

Revisiting Longewala - An epic battle won by both soldiers and airmen

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A recent controversy on the battle of Longewala is wholly unnecessary and detracts from the reality of that iconic event. Every battle can be perceived from different perspectives. Individual claims on such events are more prone to misinterpretations.

The correct and factual record of a battle is therefore, always, based on accounts of those who fought in it, and those who planned and conducted it. Gallantry awards are awarded after the action is corroborated by a number of eye witnesses.

It is therefore helpful to analyse the reality of the battle to separate facts from fiction. This is particularly relevant since the movie 'Border' based on the battle had captured the public imagination. Movies of necessity dramatise the action. The director of the film cannot be blamed for using artistic license to increase its market value. Those who fought the gallant action cannot likewise be blamed for the way the film portrays them. In real life, they are all modest human beings unrecognisable from any other citizen. Those who really fought speak the least of it.

The battle was a classic example of a joint effort by the army and air wings in destroying a bold armoured thrust by Pakistan. The Indian Air Force would not have had a concentration of tanks to destroy, if the small and outnumbered army position had not stood its ground and stopped the armoured thrust.

Pakistani tanks would have made a deep thrust into our territory if they had not been stopped that night. The army position would have been overrun, if the air attack had not come when it did early the next morning. The army pilot, in an unarmed small aircraft, made a significant impact by first directing artillery fire and then guiding the Hunters of the air force on to the Pakistani tanks. In classical military terminology it was the army's anvil on which the hammer of the air force destroyed the enemy thrust. Both were needed and combined superbly to bring about an outcome which is rated as a classic battle.

It is pertinent to mention what the Pakistani experts had to say of this battle. Brig (Retd) Zaheer Alam Khan commanded a tank regiment in the sector. He is one of nine brothers who served in the Pakistani defence forces, with one brother rising to become Chief of Joint Staff. His is a graphic account of the confusion and chaos that prevailed because of not assessing the terrain correctly and of the shock when the Indian group fired back on the leading column.

Unable to move off the single track which was being denied by Major Chandpuri's men, they remained bunched up and offered themselves for destruction by the Indian Hunters in the morning. No wonder Longewala is referred to by some Pakistan analysts as their biggest tank disaster in that war.

The questions which need to be asked are, who would have kept the Indian chain of command informed of where the action was, of the seriousness of the threat, and the nature of targets that were available, if not from Longewala? Whose interest was being served, in falsifying the depiction of battle in a war that had been won? It

would be grossly unfair to claim that the entire chain of command from Company to Division and above up to the redoubtable Sam Manekshaw was party to it.

The air force itself won eight Vir Chakras in this action. Air Chief Marshal Lal in his book, *My Years in the Air Force* refers to the critical role played by the outnumbered but brave group which held their ground at Longewala, and refers by name to their commander.

It is therefore a travesty to interpret this fine battle as an achievement of one service or group or even an individual. That is what modern war is all about. Unless it is fought jointly without regard to the glory of one individual or group, it will be lost. That is what happened on the Pakistani side, where personal rivalries and professional egos made a mess of the little chance of success which might have existed.

It is time to reflect on the nature of military battles in the age of modern technology. Battles can go wrong within the hour by a wrong decision by the man on ground, or, by a commander in his map room. While the best results are obtained by combined action, the best plan can sometimes be defeated by one weak link in the chain.

When it all works well a wise leader thanks fortuitous circumstance, instead of casting aspersions. Field Marshal Slim, who was a legendary commander, wrote of his reconquest of Burma as an outcome of many nationalities and forces fighting together, which fortunately proved good enough to obtain victory. Let us be modest in victory and be thankful for the efforts by the soldiers and airmen who won us the battle of Longewala.