

TENSIONS BETWEEN INDIA AND PAKISTAN OVER DESOLATE SALT MARSH

By Joe McGowan Jr.

A vast salt marsh wasteland on the Arabian Sea along the India-Pakistan border went largely unnoticed by both countries for years, until the spring of 1965 when rumors spread of large petroleum deposits under the barren land.

Immediately, both countries moved troops and tanks into position. India complained to Washington that Pakistan was using Patton tanks supplied by the United States. The Patton tanks were supposed to be used on the Pakistan border with China.

The Indian government even supplied an airplane for the press and flew reporters over the militarized line. A government spokesman then told the reporters those were Patton tanks down below and many of them reported in their newspapers that they had seen the American tanks first hand.

An AP reporter based in New Delhi missed the press flight, so interviewed Indian reporters when they returned. Based on what they told him, he wrote a story with his byline saying he had seen the Patton tanks in the desert below. When the truth came out, he lost his job and I was sent to New Delhi from AP's foreign desk in New York City as the man's replacement.

Word got to President Lyndon Johnson in Washington. He called his Defense Department officials and asked them what Patton tanks were doing in the Rann of Kutch. They quickly supplied him with aerial photos showing the tanks were

French AMX tanks. They also told him the Patton tanks were so heavy they would bog down in the desert sand.

Tensions remained high during the summer and there was periodic fighting. Then in September, 1965, the two countries went to an all-out war, mostly over possession of Kashmir state.

During a good part of the year, the Rann of Kutch was, indeed virtually uninhabitable desert land, with the Thar Desert on the Indian side and Sindh Province on the Pakistan side. Then, during the annual monsoon, the area was usually flooded. Average elevation of the wasteland was about 50 feet. It covers about 3,000 square miles and in the summer is one of the hottest places on earth. Temperatures of 122 degrees are normal.

British Prime Minister Harold Wilson mediated the dispute and an international tribunal in 1968 awarded 10 per cent of the land to Pakistan and the remainder to India. Immediately, tensions rose and the two countries nearly went to war again.

Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi held urgent talks with her cabinet members and assured the legislative assembly of Gujarat state that Pakistan would not be allowed to invade.

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