

The Story of How Srinagar Was Saved

By [Col Neerav Bhatnagar](#)

The Battle of Shalteng was one of the most decisive battles ever fought by the Indian Army. Although it was short and intense but it entirely changed the tide of battle in the Kashmir Valley and fully removed the threat to Srinagar and also led to recapture of most of the territories lost to the Raiders in the initial days of the conflict in 1947.

What stood between Srinagar and NWFP tribesmen supported by Pak army regulars was a weak infantry brigade of Indian army, with indomitable courage, at Shalteng, barely few kms outside Srinagar.

Had we lost at Shalteng, or had we not managed to move troops on time, Srinagar would have fallen into the hands of Raiders and it would have been extremely difficult to move in army troops into Kashmir, as there was no other airfield available and no other Road route available as the road to Srinagar from Jammu was under disuse.

Communication system-

The entire trade to valley, those days, used to take place via Muzafarabad and Uri. The partition, therefore, provided Pakistan with all the three major roads connecting Jammu and Kashmir whereas where as the one from Indian side through Kathua and Banihal pass was in disarray. This road, was chopped at many places by rivers and nullahs.



The fastest available way to reach Jammu and Kashmir from India was by air route. But even that air strip at Srinagar was ill equipped to handle heavy air traffic. As a result, it would have taken weeks to make the reinforcements reach valley and by then Pakistan would have strengthened its hold by moving in troops speedily.

Background-

When Pakistan armed forces decided to use Raiders from NWFP to take Valley by hatching a conspiracy, the West Pakistan-Kashmir border areas of Muzaffarabad and Domel, was guarded by one of the trusted battalions of the Kashmir State Forces which comprised 50% Dogras and 50% Poonchie Muslims.

Concerned by the communal flare up all over, the intelligence sources in the state advised Lt. Col. Narain Singh, then Commanding Officer of the unit, to pull Poonchie Muslims back from the border area and have them replaced by the Dogras. But Lt. Col. Singh who had trust on the commitment of his Muslim troops, vouched for them and downrightly rejected the valuable intelligence reports.

This confidence on his muslim troops was proven wrong when in the early hours of October 22, 1947, Muslim soldiers occupied the armory and assassinated their fellow Dogra soldiers along with Lt. Col. Narain Singh. This act of brutal massacre opened all the

gates for enemy to enter into Jammu and Kashmir. The marauding tribesmen wreaked havoc by looting, raping and pillaging their way through the town of Muzaffarabad.

However, some of the Dogra soldiers managed to escape and hurriedly telephoned the Headquarters at Srinagar. To subdue the advancement of tribal forces towards Srinagar, Brigadier Rajinder Singh, then Chief of Staff of the State Forces, gathered nearly 200 soldiers and rushed down towards Uri in the direction of approaching enemy with whatever weapons and ammunitions he could accumulate.

The tribesmen, because of the tarmac road, could have reached Srinagar from Muzaffarabad in a couple of hours but true to their barbaric nature, they got involved in raping Kashmiri women and looting to take booty back home rather than focusing on onward motion. The undisciplined enemy gave plenty of time to Brigadier Rajinder Singh and his boys to settle themselves in Uri, a strategically important place which was only 78 Kms away from Srinagar.

Brigadier Rajinder Singh's forces placed explosives on the bridge. The tribals, tried bypassing the bridge by crossing through the river, however, when Brig Rajinder Singh noticed that his defences would become untenable, he ordered demolition of the bridge at Jhelum River to cut the advance of invaders' motor transport. Brigadier Rajinder Singh continued fighting with raiders and finally attained martyrdom on October 27 at Uri. The road to Srinagar was now open for the Raiders as there was virtually no opposition.

Had he not exploded the bridge and compelled the enemy to stay on the other side for a reasonably long time and had the enemy not got involved in looting, raping the convent at Baramulla, the history of Jammu and Kashmir would have been different today.

The enemy was numerically more in strength and also possessed better weapons than the Kashmir state force soldiers, of Maharaja Hari Singh.

The tribals moved into Uri and captured the power plant which brought darkness in Srinagar.

Maharaja Hari Singh, fearing a certain defeat, left Srinagar in despondency on October 25th and sent a communiqué to Indian government asking for State's accession. Next day, on October 26, 1947, Jammu and Kashmir officially became a state of India with the ratification of Instrument of Accession. The same day, Indian Military was given a go to commence its operations to defend the newly formed state of India.

Uri to Srinagar is hardly 72kms, the tribesmen could have reached Srinagar in just an hour plus with no one to stop them.

The tribals did not want to leave their transport behind because it contained their loot so they waited for the diversion that required some engineering effort so they got delayed.

Finally after the diversion was created the enemy captured Baramullah on 27th Oct 1947 and once again resorted to arson and loot.

The tribals then remained stranded and after capture of Baramulla indulged in rape and arson at the missionary hospital at Baramulla.

Enemy Advance-

The tribesmen were approx 8000 in numbers led by Pakistan Army Regulars. They were divided in three columns.

Column 1; The main force of about 5000 was advancing along the main Uri – Baramulla – Patan – Srinagar Road.

Column 2; A Northern column of about 2000 were approaching from the North via Sopore, and.

Column 3; A Southern column of about 1000 was approaching the Srinagar airfield from the South via Gulmarg/Badgam.

The enemy was supported by machine guns and mortars. The enemy morale was high after they had decimated the State Forces en route and captured and looted one town after another with ease. Within 10 days they had reached the gates of Srinagar.

What Happened In Delhi From 25th Oct/27th Oct 1947

The Army HQ at Delhi and many army units were still embroiled in sorting out the mess created by partition. The army officers who opted for Pakistan took away everything at their disposal to Pakistan leaving the Indians high and dry. Everything was divided. There were some artillery units where the Muslims took away the dial sights leaving the Big guns ineffective. Similarly, the Govt was entangled in handling the crisis created by communal rioting and the millions of refugees that were coming from Pakistan. No one could, in his wildest of dreams think that when the two newly born nations were engaged in sorting out the biggest human crisis, the Pak army could conceive such a devious and treacherous plan.

In mid Oct an innocuous radio intercept was received “Gorkhas still holding out in Sensa and Owen captured, wait until I join you then coordinated attack on Sensa”.

This radio intercept made Indian army establishment search for the details. Concerned authorities started wondering where are the gorkhas fighting. But because of the lack of any maps no one could locate the place as Gorkhas were known to be part of Indian army. However, then came another intercept that cleared the doubt ; “Received one hundred Punchies , arrange ration”.

But as Maharaja had still not given his consent of accession the then Indian Govt preferred to keep quiet.

However, when one after the other, posts of J&K State force started getting captured and NWFP Tribals with the assistance of Pak regulars had reached Uri, mere 72 Kms short of Srinagar and valley plunged into darkness as the power plant at Uri was captured by Raiders, on 26th Oct 47, that Maharaja Hari Singh signed the instrument of accession

while fleeing the valley and so on 26th Oct it was decided that Indian army be sent to Valley.

Finally on 27th Oct when it was not certain if the Srinagar airfield had fallen to the enemy and also not known whether the airfield was fit for landing an aircraft, the troops were planned to be dropped at the air field.

Entire country was then engulfed in communal riots in which thousands were killed, there was mayhem all around and in the midst of that there was also another human tragedy that the country was facing – millions of refugees from Pakistan were arriving.

The nation was just not prepared to meet this influx. Most of the Indian army units were deployed in controlling the riots, so it was not easy to get the troops needed to fight in Kashmir.

However, at such short notice 1 Sikh which was employed in aid to civil authorities at Gurgaon was moved to Delhi for being airlifted to Srinagar on 27 Oct 47. Lt Col Ranjit Rai was the Commanding Officer of the unit.

This day is celebrated every year as THE INFANTRY DAY.

The Action

As there were no transport planes with the new IAF, Civil aviation companies were requested to provide Dakotas to ferry the troops and their stores to an unknown territory. The pilots displayed incredible enthusiasm and courage and kept inducting troops and stores on a strip which had no navigational aid and no Air controller. There was a time when nothing was visible due to the dust raised by the plane but they kept flying and kept landing.

16 1 Brigade which was deployed near Gurgaon handling communal riots, was ordered to move. Their heavy weapons were at Ranchi at their permanent location.

No one knew about the state of affairs in Srinagar and also the condition of airfield whether it has been captured by tribals or not.

1 Sikh which was deployed in Gurgaon was the first to get assemble and was airlifted to Srinagar.

Under those precarious conditions the army unit 1 SIKH landed at Srinagar airfield in the morning of 27th Oct 1947.

Lt Col Ranjit Rai who was the CO of 1 Sikh immediately deployed his troops to first guard the airfield. And once he confirmed that there was no enemy he immediately leaving one company to guard the airfield moved the battalion to Baramulla almost 34 miles from Srinagar and deployed his men on the surrounding hills.

However, when he approached Baramulla town with the escort team , he came under fire and died.

His gamble could not pay, so his second in command brought the battalion back to Pattan almost 17 miles from Srinagar which afforded some defensive capability and the hills

dominated the road so that the raiders who had come with lorries to carry the loot back could be denied its use.

The raiders seeing the army troops did not move ahead and so First Sikh got respite for a few days after having lost their CO, as the raiders did not attack the defensive positions but only probed.

Although some may criticise that when Col Rai was given the task of guarding the airfield why did he move his unit so far. However, the answer is ;

One, You can not guard an installation or an airfield by just deploying its troops around its perimeter. Because the enemy which was in large numbers and was having a free run could lay a siege of the airport as well as the Srinagar town. Thereby not letting the aircrafts fly and also creating panic in Srinagar town which would have created havoc.

Two, Having found that there is no enemy around the airfield he took a wise decision of leaving few troops to guard the airfield and moved ahead along the road to deny enemy a clear and unopposed run.

Three, Had the CO not moved his troops to Baramulla the enemy would have been there in Srinagar precisely in two hours. This would have made things more difficult with the airfield hardly 7 miles from the town. So, as a matter of fact, Col Rai's action not only delayed the enemy but also saved Srinagar.

Although he died but his decision caused enough delay to the enemy's advance which enabled Indian army to send in more reinforcements by the time they closed in to Srinagar.

So, Brig Rajinder Singh's action and Lt Col Ranjit Rai's actions caused enough delay that allowed Indian reinforcements to reach Srinagar just in time.

Within 3-4 days by 02Nov47 some more units were flown in.

- *1 Punjab which had only 450 men as the Pakistanis part of this Battalion had left. This was located at Magam on road to Gulmarg to guard the left flank of 1 Sikh which was almost 5 kms on its right.*
- *1 Kumaon which had only 650 men alongwith the Two Companies of 4 Kumaon manning the airfield.*
- *Subsequently, The two companies of 4 kumaon were moved inside and made them as Brigade reserve.*
- *The Brigade had no artillery and no additional troops to carry out any offensive.*
- *All it could do was guard the area and wait for the enemy which was 10 times more its strength.*

On 02 Nov Col LP Sen as an acting Brigadier landed at Srinagar airfield as Commander 161 Infantry Brigade. Because of the poor communication no one in Delhi was sure whether the airfield is still with Indian army or its been captured. There were rumours all around.

OWN PLAN. (Map-2 Deployment before the Crucial Battle)

- So, the Commander 161 Brigade Brig Sen, immediately on his arrival took following action;
- **One, coordinated the Patrolling plan of each unit in order to enquire about the whereabouts of the enemy. A strong patrol of two companies of 4 Kumaon and One company of 1 Kumaon was sent towards Badgam. 4 Kumaon was to lead and establish a firm base on hills overlooking Badgam and thereafter 1 Kumaon to move ahead and then link up with 1 Punjab at Magam and thereafter fall back to Srinagar airfield. While 2x Companies of 4 Kumaon to remain at Badgam till further orders.**
- **Two, Link up patrols between 1 Punjab and 1 Sikh so as to show presence of troops and prevent enemy's small parties infiltrating through the gap between 1 Punjab and 1 Sikh.**



The Action Commences.

- **On 03 Nov 47, the Patrols were launched in the morning and by 0930 hrs, 4 kumaon had reached the Hills around Badgam and established the firm base. 1 Kumaon also moved ahead, linked up with 1 Punjab at Magam and came back to Airfield using transport by evening. There were no signs of enemy anywhere.**

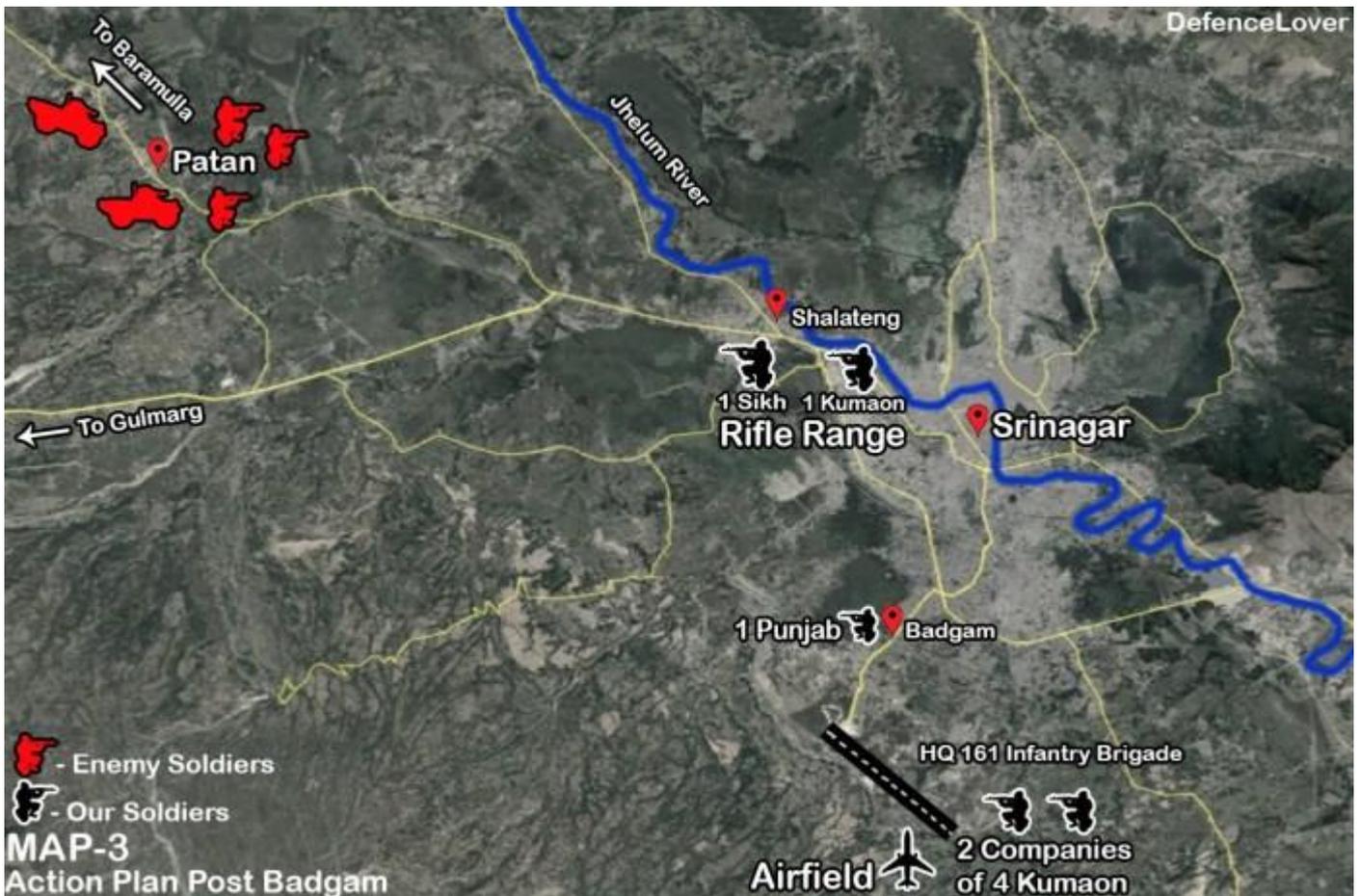
- *However, by 1500hrs the enemy started engaging the 4 kumaon at Badgam. It was being engaged by 3 inch mortars and MMGs and was heavily outnumbered.*
- *Maj Somnath Sharma the company Cdr While he was busy fighting the enemy, a mortar shell exploded on the ammunition near him. His last message to Brigade HQ received a few moments before he was killed was:
"The enemy is only 50 yards from us. We are hopelessly outnumbered. I will not withdraw one inch but fight to the last man last round."*
- *Realising the pressure on 4 Kumaon, 1 Punjab was asked to withdraw from Magam in the area of Humhom-Badgam to take up defensive position in order to seal off the route to Srinagar. The unit moved speedily, 4kumaon fell back under heavy enemy pressure to 1 Punjab new location. The road to Srinagar now was blocked for the Raiders.*
- *Had 4 kumaon not been there at 1500hrs at Badgam and been withdrawn, earlier, the enemy would have had a free run to Srinagar.*
- *The situation even now on night was pretty precarious as 1 Punjab standing in front of Srinagar was a weak Battalion with just 400 troops.*
- *On 04 Nov Sardar Patel visited Srinagar who directed Brig Sen that Srinagar be saved at all costs and assured reinforcements soon. The same evening he got a message that 2xInf Battalions, one sqn of armoured cars and a Battery of field arty guns(6 guns) were being dispatched by road and would reach his loc by 07Nov.*
- *The Engineers had during this period improved the road from Pathankot to Jammu.*
- *1 Sikh was still at Pattan and so blocking the Road from Baramulla to Srinagar, thereby denying the enemy to drive their lorries full of loot. So, The enemy now had broken into small parties and reports were pouring in from many areas about their appearance. This was causing panic amongst the local population and the fear was if the raiders manage to enter Srinagar town it would be extremely difficult to drive them out from a built up area.*

Post Badgam Action. (Map-3 Action Plan Post Badgam)

Brigade Commander's appreciation of the Situation;

The raiders had no love lost with Valley, all they had come was for loot. This was evident by the manner in which they burnt villages after villages while advancing and got involved in looting and pillaging. So, If the raiders are allowed a free run right from Baramulla to Srinagar they would come with their lorries full of Loot as they would be in a hurry to capture Srinagar. And so, would attack the defences blocking the route to Srinagar. And that would provide an opportunity to make a Kill. Brig Sen, the Commander 161 Brigade, contemplated.

So, he planned to withdraw 1 Sikh from Pattan to Srinagar, which was a stumbling block for the raiders and in the backdrop of battle at Badgam, the raiders would feel confident and feel that the Indian forces have suffered a setback. So, they finding the road open, would come full steam with their lorries and recklessly attack the well prepared defences blocking their entry into the Srinagar town. Which would allow the Commander to get behind the marching tribals and destroy them in one go.



Final Action Commences

So, 1 Sikh was pulled back to Srinagar. Although it would sound to be disastrous, and so was opposed by superiors but Brig Sen stood his ground.

There was only one all weather road that could take them to Srinagar and Brig Sen selected the best spot which provided him a big killing ground, which the raiders will have to cross through.

So, he deployed 1 Kumaon at Rifle range area which dominated the road to Srinagar locally called Chandmari with 1 Sikh a strong battalion because of 2x additional companies. Thus adequately blocking the route to Srinagar.

1 Punjab a weak battalion at Badgam and 4 kumaon again with just 2x companies at airfield.

However, there was hardly any Brigade reserves.

The moment 1 Sikh was withdrawn from Patan the enemy parties started getting concentrated at Patan .

The plan was that to hold the enemy at Shalateng by the troops already in Position.

It was contemplated that enemy would not be able to contact the defences before 08 Nov47.

So, on 09 Nov/10 Nov night the two new Infantry Battalions that were likely to join them on 07 Nov with the help of guides provided by 1 Punjab and 1 Sikh will make a encircling movement via Magam. And launch an attack at Patan on 10 Nov morning first light. And as soon as the enemy is sandwiched between Patan and Srinagar, he would be subjected to attacks both from front and rear. Thereafter troops from Srinagar would advance towards Patan.

However, another contingency plan was prepared in case enemy attacks before the reinforcements are ready to carry out an encircling movement.

This plan was;

Deploy one of the newly arrived Battalions in depth in the rifle range area and the other battalion kept reserve at Srinagar. Brig Sen expected that the enemy would march at night and would not like to carry out a frontal attack against the defences. This hope gave confidence to the Brig Sen who knew that the defences are thinly held.

However, on 05 Nov an unfortunate incident led to moving 1 Sikh from South East(SE) Srinagar to Rifle range area in depth, leaving Srinagar exposed from SE.

The gamble of Commander, was looking to be paid off as the tribals were reported to be moving from Baramulla to Srinagar and concentrating there in thousands. It was now a matter of time.

Fortunately, on 06 Nov evening Maj Inder Rikhye along with his troop of armoured cars landed up. He, in order to reach Srinagar at the earliest left rest of his Squadron behind because of some problem in crossing the narrow bridge at Ramban. This speaks volumes about the sincerity of this officer and the professionalism displayed by him.

Brig Sen decided to use this troop to carry out a recce of area Bandipore which was approx 35 miles from Srinagar because there were reports that the enemy raiders have been seen in that area.

07 Nov47 Fateful Evening. (Map-4 the Death Blow)

As was expected by the Commander the enemy in a hurry to reach Srinagar forgot to first capture the dominating positions and secure their back side by establishing a firm base before taking on Srinagar defences.

They probably thought that the manner in which they had captured all the towns enroute , Srinagar would also fall the same way. More so, they were aware that Srinagar airfield was the only means available from where Indian army could reinforce and so probably they were in a hurry to capture the airfield and so undermined the need to establish a firm base before tackling the defences.

The rest of the reinforcements, as promised, could not make it before 07Nov. Suddenly the enemy started appearing and firing upon the 1 Sikh defences in the evening. Brig Sen in order to ascertain the enemy position requested Airforce to carry out recce sorties. They reported hundreds of lorries moving on the Road to Srinagar.

The confirmation of raiders closing in made Brig Sen to now change his plan immediately. He ordered Lieutenant Noel David of 7 Cavalry, who was on a reconnaissance with two armoured cars to Ganderbal-Bandipura area, to attack the enemy from rear upon reaching Shalateng village.

This required crossing bridges at Jhelum River some of which were too weak to bear the load of an armoured car.

The main hurdle in Lt. David's path was a weak wooden bridge between Krahom and Sumbal, crossing which was a fair invitation to death.

With railings leaning slightly inwards on an already narrow bridge, his advancement was out of the question though he had to do it at any cost to protect Srinagar from falling in the hands of invaders.

A slightest stumble meant certain death, However, by knocking down railings and then carefully driving the armoured cars with only two inches of space left on either side of the vehicle, he managed his armoured cars to cross over the narrow bridge.

After crossing the bridge Lt. David radioed his position.

Meanwhile 1 Kumaon was ordered to move stealthily and entangle the moving invaders from the right side.

After arriving on Sumbal-Shadipur road which went all the way to Shalateng, Lt. David joined the enemy pretending to be their fellow comrade of the tribesmen.

The Raiders thought that Lt. David's team was a part of reinforcement from the Pakistan Army, and so were elated and started firing in the air to celebrate the arrival of armoured cars without knowing that it was actually a death trap moving behind their arses.

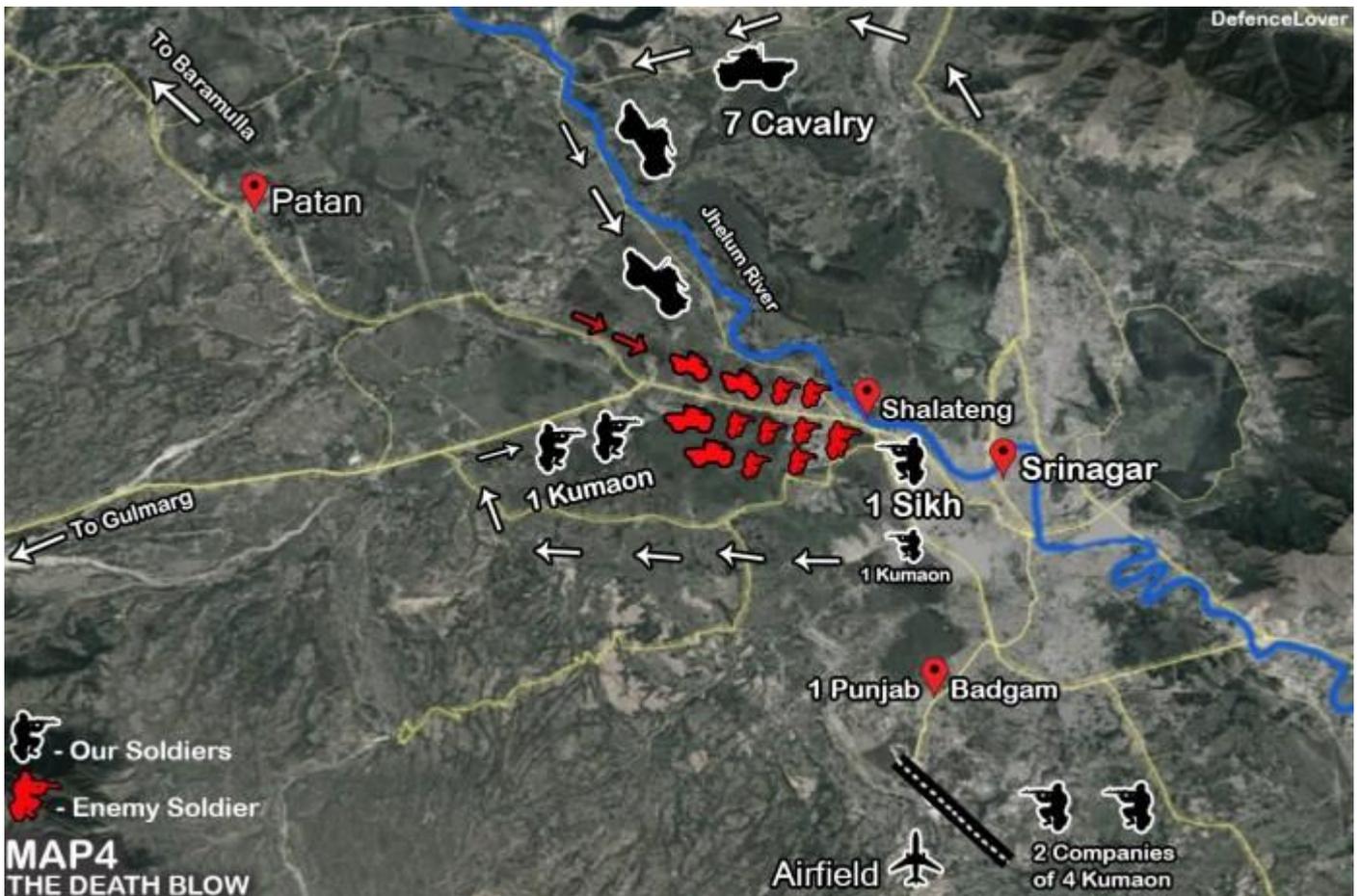
The raiders unaware of impending mayhem, began firing in Shalateng area.

After getting green signal, from Lt Noel and 1 Kumaon, The code word for attack "GO" was sent to all fighting units by Brigadier Sen.

Indian troops launched their daring attack.

The tribals came under attack from all sides , the front as well as rear. They ran for their lives.

The battle was won in only 20 minutes.



Unable to withstand the ferocity of the Indian attack, highly panicked tribesmen rolled backwards to Srinagar-Baramulla route in a disorganized way only to be strafed by the Indian Air Force.

The raiders suffered heavy casualties a total 618 invaders died in that decisive battle.

This battle shook their confidence and they could never retrieve that shock.

The map indicates how in just 45 days they were chased back.

This is how Srinagar was saved.

After that within next few days Baramulla and Uri was taken.

Factors Which Saved Srinagar. The factors that saved Srinagar from the onslaught of the raiders in Oct 1947 were as follows : –

a) The delay imposed by Brigadier Rajinder Singh's force at Uri.

(c) Time wasted by the raiders in their rampage at Baramulla.

(d) 1 Sikh's delaying action at Baramulla and Pattan.

(e) 4 Kumaon's heroic stand at Badgam.

Last but not the least the commitment of soldiers and exemplary leadership of Brig Rajinder Singh, Col Ranjit Rai, Maj Somnath Sharma, Major Ravi Rikhye and Lt Noel David.

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