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Battle of Haji Pir

The Army's Glory in 1965

*P.C. Katoch**

In 1965, Pakistan attempted infiltration into Jammu and Kashmir (J&K), with Operation Gibraltar, followed by a planned capture of Akhnoor Bridge under Operation Grand Slam. While Operation Gibraltar was bold from the point of view of multi-directional infiltration, it was largely based on the utopian dream of President Ayub Khan and Foreign Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, ignoring the ground realities that J&K's population would not support it. The Indian reaction was swift and included the epic capture of the strategic Haji Pir Pass at a height of 2,637 metres (m) on the formidable Pir Panjal Range that divided the Srinagar valley from the Jammu region. The pass has been a constant source of problems since Pakistan-trained militants have been sneaking into the Kashmir Valley, Poonch and Rajouri districts. Ironically, the Haji Pir Pass, captured through a heroic and daring action, had to be returned to Pakistan under the Tashkent Agreement.

Much has been written about India's lack of strategic thought and blunders made over the years.¹ But never has anyone specifically elucidated upon that single-largest strategic blunder made by India—halting its army pursuing the fleeing Pakistani Army-backed infiltrators in 1948, agreeing to a ceasefire, and to go knocking on the doors of the United Nations (UN). In doing so, India gave Pakistan a border with China that it never had with Jammu and Kashmir's (J&K) legal accession to India. India also lost the land-link with Afghanistan, which remains a chimera to date, and because of this the course of history of the subcontinent changed for

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the years that followed as well as the geopolitics of international relations between India, Pakistan, China and Afghanistan. The fact that Pakistan was able to hold on to 78,114 sq km of the state of J&K because of her sub-conventional experiment, set the course for the future blueprint against India. Unfortunately, the British Commander-in-Chief (C-in-C) of the Pakistan Army, General Douglas Gracy, who could have saved the fall of Skardu to Pakistan did not do so and permitted the massacre of the Indian Forces along with their families. He did, however, save the garrison commander, Lt Col (later Brigadier) Sher Jung Thapa, because when Captain Douglas Gracy was Adjutant of the 1 Gorkha Rifles Regimental Centre at Dharamsala, he had been impressed with young Sher Jung Thapa's hockey prowess and had encouraged him to join J&K State Forces.²

Though many heroic battles were fought during the 1947–48 Indo-Pak War by Indian troops hastily inducted into J&K, no other action by Pakistan hurt India so much—strategically and economically—than the capture of the Haji Pir Pass. The entire area of the strategic pass occupied by Pakistan is known as the Haji Pir Bulge. India's vacillation in J&K was taken note of by China, which may have contributed towards her subsequent aggression in Tibet and offensive designs for occupying and claiming large swathes of Indian territories. It would be later, in the early 1960s, that the Chinese Premier Zhou-en-Lai would travel to Pakistan and suggest to President Ayub Khan that Pakistan should prepare for prolonged conflict with India instead of short-term wars, and raise a militia force to act behind enemy (Indian) lines, as described in a book authored by a Pakistani scholar.³

Against the given backdrop, history repeated itself in J&K in 1965 when Pakistani regulars, along with Lashkars and Mujahids once again infiltrated into J&K; the Gibraltar Force as a prelude to Pakistan's Operation Grand Slam.

STRATEGIC IMPORTANCE OF HAJI PIR

Haji Pir Pass, at a height of 2,637 m, is located on the western fringe of the formidable Pir Panjal Range, which divides the Srinagar Valley from the Jammu region (see Figure 1). It is through this pass that a wide, metalled highway connected Srinagar to Jammu via Uri–Poonch–Rajouri, over which bulk of passenger and trade traffic used to ply to and fro. This road is of strategic importance as it connects Uri with Poonch, but since a major portion of road is in Pakistan occupied Kashmir (PoK), it cannot

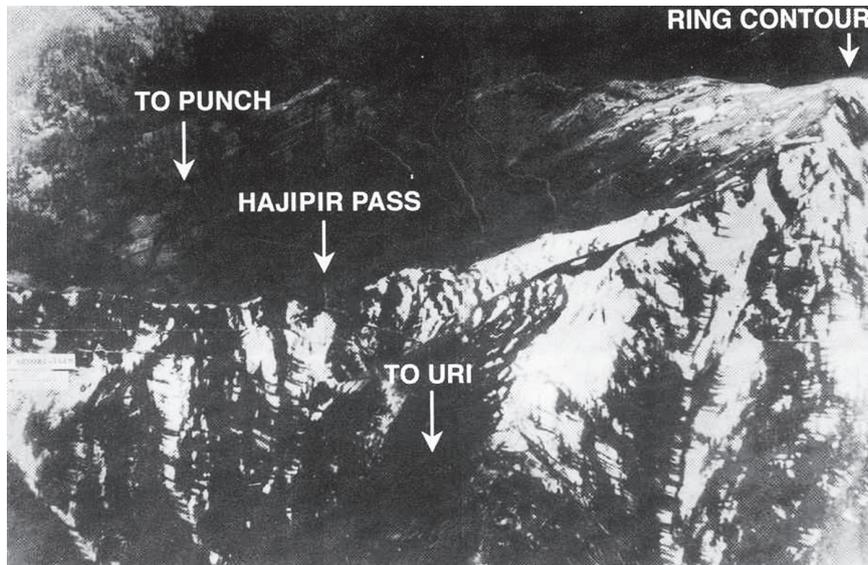


Figure 1 View of Haji Pir Pass from North

Source: 1 PARA.

be used. It has been a constant source of problems for the Indian security forces in Kashmir as trained militants sneak into Kashmir Valley, Poonch and Rajouri districts via the pass. One of the most pressing operational objectives of the Northern Command, if India were to enter into a conventional battle with Pakistan, would be the strategic pass of Haji Pir, which cuts into Indian-held territory by severing the Poonch–Uri route and can provide access to much of PoK.⁴

PAKISTAN’S GIBRALTAR FORCE AND OPERATION GRAND SLAM

The Poonch Valley link road connecting Jammu with Poonch Valley, the second-largest valley of Kashmir, was a hot favourite military objective of military planners in Pakistan, right from 1947–48. When Pakistan launched Operation Grand Slam in 1965, history was repeating itself. The skirmish in the Rann of Kutch area during May 1965 was used by President Ayub Khan to create a climate of overconfidence in the Pakistani military and political establishments. The idea of launching a guerrilla war in J&K was in vogue in Pakistan since the 1950s, as admitted by Major General A.O. Mitha, who had raised the Special Services Group (SSG), though he had been advising the hierarchy that such operations

had no chance of success.⁵ However, the Foreign Office prevailed with the assessment that Pakistan was in a position to dislodge the Indians from Kashmir; and once trained Pakistani soldiers went inside Kashmir, the people of the valley would spontaneously rise in revolt, while fear of China would prevent India from provoking an all-out war. According to Air Marshal Asghar Khan, former Commander-in-Chief of the Pakistan Air Force (PAF), Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, who was then Foreign Minister of Pakistan, had convinced the government (read Ayub Khan) that Pakistan's incursions into Kashmir would not provoke the Indians to extend the area of hostilities to the Indo-Pak international border.

So, the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) and the Pakistan Foreign Office drew up the plan for Operation Gibraltar. Interestingly, while approving Gibraltar, Ayub wrote, 'As a general rule Hindu morale would not stand more than a couple of blows delivered at the right time and place. Such opportunities should, therefore, be sought and exploited.'⁶ The mission assigned to the various Gibraltar forces was warfare in the enemy's rear, including harassing communications and destruction of bridges, logistic installations and headquarters, with a view to create conditions of an armed insurrection in Kashmir, finally leading to a national uprising against Indian rule, thereby leading to liberation of Kashmir or at least parts of it. Over and above Operation Gibraltar, Ayub wanted his 12 Division to capture Akhnoor and assigned it the codename, Operation Grand Slam. Akhnoor was chosen because it had a single Class 18 bridge on the fast-flowing Chenab River, which was the key to Indian communications from Jammu and a group of valleys lying south of the Pir Panjal Range, and west of Chenab River, most prominent of which was the Poonch Valley.⁷ The bridge was the sole all-weather lifeline of an Indian infantry division, with some 20 infantry battalions defending Poonch, Rajouri, Jhangar and Naushera, and one independent infantry brigade defending Chhamb–Dewa sectors. Possession of Akhnoor could enable Pakistan to threaten Jammu, the key to all Indian communications from Pathankot to Srinagar/Ladakh.

Infiltration operations of the Gibraltar force comprising a number of guerrilla groups of roughly a battalion strength, including Kashmiri volunteers trained by Pakistan Army, SSG and some regular infantry troops, some 5,000–7,000 strong, according to a Pakistani military scholar, began in the first week of August 1965.⁸ Open source information puts the strength at between 26,000 and 30,000. The forces had five sub-divisions, each with a nucleus of regulars, with specified area targets: Salahuddin



Figure 2 Gibraltar Force Infiltration Routes

Source: 1 PARA.

Force for Srinagar Valley; Ghaznavi Force for the Mendhar–Rajouri area; Tariq Force for Dras–Kargil; Babar Force for the Noushera–Sundarbani area; and Qasim Force for the Bandipura–Sonarwain area (see Figure 2). The Salahuddin Force for Kashmir Valley had separate task forces specifically tasked for the Qazinag–Naugam, Tithwal–Tangdhar, Gurais, and Kel–Minimarg areas. Each of these task forces was commanded by Captain-level officers of the SSG or Pakistan Army. The name Gibraltar was copied from an area south of Spain named ‘Jabal Tariq’ in Arabic after the Christian-turned-Muslim General, Tariq ibn Ziyad, who conquered the Iberian Peninsula in 711 AD.⁹ The 75-year-old Tariq ibn Ziyad, with 7,000 soldiers, arrived in the Iberian Peninsula on 11 April 711, near the area today known as Gibraltar, and having been reinforced by another 5,000 soldiers on request, burned all his ships to motivate his soldiers

to either conquer or die in honour. Apparently, Ayub Khan believed his Gibraltar force would conquer J&K for keeps.

Operation Gibraltar undoubtedly was a bold operation that was well coordinated through multiple infiltration routes. However, its failure lay in the basic presumption in Pakistan that that the population of J&K would rise with them against India. It was thus a miserable failure, despite limited local support in some pockets of 15 Corps zone and in Mandi area of 25 Infantry Division sector. It created sporadic violence, some of which possibly went underground with local support, for future use by Pakistan.

INITIAL RESPONSE IN 15 CORPS ZONE

Chhamb, Naushera and Rajouri were not isolated instances of Pakistan using its artillery to support the infiltrators into J&K. On 19 August 1965, a large concentration of Pakistani guns moved close to the Cease Fire Line (CFL) and began to shell Indian positions near Tithwal, Uri and Poonch. Some days earlier, India had come to realise that the infiltrating groups were a serious threat to the security of J&K and that the only way to deal with them was to plug their infiltration routes and destroy their sanctuaries across the CFL. Accordingly, Indian troops struck in the Tithwal sector, captured two important pickets, and then advanced up to the Kishanganga River. Indian response to Pakistan's Gibraltar force in the 15 Corps zone was quick and decisive. Point 13620 in Kargil sector was captured by 17 Punjab on 15 August. In the Tithwal sector, 1 Sikh captured Rishmar Ridge held by 16 Azad Kashmir Battalion on 24 August and moved onwards to the Pir Sahiba feature from where they could see more of PoK and dominate infiltration routes. Next, 3/8 Gorkha Rifles (GR) captured the Sunjoi feature on the outskirts of Mirpur, held by Azad Kashmir troops and a company of Kurram Militia, killing 28 enemy soldiers. The infiltrators resorted to two counter-attacks but failed. The 3/8 GR next captured the Ring Contour overlooking the Mirpur Bridge which the retreating Pakistanis destroyed. Next came the capture of Haji Pir Pass (described below) and then Point 9013 in Tithwal sector by 4 Kumaon, held by two companies of the 23 Azad Kashmir Battalion, by 21 September. Capture of Point 9013 gave Indian troops complete domination of the Mirpur area right upto the bridge at Jura on river Kishanganga. The 15 Corps thus cut off the routes for further infiltration into the Gurez Valley and Tithwal sector.

appreciated that the linkup between these forces would cut off all routes of approach into the crucial area of the Haji Pir Bulge. The responsibility for the thrust from the north (along the general axis Uri–Haji Pir Pass) was given to the 19 Infantry Division and the 68 Infantry Brigade was placed under its command for this task. At this time, 68 Brigade had only one infantry battalion. However, soon the complement of the brigade was built up for the allotted task to five infantry battalions: 1 PARA, 19 Punjab, 4 Rajput, 6 JAK Rif and 4 Sikh LI. The brigade had five artillery fire units (one field regiment less one battery, one mountain battery, one troop ex a medium regiment and one field battery), in addition to one section of 4.2 inch mortars. The 68 Infantry Brigade operation was code-named Operation Bakshi after the name of the Brigade Commander, Brigadier (later Lieutenant General [Lt Gen]) Z.C. Bakshi. The responsibility for the combination pincer along the general axis Poonch–Kahuta approach from the south, to link up at Haji Pir Pass, was given to 25 Infantry Division. The 93 Infantry Brigade of 25 Infantry Division was allotted this task. The codename given to this operation was Operation Faulad.

OPERATION BAKSHI

Brigadier Bakshi estimated that enemy dispositions in the area of operations facing his brigade totalled up to some three-and-a-half battalions or 14 rifle companies, of which about one battalion strength was deployed opposite Point 8370 held by own troops. The enemy was known to be well equipped with medium machine guns (MMGs), light machine guns (LMGs) and small arms. The defence positions were well prepared and coordinated implying that credible resistance would be offered by the enemy. This approximated three-and-a-half battalion enemy strength including 20 Punjab of the Pakistani Army. Considering the terrain and enemy dispositions, Bakshi decided on a two-pronged simultaneous attack to capture the Haji Pir Pass. The left prong was to advance along Uri–Sank–Ledwali Gali–Haji Pir Pass, while the right prong was to advance along Uri–Bedori–Kuthnar Di Gali–Kiran–Haji Pir Pass. The operations of the left and right prongs were entrusted to 1 PARA and 19 Punjab, respectively. The entire operation was planned in three phases with H-Hour as 2200 hours on 24 August. In Phase 1, 19 Punjab was to capture Ring Contour and Pathra by 0100 hours on 25 August, while 1 PARA was to capture Sank Ridge upto Ledwali Gali and Sawan Pathri by 0500 hours on 25 August. In Phase 2, 19 Punjab was to capture Bedori and Kuthnar Di Gali by 0600 hours on 25 August 1965,

while securing the Ring Contour and capturing Haji Pir Pass was to be undertaken by 4 Rajput by 1200 hours on 25 August. Phase 3 required mopping up of the area by 19 Punjab with one company of 4 Rajput under its command. The 4 Sikh LI and 6 JAK Rif were to provide troops for the fire bases for the operation and 6 JAK Rif was also tasked to hold the captured territory.

The time schedule of the abovementioned plan, however, had to be modified because of heavy rains as the attacking battalions (1 PARA and 19 Punjab) had to be relieved in their defensive positions in the Uri sector. Also, in preparation for the operation and to facilitate forward dumping of artillery and infantry ammunition and other war-like stores, the formation's engineers were constructing a motorable track for one-ton trucks upto Solikot, reasonably close to Haji Pir, and a 21 m Bailey bridge across a torrential river—all during the hours of darkness and in heavy rains. The 1 PARA and 19 Punjab holding defences were to be relieved by 6 JAK Rif and 4 Sikh LI on the nights of 22/23 and 23/24 August, respectively, for the initial attack to begin at 2150 hours on 24 August 1965. The 19 Punjab was relieved by 6 JAK Rif on schedule, but owing to heavy rains, 4 Sikh LI could not relieve 1 PARA in time to concentrate for the impending operation. The brigade commander, therefore, decided to delay the operation by 24 hours with the H-Hour fixed at 2200 hours on 25 August instead of 24 August. The second problem arose because of the flash floods in Uri Nullah that made it impassable on foot. In addition, 4 Rajput, who were to follow 4 Sikh LI on the way to Uri and onwards to Sank, had to pass through village Lagna. Brigadier Bakshi appreciated that the movement of 4 Rajput would have alerted enemy agents in village Lagna. Hence, Bakshi changed the plan further, tasking 4 Rajput to move behind 19 Punjab along the right prong on the axis Uri–Bedori–Kuthnar Di Gali–Kiran–Haji Pir Pass, instead of the original plan to move behind 1 PARA in the left prong along Uri–Sank–Ledwali Gali–Haji Pir Pass. As per the plan, 1 PARA, under the command of Lt Col Prabhjinder Singh, was to attack along the left prong to capture three intermediate features, namely, Sank (also known as Point 9591), Sar and Ledwali Gali, while 19 Punjab was to advance along the right flank and capture Bedori, the prominent feature east of Haji Pir Pass. Once the latter was taken, while 4 Rajput was to pass through and make for the final objective of Haji Pir Pass, while 6 JAK Rif was to hold on to captured territory.

The operation commenced at 2150 hours on 25 August, on schedule as per the new plan. On the left prong, the attack was preceded by shelling

of suspected enemy positions at Point 9591, Sawan Pathri and Agi was in the vicinity of Sank. The 1 PARA launched the pre-dawn attack on Sank Ridge with two-company strength. 'A' Company, followed by 'C' Company, reached the base of Sank, but the approach to the ridge was very difficult and the heavy rains of the previous night had made it very slippery. The rain-sodden ground was slushy with mud and progress became very slow because of which the attack got daylighted. Sank stood on the enemy's axis of communications from Bagh to Bedori, so the Pakistanis knew the importance of Sank and it was held in strength by a company of Rangers supported by machine guns and mortars. The enemy held fire till the leading troops reached within 45 m of the perimeter fencing and then opened up with all their weapons. No. 3 Platoon of 'A' Company hit the alert enemy head-on and suffered heavy casualties. The battle continued close to the fenced trenches of the enemy till 0930 hours, when the effort was called off. Contact with the enemy was broken on 26 August morning to enable preparing for the second attack the same night.

The second attack by 1 PARA was pressed home at 2230 hours on 26 August. 'B' Company led by Major (later Lt Gen) Ranjit Singh Dayal charged up the slopes of Sank, followed by 'D' Company, supported by artillery fire. Enemy troops rushed forward from their trenches and opened fire with MMGs, LMGs and other small arms, but effective fire from the attackers forced the enemy to fall back to their trenches. By 0430 hours on 27 August, 'B' Company had reached within 450 m of the enemy positions, where they formed up in front of the enemy positions at Sank and charged frontally. In a daring platoon attack, enemy MMGs and LMGs were silenced as closing-up troops showered enemy emplacements with grenades and bullets (see Figure 4).

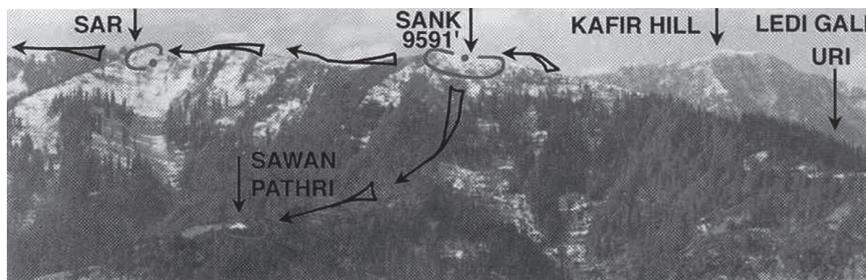


Figure 4 Direction of Attack on Sank and Onward Operations for Capture of Sar and Sawan Pathri

Source: 1 PARA.

Thus beaten, the enemy withdrew to Sar and Ledwali Gali features leaving 16 dead, but managed to evacuate about 100 wounded. However, though the enemy had been eliminated at Sank, the feature could not be fully secured immediately because of effective enemy fire from Sar. 'D' Company of 1 PARA was therefore asked to clear the enemy from Sar. The company soon captured Sar and advanced upon Ledwali Gali, where the enemy made the last stand to facilitate withdrawal of its troops from surrounding areas by 1100 hours. 'B' Company, meanwhile, had secured Sawan Pathri and Agi by 1400 hours in face of minor opposition from the defending enemy. 'C' Company, which had in the meantime reached Sank, was ordered to clear area south of Sank, including Point 10033, which it successfully did by last light. Thus, 1 PARA had captured the objectives allotted to it by 68 Mountain Brigade.

The progress along the right prong (Uri–Bedori–Kuthnar Di Gali–Kiran–Haji Pir Pass) could not keep pace with the left prong. At 2150 hours on 25 August, 19 Punjab started its advance to capture Bedori in Phase 1 of its operation. Though the weather was inclement, Point 10944, north of Pathra, and Pathra were secured by midnight since no enemy resistance was met. By 0430 hours on 26 August, 'C' and 'D' Companies of 19 Punjab were poised for attack on the massive Bedori hill feature to begin Phase 2 of the operation. However, having reached the base of Bedori feature, the battalion encountered heavy MMG fire. Probing further, it was discovered that the approach to the objective had to be made along a very narrow ridge line with sheer drops on either side. Pressing further or advance along this narrow space with slippery ground would have resulted in very heavy casualties. Therefore, advance from the north-west direction was considered near impossible and was abandoned. It was concluded that the only way to reach Bedori lay through the Bedori springs to the north-east of the feature. However, shifting 19 Punjab to attack Bedori from the direction of Bedori springs meant a delay of 36 hours. This delay would give enemy adequate time to reinforce both Bedori and Haji Pir. In order to secure Bedori at the earliest, 7 Bihar less three companies was called upon to attack Bedori, but this too did not succeed because of insufficient number of attacking troops. A subsequent attempt by 4 Rajput from the north on 27 August also did not meet with success.

At this stage, Lt Col Prabhjinder Singh, Commanding Officer (CO) 1 PARA, requested the brigade commander that his battalion be permitted to go for the Haji Pir Pass.¹⁰ With Bedori still in enemy hands and delay in

capture of Sank having alerted the enemy, the enemy had begun moving a regular brigade into the bulge. For 68 Mountain Brigade, with the right flank of the pass still not secured, the only chance of success to capture Haji Pir Pass lay in a frontal attack through a re-entrant that ran north of it. The risk was that the advance would be under observation of the enemy, but Brigadier Bakshi decided to take the risk and gave the green signal to 1 PARA. A company column drawn from 'A' and 'D' Companies of 1 PARA was quickly formed under Major Ranjit Singh Dyal and tasked to capture the Haji Pir Pass. The approach involved a climb of over 1,220 m, and it had to be done during the hours of darkness. The force starting from Ledwali Gali was to infiltrate Haidrabad Nullah on night 27/28 August and capture Ring Contours 1194 and 1094 to proceed further (refer Figure 5).

The column started descending at 1530 hours on 27 August from Ledwali Gali into the Haidrabad Nullah along the spur running south-west before climbing to the Haji Pir Pass. Soon the enemy started MMG fire from the western shoulder of the pass. Small arms fire from area east of Ledwali Gali also commenced. The company commander thereupon ordered the accompanying forward observation officer (FOO) from the artillery to register these enemy posts in the eastern and western shoulders of the pass. The small arms fire was eliminated in a quick physical action by a platoon of the column. Under continuing artillery shelling, the column moved along the left bank of the Haidrabad Nullah, alongside the hill, before crossing over to the pass side. At about 1730 hours, it started raining very heavily, making the going very difficult. Further progress became slow and towards nightfall a drizzle accompanied by heavy fog enveloped the troops. This made matters all the more difficult

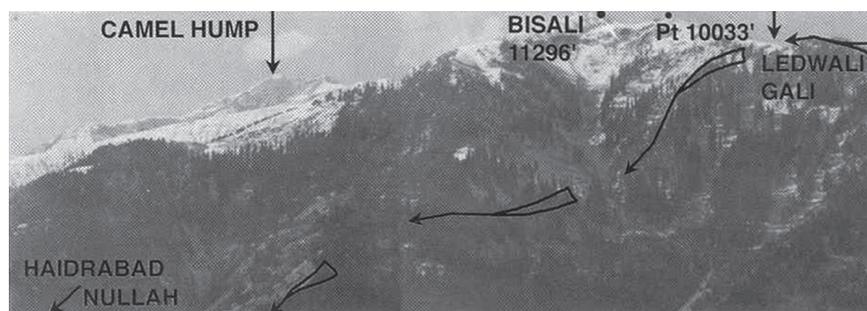


Figure 5 The Steep Descent from Ledwali Gali to Haidrabad Nullah—for Onward Climb to Capture Haji Pir Pass

Source: 1 PARA.

for the men who had been in action for more than two days and were quite exhausted, but Major Dayal spurred them on. By 1900 hours, the column was still climbing along Haidrabad Nullah and it was completely dark now. Major Dayal then decided to climb directly to the pass. On

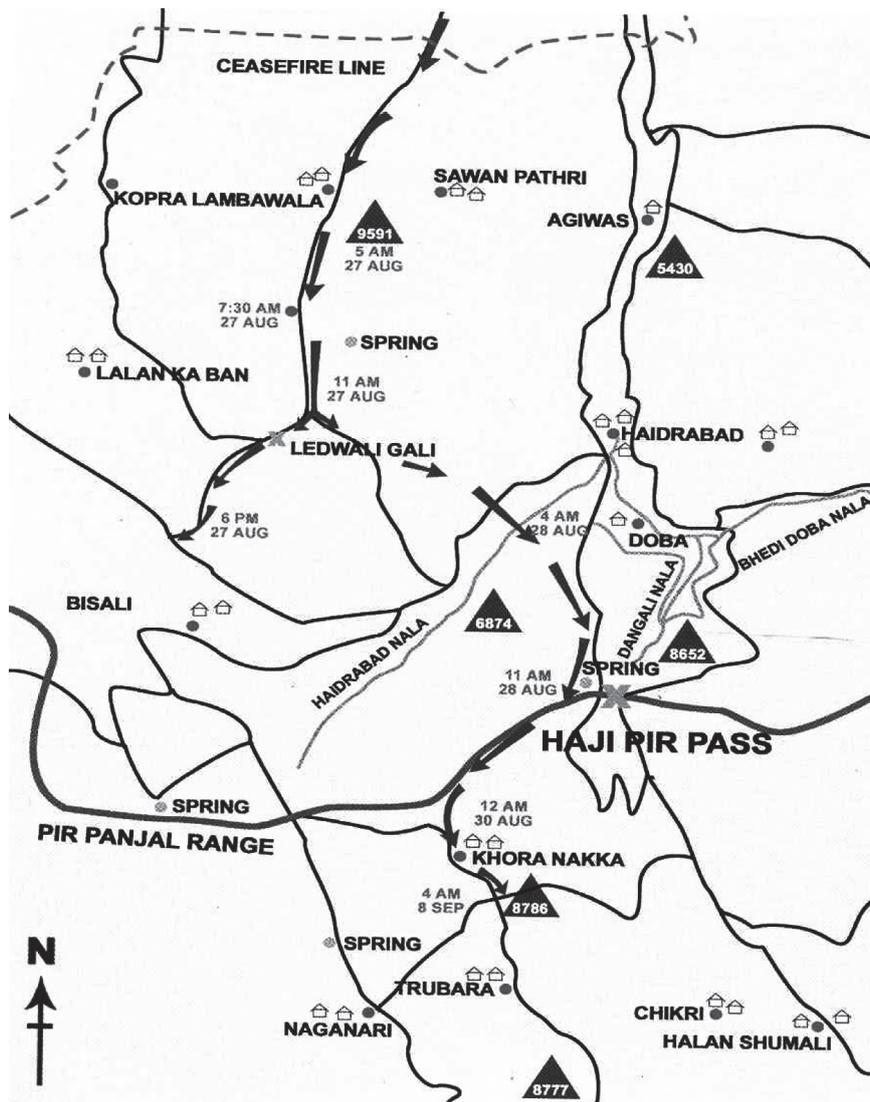


Figure 6 Capture of Haji Pir Pass via Ledwali Gali on 27-28 August 1965

Source: 1 PARA.

the way, the company surrounded a house and captured one LMG, nine rifles and 10 personnel of the Azad Kashmir militia. At 0430 hours, the company hit the old Uri–Poonch Road. Here, the troops were given a much-needed short break/halt in the cold and bitter morning.

At 0600 hours, the column was again on the move. Moving along the road, it reached 700 m short of the pass at 0900 hours. The enemy, which had lost touch with the advancing company the previous evening following heavy rains and approaching night, appeared surprised to see the 1 PARA column right on the pass. They, however, opened up with MMG fire from the western shoulder of the pass and with LMG and rifle fire from the pass area itself. In the meantime, fire was directed on enemy targets by the accompanying FOO and the company commander ordered two platoons to climb up the spur, assault the enemy from the western side of the pass and then roll down to eliminate the LMG and rifle fire on the pass. The enemy could not withstand this daring daylight attack and withdrew in confusion to a feature to the west of the pass. Soon the LMG on the pass was silenced and by 1000 hours on 28 August, the formidable pass fell to the column, with 1 PARA in complete control of the objective, and Major Ranjit Singh Dayal radioed back the information that the Haji Pir Pass was in Indian hands.¹¹

The capture of Haji Pir Pass by 1 PARA was a remarkable achievement. The battalion not only captured the objectives allotted to it in the Phase 1 of the brigade attack, but also the task allotted to 4 Rajput in Phase 2 of the brigade operation. This was possible because of excellent leadership of Brigadier Bakshi and Major Dayal, the element of surprise and the ability of the battalion to quickly regroup and continue attacking.

Simultaneous to the above, following the stalemate at Bedori along the right prong on 27 August, the CO of 19 Punjab volunteered to make another attempt to capture Bedori from the north-east direction through Kunrali, Gaghrill, Tilpatra, Jabar, and Bedori Spring onto Bedori Pass. The battalion less one company started at 0500 hours on 28 August and reached Heman Buniyar by 0715 hours in transport. From there, it moved to Bedori springs that had been already secured by 7 Bihar, and concentrated there for the assault. Here, 19 Punjab discovered that the enemy had built stone sangars at Bedori, taking advantage of the rocky nature of the feature. Therefore, a request was made for the 3.7 inch mountain gun which had arrived in the brigade sector just before last light on 28 August itself to engage the enemy positions. This gun not only destroyed the enemy sangars but also shattered enemy morale completely.

At 0300 hours on 29 August, the troops of 19 Punjab crossed the forming up place (FUP) for assault on Bedori, 3,760 m above sea level and 600 m above the FUP. The dominating feature of Bedori was finally captured by 'B' and 'C' Companies of 19 Punjab by 0600 hours on 29 August 1965 (see Figure 7).

On 29 August, while 19 Punjab was again on the move to Kuthnar Di Gali and further on to Kiran, the enemy mounted a furious counter-attack in a desperate bid to recapture the Haji Pir Pass. On the previous night, 68 Infantry Brigade had received information that the Pakistanis were regrouping on the Ring Contour NR 1093, some 2,000 yards south-west of the Haji Pir Pass.¹² 1 PARA sent one platoon-sized patrol from D Company to investigate the enemy strength, which was assessed to be considerable. Therefore, Major Dayal, ably supported by Major A.S. Baicher, led two platoons from D Company towards the enemy, with another platoon from A Company following in their wake. The troops had to descend nearly 1,000 feet to get to the other side of the nullah. As it was daylight, they were soon spotted by the enemy who opened up with every weapon they had. Ignoring flying bullets and exploding mortar bombs, the troops swarmed up the steep slope shouting their war cry. Hand-to-hand fighting erupted and rifles belched fire and bayonets were wielded energetically. Stunned by the ferocity of the attackers, the enemy panicked and fled leaving behind bodies of eight of their comrades, identified from 20 Punjab. The enemy soon regrouped and again counter-attacked the 'D' Company platoon position. The battle raged for three

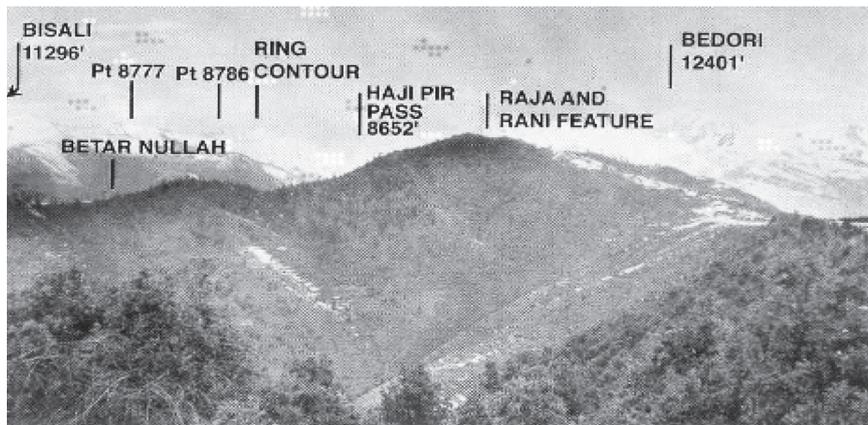


Figure 7 Panoramic View of Haji Pir Pass and Surrounding Areas

Source: 1 PARA.

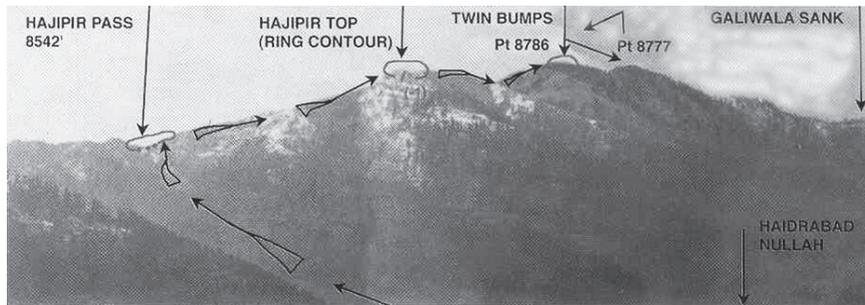


Figure 8 Progress of Operations after Capture of Haji Pir Pass—Ring Contour and Pt 8786 too were Captured by 1 PARA. Ceasefire Came into Effect before Pt 8177 could be Captured

Source: 1 PARA.

hours. Wounded, Major A.S. Baicher fired long bursts from a Bren Gun and Lance Naik Jai Singh, the intelligence Junior Commissioned Officer (JCO), despite being seriously wounded in the leg, kept calling for artillery support which was not long in coming. Soon a platoon from 'A' Company arrived and the enemy fled. On 30 August, enemy launched several furious counter-attacks which were effectively repulsed. Now, it was the turn of 1 PARA to attack again, and 'C' Company attacked the neighbouring area designated as NR 1092 and captured it. The surviving members of Pakistan's 20 Punjab then retreated and took up positions on two tall hill features, Points 8786 and 8777, which overlooked a long stretch of the Uri–Poonch road. Point 8786 was subsequently captured by 1 PARA in the face of heavy resistance, losing Naik Amar Singh in the process, while Major J.C.M. Rao was wounded twice. However, before Point 8777 could be captured, the ceasefire came into effect and the hill feature remained in enemy hands. Meanwhile, the link up at Haji Pir Pass through the right prong by 19 Punjab had been effected on 1 September (see Figure 8).

OPERATION FAULAD

The Battle of Haji Pir would not have been complete without Operation Faulad which sealed the Haji Pir Bulge from the south. Enemy had many pickets on numerous hill features between Poonch and Kahuta, which effectively dominated the Poonch–Haji Pir track. These were well-fortified positions replete with cemented weapon emplacements and shell-proof bunkers having coordinated MMG and LMG fire. The

approaches to these posts were mined and covered by automatic fire. The 93 Infantry Brigade of 25 Infantry Division was tasked to effect the Poonch–Haji Pir linkup by capturing these pickets enroute to Kahuta. The most formidable and important amongst these enemy posts were Raja and Chand Tekri pickets, both formidable battalions of enemy defences, encircled with wire and mine obstacles. The 93 Infantry Brigade had some initial setback, but with gallant actions in keeping with traditions of the Indian Army, fought and captured Raja and Chand Tekri, both of which were considered to be virtually impregnable.

On the night of 5/6 September 1965, a simultaneous attack was launched on Raja and Chand Tekri by 2 Sikh and 3 Dogra, respectively. The battle opened with an intense artillery bombardment, but it had little effect on the built-up positions. The approach to the objective also lay along steep and slippery slopes, and very often the assaulting troops had to crawl on all fours. As they approached the posts, they were met by heavy automatic fire. However, with bold leadership, the leading troops dashed through the mines and wires and were soon locked in a grim hand-to-hand battle for over two hours before the pickets fell. The defenders fought with determination. The garrison at Raja picket fought to the last man. On the Indian side, Major G.C. Verma and Captain G.S. Bawa of 3 Dogra fell while personally leading the assaulting waves. The intrepid CO of 2 Sikh, Lt Col K.K. Khanna, was also fatally wounded as he led his battalion into the attack. For his bravery, Lt Col Khanna was awarded the Maha Vir Chakra (MVC).

These two massive features dominated most of the area, east of Betar Nullah, along which ran a track that linked Poonch with Haji Pir Pass. The enemy posts located on these features served as the main pivots and staging camps for all infiltrator activities in the Poonch sector. The capture of these pickets was necessary not only to seal off the Haji Pir Pass area but also for the destruction of the two major bases of the enemy operations. The link up with 93 Infantry Brigade eventually took place on 10 September.¹³ The entire Haji Pir Bulge was thus captured by Indian troops. This closed the mouth of the bulge and sealed the Haji Pir sector, ceasing all enemy resistance east of Betar Nullah.

On 1 September 1965, Pakistan launched Operation ‘Grand Slam’ with a view to capture Akhnoor, but that is another story with a similar ending—Pakistani efforts were thwarted.

ACCOLADES AND AFTERMATH

The capture of the Haji Pir Pass made international news and proved to be a big setback for Pakistan's morale. Its fall completed the linkup of Uri with Poonch. Soon the sappers had the Uri–Poonch road link restored and the strategic Jammu–Rajouri–Srinagar road, which had been in disuse since 1947, became functional again. After this success, many enemy posts continued to be captured by 68 Infantry Brigade and 93 Infantry Brigade of the 19 and 25 Infantry Divisions, respectively, right up to Kahuta, which was captured subsequently with the combined efforts of 19 Punjab and 6 Dogra. Brigadier Z.C. Bakshi was awarded an MVC. The 1 PARA earned one MVC, which was awarded to Major Dayal, one Vir Chakra and four Sena Medals, along with the Battle Honour of Haji Pir and the Theatre Honour of Jammu and Kashmir 1965. The Pakistani Army apparently offered a prize of Rs 50,000 for the head of Major R.S. Dayal. This was discovered through a radio intercept of a Pakistani officer telling his comrade, 'I wish I had Major Dayal's head. I could get fifty thousand rupees from the Pakistani Army.'

The Battle for Haji Pir was a prestigious operation and the Indian troops spared no effort to make it a great success. It was well planned and skilfully executed. The courage and determination of the commanders as well as the high morale of the troops ensured its success. There were many heroes in the Battle of Haji Pir but the one who stood tall above all was Major Ranjit Singh Dayal, who had led the assault on Sank and captured the most valuable and terminal objective of Haji Pir Pass (see Figure 9).

As in all wars, there were numerous deeds of valour, many sacrifices, many wounded, many losing limbs and some fortunate enough to join back their units after surgeries, like Major (later Brigadier) A.S. Baicher who was grievously wounded, remained in low medical category for next three years before joining back 1 PARA. With hoisting of the Tricolour at Haji Pir Pass, the jubilation was followed by the arduous task of winter stocking of posts where all the loads had to be manually humped over long distances on steep slopes, an effort where all officers, including Major Dayal, joined in (see Figure 10).

The pass itself had a host of visitors, among them were the brigade commander, followed by the Army Chief accompanied by the army commander, the corps commander and the divisional commander, and even Indira Gandhi, the then Minister for Information and Broadcasting (see Figure 11).



Figure 9 (L) Major (later Lt Gen) R.S. Dyal after capture of Haji Pir Pass. (R) Dayal receiving the Maha Vir Chakra from President S. Radhakrishnan

Source: 1 PARA.



Figure 10 (L) Clockwise from Left Top: Hoisting of Tricolour on Haji Pir Pass; The Heroes after the capture with Brigadier (later Lt Gen) Z.C. Bakshi who too was awarded Maha Vir Chakra

Source: 1 PARA.

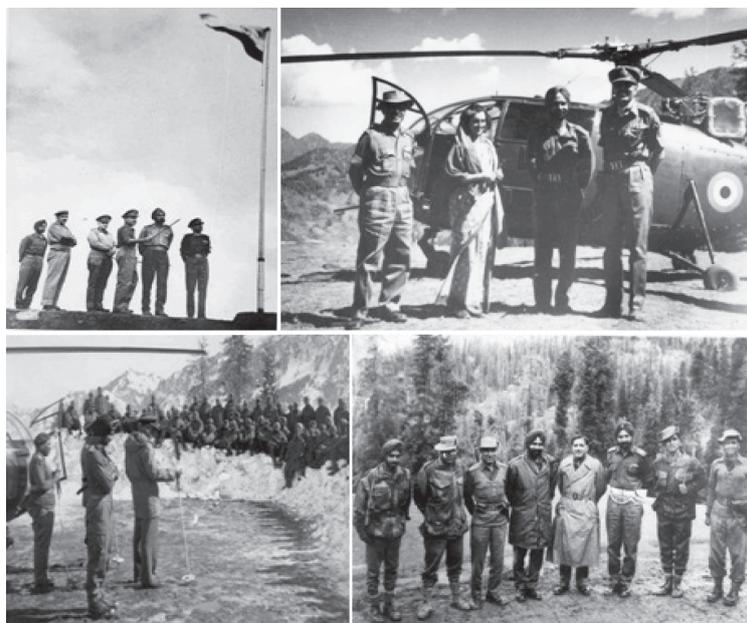


Figure 11 Clockwise from Left Top: COAS, Army Commander, Corps Commander, Brigade Commander with Major R.S. Dayal at Haji Pir Pass; Indira Gandhi, Minister for Information and Broadcasting lands at Haji Pir Pass— seen with COAS and Major R.S. Dayal; COAS addressing the heroes; Brig Z.C. Bakshi with the conquerors

Source: 1 PARA.

THE TASHKENT AGREEMENT AND AFTERMATH

As per Tashkent Accord signed by the Prime Minister of India, Lal Bahadur Shastri, and the President of Pakistan, General Ayub Khan, on 16 January 1966, Indian and Pakistani forces withdrew to their respective positions as prior to 5 August 1965.¹⁴ Shastri, who wanted talks with Ayub Khan next day to extract a promise from the latter never to use force again, mysteriously passed away while in Tashkent. Conspiracy theories abound: a Mumbai weekly, *Blitz*, published photographs of the dead body gone black and *Outlook* published a story of possible conspiracy at the international level. The strategic Haji Pir Pass and its adjacent areas were thus returned to Pakistan. The Accord was signed by Prime Minister Shastri in good faith hoping for good neighbourly relations with Pakistan, but subsequent events of 1971 war and Kargil conflict have proved that Pakistan cannot be expected to refrain from terrorism and treachery.

Had the Haji Pir Pass remained with India, the distance from Jammu to Srinagar through Poonch and Uri would have been reduced by over 200 km, besides blocking major infiltration routes.¹⁵ The return of this pass has been considered a major strategic blunder by many scholars.¹⁶ In an interview to *rediff.com* in 2002, legendary Lt Gen Ranjit Singh Dayal, the hero of capture of Haji Pir Pass, had stated: 'The Pass would have given India a definite strategic advantage...It was a mistake to hand it back...our people don't read maps', regretting the return of the pass to Pakistan at the Tashkent talks brokered by Russia to end the Indo-Pak War of 1965.¹⁷ That says it all.

NOTES

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