

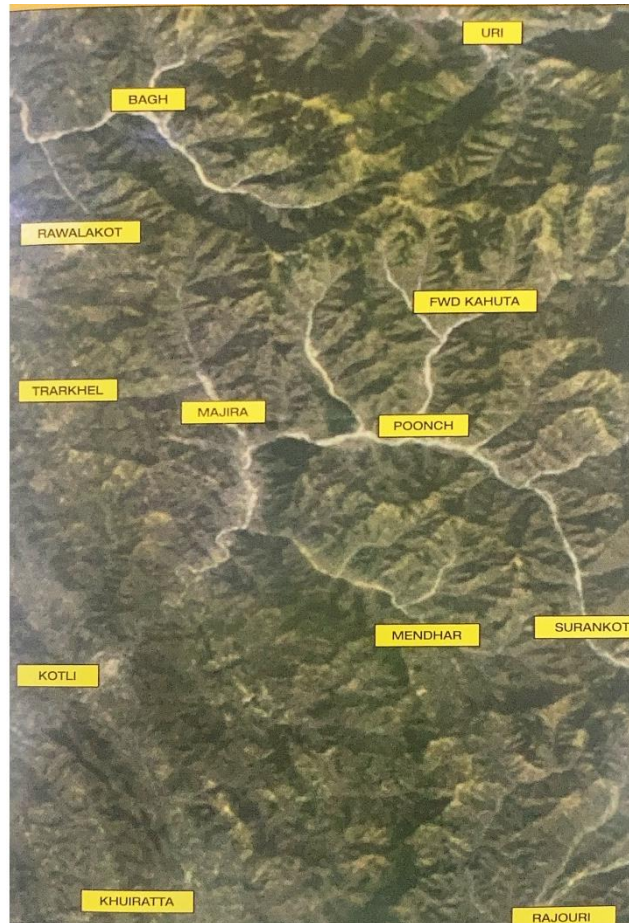
Battle of Poonch 1971

The 1971 Indo-Pak War began with Pakistan launching pre-emptive air strikes against eleven Indian airbases on 03 December 1971. The war was forced upon due to widespread genocide of people of East Pakistan carried out by an oppressive military regime under General Yahya Khan of Pakistan. The war, which was short and intense, was fought on both Eastern and Western fronts. The thirteen days war resulted in complete surrender of Pakistan forces and the creation of Bangladesh. The Indian Armed Forces reigned supreme over the Pakistani military in the battle field. The Battle of Poonch is one of the most notable battles which were fought on the western sector. ¹

Poonch, located at a height of 1000 metres above sea level, lies in the South-Western corner of J&K. It is about 55 Kms from Uri via Kahuta and 96 Kms from Srinagar via Shopyan. It is surrounded on all sides by high hills. The hji pir salient, held by Pakistan, separates it from Uri. Pakistan is better served by roads in the area, as the terrain on its side is easy, slopping down to the plains. This enables Pakistan to concentrate troops along the front conveniently. While the Poonch town and the valley are at a height of about 1,000 metres, the mountain ridges are about 1,800 metres high. Most of the nullahs drain into the Poonch river.

The Ceasefire Line in this Sector runs from south-west to north east. The Poonch river flows from India to Pakistan across the Ceasefire Line, while the Betal Nala enters India from across the Ceasefire Line. There are two other nullahs, viz. Tatan-di-Rangar and Chirikot, both of which originate in the Pak, held territory across the Ceasefire Line and flow into Indian territory. These stony nullahs, with little water for most part of the year, provide a safe passage to Pak infiltrators.

¹ Vijay Diwas Celebration at National War Memorial Southern Command Pune, Press Information Bureau, Ministry of Defence, 16 December 2020. <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleaseIframePage.aspx?PRID=1681094>



Terrain

Source: - Natu, Brig Vijay. Major General A.V Natu , a Soldier's Soldier, September 2023

Planning and Preparation

The Poonch Sector was defended by 93 Infantry Brigade commanded by Brigadier AV Natu . Kalai Bridge on the Poonch River linked it with the 25 Infantry Division commanded by Major General Kundan Singh. The Brigade had divided the Sector into three Sub-Sectors before the commencement of war as follows:

(i) Gulpur area to the West of Betal Nala (ii) Banwat area to the East of Betal Nala (iii) Doda area to the East of Dorunli Nala.

In its overall plan, the Brigade had assigned the responsibility of depending on Gulpur to 1/4 GORKHA RIFLES commanded by Lieutenant Colonel (Later Lieutenant General) V Madan, of Banwat to 6 SIKH commanded by Lieutenant Colonel KL Rattan and 8 JAT, and of Doda to 11 JAK Militia. Subsequently, 13 MAHAR (ex 33 Infantry Brigade) was also brought into Poonch in mid-November 1971.

93 Infantry Brigade was put through an exercise in the Kandi Budhal Area in April-May 1971. This was to rehearse the defensive and offensive operational plans. 21 PUNJAB was earmarked for an offensive task across the LoC as and when the opportunity presented itself. During November 1971, Lieutenant Colonel RN Sharma the Commanding Officer was ready with the attack plan and made his unit rehearse it in depth areas of the Brigade Sector.

From September 1971, with the induction of additional forces, the final deployment of 93 Infantry Brigade during the hostilities and thereafter was as below:

- 21 PUNJAB plus Company RR : deployed at KG and had the responsibility of areas from Mendhar to KG and the left bank of Poonch River,
- 1/4 Gorkha Rifles plus Company 4 BIHAR: deployed at Durga and had the responsibility of areas from the right bank of the Poonch River till Langoor Post,
- 6 Sikh: deployed at Banwat and had the responsibility from Malti post to Nagali Gurudwara,
- 11 J&K Militia Battalion: had the responsibility to defend the area from Doda to Kopra II Spur,
- 104 BSF Battalion: had the responsibility to defend areas from Kopra II to Gulmarg Heights,
- Artillery: 195 Mountain Regiment with 18 Guns and 55 Heavy Mortars.
- Regiment with 18 Heavy Mortars, Engineers: 370 Engineer Company,
- 33 Infantry Brigade: this Brigade from 39 Infantry Division was inducted in this Sector in late November / early December 1971,
- JAT ex 33 Infantry Brigade: the Battalion was placed under the command of 93 Infantry Brigade and occupied depth localities in Banwat Area,
- ITBP Battalion: The Battalion was tasked to protect various Vulnerable Areas (VA) and Vulnerable Points (VP) in the Brigade Sector.

The Battle

On 03 December 1971, Pakistan opened Western Front with wide-spread pre-emptive strikes to gain impetus for the ground attacks that were to follow. At 0500 hours on the same day, two Pakistani aircraft flew over Poonch and fired a few rockets at the administrative base of 6 SIKH causing some damage. Pakistan's 12 Infantry Division had launched its offensive against 93 Infantry Brigade attacking the Durga, Banwat and Doda defences with the aim to capture Poonch. Throughout the night of 03 and 04 December, there was heavy shelling by enemy on all forward picquets. Message poured from all picquets that they were under attack or troops were amassing them. Since 93 Infantry Brigade was farthest away along the line of communication, so they could expect no reinforcement whatsoever. However, Brigadier Natu, Commander 93 Infantry Brigade, had laid his plans well and was confident of his troops's ability to deal with the enemy.

Operations in Gulpur Subsector

The Gulpur sub-sector was triangular territory bounded by the Betal Nala on the east and the Poonch river in the South. The Ceasefire Line formed its base and the junction of the Betal Nala and the Poonch river. apex. The area comprised a series of spurs and ridges, starting from across the Ceasefire Line and sloping down to the Poonch river and the Betal Nala on the Indian side. The Poonch town is only about 8 km from the Ceasefire Line as the crow flies. This subsector was important in many ways:

It denied physical domination of the town from the north-west. It covered the infiltration routes along the beds of the Poonch river, Betal Nala, Tatan-di-Rangar Nala and Chirikot Nala. It dominated the old Kahuta-Poonch road and denied its use to Pakistan for troop movement towards Poonch town. The Pak threat to Gulpur was estimated at a Brigade

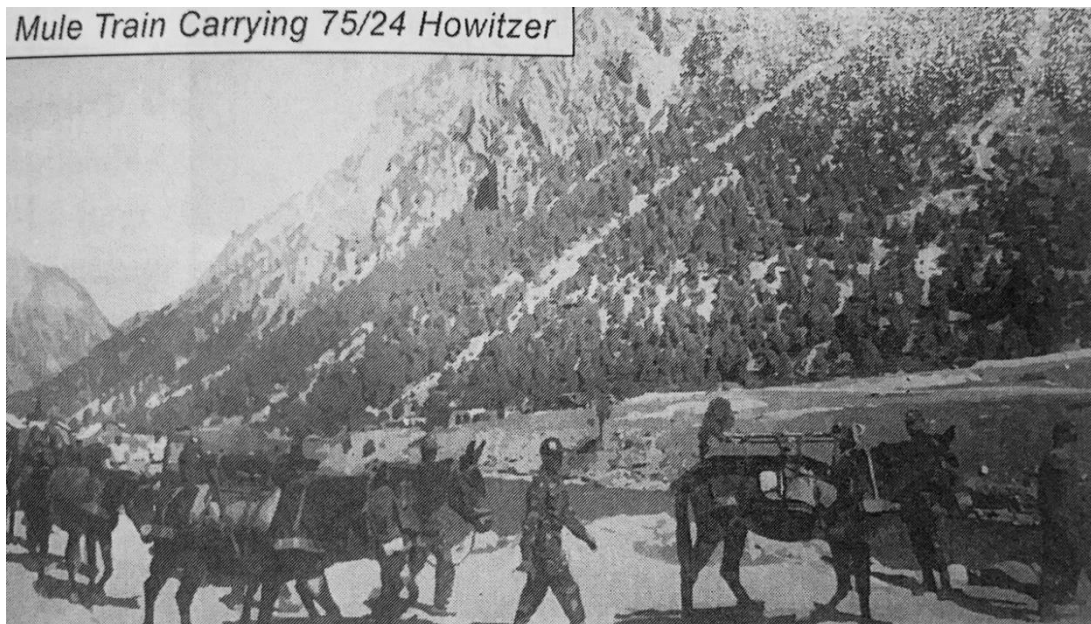
strength, supported by artillery. As there were apprehensions that Pakistan might bring tanks up to the Poonch river, precautions were taken to guard against the contingency. The existing anti-tank minefield was extended up to the water line, and a number of recoilless guns and rocket launcher teams were formed to act as tank hunting parties.

1/4 Gorkha Rifles was responsible for the defence of the Gulpur sub-sector, which included localities of 412A (Langoor), 412 (Agni), 413 (Durga), 415 (Lata, Bhim, Hathi), 417 (Sarla, Sumi, Baaz), and 418 (Ujagar), as part of 93 Infantry Brigade Sector. Bump, Rakh Haveli, Veer and Niti (414) were new defended localities that were occupied just before the outbreak of hostilities.

The Tatan-di-Rangar Nala separated the Pak defended sector beyond the Ceasefire Line into two parts. While the area to the north was held by 28 POK Battalion, the area to the south was held by 5 Frontier Force Rifles. Tipu 1, 2 and 3 and Babar 1, 2 and 3 were the strongest Pak positions near the Ceasefire Line.

At 2000 hrs on 3 December, the Pak Army started heavy shelling of the area. By 2030 hrs the mortars of 1/4 Gorkha Rifles also started engaging Pak troops while Indian artillery pounded the Pak positions. The first Pak attack on the Langoor position overran the listening posts, breached the minefield and penetrated the entrance of the defended locality. But 1/4 Gorkha Rifles, assisted by artillery, repulsed the attack and drove the attackers out.

Another Pak attack launched in the early hours of 4 December, was also repulsed by 0300 hrs. It is said that Pakistanis suffered about 45 casualties during the attack. After the operation, Lance Naik Nar Jung Gurung was found killed with no less than 56 bayonet wounds. Subsequent to this encounter, the Pakistanis made no serious effort to capture the Indian Posts. Indian artillery, however, continued to pound the Pak positions and strong raiding parties were sent almost every night till the end of the war to harass the Pakistanis.



Mule Carrying 75/24 Howitzer

Source: Brig Satjit Singh. Battle of Poonch 1971 Operations

Operations in Banwat Sub Sector

The Banwat Sector included a Hill Complex which dominated Poonch town. The defence of this Sector was necessary to protect the town from any assault from the East and North East. The complex culminated at Piquet 405 and included Tund and Helipad. It was the highest point in the complex. This Piquet and Piquets 406 and 406A were considered grounds of tactical importance (GTI) and 6 SIKH was entrusted with the task of defending this area. To the South of 6 SIKH Battalion Defended Area was deployed 8 JAT. This Battalion was placed under the command of 93 Infantry Brigade on 26th November to give depth to the 6 SIKH defences.

The pattern of attack on 6 SIKH was similar to that on 1/4 GORKHA RIFLES. On 3rd December, the Pakistanis commenced heavy shelling of the Banwat Defended Area. Helipad and Tund were subjected to heavy and continuous shelling with guns of medium calibre. All lines of communication were cut off near the Brigade Signal Exchange and radio communication was resorted to. Pakistan Army launched a full-blooded attack on Helipad and Tund between 0300 hours and 0600 hours on the night of 03/04 December with three Battalions - 7 POK, 5 FFR and 14 POK. There was fierce hand-to-hand fighting lasting nearly two hours. The Helipad fell to Pakistani troops at 1030 hours. The remnants of the two platoons defending it withdrew to the main defences under very heavy odds and Pakistani pressure. The Platoons facing Kalas and Kasba approaches held their ground and took a heavy toll of the Pakistani troops and beat back the attack. In view of the mounting threat to the area, two Platoons of 8 JAT were sent to reinforce it. The attackers then attempted to isolate the area at 1500 hours by inserting troops between Points 405 and 406. The attempt was foiled by artillery and MMG fire, inflicting heavy casualties.

Pakistani troops resumed the offensive on the night of 04/05 December. The attacks were once again beaten back by effective shelling and air strikes. The Pakistani troops continued to remain in occupation of the Helipad. They could not, however, make any further advance due to the effective LMG and MMG fire brought down on them. The gunners did a magnificent job in bringing down accurate fire of the entire Divisional artillery on the Pakistani concentration / assembly area, forming-up place (FUP) and all approaches to Piquet 405.

Artillery shelling went on from the Pakistani side also and they continued to probe the Indian defences to gain some ground at any cost. They had orders to capture Poonch by the evening of 10 December as revealed by Second Lieutenant Golap Khan, a Bengali officer of 51 Punjab Regiment, who crossed over to India on 07 December. All Pakistani efforts, however failed, and 6 SIKH cleared the area North-East of Tund and Kasba Spur. Pakistani losses were so heavy that they broke contact with Piquet 405 and withdrew from Helipad at 0500 hours on 06 December. Helipad was re-occupied at 0900 hours by two platoons of 6 Sikh. The platoon commander later reported that the area was found covered with a sheet of blood and considerable amount of ammunition.



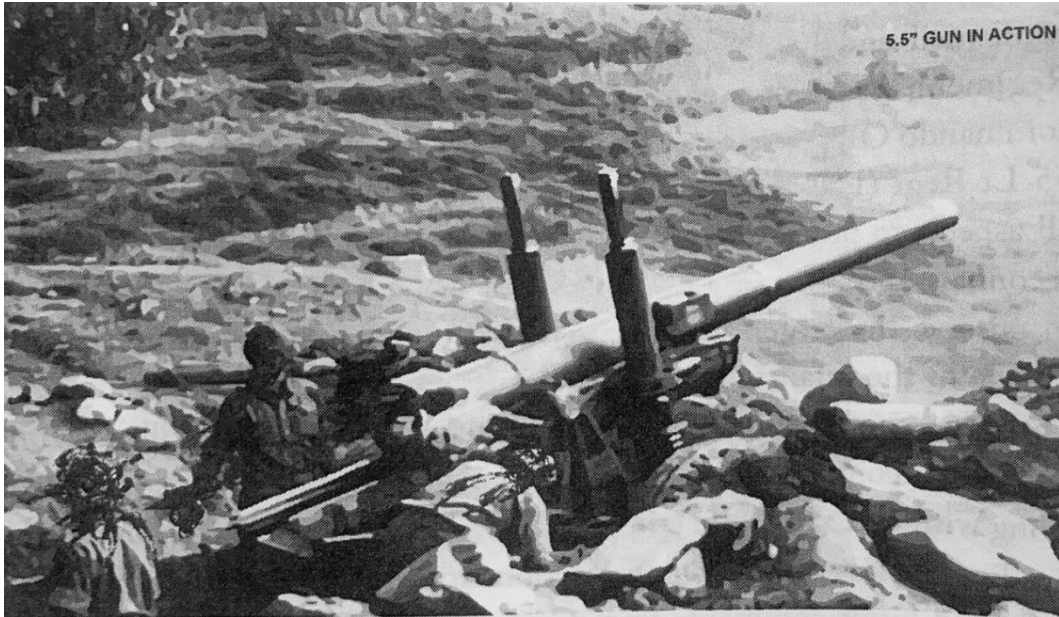
Soldiers of 6 SIKH during the Battle of Poonch

Source: ADGPI

<https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=1364075477129296&set=a.921772321359616>

The attackers tried to occupy Helipad again at 2235 hours on 07 December and formed up with two companies each at the Helipad, Kasba and Kalas approaches. They were dispersed by heavy artillery fire. Another attempt was made on 09 December at 0200 hours which too was repulsed, and Pakistani troops were driven back. Credit goes to the valiant leadership of the Company Commander of 405, 406 posts, Major KS Padda and one of his Platoon commanders, Captain Punjab Singh, in beating back the attacks launched on these posts.

8 JAT was occupying the area south of 6 SIKH. The area was subject to shelling from 2000 hours on 3rd December, followed at 2115 hours by an assault on Bandi Chechiyan from the direction of Kasba Spur. The attackers, in Battalion strength, also sent a Company to the position along Dorungli Nalah. Mortars and MMGs engaged and broke up the attack. The Pakistanis returned twice to attack Bandi Chechiyan, first at midnight on 03/04 December and then at 2000 hours on 04 December. Both the attacks were made in Battalion strength, comprising elements of 16 AK Battalion, 2 FF Battalion and two Mujahid Companies. These attacks were repulsed by 8 JAT. On 06 December, one Platoon of 8 JAT surprised and chased away Pakistani troops trying to interpose between Piquets 406 and 406A. Thereafter, Pakistani troops did not attempt any attack on 8 JAT. Captain K S Rathi was martyred while defending the Post and was awarded VrC (Posthumously).



Source: Brig Satjit Singh. Battle of Poonch 1971 operations. KW Publisher Pvt Ltd

Doda Sub-Sector

In the defence lay out of the 93 Infantry Brigade, 11 JAK Militia was deployed in the Doda sub-sector, to the east of Dorunli Nala. Gutrian and Shahpur, the two vital positions of the complex, were held by 'D' Company. The Pak offensive started with the shelling of these positions at 1930 hrs on 03 December. Two attacks on Gutrian, which followed the shelling, were beaten back. The third attack came at 0230 hours on 04 December. India responded with heavy shelling and small arms fire. But some Pakistani troops managed to enter the defended locality, lobbed grenades into the Indian MMG and LMG bunkers, and wounded the gunners. They even occupied a part of the Post. The Picquet Commander organised an immediate counterattack and after a hand-to-hand fight, recovered the lost ground. In this action, Lance Havildar Jagdish Singh, operating a Light Machine Gun, killed all the intruders. He was decorated with the Vir Chakra. Some attackers, who had infiltrated into the defended locality in the center, were attacked by the Company Commander with three men. In this action Captain Mohammed Sharif Khan, the Pakistani Company Commander, was wounded and taken prisoner along with five ORs of 26 POK Battalion. The attackers withdrew, leaving behind a large number of dead bodies, arms and equipment.

The Pakistanis attacked Shahpur with two Companies at 2030 hours on 3 December, even when the attack on Gutriyan was in progress. They made three attempts to capture the Shahpur Picquet and the Shahpur OP and managed to come within a few metres of the crawl trenches of the Picquet'. All these attacks were beaten back.

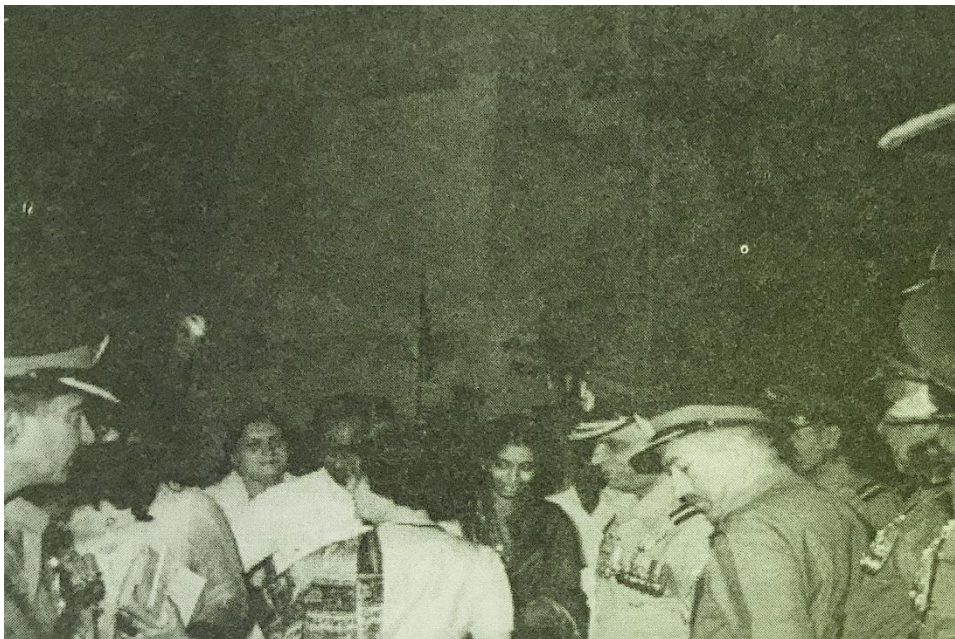
Battle of Thanpir

On the night of 03/04 December, as the battle was raging in other Sectors of the Brigade, Brigadier Anant Natu had spoken with the Company Commander of Thanpir Company to be vigilant and alert. Brigadier Natu took permission from the Division Commander to move two companies of the Division Reserve Battalion to Kalai Bridge. On 04 December 1971, at 0615 hours, Pakistani Force penetrated through the 11 JAK Militia Defended Area and

surrounded the Thanpir Post with strength of two-three companies, the post fell to the enemy by 0800 hours. The Pakistani also occupied the Chandak village. The occupation of Thanpir by Pakistani troops endangered Poonch, and the Brigade defended Sector including Rajauri and Mandi Valleys, and also threatened the strategic Kalai Bridge, the lifeline of the Brigade.

13 MAHAR, which had been moved to Kalai Bridge Area, was ordered to attack and capture Thanpir. 'A' and 'D' Companies of the Battalion concentrated at Chandak and commenced the assault at 1500 hours on 04 December. The Chandak Spur was cleared of the infiltrators in about two hours. At 0700 hours, on 05 December, the Battalion was ordered to capture Thanpir. The operation for the capture of Thanpir started at 0800 hours. The assault echelon ('A' Company) moved along the knife-edge ridge from Chandak to Thanpir to avoid enemy fire. Another company moved from the Chandak Spur to the Northeast. Both Companies finally converged on Thanpir from the South. A BSF Company climbed up the Spur and posed a threat from the Eastern flank. A Para Commando Group climbed along the Nagali Spur, to threaten the stronghold from the West.

As Pakistanis did not expect an attack along this precipitous slope, they were taken by surprise. Thanpir was captured by the Indians at 1800 hours on 05 December, thus removing the threat to Poonch from the East. Pakistanis fled, leaving behind 20 dead, and many arms and ammunition, including one recoilless gun of Chinese make. The body of Lieutenant Colonel Nazir Ahmed Khan, the CO of 26 POK Battalion, was recovered along with the body of Major Javed, his Battery Commander.



Brigadier Natu MVC, Commander 93 Infantry Brigade, seen with Mrs Indira Gandhi after the ceremony.
Source:- Natu, Brig Vijay. Major General A.V Natu, a Soldier's Soldier, September 2023

Brigadier Anant Natu as Commander of 93 Infantry Brigade not only ensured that his brigade successfully defended its area of responsibility but after having done so, launched an offensive to capture a forward defended localities of Pakistan opposite his Brigade Sector. Brigadier Anant Vishwanath Natu who successfully organised the defence of Poonch was awarded the Maha Vir Chakra.

Indian Army had clearly anticipated that Pakistan would make a serious effort to grab Poonch

in the event of war. The Indian plan was sound, well-coordinated and well executed. The brigade had deployed the units in such a manner that no gaps were left in the defences, and one could effectively support the other. All over the sector, the artillery gave good support to the infantry and often, by itself, broke up the attack before it really got under way. These factors helped the valour of the Indian troops to smash all attacks on Poonch by a determined enemy force more than double in numbers.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

1. Natu, Brig Vijay. Major General A.V Natu , a Soldier's Soldier, September 2023.
2. The India-Pakistan War of 1971: A History. S.N Prasad and U.P. Thapliyal.(2014). Natraj Publishers and Ministry of Defence, New Delhi.
3. Singh, Brig Satjit. Battle of Poonch 1971 operations. KW Publishers Pvt Ltd.