



रक्षा मंत्रालय
MINISTRY OF
DEFENCE



BRIGADIER (THEN MAJOR) AMARJIT SINGH BAL

SERVICE NUMBER	IC-13377H
RANK	Brigadier (then Major)
NAME	Amarjit Singh Bal
SON OF	Lieutenant General Tara Singh Bal
RESIDENT OF (Village/District/State)/ DOMICILE	Lucknow, Uttar Pradesh
UNIT/REGIMENT/CORPS	17 HORSE (POONA HORSE)
SERVICE	Indian Army
DATE OF ENROLMENT/ COMMISSION	10 June 1962
AWARD/DATE OF ACTION	Maha Vir Chakra/ 15 December 1971
WAR/BATTLE/OPERATION	Indo-Pak War of 1971
OTHER AWARDS WITH DATE	

Major Amarjit Singh Bal was born on 06 June 1940, to Lieutenant General Tara Singh Bal and Kartar Kaul Bal, in Lucknow District of Uttar Pradesh. He was an alumnus of the Lawrence School in Sanawar. Major Bal was married to Indra Bal and had two children: Aminder Singh Bal and Ameena Anantishi. He was commissioned into 17 HORSE (POONA HORSE) of the Indian Army on 10 June 1962, a Regiment his father belonged to and which his nephew Lieutenant General DS Sidhu also commanded. His father, Lieutenant General Tara Singh Bal, was commissioned into the Indian Army in 1929. He later, after the Second World War, commanded the 19th Infantry Brigade. Thereafter, he was GOC Delhi area and finally served as Theatre Commander J&K from 1949 to 1953. During the 1971 war, Major Bal was Commanding the B Squadron of the Regiment, under the command of Lieutenant Colonel Hanut Singh.

17 HORSE which is known as POONA HORSE is an Armoured Regiment of the Indian Army. It was raised on 15 July 1817, as a result of the Treaty of Poona, concluded on 13 June 1817 between Lord Hasting and Bajji Rao II, the Peshwa. The Honourable Montstuart Elphinstone, who later became the Governor of Bombay negotiated the Treaty of Poona. It was formed from the 3rd Regiment of Bombay Light Cavalry, raised at Sirur on 04 May 1820 by Major Peter Delamotte. The Cavalry element of this Force, which was known as the Poona Auxilliary Horse was later designated as (Prince Albert Victor's Own) Poona Horse. It was amalgamated in 1921 as The Poona Horse (17 Queen Victoria's Own). In the First World War, the 17 HORSE fought in France, Palestine and Mesopotamia. During the Second War, the regiment was part of the British Eighth Army. Post-Independence, the regiment was part of Op POLO in Hyderabad in 1948, India-Pakistan War of 1965 as part of 1 Armoured Division and 1971 as part of 16 (Independent) Armoured Brigade. The Regiment was equipped with Centurions tanks in both these wars and fought in the Shakargarh Bulge. During the 1965 India-Pakistan War, 17 HORSE had displayed immense skill in the Sialkot Sector during the tank battle at Phillora, Wazirwali and Butur–Dograndi, and their Commandant Lieutenant Colonel AB Tarapore was awarded the Param Vir Chakra. In the 1971 War the regiment fought at Basantar and Second Lieutenant Arun Khetarpal won the Param Vir Chakra and the Commandant Lieutenant Colonel (later Lieutenant General) Hanut Singh was awarded the Maha Vir Chakra. The Battle of Basantar is considered one of the fiercest tank battles in Indian military history and the unprecedented bravery showed by 17 HORSE earned praise from Pakistan army and the title 'Fakhr-e-Hind'.

The 1971 War was a military conflict between India and Pakistan during the Bangladesh Liberation War from 03 to 16 December, 1971. India gained Independence in 1947, and the partition resulted in the creation of Pakistan. It began with preemptive airstrikes by the Pakistan Air Force on Indian targets, leading to India's involvement in support of Bengali nationalist forces. Pakistan suffered a significant defeat in this War. The Indo-Pak War of 1971 was the first war when the Indian Government engaged all three services on a large scale. A total of 4090 Indian soldiers made supreme sacrifice during this war and about 600 officers and men of the Indian Armed Forces were decorated with Gallantry awards. Of these, 04 were Param Vir Chakra, 76 Maha Vir Chakra and 513 Vir Chakra. In the Battle of Basantar, the Battalion was awarded two Maha Vir Chakras, five Vir Chakras, two Sena Medals and five Mention-in-Despatches.

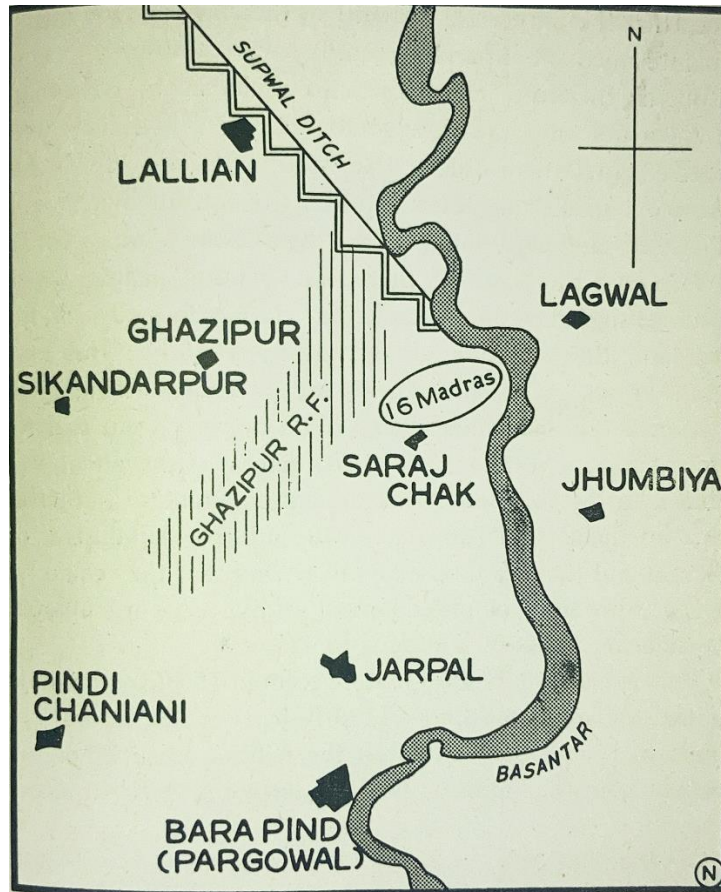
54 Infantry Division earmarked 47 Infantry Brigade with 17 HORSE to establish a Bridgehead in the Lalian Reserve Forest area across the Basantar River.

The plan of 47 Infantry Brigade was as follows:

Phase 1 – 16 MADRAS to capture Sarajchak and Lallial by 2230 hours 25 December.

Phase 2 – 3 GRENADIERS to capture Jarpal on completion of Phase 1.

Phase 3 – Induction of 17 HORSE into the bridgehead.



Map

Source: Bhargava, G. S. Their Finest Hour: Saga of India's December Victory. India: Vikas Publishing House, 1972.

The task allotted to 54 Infantry Division included the destruction of Pak 8 (1) Armoured Brigade and capture of Zafarwal. After capturing Lohara-Laisar, Kalan-Mehlwan-Lagwal it decided to establish a bridgehead to the south-west of Basantar. The 47 Infantry Brigade was ordered to establish the bridgehead, in the area Barapind-Sikandarpur-Lallial and south-west shoulder of the Supwal Ditch, while the 74 Infantry Brigade was ordered to capture the remaining part of the Supwal Ditch. The Pakistanis had predictably concentrated the bulk of their armour to the west of the Basantar river in the area of the Supwal Ditch and Zafarwal.

The terrain was devoid of roads and abounded in streams. The Pakistanis had sited obstacle belts in considerable depth, and had covered them by infantry, RCL guns and tanks. Medium Machine Guns and infantry 'Nests' supported by automatics were positioned in between the minefields. The positions were fortified with bunkers, connected by a network of communication trenches and alternate positions. Gaps in platoon localities and flanks were covered by elements of recce and support battalions. Formidable mine barriers, approximately 1460 metres deep, were laid.

The Indian engineers breached the minefield with considerable effort and skill. They also forged operational tracks in this dusty terrain and surfaced the roadways with elephant grass and Chari. Other arms too were well integrated. Major VR Chowdhry did a commendable job in clearing the mines and was killed while clearing a lane. He was decorated with the Maha Vir Chakra.

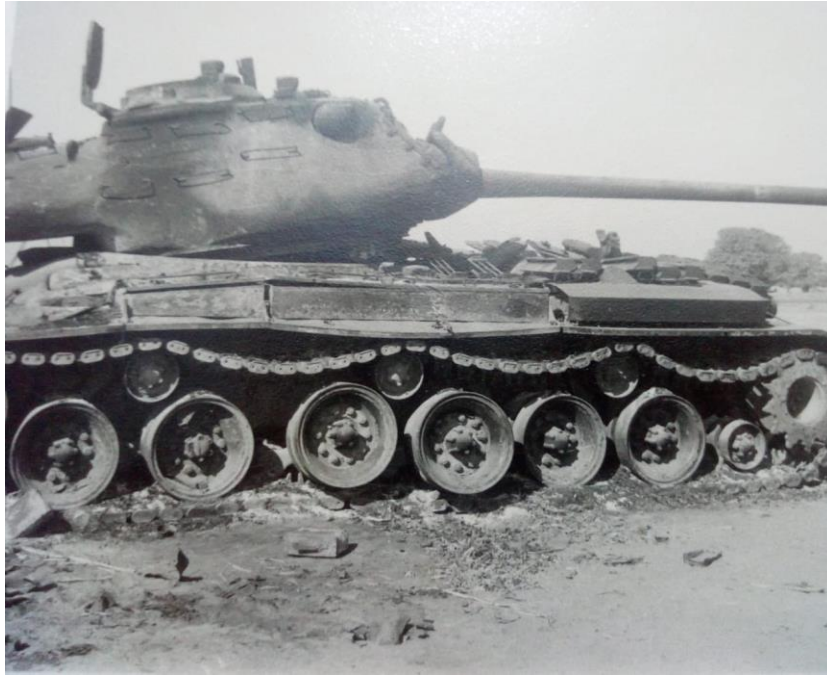
54 Infantry Division chose the Sarajchak-Lalial RF-Jarjal-Lohal area for crossing the Basantar River, while the enemy had expected it around Badwal.

In Phase-I, 16 Madras (47 Infantry Brigade), started the attack on Lalial and Sarajchak at 1930 hours on 15 December. The positions were captured after a sharp hand-to-hand encounter. The depth positions were also captured by 2330 hours. Both sides suffered heavy casualties. The Pak Commander could not reconcile to the loss of these positions and made efforts to eliminate the bridgehead. He launched a series of counterattacks with the 8 (I) Armoured Brigade and 124 Infantry Brigade, supported by artillery. 16 MADRAS fought back these attacks continuously for three nights and two days and held its ground. For his outstanding leadership in this battle Lieutenant Colonel Ved Prakash Ghai was awarded the Maha Vir Chakra, posthumously.

In Phase-II of the Division attack, 3 GRENADIERS (74 Infantry Brigade) was tasked to capture Jarjal and Mohal. The Battalion was launched at 2230 hours on 15 December, and in a fierce battle at Jarjal, most of the Pakistani bunkers were cleared after a hand-to-hand fight. The Battalion mopped up the remnants still hiding in bunkers and sugarcane fields in Lohal and captured its objective by dawn on 16 December 1971.

The Pakistanis counterattacked with armour and infantry five times during 16 December but the Grenadiers, supported by 17 Horse, artillery and mortars, beat off the attacks, inflicting heavy losses. During the early hours of December 16, after having captured Jarjal, at a heavy cost in those killed and wounded, Major Hoshiar Singh and his 'C' Company of the 3rd Grenadiers blunted the immediate counter-attack by Pakistan's 35 Frontier Force battalion without ceding an inch of the captured territory. Before the enemy regrouped to launch another counter-attack supported by tanks, the tanks of 'B' Squadron less two troops of The Poona Horse, under the command of Major Amarjit Singh Bal, reached the western flank of Jarjal (on the eastern flank was Second Lieutenant Khetarpal).

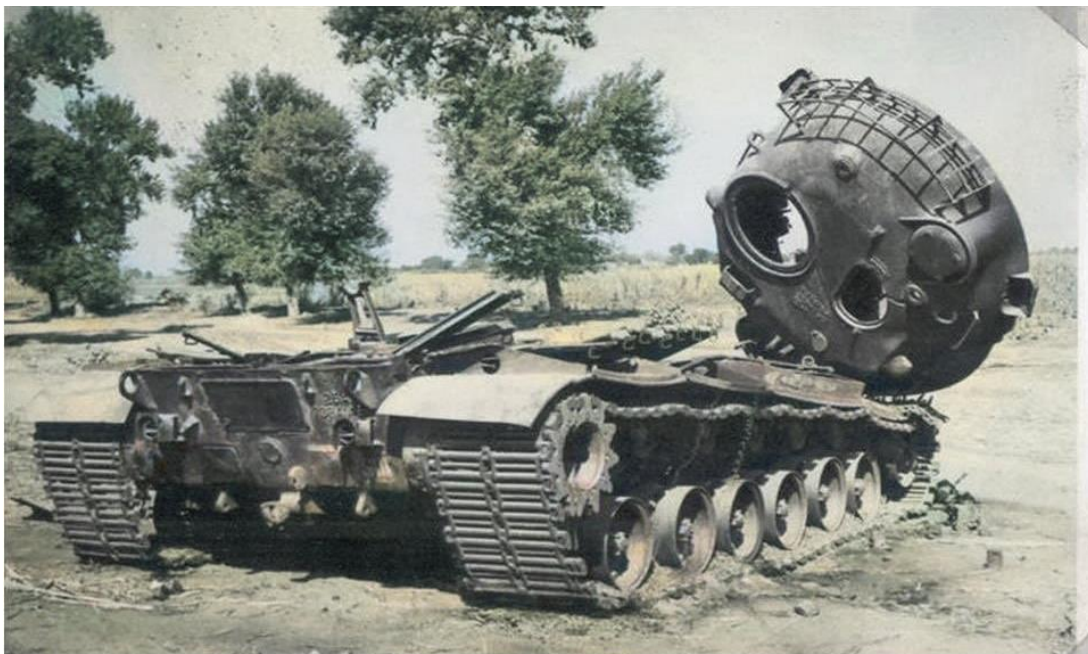
With just eight tanks, Major Bal maneuvered in a manner that the superior armour force of the enemy was comprehensively held at bay, and also selectively carried out destruction of the enemy Patton tanks of 13 Lancers ex 8 (Independent) Armoured Brigade — thus not permitting them to interfere with our infantry operations, while the Grenadiers steadfastly held the ground beating repeated infantry counter-attacks. During the intense tank versus tank battle that ensued, Major Bal, for his bold leadership and conspicuous personal gallantry, was awarded the Maha Vir Chakra. In 2 days, Major Bal's Squadron had destroyed a sum total of 27 Pakistani Patton tanks.



Destroyed patton tank in the battle of basantar

Source: <https://x.com/rathorekaran17/status/1652528127774695424/photo/2>

Lieutenant Arun Khetrupal rushed forward with his troop to assist. Despite casualties to his crew, he fiercely attacked the enemy armour and destroyed four tanks. Meanwhile, his tank was hit but he refused to abandon it and destroyed one more tank. In the process he received a second hit and was killed. He was decorated with Param Vir Chakra, posthumously.



A destroyed tank in the Battle of Basantar

Source: <https://x.com/rathorekaran17/status/1652528127774695424/photo/2>

The Pakistanis were now desperate. They put in a more determined effort at 0430 hours on 17 December, to dislodge the Grenadiers, charging them in wave after wave. The Grenadiers fought gallantly and beat back all the attacks. The last counterattack was made by the Pakistanis at Jarpal.



The POONA HORSE squadron

Source: <https://x.com/rathorekaran17/status/1652528127774695424/photo/2>

Repeated failures completely demoralised Pakistanis and they stopped the counterattacks at dusk on 17 December. They lost 89 men, including Lieutenant Colonel Mohammed Akram Raja, the CO, 35 Frontier Force Rifles. Brigadier Jehangir Karamat of the Pakistan Army has succinctly described severity of the debacle: "One cannot, however, help comparing this attack to the controversial charge of the Light Brigade. The Armoured Brigade lost almost fifty tanks and failed to restore the defences on the Basantar Nullah. The enemy was not destroyed; in fact, his losses were less than one third of the Armoured Brigade's losses."?



Indian Soldiers atop destroyed tank.

Source <https://x.com/HistorifyToday/status/1735906179895980195>

In the Battle of Basantar many acts of courage were performed. Lieutenant Colonel Hanut Singh and Major Amarjit Singh Bal of 17 Horse, Havildar Thomas Phillpose of 16 Madras

and Lieutenant Colonel Ved Airy, CO, 3 Grenadiers were awarded the Maha Vir Chakra. Brigadier AS Vaidya earned a second Maha Vir Chakra for his bold leadership while commanding the 16 (I) Armoured Brigade at Zafarwal and Basantar. The Battle of Basantar fought from 15 to 17 December turned out to be one of the fiercest battles of the 1971 War.

Major Amarjit Singh Bal also took part in the Indo-Pak War of 1965. He was the Intelligence Officer of the Commandant of the Regiment, Lieutenant Colonel AB Tarapore, and had joined the advance towards the Zafarwal-Sialkot crossroads. Being the Commandant's Intelligence Officer, Major Bal shared his tank with Lieutenant Colonel Tarapore. When the tank was hit, Major Bal was wounded in both the ankles and had to spend eight months in the Delhi Military Hospital.



Major Amarjeet Singh Bal with Lieutenant Colonel Hanut Singh

Source: "Fakhr-E-Hind" The Story of the Poona Horse



Another group with the Squadron Commanders with the crew of 'Kooshab' seated on top.

Source: "Fakhr-E-Hind" The Story of the Poona Horse

Major Amarjit Singh Bal rose to the rank of Brigadier, before hanging up his boots. He commanded POONA HORSE and 23 (Independent) Armoured Brigade. Brigadier Amarjit Singh Bal passed away on 06 November 2010, at the age of 70, in Delhi.



Indian Soldiers celebrating the victory.

Source <https://x.com/SinghNavdeep/status/284600912025112576>

CITATION

Major Amarjit Singh Bal
(IC-13377), 17 Horse.
(Effective date of award–15th December 1971)

Major Amarjit Singh Bal was commanding 'B' squadron, 17 Horse during the battle of the Basantar river in the Shakargarh Sector of the Western Front. On the 5th and 16th December 1971, the enemy launched a number of armoured counter-attacks against the 'Jarpal' position. Though heavily outnumbered, Major Amarjit Singh Bal displayed exemplary courage, determination and aggressive spirit and by his personal example motivated his troops to remain steadfast and resolute and to repulse all enemy attacks inflicting heavy casualties.

Throughout this action, Major Amarjit Singh Bal displayed conspicuous gallantry, outstanding and exceptional devotion to duty in keeping with the best traditions of the Army.

Reference: Gazette of India, Notification No. 18-Pres./72. — dated FEBRUARY 12, 1972

BIBLIOGRAPHY

1. Armour 71, Cavalry officers Association. (2022). Defstrat Books.
2. Candeth, K. P.. The Western Front, Indo-Pakistan War, 1971. India: Allied, 1984.
3. Ian Cardozo. 1971 Stories of Grit and Glory from the Indo-Pak War. Published by Penguin Random House, 2021.
4. SN Prasad and UP Thapliyal. The India - Pakistan war of 1971 A History. Published by Natraj Publishers, Dehra Dun on behalf of the Ministry of Defence, 2014.
5. Bhargava, G. S.. Their Finest Hour: Saga of India's December Victory. India: Vikas Publishing House, 1972.
6. "Battle of Basantar 1971 War." *Indian Defence Review*, 6 Sept. 2023, www.indiandefencereview.com/spotlights/battle-of-basantar-1971-war/. Accessed 13 Apr. 2024.
7. The Daily Guardian. The Battle of Basantar: A Saga of Valour and Determination. Accessed 13 Apr. 2024
8. Lt Col JR Daniel. The Black Poms Poms: History of the Madras Regiment. Published by Commandant, The Madras Regiment Centre Wellington.
9. Lt Col Dilbag Singh Dabas (Retd). <https://www.tribuneindia.com/News/Features/Remembering-The-Iconic-Battles-of-Basantar-And-Chakra-Dehira-260652#>. n.d. Tribune India.
10. "It's a Family Matter!" 2012. Ngathingpei Khayi. January 31, 2012. <https://nkhayi.wordpress.com/2012/01/31/its-a-family-matter/>.
11. Singh, Hanut. 1993. "*Fakhr-e-Hind*", the Story of the Poona Horse.

Videos

Second Lieutenant Arun Khetarpal #ParamVirChakra (P) and the Bravest #IndianBraves of Poona Horse Regiment (Fakr e Hind) - a tale of gallantry by Brigadier Amarjit Singh Bal (Source – Twitter Lest we Forget) <https://x.com/LestWeForgetIN/status/1074153170035765249>

