

Operation Pawan

the mercy of the LTTE. They needed help to bring all the dead and wounded to Palali. Fortunately, that was on its way.

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back at Palali, within hours of launching the operation, the Division HQ was in a state of panic. Harkirat Singh, a hero of the 1971 war, had already pulled out everything he had under his command to salvage the situation. When the helicopter sorties had to be abandoned, Mishra's 72 Infantry Brigade had been told to move on foot towards Jaffna University. This advance was led by 4/5 GR. The rest of the brigade was still at Palali, waiting for some more men to fetch up.

Later that morning, Harkirat Singh took off in the Chetak helicopter for a reconnaissance of the Jaffna University area. He was barely airborne when a machine gun round fired by the LTTE went through the three-inch space between the seats of the general and his pilot. The helicopter returned to Palali.

Harkirat Singh now modified his plans. Sethi – who still had no information about his twenty-nine soldiers under Birendra Singh, and with his two companies yet to land in Sri Lanka – was to advance with eighty of his men towards Jaffna in six vehicles and link up with 4/5

GR. Sethi started his advance at 6.30 a.m. on the 12th, with his troops coming under intermittent fire from the LTTE – and linked up with 4/5 GR on the outskirts of Urelu village six kilometres short of Jaffna. He could not move any further towards Jaffna because of a siege laid by LTTE fighters.

Sethi was now ordered to take a detour and march cross-country to link up with Birendra Singh and his men. Sethi felt duty-bound to make every effort to save the lives of as many of his men as he could. But he was let down by the Division HQ. Sethi was misled into believing that Birendra Singh and his men had been trapped because the helicopter pilots had dropped them at the alternate landing zone – an open patch of land randomly selected off the map by the Division HQ when Sheonan had asked for one.

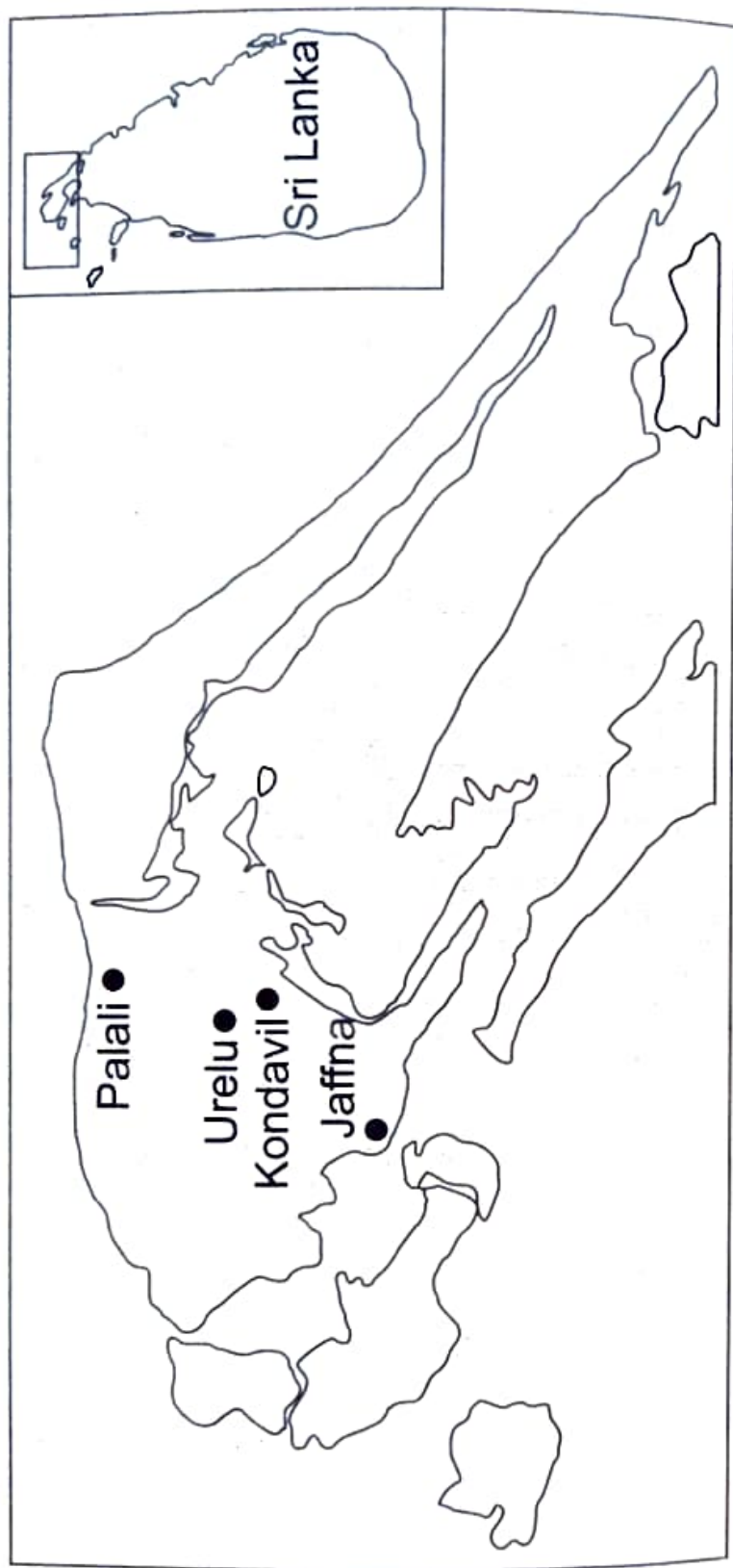
The truth emerged later during the enquiry. The alternate landing zone was too small to accommodate even a Chetak helicopter, let alone two Mi-8s. Either because of confusion about the battle plan or because it wanted to cover up the fact that it had ordered the para commandos to leave the Sikh LI behind at the Jaffna football field, the Division HQ tried to claim that these men had been killed because the IAF had dropped them at the alternate landing zone, while the para commandos were waiting for them at the university ground.

This misinformation continued to be widely reported even later in the media. On 21 October 1987 *The Hindu* reported: 'Unfortunately in the darkness, the Sikh LI jawans were put down in a clear ground some 2 km away from the intended Landing Zone. The Para Commandos disembarked successfully but the Sikh LI jawans were trapped in a heavily built up area, and though surrounded fought valiantly for 24 hours before being overwhelmed.'

The same details were repeated in a story in *India Today* in February 1988.

Believing that Birendra Singh was trapped in the alternate landing zone, Sethi started moving towards that open patch – with no local guides or proper maps, in a heavy downpour and under firing from the LTTE fighters. Having taken a detour from Urelu village they now reached Kondavil, a kilometre short of the alternate landing zone, but found they could not go beyond it. The LTTE had taken strong positions there, and Sethi's troops came under heavy fire. He lost five jawans, and another twenty-seven were injured.

Havaladar Kuldeep Singh, who was badly wounded during that action, later told *India Today*: 'We were pinned down by snipers firing at us from all sides. Five men from our unit died. It was very difficult. We have not been trained for this kind of battle.'



Map of Jaffna Peninsula

Everything that could go wrong had gone wrong. Harkirat Singh came to know later that the LTTE had intercepted the IPKF's radio communication network and were always a step ahead of the Indian soldiers and had enough time to plan an ambush.

The situation at 6 p.m. on 12 October was: Birendra Singh and twenty-nine men of the Sikh LI battalion at Jaffna University ground either missing or dead; Sheonan and his 102 para commandos (no one at HQ then knew that six of them were dead) surrounded by 500 LTTE fighters at Kokuvil East; Sethi with his Sikh LI column on their mission to rescue Birendra Singh and his men trapped by the LTTE at Kondavil; and 4/5 GR blocked by the LTTE and unable to move beyond Urelu temple crossing.



In the meantime, the rest of Sethi's Sikh LI battalion had landed at Palali from India. They, along with the tanks from 65 Armoured Regiment which had landed at 8.30 a.m., were ordered to join Mishra's 72 Infantry Brigade. Sheonan's CO, Dalbir Singh, insisted on joining the tanks and the freshly arrived Sikh LI troops. Mishra was now tasked by Harkirat Singh to rescue Sethi and his men

held up at Kondavil and the 10 Para Commando men fighting the LTTE fighters in Kokuvil.

The commander of the tank troops was Major Anil Kaul. He had landed at Palali with two of his tanks and was surprised when he heard a despondent Harkirat Singh exclaim in Punjabi: 'I was sent to keep the peace. Suddenly they expect me to fight a war.' At the Division HQ, the short briefing he got from the Colonel GS left him perplexed. He was told that 'the road to Jaffna had been cleared of all opposition – however, I was to be careful of improvised explosive devices, snipers sitting on trees or high buildings along the road, and medium machine guns operating from hides. Otherwise, the road was clear.' Kaul didn't quite know what to make of this briefing which said two conflicting things. He was further instructed: 'Assist 72 Infantry Brigade for the establishment of a firm base for the capture of the LTTE HQ in Jaffna University.'

'At 10.30 a.m. we exited Palali base with a company of infantry riding piggyback on my tanks, and TV cameras of Doordarshan capturing on film a scene which was repeatedly played on TV screens back home, so as to give the impression of the advent of a large body of tanks and troops in the battle for Jaffna,' Kaul later recounted.

In an hour, he had reached the Urelu temple crossing and joined up with Mishra's brigade, which had reached

the officers of 4/5 GR sheltering in a depression in the road. Dalbir Singh and Kaul were sent to Kondavil where Sethi and his men were stranded. They brought them back to the Urelu temple crossing by 8.30 p.m., coming under fire in the process. Dalbir Singh, who was riding on Kaul's tank, recalls that when he admitted he was scared, the para commando havaldar with him laughed and said, '*Sahab, agar yahaan goliyan nahin chalengi toh kya phool barsenge?*' [Sir, if not bullets what do you expect here – a rain of flowers?]' A shamed Dalbir Singh quickly recovered his nerve. The bullets that day didn't have his name on them, but Kaul was not so lucky. He was severely wounded. While his tank was passing through narrow lanes and he had momentarily opened his tank's cupola door, a 40mm grenade fired by the LTTE hit the turret. The explosion severed his finger, while splinters hit him in the eye and arm. His men put him on morphine and kept him at Mishra's location at Urelu.

The task of bringing out Sheonan and his men from Pirampadi Lane, five kilometres away, was still pending.



It was then decided that Dalbir Singh, along with some troops of Sikh LI, would go along with these tanks to bring back Sheonan and his men. Dalbir Singh and two

of his para commandos sat atop the three – a third tank, stationed at Palali, had also been deployed – Soviet-made T-72 tanks and started moving.

Dalbir Singh had flown over the area often in the past two months and was familiar with the layout of its roads and railway lines. In what he now calls 'a moment of divine inspiration', he decided to move the tanks along the Palali-Jaffna railway line which passed to the left of Jaffna University. 'If I had not followed the railway track I would never have reached my men,' says Dalbir. The LTTE, who were waiting to ambush them on the roads and lanes, were taken by surprise. The railway track did not have heavy embankments and so the tanks could move smoothly.

It was well past midnight when Dalbir Singh asked Sheonan for his exact location. Giving exact directions in an unknown area was a futile exercise, so Sheonan ordered his men to set that single hut on fire. 'We have put a hut on fire. Climb a tree and you will see the fire. To get to the hut, you will hit a major road crossing and then take a right,' Sheonan told his CO.

Dalbir Singh found his way around without much difficulty. By 4 a.m. on 13 October, Sheonan had taken stock of his men and material and reported to his CO: six para commandos dead – three in the initial firefight, two

in shelling and one shot by the window in the evening – and fourteen wounded.

This is one record Sheonan is proud of. 'More than twenty-six hours of intense fighting, with no artillery support, and we were able to keep our casualties to a minimum. Compare this to what others suffered during the same period,' he says.

Now that they had the tanks with them, Dalbir Singh and Sheonan decided to blow up the houses from where the LTTE fighters were firing. But one tank had finished all its ammunition en route, the other had a round stuck in its barrel and the third tank didn't have a gunner in the crew who could fire. They asked a gunner from the second tank to fire the gun of the third tank but he just couldn't use the gun. It took him forty-five minutes to fire one shot from the tank, leaving both Dalbir Singh and Sheonan demoralized.

Worried about impending daybreak they decided to quickly make their way out while they still had the cover of darkness. But then the seniormost JCO with the tanks reported that one of his tanks had got bogged down in a slushy area, and they needed a recovery vehicle to pull it out from there. At the end of his tether by then, Sheonan resorted to some colourful language to tell the JCO that they would leave him behind with the

tank, and the LTTE would next morning teach him everything about how to pull out his tank using his private parts.

Jolted into action, the JCO threw out the driver of the tank, took his seat and reversed the tank with such ferocity over a small house that the house was completely destroyed (fortunately, the house was empty). The para commandos loaded their six dead and fourteen injured comrades on top of the tanks, as they started their journey back to Palali. They wanted to travel the maximum distance before dawn.

The Sikh LI soldiers who had accompanied Dalbir Singh had been on the move from Gwalior to Agra to Palali to Kokuvil, all in the last forty-eight hours, and were so exhausted that most of them just dozed off as soon as they reached Sheonan and his para commandos. They were woken up and told to move.

As they were about to leave, one of Sheonan's JCOs told Dalbir Singh that he wanted to show him something. He took his CO into the house he had been deployed in during the day and opened an almirah. The almirah was stacked to the top with cash and gold.

'We have not even touched it. Tomorrow someone might allege something against us and so I wanted to show it to you,' the JCO said. The CO called the house owners and asked them to verify that all their valuables

and money were intact. They repeated the exercise with the owners of every single house, till all of them were satisfied that the Indian soldiers had taken nothing.

'Death was so close that day,' Sheonan reflects, 'that if anyone was tempted to do something wrong – and they had ample chance to do it – he wouldn't do it.'

In her book *Broken Palmyrah*, the human rights activist and Jaffna University professor Dr Rajani Thiranagam – who was later killed by the LTTE – makes special mention of the para commandos, when she writes about human rights violations by the Sri Lankan army, IPKF, LTTE and other Tamil groups during 1987–88. She says a 'grey haired Major' of the commandos – Sheonan – treated the families at Kokuvil East with dignity, showed concern for civilian lives and ensured that nothing was looted from the houses.



Daylight had broken on 13 October by the time the tanks, accompanied by Dalbir Singh and his men, reached the railway line, a kilometre away. As the para commandos walked alongside the tanks, they were fired on from houses on both sides of the railway line. As none of the tanks were in a position to use their main guns, they mounted an MMG on top of each of the three tanks. A Sikh LI

soldier manning the MMG got a burst from an AK-47 on his chest and died. So a wounded para commando on top of the tank started manning that MMG.

The tanks were now making a bad situation worse. The barrel of a tank brought down an electric pole and got entangled in the electric cable. The tank dragged the cable and the pole for a few hundred metres, and disentangling it took a precious twenty minutes while LTTE fighters kept up heavy firing. The soldiers were lucky to make their way through it.

It was 7 a.m. when they reached Mishra at the Urelu temple crossing. Mishra, who had taught Sheonan at Staff College, greeted him with a cheerful hello.

Sheonan's reply was blunt and clear: 'Forget the hello, sir. We must get out of here immediately or we must start digging down. They are following us and they will be here very soon.'

For a moment Mishra didn't get what Sheonan was saying. The men and officers were all sitting calmly in groups in that open patch of ground, least expecting an attack. But Mishra quickly issued orders that they would all return to Palali: 13 Sikh LI would lead the move, followed by 10 Para Commandos, and 4/5 GR would move on a separate axis along the railway line.

The Sikh LI soldiers, having taken the brunt of LTTE assaults since the previous night, were up and running

in a jiffy. The para commandos followed, and Mishra joined Sheonan. But Mishra's radio operator was unable to connect him to the 4/5 GR CO, Lt Col I.B.S. Bawa. So Sheonan offered to run the 100 yards back to the battalion and pass on the message.

'I will go and tell them to move quickly. If they don't, they will be butchered,' Sheonan suggested.

'No, no, don't say butchered. Just tell them that commander has ordered that they move quickly,' Mishra replied.

On reaching the 4/5 GR location, the first person Sheonan encountered was the adjutant of the battalion, a young captain. Sheonan gave him the orders of the brigade commander, but the hassled young man was dismissive of Sheonan: 'You don't have to tell me what to do. I take my orders from my old man [i.e., the CO].'

His CO, Bawa, was barely 50 yards away. When Sheonan reached him and passed on Mishra's orders, the CO asked: 'Who are you? You f*** off. I am commanding my battalion.'

Sheonan was outraged: but he understood the CO's problem. The Gurkha battalion was unwilling to move because they had been pinned down by the intensity of LTTE fire. They should ideally have either moved earlier or prepared themselves to fight till the night, when they could have got out under the cover of darkness. But the

men had neither deployed themselves to fire effectively nor dug their positions to take cover and fire. Moreover, the officers were not with their men but bunched in a single group near the railway line.

The whizz of AK-47 shots was getting closer. Sheonan dashed back to Mishra and told him that the battalion CO had refused to move. Mishra shrugged and said, 'No point trying to persuade them – the CO has been killed.' In the two minutes that Sheonan had taken to run back to Mishra after talking to Bawa, he had been shot by the LTTE (in fact Bawa, critically wounded, died a few hours later).

CO 4/5 GR had been especially targeted because of an LTTE tactic that the IPKF had not yet figured out. The LTTE snipers were adept at picking out officers from among a body of Indian soldiers, looking out for those who wore epaulettes with stars, who were shadowed by a radio operator and the distinctive headgear and battledress that were other giveaways of their rank. Picking up these cues, LTTE snipers killed a disproportionately large number of IPKF officers in the first few days.

Under the cover of three tanks – the LTTE fighters didn't know that the tank guns weren't working so they didn't come too close – Mishra, Dalbir Singh, Sheonan and the rest of the para commandos and the Sikh LI soldiers started walking towards Palali. As soon as

they reached Pullampalai, a small IPKF administrative base, Harkirat Singh ordered the para commandos to go back and evacuate the gravely injured 4/5 GR CO. The para commandos felt they were in no shape to go back after what they had been through over the past two days, but they prepared to make the hazardous journey once again. It seemed their ordeal would never end.

Dalbir Singh prepared a team of twenty para commandos under Bhadauria to go back to the Urelu temple crossing. But once again they came under LTTE fire and they had to stop and take cover. By then, news came that apart from Bawa, 4/5 GR had lost two other officers, two JCOs and fifteen jawans, and another forty-two were injured. It was not possible for Bhadauria to evacuate all of them. He was asked to fall back to Pullampalai. At around 1 p.m., the Sri Lankan army sent its helicopter gunships to the Urelu temple crossing area and targeted the LTTE fighters. Only then were the tanks able to go and bring the dead and wounded 4/5 GR troops to the field hospital.

From Pullampalai, these tired men boarded military vehicles to return to Palali. Sheonan was driving the leading one-ton truck and Dalbir Singh was in the co-driver's seat. They had moved a kilometre when Sheonan saw three men on the road. He stopped the vehicle and

fired on them. The men ran away. When his CO asked him why he had done so, Sheonan said that they were surely up to some mischief.

This convoy crossed the spot uneventfully, but three days later an IPKF tank was blown up at exactly the same place. The LTTE had buried barrels of explosives under the road and when Sheonan and Dalbir Singh spotted them, the three men had been trying to fix the final connection of the wires to detonate the explosives.

It was around 2 p.m. on 13 October that the para commandos reached Palali for a hot meal, a full thirty hours later than the original battle plan had estimated.



After this disastrous operation, Major General A.S. Kalkat took charge at Palali. Harkirat Singh was later moved out of Sri Lanka and so was Mishra. When Kalkat took charge, he asked the para commandos to go back and destroy the building overlooking the Jaffna University ground from where the helicopters had been attacked. That was to be by way of retribution, to convey a message to the LTTE.

But it was a medical college, and the para commandos resisted, saying that it would serve no purpose. Moreover, the three-storey concrete structure would need a lot of

explosives to destroy it. So they were asked to destroy the LTTE HQ instead, the one Sheonan was supposed to destroy after landing at the Jaffna University ground on 12 October.

It was still the month of October and the rains hadn't let up. The para commandos walked from Palali to Kokuvil with a three-ton truck full of explosives to destroy that building. 'The weather was horrible. It was hot and sultry, with heavy rain. We were also being fired upon by the LTTE, and this order which put our lives in danger just to demolish an empty building made no sense,' says Sheonan.

A frustrated Sheonan started distributing sheets of paper to the para commandos, asking them how many of them would still volunteer to be a para commando. The para commando units are entirely drawn from volunteers. But that day, 90 per cent of the men wrote No.

Dalbir Singh admonished Sheonan: 'Why are you doing this?'

'Let's just have some good fun. If some of us have to die, so be it. But not for this idiotic job,' Sheonan replied. He laughed as he told me this story. That evening they destroyed the building.

As he was relating this, Sheonan's wife, Paramjit Kaur, entered the room. I asked her what she remembered most about the time her husband was deployed in Sri Lanka.

She recalled that after the battalion left for Sri Lanka, the wives of many para commandos came to her house and, in true Rajput tradition, hung their bangles in her living room. This was their way of saying that they trusted Sheonan to bring their husbands back alive. Sheonan interrupted her to say that that was the only time in their lives she ever wrote him a letter. Right after the Jaffna University landing disaster, he received a letter from her that said: 'We can live without you with honour. But we cannot live with you with dishonour. Just do your duty.'

Sheonan said every step he had taken had been guided by his determination to do his duty and do it with honour – and that included disregarding orders from Division HQ during the Jaffna operation. 'If I had taken their orders literally,' he said, 'I and all my men would have been killed.'

He added that he also had 'a family legacy to uphold', the legacy of his uncle Bhagat Singh. Hanged by the British at the age of twenty-three, Bhagat Singh was Sheonan's father Ranbir Singh's elder brother.



The ultimate accolade for Major Sheonan Singh and his men of 10 Para Commandos came from the LTTE.

During the exchange of prisoners on 18 November 1988 – when Sepoy Gora Singh of 13 Sikh LI, the only survivor from the Jaffna University ground, was returned – the LTTE's deputy leader Mahattaya told the IPKF that 'the commandos who landed at Kokuvil to raid the LTTE camp carried out the operation boldly and they were tough and brave soldiers'.

On his part, Sheonan too expressed admiration for his adversary. He told the army study group that arrived in Palali to prepare a report on IPKF operations, 'You still believe that these lungi-wearing Tamils know nothing about fighting. It doesn't matter what he is wearing, he is a far superior soldier to us.'



Lt Col Dalbir Singh, Sheonan and Sepoy Gangaram got Vir Chakras for the operation. Major Rajiv Nair and Captain Veniyoor were awarded Sena Medals for gallantry. Thanks to Major Sheonan's testimony at an Inter-Services Court of Inquiry into the Jaffna University operation which cleared their names, four of the IAF helicopter pilots were awarded Vir Chakras a year later, while the four co-pilots got Vayu Sena Medals for gallantry.

For Major Birendra Singh and the other twenty-eight men of 13 Sikh LI, slaughtered like sitting ducks in the Jaffna University ground, there were no coffins draped in the Indian tricolour, and no funerals with military honours – their bodies were never found. According to one persistent rumour they were cremated en masse by the LTTE; according to another they were all buried together in an unmarked grave.



The IPKF lost 1155 men in Sri Lanka between 1987 and 1990, when it withdrew from that country. Today, a black granite memorial near Palali airport stands as a sombre tribute to the IPKF men who died in that ill-fated operation in October 1987.

Although several of those who served in the IPKF have penned their memoirs, the defence ministry has not released the official history of Operation Pawan. The seventy men who fought and died at Jaffna during those thirty-seven hours from 12 to 13 October 1987 remain largely forgotten. They were part of a disastrous military misadventure that nobody wants to remember.