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# THE BATTLE OF LONGEWALA: THE QUICK RESPONSE AND DECISIVE IMPACT OF AIR POWER

**BHARAT KUMAR**

Some of the most significant and decisive events of the Indo-Pakistan War of 1971 were the Battle of Boyra on November 22, (when the intruding Sabres were promptly shot down by the midget Gnats airborne from Dum Dum); the bombing of Dacca and the attack on the Governor's House in particular, and the establishment of air supremacy over the then East Pakistan; the Meghna helibridge, the Tangail paradrop, the sinking of the PNS *Ghazi*, the aerial attack on the Karachi oil farms, the attack on Karachi harbour by the Indian Navy missile boats; and the Battle of Longewala. It would not be wrong to say that amongst these events, what brought victory and laurels to India in the shortest possible time was the Battle of Longewala and which, perhaps, put paid to the Pakistani plan of launching a Corps-level offensive supported by the entire Pakistan Air Force (PAF) in the central sector. It would, therefore, be worth examining the background and the actual conduct of the battle.

The Battle of Longewala was between the Indian Hunter aircraft operating from the newly constructed airfield at Jaisalmer and a

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Pakistani thrust comprising two armoured regiments supported by two infantry brigades. This historic battle lasted just over two days during which the enemy was decimated.

One of the lessons learnt during the Indo-Pak conflict of 1965, was the paucity of airfields in the Punjab and Rajasthan sectors. Accordingly, Utterlai, Jaisalmer, and Nal airfields were constructed, and Care and Maintenance Units (C&MU) established there with very limited manpower at each of these bases. At Jaisalmer, it was 14 C&MU with one officer and 17 airmen. With the probability of a conflict between India and Pakistan increasing, it was decided to activate these bases in September 1971. At that time, Jaisalmer had just the runway, taxi tracks, and hardened aircraft shelters besides a make-shift Air Traffic Control (ATC) building. It did not have the other basic infrastructure to support air operations—no bulk petrol installation for storage of fuel, no electrical runway and taxiway lighting, etc. Wg Cdr MS Bawa, who was nominated as base commander in September 1971, had to motivate the men and supervise the work with the augmented manpower that was inducted from numerous units as part of Air Headquarters' (HQ's) Manpower Augmentation Plan. He ensured that the base became operational within a short time. For its air and ground defence, Jaisalmer was given a P-30 radar, a troop of six L-60 anti-aircraft Bofor guns and a company of the Territorial Army. Six Hunter aircraft of No. 122 Squadron (Hunter Operational Training Unit or OTU had been rechristened for the duration of the war) were inducted from Jamnagar, with allotted tasks of air defence of the airfield and close air support to 12 Infantry Division. In addition, No. 12 (Independent) Air Observation Post (AOP) Flight was deployed at the airfield initially but moved near HQ 12 Infantry Division when hostilities became imminent. The base was fully operational by the third week of October, 1971.

The Thar desert, of which Rajasthan is a part, extends into Pakistan. The surface lines of communication, especially West of Jaisalmer, were scanty and consisted of a few tracks, with a metalled road from Jaisalmer to Longewala via Ramgarh. Pakistan's only railway link between its lone port of Karachi and Lahore and beyond ran opposite the Jaisalmer sector. Rahim Yar Khan was the most prominent place in the sector. Pakistan had

also not built any roads East of this railway line and just a few tracks existed up to the international border. The area was full of sand dunes – their height and frequency increasing as one moved West from Jaisalmer.

Pakistan's 18 Infantry Division deployed in Rahim Yar Khan sector consisted of two cavalry regiments (22 Cavalry was equipped with the Chinese T-55 tanks and 38 Cavalry had antiquated World War II era and somewhat unreliable Sherman tanks), three infantry brigades and the usual other elements. The Indian 12 Infantry Division's appreciation was that 18 Division would be deployed in a defensive role mainly to protect Pakistan's vital lines of communication, with little possibility of any offensive tasks. 12 Infantry Division had been tasked to capture Rahim Yar Khan and then exploit the situation further. It planned to achieve this objective by launching an offensive through Kishangarh. Hunters from Jaisalmer were to support this offensive. The division had been allotted 12 Hunter sorties per day with an assurance that, if required, the air effort would be stepped up from D+2 onwards.

The Pakistan General Headquarters (GHQ) had a different plan for its 18 Infantry Division. Besides safeguarding the vital lines of communication in the sector, it was ordered to undertake an offensive with both its armour regiments along with two infantry brigades on the night of D-day with the objective of capturing Jaisalmer airfield the following morning. The entire offensive was planned by the GHQ. The order stated that D-day would be conveyed subsequently. The distance from the international border to Jaisalmer is nearly 140 km. It was an ambitious target as the Pakistani force would have to stick to the desert track till Longewala, followed by metalled road onwards to Ramgarh and Jaisalmer. The division had also not been trained in desert warfare and did not have specialised 4 × 4 wheeled vehicles to traverse the sandy desert terrain.

On receipt of these orders, the General Officer Commanding (GOC) 18 Division discussed the plan with the commanding officers of his two cavalry regiments who agreed on the viability of the plan and the high probability of its success. This was subject to availability of air support during at least the first three days of the operation. This requirement was conveyed to the GHQ which

seemed to have been assured by Pak Air HQ of this support, provided a warning of a fortnight was given to them to activate Jacobabad airfield.

While officers of 38 Cavalry did carry out a recce of their axis of advance up to the international border, 22 Cavalry did not initiate any such step.

The GOC 18 Division received a hand-written order on the morning of December 2, 1971, to launch the offensive the following evening to capture Jaisalmer by December 4 morning—hostilities between India and Pakistan had not commenced at that time. During the briefing for the operations, the PAF representative in the meeting dropped a virtual bombshell when he stated that air support would not be available as a fortnight's notice to Pak Air HQ for activation of Jacobabad had not been given. The brigade commanders pointed out the inherent dangers in launching the land offensive without air support and suggested that the operation be either postponed or cancelled. The GOC referred the matter to the Chief of the General Staff (CGS) at the GHQ who ruled that since very little air action was expected from the Indian Air Force (IAF), the operation must go through in 'the national interest' even without air support. The GOC did not agree to the brigade commanders' suggestion to refuse to undertake the operation as he feared that he would be marked a coward and that would be the end of his career. However, commander 51 Brigade was able to convince the GOC to change his objective from Jaisalmer to Ramgarh. The GOC ordered that the operation would go ahead as planned even without assistance from the Pakistan Air Force. Pak 51 Infantry Brigade and 22 Cavalry were to be in the lead and 206 Infantry Brigade with 38 Cavalry were to follow. H-Hour was set as 2130 hrs on December 3, when the force was to cross the international border.

Pakistan launched Operation Chengiz Khan on the evening of December 3, when the PAF attacked numerous IAF airfields and radars—Jaisalmer was, however, not targeted. The Pakistani ground offensive, however, faced various organisational and logistics problems and could not kick-off. The GOC revised the H-hour to 0200 hrs on December 5, and later ordered that the force was to cross the border at last light.

Pre-planned air operations from Jaisalmer were launched on December 4, and supported the Indian Army offensive through Kishangarh.

The Pakistani column commenced its move from its launch pad around midnight of December 4. The noise of the tanks and vehicles was picked up by an Indian patrol at around midnight. This information was conveyed to 'A' Company of 23 Punjab that was located at Longewala post. The patrol was instructed to get back as soon as the tank column was sighted. However, when the patrol did sight the tanks, it could not pass the message due to communication problems. The information finally reached the Divisional Headquarters at 0230 hrs on December 4. The GOC was taken aback by this sudden and totally unexpected move as it had been appreciated that the desert terrain would not allow Pakistan to intrude along that axis. There were just no reserves to counter this intrusion. Unable to think of any solution, he rang up the base commander, Jaisalmer, and informed him about the Pakistan thrust, with Jaisalmer as its likely objective. The GOC also informed him that he was trying to send a small contingent of tanks to Longewala to intercept the Pakistanis and beef up the Longewala post, as required. He requested the base commander to launch aircraft to locate and engage the enemy armour and infantry. While the base commander accepted the commitment, he stated that the aircraft could be launched only at first light as the Hunters did not have the wherewithal for night operations. Then onwards, there was a frenzy of activity at Jaisalmer to reconfigure the aircraft to carry T-10 rockets—the ideal weapon for the task. Two pilots were detailed to get airborne at first light, reconnoitre the road Jaisalmer-Ramgarh-Longewala and then the track therefrom to the border and engage enemy tanks wherever they were sighted.

The first pair of aircraft taxied out when it was still dark and took off even before first light, flew low along the Jaisalmer-Ramgarh-Longewala road, trying to spot any movement but there was none. All this changed when they approached Longewala. By this time, there was greater light and what they saw ahead of them made their heartbeat faster and their adrenaline shoot up. What looked like lots of matchboxes from a distance, now clearly stood out as a body of

tanks! The enemy tank column had arrived at Longewala a little earlier. The lead Hunter pilot counted 32 of them and then stopped any further count. They did not see any enemy aircraft in the area. The leader observed one of the tanks moving towards the Longewala post apparently to attack it. He immediately went in for an attack and blasted it with his rockets. His wingman, in turn, knocked out the second tank. By this time, the pilots developed doubts about whether the tanks they had attacked were, in fact, Pakistani—the doubt arose as they had been briefed that some Indian tanks would be sent to the area to intercept the Pakistani column. Fratricide is the worst thing that can happen. Fortunately, for them, one AOP aircraft that was to perform the role of airborne Forward Area Controller (FAC) arrived and confirmed the identity of the tanks. With their fears allayed, the Hunter pair resumed their hunt by carrying out as many as 13 more passes between them (instead of the normal 1-2 passes and then getting back to base), destroying five tanks and damaging another ten. During these attacks, they came under intense anti-aircraft fire from the tanks. The lead aircraft was hit, its hydraulics and radio were knocked out, but it managed to land back safely. The Pakistani tanks carried two 100 gallon barrels full of diesel just behind the cupola of each tank. The fuel caught fire when hit by the 30 mm rounds of the Hunters, engulfing the tank in flames. This made the pilots' job that much easier, giving them greater opportunity for more kills. The Pakistani tanks played every trick in the book to protect themselves. They fired with their machine guns at the attacking aircraft and also tried to create additional problems for them by moving around in circles and raising a lot of dust. These tactics did not appreciably deter or distract the attackers and they kept scoring hits. Not a single pass went without getting a victim.

The second Hunter pair soon appeared on the scene and continued the unfinished task of the first pair of aircraft. During one of the attacks, the tank gunner became so desperate that he opened up at the diving aircraft with his main 100 mm gun. Fortunately, the round failed to score a direct hit but whizzed past so close to the aircraft as to disturb its aerodynamics. Consequently, the aircraft continued to mush in during the pullout manoeuvre and scraped the sand dune during its recovery from the dive. The pilot was lucky to

pull out though his aircraft was badly damaged and could not build up speed beyond 250 knots. The skilful pilot managed to land the aircraft safely.

The base commander now faced the dilemma of whether to wait for the damaged aircraft to be repaired or send out the other aircraft singly, a practice not recommended for tactical reasons. Any delay would have given breathing space to the intruders and time to regroup and may be withdraw—a totally unacceptable situation. The base commander took a calculated risk and approved single aircraft missions, if the aircraft in pairs were not available. Thus, the Pakistani tanks remained under attack till sunset. The pilots continued to be directed by the AOP pilots. One of them had to force-land at Jaisalmer helipad but continued his direction by using the aircraft radio on the ground. The Auster was temporarily repaired that night and flown out early the next morning. In the meanwhile, the Hunter pilots extended their 'area of interest' right up to the international border and accounted for many vehicles. By the end of the day, 17 sorties had been flown, with some of the aircraft flying as many as five sorties, while a few pilots flew three sorties. The claimed enemy losses were 22 tanks destroyed, another 30 damaged, besides accounting for vehicles and trains. An intercept that evening summed up the havoc caused by the Hunters. The translation of the communication intercept was as follows: "The enemy Air Force is playing hell with us. As one aircraft goes away, another comes and dances, remaining overhead for twenty minutes. Forty per cent of our Army (personnel) and equipment have been destroyed. What to speak of going forward, turning back has become very difficult. Send the Air Force for help quickly; otherwise, it is impossible to return." It certainly boosted the morale of all the personnel at Jaisalmer.

Jaisalmer came under an aerial attack by a Pakistani C-130 transport aircraft but did not suffer any damage as the entire bomb load was dropped just outside the airfield. To add to the base's problem, the GOC warned that night that he feared that some elements of the armour and infantry column might be headed towards Jaisalmer and Bawa should try and protect his assets as the Army was in no position to augment Jaisalmer's resources. Bawa was entirely on his own. The Hunters were, once again airborne at first light and



receded all possible approaches to Jaisalmer but did not find a single enemy vehicle. It was a false alarm. The aircrew got back to their task of massacring and decimating whatever was left of the attackers. During the day, additional Hunters had flown in from Jamnagar and had joined the fray. The squadron flew 18 sorties and the wreckage of 37 tanks could be seen around Longewala that evening. The Battle of Longewala was practically over! The Pakistanis had been mauled by the relentless attacks by the Hunters, their morale was shattered and they were in no position psychologically to offer any resistance. But this was not the end of the IAF's exploits as the Pakistanis were to get more bashing during their retreat and the IAF's mopping up operation.

Air operations continued against the retreating forces. In addition, Hunters from Jaisalmer provided support to both 11 and 12 Infantry Divisions, and carried out interdiction against the Pakistani lines of communication besides delivering a knockout punch to the Sui gas plant which took over a year thereafter to get back into action.

No. 122 Squadron flew 222 operational sorties during the entire war, averaging 16 sorties per day. It could have flown many more but for lack of close air support demands and paucity of targets. The squadron had decimated a massive armour and infantry thrust entirely on its own, without the loss of a single aircraft. It also goes to the credit of the squadron that it maintained nearly 100 per cent serviceability thanks to round-the-clock voluntary toiling by the ground crew who exhibited very high technical skill.

It must be conceded that Pakistan's plan for the capture of Jaisalmer was just brilliant, with a high probability of success if it had been executed properly as also if the timeframe of its attainment of the assigned objective had been more realistic. The pitfalls in the plan would have been evident to enable their rectification and modification if the plan had gone through the normal staff scrutiny and been war-gamed. The timing of the launch of the offensive and the axis of advance had not been anticipated by the Indians and caught the Indian 12 Infantry Division absolutely unprepared, leaving it with no option but to call the IAF to its rescue. It is to the credit of the IAF that it did not let its sister Service down. Imagine the scenario wherein Pakistani armour under the PAF's cover had advanced along its axis,

unopposed by Indian 12 Infantry Division and had captured either Ramgarh or, more importantly, Jaisalmer within a day or so. It would have been reminiscent of the German *blitzkrieg* of World War II. But this was not to be. While Pakistan had an ace up its sleeve, it had not anticipated the Indian hand and their ace got trumped by the Indian Air Force and, thus, they lost the battle. The Pakistan Army brass did not realise the impact of air power in modern warfare. They had apparently either forgotten, or decided to ignore, the lessons of history. It so happens that it was in India that the role of air power in future conflicts was first propounded way back in 1920. After the Third Afghan War and the Waziristan Campaign, it had become an accepted doctrine in the British Indian Army that no major operation could sensibly take place without the availability of air support. "Air power would not guarantee success, but it would hopefully prevent defeat."<sup>1</sup> Over a period of time, this dictum has altered somewhat to "Air power may or may not ensure your victory, but its lack will certainly bring you to defeat." This doctrine has stood the test of time and remains valid even more today, especially when one considers the increasing lethality of air power. The other characteristics of air power viz quick response, flexibility and ability to strike at vast distances add to the cost that air power can impose on an adversary. The IAF exhibited all these characteristics except for the vast distance, as the flying time from Jaisalmer to Longewala was a mere ten minutes.

Since the quality of the leadership plays a significant part in any operation, it would be only right to have a look at the quality of leadership at Jaisalmer vis-à-vis that of the invading force. Wg Cdr MS Bawa had successfully commanded a fighter squadron and was the chief instructor at the Armament Training Wing. He was reputed to be a 'go-getter' and he displayed this trait by the speed with which Jaisalmer became operational, with the personnel drawn from a plethora of units and gathered at Jaisalmer temporarily. He motivated them and they delivered the goods in an environment that was anything but conducive. He was totally involved with the aircrew, shared their feelings and paid great heed to their suggestions. When

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1. Brian Robson, *Crisis on the Frontier: The Third Afghan War and the Campaign in Waziristan 1919-1920* (UK: Spellmount, Staplehurst, 2007), p. xiv.

the aircraft were damaged by the enemy ground fire on the first day of the battle, he did not refer the matter to the higher authorities and decided to launch single-aircraft missions—it was a calculated risk and if things had gone wrong, he would have been held responsible for a decision which was tactically speaking wrong. He did not leave this decision to the detachment commander and told him that he would answer to the authorities if so required. The aircrew were motivated and experienced, and exhibited a high quality of leadership, flying skills and initiative, resulting in extremely good results. On the opposite side, the Pakistani commanders were not motivated, and their morale took a further beating once they were told to launch the offensive without air support. They also had not motivated their personnel as was evident from a large number of desertions that took place once the force crossed into India.

The second characteristic of air power that needs to be looked into is rapid response. Aircraft on air defence missions are normally ordered to be either on two or five-minute readiness and get airborne well within this period. If the situation so warrants, aircraft on ground attack missions can also be ordered to standby on 15 or 30-minute readiness by housing the aircraft and the aircrew not far from the take-off point. In this case, it was night time and no aircraft was on standby. The base commander, Jaisalmer, was informed of the Pakistani intrusion at about 0230 hrs. It was not possible to launch the aircraft immediately as the aircraft did not have the wherewithal for night vision and had to wait for daylight. Besides, the two aircraft that were earmarked for air defence operational readiness, the other aircraft had been configured the previous evening according to the missions that had been assigned by the Army. It was realised that T-10 rockets were the most suitable weapon for engaging the tanks. The ground crew—their number was extremely limited as the majority of the squadron's assets were at Jamnagar—had to now fit the rocket rails and load the rockets which is a time-consuming task. Every person pitched in and the aircraft were ready well before first light. The aircrew proceeded to the aircraft when it was still dark and taxied out, groping their way, as the Hunters did not have any landing lights and Jaisalmer did not have an electrical runway and taxiway lighting system installed. It was just about first light when

the aircraft got airborne. Could one have responded any faster?! Obviously not. Almost the same scenario played out the next day except for the fact that the aircraft were already configured for the carriage of T-10 rockets. The aircraft were turned round quickly and repairs were carried out wherever required. The ground crew were working at the aircraft almost round the clock to ensure that the allotted tasks could be executed. Had it not been so, it would not have been possible to launch 17 sorties on the first day.

The biggest impact of air power lies in its lethality. It is based on weaponry (sophistication and payload) and the accuracy of its delivery. When the doctrine of the inevitability of air support was propounded in 1920, an aircraft normally had just a few 20lb, and still fewer 120lb bombs, besides .303 machine guns. Delay fuzes were in use and the heavier bombs came into use a decade or so later. Even though the lethality of such aircraft was rather low and totally non-effective against houses and other structures made of mud, they still had an impact on the morale of the tribesmen. Now compare this to the armament of the Hunter aircraft that entered service in the early 1950s—four 30 mm cannon and 12 T-10 rockets—a quantum jump indeed. Of course, the Hunters could also carry  $2 \times 500$ lb bombs or two napalm containers, but these were not the ideal weapon for the task. The gyro gunsight permitted armament delivery with a fair amount of accuracy. The lethality of the Hunters becomes evident when one notices the ease with which Pakistani tanks succumbed to the T-10 rockets and 30 mm rounds. The sophistication in aircraft weaponry has since then increased manifold and there is just no target that cannot be engaged and neutralised with a suitable aerial weapon. Today is the age of precision-guided munitions using various devices like lasers, inertial navigation systems, Global Positioning System (GPS), etc. besides various types of seekers to ensure pinpoint accuracy. Rockets and cannons are fired at fairly close ranges and the attacking aircraft are vulnerable to the anti-aircraft guns and shoulder-fired surface-to-air missiles. However, modern weapons can be launched from greater distances, providing the requisite safety to the aircraft. The decision of the CGS of the Pakistan Army to brush aside the likely impact of a small force at Jaisalmer air base proved fatal. This lapse was not something new but in the absence of

joint planning and lack of full understanding on the lethality of air power, such mistakes are bound to be made. It is unfortunate that in most cases of planning by the ground forces' commander, the role of the Air Force figures in the end and as an adjunct, not as the decisive, contributory element. Ideally, he should initiate his planning by asking his Air Force counterpart about how the Air Force can make the surface forces' task easier.

No. 122 Squadron's performance must be gauged from the fact that with just five aircraft for the task and quite a few becoming unserviceable, as many as 17 sorties were flown on December 5, with some aircraft flying six sorties in a little over ten hours of daylight. This was possible due to factors that are normally not fully appreciated. Firstly, the dedication and the technical skill of the ground crew in turning round and rectifying the aircraft in the shortest possible time. The few personnel of the R&SU (Repair and Salvage Unit) who were at Jaisalmer ensured that the aircraft that had suffered battle damage was restored to flying status at the earliest. These ground crew were highly motivated and their morale went really sky high once they came to know that their efforts had borne fruit and the invaders had been dealt a mortal blow. The efficacy of this small force was enhanced by these factors and resulted in the decimation of the invaders.

The lethality of air power in the modern age can be gauged by the happenings in Operation Desert Storm (January 17, 1991-February 28, 1991) in which the coalition Air Forces pounded the Iraqis for 42 days after which the ground forces had a practically free run to a quick victory. It was again evident during Operation Iraqi Freedom in which the "*shock and awe*" bombing campaign in 2003 helped overthrow Saddam Hussain. However, in both these operations, though the main destruction was caused by the aerial campaigns, the mopping up operations were carried out by the land forces. Similarly, in Kosovo during March-June 1999, the Serbs were bombed day in and day out; it is different that they succumbed only under the threat of a ground invasion and a ceasefire came into being.

However, there are at least two land battles in which victory was won by air power alone, without any role played by the ground forces. It so happens that both these battles took place in India. The first of

these was the Pink's War of 1925. It was a 54-day aerial campaign (March 9-May 1, 1925) in Waziristan in which five Royal Air Force (RAF) squadrons forced the Waziris to accept the British terms. Normally, a ground-based campaign would have involved at least two brigades and around one to two years, with lots of casualties. In this case, the war lasted just 54 days in which the British lost just one aircraft and two pilots and that too in an accident. The ensuing peace lasted much longer. The Pink's War should have been a trend-setter and the RAF should have been given a free hand from then onwards but glory to another Service was not acceptable to the British Indian Army brass and they never permitted the RAF to undertake the operations again. While the Pink's War lasted 54 days, the Battle of Longewala, which was the showpiece of the responsiveness of air power and its lethality, lasted just two days—strictly speaking, the back of the Pakistani offensive was broken by the evening of the first day. Not a single aircraft was lost despite some desperate but intense ground fire by the Pakistani tank crews. One can speculate about the duration of the battle and its outcome if the Pakistani intruders had been engaged by the Indian 12 Infantry Division on its own. It must be brought out that there was no major engagement between the Pakistani and Indian forces except for a few artillery attacks on the Pakistani gun positions after the intruders had retreated into their own territory. It was solely the effort put in by the Hunters from Jaisalmer that brought about this resounding victory.

The Battle of Longewala thus, remains a unique one in the annals of aerial warfare where the intruding armour forces were decimated by air power alone. It will always be remembered as one of the proudest moments in the history of the Indian Air Force.

**Disclaimer:** The article has previously been published as part of the author's book, Bharat Kumar, *The Epic Battle of Longewala* (Natraj Publishers, 2020).