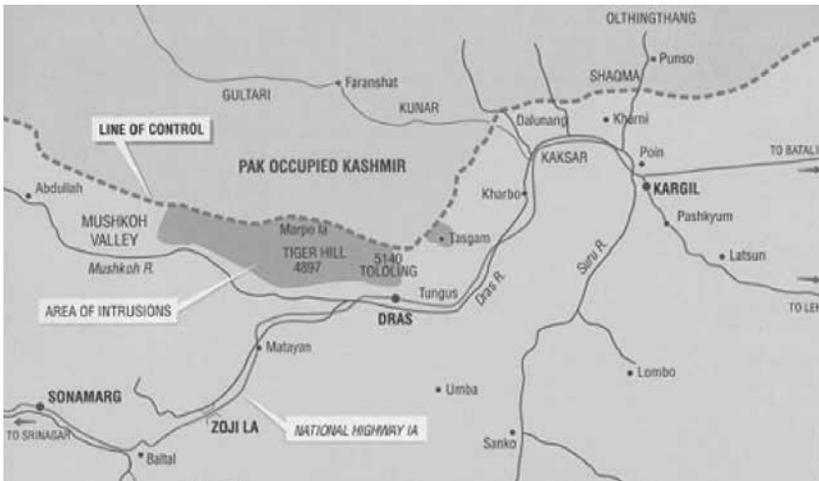


# Battle of Tololing: The Toughest Battle Ever Fought

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TEAM 15 GRENADIERS

## Introduction



Source: Kargil: 10 After- A Ringside View ([www.sify.com](http://www.sify.com))

The battle of Tololing was a pivotal battle of the Kargil War which turned the tide in favour of India. Tololing is only 4 km from Dras, with excellent domination of the National Highway IA (NH1A) by observation and fire, the life line to Leh. It is an ideal location to interdict the NH1A, and the capture of Tololing was vital for the safety of the highway. Tololing is connected with Point (Pt) 5140 via another

hill feature called Hump and formed a complex. Pt 5140 is a majestic feature, imposing over the entire Tololing complex, from where the intruders were able to take precise shots to interdict the highway. The feature is devoid of vegetation and is full scraggy boulders of different sizes and shapes which do not provide any cover from observation and fire. The ridge is located between two nalas, the Bimbat nala in the east and the Tololing nala in the west, both flowing from north to south.

## **Attack Plan**

As the Kargil War progressed, the capture of Tololing became essential to flush out the Pakistani intruders. 56 Mountain Brigade was given the task of capture of Tololing and on May 19 1999, 18 Grenadiers was tasked for the capture of Tololing at the earliest by the Brigade Commander. The attack plan was as follows:

- 18 Grenadiers to capture Tololing by first light on May 23.
- 1 Naga to attack Pt 5140 from the east.
- D-Day selected was for May 22.

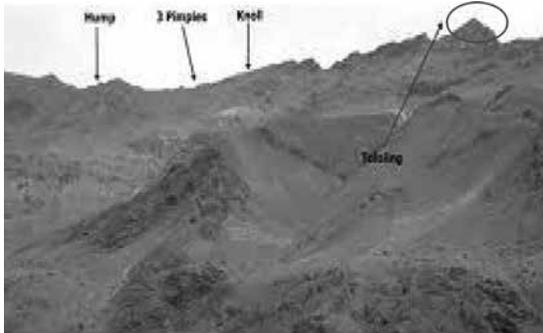
The attack plan of 18 Grenadiers was:

- The Ghataks to move along approach the southeast, with 'A' Company to follow them. The Ghataks to provide a firm base to 'A' Company to launch the final assault.
- 'B' Company to follow the southern approach to Pt 4590.
- 'C' & 'D' Companies to move along the Tololing nala and attack the feature from the west.
- D-Day was fixed for the night of May 22/23.

## **Execution**

Despite snowfall, drizzle and poor visibility, the troops left the administrative base on the afternoon of May 22 and reached the firm base by last light. The attack began at 2130 hours (hrs). The Ghataks, followed by 'A' Company, moved towards the Tololing feature from the eastern, and the most likely, approach. However, due to the inhospitable terrain, dense fog and poor visibility, coupled with limited artillery fire, the Ghataks and 'A' Company were well short of the objective and the attack did not go as planned. Notwithstanding, the Ghataks firmed in 500 metres (m) short of Tololing to provide a firm base to the Jats of 'A' Company. The foggy condition continued till 1530 hrs which certainly assisted 'A' Company to move without being observed, but soon the company came

under heavy fire from the feature and was pinned down by heavy automatic as well as sniper fire. The troops took cover behind boulders and returned the fire with Medium Machine Guns, Light Machine Guns and Rocket Launchers (MMGs, LMGs and RLs). The enemy was well entrenched, and difficult to pinpoint and sight. Apart from Tololing, the troops also came under fire from Hump and Pt 5140 since the southeast approach was well under observation and fire from both these locations.



As the attack could not progress, 'A' Company under Maj R S Rathore was given the task to launch operations along the southeast spur at 0600 hrs on May 24. The company managed to close in up to 300-400 m of the enemy by 1700 hrs when the bad weather suddenly cleared up. The Pakistani troops opened up heavy fire on the Indian troops and the men of 'A' Company were pinned down in the open and had only boulders to take cover behind. Throughout the day on May 24, 'A' Company remained pinned down and was subjected to a heavy volume of fire. The company suffered one fatal casualty to a sniper, apart from one injured. That was the first casualty of the battalion in Operation Vijay. The slightest move by a soldier came under heavy automatic fire or a sniper shot. However, the brave Jats kept returning the fire with MMGs, AGLs (Automatic Grenade Launchers), LMGs and 51 mm mortars.

On May 25, 'C' Company under Maj Johdas Gupta and 'D' Company under Capt NS Rathore were launched along the southwest spur to Pt 4590 to divide the enemy's attention by presenting him with another direction of assault, simultaneously cutting off his axis of maintenance and support from the other direction. Once again, they were pinned down 400-500 m short of Pt 4590. 'C' and 'D' companies were also under observation from Pt 5140 and Hump. It was then that Maj Ajit Singh of 16 Grenadiers was given the task

to explore a new approach along the southern spur of Pt 4590 at 1100 hrs with his platoon. On the same day, the Ghataks under Lt Balwan moved up to reinforce the 16 Grenadiers platoon.

Air strikes were launched on May 26 against the intruders which boosted the morale of own soldiers. However, unfortunately, two MiG aircraft were lost on May 27 and one MI-17 on May 28 to a Stinger missile fired from Pt 5140 which led to the cessation of close support by the Air Force.

It was then planned to launch a fresh attack on the feature and a two-pronged attack was launched on May 28 at 0400 hrs by the Ghataks from the southeast ridge and by 'B' Company from the southern ridge. The Ghataks could move up to 30 m short of Tololing before being pinned down by accurate enemy fire. The Ghataks remained pinned down for the entire day and a plan to extricate them was to be launched from the southern approach. The Ghataks and one section of 'A' Company were extricated on the night of May 28 and they moved towards the southern approach. On the southern slope, 'B' Company was successful in reaching 30 m short of Pt 4590 after being pinned down by heavy enemy fire. Realising the difficulty of the terrain along the southeast spur, it was decided to launch an assault from the southern spur. Thus, the Ghataks augmented the strength of 'B' Company at the southern spur.

'B' Company under Major Rajesh Adhikari launched an assault on Pt 4950 from the south on May 30 at 0130 hrs. Two teams of Ghataks, under Lt Balwan and Capt Nimbalkar supplemented the 'B' Company column. The Ghatak team with Capt Nimbalkar was pinned down from, from the west of Barbad Bunker, however, the column under Maj Adhikari could reach 20 m from Barbad Bunker and in the ensuing fight, Maj Adhikari, along with two other soldiers, sacrificed their lives but not before inflicting heavy casualties on the enemy. Unfortunately, the enemy was able to reinforce Pt 4590 from Pt 5140 and the feature could not be captured. Contact with the enemy was maintained till the next attack on June 02/03 was launched again by the battalion.

On the night of June 2/3, the attack was launched at 0030 hrs along the southern spur. Col Kushal C Thakur, Commanding Officer (CO), with Lt Col R Vishwanathan, second-in-command, himself led the assault with the Ghataks while a section of 'A' Company, made an attempt to capture Barbad Bunker. In the intense fire-fight at ranges as close as 15-20 m, Lt Col R Vishwanathan sustained a machine gun burst in the groin, while a few others assaulting troops were wounded. While being evacuated, like a brave soldier and true leader, Lt Col R Vishwanathan told the CO to leave him as he in any case would not survive,

and evacuate those who had a chance of survival, before he passed away. At this stage, Col KC Thakur appreciated that there was a requirement of additional troops and firepower to neutralise the enemy's strength and opposition. Finally, his assessment was accepted and he was told to firm in. This action led to a stalemate in operations for the next twelve days. During this period, the artillery fire was effectively employed in plastering Tololing from June 3 to June 12, which helped in breaking the will of the enemy to contest our attacks.

### **Situation on June 4, 1999**

The Divisional Commander appreciated that while the capture of Tololing was vital for removing the enemy's domination of NH 1A, it required detailed planning, fresh troops and adequate artillery and logistics support. For the next phase, two fresh units, 2 Rajputana Rifles (RAJ RIF) and 18 Garhwal Rifles joined 56 Mountain Brigade. It was also felt that direct fire by artillery guns was an effective proposition for silencing the enemy machine guns which had been inflicting maximum casualties on the assaulting troops. The gunners lived up to the expectations and hereafter, direct fire of the Bofors guns became a decisive battle winning factor.

The revised attack plan of 56 Mountain Brigade was formulated and now 18 Grenadiers was tasked to provide a firm base in Phase 1 for an attack on Tololing by 2 RAJRIF from the southeast to the southwest, and secure the feature by 0600 hrs on June 13. Subsequently in Phase 2, 18 Grenadiers was to secure Hump. The attack was executed as planned and 2 RAJRIF was able to capture Tololing after a bloody battle. During the attack on Hump, Col KC Thakur retrieved the mortal remains of Lt Col R Vishwanathan amidst heavy artillery shelling and enemy small arms fire.

### **Operations of Features Hump I to VI**

As part of exploitation operations, 18 Grenadiers was tasked to capture Hump and 'A' Company was nominated for the task. Hump was a whale back feature connected to Tololing by a saddle. It consisted of 8-9 enemy bunkers in echelons which finally terminated at the base of Pt 5140. The H hour for the attack was 1945 hrs. At approximately, 1925 hrs while the company was formed up for attack, it came under enemy artillery fire and suffered 12 fatal and 6 non-fatal, but grievously injured, casualties. On the request of the CO, the H hour was readjusted by plus 30 minutes. The reserves for Phase 2, 'C' and 'D' Companies were tasked to capture Hump and the troops captured the bunkers one by one.

One Pika gun was recovered which was used again by the gallant troops against the enemy. Hump was captured by first light on June 14. The troops occupying the captured bunkers come under heavy automatic fire, artillery shelling and sniper fire from Pt 5140, but they held on to the positions by returning the fire with the MMGs, AGLs, RLs and LMGs. The capture of Hump provided a firm base to 13 Jammu and Kashmir Rifles (JAK RIF) who were tasked to capture Pt 5140. Thus, the capture of Tololing and Hump provided the initial and much awaited success. The capture of Tololing turned out to be a turning point in the Operation Vijay, breaking the enemy's will to fight. The success at Tololing came at a heavy loss of two Officers, two Junior Commissioned Officers (JCOs) and 21 Other Ranks (ORs). For this phase of gallant action, the unit was awarded one Maha Vir Chakra, four Vir Chakras, 10 Sena Medals, two Mention-in-Despatches, two Chief of the Army Staff (COAS) Commendation cards and three General Officer-in-Commanding (GOC-in-C) Commendation cards.

### **Reasons for Inability to Secure the Feature**

During the period of the initial attacks, the difficulties faced by the units which had resulted in casualties and slow progress of operations were:

- The troops had to switch over from the counter-insurgency mode to conventional operations within a very short duration, hence, reorientation training and rehearsals were limited.
- The urgency of the operations led to incomplete acclimatisation, and adequate high altitude clothing was not available in the initial stages.
- The information provided about the enemy dispositions was limited and hampered proper planning. Non-availability of adequate maps further compounded the issue.
- The attacks were launched in the initial stages without adequate artillery support which resulted in heavy casualties and led to limited progress of the operations.
- Most of the troops had been inducted in this area for the first time and were not familiar with it.
- There was lack of administrative support of porters and ponies for dumping of ammunition and war-like equipment.

### **Effect of Tololing on Future Operations**

The battle of Tololing was one of the toughest battles fought during the Kargil War. Its capture was a major breakthrough and it lifted the fog of despondency. It

## **SCHOLAR WARRIOR**

enthused the soldiers to defeat the enemy and take back the occupied positions. This provided greater resolve and greater confidence in the units and formations as the troops were able to quickly mop up remaining enemy bunkers and reclaim own precious territory.

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This inspiring narrative has been contributed by the present team of 18 Grenadiers.