

Capture of Barki by 4 Sikh

■ By Brig Kanwaljit Singh (Retd)

PAKISTAN'S MUCH hallowed "Operation Gibraltar" in 1947-48 to capture the whole of Jammu and Kashmir (J&K), had been thwarted by the Indian Forces successfully. Pakistan was seething within due to its miserable failure and was itching to have another try. The Indian forces' debacle of 1962 emboldened the Pak forces, already getting aid of all kind except the troops, from the West, US, some countries of Middle East and China, to venture an expedition against India in 1965.

All talks for peaceful settlement of issues had failed. Armed forces, on both sides, manoeuvred to defensive positions, eyeball-to-eyeball. Aggressive reconnaissance by air and ground had set in. On the pretext of India having opened the innings first at Cooch-Bihar, a fictitious paradox, Pakistan's air arm pounded Indian airfields on September 5. India responded.

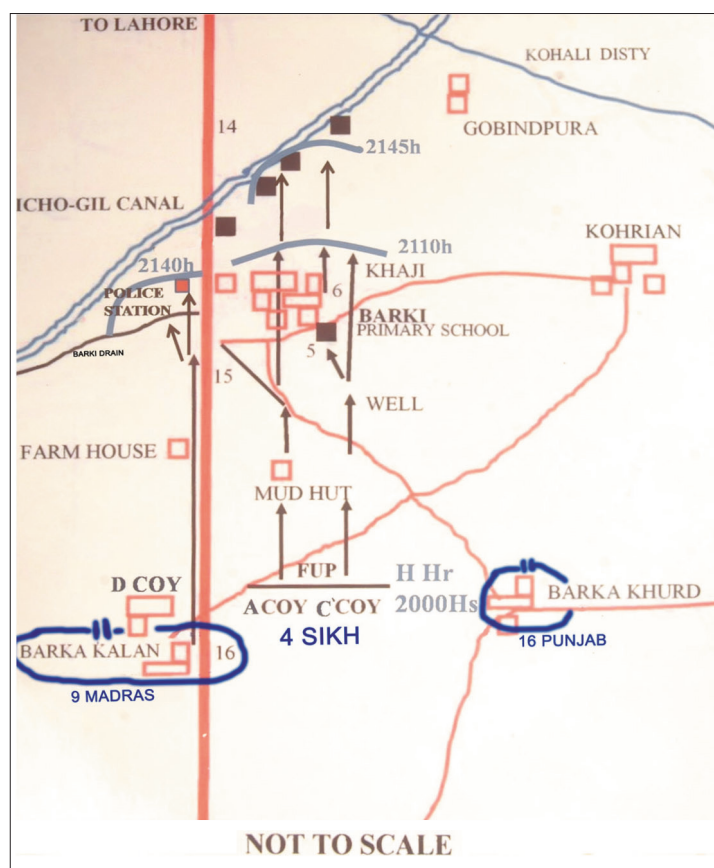
7 Infantry Division, with 48 and 65 Infantry Brigades, was tasked on Axis Hari Ke Pattan – Khalra – Hudiara - Barki - Lahore, to capture area up to Barki. As per plan, International Border (IB) was to be crossed at 0400 hrs on September 6; 4 SIKH of 65 Infantry Brigade and 6/8 GR of 48 Infantry Brigade was to secure firm base along the Road. Thereafter, 48 Infantry Brigade was to advance to capture Barki by last light.

4 SIKH, of Battle of Saragarhi fame, gloating in the glory of fighting a magnificent 25-days continuous battle at Walong in 1962, was moved to Ferozepur in August 1965. (Late) Lt Col Anant Singh, a war veteran of WW II and 1962, tasked two companies; 'A' under Major Shamsheer Singh Manhas (a VrC, later Brigadier) and 'B' under Major D S Sidhu (an AVSM VSM, later Brigadier), who captured enemy's BOPs of Theh Sarja Marja and Rakh Hardit Singh. At the same time, 6/8 GR cleared Ghawandi Barrier.



Maj PP Singh (QM during war) Lt Col Shamsheer Singh Vr C and Lt (Later Brig) Kanwaljit Singh Latter's 'D' Company had captured Police Station (in the background)

SKETCH SHOWING EXECUTION OF BATTLE OF BARKI BY 4 SIKH (XXXVI SIKH/ SARAGARHI BN) ON NIGHT 10/11 SEPTEMBER 1965



48 Infantry Brigade launched 6/8 GR and 5 GUARDS, supported by a squadron of Central India Horse (CIH), to clear Hudiara drain, Nurpur and Hudiara, which were about four kilometres from the IB. Pak artillery was having a field day with advancing troops during the day. Enemy's Company less a Platoon, augmented by elements of recce and support battalion gave a tough fight, however was pushed back by the evening. The Division's plan was now modified and hereafter 65 Infantry Brigade was tasked to resume the advance and capture Barki and secure eastern bank of Ichhogil canal, about nine and half kilometres from the IB.

Against enemy's heavy accurate artillery fire, the troops had learnt to dig a slit trench for protection at the slightest lull. On night September 7-8, 4 SIKH concentrated South-West of Village Brahmabad, which was captured by 'D' Company under Lieutenant Kanwaljit Singh (now a retired Brigadier), on September 8, suffering casualties because of immense enemy airburst shelling. 4 SIKH suffered four killed and 19 wounded thus far.

On September 8, 9 MADRAS and 16 PUNJAB, captured villages Barka Kalan and Barka Khurd

by gallant actions. The enemy brought in intense artillery and mortar fire on the attackers. On night September 8-9, 4 SIKH was moved north of the road in area Mile 16, prepared itself by the morning for any counter-attack by the enemy.

Meals, at times were not available due to enemy's shelling and air attacks. Water was scarce, thus troops had to consume standstill water from the paddy fields. Destroyed mud houses, trampled drying fields and dead bodies of animals were seen everywhere. Weeping dogs and howling jackals were silent only in fear of 'screech and thud' of artillery. No cremation was possible for the dead, except the burials with a stick outside, the martyr's identity disc tied with it, for later recognition and respectful disposal.

On night 9-10, patrols were sent out to obtain information about enemy defences. Enemy was sensitive to any movement and responded by lighting up

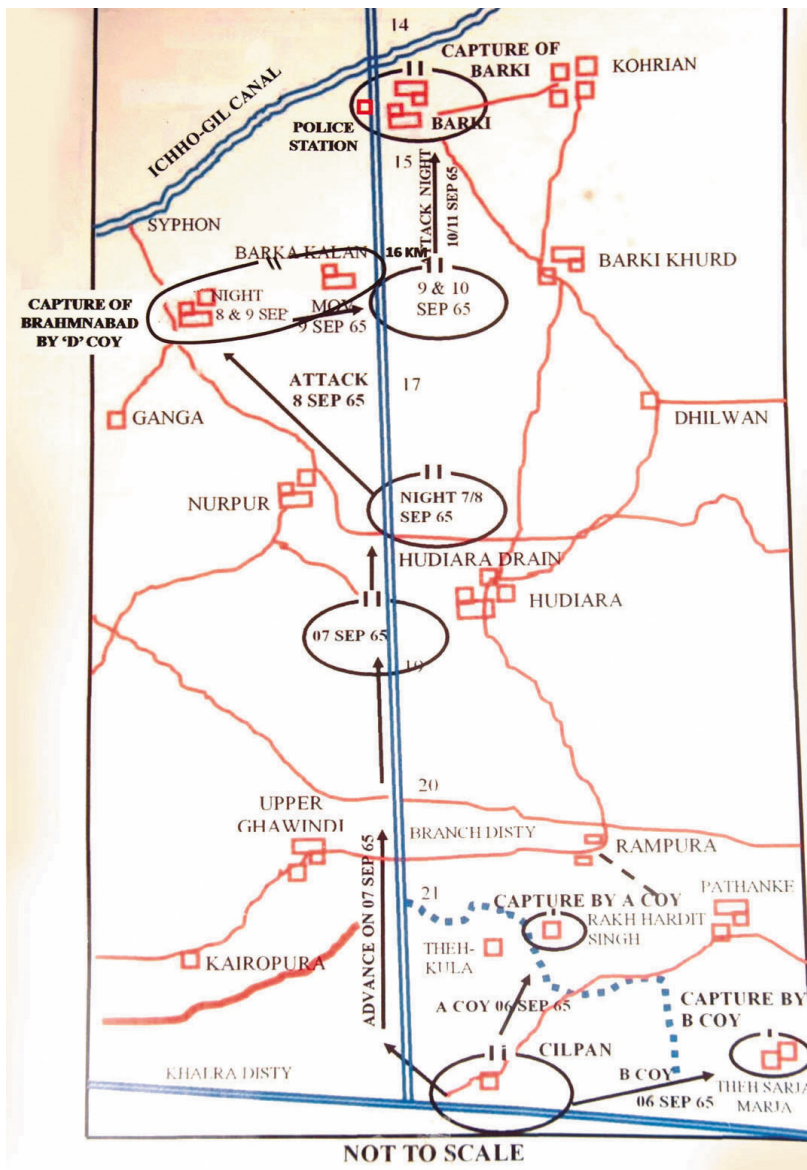
the area and a heavy barrage of fire. Thus, much information about the area and enemy could not be obtained.

However, as revealed later, the formidable defence system at Barki and Ichhogil behind it had 11 concrete pillboxes, so strong that even a direct hit of artillery shell or tank's rocket could not destroy it. Each pillbox was equipped with a medium machine gun, a light machine gun, one or two rifles or sten guns and ample supply of ammunition and grenades. On the left of the road was a solid building of police station, strengthened to locate weapons firing heavy volume. A deep ditch, as a tank obstacle, was expected before Barki. The Ichhogil, was constructed as a defence system in 1950, linking Rivers Ravi and Sutlej. Its rear bank was three feet higher than the front, with solid fortifications, to bring in effective fire upon the attacker. Tanks were sheltered behind the canal with only turrets and guns up to fire across the canal. The canal was 150 feet wide and 17 feet deep, filled with water, which could be controlled.

According to the plan, 9 MADRAS was to

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**INDO-PAK WAR 1965
SKETCH SHOWING MOV OF 4 SIKH (XXXVI SIKH/
SARAGARHI BN) FROM 06 TO 11 SEPTEMBER 1965**



provide firm base in line with Barka Kalan on the right of the road. After last light, CIH less two squadrons, equipped with Sherman tanks, were to assault Barki in an unorthodox role with lights on, firing all its armaments, followed by 4 SIKH to physically capture Barki in Phase I of the Brigade attack. Ichhogil Canal, which was expected to be 500 to 700 yards behind, was to be captured by 16 PUNJAB in Phase II.

CO 4 SIKH gave his orders to his sub-unit Commanders on the 10th, setting the mood for the fight with the following words in Punjabi: "It is one of the luckiest days for XXXVI. We are moving back to our 'homes' from where we had been pushed

out at the time of Partition. Today, Barki is like a bride and we the bridegroom. The elephants (tanks) will lead the marriage procession and crackers and lights (artillery) will put a Diwali celebration to shame. I am confident XXXVI will live up to its traditions of bravery and sacrifices."

As per 4 SIKH plan, 'A' and 'C' Companies formed up right side of the road at the Start Line at 1950 hrs for assault. 'B' Company was in the rear as reserve. 'D' Company was assigned a special task to move behind tanks in civilian trucks full of wooden planks to be lowered in Barki drain for crossing over of tanks. After doing this task, it was to clear the Police Station area. The Company formed up at Mile 16, the rendezvous, at 1930 hrs. Somehow the tanks did not arrive till 2000 hrs. Frantic calls to Brigade Headquarters provided no information.

The forming up area happened to be enemy's registered target, thus heavy accurate shelling ensued. CO 4 SIKH, being sure of tanks coming, though delayed, ordered the assault Companies to move at 2000 hrs, the exact 'Start Time'. Indian artillery pounded enemy positions, though lesser in scale than planned, probably due to some other priorities. It was a sight worth watching with enemy's deadly web of hundreds of whistling bullets with orange tracers, criss-crossing, and a heavy barrage of bombs landing all around with piercing shrieks and bursts. The enemy illuminated the entire area turning it into daylight. This spurred the jawans to reach the objective as fast as possible. The battalion mortars started pounding the enemy positions. Attacking troops closed on to pillboxes, from where the small arms fire was now effective.

After about 20 minutes of assault having begun, CO confident of armour fetching up ordered 'D' Company to move along left of the road as planned and complete its task. The Company had moved at a fast pace hardly for 15 minutes when the tanks arrived rumbling along, firing towards the objective. Assaulting troops therefore were subjected to firing from the rear. Lt Kanwaljit Singh quickly got in touch with a tank commander, and tank fire was switched to left of the road. Contrary to the plan, they had not put on their lights, which at this stage proved to be fortunate for the infantry ahead.

The enemy's intense artillery fire was further augmented by direct firing weapons and armour from behind Ichhogil canal, pillboxes and fortified positions from some housetops and police station. The Companies inched forward through fire with grit and determination, till they were close to a mere 100 yards from pillboxes, where they shouted their war cry, "Bole so Nihal, Sat Sri Aka", and pounced upon the enemy, men crawling and



Lt Kanwaljit Singh at destroyed Barki Police Station which his 'D' Company had captured on Night September 10-11, 1965

lobbing hand grenades into the pillboxes and thus silencing them. Casualties were mounting. Once the forward crust was pierced, there were hand-to-hand fights, bayonets crossing bayonets splitting the bellies, with filthiest abuses hurled at each other by the foes. Enemy had been crushed, some paralysed in their pillboxes hearing the Sikh war cry. Survivors abandoned their positions running helter-skelter through the lanes of the village to the safety behind Ichhogil wading through it since the bridge had already been destroyed by them in the evening. 'A' Company neutralised the south-western portion of the village up to the road and 'C' Company, under Sub Sadhu Singh cleared the north-eastern area.

The success signal, firing of two para flares, was given by the assault Companies, exactly 70 minutes after the commencement of the attack. After a stiff fight, 'D' Company captured the police station area; enemy's tanks brought in devastating fire on to the Company from across the Ichhogil which was just 150 yards away. Enemy had laid anti-tank mines hastily, on both sides of the road; track of an own tank was blown up about 200 yards short of the police station. OC 'D' Company conveyed to the armour not to leave the road or move forward as the objective had already been captured, there was no ditch as such to be crossed, and enemy had laid anti-tank mines all over. While this message was being passed, a 4 SIKH recoilless gun jeep with CO CIH, Lieutenant Colonel S C Joshi, came rushing along and was blown off near the police station, just 20 yards from OC 'D' Company. The brave officer was wounded and succumbed to his injuries later.

The assaulting Companies found Ichhogil only

150 to 250 yards from Barki, scrambled up and secured the east bank. The defeated enemy had already fled to the rear of the canal. 'B' Company moved up and completed mopping up. Major Shamsheer Singh and Captain SS Duggal (later Colonel), the Adjutant, had been wounded and were evacuated. Phase II of the Brigade attack thus was completed in Phase I, within two hours of the assault. 16 PUNNJAB was then assigned the task of capturing area along the Ichhogil further north, thus a large area was secured.

Later, it came to be known that Pakistanis had fired over 3,000 bombs within half an hour. Major Aziz Bhatti, who had been tasked to defend the formidable defences with two Companies plus, was awarded Pakistan's highest gallantry award, Nishan-I-Haidar, posthumously. Besides, enemy's continuous fire night and day, his two F-86 Sabres bombed and strafed 4 SIKH in the morning.

Capture of Barki was hailed as one of the master set piece battalion attacks. 4 SIKH had 39 killed and 121 wounded. Battle Honour 'Barki' and Theatre Honour 'Punjab' were awarded to the Unit besides gallantry medals one MVC and three Vrcs. Dr S Radhakrishnan, President of India, visited Barki later, had tea with the troops and highly complimented the battalion for its sacrifices and victory.

***Author's Note:** On 11th itself, 4 SIKH was moved out without relief, unmindful of heavy casualties and being in battle for continuous six days, to a different sector under a new formation, to move 18 km on foot after midnight, in an un-reconnoitered area, to carry out a ill planned task against heavy odds. This was a setback. The unit thus was bereft of many more awards, the irony being defender of Barki getting highest award of his country and the CO of battalion capturing those formidable defences getting nothing.*

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