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Title: Battle of Longewala [4 - 7 December, 1971]: Prelude, Planning, Battle and Significance

Meta Description: The Battle of Longewala was one of the first and decisive engagements in the western sector of the Indo-Pak war of 1971. The Pakistani Army was dealt a heavy blow at the hands of the Indian Army. Read on to know more. Download Battle of Longewala PDF Notes for free. For UPSC 2020, follow BYJU'S

Battle of Longewala

The Battle of Longewala was one of the first and decisive engagements in the western sector of the Indo-Pak war of 1971.

Fought from 4 - 7 December 1971, a company of the Indian Army's 23rd Battalion, Punjab Regiment, commanded by Major Kuldeep Singh Chandpuri defeated a much bigger contingent of the Pakistani Army. Contemporary media of the time described the battle of Longewala as India's 'Battle of Thermopylae', a reference commonly used to describe the victory of a numerically inferior force over that of a numerically superior.

Prelude to the Battle of Longewala

The 1971 India-Pakistan war had broken out on December 3, with the main thrust of the Indian Army focused on East Pakistan (erstwhile Bangladesh). The western sector of the conflict was envisaged as a holding sector to prevent any incursion from the Pakistani Army. Field Marshal Sam Manekshaw was of the opinion that while the Pakistani Army in East Pakistan could not mount any spirited defence, any gain made by them in the western sector would be a useful bargaining tool which would be used at the negotiation table by the Pakistani government when the conflict would eventually end.

The Pakistani Government under Yahya Khan also knew very well that it was near impossible to defend East Pakistan considering the forces there were vastly outnumbered against the Indian Army's onslaught.

Yahya Khan chose at this point to try to protect Pakistan's integrity and to hold India by his general, Ayub Khan's strategy – "*The defence of East Pakistan lies in the West*".

To this effect, Pakistan High command proposed a thrust into Rajasthan, particularly the Sri Ganganagar area. They felt that along with gaining territory, it would also protect the North-South road link which would cut-off supplies to Sindh and the Punjab regions in the event of an incursion by the Indian Army.

A Combined Arms Plan was decided upon. This involved two Infantry Brigades and two Armoured Regiments. A separate division, the 18 Division, was formed for this purpose. 18 Division Operation Orders required one Infantry Brigade (206) with an Armoured Regiment (38 Cavalry) to capture and establish a firm base at Longewala, a junction on the Indian road system and 51st Infantry Brigade and the 22nd Cavalry (Pakistan Army Armoured Corps) to operate beyond Longewala to capture Jaisalmer.

Indian Defensive Planning

On the Indian side, the post was held by A Company, 23rd Battalion, Punjab Regiment, led by Maj. Kuldip Singh Chandpuri, the defences occupying a high sand dune which dominated the area that was largely intractable to vehicles. The post was surrounded by a barbed-wire fence of three strands. A recoilless jeep and artillery support further augmented the defences at the Longewala post

Battle of Longewala

During the night of 4th December, 1971 2Lt. Dharam Veer Bhan's platoon on patrol detected noises coming across which indicated a large column was moving towards the Longewala post. His report was immediately relayed to Major Kuldip Singh at Longewala This report was confirmed through aerial surveillance.

Contacting battalion headquarters, Major Kuldip Singh Chandpuri was told that reinforcements would not be available for at least six hours. He was given a choice of carrying out a tactical retreat towards Ramgarh or staying put to contain the attack as long as possible. Knowing fully well that he was facing a mobile enemy, Major Kuldip chose to stay and fight. He knew very well that he could use the elevated position of the Longewala post to their advantage.

The Pakistani forces began their attack at 12:30 am following an artillery barrage from across the border. As the 45 tanks of the armoured column approached the post, they were fired upon by the Jeep-mounted 106 M40 recoilless rifle. It proved to be quite effective in destroying the tanks from an elevated position. The defenders claimed 12 destroyed or damaged tanks with the Jeep crew losing one member.

The initial Pakistani attack was stalled upon the sighting of barbed wires, which would signify a minefield. The truth was that the Indian defenders had little time to lay a dense minefield. Added to the confusion was a dense cloud of acrid smoke coming from burning tanks destroyed by the recoilless rifle. Precious time was lost as sappers were brought in for a minefield that never existed and upon its discovery, the Pakistani force began their advance. However, their armoured vehicles became bogged down in the soft sand making them easy targets for the Indian defenders. Throughout the engagement, Maj. Chandpuri continued to direct the supporting artillery fire.

Although massively outnumbering the Indian defenders, and having surrounded them, the Pakistani troops were unable to advance over open terrain on a full-moon night, under small arms and mortar fire from the outpost. This encouraged the Indian defenders not to give up their strong defensive position, frustrating the Pakistani commanders. As dawn arrived, the Pakistan forces had still not taken the post, and were now having to do so in full daylight.

In the morning, the Indian Air Force was finally able to direct some HAL HF-24 Maruts and Hawker Hunter aircraft to assist the post; they were not outfitted with night vision equipment, and so were delayed from conducting combat missions until dawn. The Indian aircraft attacked the Pakistani ground troops with rockets and the 16 and 30 mm cannon fire. Without support from the Pakistan Air Force, which was busy elsewhere, the tanks and other armoured vehicles were easy targets for the IAF's Hunters.

By noon of 5th December, the assault ended completely, having cost Pakistan 22 tanks claimed destroyed by aircraft fire, 12 by ground anti-tank fire, and some captured after being abandoned, with a total of 100 vehicles claimed to have been destroyed or damaged in the desert around the post. The Pakistani attack was first halted, and then Pakistani forces were forced to withdraw when Indian tanks from the division's cavalry regiment, the 20th Lancers, commanded by Col. Bawa Guruvachan Singh, along with the 17th battalion, Rajputana Rifles, launched their counter-offensive to end the six-hour engagement. Mop-up operations would continue to the early hours of 7th December. The battle of Longewala had proved to be one of the defining moments in the war.

Significance of the Battle

The victory at Longewala ensured that there would be no further thrust into Indian territories by Pakistan. This would ensure that the eastern theatre of the war would continue unabated until the fall of Dhaka on 16 December 1971. With no bargaining chips to bring at the negotiating table Pakistan was forced to accept an unconditional surrender to the Indian forces.

Upon the signing of the Shimla Agreement on 2nd July, 1978, the new nation of Bangladesh was diplomatically recognised by Pakistan.

For his part, the Indian company commander, Major (later promoted to Brigadier.) Kuldip Singh Chandpuri was decorated with India's second-highest gallantry award, the Maha Vir Chakra. Several other awards were earned by members of the defending company, and the battalion's commander.