sup>

#### **Situation on the International Border**

In the east, the situation on the Indo-Pakistan border was worsening due to genocide by the Pakistan Army. In view of the military actions by the Mukti Bahini, Pakistani forays and provocations inside Indian territory increased, leading to Indian casualties. The 14 Punjab was concentrated near the international border, where it was tasked to train the Mukti Fauj volunteers and successfully dominate the border.

By end of November 1971, the enemy actions had reached a level where it became necessary to protect Indian interests by occupying selected enclaves in East Pakistan. On 16 November 1971, the battalion was further moved for a new operational role in an entirely new sector of Bayra.

#### **The Assigned Task**

The battalion, under the command of Lieutenant Colonel (Lt Col) RK Singh, was initially tasked to occupy a battalion defended area in Fatehpur, which was located 6 kilometre (kms) inside East Pakistan. The task was later revised 'to secure the area of Garibpur by first light 21 November 1971'.<sup>3</sup>

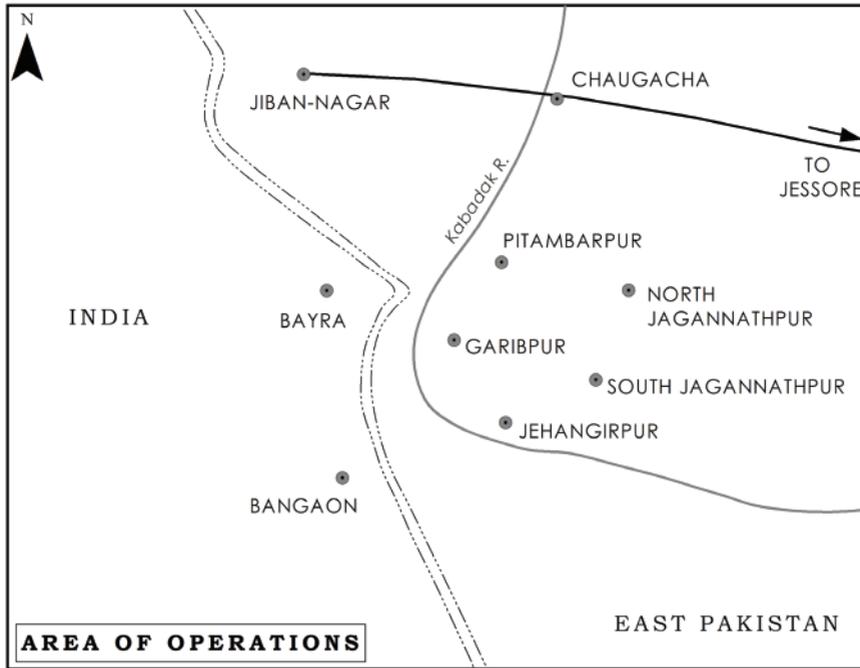
The battalion was tasked to advance well inside to secure enemy territory in order to interdict the Chaugacha–Jessore road and trap the withdrawing enemy from Chaugacha, or prevent any reinforcements joining from Jessore (See Maps 1 and 2). The unit was allotted 'Charlie'



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**Map I** Orientation Map

Squadron of 45 Cavalry consisting of 14 PT-76 tanks, one platoon of 102 Engineer Regiment under command, with 87 Battery of 6 Field Regiment in direct support and remainder 6 Field Regiment and 78 Medium Regiment in support.



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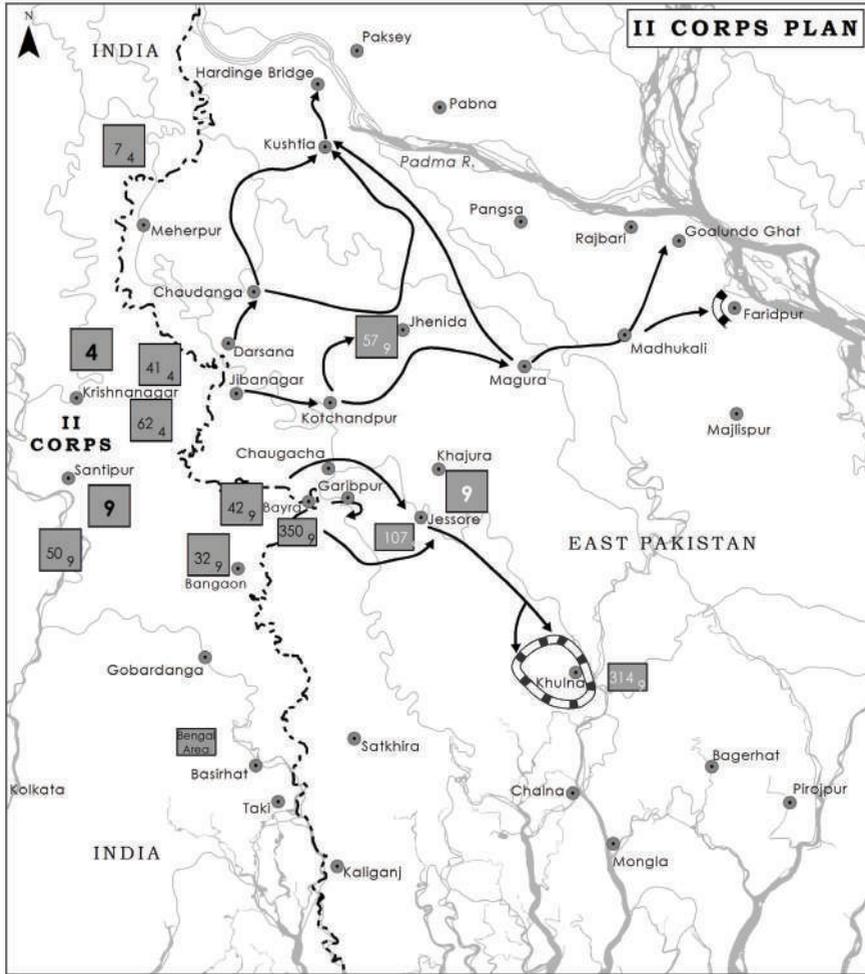
**Map 2** Area of Operations

### Importance of Garibpur

The hamlet of Garibpur, located in the Bayra salient 9 kms inside East Pakistan, astride the highway from India to Jessore via Chaugacha, was an important crossroad for both the nations. In the event of full military option being exercised, 9 Infantry Division had the initial task to capture the prestigious cantonment and vital communication centre of Jessore; and one of its axis of advance was the Chaugacha–Jessore highway. Its control created a road map for Indian forces to eventually defeat Pakistani troops in December 1971.

### 2 CORPS PLAN: AN OUTLINE

The newly created 2 Corps consisted of 9 Infantry Division and 4 Mountain Division (Map 3). The 9 Infantry Division's main thrust was planned along the Bayra–Garibpur–Jessore axis, while a secondary attack would be made along the Benapol–Jessore line. The role of 4 Mountain



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**Map 3** The 2 Corps Plan

Division was to move along the Darshan–Jibannagar–Kotchandpur axis, with a secondary thrust along the Chaudanga–Jibannagar axis.

As mentioned earlier, India’s 9 Infantry Division had the initial task to capture Jessore. Meanwhile, Pakistan’s 9 Infantry Division was responsible for the defence of this sector, with 9 Division Headquarters located at Jessore. Pakistan 107 Infantry Brigade was responsible for the defence of Jessore.

### **Reconnaissance**

A night before the attack, on night 19–20 November 1971, a strong patrol of 14 Punjab was sent across the border to reconnoitre a suitable area ahead of Fatehpur. Major (Maj) A.P. Viswanathan, Officer Commanding, Alpha Company led this patrol, which comprised elements of rifle companies to ensure that all the companies would have route guidance on arrival into positions. The move of the unit was supposed to be a surprise, but following a skirmish with an enemy patrol, the Pakistanis were alerted of the impending attack.

### **Advance to Fatehpur—A Tragic Start**

The 14 Punjab commenced its advance at 7 a.m. on 20 November 1971. The Kabadak River on the border had to be crossed. For this, the engineer troops were building a bridge across the river, which was about 40 metres in width and 5 metres in depth. As this process would have taken many more hours, it was decided that since the battalion had arrived on the river banks, they would be ferried across on motorboats steered by engineer troops.

Bravo Company under Maj K.M. Machiah, was nominated as the vanguard company. The only crossing expedients available for the entire battalion were one assault boat with one out board motor (OBM), with a sitting capacity of 16 men, and a Class-5 raft with a maximum capacity of 20 men. In order to prepare the first wave to cross fast with the help of the available crossing aids, the men were fully equipped with arms and ammunition. No safety belts were available as the boat was meant for the exclusive use of the engineer crew for their work to lay the bridge.

In the first wave, one section with medium machine gun (MMG) detachment, totalling 16 men, got on board at about 9.30 a.m. to cross the Kabadak River. The boat, while approaching the other side, overshot the berthing area. The engineer operator of the OBM took a sharp U-turn and in this manoeuvre, the boat overturned and capsized. All the occupants fell into the river, entrapped in swamp and weeds under the upside-down boat, each swimming and struggling hard to save his life. Two engineer divers at once jumped in to save the drowning men. However, out of 16 soldiers, only seven were saved and nine got drowned.<sup>4</sup>

This unpredictably calamity, may be termed as an imponderable of war. The mishap affected the morale of the troops. They were dismayed and disheartened. However, it is to the credit of the unit officers, particularly the second-in-command, Maj Inderjit Singh who motivated

the troops by citing the sacrifices made by Guru Govind Singh. The company groups slowly and carefully commenced crossing the river with proper safety measures. The entire battalion was able to cross by last light.

It is to the credit of the unit that this catastrophe did not deter them to get on with the impending operational task.

### **Advance to Garibpur**

The infantry battalion of 14 Punjab along with 'C' Squadron, 45 Cavalry equipped with 14 PT-76 tanks, reached the Garibpur position by last light on 20 November 1971. There was just enough time for Lt Col R.K. Singh to issue orders to his company commanders before the early winter night set in.

The Battalion Headquarters, under Maj Inderjit Singh, Captain (Capt) M.P.S. Bajwa, Adjutant, Mortar Platoon under Capt V.S. Butalia and other heavy stores reached around 10.30 p.m.

### **Assessment of the Enemy**

A battalion of Pakistani 107 Infantry Brigade was located at Chaugacha, while the remainder brigade and 9 Infantry Division was in Jessore. Since the Garibpur position would outflank the Pakistani battalion at Chaugacha, there was likely to be a strong enemy reaction.

## **DEPLOYMENT AND PREPARATION OF DEFENCES**

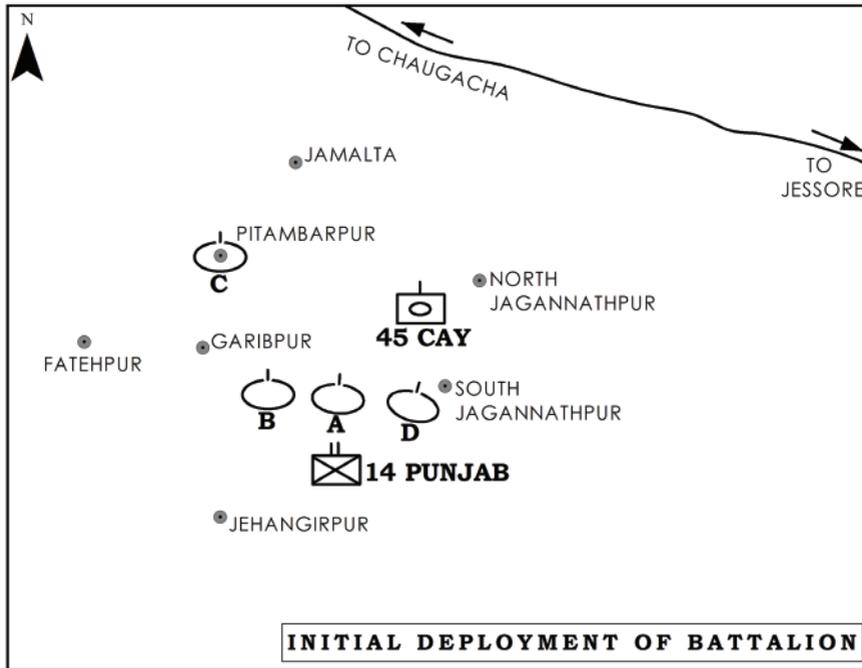
### **Initial Deployment of Battalion**

Capt Bajwa, the Adjutant, narrated the salient aspects of the deployment:

The companies were allocated their area of deployment. Maj N.S. Narang, 'C' Squadron Commander, 45 Cavalry, was ordered to deploy his tanks in conjunction with two recoilless guns to cover the enemy armour advance from the direction of road Jessore–Chaugacha and the east between Garibpur–South Jagannathpur.

Delta Company under Capt Balbir Singh, with one section MMGs and a recoilless gun, occupied a company-defended locality in South Jagannathpur to cover the tank approach with elements of armour. Charlie Company under Maj N.J.S. Bains, with a section of MMGs, occupied a company defended locality further north at Track Junction near Pitambarpur, where the two tracks converged from Chaugacha.

Alpha and Bravo Companies under Maj Vishwanathan and Maj Machiah occupied the gap between Charlie and Delta Companies.



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**Map 4** Initial Deployment of Battalion

By 3 a.m. on the 21st, the battalion was in position and the men were feverishly at work to get the defences ready by first light.

The Battalion Headquarters was located near Garibpur. Since strict radio silence was to be maintained, the Signal Platoon was instructed to lay lines to all companies and mortar position. Somehow, the linesmen were unable to find Charlie Company location of Maj Bains, hence no line could be laid to Charlie Company.

It was past midnight when Maj D.S. Narang had deployed his tanks. The tank troops were commanded by Capt Tejinder Singh Sidhu, located near Alpha Company-defended locality: the other troop was commanded by Capt B.S. Mehta, which was deployed towards south eastern side, near Delta Company at the farthest end: and the third troop was commanded by a Junior Commissioned Officer (JCO).<sup>5</sup>

### **Bold Deployment of Protective Patrol**

Maj Inderjit Singh explained why it was essential to send an officer patrol with an Artillery Observation Post (OP) officer ahead of the defences:

It was tactically important to locate the enemy gun area, as we had encountered enemy fire during our move. So I advised the Commanding Officer to send an officer patrol along with Artillery OP to engage enemy gun area.

A patrol with Capt G.S. Gill, the MMG officer and the artillery observer, Capt P.P. Chaturvedi from 6 Field Regiment, were moved north towards Singhajhuli–North Jagannathpur to cover the enemy movement on road axis Jessore–Chaugacha.

In the cold and foggy early hours of 21 November, Capt Gill heard the unmistakable sounds of enemy tanks moving south from the Chaugacha–Jessore road. The fog and poor visibility allowed the patrol to remain close to the enemy columns and report on them accurately.

Capt Chaturvedi, provided with a fine opportunity, brought down some good concentrations on the closely massed Pakistani columns. In the poor visibility and the noise of tanks and own artillery fire, the patrol was nearly encircled, but resolutely broke away. Capt Chaturvedi was wounded and was bravely carried by Capt Gill and others till they finally made their way back to the Company. They were both awarded Vir Chakra (VrC).<sup>6</sup>

Capt Bajwa narrated an interesting incident:

It was around 5.30 am on 21 November 1971 that all of a sudden, I heard Capt Gill mumbling on the radio set, ‘Sir, etthe dushman de bahut tanks te infantry ekathe ho rahe ne’. [Sir, many enemy tanks and infantry are seen closing in this area]. He, thereafter, went off the air. I immediately informed the Commanding Officer about this important message.<sup>7</sup>

Although radio silence had been lifted, Charlie Company of Maj Bains was still out of communication. Later it was found that his radio operator had carried a faulty AN PRC-25 (radio set).

#### THE ENEMY RESPONSE AND OUR COUNTER RESPONSE

As visualised, the Garibpur position outflanked the Pakistani battalion at Chaugacha and there was violent response by Pakistani 107 Infantry Brigade at first light, 21 November to 14 Punjab’s entry across the Bayra salient. It became known later through the prisoners taken, that Pakistan’s 6 Punjab, elements of 21 Punjab, 22 Frontier Force and 3 Independent Armoured Squadron of Chaffee tanks made up the attacking force.

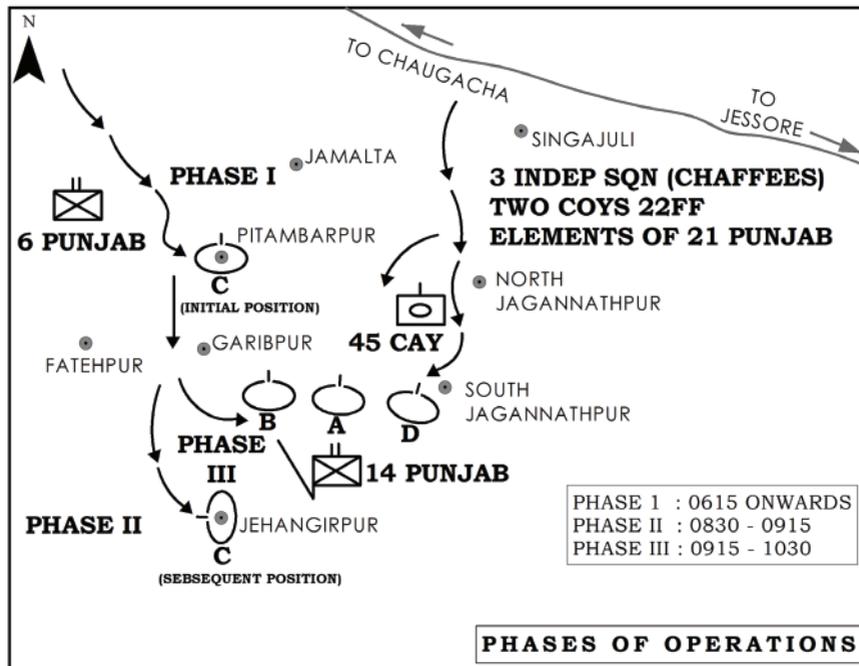
## Pakistani Infantry and Armour Attacks

### *Phases of Operation*

During early winter morning, heavy fog had enveloped the surrounding area. At about 3.30 a.m. on 21 November, our patrol deployed near Singajhuli passed on a message regarding roaring sound of tanks from the direction of Jessore. At 5.30 a.m., Capt Gill reported on radio link that he could see enemy armour and infantry lining up for assault in the forming up place (FUP). All companies were warned to be ready for the impending enemy attack. However, Charlie Company was still out of communication.

The Pakistani thrust lines having become apparent, thanks to the good work of the patrols operating ahead of the defences, readjustments to muster the recoilless rifle (RCL) guns and the PT-76 tanks at the required places were carried out.

Enemy artillery guns opened up and started pounding our defences to support their assaulting armour and infantry. As dawn broke out on 21st November, the enemy launched an attack by two infantry



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**Map 5 Phases of Operation**

battalions supported by a squadron of armour equipped with M24 Chaffee tanks.

The troops of 14 Punjab battalion group rose splendidly to the occasion and the well-organised drills and training stood to good effect in those crucial hours.

### **An Intense Infantry Encounter**

Around 6 a.m. on 21 November 1971, enemy activity was observed opposite Charlie Company from Chaugacha built-up area side. The enemy attempted to encircle the company and a fierce encounter commenced.

Maj N.J.S. Bains was very nostalgic when he narrated his personal experiences of the Garibpur battle:

The Commanding Officer, Lt Col R.K. Singh ordered me to occupy a company-defended location at Track Junction, ahead of village Pitambarpur, where the two tracks converged from Chaugacha. The location was about 1 km from the forward defences of 14 Punjab. It was already dark by the time Charlie Company moved to the given location. I deployed the Company and sent two patrols ahead of the defences for early warning of the enemy. Our radio set was also non-functional.

During the night, the enemy sent two patrols, probably to find out our strength and location. At first light on 21 November, enemy activity was observed opposite our Company location from Chaugacha built-up area. It was sheer coincidence that when I banged the company radio set, it started functioning!

As the enemy was forming up for the attack in front of our location, I requested the battery commander to give me fire immediately as the enemy was preparing to attack our location. The artillery fire was very effective as we could see the enemy suffering heavy casualties and retreating.

Soon it was realised that the defences occupied by the company at night were too far from the main battalion defences and not fit for fighting a cohesive defensive battle. So we were informed to move the company further south, to the alternative location behind near Jahangirpur.

I gave orders to my company to move to the alternate position. After marshalling the company, we executed a well-organised move almost in the face of the enemy. This location was in an open rice field and we were now ready to take on the enemy, if they followed us.

Readjustment by Charlie Company was taken as a withdrawal of Indian troops and enemy commander ordered the remainder infantry and armour squadron to encircle my company from the south western direction.

Soon it was seen that the enemy (which we learnt later was 6 Punjab of Pakistan) followed us; they were forming up in front about 500-600 metres away, and getting ready to attack us. The column of tanks, which were coming towards us were taken on by our armoured squadron. By now the enemy started shelling our location and preparing to attack us.

I instructed the company to put on their bayonets and be prepared for hand-to-hand fight. Now heavy enemy small arms fire was coming on us, while we engaged the enemy with our small arms, MMGs and 2" mortar giving us supporting fire.

Subedar Malkiat Singh, the Platoon Commander of my company, enthused the troops by moving under the enemy's small arms and artillery shelling at the cost of his life. He displayed conspicuous gallantry, for which he was awarded a Maha Vir Chakra (MVC). The enemy retreated, suffering heavy casualties, dead and seriously wounded.<sup>8</sup>

Capt Bajwa, in fact, remembered how Maj Bains suddenly came on air and requested for defensive fire DF [SOS], as the enemy had closed in and was forming up for the final assault. The artillery fire was promptly given by the Battery Commander, Maj Kailash Nath, who ensured an accurate barrage of fire to break the enemy attack.

The enemy tanks had come in the open and most of the tanks rushed towards southern direction towards Delta Company of Capt Balbir Singh with the aim to encircle Charlie Company from south-west. They were unaware about the deployment of the entire battalion, which was supported by tanks.

By this time, the 'C' Squadron, 45 Cavalry had swung into action and Maj D.S. Narang had readjusted the position of all the three troops. In the close fighting that ensued when the other Chaffees closed in, Maj Narang was hit and killed while directing his tanks standing up in the cupola, but not before taking out two Chaffee tanks. He was later awarded MVC for displaying indomitable courage in the face of the enemy. Capt B.S. Mehta, being the second-in-command, took over the charge.

### **The Main Frontal Attack**

In the meantime, Delta Company, led by Capt Balbir Singh in the south, had fought fiercely and was successful in repulsing the repeated enemy

attacks. Capt Balbir Singh shared some fond memories of the Garibpur battle:

My Delta Company was last in the order of march and we advanced mounted on the tanks of 'C' Squadron, 45 Cavalry. We did not meet any enemy enroute and dismounted as we reached the outskirts of Garibpur village.

After sometime, Commanding Officer came and indicated the general area where my company was to take up defensive position. I was lucky to have about 15 mins of daylight which helped to decide the deployment of my platoons and supporting elements. We immediately started preparing our defences as early morning the enemy attack was imminent.

During the early hours of 21 November, we found enemy tanks coming at full speed towards our location. Our tanks started engaging them, but because of the fog it was difficult to engage them accurately.

During the tank duel, a charging enemy tank sneaked through the fog close to Delta Company locality, within 25 metres of the positions. I instructed the RCL detachment commander, Havildar Lekh Raj, to engage the enemy tank charging into our company location. He himself loaded the shell and fired at the last tank which was visible to him. The enemy tank instantly went up in flames. This Non Commissioned Officer (NCO) was awarded Vrc for his outstanding courage.

The leading two enemy tanks had come very close to our defences, probably unaware of our presence. On seeing our tanks at 25 metres, they stopped and started aligning their guns. Before they could do so, our tanks blasted them. Enemy troops who jumped out of the tanks were engaged by our troops. The enemy troop commander, Lieutenant (Lt) Bhatt, was among those killed.

Other enemy tanks which were following the leading tanks of Lt Bhatt were engaged by Capt B.S. Mehta and Capt Tejinder Sidhu. Witnessing the tank-to-tank battle in real life was an experience beyond imagination. After a few minutes, all the enemy Chaffee tanks were in flames. The enemy infantry, which was following the enemy tanks, were engaged by own troops. After seeing the three enemy tanks up in flames ahead of them, the infantry withdrew and started engaging us from village Jaganathpur. Luckily very accurate and intense artillery fire was brought on the enemy infantry which silenced the enemy small arms fire to a great extent.<sup>9</sup>

Later during the day, while searching the dead bodies of enemy troops, an enemy soldier was found who had hidden in the paddy field. When he tried to escape, Capt Balbir chased him for 40–50 metres and apprehended him.

### **The Attack on Battalion Headquarters**

Capt Bajwa mentioned:

By this time, Pakistan's 6 Punjab elements, which had earlier attacked Charlie Company, had now moved south towards Garibpur and attacked the Battalion Headquarters from the north-western direction. As Adjutant, I was busy controlling the battle when all of a sudden someone shouted, 'Sahib dushman sade pichhe walon attack kar riha hai.' [Sir, the enemy is attacking from our rear]. I quickly reorganised the Battalion Headquarters defences and asked the Signal Platoon and Intelligence Section boys to readjust their defences to face the most unexpected threat from the rear.

Meanwhile, I saw one of our tanks, which was passing by the Battalion Headquarters and requested him to chase the enemy, who was in the process of forming up in the wooded area of Garibpur. The Signal boys led by Capt P.S. Mankotia along with other Battalion Headquarters personnel, followed the tank which was by now chasing the enemy while firing his MMG. The enemy was totally confused and started retreating. This sudden action by us ensured breaking up the enemy attack towards Battalion Headquarters and mortar position.<sup>10</sup>

Maj Inderjit Singh too narrated an interesting incident:

The protective patrol gave us adequate early warning of the impending enemy attack at first light, 21 November. The enemy assaulted our position; there was intense engagement of artillery, tank-to-tank battle along with our RCL guns engaging tanks and small arms fire.

During the battle, one shell landed 6 metres away from my trench with the splinters flying all across. I was not hit but one of the shrapnel tore apart the skull of Lance Naik Piara Singh who was in the neighbouring trench with my sahayak.

When the enemy started withdrawing, they came near our defences. We imagined that it was another assault through Garibpur village. Own tank nearby blasted the village. During that time, I could personally see a Pakistani Army JCO probably hiding behind a tree. Later on checking the area, the JCO was brought near our

trench. Our doctor checked him and declared him dead. However, after sometime the JCO opened his eyes. He looked around and then died. On checking, we found a letter in Urdu written to his wife. In the letter he had written: 'Fatima, hamari Eid toh tab hogi jab ham apne watan wapas ayenge. Pehle to Bengali maarte the, ab Hindustan ki fauj hamare peeche hain'. [Fatima, our Eid will be celebrated when we return home. Earlier the Bengalis were after us, now it is the Indian Army].<sup>11</sup>

#### THE ROLE OF MEDICAL PERSONNEL

Capt H.C. Vishwakarma, Regimental Medical Officer (RMO) posted with 14 Punjab, shared some nostalgic memories of the Garibpur battle:

As a young RMO, I moved with the battalion to Garibpur on 20 November 1971. During the midnight darkness, we established a temporary Regimental Aid Post (RAP) with solitary Nursing Assistant (NA) Naik/NA B.R. Kharat (instead of two authorised) and Medical Platoon elements, 150 metres ahead of the Battalion Headquarters.

During early morning of 21 November 1971, Pakistan Army elements of armour with Chaffee tanks and infantry attacked 14 Punjab. A fierce battle ensued effecting heavy casualties on enemy side with some casualties of ours. They were evacuated by our Medical Platoon elements to RAP, about 10-12 troops initially who were given prompt first aid by me and my NA. More casualties kept on coming for life-saving first aid at RAP. After requisite documentation, the serious ones were evacuated to Advanced Dressing Station (ADS) of 409 Medical Battalion during reasonable lull period.

When we were attacked by Pakistani forces and bullets were flying all over, our Medical Platoon, and NA fired 70-80 rounds on the enemy located 100-150 metres away. We were lying on the ground, since there were no bunkers or proper trenches dug.

A Pakistani soldier was brought after capture to RAP with extensive wound of left leg. I tended to him on priority following Geneva Convention and my professional ethics.

Another enemy soldier was brought to RAP with large infected wound of right thigh in a moribund condition, as he was found lying in the field following injury. He was given intravenous plasma by me lying down beside him, holding the IV Plasma bottle to resuscitate him. The shelling and firing going around Battalion Headquarters made it impossible to stand.

More casualties were attended by me and my NA along with Medical Platoon personnel, disregarding personal safety and upholding the battalion honour.

On 22 November, we were subjected to air attack by enemy Sabre jets. The RAP was withdrawn behind the Battalion Headquarters.

The Garibpur battle and other subsequent incidents during the war were a real-learning experience for me.<sup>12</sup>

By about 10.30 a.m. on 21 November 1971, the enemy's momentum of assault had petered out and it was very clear that Nabha Akal, with its affiliated units, had carried the day. Possessing numerical superiority, the Pakistani troops were in a position to decimate the Indian intrusion. However, the Punjab battalion, known for its long history and valour, rose to the occasion and thwarted the enemy attack. The winter sun rising up through the fog revealed a large number of enemy casualties, including 10 destroyed enemy tanks and three abandoned ones in good running condition.

#### TERRAIN AND CLIMATE PREVAILING IN THE AREA AND ITS IMPACT ON OPERATIONS

The terrain in the area of operations was generally plains. As Garibpur is a tiny and predominantly agricultural hamlet, there were paddy fields around, water-logged at places. The battle was largely confined to the open fields.

The climate was bit cold and foggy, it being the onset of winter in late November. During the early hours, there was poor visibility on account of the fog, with restricted observation. The Pakistani tanks were unaware of the exact positions of the Indian tanks and field defences due to the early morning fog. This played a vital role, as it helped the Indian troops deployed in defences.

As mentioned earlier, the protective patrol sent ahead of the defences on the cold and foggy early morning of 21 November was able to observe the enemy tanks moving south from road Jessore–Chaugacha. The fog and poor visibility allowed the patrol to remain close to the enemy columns and Capt Gill was able to provide early warning as well as report on their movements accurately. It also helped the Artillery OP officer, Capt Chaturvedi to bring down accurate artillery fire on the enemy columns.

#### REACTIONS AND PARTICIPATION OF MUKTI BAHINI AND LOCALS

The attitude of the Mukti Bahini and locals of the area was friendly and helpful. The Mukti Bahini was happy to assist the Indian Army and provided volunteers, who helped as guides, and also provided information. After the fighting was over during the Battle of Garibpur, the locals helped the battalion in burying the dead soldiers.

During Brigadier (Brig) R.K. Singh's visit to Garibpur during Vijay Diwas, 16 December 2013, the people of Garibpur and surrounding areas were ever grateful for the contribution and sacrifices of the Indian soldiers in the liberation of Bangladesh in 1971.

#### **List of Officers of 14 PUNJAB (NABHA AKAL) who Participated in Indo-Pak War 1971**

- Lt Col (later Brig) RK Singh, Commanding Officer (Was awarded Maha Vir Chakra).
- Maj (later Col) Inderjit Singh, Second-in-Command (Later commanded 19 PUNJAB).
- Maj (later Lt Col) AP Viswanathan, Officer Commanding, Alpha Company (Later commanded 14 PUNJAB).
- Maj (later Lt Col) KM Machiah, Officer Commanding, Bravo Company.
- Maj (later Lt Col) NJS Bains, Officer Commanding, Charlie Company.
- Capt (later Col) Balbir Singh, Officer Commanding, Delta Company (Was awarded Sena Medal).
- Capt (later Col) VS Butalia, Officer Commanding, Support Company and Mortar Platoon Commander (Later commanded 14 PUNJAB).
- Capt (later Brig) MPS Bajwa, Adjutant (Later commanded 27 PUNJAB and commanded a brigade in Kargil War, winner of YSM).
- Capt SS Samyal, Quartermaster and Administrative Company Commander.
- Capt (later Lt Col) PS Mankotia, Signal Officer.
- Capt (later Col) GS Gill, Medium Machine Gun Officer and Commando Platoon Commander (Was awarded Vir Chakra).
- 2/Lt (later Lt Col) HS Kaushal, Company Officer.
- 2/Lt (later Maj) ML Bajaj, Intelligence Officer.
- 2/Lt (later Brig) PK Chowdhury, Company Officer (Later commanded 14 PUNJAB).

- 2/Lt (later Capt) Amarjeet Kumar, Company Officer.
- Capt (later Col) HC Vishwakarma, Regimental Medical Officer (Was awarded Mention-in-Despatches).

#### THE BATTLE OF GARIBPUR FROM THE ENEMY'S POINT OF VIEW

Brig Hayat Khan, Commander Pakistan 107 Infantry Brigade, who was in custody as a prisoner of war (POW) at Ramgarh Cantonment, narrated his version of the battle during interrogation. He stated in his interrogation report that he had definite information that one Sikh company of Indian Army, that is, Charlie Company (under Maj Bains), had taken up position near Pitambarpur road junction. He was not aware of the remaining battalion (14 Punjab) having fetched up and deployed in area of Garibpur with a squadron of armour and other supporting elements. So, he ordered his brigade, comprising of 6 Punjab, 21 Punjab and 22 Frontier Force, along with 3 Independent Armoured Squadron consisting of Chaffee tanks, to encircle the Indian Army's lone company (Charlie Company) from the southern and south-western direction and prevent them from escaping towards the Indian territory. The aim was to capture them at first light, and show to the United Nations team that Indian troops were fighting inside Bangladesh, though war was still not declared.<sup>13</sup>

#### THE AIR BATTLE

Around 9.25 a.m. on 22 November 1971, three enemy F-86 Sabres strafed the battalion defences at Garibpur, knocking out one PT-76 tank and injuring some troops on the ground. Around 2 p.m., three Pakistani aircrafts roared in freely, when Maj Kailash Nath, the Battery Commander, got a smoke shot fired in the enemy position at Singhajhuli. This deception paid good dividends as all the enemy aircraft diverted their attack on their troops at Singhajhuli.

At about 2.45 p.m. the same day, three more Pakistani aircrafts roared in and were having a free run, when suddenly, four Indian Gnat aircrafts from No 22 Squadron, based in Kalaikunda, appeared in the sky. In the first aerial combat between the two sides since the 1965 war, all three enemy aircrafts were shot down in the ensuing dog-fight. Two of the Pakistani pilots, Flying Officers Khalil Ahmed and Parvez Mehdi Qureshi, ejected safely but were captured by the Indian troops and treated as POWs.<sup>14</sup>

Our troops on the ground had an uninterrupted view of the air battle, which gave the battalion a tremendous fillip. Once more, the diminutive Indian Gnats flown by the Indian Air Force (IAF) pilots had established their mastery over the Sabre jets.

The result was that since the interception of the three Sabres over Garibpur, the PAF stopped sending fighter-bombers to support of their own troops and the subsequent Indian formations were now free to continue their advance towards Jessore.

#### CHIVALRY AND HONOUR OF BOTH SIDES

Of the two Pakistani pilots who ejected, one was Flying Officer (Fg Offr) Khalid Ahmed, brother of the Pakistan diplomat Aziz Ahmed Khan, who did two postings in India, the last as one of Pakistan's most popular High Commissioner to India.

The second captured pilot, Fg Offr Parvez Mehdi Qureshi, a Sword of Honour at the Pakistan Air Force Academy (PAF), later on become the Chief of Air Staff (CAS) of the PAF in 1996. Not many people recognised Qureshi as the same pilot who was a '*guest*' of India after the Bayra air battle on 22 November 1971.

When the news was reported in India, Group Captain Donald Lazarus (then a Flying Officer), who had shot him down in 1971, sent him a letter congratulating Qureshi for his achievement in becoming CAS. He mentioned that Qureshi may not recall his earlier meeting with Lazarus in the air. Lazarus did not expect a reply to the letter, but to his surprise, a Staff Officer for Qureshi wrote a reply acknowledging receipt of the letter and thanking Lazarus for the greetings. Lazarus received a further surprise, when a letter came signed by the Pakistan CAS himself. Air Chief Marshal Qureshi expressed his thanks to Lazarus for his wishes and complimented on the '*fight*' shown by the Indian pilots on the occasion.

Lazarus, who also happened to be an instructor at the prestigious Defence Services Staff College at Wellington, preserves this letter quite carefully. It speaks volumes about soldiering, chivalry and honour on both sides!<sup>15</sup>

#### IMPORTANCE OF THE BATTLE OF GARIBPUR

The Battle of Garibpur, where one battalion group was able to defeat an enemy attack by two infantry battalions supported by armour and PAF,

will go down in the annals of warfare as a classic example indeed. In the process, two Pakistani infantry battalions (6 Punjab and 22 Frontier Force) and 3 Independent Armoured Squadron were badly mauled.

On the tactical level, due to the overall pullback of Pakistani troops in each sector, the Pakistanis vacated Chaugacha without a fight. The success at Garibpur on 21–22 November was particularly significant, as it allowed India's 9 Infantry Division to gain considerable ground towards Jessore and resulted in the virtual destruction of the lone Pakistani armoured squadron in the area.

Later, after the declaration of war in early December, it allowed 9 Infantry Division to walk into Jessore unopposed, which was the initial objective.

#### EXCERPTS FROM NATIONAL NEWSPAPERS

The successful battle of Garibpur was laudably commended in the newspapers and magazines. It is important to note that the 1971 Indo-Pak War had not been declared when this battle was fought on 21–22 November 1971.

*The Times of India* on 27 November 1971, carried an article by their special correspondent from Bayra, which mentioned about the tank battle fought at Garibpur, located 5 miles inside East Bengal, which we won decisively. Eleven Chaffee tanks of 20 Lancers of the Pakistan Army had been knocked out in the 7-hour tank battle which started at 6 a.m. and ended at about 1 p.m.<sup>16</sup>

Col C.L. Proudfoot, military correspondent of the Indian Army, was specially deputed to brief the press and military attaches of other countries posted in India on this sensitive issue. The reports based on the briefing by late Col Proudfoot appeared in the newspapers. An Indian Army spokesman described the Bayra fighting was 'limited offensive action' on the part of Indian Army troops, who had returned to their bases on Indian side of the border after the operation.<sup>17</sup>

#### LESSONS LEARNT

1. *Intelligence*: No attack should be launched without proper information, as undertaken by the enemy in this battle. Its offensive capability was blunted for the subsequent battle as the whole squadron supporting 107 Infantry Brigade was destroyed in the first action. Similarly, without exact information of the enemy's locations or dispositions,

- 14 Punjab was also inducted in Garibpur area. Hence the need for carrying out reconnaissance and patrolling prior to any operation.
2. *Artillery Support:* The fire support provided by own artillery was very effective. The accurate and prompt artillery fire, particularly DF [SOS] was responsible for breaking the enemy's assault. Hence, intimate fire support by own artillery is a must for conducting any operations.
  3. *Air Support:* There was no air support available to the battalion initially, when three enemy Sabres strafed our defences at Garibpur on two occasions on 22 November. It was only at 2.45 p.m. the same day that, four Indian Gnats aircrafts appeared in the sky and engaged with the Pakistani aircrafts, shooting them down in the ensuing dog-fight. Hence, this emphasises the importance of air support to ground troops.
  4. *Motivation and High Morale:* The troops of 14 Punjab and affiliated units were imbued with high morale and were greatly motivated. Hence, the importance of junior leadership.
  5. *Combined Arms Operation:* The Battle of Garibpur was fought very well by 14 Punjab, ably supported by 'Charlie' Squadron, 45 Cavalry and the artillery component. The Engineer troops allotted to the battalion also played an important role in assisting the unit in engineer tasks, while the RMO, with his NA, played a crucial role in treating battle casualties. This intra-service cooperation helped in defeating the fierce counter-attack launched by the enemy infantry and armour. It needs to be presented as a good case of combined arms operation.

#### CASUALTIES, POWS AND HONOURS AND AWARDS

Our losses, including the affiliated units, were 28 killed and 42 wounded, while four PT-76 tanks were destroyed.<sup>18</sup> In contrast, 13 Chaffee tanks of Pakistan were neutralised, which included three captured in running condition. Three enemy aircrafts were lost in the air battle, while 300 soldiers, including three officers were killed and many wounded. Six enemy POWs were apprehended.<sup>19</sup>

The Battle of Garibpur brought a total of 40 well-deserved gallantry awards to the battalion, its affiliated troops and the IAF. While Lt Col R.K. Singh was awarded the MVC, the unit earned another MVC posthumously, two VrCs and two Sena Medals. The attached troops won one MVC (Maj D.S. Narang) posthumously, two VrCs and two Sena

Medals. The three IAF Gnat pilots (Flight Lieutenants R.A. Massey and M.A. Ganapathy and Flying Officer D. Lazarus), who shot down the Sabre jets, were awarded a VrC each.<sup>20</sup>

#### CONCLUSION

The Battle of Garibpur was a significant military victory that blunted the enemy's counter-attack capability and adversely affected their morale. This eventually paved the way for the Indian victory over Pakistan 50 years ago.

As we commemorate the Golden Jubilee of the 1971 Indo-Pak War, this battle stands out as a worthy curtain-raiser to the famous victory of the Indian defence forces. However, the unit was denied a well-deserved award of Battle Honour 'Garibpur' Battle, since it was fought prior to commencement of hostilities on 3 December 1971. One of these Pakistani Chaffee tanks captured in running condition by 14 Punjab occupies a place of pride in the Punjab Regimental Centre at Ramgarh Cantonment, Jharkhand today.

#### APPENDIX

##### List of Officers Interviewed

- Maj (later Col) Inderjit Singh
- Capt (later Brig) M.P.S Bajwa, YSM
- Maj (later Lt Col) N.J.S. Bains
- Capt (later Col) Balbir Singh, SM
- Capt (later Col) H.C. Vishwakarma

#### NOTES

1. D.K. Palit, *The Lightning Campaign: The Indo-Pakistan War, 1971*, New Delhi, Thomson Press Ltd, 1972.
2. R.K. Singh, *The Battle of Garibpur: Indo-Pak War 1971*, 2nd edition, New Delhi, IMR Media Pvt Ltd, 2014, p. 29.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 41.
4. *Ibid.*, pp. 39–40.
5. Narrated to the author by Brig M.P.S. Bajwa on telephone from Jalandhar on 16 August 2021.
6. Narrated to the author by Col Inderjit Singh on telephone from New Delhi on 16 August 2021.
7. Narrated by Brig Bajwa on 16 August 2021.

8. Narrated to the author by Lt Col N.J.S. Bains on telephone from Panchkula on 17 August 2021.
9. Narrated to the author by Col Balbir Singh on telephone from Chandigarh on 17 August 2021.
10. Narrated by Brig Bajwa on 16 August 2021.
11. Narrated by Col Inderjit on 16 August 2021.
12. Narrated to the author by Col H.C. Vishwakarma on telephone from Ranchi on 17 August 2021.
13. R.K. Singh, *The Battle of Garibpur: Indo-Pak War 1971*, 2nd edition, New Delhi, IMR Media Pvt. Ltd, 2014, pp. 133–35.
14. *Ibid.*, pp. 153–56.
15. P.V.S. Jagan Mohan and Samir Chopra, *Eagles Over Bangladesh*, New Delhi, HarperCollins, 1972, Footnote, pp. 104–05.
16. R.K. Singh, *The Battle of Garibpur: Indo-Pak War 1971*, 2nd edition, New Delhi, IMR Media Pvt. Ltd, 2014, pp. 143–45.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 143.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 66.
19. *Ibid.*, pp. 66–67.
20. *Ibid.*, p. 69.

